

Lord, make this words to be your Word, that our hearts may become your heart.

Didn't we hear this story on the news?

Lower-level banker makes some bad loans with short-term gains – and when the hammer's about to fall, he scrambles. Not willing to risk prison or a job at MacDonald's, he cuts a deal with the customers – something is better than nothing, and when he gets fired, at least he'll have some favors to call in.

But in Jesus' story, the boss is actually impressed.

Is Jesus commending this kind of shrewdness? I think he's being sarcastic.

But he does suggest there is a connection between what we do in this world, our relationship with God. And lest we miss the point, Jesus brings it home:

“You cannot serve both God and Money.”

Or, as Bob Dylan sang, “*You gonna have to serve somebody....*”

We don't like to think it's a choice, do we? We're not serving our money, right?

Jesus makes us take a look: Are we running it, or is it running us?

Money is so important to the way we live,

it's hard to step outside and look at our relationship with it.

And it is a relationship. Sometimes money seems to be running us

– making it, keeping it safe, saving it – and spending it – takes a huge amount of our time and energy. Money is where we spend most of our week.

And then comes Sunday, and we come to this place, God's house.

Some of us don't want to hear about money here. Not here.

This is a time-out, a sanctuary, a place to retreat from all that messiness, right?

I hope not. Because if there's no connection between what we do “out there”

and what we do “in here,” what we do in here and take back to out there, there's not a lot of point in being here.

Jesus talked about money all the time, more than any topic besides love.

Many of his parables, like the one we heard today,

use the language of commerce. Because it's the universal language!

It's a language they understood back then as well as we do now.

Our money trail tells us where our hearts are, where our faith is.

When there is a cause I care about or an organization I admire,

I give my money and often my time and energy follows.

What does “wealth” represent? Often, it’s status and security,
the security we try to gain for ourselves instead of trusting God for it.
What if instead we began to see our money as a sacrament, a sign of God’s love?
Is it hard to associate money with love? The Beatles say, “Money can’t buy me love.”
The Bible says, “The love of money is the root of all evil.”
Money seems hard and cold, so unyielding. But oh, it promises things –
it promises security, it promises luxury, it promises lifestyle –
and the ability to make things better for people in our lives.

It’s hard to have a straight up relationship with money.
As soon as we get some, it feels like it’s ours. It can be hard to think of it as
something that belongs to God, entrusted to us – but that’s the Christian view.
Most of Jesus’ money or business parables involve managers or stewards –
middlemen engaged to oversee the finances or the property of an owner.
As the parables play out, it generally becomes clear that this owner is God.
And the middle manager? Well, Jesus was often skewering the religious leaders,
the scribes and Pharisees who were the stewards of God’s revelation.
Religious institutions can play that role; Tradition can. And so can we.

In today’s parable, one of the most confusing we have recorded,
we have a manager who’s not just incompetent – he’s also creative.
Faced with an accounting that’s not going to come out very well,
he manages to pull off a scheme in which everybody wins, a little...
the boss gets some of what’s owed him, if not at full price;
the customers get a deal – and he gets commended by the boss who is firing
him, and can hope for the customers’ loyalty when he gets tossed out on his ear.
Is Jesus saying we should all operate this way. No - I think he’s saying,
“If getting by in this world is your goal, that’s a way to play it. But if you want
to be entrusted with eternal investments – let’s see how faithful you can be.”

That’s always our choice, isn’t it? Investing in this realm we can see,
or in the Realm of God that becomes more visible the more we invest in it.
It’s tricky that way – we exercise faith first and then experience God’s realm.
And somehow we’re called to live in both realms, fully invested, and faithful.
Living in the realm of this world means being faithful with money.
Can we let God guide us in our relationship with money,
instead of letting money guide us in our relationship with God?
Can we see our wealth not as ours to keep and hoard, but to invest in God’s life?

The tradition of the tithe suggests we enjoy 90 percent of what comes our way, and return 10 percent to support the mission of God in the world and in our communities. 90 percent – that’s a pretty good rate!

I remember the day I became a tither – I was at a church conference in St. Louis that had amazing speakers and amazing worship, and I was so filled with gratitude that out of nowhere the thought appeared: “I’m going to tithe.” So, whatever comes in, I try to give ten percent away. I tithe on net, not gross.

It begins with the recognition that it all comes from God. Even what I earn is a gift of my genes, my racial and economic status, family networks, education, inherent privilege as a white person in America – all factors I did not bring about. As Mark Twain said, “A self-man man is like a self-laid egg.” No one is self-made! Everything I have belongs to God’s, on loan to me to tend and grow.

As soon as I think it’s mine, I want to keep it, and give it out sparingly.

As soon as I let anxiety rule me, I want to hold on to it.

But God has been rewiring me to expect blessing. When I am really filled with a sense of how much God loves me, I share “my” money much more freely.

I come to hold lightly what the world holds dear, all those “must-haves” fade.

It’s a big step when we can see all the gifts in our lives, even the people, as blessings from God entrusted to us, on loan, for us to look after and nurture.

And what if we go beyond that to seeing all our gifts as not mine, or yours but ours? Gifts God has entrusted to us not as a test, but as an invitation to participate with God in restoring all things to wholeness?

God has released tremendous power into the universe, into our world, and it is manifest in so many ways. Money is one of those ways.

Like any gift of God, it can be ignored, or mis-used – or made holy and sanctified.

That’s why I lift the plates at the offertory – not to say, “Look at today’s take, God!”

But to say, “This is yours, through your gift it became mine, and now it’s ours.”

It has become holy, resources for in God’s mission in this world.

What if we did that at home, with the money in our wallets, in our accounts?

What if we took our financial statements and lifted them up and said, “Make this holy, Lord. It was yours; through your gift it became mine, and now it’s ours.”

Can you do that with me now, with whatever you have in your wallet or pockets, were planning to put into the plate today, or text or give online, just as a practice?

Repeat after me: “Make this holy, Lord. It was yours;

through your gift, it became mine, and now it’s ours.”

Try that at home. Start and end each day recalling your status as a beloved child of God, deeply loved, truly cherished – and invited to participate with God in bringing wholeness and life to the world. God wants to fill our lives with blessings. We need open hands to receive those gifts. We need open minds to accept the grace that commends us, no matter what we do. We need open hearts to love even a fraction as much as we are loved. When the love of God is our wealth, we have no choices to make. *Amen.*

Luke 16:1-17 (New International Version)

1Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 2So 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.’

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

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

6” ‘Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

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

7”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.’

8”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. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

10”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. **11So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?** 12And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? 13 “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.”**

14The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. 15He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but **God knows your hearts. What** is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.