

Money Talks
A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Delivered at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Pasadena, CA

September 23, 2007
[PROPER 20, YEAR C](#)

Our collect for today says “Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love heavenly things; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”

Fear not! You have nothing to be anxious about because “Jesus Christ our Lord lives and reigns” and his kingdom shall endure for ever and ever. Amen. And our Psalm for today tell us the source of Christ’s power to rule his kingdom is *love*. The Psalm for today ends with the glorious declaration that it is God’s love that endures forever (Psalm 138:9).

But the Psalm begins with a different declaration. The Psalmist says that he will worship Yahweh “before all the gods” (138:1). Before all the gods? What could this mean for us today? Who are the other gods in America today? Our gods are not Baal and Asherah as they were for the ancient Canaanites. And our gods are not Apollo and Artemis as they were for the First Century Greeks. Our gods are Mammon and Caesar – money and power.

We are like those upon whom the prophet Amos pronounced God’s judgment – those who wish they could hurry up and get worship over with so that they may get back to their everyday business of making money.

Worshipping Yahweh is all well and good, but it won’t put food on the table. (Which is, by the way, another way of saying that the food God does put on the Table during worship is not *really* food.) So we wonder “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?” (Amos 8:5). When will this worship service be over? I’ve got some stuff to get at the mall. When will this liturgy be finished? I’ve got work to do back at the office.

Jesus is right: “You cannot serve God and money”. Can’t be done. It’s impossible. “No one can serve two masters”. We *think* we’re serving God, but because we love our money so much, we end up hating God, resenting him.

What does God *mean* he’s angry that I’m “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 8:6)? I really *need* a new pair of sandals! And its not *my* fault that the Nike people only pay their workers a few cents a day. Plus, these sandals are really *cool*. Come on, God, what’s you’re problem. Get *with* it!

“No one 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” (Luke 16:13).

So what about the parable of the dishonest steward? Many people have a hard time understanding this parable because it seems to make not only wealth but *dishonest* wealth look good. The manager goes around cooking the books and the master ends up praising him for it. It looks like Jesus is commending greed and theft. How could that be?

Now, we *do* have a bad habit of interpreting every parable allegorically so that God is always the master and we are always the servants. But not *all* parables are supposed to be allegories where every character is a symbol of something.

Sometimes Jesus is just illustrating a simple point -- in this case about how shrewd businesspeople are. He says the world's businesspeople are much more shrewd about money than most Christians are. Maybe that's his only point.

And yet, there is a way to hear God giving us a word about *our* role in the parable. What if the rich man in the parable is not God. What if the rich man is Caesar? The guy who owns the dishonest wealth.

"Dishonest" here is a misleading translation of the original Greek word that means "unrighteous". Jesus isn't telling us to be dishonest or to steal money. He is telling us how to use "the mammon of unrighteousness". The dishonest wealth here is literal monetary wealth. Money. It is called unrighteous wealth, because it is the kind of thing the kingdom of this world cares about. Money is what unrighteous people are anxious to get and keep because it is considered wealth in their unrighteous kingdom.

Look at that dollar in your pocket or purse. Whose face is on it? Render to Washington what is Washington's and to Christ what is Christ's.

Money belongs to the ruler of this world. And here we are "squandering" it. We refuse to play Caesar's game. We refuse to buy the sweatshop sandals. We care more about worshiping God than about shopping. We complain when Caesar uses our tax money for war instead of healthcare. So we're trouble-makers. Caesar's got his eye on us.

And the spirit of Caesar lives *not* just in the heart of the George Bushes of this world, by the way. The spirit of Caesar lives in the heart of the Bill and Hilary Clintons, too. *Both* American parties serve money, and so neither can serve God.

It is the fault of no individual person. It's just a law of nature. In Physics Isaac Newton taught us that "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." And in politics, Jesus taught us that "Those who seek worldly power serve money, and those who serve money cannot serve God." Two plus two equals four.

So if the rich man in the parable is Caesar and we are the managers entrusted to invest his property, you can see why he wouldn't be happy. We don't play by his rules. We don't share his values. So, to him, what we do with his money – the money with *his* face on it – looks like squandering.

“What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer” (Luke 16:2). What do you *mean* you took Sunday off to go to church? What a waste of time! What do you mean you won’t buy sandals made in a sweatshop? You’ll undermine the economy! You’ve got to shop or the terrorists win. “You cannot be my manager any longer.”

What do we do in this situation? What do we do when the world hates us on account of our righteousness? We do what we *always* do. We worship Christ.

In today’s Epistle, Paul tells Timothy to *pray* for “kings and all who are in high positions” so that they may “be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Likewise we are told in today’s Psalm that even “the kings of the earth” will praise God when they have heard his words and seen his ways (Psalm 138:5-6).

“I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I will sing your praise. . . . All the kings of the earth will praise you, O Lord, when they have heard the words of your mouth. They will sing the ways of the Lord, that great is the glory of the Lord” (Psalm 138:1, 5-6).

So what do we do? We *pray* for “kings and all who are in high positions”. We sing our God’s *praise* “before the gods” of this world. And we *preach* the Gospel of the Lord so that when the “kings of the earth” have “heard the words of” God, they, too, can praise him. In other words, we *worship*. The way we respond to Caesar’s threats is through our worship of Christ: re-presenting God’s story through prayer, praise, and preaching. That is how you put food on the Table. You worship the one whose flesh is food indeed.

Of course this worship must be “not only with our lips but in our lives”. And this is what we can learn from today’s Gospel. The parable of the unrighteous steward shows us how our worship of God can win over the heart of Caesar. This miracle happens when we worship God by means of unrighteous wealth.

When Caesar is finally fed up with us and decides to terminate our employment in his kingdom, he will look and see what we have been doing. We’ve been squandering his property, but how? By forgiving people’s debts to the rich man. By using the world’s tools against it. Money is the world’s primary tool. But God can redeem even unrighteous wealth.

As Jesus says, we are to use our “unrighteous wealth” to “make friends” who will be able to “welcome” us “into the eternal homes” when our money “is gone” and we are economically bankrupt and physically dead (Luke 16:9).

His point is this. Money doesn’t last. If that makes you feel anxious, that’s because you’re still thinking like an American. Money doesn’t last. That’s supposed to be good news! “We are placed among things that are passing away.” But fear not! “Hold fast to those that shall endure.”

The kingdom of heaven has its own currency. Instead of money we have things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These are what are really worth something in heaven, the things that will endure.

“But if you have not been faithful with the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” We still face the question of *how* we can be faithful with our money. How can we be “faithful in very little” so that we may learn to be “faithful in much”? How can we be faithful with “what belongs to another” – what belongs to Caesar – so as to be given what is our own – the fruit of the Spirit?

What does God want us to do with our money? Jesus says we’re supposed to use our money to make *friends* – friends with the children of this age – thereby creating “true riches” that will endure unto the next age, the age of eternal homes.

Well, brothers and sisters, the next age has already begun. We have been bought by the Christ whom Paul says “died as a ransom for all”. The powers of this age were defeated at the Cross of Christ and now our God reigns and his kingdom will have no end. But if we want to be welcomed into eternal homes, we need to use our money accordingly. We need to forgive our debtors as God has forgiven our sins. We need to use our money to love one another.

Try *this*. Every time you spend money this week, ask yourself whether your transaction is one that serves God or Caesar. When you buy coffee, gasoline, groceries, clothes, whatever you buy this week, ask yourself where the raw materials came from. Were they grown or mined from the earth in a way harmful to the environment? Were the workers who made and sold the materials treated well? What happens to the waste from the products? Who benefits and who is harmed by your purchase? These are things we don’t often think about.

When Jesus contrasts “the children of this age” with “the children of light”, he is contrasting two whole nations, tribes, or families. (Luke 16:8). So the word “generation” does not mean age-group so much as it does people-group. The point is that people of the world *know* how to deal with *their* own kind of people better than we know how to deal with our own kind of people. They can use their money to win friends in *their* kingdom, but we don’t often use our money to win friends in *our* kingdom. We don’t often use our money to accomplish things that will endure.

And if it is in this place, gathered around that Table that we learn what things will endure, then it is here that we learn what to do with our money. This is why we have an offering each week. It’s not just a way to get money to run the church. It is an act of worship. Just as we bring our offerings of earthly bread and wine so that they can be broken and poured out and transformed into heavenly food and drink, so we bring our unrighteous wealth so that it can be turned into true riches.

And what do we *find* when our unrighteous wealth is turned into true riches? We find that “very little” has been turned into “much”. We find that what once “belonged to another” has been turned into “our own”. By giving them away, we can turn some worthless green pieces of paper and silver coins into joy and peace. By refusing to use our money to support injustice, we can turn dishonest wealth into kindness and gentleness. By giving up our earthly treasure for the

work of God's eternal kingdom we can invest in faithfulness and self-control. By making friends through unrighteous mammon, we can turn money into the love of God that endures forever.*

Even "the kings of the earth will praise" the Lord "when they have heard the words" of his mouth. How is your money speaking the words of God's mouth?

* *Deleted paragraph:* And what will happen when Caesar sees what we have done with his property? What will happen when the rulers of this world see that we have made friends by means of dishonest wealth? They will commend us for acting shrewdly. Because in their world, only money talks, this is the only way to make them *hear* the Word of the Lord. And so we are told to take the unrighteous wealth Caesar offers to let us manage and to use it to make friends. "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." What we do with our money doesn't always make sense to the world. But even they can understand the value of friendship. When he takes account of our management, the rich man will see in some incomplete way what true wealth is about and will commend us for acting shrewdly. Caesar will allow us in this world to "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity". For he will begin to understand the nature of true power. He will have a hunch that when the next age comes in all its fullness and the kingdom of heaven replaces the kingdom of the world once and for all, even Caesar will have to bow before the throne of Christ and that all the kings of the earth will praise our Lord when they have heard the words of his mouth.