

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 16:1-13

Sermon Title: "Clever Use of God's Capital" (Misuse of Funds Series)

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We have been talking about the misuse of funds, especially the misuse of all that God gives us. During this month of stewardship, we've talk about receiving God's blessings of whatever they may be, and using such items and gifts for the good of God's kingdom. We read today's parable from Jesus, and we hear about a person who didn't get the message about stewardship.

Here is the gist of the story. There is a rich individual who has an accountant working for him. Whatever the rich man makes, the accountant is well aware of. He marks it down in a register and keeps track of the rich man's net worth. However, one day the rich man accuses the accountant of embezzling his funds. Money has gone missing. The rich man wants to see the accounting books and take note of where his money has gone, and then he wants to fire the accountant. Rightful so, because none of us can have people mismanaging our money, especially when we trust them to manage it wisely.

Jesus tells us that the accountant knows he is in deep trouble. Jesus doesn't tell us where the money has gone – he just tells us that the accountant is now running scared. The accountant quickly considers all his options and acts.

He gathers all the rich man's debtors together. He asks them how much do they owe to the rich man. One says he owes a hundred measures of oil. Let us say that comes to eight gallons per measure, so 800 gallons of oil the man owes. A considerable amount. Another debtor says he owes a hundred measures of wheat, or 1000 bushels of wheat. A measure of oil is different from a measure of wheat, but they both are considerable amounts nonetheless. This is what the accountant does: he tells the man who owes 800 gallons of oil that he only owes half of that: 400 gallons. He tells the man, who owes 1000 bushels of wheat, that he only owes 800. What is going on here? It sounds as though the accountant is cheating the rich man, his employer, even further. These people aren't giving back to the rich man exactly what they took from him. They are only giving back 50% and 80%, respectively. This cannot happen. Surely the rich man will find out, and then fire his accountant and have him arrested possibly. Then he will tell everybody to pay back their debts, or he will increase

the interest on all goods. It doesn't look good for the accountant.

Yet it is Jesus telling his story to us, and Jesus says that the rich man finds out, and he commends the unjust accountant for his shrewdness. Other translations say that the accountant was prudent with the rich man's capital.

It doesn't matter how many times we read this parable in Luke 16, it always shocks us. We always think that it cannot possibly be a parable of Jesus, and yet there it is in Luke 16. Jesus told the parable without changing a word.

It is still a shocking story. How can a rich man, or even a prosperous company, commend a corrupt accountant. How can Jesus use such a negative example to teach us spiritual things? In light of the world's economic problems – questions circling around businesspeople on Wall Street who seemed to gamble our money away on shaking funds, and Greece as a nation defaulting on its loans – we do not want to hear about people embezzling funds *and* getting away with it. Years ago, I served in my father-in-law's Presbyterian church in Scottsdale, AZ as a seminary intern, and it came to light that the financial secretary of the church was skimming money of the top of the

donations plates. She bought her son a shiny new \$30,000 sports car, which neither of them could have afforded, and she purchased all sorts of nice stuff for herself. She wasn't commended for her prudence with church funds; she was immediately fired. She had to pay back every penny or face criminal charges, which she avoided because she did pay back everything.

Jesus is not commending criminal activity. He is not telling us to misuse our money, or anybody else's money. He tells a negative, unsavory parable in order to show us how to carry out the will of God.

C.S Lewis did an excellent job with this concept in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*. He helped readers to consider spiritual matters from the viewpoint of two devils, who were trying to cause a Christian man to slip up and turn from God. By revealing possible strategies that the devil loves to use against us to cause us to sin, Lewis helped us to be more aware of sin itself, so that we might avoid it. As the saying goes, "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer." Jesus tells us a "negative" parable in order to help us live positive lives. We need only to go to Jesus' explanations after the parable to see this.

Jesus says in Luke 16:9, "I tell you, make friends

for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Let us understand that *everybody* in Jesus’ parable is corrupt. It isn’t just the accountant who is embezzling funds, but the rich man himself is corrupt. He’ll make a buck any way he can. He loves having people owe him money, so he can fleece more interest from them. And those debtors of his are corrupt as well, because they will never think twice about not paying back in full that which they owe. The accountant gives them a way to renege on their loans, and they take it. They are all corrupt scoundrels in Jesus’ parable.

So, whereas these people are using their corrupt funds to make friends and create alliances that will last, Jesus is telling us that, with our funds that most likely are not corrupt, we should use them to make friends that will last into eternity. The unjust accountant, for example, was using his influence and possessions to gain friends who will be on his side, in case he loses his job. Likewise, and in a less corrupt way, we use our influence (however small or large it is) and we use our possessions (however small or large) to gain citizens for the kingdom of God. Their citizenship in God’s kingdom lasts forever.

Jesus’ words underscore what he said in Luke 12,

“Seek [God’s] kingdom, and all these things will be added to you... Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”¹ As we once said before, our free market economy is only interested in making money at this present moment. Profits are most needed. But for us as Christians our economy is to share God’s message with whoever wants to hear it, and then pray more children of God turn to God. The profits are more people having eternity as their final prize. We could use our money and possessions selfishly, and then we will be running scared like the accountant was. Or, we can share and make another person’s life a bit easier. We can influence somebody with our charity (goodness), and hope it might wear off on them, so they too would become more charity. And who knows, maybe they will consider a life with God and willingly accept Christ as their Savior, all because we were not as tight-fisted with our stuff.

Jesus also says, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”² Ah, here is the

¹ Luke 12:31, 33.

² Luke 16:10.

proof from Jesus' lips that confirms that he is not encouraging us to live corrupt lives, as his parable seems to be telling us. He is calling everybody out from that parable, unveiling their true colors, and those colors are dull and unattractive. All of these people are corrupt scoundrels, Jesus says, and if they are scoundrels with the little they have, they will be scoundrels with the big they have. And vice versa. If they see a dime sitting on the counter at Starbucks, they will not throw it in the tip jar for the employees, but will pocket it and feel as though they pulled off a grand heist. If someone comes to them with a problem, they will make every excuse for why they cannot help, and then walk away smiling to themselves that somebody is having a worse day than they are. Give these corrupt scoundrels in Jesus' parable any advantage and they will take it all for themselves.

However, we who are given little are responsible. We who love the Lord our God know that every little and big thing that is placed in our hands can never be hoarded for ourselves. As soon as it touches our hands, it must be released and used for the good of God's kingdom.

We prove this whenever our Food Pantry requests items to distribute to our clients. It doesn't matter if

it's \$100 or a packet of diapers or a can of black-eyed peas, the small and big are always welcomed and used for God's ministry to this community. We prove we are responsible, when it comes time to buy Christmas presents for unprivileged families. It doesn't matter if it's a bicycle or a new dress or gloves, it is important to our ministry in God's name. When the youth clean our cars in order to raise funds for their summer retreats, we are generous. "Sure, go ahead and have \$20 to clean our cars. We would never think to spend that at any car wash, but this is for the youth. They need our generosity to learn more about God." When somebody approaches us with a problem, we are willing to give small or big advice. It's not the pastor who is fielding questions and relieving pains – all y'all support each other. All of us have ears to hear, arms to comfort, and words to share. Let those scoundrels in Jesus' parable hoard what little they can for themselves. The big and small that cross our paths are shared with thanksgiving and joy.

And we've heard these words from Jesus before: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and

wealth.”³ Do you realize that this thing (a wallet) has a voice? It is a tiny voice that we hear quite often, at least once a week if not more. It says to us, “Trust me. I will take care of you. I’m the only one who can provide for all your needs.” We listen. We believe that it is only money that can bring us happiness. We believe we can do nothing without money, and if the money isn’t there we are paralyzed. And when the money isn’t there, this thing (our wallets and purses) become strangely silent. Our god has no more voice, and can give us no more counsel. We are stuck on our own.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes once said, “Sure, it would be great to have loads of money, but having wisdom is much, much better.” Wisdom tells us to fear the Lord, pay respect to him, admire him, latch onto him, listen to him because God’s counsel will never steer us wrong. The lesson we learned weeks ago from Cain and Abel is that we should offer the sort of sacrifices that God wants us to offer. If money is one of those sacrifices, then money itself cannot be our god. It has no power at all. It serves us, and it serves God’s purposes for the good of God’s kingdom.

In Jesus’ parable today, God was not mentioned at all. When the corrupt accountant was caught with his

³ Luke 16:13.

hand in the rich man's pocket, he never said, "God, I need your help. Show me how to correct this situation properly." Instead, he focused on money, and how to secure his position with money. It worked for him at that time, but it would not always be that way. Sooner or later, the rich man would become completely frustrated with his corrupt accountant's actions, and eventually fire him and get him arrested.

We cannot serve money and God, Jesus tells us. We will love the one and hate the other. It is our jobs to tell this thing (the wallet or purse) to shut up. It is time to ignore its little voice, and to command it to bow before our Lord and God as we do. Serving God is not a part-time job, but a full-time job. God is always our Master at any moment on any day, even while we sleep. Once we choose to serve God, "every moment of [our] lives and every atom of [our] energy belong to God."⁴

Unlike the unjust accountant, and unlike all the others in Jesus' parable, we belong to God totally and altogether. We delight in having God take possession of us and all of stuff. We hold nothing back. It is all out there in front of God, ready for him to take and use any way he wills.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 218.