

Following God or Mammon  
Luke 16:1-13  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
September 18, 2016 / 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

There was a tv show called “Crusade” that was a spin-off of a show that I have referenced a lot, which in its opening, brings us the same issue that Jesus is teaching the disciples in today's selection. The voice-over asks a series of questions, where the responses tell the viewer what the show is about. This interchange was taken from a scene in the first episode where two characters were talking; the questioner is trying to find out if the other's mission is righteous and worthy of following. The final question was: Who do you serve and who do you trust?

That question is at the core of what Jesus is preaching about in this chapter about the use and abuse of wealth.

Prior to this instance, Jesus had just taught the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which followed the selection from last week. At the start of this chapter, Jesus teaches the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, and then derives lessons from it.

The first time I had read this parable, I was very confused. It is unlike any of the other Parables, in that the Dishonest Steward is not an example to live by, as there isn't much that is edifying about him. He is like the opposite of the Good Samaritan. The Steward's conduct is characterized as incompetent to begin with, and outright dishonest by the end.

Now, there is no allegory in this story. The rich man is not God, nor the devil, nor mammon, which is wealth itself; and the steward is not a disciple. This is an employer-employee relationship, where the employee is to give a report prior to dismissal.

Up until that point, the steward had not been accused of dishonesty, only wasteful incompetence, and he was fearing for his future and his ability to make a living. So, he concocted a scheme, hoping to oblige people to him, to ensure that they will help him in the future.

He summoned the master's debtors, and these were tenants who have signed agreements or purchasers of his produce, and the steward encouraged them to falsify their bills, altering their amounts.

Here's where the difficulty happens. This guy was being dishonest and we cannot see Jesus condoning an example of dishonesty, can we? What interpreters from the First Christians forward have suggested is that the steward eliminated his own commission, his own cut, from their bills. And the commendation was for the prudence shown, not the act of dishonesty. There was no way that this act could be hidden from the master, who could have easily rectified the situation if he chose.

Then Jesus starts with the lessons of the Parable. The Dishonest Steward, by removing his part of the bill, made himself some friends. Now, it is common in the Gospel of Luke that money is seen as unrighteous, with its only redeeming quality coming from being used for righteous purposes, like how he gave up his cut. He could have laid claim to his cut, or just taken it and rode off. But he used it for a more righteous end, presumably.

Jesus then ties mammon to the common dichotomy that He often makes: Earthly thing vs. Heavenly things, with mammon being representative of earthly matters, which is useless in spiritual matters and in Heaven.

Jesus ends with the summation of this parable and the lesson: 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 mammon.”

Mammon, earthly wealth is fleeting, and only Heaven's treasure is true and eternal. Mammon is like a loan that can be withdrawn at any time, while Heaven's wealth is our own, and can never be taken away. Jesus is counseling us to not covet the accumulation of money, but the righteous use of money, for training or for the benefit of the less fortunate.

And Jesus does not seem to be shouting or chastising someone here. No threats or coercions, just a quiet statement of fact, like saying you cannot walk east or west at the same time.

A person can attempt to serve two masters, by dividing their time between them, but cannot be a slave to both. If both masters demand their allegiance, that person must choose. Time can be divided, but not one's soul.

A good example of this trope of divided loyalties causing issues and tensions is from the popular tv show, NCIS, found in the character of Ziva David. Ziva was a Mossad Agent, on loan to assist the U.S. Navy's investigators; and in a number of episodes, her loyalty was called in to question, where her identity as an Israeli Mossad agent came into conflict with her role as a Naval Investigator. Was she to obey her father and original organization, or her boss on her current assignment. In the end, perhaps fearing a Gibbs smack, she chose her boss.

And there is that show I referenced earlier, Crusade. The main character was a ship's captain on a vital mission, but he received orders from both Admirals in his chain of command, and Senators outside of it. Who should he follow? Nearly the rest of the main cast experienced similar issues, to the point that I suspect the writers were read this verse before writing the show. The crew was a mix of different military, scientific, civilian, and business organizations; and each had to choose who to follow, their mission to save billions of lives, or their own selfish wants.

But for us, what of the two masters that Jesus is speaking of? Jesus tells us that we can choose to serve God or serve mammon. Jesus implies that mammon poses as a deity, a rival for the devotion and souls of humanity. The complete devotion to mammon risks our eternal soul, because righteousness is lost in its practice.

Contrast these two types of wealthy people. The Rockefeller family, in an effort to redeem their family name from the mammon-driven origins of their family wealth, have given billions of dollars to charity, mostly focusing on education, health, and conservation. Their self-awareness realized that they

were serving mammon, not God, and in an effort to make amends for it, engages in overwhelming philanthropy.

On the other hand, we have seen in the news recently, certain businesspeople or companies have dramatically raised the prices of HIV medications, EPI pens, and insulin injections. Those are necessary medicines, without which, people die. People who need those medicines have no real choice. They have to pay or they risk their own lives. And the reason for the increase? The devotion to mammon, accumulating an earthly treasure, that will do them no good in the next life.

Each and every one of us has a choice to make as to how we live our lives, and how we pursue our lives. While we can divide our time, our true devotion can only respond completely to one master. Which do we choose? In whom do we put our faith? Do we choose mammon and put our faith in fleeting earthly riches? Or do we choose God and put our faith in Christ's promise of heavenly rewards and using what mammon we do have for righteous purposes? Like that tv show asked, "Who do you serve and who do you trust?"

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

O God, as Jesus teaches us, that: "No one can serve two masters," we pray that You give us strength and courage to get our priorities straight. Help us to seek your kingdom first. Help us to live faithfully and joyfully in the world, and to be friends with the people you call us to serve. Help us also to remember that our best relationship is the one we have with You. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

God of mercy and healing, you who hear the cries of those in need, receive these petitions of your people that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage.

We thank you for the beauty of Your Creation and for all who dwell in it. May we prove to be worthy stewards of it, in Your name.

Most Patient God, we recognize that we do not always act as we should, and that we are not as hospitable as Christ demands of us. We ask that you forgive us for all the times when we have lost our way. Shower your mercy upon us, and lead us safely home to faithfulness.

Gracious God, we pray that be with all who need you, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. May refugees be restored to safety. May lands of flood, famine, or scorch be restored to fertility. May broken hearts be restored to wholeness. May fearful lives be restored to peacefulness. May those who are fatigued be restored to hopeful perseverance. May those who are unwell find wellness. Grant all of us a willing spirit to sustain, and move our hearts to be of whatever assistance we are called by You to offer.

We pray that You help guide us through our own troubles, helping us to see the way You want us to walk. Supply us with the boldness that your Holy Spirit supplies, that we might be strength for the weak and a voice for the silenced. Empower us with the sureness of your presence as we walk on Your Way.

We especially pray for:

God of mercy and healing, You who hear the cries of those in need, receive these, the petitions of your people, that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage. Amen.

### **Psalm 113**

Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised. The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!

### **Luke 16:1-13**

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 accounting 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. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the 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 the 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. You cannot serve God and wealth."