



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Two Masters Luke 16:10-18

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In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul writes these very wise words:

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. (1 Timothy 6:6-10a)

Paul contrasts contentment with a love for money and a desire to be rich. Those who desire riches, he says, “fall into temptation” and ultimately bow to “senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” Pick up the daily newspaper or watch the evening news. They’re full of scandal and most of those scandals boil down to money. We all know the old saying, “Follow the money”. If you want to get to the bottom of something, just follow the trail of money changing hands or look for the people getting rich off the scheme and you’ll eventually get to the root of it.

I used to work for an Apple reseller. The boss wasn’t above occasionally selling grey market product that “fell off the truck” on the way to Asia or Europe. He didn’t make shady business deals because he thought poor people deserved computers and he could offer them discounts by lowering his cost. No. He did it because he could sell that product at the usual price and make more profit. The dishonest manager in our last

parable wasn’t squandering his master’s money so that he could help the poor. He was doing it to enrich himself at his master’s expense. And that’s usually the case wherever we see people grubbing for money. And yet it’s not just wealthy people in high places in the business world. The poor man obsessed with money can be just as dishonest as the rich man. The scale may be smaller, but the problem is the same. And as Jesus pointed out in Luke 16:8, this is the way of the “sons of this world”.

At the very beginning of Scripture’s story, Genesis expresses our common human problem in the story of Adam and Eve. God placed them in his garden temple to be his priests. He provided everything they could possibly need for their well-being. He even fed them from the tree of life that they might never die. No, they didn’t have a fancy house, a fancy car, fancy gadgets that get used once in a blue moon, or fancy clothes—they didn’t have any clothes at all. But they were content to live in the Lord’s temple, to eat the food he provided, to care for his world, and to be satisfied simply in him. They were content—not to mention happy and fulfilled—until they believed the serpent’s lie and began doubting God’s goodness. They were content until they believed the serpent’s lie and began grasping at what they thought was more, but in the end turned out to be so much less. And that’s been humanity’s problem—*our* problem—ever since.

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus calls us to himself he calls us away from this temptation. He’s come to restore to us what was lost to Adam and Eve though their discontent and their grasping. He’s come to restore us to the garden. He’s come to restore us to our priestly role in the temple. He’s washed us clean that we might once again live in the presence of our holy God. That’s our eternal hope. And so, one of the first changes in the life of a new Christians ought to be an end to discontentment and an end to grasping after riches. A godly view

towards the things of this world—towards money and material things—becomes for us a sign of faithfulness.

This is what Jesus gets at in the next several verses. In the Parable of the Unjust Steward, he rebuked the Jews. Like the steward in the story, who squandered his master’s riches, Israel has squandered the message and the blessings that the Lord had entrusted to her stewardship. She was called on to be faithful to the Lord and to be a light to the nations, but instead she’s turned that light into darkness. Now Jesus offers some commentary on the parable. This is also a lead-in to our lesson next week: the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus—another parable about stewardship. Look at verses 10-11:

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”

There are two themes coming together here. Jesus ended the parable of the Unjust Steward with an exhortation to use the things of this age to prepare for the age to come: “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” Specifically, Jesus refers to “mammon”. Mammon was an Aramaic word for riches and wealth, but “Mammon” was originally the name of the Syrian god of wealth. Jesus’ choice of “mammon” points to the nature of riches—at least as we’re prone to obsession with them as fallen men and women—as a rival to our faithfulness to God. Again, going back to the story of Creation, one of the things that stands out is that God created everything for his glory. Humanity was given dominion over creation, not to exploit it, but to steward it and through that stewardship to give God glory. And yet in our fallen state we turned the world upside-down. Instead of being

stewards of the riches of this world, we turned them into a god and worshipped them. There's a reason why Jesus chose to talk about "mammon"—it represents the very thing from which he's redeemed us.

Jesus warns: If you've been faithful in a very little, you've been faithful in much; if you've been dishonest in a very little, you've been dishonest in much. His point is that this present age is passing away. When Jesus came he inaugurated the age to come. Mammon—dishonest and worldly riches and material possessions in general—is a reality of the present age. We can't live without them. But our attitude towards our money and our material possessions reflects which kingdom, which age, we're living in. The men and women of the age that is passing away serve wealth as if it were a god. They're living the reality of the fall. They're serving and worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. But men and women who are living and preparing for the new age to come—the age that has been breaking into this world ever since Jesus came—they understand that money and material possessions are a trust. As Adam was entrusted with the garden, to care for it and to keep it for the Lord and for his glory, so we understand that everything we have has been given to us to care for and to keep for the Lord's glory—to do the work of his kingdom. Our money and our material possessions are no more ours to obsess over or to do with as we please than the garden was Adam's to obsess over and to do with as he pleased. The Lord has great things in store for us in this new age that is breaking in and we show our commitment to that kingdom in how we steward the comparably small things we have today.

Jesus goes on in verses 12-13:

“And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?”

No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

This age is an opportunity to prepare for the age to come. In this life we prepare for the inheritance that is promised to us in Jesus in the resurrection and in a restored creation. So, Jesus warns, think on how you're preparing. If you're not a faithful steward of the things God has given you in this age; why would you expect him to make you a steward of even greater things in the age to come? If you think your wealth in this age is yours to spend and squander how you see fit, to spoil yourself, or to use and invest dishonestly, how do you expect to be entrusted with the kingdom of heaven?

At this point some people might be thinking that this means we have to earn our way into the kingdom through works: living simply, contributing to the Church's ministry, and giving to the poor. And while all those things can demonstrate good stewardship, that's not the point. Jesus gets at the real issue in verse 13: you can't serve two masters; you can't serve God and money at the same time. This is his call to radical discipleship again.

The problem for many of the people who were following Jesus—and the problem for so many of us today—is that we don't really grasp just how radically different Jesus' kingdom is from the world. People then and people today think that Jesus' call is a call to be better people. We can pretty much just keep living our lives as we always have—we just need to be more moral, we need to give up our Sunday mornings and some of our money to the Church, and we should just generally be nicer to people. Brothers and sisters, Jesus wouldn't have been killed if his message had simply been that people need to be nicer, think

better of themselves, and sin a little less. If that had been Jesus' message, the Pharisees would have welcomed him instead of always being angry with him and challenging him. Jesus' message was far more radical. Jesus' message is a call to repentance because the kingdom of God has come. To repent is to do an about-face. It's to turn aside from *every* earthly loyalty and from every earthly source of security and to turn to Jesus and to follow him. You can't serve two masters. You can't serve God and money at the same time. Again, Jesus uses that word “mammon”. If we remember that Mammon was the god of money, it helps put things in perspective. When Jesus says you can't serve God and money, instead of picturing a wad of bank notes, think of a pagan idol named Mammon. That's what Jesus is doing when he chooses to use this word. You can't serve the Lord and a pagan idol at the same time. Some people worship sex. Instead of sex as an abstract idea, think of the pagan goddess Aphrodite. You can't worship God and Aphrodite at the same time. In the pagan pantheons there's a god or a goddess for everything we're prone to serving and worshipping. Maybe it's not Mammon, maybe it's not Aphrodite, but whatever it is, the pagans had a god for it and when we worship and serve these things we might as well be worshipping a pagan idol.

This is what got the kingdoms of Israel and Judah into trouble. It's what got Israel destroyed and Judah exiled. They set up pagan idols and altars in the Lord's temple. Yes, the Lord's altar was still there, but they tried to worship Canaanite gods like Baal and Asherah at the same time. It was symbolic of the rest of their lives as a nation and as individuals. They claimed to trust in God, but they hedged their bets with horses and chariots and with ungodly alliances with the pagan kings around them. They celebrated the holy days and made the sacrifices that the *torah* told

them to, but they worshipped money, cheating and robbing widows and orphans and the poor. Through the prophets the Lord called the people to repent—to turn away from everything else—and to serve him and him alone. And when they refused he took all those other things away, destroyed the temple, and exiled them to a foreign land where they had *nothing* but him. It was a hard lesson that you can't serve two masters; you can't serve two gods; you can't serve God and mammon.

Again, we so often think that we can make God a *part* of our lives—that we can simply add God to whatever we're already doing, that we can be a little more holy, give a little more money. Brothers and sisters, no. We must make God *all* of our lives—letting go of everything else—*everything*. And the Pharisees responded to Jesus the way many people today respond:

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. (Luke 16:14-15)

The Pharisees mocked Jesus because they were convinced that riches were a sign of God's favour. It went back to God's promise of the land to Abraham. Possessing the promised land—and especially their own personal pieces of it—and the prosperity that came from that land—were, for them, signs of God's favour. The problem was that they kept that wealth for themselves and when they did give it away, it was done for show. They made their sacrifices, they dropped their coins in the treasury box at the temple, but when they left the temple they never gave the slightest thought to sharing their wealth with the poor. They weren't unlike the purveyors of the “Prosperity Gospel”

today, who teach that wealth is a sign of God's favour and who fleece the poor with promises that if you give to them God will give back tenfold. Not only are they serving mammon rather than God, they draw their followers into the same sort of false, greedy, mammon-obsessed religion. For all their talk about God, the money-worship they exalt “is an abomination in the sight of God”.

But God knows the heart. Seven centuries before, the Lord had rebuked Israel through the prophet Hosea saying:

**For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)**

And through Micah:

**He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)**

Instead, the Pharisees damned the very poor to whom Jesus preached good news. They condemned them as unclean and sinful outsiders. Their attitude and their behaviour won the praises of the people around them, but it was an abomination in the sight of God. But this would have just caused the Pharisees to mock Jesus all the more. They were the righteous ones. They were the ones who knew and upheld the law—as we might say: “religiously”. Unlike the Sadducees who had compromised with Rome and with Herod and unlike the masses of poor people who were too illiterate or too consumed with survival to give much thought to the *torah*, the Pharisees truly lived it. Who was Jesus to tell them that their lives were an abomination to God? After all, he was the one eating with unclean

sinner, he was the one offering forgiveness apart from sacrifices and the temple, he was the one welcoming Samaritans into God's kingdom—he was the one who compromised the *torah*!

But Jesus knows just what they need to hear. Look at verses 16-17:

“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.”

They've built their lives on the law and the prophets. The problem is that they've never truly understood the law and the prophets. No one who loves money the way they do, no one who loves the praises of men the way they do, no one who rejects and oppresses the poor the way they do really understands the law and the prophets. Jesus, however, truly does understand them. What he's saying is that, in fact, his ministry is built on the law and the prophets. The law and the prophets were the guiding lights of God's people from the time of Moses until John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of God was at hand. Now Jesus has come, not to do away with them, but to fulfil them. As we've seen over and over through Luke's Gospel, Jesus has come not only to fulfil Israel's mission, but to become Israel herself. The good news that Jesus preaches to the poor is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets and if the Pharisees truly understood and wanted to live the law and the prophets, they'd be preaching good news to the poor as well. Instead, they lord their riches over them. No, the law and the prophets have not passed away. Heaven and earth will pass away long before a single “dot” of the law will pass away. Without the law, Jesus has nothing to fulfil.

Verse 18 might seem like an oddly placed, one-off comment about divorce, but in light of what Jesus has said about his faithfulness in fulfilling God's promises and the Pharisees' misinterpretation of the law the passage makes much more sense.

“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Jesus hits on a long-running debate between the rabbinic schools of Shammai and Hillel. Shammai taught that the only valid ground for divorce was infidelity. Hillel's school was much more liberal. A husband could divorce his wife for something as insignificant as ruining a meal. Most of the Pharisees would have sided with Hillel. And yet these were men who purported to be faithful to the law. And Jesus puts them in their place here. He cuts through all of their casuistry and legal wrangling and shows his own faithfulness to the law and prophets: no divorce. There are no excuses, no casuistry, no wrangling or loopholes. Either you live by the law or you don't. Jesus uses one of the big debates and hot-button issues of the day to expose the Pharisees as hypocrites.

And that brings us back to the issue of faithfulness. No one can serve two masters. You can't pretend faithfulness to God while setting up another altar in his temple, whether it's to Mammon or Aphrodite—or Dionysus, the god of drunkenness and parties, Ares, the god of war, or Athena, the goddess of wisdom. You can't setup an altar to yourself in God's temple either. No one can serve two masters. Either you worship the Creator or you worship his Creation; you can't do both. And so, again, we need to realise that Jesus isn't calling us to “do a little more” or to “do a little better”. He's not calling us to add a little more holiness or a little

more sacrifice to what we've always done. He's not baptising the world's way of doing things. He's calling for repentance—for a complete one-eighty, for a complete house-cleaning of the temple.

It helps to remember what he's doing. Sometimes we focus so narrowly on the issue of personal salvation that we forget the big picture. Jesus has come not just to redeem individual people, not even just to redeem the human race—he's come to redeem his entire creation. He's come to set his temple to rights. He's come to take back his throne. And our redemption is part of that. He calls us to leave behind all of our idols, whatever they may be, and calls us to serve him and to worship him and him alone. One day there will be no competing loyalties and that's the day we live for in hope and ready expectation—that day when we can live again like Adam and Eve, in the temple, satisfied and content merely to be servants and worshipers of the Lord and stewards of his temple.

But what are we doing to prepare for that coming age as the present age fades around us? Too often we're living for the age that is passing away, not for the age to come. How are we stewarding the gifts we've been given? Are we using them as if there will be no end to this age? As if there will be no day of reckoning? As if this world belongs to us and not to the Lord? Or do we see everything that the Lord has placed in our hands as a means to further his kingdom—as a means to serve the poor, as means to show and to work for justice and mercy, as a means to manifesting the heavenly hope of the age to come in the here and now? When the world looks at us, do they see people just like themselves who are simply trying to be a little more moral or who sacrifice a little bit more? Or does the world see people with radically different priorities? If others were to see into the temple of your heart, is

there a single altar there, dedicated to the Lord, or are there many altars competing for your love and loyalty. Brothers and sisters, you cannot serve two masters.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you made us for yourself. When we rebelled and sinned against you, you sent your Son to redeem us and to restore us to yourself. And yet we continue to live with competing loyalties. We continue to love the world rather than you. We worship your creation rather than you, our Creator. You've given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to renew our minds and to regenerate our hearts. Open our eyes we pray that through the working of the Spirit we might see the competing loyalties and false gods in our lives and purge them from your temple, that we might be holy people devoted only to you. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.