

Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.<sup>2</sup> 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.’

<sup>3</sup> “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—<sup>4</sup> I know what I’ll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’

<sup>5</sup> “So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

<sup>6</sup> “ ‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

<sup>7</sup> “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.’

<sup>8</sup> “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.<sup>9</sup> I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

<sup>10</sup> “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.<sup>11</sup> So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?<sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?

<sup>13</sup> “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)

### Wealth: A Test for our Faith

“This has been a real test for my faith.” Have you ever heard that? What do we mean when we say it? Obviously, we mean that something challenges our faith. For the most part, aren’t we thinking of something painful? My faith has been challenged in the last few months, and I’ve sat down many times with people who had lost someone or who were in the hospital or who had lost their jobs. And they were struggling to trust that God knows what is best. It’s easy for us to see how those things test or challenge our faith. But you know what? There are many other kinds of tests to our faith. Have you ever thought about how blessings can actually challenge our faith? Jesus said that whoever loves their parents or their children more than him is not worthy of him. Our families are tremendous blessings to us. But could a spouse that we love, could those children who light up our lives be challenges to our faith? Yes, if we make them more important than God. Other blessings can challenge our faith, too. Being good at math, being good at sports, being good at music are wonderful blessings. But we can easily turn those things into sources of pride that lead us away from God. This morning, Jesus focuses our attention on another real blessing that can easily lead us away from God: wealth. **Wealth is a test for our faith.**

Don’t we usually think of poverty as a test of faith? Losing your job and having to somehow feed your kids or make your house payments – that is obviously a test of faith. But having all the money you want or need? Living a comfortable, middle class lifestyle or better? How does that test our faith? One way is that wealth never makes us content. You always want a little more. How many of us here today can honestly say that we’re good with what we’ve got and we don’t need any more money, any more stuff, any more physical blessings? Wealth tests our faith.

Jesus goes in a little different direction with the difficult parable that he told. A man serves as a manager of the property of a very rich individual. He gets accused of squandering that property and he’s told to turn in his books. He’s getting fired. What he does next doesn’t make a lot of sense to us because our world works differently. He wants to be welcomed into rich people’s homes – he wants to become a part of some rich person’s posse, if you will. In the ancient world, rich people cultivated networks of people who owed them favors and who were dependent on them. Then they would call on those people to do things they needed done. That’s what this man hopes to become. So he calls in a couple of other rich people who owe his boss money.

And they cook the books. They change the bills and reduce what these guys owe his boss. His boss realizes what happened and that there's not much he can do about it. And he does something surprising: he commends the manager for being shrewd. If Jesus were telling this parable today, he might've had that boss tell the manager, "Well played."

What is Jesus' point? He says that the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with each other than we Christians are. He goes on to tell us to use worldly wealth to gain friends for ourselves so that when it's gone, we'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Now what on earth is Jesus saying? He's not talking about doing what the manager did – he clearly engaged in a conspiracy to defraud his boss. He stole from him to gain friends. That's not what Jesus wants us to do. Rather, Jesus' point is using our wealth for the good of others, especially for the poor. You gain their friendship, their good will, when you're generous to them. And Jesus says that when all our wealth is exhausted, we will then be welcomed into heaven. After living our faith in regard to this difficult issue, that faith will carry us home.

God gives us wealth for a purpose: to reflect the love of our Savior in our dealings with the people around us. Jesus explained his point by saying, **"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."** He goes on to make it clear that "the very little" he's talking about is worldly wealth and the "much" is eternal life. He calls our wealth in this life "someone else's property" – it's God's property. If we're not faithful in handling it, he asks who will give us property of our own, by which he means eternal life. So wealth here is a test of our faith. Do we trust God enough to use the wealth he gives us the way he tells us to? Or will our greed drive us to view our wealth and our comfort and all those possessions as the true goal of our lives?

My friends, what is our true goal of life? It's heaven. It's eternal life with Jesus. But do we always see it that way? No. Why not? Because we can't touch that life yet. We can't see it. We know it only by faith. Even leaving eternal life aside for a moment, it's hard to be disciplined about your spending, isn't it? If you're saving to buy your first house or to get your first apartment, how easy is it to skip the Starbucks coffee this week and put that five or six bucks toward that long term goal? Most of us find that pretty tough to do, don't we? And that's true even though we can go visit houses we might like to buy. So how much harder is it to be disciplined about using our wealth to advance our goal of getting to heaven, something none of us has seen or can see?

That makes this a question of faith: do we trust God enough to use our wealth as he calls us to? Maybe we need to ask: how does he call us to use it? God gives us money so we can take care of our families. Most of us can see that. But what about shelling out money for that brother-in-law who can't or won't keep a job? What about making sure his kids don't starve? That's harder, right? God also gives us money to support the work of the church. We all get that. But the problem is priorities. God calls us to give him our firstfruits. God calls us to be generous with him, in proportion to how he has blessed us. That's harder. I've spent twelve years here coming to the congregation over and over again with our financial problems. We are wracking up hundreds of dollars in penalties every quarter because we are so far behind on paying our pension bills. Are we truly being generous with God? Or do we just not like the idea of paying for pensions so we don't want to give to that? Do we need something exciting to be moved to give? Is that how God calls us to view our wealth? Finally, God gives us money to help people in need. That is the money lesson that Jesus spent the most time on. How often do we equate helping those in need with giving to the Lord? The Bible does that all the time. Do we include in our family budgets a percentage of our wealth to help those who are hungry or homeless or sick?

What makes all this hard? We only have so much money. And if I give ten percent to the Lord in my church and to the poor, if I spent thousands of dollars a year supporting nieces and nephews because their dad is a deadbeat, I will have that much less to live on, to eat out on, to save for a house or a new car. It will hurt me here to live the way Jesus calls us to.

And that's all true. That's why it takes faith. God promises that if we are generous with him, he will shower blessings down on our heads. God promises that we can never outgive him. God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us and even if we have trouble figuring out how to make the math in our budgets work, he will take care of us. Do we trust him to do that? When he has blessed us tremendously already, do we trust him enough to put all that blessing on the line and give to him through support for our church and support for our family and support for those who are in need?

Jesus 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.”** What is the most important thing in our lives? God or money? I don’t lose a lot of sleep worrying about you becoming Muslims or Hindus or even atheists. It happens sometimes, but most of you will probably call yourselves Christians for the rest of their lives. But I do worry about us letting something else, like money, get in the way of our faith. I worry about us not coming to church because we always have to work on Sunday or because we like to have fun on Saturday nights. I worry about us getting so caught up in the pursuit of things in this life – houses, cars, athletic trophies, whatever – that hearing God’s Word and putting that word into practice becomes a more and more distant memory.

Could that happen to us who are gathered here today? Absolutely. Because it’s already happening to every one of us, in one way or another, every single day. We are all sinners and saints at the same time. And the sinner inside us worships only himself. The sinner inside us wants more and more wealth, and he doesn’t want to share any of it. If you can’t see that about yourself, then I haven’t done a good enough job of showing how broad Jesus’ point really is. We are all sinners and for our worship of ourselves and our wealth and our comfort, every single one of us deserves God’s eternal punishment in hell.

But that’s not the end of Jesus’ message to us, even though that is where the parable ends. Jesus said these things because the **“Pharisees, who loved money ... were sneering at”** him. But I hope that we are having a different reaction. I hope and pray that we all recognize our guilt and repent. We confess to our God and Father how far short we have fallen in our attitudes and in our actions. And we cling to Jesus to take all that guilt away. Jesus did more than just give an offering for the poor. Jesus gave himself. He surrendered more than money for the good of those who were in need. He gave up heaven itself and was born in a stable. He gave up even his job here as a carpenter and wandered the roads of Israel to proclaim the good news. He healed the sick and fed the hungry and he taught the poor in spirit to know their Savior and to find hope. Jesus sacrificed all that he was for the good of others. And he did all that so that God can say that we did all that. His life, his love, his generosity counts for all of us in God’s record. Then Jesus died and paid for our greed and sin. He suffered the hell that our lack of trust in God deserves. He stood in our place and took the punishment for our idolatry. And his blood washed all that sin away. To God we are now perfect. Jesus rose to make sure that we understand that. He rose to guarantee us that we will rise and live with him in that perfect world that is coming. He rose to assure us that we will go to heaven when we die to wait for that day of resurrection.

And he comes to us in that message to renew our faith. He comes to us in that message to take away the guilt we feel when we hear a sermon like this. Let me repeat his promise to you, in the place of Jesus: you are forgiven. And he comes to us to build us up in faith and trust so that we can indeed be faithful with little things like worldly wealth and use it as God calls us to. He changes our hearts so that we can see all that we have here is just a loan from God. He builds us up to be generous here, to be joyful in using our wealth to care for our family, to support the work of our church, and to help those who are in need, because that’s why God gave us that money. And we have a much richer treasure coming in heaven. So yes, wealth here is a test of our faith. Pass the test, my friends. Look at your life through the cross and the empty tomb of Christ and see all the wealth God gives you as true blessing. And use it as God calls you. Not to win heaven. But because heaven, the greatest treasure any person can ever have, is already yours. Amen.