

Where is an American dollar worth the most? If you go north to Canada, you can exchange an American dollar for about a dollar and thirty cents in Canadian money. If you go south to Mexico, you can exchange an American dollar for about nineteen and a half pesos. Or, get this: If you go across the ocean to Japan, you can exchange an American dollar for over one-hundred Japanese yen. So, after this service, I'll be booking a flight to Japan if you'd like to join.

Now, these exchange rates have a way of evening out. For example, if you want to buy a Big Mac in Japan, you're not just paying five yen; you're paying something like seven-hundred yen. But the question all this raises is worth considering: Where is your money worth the most?

We'll get to the bottom of that question today, and we'll start by looking at one of the most surprising stories that Jesus ever told. It's found in Luke 16:1-13. Let's go through that story, and I think you'll see why I call it surprising. First, verses 1 and 2:

¹Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'"

So, we have a rich man and a manager. Think of this rich man as someone who is so incredibly wealthy that he employs someone to handle all his business and take care of all his stuff. The word for this manager in the original Greek is *oikonomos*, which is two Greek words smashed together: *oikos* and *nomos*, or, in English, "house" and "law." This manager was literally the law in his master's house. That's the kind of responsibility he had.

And apparently he wasn't taking his responsibility seriously. The rich man heard that his manager was wasting his possessions. So, the master more or less said to the manager, "You're done." That leads us to verses 3 to 7:

³"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-- ⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶"'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'

⁷"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'"

'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'"

Too weak to dig, too proud to beg, so what's the solution? The manager lightens the load of those indebted to his master. That way, when his master kicks him out, these people will feel duty-bound to help him. Clever, right? Well, that's what his master thought. Look at the first half of verse 8:

⁸"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

Not quite the reaction you'd expect. The idea might be that the master himself is corrupt, and he has an appreciation for the clever corruption of his manager. Perhaps the strangest thing of all, though, is what Jesus has to say about this story. Let's take the reading through verse 12, beginning with the last half of verse 8:

"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

So, when you hear the parable of the dishonest manager, you probably think that Jesus' point is going to be, "Don't be like that. Don't be dishonest like the manager." But that's not really what Jesus says about the parable, is it? Instead – and this is kind of mind-boggling at first – he holds up the dishonest manager as an example and says, "Be like him!"

But here's the key to understanding this parable: Jesus is not saying that you should imitate the manager's dishonesty. God values true and honest behavior. Instead, the lesson is this: Imitate the manager's willingness to use what he'd been given in a wise way. When you strip away the dishonesty from the story, that's what we're left with; the manager used his control over his master's possessions to secure for himself a future. He used what he'd been given in a wise way.

That's the lesson for you today. Use what you've been given in a wise way, because, if you think about it, your situation reflects very closely the situation of the rich man and the manager. The rich man is your God, and he has given you control over many things that ultimately belong to him. Your life, your home, your car, your clothes, your food, your money, everything you have is yours because your Creator allows it to be. Do you realize who that makes you? You are God's *oikonomos*; you are the law in your Master's house.

Maybe that makes this question a little more unsettling: Do you use what God's given you in a wise way? Are you wasting your master's possessions. Or, here's another way to ask that: Do you use what you've been given to serve God or to serve yourself?

It's not always easy to think about that, because then I have to think about questions like: That money that God has given me control over, am I using it wisely? Is its primary purpose to serve the interests of my Master, or have I hijacked it for my own interests? Or that strength to think and move that God has given you, are you using it wisely while you still have it? Is its primary purpose to work for the good of your Master, or have you commandeered this blessing for your own purposes?

And let me reveal what's truly at stake here. I've been talking about using what you've been given to serve either God or yourself, but the reality is a little different; the reality is much more serious. It's not whether your money serves God or you. It's whether you serve God or your money. Listen to Jesus' words in the final verse of this reading, verse 13: ¹³"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." It would do all of us well to ask ourselves: "I am God's manager, but whom – or what – have I truly been serving?"

That question has the potential to be sobering, but an even more important question is this: Who is your Master? We answer with joy that he is not a master who simply fires you when you waste his possessions, like the master in the parable. If he were, would anyone one of us still be in his service? Rather, he is a master who seeks desperately to keep you in his service.

Consider the lengths he went to for you. God looked at his Son and had to do something terrible. He accused him of something he didn't do, and then punished him for it. God acted as if Jesus had been the one who rebelled against him, who betrayed him, who wasted what he'd been given. He acted as if Jesus was you. Perhaps our human hearts are left asking this question: Whose grief was greater on Good Friday – the Father who punished his own, innocent Son, or the Son who suffered what our sins deserve? Perhaps we find something of hell in both.

To think that all this was done for you and me. Has any earthly master ever done so much for his servant? Could any earthly master ever do so much? No, only our heavenly Master could do and has done something so profound, something that allows me to say to you: Brother, sister, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. For whatever you've done, for your sins against God and man, for the hidden things and the known things, and, yes, for wasting that which your Master has given you, you are forgiven. The doors of heaven are open to you. Your husband, your wife, your parents, your grandparents, your children, your friends, all those who have died trusting in your Savior, they're waiting for you there. Your Savior himself is waiting for you there.

And maybe that makes what I'm going to say next sound shocking. Heaven is waiting for you, but, until you get there, you should be like an unbeliever. And, of course, I don't mean that you should be dishonest or deceitful like the unbeliever in Jesus' parable. I mean what Jesus meant: Use what you've been given in a wise way.

What exactly is a wise way? Well, Jesus gives a perfect example in verse 9: ⁹I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

What a novel way to think about your wealth! I can use the money God has given me to make earthly friends that will turn into eternal friends. I can use money to gain a hearing for the gospel.

What are some real-life examples of what that looks like? Maybe you use your dollars or your credit card or your checks to buy something for someone you suspect doesn't have the love of Jesus in their life. You can buy a meal or fill some other need. You provide for their physical needs so that you can meet their spiritual needs. Gain friends on earth with your wealth so they can welcome you in heaven.

Maybe you don't have someone like that that comes to the top of your mind. Well, you can give money to your church, too, because we have larger mission as Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, and that is to bring the love of Jesus to people who don't have.

Or, how about this: Our church body as a whole, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, they can do things that we can't do as a local church. They can send missionaries to places like Asia and Africa to spread the love of Jesus there. What if your contribution to them means that someone from those places welcomes you into heaven when you get there? And you may not know them yet, but they'll say, "You gave so that I could believe."

And that principle carries over to everything that God has given you. Whatever time you've been given, whatever talents you've been given, whatever treasure you've been given, is there a wiser, is there a better way to use these things than in the service of your Master who went to such lengths to make you his?

That brings us back to the question I asked at the beginning of this sermon. Where is your dollar worth the most? You can go to Canada or Mexico or Japan and exchange one piece of paper for a bunch more pieces of paper, and maybe that will make it feel like your dollar is worth a lot.

But the reality is this: Nowhere is your dollar worth more than when it is spent in the service of your Master. Nowhere is anything else your Master has given you worth more than when it is spent doing his will. After all, what can be worth more than the soul of someone you knew on earth waiting for you in heaven?

So, brothers, sisters, be like unbelievers: Use what you've been given wisely. Your Master is watching over you. Your Master is forgiving you when you fail. Your Master is waiting to bring you home to be with him. But, until then, go and use what you've been given by your Master to see that others are waiting for you, too. Amen.