

Squandering

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[0 : 00] Y'all, it is my privilege as always to be here, and today we are moving into the third sermon in the series that we are calling Generosity and Communal Economics.

Even though it's notoriously hard to talk about money and possessions in church, Pastor Anthony and I felt like it was important to put together this series. For one, the holidays are a lot of people approaching, and I'm conscious that this year, as really every year, we are about to enter into what I think of as a feeding frenzy. There's going to be pressure to consume without intention, to be consumed by our desire, in fact. To be consumed, to be overwhelmed, it's going to come from every side, from marketing campaigns. Y'all know the ones where you magically get a car on Christmas morning? Those campaigns. You're going to get pressure at white elephant parties to give and to receive things that you will probably never use. And there'll be pressure from your own inner sense that you deserve things no matter the cost to the planet or to your neighbors.

No matter the cost in terms of mounting debt. And it's all because of these pressures that we need to talk about money and possessions. That we need to think about how we as followers of Jesus should relate to these pressures. How do we escape from defining ourselves by our capacity to consume versus our capacity to create? In what ways can we grow from acknowledging that how we spend and how we regard possessions almost always says more about what we believe, about who we are and who we're really loyal to, than really anything else about us?

And even as I ask those questions, I want to tell you that, of course, I have the answers. And of course, you know that I do not have the answers to all those questions. I'm trying to swim upstream just as you are.

And yet, I remain convinced by the overwhelming witness of scripture about money and possessions that to be in covenant with God and with one another means that we are called to a different set of grounding assumptions than we often experience in the world at large.

[2 : 49] And then, in addition to the holidays approaching, it feels like an important time to talk about church finances and the cast of vision for where we are and where we want to go.

Past three years have been a time of transition for this community. And transition that, to my understanding, has been hard. Has been painstaking, has been full of dreams, but also hard fall. And from where I stand, it's beginning to feel like this community is regaining its feet. Standing up and we're walking, we're walking forward.

That feels like deep, deep joy. So it feels like it's time to talk about where we're going, in what direction, and to be honest, how we fund that, how we get there.

And I have to admit, as I say all this, that I grew up in a tradition where, a church tradition, where talking about money was always over-spiritualized.

[4 : 01] Instead of saying, this is how much it takes to pay the rent, or this is how much it takes to pay pastors well, or this is how much it'll take to build that recording studio that we think will be really a blessing to the community and generate income and all of that.

I grew up in spaces where the leaders would over-spiritualize those things and would extract from scripture rules about how much every single person, regardless of circumstance, had to give.

And that was the best case scenario. Sometimes those same people would instead just say, I and I alone have heard from God what you should give.

And all of that was deeply, deeply problematic. People were not invited into their discipleship responsibility to discern personally and communally how to live out the call of Jesus to generosity.

And at the table church, we want to be inviting you into that rich discernment. And I realize every time I talk about invitations, they're always difficult. I'm sorry, okay?

[5 : 13] I'm really sorry. But like, we want to be the kind of place that's inviting you into that kind of discernment that shapes you as disciples, informs you, and helps us as a community to ask better questions about what our commitment should be.

We want our self-understanding to be about mutual investment, apart from consumerism. We want to be rooted in covenant community that touches all that we have and yet does not cross boundaries inappropriately, does not manipulate.

So, during the first week of this series, Pastor Anthony shared some personal stories. I reflected a little bit on the story of manna. And just name that.

I tend to think that when we start to talk about money and possessions, there are two bedrock assumptions. One, all we have is gift. And two, there will be enough when our communities steward resources equitably and without hoarding.

And then last week, Pastor Anthony compared all pastors and clergy to used car salesmen, which was, as people I know would say, it was tight but right. And then he talked about how leaders like us, like me, have often created upon people and helped to create systems of injustice.

[6 : 47] So, this week, what I want to do is actually explore one of the parables of Jesus that I consider to be, it's kind of an odd parable. It's a little bit mind-bending in its quality.

It's a parable that's not usually preached on. It's hard to understand. And on a first read, you kind of have to read it a number of times. But I think that it does well at laying out an alternative set of economic assumptions that we, as Jesus followers, should consider.

And it helps us to critique where our security actually comes from, to consider where it comes from, and to critique our false beliefs. And then the final thing I want to say by way of introduction is that, for me, the passage, this passage we're going to talk about, it was watershed in my thinking about money and possessions.

Last year, literally tomorrow, Halloween, I gathered with Resurrection City in one of our, like, only in-person services in the backyard of a home in Columbia Heights.

And we held this small group-style service around this passage. And the things that people came up with from Luke 16, 1 through 13 were mind-blowing.

[8 : 05] The word generosity in the title of our sermon series is critical. And that's why we used that same title last year. One scholar says that generosity, and I love this, this is a philosopher, is a penetration of grace into the world of selling and competition.

Generosity is a way of embodying grace materially. And we are called to that kind of penetration and that kind of embodiment.

And then it's communal. We're talking about communal economics in this series. And as Res City, that's where we started, because the way in which the Bible talks about money and possessions always is within the realm of how those things affect the neighbor.

They're always surrounded and circumscribed and limited and expanded by the neighbor and what the neighbor needs in terms of health and wholeness.

But we're trying to interrupt our dominant model, so we need another set of grounding assumptions. So let's go ahead and get into this passage today.

[9 : 20] It's Luke 16, 1 through 13. This is going to be up, but I also am going to go back and forth into it. So if you want to pull out a Bible or a device, feel free to do that.

Luke 16, 1 through 13. Then Jesus said to the disciples, there was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

So he summoned him and said to him, what is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.

Then the manager said to himself, what will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.

So summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, how much do you owe my master? He answered, a hundred jugs of olive oil. He said to him, take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.

[10 : 38] Then he asked another, and how much do you owe? He replied, a hundred containers of wheat. He said to him, take your bill and make it eighty.

And his master commended the dishonest manager, because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their generation than are the children of light.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

If then you have not been faithful with a dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

[11 : 46] You cannot serve God and wealth. Okay. So first I'm going to give just a little bit of context, and then I'll give some specific things to notice from this scripture, which is so rich.

And then we'll do some takeaways, some wrap-ups. So first, the basic thing to know about this parable is that it comes in a section of the Gospel of Luke in which there are several stories that have social and economic ramifications.

Luke 12 through 19, that whole section contains stories about not concentrating wealth, about resisting anxiety when it comes to possessions, about conspiring to create boundary, crossing, table, fellowship, with humility, and then right before this story, the parable of the prodigal son. The writer of Luke over and over again demonstrates concern for justice with generosity by paying attention to socioeconomic realities.

This is the writer, Luke, who includes Mary's song of praise in which there is celebration at God's filling the hungry with good things, but sending the rich away empty.

[13 : 01] And this is the writer who remixes the Beatitudes, making them more explicitly about socioeconomic conditions. Blessed are those who are hungry and weep now.

Woe to those who are rich and full and laughing now. And it's inside this section of Luke that we get this story that challenges many of our assumptions.

So notice a few things with me. So first, notice the primary characters in the story. You have a rich man, you have a manager, and then you have folks who are in debt to the manager.

And from what we know about the Gospels in the world of first century Palestine, the rich man is probably an absentee landlord with a large estate, and that estate is being worked by landless tenant farmers who are indebted to him.

But what I found especially fascinating in my conversations about this story is that most people assume that the rich man represents God.

[14 : 09] I know that likely many of us have been taught that parables always have this very direct one-to-one meaning rather than being stories from the real world that we have to kind of turn over in our souls like rich soil.

And even as I know that, it doesn't escape me that the frequent assumption that the rich man is God carries under it often uninterrogated theologies of God.

God is one who requires strict accounting even as God dwells in absolute abundance. God operates with a tight fist only being generous to those who are the most deserving.

And even though we are indebted to God in ways that may corrode our soul, God is mostly feeling, unfeeling, and absent. We are tenants that are ensnared beyond our control.

But the rich man, thank God, does not represent God in this text. The rich man is just a rich man. And if there is any parallel for our own lives in this story, for many of us, it is to that of the manager and not the tenants.

[15 : 31] Perhaps the manager was a slave or a tenant at some point, but now he's worked his way into the dominant, into the dominant system. He is middle class and respectable and is in a perfect position to do the bidding of the rich man.

Second, second, notice the word squandering. The manager is accused of squandering the rich man's wealth.

Some Bible versions choose the word wasting for the Greek word used there. But whether it's translated squandering or wasting, the sense underneath this word is about scattering.

Instead of concentrating, scattering, instead of a perfect balance sheet, a reckless giving away. And it's not completely clear what the manager actually is doing when he squanders.

He could be redistributing. He could just be, you know, be wasteful in his job. He might actually be stealing. But what is clear is that whatever he's doing is outside of the dominant socioeconomic model of concentrating wealth in order to increase economic privilege and social power.

[16:53] He's doing something that threatens the very logic of domination that the rich man upholds. He's threatening the system. And then next, notice how central indebtedness is to this story.

And you'll see this a lot in Luke if you go back and read that section, 12 through 19. The tenets and others in the story are in debt to the rich man. There is something about the way in which the world of the rich man is supported by debt, is supported by the structuring of some people out of God's shalom of peace and welfare and flourishing.

Debt. Debt may be the ultimate we have, you need mentality. That is always the beginning of logics of domination.

Creation in this world instead of being a gift to treasure and steward is an object to own and categorize. So debt.

Notice the importance of debt in the story. And then fourth, notice the ways that verse 4 and verse 9 are parallel to each other.

[18:14] Take time if you go home to look at this more closely. At their ends, both of these verses note that the path through which we will be welcomed home in verse 4 to earthly homes and to verse 9 to eternal homes, they both note that path.

See, when the manager realizes that he may lose everything, he decides to curry favor with the people who owe his boss, the less significant people, the people at the bottom of the system. The story is not really clear about how exactly the manager gets the bill reduced. He could be reducing the interest on the debt, but probably what is most likely is that he's actually taking off his own commission from the bill.

And in doing so, he's actually outwitting the rich man by making him look generous. But he's also gaining favor for himself. When it finally kind of all goes south, it all falls apart, the manager will have a place to stay with the people among whom he has gained favor.

The point may be that the future, the real future outside of systems of domination and oppression is secured from within the community, the neighborhood.

[19:42] It is secured by choosing community and neighborliness and connection over capital. By choosing messy networks of reciprocal obligation and mutual aid and covenant community over commodification and transactional ways of being.

And the point is also that wealth and possessions can be a means for evil and injustice or they can be used for the kind of good on which the age to come rests.

Two more points. Fifth, the center of the story, verse eight, is a commendation from the rich man to the manager for his shrewdness, for basically being clever.

The man is praised for being clever. Then Jesus steps outside of the telling of the parable and he also echoes the commendation. He echoes the praise. And what I love there is that the manager, part of the story is about the manager being like us.

Part of what we can take is that the manager is really like us because he knows that he cannot outright overthrow things as they are. He can't.

[21:04] But he can find opportunities to creatively resist from within the system. He can outwit it through intentional action. And then, sixth and finally, notice the contours of this famous statement.

No slave can serve two masters. There's a little more there, but then it ends with, you cannot serve God and money. What's interesting here is that in the world in which the story is being told, an enslaved person actually could serve two masters.

They could have two masters. To say that a person could not serve both God and money is to say that giving fidelity to both at the same time is literally impossible.

If your fidelity is to money and possessions, it cannot be to God. If it is to God, it cannot be to money and possessions. Both God and money, mammon, represent pathways of reverence and of ultimacy.

Following Jesus, y'all, is an act that claims our whole lives, but it wouldn't be particularly countercultural if it did not have socioeconomic implications.

[22:30] Following the way of Jesus means investing in ways that feel alternative and foolish. It means thinking about how the bank where you keep your money is using it, for example.

It means finding your way into those R words that for many of us feel so threatening. Redistribution and reparations.

When I introduce myself to people these days, they ask me what I do. It's D.C. they ask me what I do. And I say that I'm a pastor.

But for three years I was a pastor and I was a church planter. I was trying to help see this different future in the church, one that was completely outside of evangelicalism with its addiction to power and hierarchy.

I had a vision for God's justice and God's generation. We had a vision for living into the practices that have often marked marginalized faith communities.

[23 : 47] We wanted to see the unwinding of trauma among our folks and we wanted to discover a different way of doing church and of uncompromisingly wedding faith to action.

But y'all, I learned as I began to talk to people about supporting this fledgling community that even Christians don't always have the imagination to fund people becoming free.

Following Jesus calls us to a reframing of where joy and beauty and life and real power come from. They come from our neighbors and not corporations.

And they come from communities like this one which are working to create a future outside of systems that dominate and do injustice. Yet, and here's the key, this is the like, if you don't remember anything else, if we are to truly live into the shrewdness that Jesus commends, we have to remember that following the way of Jesus will always feel like squandering.

That's how it's always going to feel. It's always going to feel like wasting time in prayer, on building relationships, on risking curiosity. It's always going to feel like wasting money on people and projects that don't have the right pedigree or don't have the correct return on investment.

[25 : 25] commitment. It's always going to feel like wasting cultural power and privilege when we could be building the babbles and babylons of our own self-assertion.

It's always going to feel a little bit wrong, a little bit counterintuitive, a little bit foolish. we should expect to be accused, as this manager is, of squandering.

When we are really just doing the ordinary work of scattering the soil into which God's commonwealth of peace and flourishing can come and be at home.

Following the way of Jesus will always take shrewdness and it will always take cultivating and imagination that is familiar with the possibility of bankruptcy.

In the end, Resurrection City, the church that I started, did not become sustainable. And I've had to wrestle with feelings of failure about that and to wrestle with my own self- understanding around that.

[26 : 35] And yet and still, every experiment birthed by the Spirit gets us a little further into the world of liberation and flourishing. That is God's dream.

We must become people day by day who are overcoming our fear of bankruptcy and our allergy to squandering. We must attune our hearts to hear the commendation, the enoughness that can only come from God.

friends, may you, may you have the courage and the faith to continue to follow Jesus foolishly and with all you have and all you are, even regarding money and possessions.

Amen.