

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto,
California

**The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 3, 2004**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

GOSPEL OF THE DAY: Luke 16:1-13

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So 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.'

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— ⁴ I 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.'

⁸ "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I 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. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

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." (NIV)

Some of the parables of Jesus are pretty easy to understand. You know the parables—the stories Jesus told. Some of them are fairly clear. For instance, the ones we heard last week about the lost sheep and the lost

coin. They picture sinners like us, lost and wandering, who are sought out and found by Jesus. And the parable that follows that one is maybe the most famous one of all: the lost (also called the “prodigal”) son. A son runs away, turning on his father. But the father always wants him back. And when the son hits rock bottom and comes crawling back, his father welcomes him. It’s a touching story about God’s welcoming and forgiving grace.

But then we get to parables like this one. This one is just weird. Did you listen as it was read before? Jesus tells a story about a rich man and the manager he has hired to take care of his property. The manager is a louse. He squanders the rich man’s money. Then the rich man finds out and calls him on it. “Turn in your books. You’re fired.” The manager starts to worry. “Oh, no. What am I going to do now? I could do some hard, honest, manual labor, digging ditches. No, I’m too weak for that. I could beg for money. But I’d be embarrassed. Wait a minute, I’ve got an idea.” The manager contacts some people who owe his boss money—lots of money. He says to the first one, “How much do you owe? Take the amount and cut it in half.” Then he says to the next one, “How much do you owe? Take the amount and reduce it by 20%.” Do you see what he’s doing? He’s doing some favors for some people, hoping that since he’s scratching their backs, they’ll scratch his. He’s making friends—dishonestly—who will take care of him when he’s out of a job with the rich man. Then, to top the story off, when the rich man finds out about this, he praises the dishonest manager for being so clever.

And Jesus seems to say, “See, Christians? You could really learn something from this guy. Look how shrewd he was.”

And we all say, “Huh? Um, Lord, I thought we weren’t supposed to be dishonest. We just heard this morning a Bible reading (Amos 8:4-7) that condemns dishonesty in business. What can we possibly learn from this guy?”

Well, Jesus does not want us to be dishonest and underhanded like the man in the parable. But he does want us to learn some things from him. Here’s how I’m distilling the main lesson from this parable and what follows it:

Use God’s Money for God’s Purposes

Let’s think about this for a few minutes and see what our Lord is talking about.

Use money; don’t let it use you.

One thing you have to say for this dishonest manager: he took control of his situation. It took him a while, granted; he shouldn’t have gotten himself fired in the first place. But when he got in gear and started using his head, he figured out a way to have some say in what his future held. And he used

money to do it. It was not his money, of course; it was his master's. But nonetheless, he used money and didn't let it use him.

Jesus' words make us wonder if we Christians could maybe learn something from this: For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. Our Lord's words to us make each of us ask, "Have I been shrewd with the way I've used money? Or could it be that instead of using money I've let it use me?"

A few years ago I was told a story by a friend who lives in the southwest part of Las Vegas. He's a pastor who has been working to start a church in that fast-growing area. He told me that he was out knocking on doors one day, meeting people and finding out whether they might be interested in a new church. He said he remembered going up to one house with a big boat in the driveway, a nice boat that obviously wasn't cheap. He met the owner of the house, who seemed very friendly, and began talking with him. "That's a nice boat," he said to the man. "Do you take it out on Lake Mead?"

The man replied something like, "Yeah, but not nearly as often as I'd like. To pay for the boat, my wife and I have to work some long hours. Between the two of us, we're working almost every day of the week. That doesn't leave much time to take the boat out."

What's wrong with this picture? It makes you wonder if that boat existed to serve that man, or if that man existed to serve the boat (and the bank who loaned him the money to buy it). A man and money: who was using whom?

The shrewd manager in the parable had an agenda. He knew what he wanted to do. Then he used his master's money to get what he wanted. He used his master's money to accomplish his goals. He didn't let money control his destiny. He used money to do what he wanted it to do.

Are you starting to pick up on what Jesus was driving at in this parable? As Christians, "children of the light," we have an agenda. It's our Father's agenda. He is the one who supplies us with money. And he directs us how to use it. He tells us to use money to serve him.

But too often we don't. Instead, we use God's money for our own selfish purposes. At least, we think we're using money for our purposes. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that money is using us. Oh, we think that we're using money to get what we want. We buy and spend and consume. But who gets the last laugh? Often it's the credit card company or any number of other lenders who are willing to let us think that we're getting what we want—until we read the fine print and the bills start coming due.

This last summer I took a summer school class taught by a former missionary to Africa. One day we were discussing the difference between different cultures in the world. The professor observed that, in his estimation, a culture can often have a blind spot for a certain sin. What he meant was that there are certain things in any given culture that are morally wrong but that are still accepted. Everybody does them and so people think

they're okay. He observed that Americans are often blind to the dangers of materialism. Most people in the world live on a fraction of what we do. Now, this is not bad; God has blessed our country with wealth. But the danger to us is that we get wrapped up in it, we get so in love with buying things and having things that this takes over. It can happen that instead of using the money and material things of this world, they end up controlling and using us.

Jesus was aware of this danger, and he was living in culture far poorer than that of 21st Century America. He said, 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.

We're not all affected by materialism to the same degree. But each of us, when we confess our sins to God, should be led by these words of Jesus to say, "God, I should have used your money to serve you. But instead, I have served myself and let money use me."

God will reply, "I know. And I forgive you. I forgive you for forgetting that the money you have is actually mine. I forgive you for pursuing your goals instead of mine. In response to your sins of abusing my gift, instead of punishing you I give you yet another gift: all is forgiven, washed away by the blood of my Son. All is forgotten. And I will look on you as I look on him, as someone who always has thought of my goals instead of your own. I choose to think of you as a perfect manager of all that I have given."

Now, as people pardoned by God, we want to do what he wants us to do. Instead of asking, "What do Madison Avenue TV commercials want me to do with my money?" or even, "What do *I* want to do with my money?" we now, prompted by God's grace, start singing a different tune. We start thinking, "Wait a minute. I wouldn't have any of this money if God had not given it to me. Really, it's his, not mine. I wonder what he wants me to do with it."

That leads us to the next thing we can learn from the shrewd manager...

Think long-term for yourself and others

When I was a kid—second, third grade—I lived in a small town in South Dakota. My friend and I would sometimes walk around town, through back alleys, looking for empty soda bottles. We'd take the empty bottles we found to Klufa's grocery store on Main Street, because Mr. Klufa would give us ten cents for each bottle. We wouldn't leave the store with dimes in our pockets, though. We would immediately trade in our money for candy. As soon as we had money we spent it.

Part of growing up is learning that money can be good for other things, too—other things besides spending it right away. Part of growing up is learning that you can use money in such a way that it will work for you. You learn that money can buy you things right away, but it can also get you things in the future. You can save it. You can invest it. And ten dollars can even turn into twenty dollars and more in the future if you think long-term.

The manager in Jesus' parable did that, didn't he? After he found out that he was going to be fired, he called his boss's debtors in and used money to make them his friends. That way, in the future when he got fired, he'd have friends to take care of him. He used money to do something for his future. He thought long-term.

Jesus tells us to do the same: I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Jesus tells us to use money, which can so often be misused, to do something good—something good for us and other people that will benefit all of us long into the future.

And what is that? What can we do with money that will help us and other people into the future? What does God want? He wants all people to be saved from hell and to know the truth about his grace. He wants people to turn from their self-centeredness and sin and believe what's true: that he has forgiven them for every one of their sins. God wants us and everybody else in the world to live forever by knowing about Jesus and the life that only he can give.

Putting this all together then, Jesus is telling us to use money to tell other people about him. Send out missionaries. Fund Christian churches and Christian schools. If you do, your money will be used for something that produces eternal returns. We sang it in the hymn: "Time and skills are ours for pressing toward the goals of Christ your Son." And what are the goals of Christ? That people hear about him, believe in him and remain in that faith until they enter heaven.

I can anticipate an objection to all this talk of using money to fund churches and missions. "Hey, preacher, isn't this a conflict of interest? You're telling us to give our money to church. Your job depends on us giving money to church!" True. But if you don't listen to me, listen to Jesus: I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Think long-term for yourself and others. Use your money to do something that lasts.

Maybe that's a good way to think about this. If I were to tell you that you could invest some money in a way that would keep bringing you returns the rest of your life and even after you die, would you be interested? Does that sound like a good investment? We can invest in such a thing, using our money to support the proclamation of the good news about Jesus through our church, our school, our Lutheran high schools, our synod, our missionaries. Investing in the gospel is smart investing.

Some people over 27 years ago thought that this project, starting a WELS church in this part of Modesto, was worth spending money on. They knew that through someone's dollars the gospel had come to them. They'd been brought into God's family through preaching, through baptism, through mission work that had been done through people's offerings. And they knew

that they, too, could use some of God's money to help other people in the same way. They knew that their offerings could help bring the gospel to people who knew it and people who didn't know it yet. So they used some of God's money for God's purposes. And here we are benefiting from that today.

Some of these people are still with us. Others are with the Lord. Someday we'll be able to say to them, "Thanks. Thanks for investing some of the money God gave you to do something for me and my family. God used your gifts to carry the message of life to us."

And someday, in heaven, someone might come up to us and say, "Thanks. Friend, thank you for using some of the money God gave you for his purposes. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for a missionary, a church, a Christian school, a Sunday school, a VBS."

We have been blessed. Let's receive God's blessings with gratitude and pass on those blessings to many others in generations to come. Amen.