

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. ²So 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.’ ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then 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.’ ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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.

¹⁰“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. ¹¹If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Friends, I've told you before that the majority of churches around the world use what's called a lectionary. It's a calendar of scripture readings assigned to different Sundays and holidays. For the most part, I use the lectionary. I took a little break to talk about Abraham in depth, but we're back to the lectionary.

I say that as an excuse to you, because Jesus and the people who created the lectionary are going to force us to talk about money quite a bit for the next few weeks.

But nobody comes to church excited to talk about money. It's not a comfortable topic. During the week, I told about 10 people what the scripture for today was, and every one of them grimaced.

So, let's start out gently.

Let's remember, first, that this is a parable, not a true story. This didn't actually happen. Jesus is just creating a scenario that is shocking and unusual to teach the disciples something.

The manager is the main character. We hear his inner dialogue and see how he uses the rich man's money to help himself. That part's pretty clear.

What's not clear is how the rich man interacts with the manager. At the beginning, some unknown character brings charges against the manager that he has squandered away money that wasn't his, and the rich man summons the manager and fires him on the spot without giving him a chance to respond. He's tough! We honestly can't be sure if the charges were legitimate or trumped up. There's just no clear evidence either way, but the rich man has made up his mind – No squandering of my money!

But at the end, the rich man discovers what the manager has done, and instead of being furious and reversing the manager's actions or having him jailed, he commends the manager! In the original Greek it says he praises the manager! – Nice job squandering my money!

It is really such a tricky passage, isn't it? What are we supposed to learn from this? Are we supposed to mimic the manager and secretly cancel the debt people owe our former bosses? Of course not!

And what does it mean when Jesus says, "Make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth," and says the children of this world are more "shrewd" than the children of the light? It's mysterious, and I wish the answer was more obvious, but I want us to zero in on what details we do have, because I think they offer us the key to unlocking this parable.

The details we have are found in how much the people in the parable owe the rich man. They're really the only details we have. The first owes one hundred jugs of olive oil. The second one hundred containers of wheat. These details tell us that the rich man was not just a middle-class entrepreneur. He was an ultra-wealthy 1%er. To have loaned out hundreds of units of oil and wheat is not nothing. A modern-day pizza place might buy oil and flour in increments like this, pallets of the stuff per week, but in those days, that's just a ridiculous amount of goods. And so, what those quantities tell us is that the rich man is an ultra-wealthy person who has so much wealth he doesn't have to personally keep track of what is owed him. His storehouses are full, and he never lacks what he needs on a daily basis. Cancelling some of his debt will not in any way impact how rich he is or how much he eats. It's like wondering what the actual, practical, difference between one billion and two billion dollars is to someone. At some point, the number is meaningless. You're just infinitely wealthy. You can buy everything, except public opinion.

The manager apparently, however, does not have a savings account or a pension. He cannot opt for an early retirement. He's at the age where he can't do manual labor like digging, and if he's fired for reasons of untrustworthiness, he can't do an office job like financial management anymore. He's in a precarious situation, and he knows his best option is to improve his reputation by canceling some of the debt owed to his former boss.

You know what this story reminds me of? Have you seen those commercials that come on when you're watching the Price is Right? Someone says, "I owed \$12,000 in taxes, and the IRS was threatening to garnish my wages. Then I called Optima Tax Relief, and they

negotiated for me and got my taxes cut in half!” And then the voice over explains that the employees of Optima Tax Relief used to work for the IRS, so they know how to advocate for you!

In the commercials, the people are so relieved, but what Optima employees know, since they used to be on the inside, is that the United States government has had the healthiest and strongest economy in the world for a long time. Its success doesn't hinge on whether it gets 60 or 80 or 100% of your tax bill. So, it would rather settle than spend the money and time investigating and prosecuting tax evasion. Settling actually makes sense, and those who owe taxes feel a weight has been taken off of their shoulders when the deal is made. It's a win-win for everyone. Now, I'm not advocating for working the system like this, we should all pay the taxes we owe, on time, and in full, but you can see how this is good for everyone.

And in the same way, the rich man is perfectly content with the manager's actions because everyone comes out better off. The debtors, the manager, and the rich man all win.

Now, I want pivot and just state a statistical, verifiable fact. In America and around the world, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Doesn't matter what political party you vote for or what you think the root cause or the response should be; that's a fact.

And in the last few years, there has been animosity growing toward the wealthiest 1%. As most of the country struggles with grocery bills, utility bills, and housing prices, the list of millionaires and billionaires grows. Blue collar workers pound their bodies to break even and then stretch their budgets to go to sporting events, but their sports heroes are negotiating for guaranteed \$200 million dollar contracts for a handful of years of sport.

Teachers' salaries are not growing as fast as the football coach's salary. The minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation. Those are just facts. Again, doesn't matter what party you affiliate with . . . the statistics show that wealth is being consolidated into

the hands of a very few and has for several years, through both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Interestingly, the new pope, Leo XIV, sat down for his first interview recently. Most of us know that he took the name Leo, but I wonder if you know why. I've been intrigued by his decision. He says he was inspired by Pope Leo XIII, who was the pope during the time of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century. That Leo, Leo XIII, said that in the midst of such change, the church should support the working class, fair wages, and the right to unionize, while opposing BOTH communism and unbridled capitalism. Our Leo, Leo XIV, wants to focus on the same issues being brought about by the digital revolution, particularly artificial intelligence, and political animosity by opposing BOTH communism and unbridled capitalism.

Now, I know I just mentioned politics again, but I want to highlight what Pope Leo XIII and Pope Leo XIV said. They said that Catholics could oppose both communism and unbridled capitalism. Both. They point to a third way, a Christian way. And that's what I think this parable is about. How to make friends with money. How to serve God and not the dollar.

I got inspired on Wednesday at coffee hours. We talked about lots of things, including how we label one another so quickly these days. You're either pro-life or pro-choice. There's no middle ground, even though there obviously is. You're either antisemitic or pro-Israeli, even though it's fair to say that Israel has gone far beyond a proportional response to Hamas' terroristic acts nearly two years ago. You can be pro-immigration and for secure borders.

And you can be for taxing the richest Americans to support things which benefit the entire country without being labeled a socialist. And you can be for small businesses and limited federal government overreach without being labeled MAGA. And you can suggest, like Pope Leo did recently, that CEOs like Elon Musk should not make hundreds of times more money per year than their average employees. That the disparity of wealth is immoral

and that the proper response of faithful persons is not to hoard that unrighteous or dishonest money but to give it away to make friends.

We're called not to build an emotional relationship with our 401K but build an emotional relationship with God and your neighbors. Not to become attached to our possessions but our community.

This isn't a partisan issue. Everybody can learn to make friends with their wealth. I want to give you just two examples before I close.

There's a man in Houston called Mattress Mack. Mack owns Gallery Furniture, two stores in the Houston area. You might be shocked to learn this, but those two stores bring in over two hundred million dollars in revenue per year. Mack loves Houston and famously places massive bets on sporting events, and if he wins, he uses a portion of the winnings to give people discounts on furniture. Mack is also a passionate Republican, donating heavily to the Republican party during political campaigns.

But what really put him on the map was how he responded to Hurricane Harvey in 2017. When the hurricane made landfall, it basically stopped moving and parked itself over Houston for two days and the city flooded catastrophically, displacing over 30,000 people and creating power outages for most of the area. Mack opened his stores as storm shelters letting people sleep on beds, couches, and recliners. He did so again in 2019 when Imelda hit the city, then again in 2021 when a winter storm left the whole state without power for 8 days. Then again after Hurricane Ida and most recently Hurricane Beryl. Mack is known for his compassion in crisis. People can come charge their phones, hang out in air-conditioned buildings, find a hot meal. Mack has learned that using his wealth to help his community has endeared him to the people of Houston. He's learned how to make friends with his money.

When Jeff Bezos and Mackenzie Scott divorced, she received 38 billion dollars in the settlement making her the fourth wealthiest woman in the world. But she doesn't want to keep it. She has given away over sixteen billion dollars in six years to over 600 organizations, mostly small to medium sized non-profits that often struggle with

fundraising. She writes seven, eight, and even nine figure checks, sends them without any hoopla or press conferences, and puts no demands on how the money gets used.

One of the checks she wrote made an impact on the community I called home. In 2020, she sent a check to the San Antonio Food Bank which cares for not just San Antonio but 29 counties - a territory the size of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire combined.

They used her gift to greatly increase their capacity. The Food Bank can now serve 100,000 people per week, every week. It has the capacity to crank out 50,000 hot meals per day during crises. It even has a culinary school so that people can learn skills to feed their families for a lifetime.

My friend Gina, who is here today, created a “Hunger Fighters” small group at my former church that volunteers there once a month in different ways. I’ve worked in the food bank garden with her, in the warehouse, processed deer, and distributed food with her. She’s awesome and so is Mackenzie Scott.

Just like the rich man in the parable, Mackenzie Scott and Mattress Mack can donate and it still doesn’t hurt their bottom line. It actually improves their reputation in the public’s eye and because of the stock market, their wealth just keeps growing, no matter how much they give away.

Jesus said, “the children of this world are doing better making friends with money than the children of the light.” What I take from that is the more Christians give and serve the community, the less hypocritical we’ll look and the more genuine we’ll be. Our lives might revolve around the dollar, but they should revolve around love, and we are to oppose both socialism and unbridled capitalism. Leo and Leo have a point. Let’s find the third way, talk to each other more graciously, give to each other more generously, and use whatever wealth we might possess to make a positive impact in our community – to make friends for their sake, our sake, and God’s sake. Amen.