

**LUKE 16:1–13.** (EHV)

Jesus also said to his disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager who was accused of wasting his possessions. The rich man called him in and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you can no longer be manager.’ The manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, since my master is taking away the management position from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do, so that when I am removed from my position as manager, people will receive me into their houses.’ He called each one of his master’s debtors to him. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘Six hundred gallons of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and write three hundred.’ Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘Six hundred bushels of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write four hundred and eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous *mammon*, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings. The person who is faithful with very little is also faithful with much. And the person who is unrighteous with very little is also unrighteous with much. So if you have not been faithful with unrighteous *mammon*, who will entrust you with what is really valuable? If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own? No servant can serve two masters. Indeed, 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 *mammon*.”

In the 1994 fictional movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, a banker named Andy is falsely accused of murdering his wife, and sentenced to two life sentences in prison. While serving his time, he overhears the Captain of the Guards complaining about having to pay taxes on an inheritance. Andy explains to him how to get around the taxes legally. His reputation as a knowledgeable financial advisor spreads and grows. Eventually the head warden uses him to launder the prison’s ill-obtained money under a false identity.

Unknown to everyone, Andy had secretly begun to make plans for his escape. When those plans are in place, he uses the false identity to transfer most of the warden’s money to his own accounts, escapes, and then sends the warden’s ledger book and other evidence of his corruption to a local newspaper.

When the warden hears about how his prisoner compromised him, you can detect a look of awe and, dare I say, even respect in his face, before he puts an end to his own life.

On virtually every other Sunday, if you were to come and listen to a sermon on using your wealth, you would hear nothing but rebuke and reproach for types like Andy. After all, even though the warden deserved everything he got, that doesn’t make Andy’s dishonest dealings any more righteous.

But you won’t hear rebuke and reproach today.

Today Jesus wants us to take something away from the Andy types of this world. He wants us to take away their cleverness, their shrewdness, their ingenuity, their thinkerish-ness with wealth, which Jesus calls mammon here. Today Jesus teaches us to **make the most of our mammon**.

## 1.

Do you remember whom Jesus was with in last week's sermon text? "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to listen to him." The Pharisees had complained that Jesus welcomed such people and ate with them. So Jesus addressed their sinful attitude first. But after rebuking the Pharisees through a series of parables, Jesus turns his attention back to these one-time tax collectors and sinners, his new disciples.

He tells them about a certain rich man who had employed another man to manage his wealth and possessions. One day a snitch approached the rich man and provided some convincing evidence that, instead of managing his wealth, his manager was wasting it. So the rich man called his manager and the manager came, probably blissfully unaware of how his life was about to change.

"What is this that I hear about you? You need to give me a detailed account of all the supposed managing you've done for me, because I now know that it was not managing, but mismanaging, and if I'm right about that, you can rest assured you're done doing it."

We can only imagine how Jesus must have seized his audience's attention with these words. Many of these people were no doubt personally familiar with mismanagement of money, and not just through wasting their employer's time and money through laziness at work, as some of us are. Many of them had formerly demonstrated the greed in their hearts through tax fraud, thievery, and all sorts of sinful, shady dealings and activities. Perhaps Jesus even had one or two of them in mind when he told the parable. And Jesus knew, just as they knew, that what they had feared most in those former lives, the thing any lawbreaker, any sinner, fears most—getting caught.

This manager was caught. Now what? Did he apologize to his rich master? Did he shed any tears of repentance? Did he vow never again to be wasteful with the possessions of others? No. He schemed to save his own hide. He knew he wasn't strong enough to dig. That was precisely the difficult manual labor he had sought to avoid by taking a managerial position with a rich man. He also was too ashamed to beg. Most beggars were nothing more than nameless faces in the backdrop of public life. But he, he would be recognized, because he had been involved in all sorts of dealings with the rich, famous, and well known. What would he do?

And then the light went on.

He went out and found the people that owed his master their own wealth. "How much do you owe my master?"

"Six hundred gallons of olive oil." Olive oil is some of the most expensive plant-based oil you can buy in the store today. It was precious back then too.

"Take your bill, sit down quickly, and write three hundred." Wow! A 50% reduction! "And what about you?"

"Six hundred bushels of wheat."

“Take your bill and write four hundred and eighty.” Okay, not 50%, but 20% ain’t bad either, when you’re talking about six hundred bushels.

What was the manager thinking?

If he had done nothing, how many friends do you think he would have had after he was fired? But after doing this, which two important businessmen could he count on still having as friends?

Even the master realized it. The EHV’s translation, “The master *commended* the dishonest manager,” is perhaps a little too strong. The rich man certainly didn’t smile broadly, stick a fat cigar in his mouth, pat him on the back, and say, “Well done, my good man! You sure took me to the cleaners!” It’s hard to find a good translation though. Perhaps: “The master *took his hat off* to the unrighteous manager.” He wasn’t happy, but, just like the head warden at Andy’s prison, the rich man had to acknowledge the man’s ingenuity and shrewdness. He may have even learned a thing or two from him. After all, the rich man probably didn’t have a squeaky-clean record either.

Now Jesus surprises us. He doesn’t say, “Isn’t it sad how people of the world are only able and willing to use the intelligence I have given them to their fullest extent when their own hides are on the line, or when they stand to get some reward?” No, he says, “For the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of the light are.”

“See that unrighteous manager,” Jesus says. “He’s better with money than my own followers are!” What does he mean?

“I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, so that *when it runs out*, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings. . . . [I]f you have not been faithful with unrighteous mammon, who will entrust you with what is really valuable? If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own?”

What is mammon? It is Stuff with a capital S. It is money, and it is the stuff money can buy. It is the appliances in your kitchen and laundry room. It is the shiny metal in your garages. It is the game controllers that, even now, are lying on the floor at home waiting for someone to trip over them or for their batteries to be replaced. It is furniture. It is instruments and vehicles of recreation. It is Stuff. And Jesus characterizes it as unrighteous, not because it has some inherent quality of sin, but because it’s so often misused.

Jesus says that one day this Stuff, this mammon, will all be gone. He says that real riches can’t be bought, sold, or traded, and don’t wear out or break down. He says that our stuff isn’t really *our* stuff. It’s someone else’s. It’s God’s.

Yet, how often don’t we Christians treat mammon as though it will be ours forever? How often don’t we treat it as if it were all that is truly valuable in life? How often don’t we treat it as if it were our very own, instead of things that God has permitted us to be responsible for and to care for? How often don’t we use it to serve ourselves rather than to glorify the God who has given it to us for our temporary use? How often don’t we treat it as our god, instead of God?

## 2.

Thank God that’s not what his Son did with his stuff. After all, all the stuff that exists is really his. He made it all and he owns it all. It has all been his from the beginning. Yet he didn’t

just remain up in heaven like we would have in his shoes—loafing and basking in his stuff and using it only for himself. He actually gave it all up! He humbled himself and took on our flesh, took on the very nature of a servant, and was born into this world to a relatively poor human family. He did so to make friends for himself, to benefit us.

When Jesus grew up and began his ministry, he still didn't have a lot of mammon. "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head," he told his disciples. But with the stuff he did have, he served God and he served others, to gain the sick, lame, and even the dead as his friends. You could even say he donated his cloak to the soldiers who crucified him, in order to befriend them and all sinners who did not know just what they were doing.

And after he shed his blood and gave up his very life to pay for all our selfish use of mammon, all of our mammon-idolatry and all our other sins, he rose from the dead and ascended back into heaven. Yet he didn't do that so that he could have a greater appreciation for and enjoyment of all of the stuff he owned as God and not take it for granted anymore. No, he is now preparing a place for all believers in heaven so that they can enjoy his stuff too. And did you hear what Jesus said? He isn't just planning to *share* his heavenly stuff with believers, like he is currently with the earthly stuff he loans us. "If you have not been faithful with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something to be your own?" He is planning to *give* us his stuff, so that it is our very own—real, heavenly treasures that can never perish, spoil, or fade!

By doing all of this and by telling us all of this, he wants to free us from a slavish use of mammon focused on ourselves. He wants to free us to glorify God, the God who has given us hope beyond what Stuff can give.

"I tell you, make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon, so that when it runs out, they will welcome you into the eternal dwellings." Money can never convert anyone to Christ. But money can convert people into your friends. If anyone says money can't buy friends, they aren't trying hard enough. Sure, it can't buy the deepest kind of friendship. But it can buy people who are happy to be around you and who are willing to listen to you because of what you've done for them. And if they're willing to listen to you, you can talk to them. So you can tell them the gospel of Jesus. And the gospel of Jesus *can* convert them.

Jesus wants you to see opportunities to serve him with your wealth not *just* when the offering plate gets passed in front of you—though that is certainly a godly way to use your money. He also wants you to see opportunities to serve him with your wealth every time your wealth is used, spent, or exchanged, and to think up ways to use and spend your money and your stuff to make friends to his glory.

Are you taking lessons from anyone? What effect would it have if you included a generous extra sum of money in your lesson check, along with a note saying thanks, and also expressing your gratitude that your Savior Jesus put them in your life to teach you that skill?

Do you regularly eat at the same restaurant? What effect would it have if you tipped your waiter or waitress lavishly every time? Wouldn't word get around the restaurant? Wouldn't you make friends? Wouldn't you have an opportunity eventually to tell people why you're so generous, namely because your Savior was first infinitely more generous to you?

Our community is known for being generous and helpful as a whole. That means we need to think harder. If we really consider the message we share here the pure gospel of Jesus and

value it as something beneficial not just for ourselves, but also for others, then we need to think as a congregation, “How are we going to make it so that people in our community don’t just want to be friends with other people in the community in general, but specifically with the members of Trinity?”

There are plenty of people making friends for themselves with their money. And when they’re asked, “Why are you doing this?” They say, “Well, I think it’s the right thing to do. I just love people and want them to have what I have.” If they don’t believe in Jesus, that’s a bunch of baloney. They are doing it simply for their own reputation, or because they think that God will give them eternal life for doing it, or to some other self-serving end.

Why should they have the monopoly on shrewd use of money, when we have much more reason to be shrewd than they do? Let’s make it so that people have to ask *us*, “Why are you doing this?” so that we can say, “Jesus has paid for my sins and given me eternal life. This is just one way I can use the temporary wealth he has given me to serve him and to serve others whom he also came to save.”

And God promises to reward us, not because our shrewd use of money by itself earns anything from him, but out of his grace, to spur us on in love. He promises us that, when we make the most of our mammon, which is mostly used unrighteously, for the righteous purpose of glorifying God, we will have a whole host of friends to welcome us into heaven—people who didn’t just become our friends, but who, through our friendship, became friends of God through faith in his Son. They will welcome us into an inheritance that can *never* perish, spoil, or fade, into riches that are real and that, for the first time in our lives, can be called our very own. Brothers and sisters, there’s no greater return on your dollar than that.

Let’s make the most of our mammon—not focused on ourselves, but as a means to glorifying God and furthering the work of his kingdom. After all, he is the God who gave us the most even before he gave us our mammon. Amen.