

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.” (Luke 16:1-13)

Why Do Pastors Talk about Money so Much?

It’s one of the most common complaints about ministers: “All he talks about is money.” Have you ever heard that? Sometimes pastors reply, “Jesus talked about money more than any other single topic.” As far as I know, that’s true. But it doesn’t really answer the criticism. **Why do pastors talk about money so much?** The most obvious reason is that money is always tight. That’s been true here at Peace since the day I got here and it’s still true today. And we are not alone. Most churches in America are struggling financially. Huron Valley Lutheran High School has serious budgetary issues. Our national church body, the WELS, has great difficulty keeping its mission and its education program afloat. Given the economy that we have before us today, given the amount of debt that most people carry, financial problems are going to be a way of life for us for the foreseeable future. When money is tight, pastors often feel pressure to try to generate more offerings.

But the church has been wrestling with money for as long as it has existed. That should not be the main reason why pastors talk about money. Even if God showered money down on the church and her members, we would still need to talk about money. Why? Because how we handle our money is a spiritual issue. That’s what Jesus is talking about this morning in our gospel lesson.

II.

Why do pastors talk about money so much? Because money offers one of our greatest temptations. To make us see that, Jesus told a very difficult parable – this story of a manager who’s getting fired and cheats his boss. It’s easy to get lost in the details of a parable and miss the point. Right at the end of our lesson for today, Jesus said something to help us see his point. 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.”**

Jesus’ point is simple: who is your God? Who is most important to you, money or the Lord? What do you trust in to keep you safe, to take care of you during bad times, to create a sense of security in your life, Jesus or your savings and investments and your retirement plan? Jesus’ words here are really about trust in him.

There are two kinds of idol worship. One kind is belonging to a different religion. Islam and Buddhism and even Mormonism and the Jehovah’s Witness church are open idol worship. They do not hold to the God of

the Bible, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But there's another kind of idol worship. It's not open and obvious. In fact, a person who's guilty of this sin would tell you that they're a Christian. They might even say they're a Lutheran and that they go to Peace Lutheran Church. But God is not the most important thing in their lives. For the person Jesus is talking about today, money is. Or to put it another way: their lifestyle is. They care more about making money than about following God. They trust in their job and their salary and their benefits package to protect their health and provide all that their family needs. They dedicate their lives to acquiring a big beautiful house, a nice car, stylish clothes, high speed internet connections, cable TV and all the coolest toys. That person worships a false god: money.

Could we ever be guilty of that kind of idol worshippers? Well, does God come first in our lives? When we're sitting here, it's easy to say, "Yes." But do our lives prove that? How much thought and concern do you put in to making money in comparison with the thought and concern you put into the mission of your congregation? How much time and money have you dedicated just this year to training and education so that you can make more money and have a nicer lifestyle in the future? How much time and effort have you put into learning about God? To reading the Bible? To coming to Adult Bible class? To attending church?

I'm not saying they will ever be equal. But look at what you spend time and money on and just between you and God – without saying one word to me – be honest. Does God come first in your life? Or do you have to admit that all too often you try to serve both God and money? That's the balancing act most of us are trying to maintain. We don't want to be totally money driven. But we try to serve both. And Jesus says you just can't do that. If you do not dedicate your heart one hundred percent to God, then you have let something else into his place, even when you think you're just trying to be even handed.

So what do you have to admit to God? I have to admit that I don't always keep him in first place in my heart. I do care about whether my house is as nice as yours. I do care about whether my kids can have all the video games that the other kids in school have. It does bug me sometimes that I can't afford cable TV and all the other toys I'd like to have. I have to admit to God that sometimes, wealth and lifestyle crowd him out of my thinking. Do you? If you do, then we have to admit that we are idol worshippers. That's the natural state of every sinner's heart. We worship money because we worship ourselves. We care most about what we want and what we feel. That sin deserves God's punishment in hell forever.

But that's why Jesus told this parable. He knew that our problem is idol worship. He came here to solve that problem. He came here to take our place in life and to honor God in a way that you and I never could. He was God. With all of his power and all his wisdom, he could've been the richest and the most comfortable man who ever lived. But he chose to live in poverty – even by the standards of his own day – to be born in a stable, to grow up in a fishing village, to depend on others for shelter and food rather than making money at a career. He chose to give up everything and put the gospel first. He did that for us. His life of following God replaces our lives of pursuing wealth and comfort.

Jesus came here to pay for you and for me. On the cross, he died for all our greed. He died because we worship ourselves, because we worship money and comfort and lifestyle. He suffered the hell we deserve and he paid for all our sin. He died. And then he rose. And God announced that all our greed, all our self worship, all our money worship are forgiven. He has washed it all away in the blood of Christ.

II.

Now, God calls us to turn from false gods. God made a change in us when he told us what Jesus has done. God gave us faith in Christ and that changes our perspective on wrestling with money, too. **Why do pastors talk about money so much? Because money provides one of our greatest opportunities.**

That's really the point of Jesus' parable. A man worked as a manager for a very wealthy man. He got fired for wasting the boss's possessions. The Greek word literally means he scattered them. Instead of conserving and growing the wealth under his stewardship, he lost money. The manager realized that he wouldn't get another job with that kind of a history, so he came up with this ingenious, little plan. He called in people who owed his boss money and he changed their paperwork. In one case, he reduced the debt by 50%, in another by 20%. Then those guys owed him. They would provide for him, either by giving him a job or just by letting him be one of those people that hangs on to rich people. Now, you'd think that the boss would've been upset by the money he lost. But he was impressed. He commended this manager for turning a bad situation to his own advantage.

Now, is Jesus telling us to be dishonest and get ahead while this life lasts? Not at all. Rather, Jesus is talking about dealing with this world in a way that shows that we are good managers of what God has given us. He says, **“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. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”** To God, how important is worldly wealth? It’s meaningless. It’s worthless. It’s what Jesus calls “very little.” It’s hard for us to look at it like that because money is such a necessary part of life. But God can create it and multiply it and supply it with no difficulty at all. To him, there are much more important things – like the gospel, the message he sent us to proclaim. If God can’t trust us with something as unimportant as wealth, how can he trust us with something really important, like the gospel, like eternal life? In that sense, every dollar that he gives us is a test of our faithfulness. It’s an opportunity for us to show God just how committed we are to him. The way we manage our lives, the way we put him first shows the change he has made in us.

Jesus said, **“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”** By gaining friends, he does not mean doing what the manager did. He does not mean gain favors here so that you get through this life OK. He means use the wealth that you have to create true friends for yourself – fellow Christians, people who will spend eternity with you. He’s talking about using all that we have for the good of the gospel.

Now, there are lots of ways we do that. When we join together with other Christians and we dedicate our time and our resources to the same gospel that they are, we’re gaining friends among them. We’re exercising our fellowship, our oneness in the mission God has given us. We will welcome each other to heaven when our time of having wealth here is over. When we teach our children to know the Lord and give our time and money so they hear the gospel, we’re gaining an eternal friendship with them. When we dedicate our time and effort and wealth to reaching out with the gospel, we’re gaining friends for heaven. We’re growing the group of people who will welcome us to heaven when the time comes.

Now, God does not need our money. His gospel will go forth, with or without us. But he gives us the chance to be a part of that work. It’s our greatest opportunity to serve him. And God never asks that we give all our money to the church. Quite the opposite, God tells us to use our wealth to care for our families, to pay taxes and to care for the poor. But God should not come in last place. We don’t go out and buy all the stuff we want and then see if we have anything left for God. God comes first, even in our planning.

Does God come first? That’s the central question Jesus is asking us. Again, we all have to admit that too often, he doesn’t. Too often, we hardly think about how he would have us use the gifts he gives us. That’s just sin. But it’s sin that Jesus paid for. It’s sin that Jesus forgave. Now, as forgiven children of God, our Lord himself calls us to think differently. He calls us to put our faith in practice. He calls us to view using the resources God has provided to spread the gospel as a joy and a privilege.

While I was studying to be a pastor, I went to Germany. This was just after the Berlin Wall came down and East and West Germany reunited. I went to East Germany to visit a Lutheran seminary there. The president of the seminary invited me into his office. We talked about how hard it had been to be faithful Lutherans under communism and all the challenges they had faced. They were so excited that they were free from all that. They were also very excited about the new economic opportunities that were pouring into East Germany. I remember thinking how unprepared they were for the materialism of the West. They didn’t know yet how the devil was going to tempt them with wealth. But we know. We live it every day. Jesus knew 2,000 years ago. Wealth can lead us away from God and become a god in its own right. But when God gives us wealth, he’s not tempting us. He’s not trying to lead us astray. He’s giving us an opportunity to serve him by using our wealth as he would use it: for the good of our families, to support our government, to help the poor and to support the preaching of the gospel. May God give us hearts that cherish what Jesus did for us and that use our wealth for his glory. Amen.