

“But Today’s Not Commitment Sunday”

March 23, 2025

Luke 16:1-9

Westminster, Greenville

3rd Sunday in Lent

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Back in the summer of 2010 in New York City,
the actor Al Pacino starred as Shylock
in the play *The Merchant of Venice*.

The performances took place in Central Park, part of New York
City’s annual summer theater, and tickets were free!

At least, they were supposed to be free.

Tickets were made available to the public each day at 1pm, but
because it was Al Pacino doing Shakespeare, the line for tickets began to
form HOURS in advance. Lots of New Yorkers did NOT have that kind
of time to stand in line. But many had MONEY to pay others to stand in
line for them...which is exactly what happened.

Line standers advertised their services on the Internet.

Some were hired at a rate of \$125 per ticket—avoid the lines, pay
someone good money, go see Al Pacino on a cool summer evening in
Central Park...

what could be wrong with that?

Well...according to the New York Public Theater, a lot was wrong
with that. Shakespeare in the Park, they argued, is publicly subsidized.
The intent is to make great theater available to anyone, no matter their
socioeconomic status.

You’re not supposed to pay \$125 bucks to see it.

It’s like charging for tickets to see fireworks on the 4th of July.¹

¹ Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

So...what do you think?

Was it ok for people to pay for others to stand in line to get tickets?

Was it the wrong thing to do?

The right thing to do?

A shrewd thing to do?

We'll get back to that word, shrewd, in a few minutes...

But how you answer that question has something to do, I suspect,

at least in part, with your relationship with money...

That's our topic for today.

Our relationship with money and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I can already see the looks on some of your faces:

Ben, why are you preaching about money...in the middle of
March?

Today's not Commitment Sunday.

And that's true!

So good news...in this sermon, I'm not going to ask for any money
from you.

But we're in the midst of a sermon series on the Gospel of Luke,
and more any other Gospel writer, Luke has a thing about money.

In fact, I did little Bible study this past week—I went through
Luke's Gospel to see how many chapters there were in Luke that say
nothing at all about money. Make no reference to it, either directly or
indirectly...

24 chapters in Luke's Gospel.

Do you know how many never touch on the topic of money?

Three!

That means nearly 90% of the time, if you're reading Luke, you're going to be reading something that has to do with God...and the gospel...and money.

And to make matters worse, I've selected what is, perhaps, the most problematic parable that Jesus ever told, and it happens to be about money.

How many of you remembered, before you came to worship today, the parable of the dishonest manager?

It's a confusing parable.

It's a messy parable.

It's a parable in which the protagonist is a small-time crook.

It goes like this:

A rich man had a manager.

The manager was squandering the rich man's property, so the rich man decided to fire him!

And the manager says:

"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."

Here's what he decides to do.

Behind his boss's back, he goes to the people who owe his boss money.

And he reduces their bills!

One he cuts by 20%, another he cuts by 50%.

Why does he do this?

He's trying to get in their good graces, so that when he no longer has a job, he might be able to find work with these people, or be kept on his feet by these people, or stay in the homes of these people—

I scratch your back, so one day you will scratch mine—
it's that kind of calculation.

But why in the world did Jesus tell a parable like that?

Verse 9 may be one of the most CONFOUNDING statements that Jesus ever made: "...make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Dishonest wealth?

Look, I'm going to come clean.

I've only preached on this parable ONCE in 27 years of ministry.

It was 20 years ago.

I remember it vividly, because I vowed, when I got done, never to preach on this parable again.

But lucky you.

I'm giving it another shot today...so stay with me.

In his commentary on this parable, Tom Long writes:

"The term 'dishonest wealth'—is "in [the original Greek]...

"the mammon of unrighteousness,"

or better yet, "the money of this unrighteous age."²

That's a helpful translation.

² Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

In other words, “Jesus isn’t merely talking about...drug proceeds, embezzled stock, laundered cash,” says Long. “He’s talking about money period, all the money of this present age.”

According to Jesus, there’s no such thing as CLEAN money, or RIGHTEOUS money, or even MY money...

Whatever wealth or money you and I have, it all belongs to an UNRIGHTEOUS age, an age that God is ushering out, with the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ.

And you remember what Jesus says about God’s kingdom, right? It’s going to be a big REVERSAL. The poor will be on top, the rich be at the bottom.

One of the members of the Thursday morning Bible study asked me why I changed my mind about preaching this parable. The answer is that I think this perplexing and puzzling story actually DOES speak to something that’s very important in our time and age:

BELONGING.

This parable speaks to what kingdom we belong to...and how we invest in it.

So let’s start with an easy question.

Who do you belong to—number one, above everything else, who do you and I belong to?

God.

Who else do you belong to?

Your family. Your church. Your friends.
Who else do you and I belong to?

The person who is homeless whom we passed on the street, when our family was out for dinner downtown a couple months ago...do I belong to that person?

The child who attends your child's 2nd grade class, and sleeps in a car with her family every night?

Does your family belong to that family?
Luke would say: you bet we do!

Which is where our parable for today comes into play.

If there's anything that plagues our society these days, it's tribalism. It's the echo chambers we build around our lives. And it's the income divide, the politics that put us in those echo chambers.

It's the sense that we ONLY belong—
to those who think like us,
or look like us,
or vote like us,
or those who live in the same neighborhood as us.

We live in an age that NARROWS our sense of belonging.
What Jesus wanted to do was EXPAND it.

So one day Jesus told a parable.

A parable about a small-time crook who makes new friends to save his own skin. Like last week's parable of the unjust judge, this week's story is another parable of LEAST to GREATEST. If someone like this dishonest manager can use the unrighteous mammon of this age shrewdly...why can't we?

Not just to invest in that which will increase our portfolio, but to invest in that which is aligned with the kingdom we belong to...

What did this dishonest manager do so shrewdly in the parable?

He made new friends.

He expanded his relationships.

He did it for his own sake...but what does it look like to do that for the kingdom's sake?

Jesus told us, back in chapter 14 of Luke:

“When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you...”

As Dr. Long puts it, “Jesus uses this parable not to tell his followers to avoid money but...to see money for what it is in the light of God's kingdom.

“The truly shrewd thing is...
to use it now for something lasting...
[something like a relationship that bridges a divide]
something that is part of the life of God...”³

Not too long ago, I saw the new Superman movie, the documentary about Christopher Reeve, who, you will recall, played Superman back in the 1978 movie.

³ Ibid.

And I was reminded not just of Reeve's story, but of Margot Kidder's story.

Do you remember Margot Kidder?
The actor who played Lois Lane in that same film?

My colleague Karl Travis once told about the time that he met Margot Kidder. Kidder died a few years ago, at the age of 69, and her life—very sadly—was not a Hollywood fairy tale.

As Karl puts it:

“Kidder's post-Superman days were painful ones. She suffered from bipolar disorder and in 1996 found herself homeless, living on the Los Angeles streets.

“Years later, I was in a small group invited to hear her story. Kidder told about living out of doors. She recalled being disoriented one day, disheveled, in a pronounced manic state, stranded in the middle of a busy intersection.

“A homeless man – I think his name was Charlie – carefully crossed the busy traffic to reach her and to escort her to the safety of the curb. He asked her name, asked where she was going, asked how long it had been since she had eaten.

“This Good Samaritan then took her to an underpass where he introduced her to the others, dozens of people also experiencing homelessness. That night, he made sure that she had a cardboard box to protect her from the elements. In the morning, he went to McDonalds to pick up yesterday's leftovers. He put the day-old fast food in a rusty grocery cart and rolled it back to the tent city, charging people what they could afford to pay.

“He fed Margot Kidder for free. She had no money.

“Kidder camped beneath that underpass for several days before remembering enough of her life and identity to seek help. Then, she made her way into the mental health system.

After Kidder was done with her remarks, Karl Travis says he waited for the right moment, and then introduced himself:

“I’m a minister,” he said to her.

“Will you please tell me about God?”

“She offered that she wasn’t a particularly religious person. Like so many people asked about God, she heard me asking instead about religion...

Church people, Kidder thought, are so often judgmental...

Still, Charlie had rescued and cared for her.

“She reflected on how, if God exists, she expected that God might look something like Charlie, might act like Charlie. He had been for her security in a time of danger, certainty in a time of disorientation. Yes, she said, this is how God would behave.”⁴

How God would behave...

I keep thinking about what Jesus said at the end of this morning’s parable.

⁴ As told by the Rev. Karl Travis in a Facebook post a number of years ago.

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves with the mammon of this unrighteous age...”

What did the dishonest manager do?

He made new friends.

What did Jesus do throughout his ministry?

He made new friends.

Who did Jesus befriend in his life?

He was friends with people who HAD MONEY...that's what we heard in our first text today, the story of Zacchaeus. (Since we're talking about money today, there's \$10 here for anyone who wants to stand up and sing the Zacchaeus song right now.) Having money did not and does not get in the way of Jesus reaching out to you or becoming friends with you.

But it's a matter of great urgency, once we've been claimed by Jesus, how you and I choose to use our money and share our money...

Because Jesus also befriended those who had NO MONEY.

People like Charlie.

People like Margot Kidder.

All of which got me thinking:

What kind of friendships are you and I building these days?

How much of my life is devoted to reaching out and building up BELONGING across the EDUCATIONAL DIVIDE,
or the POLITICAL DIVIDE,
or the INCOME DIVIDES
that exists in our society today?

Not only by giving money, but by giving my time, my attention, my heart...my friendship?

I'm reminded of something I once heard from Dr. James Forbes. Dr. Forbes was, for many years, the Senior Pastor at the well-known Riverside Church in New York City.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Forbes preach. It was a marvelous sermon. I don't remember the text or the topic.

But I do recall this one thing.

In his sermon, Dr. Forbes said:

“In order to get into heaven, each of us is going to need a letter of recommendation from the poor.”

It made me smile, because I knew he couldn't be serious. Surely Dr. Forbes knows that God works by grace alone.

God does not work like a college admissions office, asking for letters of recommendation. At least, I'm pretty sure God doesn't require letters of recommendation.

But what if Dr. Forbes was right?

What if, in order to enter the kingdom of God, I'm going to need to know people who, because of their income, were much more vulnerable than I have been, and God not only wants me and you and all of us to be generous with them, but God wants us to be friends with them, **so there is no more US and THEM...**

To walk by their side, to share in their sorrows and joys, so that whenever the day comes that I go to meet God, what if I'm going to need one of those people to stand with me, and say, “God, I commend this person to you.”

Do I have any friends like that?

If my answer is no...not many...maybe one or two...I suspect Jesus told this parable so I might go from this place today, and make some new friends....

(Amen.)