

Stewardship

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] Come into this place as people who have pockets of joy, sometimes tiny, sometimes growing larger, and sometimes overwhelming us with gratitude. I pray that no matter where we are in this moment, that we would sense your presence and your love, your goodness. We would sense the holiness of this moment that we would respond to you because you have first reached out to us in love, with joy and delight, with singing. In Jesus' name, amen.

All right, so welcome y'all, welcome. I'm excited to be here for another time of being formed in the way of Jesus and helping to form you in the way of Jesus. So often I confess I get up here and I want to be perfect before you, but I feel like the Lord is doing a work in breaking my perfection because as last week, Pastor Anthony is again sick this week, and so I found myself with, instead of a 5 a.m. sermon, a 10 p.m. sermon. So we need the grace. I ask for your grace today and that you would bear with me. Can I get an amen? I'll bear with you. Okay, all right, all right. So what I want to do again is remix a sermon. This is actually a sermon that I preached this last year, and it was, I actually preached this about this time of year, and we are again approaching the holidays. We are again coming into this time of incessant invitation to consume thoughtlessly.

James highlighted that so well, and we also again approach the end of the year where we start to look at our own budgets, think about what we're spending. We start to also, as a church, look at our ledgers.

So it seems good to, in this moment, resurrect a sermon on communal generosity. This will mark the fourth time that I have interacted with this text, and I have to admit that I don't know if there's another gospel text that I find so intriguing when it comes to thinking about money and possessions. So if you are willing, I ask that you would come with me freshly to this text, which is Luke 16, 1 through 13. It's going to be on the screens, but I also, and I'm going to read it aloud, but this is one of those sermons where I'm going to point out a number of things in the text, so you may want to pull it up on your phone. I think there are some Bibles in this room, or if you have a Bible, but I recommend you do pull it up, because I'm going to go back and forth a lot with this text.

So it is 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.

[3 : 29] 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. 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 own generation than are the children of light.

[4 : 42] 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 very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust you with 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.

You cannot serve God and wealth. Okay. So what I'm going to do is give a little bit of context to the scripture.

Then I'm going to point out six specific things in the story that I think are worth noting. And then I'm going to end with just a few takeaways, things that I don't want you to leave here without getting.

[5 : 51] So first, the basic thing to know is that this parable comes in the section of the Gospel of Luke in which there are several stories that have economic and social ramifications.

Luke 12 through 19 contains stories about not concentrating wealth, about resisting anxiety when it comes to possessions, about conspiring to create boundary, crossing fellowship in humility.

And right before the story, this story, you get the parable of the prodigal son. The writer of Luke over and over again demonstrates concern for justice with generosity by paying particular attention to socioeconomic realities.

This is the writer, Luke, who includes Mary's song of praise that we're going to probably refer to a lot in the season to come, Christmas season, Advent season, which is a celebration of God filling the hungry with good things but sending the rich away empty.

This is the same writer who remixes the Beatitudes that you get in Matthew and makes them more explicit about socioeconomic conditions. Blessed are those who are hungry and weep now.

[7 : 14] Woe to those who are rich and full and laughing now. So it's inside this section of Luke that we get this story which challenges many of our assumptions.

So notice a few things with me. First, notice the primary characters in this story. This is very English teacher of me, literature teacher.

Notice the primary characters. You get a rich man, a manager, and the folks who are in debt to the manager. And from what we know about the Gospels and the first century world of Palestine, the rich man is probably an absentee landlord.

He probably has some kind of estate that is worked by landless tenant farmers who are indebted to him. But what I found actually even more interesting as I've talked with people about this story is that most people assume that the rich man represents God.

And I know that too often we've been taught that parables have this direct one-to-one meaning rather than being stories about the real world that we have to kind of turn around, turn over and over like soil to figure out the meaning, to get the fruit.

[8 : 39] And yet even as I know that it doesn't escape me that the frequent assumption that the rich man is God carries under it these uninterrogated theologies of God that are often so harmful.

That God is the one who requires harsh and strict accounting from us even as God, God's self dwells in absolute abundance. That God operates with a tight fist, only being generous with those who are deserving, whatever that means.

And even though we are indebted to God in ways that may corrode our souls, this way of seeing God holds that God is unfeeling and absent no matter what, that we are tenants.

We are ensnared by debt that is out of our control. But I don't think that the rich man actually represents God.

I think that the rich man is actually just a rich man. And if you look closer to this text during the week, you'll see that the rich man makes some interesting decisions. But it's just a rich man.

[9 : 52] And I think that if there's any parallel for our own lives, it's to that of the manager and not the tenants. Perhaps the manager was this slave or this tenant at some point, but he has now worked his way into the dominant system.

And y'all, we're in D.C. So I know that we live inside a similar system, a similar structure, where often the goal, even out of need, is to work our way up into this dominant system.

The manager is this middle-class, respectable person. And he is in this perfect position to do the rich man's bidding.

Second thing to notice, this wonderful word, squandering. The manager is accused of squandering the rich man's wealth.

Some Bible versions choose the word wasting for that word, whether translated squandering or wasting. The sense underneath that word is of scattering.

[11:01] See in your mind a farmer with seed that is not concentrating seed, but scattering it recklessly. Instead of concentrating, scattering.

Reckless giving away instead of perfection. Now, another thing to say about this story is it's actually not real clear what the man is doing, what the manager is doing when he squanders.

Maybe he's redistributing. That's a really positive spin. Maybe he's just being wasteful. I mean, some of the story indicates that he's a little bit lazy. He might be stealing.

I don't know, okay? But what's clear is that he's doing something that is outside of this dominant socioeconomic model of concentrating wealth in order to increase power and social privilege.

He's doing something that threatens the very logic of domination that the rich man upholds. Next, notice the centrality of indebtedness in the story.

[12:10] The tenants and perhaps others are in debt to the rich man. There is something here 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, out of welfare and peace and well-being.

And I know whenever I talk about debt, it's a hard thing to talk about in any community because so many of us are affected by it. So many of us are affected by it.

And yet, it's a central way in these stories. It may be the ultimate way to colonize, to solidify that I have and you need that makes the way for domination.

Creation in this world, instead of being a gift to treasure and steward, becomes an object to own and categorize.

So notice debt. Pay attention to debt in this story and in the story of scripture, whenever you think about money and possessions. Fourth, notice the ways that verses 4 and 9 parallel each other.

[13:30] If you're looking at this on your phone, at the end of this, both verses talk about being welcomed home. One, into earthly homes, and then verse 9, into eternal homes.

See, when the manager realizes that he may lose everything, he decides to curry favor with those people who are considered less significant, those people who are at the bottom of the system.

That story isn't clear about how the manager does this exactly. He could be reducing interest on the debt, or maybe, this is probably likely, that he's just removing his own commission.

But either way, he's finding a way to outwit the rich man by making him look generous. And in the process, he's gaining favor for himself.

When it finally all goes south, and this manager is fired, he will have a place to go. He will have a different future that is with community, that is with neighbors, that is outside of the system that the rich man has created.

[14:39] His security will come from the community. What does this mean for us? How do we think about choosing community and neighborliness and connection over capital and commodification and transactional ways of being?

The story is about the way in which wealth and possessions can be a means for evil or injustice, or they can be used for great good, and the kind of good on which the kingdom of God, the age to come, rests.

Fifth, there's only two more. Bear with me. The center of the story, verse eight, is a commendation from the rich man to the manager for shrewdness. Please do not miss this.

This is about being clever. And then Jesus, after he finishes telling the story, it also commends this man for being clever, for being shrewd.

What I love is that the manager really is like us. That he knows that he cannot outright overthrow the system as it is, the way things are, the status quo, but he can find opportunities to resist the system from within creatively.

[16:00] He can outwit it if he's intentional. And then, finally, and sixth, notice the contours of this really famous statement.

No slave can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money. What's interesting here is that in the ancient world, you actually could serve two masters if you were enslaved, if you were enslaved.

So to say that a person can't serve two masters is essentially saying that God and money are so opposite to each other. This way of concentrating wealth and this way of following Jesus are so opposite of each other that you cannot do both and follow Jesus.

If your fidelity is to money and possessions, it is literally impossible for it to be to God. And if your fidelity is to God, it is literally impossible for it to be to money and possessions.

And that is a hard thing to swallow. That both of these things, money and possessions, and God, are pathways of reverence.

[17 : 16] And a choice is called for. Following Jesus is this act, this thing that claims all of our lives.

And it has socioeconomic ramifications. It means investing in ways that are deeply alternative and might even be seen as foolish.

It means reframing where joy and beauty and real life come from. from neighbors and not corporations, from community. Communities like this one.

Communities maybe like some in your neighborhood that are grassroots. Communities that are working for a different kind of future. And we have to remember that squandering is important.

Earlier in this year, in May, we did a few sermons about, you know, for some of us, we have great theology, but our relationship with God sucks. And we talked about prayer and how we've got to enter into this, I would reframe that and say this squandering posture in prayer where we're wasting time with God in ways that it can feel deeply alternative.

[18 : 36] I think we're called to waste money on, and I waste money on people and on projects that don't return investment in the ways that we would like. I think it means wasting cultural power, spreading it out for the good of those around us.

So I said I was going to give a couple of things at the end that I don't want you to miss, and here are those things. Things that I've discovered and am continuing to discover about money and possession.

So the first one is that I don't often say things are biblical, but the scriptural witness is pretty consistent in condemning hoarding and the concentration of wealth.

Think about that verse in Matthew 6, store up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not, like, eat away. You get that same rust image in James. The idea is that wealth should be circulating.

Another good example of that is with the Tower of Babel, which is a story about this human attempt to concentrate resources and power in one place, and yet God is like, nah-uh, no, I'm going to scatter it.

[19 : 55] I'm going to scatter you over the earth. This will for power and resources to be scattered.

Second thing, I don't want you to leave here with, these two words that I really like, divesting and investing.

Divesting from systems of wealth concentration and investing in the kingdom of God. Investing in ways that create flourishing. A question we have to ask, and this is the perfect time of year to ask it, is how are we divesting and investing?

What are we divesting from? And investing in? One of the ways that I think about this for myself and our family, and actually Bukola might not have known until today, this is how I think about this for our family, but I think about the idea of an investment portfolio, which, you know, I said this this morning, I'm a little older than some of you, and so thinking about things, I meet people, they talk about their stock options or their real estate or all these kinds of things, these ways that they want their investment to look and to show up and to be embodied concretely in the world.

And I realize, like, I do want, it's not like I know how to fully get there, but I do want this other kind of investment portfolio as I grow older. Like, I want, I mean, you know, I'm this crazy church plant pastor.

I, you know, I really want to be, I want my investment portfolio to include seeding experiments for the good of Christianity in the United States so that this faith becomes what we know it can be for more people.

[21 : 43] I want that portfolio for me to include things like hospitality. I've been thinking so much about what does it mean to, this is, this is a weird word, but I would like to do more homemaking.

And for me, that's a way of investing, investing in our family and investing in the community. What is it, what do you want your investment portfolio to look like?

And then, yeah, I want you to consider investing here. And this is the part where I always get a little wary because it's hard to talk about this, right?

There's part of me that's like, oh gosh, like what if I, I don't want anybody to feel manipulated. I don't want anybody to feel like boundaries have been crossed. And again, as a church planner, I learned like, we've got to be inviting people to something.

And that something involves investment. And when I talk about investment, I'm really talking about something I mentioned last week, which is commitment. Settling down and participating and

showing up.

[22 : 50] Investing. I think, you know, as I think about all the things that have happened this year, 10 years in this church's life, thinking about getting again, finally, another space, I'm thinking so much about this season as a season of committing and recommitting for many people in this community.

community. So we started doing this thing where we put out the serve card. We're asking more people to show up and to serve, which has been so fun to see what people show up to and what skills they bring.

And now, we're asking you to show up in this other way, which is by giving. I mean, pretty openly, right? That's an invitation I want to give.

So you have this card in your seat and on the back of it's a QR code. We've kind of decided to be, I told y'all last week, I want the faith of an Atlanta-based pastor asking for their second jet.

So here we go. You know what I'm talking about. You know what I'm talking about. I don't own a boat, but you know, I need that kind of faith to ask. So yeah, we're starting this campaign and we're asking that by giving Tuesday.

[24 : 04] we're trying to raise \$15,000. If that sounds like a lot, just note some of you in May participated in a campaign to reach out to your networks and from people outside of this community in seven days we raised \$15,000.

So we're asking to end the year well, to go there again. And I think this morning, as of the last time I looked actually, before the service, we had raised \$1,000. So asking you to consider that.

And then the last thing I just want to say, oh, there's so many things I want to say about that. But I'll end here. As you consider divesting and investing in the kingdom of God, divesting from ways of concentrating wealth and investing in the kingdom of God, I do not want you to forget the good news.

The good news. The good news is that you can step out in faith and in vulnerability and invest as you discern here and outside of here in this holiday season.

You can do that in trust because you are trusted. Because we deserve the God who in some incredible way has become vulnerable.

[25 : 27] Think about the way in which this God entrusted us with revelation of God's self and said, I'm going to partner with you and I trust that you will figure it out and carry that message forward.

Sometimes I think about that and I am astonished that God chooses to partner with us in trust and so that we can reach out and trust to partner with other people and other projects and things that go sometimes beyond our wildest dreams.

And then I'm reminded that Jacques E. Lowell said this, that giving is the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling. Giving is the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling.

selling. We live inside this good news that grace has penetrated our reality. The grace of God. And we now live, and I need to remind myself of this news every day, that we now live outside of the economy of deserving. The economy that says you are not worthy unless you have certain kinds of resources.

[26 : 47] We live outside of that. And we now live inside the economy of gift. The economy of grace. And that's the good news today.

All right. Amen. I think I'm going to end there. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.