



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 21, 2025

AMOS 8:4-7; PSALM 113; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; LUKE 16:1-13

BREAKING THE SPELL OF MAMMON

Luke 16: 1-13 *[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. So 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.' Then 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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then 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.' And 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. And 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. "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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No 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."]*

"And 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."

Does that really sound like Jesus to you?

Yep, that's him. In today's gospel, Jesus compliments the manager's shrewdness.

He appears to respect the guy's wily, under-the-table dealings to secure his future. What do we do with this?

The Church has wrestled with this parable, found only in Luke, for millennia. Even St. Augustine supposedly said he couldn't

believe these words “came from the mouth of our lord.”¹

But we have those words today, and they are holy writ. Let’s see if we can unpack something of what Jesus is up to.

As I repeatedly returned to this story in preparation for preaching today, I found a kind of recognition – a kinship, even, with the shrewd manager, not as a fellow thief or embezzler, (all of you and my employer here will be glad to know),

but as someone who has felt visceral panic on the far edge of making a royal mess.

Perhaps some of you have been in a bind like that, too!

I give thanks to God and Alcoholics Anonymous for eight years of sobriety this November, but I can remember numerous times in active drinking when I was caught red-handed, deep into a lie – lies are the malignant language of addicts – or I was saying or doing something selfishly unkind or hurtful to someone that I’d never say or do sober.

When I was confronted by the damage I caused in the light of day, my heart would plunge headlong into my stomach with shame and embarrassment, and my mind would race into hyperdrive to try to salvage whatever I could of my relationships and future prospects.

Anyone whose life is touched by alcohol and addiction knows that this is a weary

cycle for everyone involved, until, with God’s help, sustained recovery is achieved – one day at a time.

We’re treated to a rare literary device in this gospel, the manager’s inner monologue of plotting for self-preservation. I think we can all recognize something of ourselves there. I can certainly empathize with his terror at the prospect of losing everything and becoming a ditch digger, as well as his desire to hang on to some shred of self-respect.

The manager’s quick-thinking mind comes up with a plan to make friends who can offer him shelter and hospitality by means of what Jesus calls, “dishonest wealth.” He ingratiates himself with his master’s debtors by giving them all a break on their debts. It’s brazen – so brazen that even the master can’t help but admire the play. He still intends to fire the manager, but the manager has successfully carved out a new path for himself.

Another word for what Jesus calls “dishonest wealth” is Mammon. Mammon is a word that personifies voracious consumption, greed, and inequity in any economic system, perpetuating abundance for a few and scarcity for the rest.

The economic Mammon of Rome had been taking more and giving back less to the

¹ St. Augustine quoted in Harkens, J. William, “Luke 16:1-13: Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke*,

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communities of First Century Jewish Palestine for generations by the time Luke's gospel was written.

The master is likely an absentee landlord, working under his own pressure from above to demand punishing quotas from tenant farmers with no allowances for famine or drought, plague, or sickness.

In fallow years, small parcels of independently held Jewish land were taken in place of crop quotas. This is partly how Roman dominance grew ever stronger in the region during the first century, and the wealth disparity of the peasant and working class became ever wider.

The Jews had good reasons for not trusting tax collectors.

Yet our tax-collecting manager is giving back up to 50% of the inflated quota tax to the debtors in this story, even if it's not his to give.

And who are these debtors? They are impoverished tenant farmers at the bottom of Rome's economic hierarchy.

Jesus is complimenting the manager for something quite radical: The manager is using the instruments, the currency of Mammon for something that is not Mammon – the making of friends. In doing this, he breaks Mammon's spell. It no longer holds power over him.

This is what Jesus wants for all of us. True freedom must always include liberation from Mammon's spell.

On Thursday, I attended an in-service on the Enneagram for cathedral staff led by the incredibly gifted Satya Jaech ("Jake"). I know many Saint Markan's are well-versed in the vernacular of the Enneagram. But if you don't know what that is – don't worry.

It's enough to know that the Enneagram describes nine personality types within a dynamic system. It can be a helpful tool for recognizing where certain types get stuck with respect to spiritual, psychological, and interpersonal growth. And it offers practices for getting unstuck on a journey of self-reflection and discovery oriented toward growth, connection, and transformation.

If I were going to guess what the shrewd manager's Enneagram number is, my imagination sees him as a Four (and by the way, we're not supposed to do this – at least with real peers – I'm going to say biblical characters are fair game).

As a fellow Four, I recognize something of what's motivating him. In my "Fourness," I process the world through the lens of my heart and can easily be guided by my strongest emotions. Fours are individualists with a deeply felt, aesthetic sense of the world. Even life's simple comforts are important – giving these up,

as the manager was forced to, would be a non-starter for most Fours I know.

We experience envy as our base passion – but if we are attuned to life’s wake-up calls and we begin to do our work, that guiding passion of envy will transform into a new guiding virtue of equanimity.

Isn’t this what’s happening with our Shrewd Manager? He was forced to pivot, away from envy, greed, and corruption, toward parity and connection with other people. Something opened in his heart, even for just a second. But in that tiny liminal moment of vulnerability and surrender, God entered in, and the Manager found his footing on a path from envy to equanimity. We might say he was faithful in very little, but that’s all God needs to make him also faithful in much.

There’s good news in that! The Dishonest Steward leaves his own story with a new, faithful moniker.

Seeking authentic human relationships is antithetical to the designs of Mammon. By staying in relationship with each other and by remembering our shared humanity with all who suffer and are oppressed, we break Mammon’s spell.

And for now, it must be broken over and over again.

And, like the Manager, may we be shrewd and nimble enough to pivot when life invites surrender, welcoming God into our new paths of transformation.

“You cannot serve God and wealth.” Now that does sound like Jesus, and my friends, he’s been saying it all along.

Amen.

