

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

Sept. 21, 2025 (Proper 20, Year C)
Amos 8:4-7
Luke 16:1-13

A man in California ran from his burning home. He watched in horror as it went up in flames. Then, suddenly, he shouted, "My securities!" And he plunged himself back into the fire to save his securities, his money. But he never made it back out again. He sacrificed his personal security for his financial securities, and he lost them both.

Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both GOD AND MONEY."

Hmm, you know, there's something disturbing in there. He said, "SERVE money.' He PERSONIFIES money. Or worse, if PEOPLE WORSHIP MONEY, Jesus is actually referring to it as a GOD, a FALSE god. Jesus doesn't do that for ANY other subject. He doesn't even grant SATAN that status. There's just SOMETHING ABOUT MONEY. More than ANY other object in our lives, it has the capacity to become ANOTHER GOD to us, an IDOL. It TAKES OVER our lives.

That's why Luke recorded the Aramaic word that JESUS ACTUALLY USED instead of translating it to Greek like he did for the rest of the gospel. "Mammon" means MORE than wealth. It means "that in which one trusts."

We can only TRUST ONE THING, just as a compass can only point in one direction. As Luther reminds us in the Large Catechism, whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in – THAT is TRULY YOUR GOD.

That's why Jesus talks ABOUT money more than any other subject (did you know that?), more than ANY other subject, PRECISELY because we feel so STRONGLY about it.

Now let's be honest, there IS a PLACE for money in our lives. Roofs over our heads, food in our stomachs, gas in our cars, ANY trip to the hospital – try to do ANY of it WITHOUT money. Impossible. Jesus KNEW that. He was EXTREMELY PRACTICAL. He knew that there are some things ONLY MONEY can do. It's a necessary TOOL. It's useful.

But what Jesus is SAYING here is that we're in DEEP trouble if money has FIRST place in our lives. Money is a nice SERVANT, but a TERRIBLE MASTER.

The subject matter here makes us UNCOMFORTABLE, but the WAY JESUS TELLS this story makes us even MORE uncomfortable, because the main character is the BAD guy. WHY on earth does Jesus COMMEND this dishonest manager, this unjust steward, as he's usually called? He's HARDLY a WELL-MEANING soul. It says he SQUANDERED his master's goods. Just like a few verses earlier, when the prodigal son squandered his FATHER'S wealth—he WASTED it.

This man EMBODIES what we read in Amos: "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land." And in the end, the ONLY reason he helps them is to help HIMSELF. And the way he DOES it is to do the VERY thing he was accused of in the FIRST place – STEALING from his master. As far as I can remember, this is the ONLY time Jesus ever commends the BAD guy in the story.

So what are we to DO with this story? Well, JESUS said, "No servant can serve two masters. ... You cannot serve both God and Money."

A church member came to his pastor's study one day. The pastor could see that the man looked deeply troubled.

The man said, "Pastor, I need to talk. I feel so empty, so dried up inside, I'm scared." His voice began to quiver just a bit. He said "Pastor, I've just come from the doctor's office, and he told me that I have only six months at best to live. After I left the office, I realized that I have no spiritual resources, no inner strength to cope with this. There's nothing to fall back on, to lean against. "

“Many people would be surprised to hear me say that, because I’ve made lots of money, and people think I’m a success, not only at making money, but at being a strong, powerful person.”

He then fell quiet, and the pastor waited in silence for him to go on. Finally, the man said, “You know, I’m poor in the things that count the most. I see it now. I’ve put my faith in the wrong things, and the truth is, I’m destitute, spiritually destitute.”

“I could pick up the phone and call any bank in Houston and borrow any amount of money to do whatever I wanted to. Just on my name, Reverend, just on my name! Do you understand? I could borrow it on my name only.”

The man then leaned forward and put his head in his hands, and said softly through tears, “I guess there are some things you CAN’T BUY.”

This man’s material bank was full, but his spiritual bank was empty. He was serving mammon and not God.

You see, at the BEGINNING of our story, the manager was just like that man. He was SERVING MONEY. MONEY was ALL he could see.

A parable is told of an enormously rich man who complained to his therapist that, despite his great wealth that enabled him to have whatever he wanted, he still felt miserable. The therapist took the man to the window overlooking the street and asked, “What do you see?”

The man replied, “I see men, women, and children.”

The therapist then took the man to stand in front of a mirror and asked, “Now what do you see?”

The man said, “I see only myself.”

The therapist explained, “In the window there is a glass, and in the mirror there is glass. The difference is this: Behind the glass in the mirror is a layer of silver. When you cover the glass with silver, you cease to see others. You can only see yourself.”

The silver in the dishonest manager’s mirror kept him from seeing anything but himself. Mammon was his master. But when the money was taken AWAY, he could finally SEE THROUGH the glass, see the OTHERS in need around him. And he did something to HELP them.

Did you know that 1 in 4 Americans owes medical debt that they CANNOT PAY, WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PAY? More than HALF the personal bankruptcies in the US are due to medical debt. The US is the only industrialized nation in the world where an illness can reduce a family to poverty.

Well, one church decided to do something about that. When medical debt isn’t paid, it’s sold at AUCTION to third-party debt collectors, for PENNIES on the dollar. But this church steps in and THEY bid on it. And then they FORGIVE the debt, rather than collecting on it.

(Show pic “debts forgiven.”)

This happened last year, in 2024. It got a lot of press back then. It says, “The members of Trinity Moravian Church in North Carolina purchased nearly \$3.3 million of local residents’ medical debt for just \$15,000. Then they held a debt jubilee ceremony and BURNED the debt, canceling all of it.”

It started a movement. Other churches JOINED them and started doing the SAME THING. I read about it just this week. The Debt Jubilee Project to date has forgiven over \$21 million in medical debts, giving over 15 thousand NC families a second chance.

Just 4 chapters before this, Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Here, Jesus is giving us an EXAMPLE of what that LOOKS like. Where is your treasure? Where was that miserable rich man’s treasure? In his wallet. And that’s where his HEART was too, but his bank account couldn’t HELP him.

Where is the treasure of the members of those churches? It’s in the lives of the people in their community, and that’s where their HEART is too.

That’s what happened to this dishonest manager in our story. Where was HIS treasure when the story BEGAN? In his own security. But, for all the wrong reasons, he MOVED his treasure to

helping people, and UNEXPECTEDLY, his HEART went WITH it. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In the end, he learned the PURPOSE of money, and that’s a lesson we ALL need to learn. Money is a TOOL that’s meant to be USED. It’s a GIFT that’s meant to be GIVEN, a BLESSING meant to bless OTHERS. TRUE wealth isn’t the ACCUMULATION of money, but the QUALITY of your life. And the MEASURE of your life ISN’T how much you’ve EARNED; it’s how much LOVE you SHARED.

It ALL BELONGS to GOD ANYWAY. It NEVER WAS OURS. It was given to us to take care of, to steward, to manage, and to pass on to others. The correct USE of our treasure is to HELP our NEIGHBORS.

And THAT is what the manager DID. What Jesus is saying is that, if a SCOUNDREL like this (a child of darkness, he calls him), doing it for all the WRONG reasons, if even HE can realize the importance of PEOPLE and RELATIONSHIPS, how much MORE should YOU, the children of the LIGHT. How much MORE should YOU USE your resources to HELP people.

Jesus is saying, “You don’t NEED more MONEY. You have ENOUGH. PEOPLE are MORE important. So USE the gifts with which God has BLESSED you to bless someone ELSE.” “Where your TREASURE is, there your HEART will be also.” Amen.