

God and Mammon
Based on Luke 16:1-13
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I remember hearing this saying as a kid—"You cannot serve both God and Mammon," and thinking, "Who is Mammon?" It turns out that it's a Hebrew word, from a Canaanite word, which maybe originally meant a god of material wealth, but came to be more like a personification of wealth. But like God, like a god, Jesus is saying, wealth *is* a master, someone to be served, something that demands service, and attention, and sacrifice.

We usually think of money as a tool, something that *we* use, something that serves us. Money does our bidding. We send it out to buy our groceries or help the poor or pay the mortgage. We sit down with the checkbook or our online account and decide where the money goes. We are in charge. Kind of. I mean, it's not like I have a choice whether or not to pay my mortgage. Having taken possession of the house with the help of the bank, the bank and the house make demands.

And not just the mortgage, but once you have the house, you have to maintain it, repair it, pay the taxes on it; it makes demands. We all know that those demands never end. How many hours a week do we spend maintaining, improving, expanding our possessions? What would we be doing with that time, if we had fewer possessions? Maybe paying more attention to what God is doing, seems to be the point Jesus is making.

The parable about the dishonest steward, which comes before this saying about Mammon, is really pretty complicated. Basically, there's a master, a wealthy person, maybe a landowner. And he has a steward, someone to manage his vast properties, maybe sort of an accountant, who manages the master's investments. But the manager is either skimming some off the top or just overspending somehow. And the master finds out. So he's going to hold the manager to account; the manager will suffer consequences for having tried to swindle the master, or for having wasted the master's resources. Ok, so far, we are tracking. We can see the moral of the story.

The money, belongings, toys we have each of us amassed to this point are not truly ours; they are gifts or maybe a loan from God. And we can identify with the manager in the parable, and assume that God is not impressed with our investment strategies. We get word that God is going to judge our lousy stewardship, the way we have been squandering the gifts with which we've been entrusted.

But hold up a minute—what gifts are we talking about and what does it mean to be bad stewards of God's gifts? Well, speaking of the church, on a very basic, practical level, we could, as the church, take a lot of money from our endowment fund—maybe even all of it--and use it to hire let's say, five new full time staff. Maybe a gardener to tend the grounds, a professional organizer to keep all our storage neat and tidy, (dream with me here) a sort of worship caddy who would take everything to and from the beach, a social media expert/publicity person to make sure all our activities and events are amply publicized, and finally, one person on retainer whose only job was to hang up the garland and decorate the sanctuary for Christmas. Worth the money, trust me. Clearly, while that would be fun for a while, spending our endowment in that extravagant way would be bad stewardship, leaving us with no resources very quickly.

Good stewardship is sometimes simply good investment, and sometimes it's *like* good investment. It's leveraging the resources we have today a) to do good and serve God today and b) to be able to do even more good and serve God better tomorrow.

Two things good stewardship is not. As that example about hiring staff makes clear, it's not a process of making today as fun and easy as possible. Fun and easy are great if they happen, but they're not always going to happen when we're using our resources most wisely. Joy should be happening along the way, but convenience may not be as frequent as we'd like. So that's one—God's gifts are not simply to be spent making life pleasant for ourselves in the moment.

The other thing good stewardship is not, though: it's not fear of the future. Good stewardship is not building a fortress around the church for fear that we'll be attacked, by as yet unknown enemies. It is not stockpiling weapons or canned goods against some unspecified future conflict. We are not afraid of the future. God is in the future. God is working his purpose out, as the

old hymn has it. What we are doing now, as good stewards, is to partner with God's work, yearning always towards God's better future.

To bring it down to the personal level, if someone hands you 20 bucks or you find a 20-dollar bill on the sidewalk you could take yourself and a friend out to breakfast at Castaways Café in Villas—I happen to know you can get breakfast for two there for \$21. That would be the fun and easy route. Or you could put that \$20 in your bank account or under your mattress (equally good investments at the moment), just in case some day it might be the last 20 dollars in your possession. That's how fear of the future works. Clinging to what we have, for fear of losing it. Or you could buy sugar and butter and eggs and make cookies to sell at the Bazaar, thus making probably a hundred dollars for the church and its mission. In this case, c is the right answer.

Getting back to the parable, then, what we have in the bad manager is someone who seems to have taken option A, squandering resources and spending them for nothing more than a little ease and comfort right now, with no regard for the future. And now he's in trouble for it. The master has had it with his lousy stewardship and is going to call the manager to account, very soon. Maybe tomorrow.

The smart thing for the manager to do, then, according to the parable, would be to make friends. If the boss isn't happy with him, he's going to need friends. He's still the manager of the master's money for the moment, so in his remaining time, the manager is going to invest that money in the future of his own relationships. Someone owes the master 100, he knocks the bill down to 80. They owe 60, he knocks it down to 30. What's it to the manager? Forgive the debts—it's not like it's his money he'd be collecting! If he collects it all, the master is richer. But if he lets it some of it go, the master is not as rich, but the manager has a couple new best friends.

I'm thinking that if the manager is you or me, and the master is God, then the other people who owe the master debts are, well, other people. The church has a long, historic habit of telling people how much God has to forgive them for, how far in the red we are in God's ledgers. But this parable says, assume you have even more to be forgiven for. Considering what we have done wrong ourselves, we are bound to be more generous with other people's sins. Stop reminding people what God has against them, the parable tells us, and use your own power to forgive as much as you possibly

can. That's the prudent way, Jesus says, to get right with our neighbors and with God.

Essentially, we should be using the resources we have to build up our relationships with others, not to lord it over them. Recognizing that we have mismanaged some of the gifts God gave us—and we all have—and anticipating that we are to be called on the carpet for overspending, at least we can try overspending on behalf of our neighbors and not only for ourselves.

All of that might be about money, or it might just be about forgiveness, with which we are encouraged to be generous, in light of our own sins. But Jesus definitely wants to talk about money. He is apparently thinking about money, because he goes on from this parable to the saying about Mammon.

We are being encouraged to be generous in the forgiveness of debt—metaphorical debt, as in sins and wrongs that must be forgiven, but also actual debt. Because if all good gifts come from God, then we will always be more indebted to God than anyone on earth can be indebted to us.

I appreciate that as Presbyterians we say debts and debtors in the Lord's prayer. Because everyone knows what that means. It speaks directly to our bank accounts, to our wallets. And it says to us, consider what you yourself owe to God, and get busy forgiving what other people owe to you.