

Use money well

Luke 16.1-13

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Money is a passport to almost everywhere - but not to heaven.

And it can buy us almost anything - except happiness.

Jesus speaks much about money matters. The Gospel reading today is, once again, about how to handle money. I feel almost embarrassed to discuss with you this passage - because again it is about money.

If we are faithful stewards over all of the resources that He entrusted to us, He will reward us generously and bring glory to His name.

We came naked into this world - without any resources. So all that you presently have, is a bonus - his gift to you. And we have to manage that well.

1. What did the bad steward do well?

Jesus tells the story of a bad manager. Money corrupts and Jesus tells us this parable to help us make the right decisions about how we use what we have.

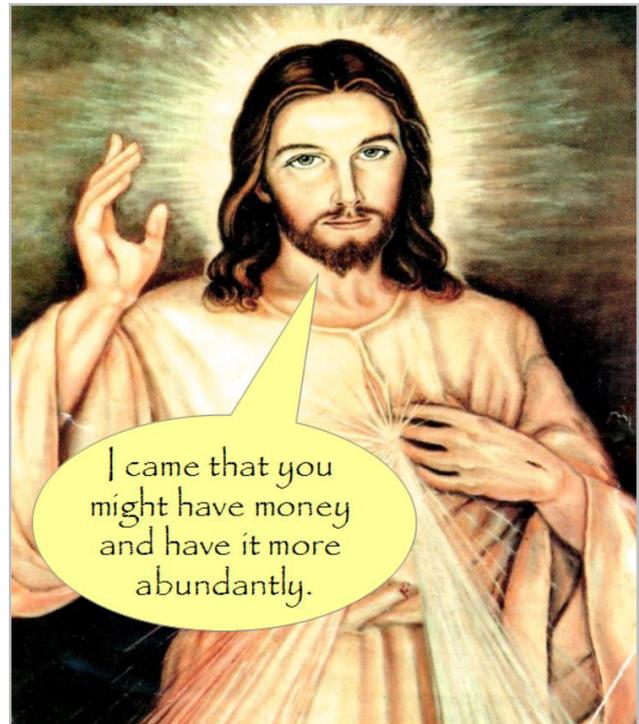
The manager was not doing his job well. The master of the estate has entrusted the financial and other management to this manager, and the master found out that he was wasting his possessions.

I assume that the manager was just slow and lazy, not necessarily stealing money from the boss. If the boss expected stealing, he would have fired the man on the spot.

Instead, the owner tells the man that he has to turn in the accounts of his management.

The landlord wanted to see the financial books, he wanted to see the 'audited accounts' - and he told the steward that after that, he could no longer work for him.

It seems that the steward has been too slow to force those who were indebted to the landlord, to pay their bills. And the landlord had enough of it.



The people indebted to the landlord had to pay rent for the land they were using. This rent was usually an agreed percentage of the products of the land they were using.

But who could check what that percentage was in real terms? The harvest is different each year. So the only one to check was a good manager who would keep an eye on it.

The landlord, possibly an absentee landlord as was very common in those days, would not know the details.

But as a good businessman, the owner of the land could smell that not enough money was coming in.

The weather had been good last year, enough rain, enough sunshine, no grasshoppers destroyed the harvest - so the harvest must have been ok. So where was the income!

The manager knew he had lost his job and he had a brilliant idea. He agreed with the debtors to lower their debts. 'Let us change the invoices, the landlord will never know'.

Clever trick! The debtors would be grateful to him; and secondly, he had involved the debtors in his crime. He had saved them so much money, in an illegal way!

So he could whenever it suited him, twist their arms. And for sure, certainly one of them would employ him after he was fired!

Jesus told this story of the scam, and then concluded:

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

His praise was not for the fact that the steward cheated him, but sometimes you have to admit that a scam is done in a very clever way. Because how could the landlord ever prove that those debtors should have paid more?

And then Jesus comes to his point:

For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

Or to paraphrase the words of Jesus, 'See how those clever guys use money to get what they want. See how clever some people are to reach their goals.'

In this world, people buy friends, they buy respect, they try to buy happiness with money. With money almost all things can be achieved.

But Jesus calls us sons of light. We belong to God. We belong to his Kingdom. We have a different lifestyle.

But..... as children of God, we also must use our money in a shrewd manner, with foresight. And this means, we have to use whatever we possess within the rules of the Kingdom of God.

The children of this world are experts at seizing opportunities for making money and friends, and getting ahead; God's people should take heed and be just as wise in managing their money and all things in life, in a godly, a christlike, a spiritual manner.

2. What is the example of the man for us?

Jesus tells us that we must use unrighteous wealth for ensuring access to our eternal home. I guess Jesus called wealth 'unrighteous' because money and all we possess has something intrinsically problematic. It has a tendency to enslave us.

But what we own must be used for the purposes of God. Only if we do that, we take the idolatrous sting out of money, out of our properties, out of whatever we possess.

What zeal people put into their earthly affairs! We seem to always strive for more. We are never satisfied. What time we spend in managing our possessions!

When you and I put the same zeal into the affairs of our souls, we will have a living and operative faith: and then there will be no obstacle that we cannot overcome in our Christian undertakings.



But in our actual reality, most of us will spend twenty times more the amount of time and money and efforts for our hobbies, our house, our sports, than we spend for the sake of the kingdom of God.

And this is a serious problem that needs a turn of heart.

The rabbis in Jesus' time had a saying,

The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come.

It was a Jewish belief that charity given to poor people would stand to a man's credit in the world to come.

A man's true wealth does not consist in what he has and what he has kept kept for himself, but in what he gives away. In how he spends it to be a blessing for others.

Let me repeat that last sentence.

A man's true wealth does not consist in what he has and what he has kept kept for himself, but in what he gives away. In how he spends it to be a blessing for others.

Jesus shared this view of the rabbi's about money. He says in verse 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?

Meticulous honesty is demanded of us in dealing with money matters. That is why as a church we have an accountant, and we have an external auditor to check the accounts. We want to be careful and precise.

And the impact of this careful faithfulness in how we use our personal money, opens the floodgates for God to give us true riches. No, that is not more money, but the spiritual blessings of the spiritual kingdom of God.

If a person is faithful and generous in how he uses his temporal wealth for the Kingdom of God, then he will, in this life and at the end of his life, receive the rewards of eternal life, which is the greatest treasure of all, and a permanent one. Money we lose anyway, but our relationship with God is forever.



Not that with our financial behavior we buy heaven, or a relationship with God. It is not that God gives us eternal life because we help the poor. But our behavior with money and we all we have, is an absolutely precise reflection of whether our heart has truly received the grace of God.

We must be faithful in the small things - how you spend your time, raise your children, what you do with your money, how you care for people, for creation. If we are faithful in all this, our life is one large symphony for God. And that is a very attractive life.

3. Choice to make

Jesus also underlines the urgency to make a choice. In verse 13 he says,

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.

Jesus does not give us much room for manoeuvring, or for finding a middle way. It is one or the other. You cannot serve God, and Mammon at the same time. If we want to serve God, Mammon must be subjected, or he will rule over us.

St Augustine said in one of his sermons that in Punic, the language of Lebanon, Mammom meant 'profit'. And it was the Aramaic word for money, or possessions in general, and Jesus really treats this as an idol in opposition to God.

Money has a tendency to draw our heart and mind to it, to occupy our heart, to make us focus on it. Money has a tendency to dictate how we live.

Not that the coin, or the banknote, has power in itself. Just as the statue of a god has no power. It is just wood, or silver, or bronze. The problem is in our heart. Our minds become blurry when heaps of banknotes are held before us.

And only by fully serving God can we break the power that our possessions have over us. So Jesus warns us. You cannot have it both ways. He demands a very radical choice.

But this is a tough choice. Not easy. The Pharisees heard Jesus tell his parable and explain it, and they ridiculed Jesus. They were lovers of money, Luke adds.

So it is possible to be very religious, to be theologically orthodox - that is how the Pharisees viewed themselves - but to be lovers of money and not of God.

The Lord admonishes us to be wholly devoted to Him and to be single-minded. If money is so important for us, we cannot truly serve God. Because we will again and again have the wrong priorities.

If God is our Master, then money will be our servant; and we will use our resources to honor the will of God.

But if God is not our Master, then we will become the servants of money; and money is a terrible master. It drives us further and further away from God. And we never have enough. Never enough. We always need more.

Conclusion

Christian stewardship of what we possess goes far beyond paying God 10% of our income and then using the rest as we please. He must also control the other 90%.

He wants us to be Kingdom Stewards. People who bless others with what we have.

Please look at your finances, when you are home, when you are alone. And ask whether your behaviour with money expresses your desire to serve God.

Once we have chosen to serve God, every moment of our time and every atom of our energy belongs to God.

Every cent in your bank, is his. We are only stewards. God is the most exclusive of masters. And the question for us is, whether we are faithful stewards of what he gave us.

So make up your mind. Let us follow Jesus Christ.

Amen