

## SPEND YOUR MONEY WISELY

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Before I get into my sermon, I just want to begin by telling you all about an interesting experience. Yesterday, two very well dressed young men came to my door and wanted to read the bible with me. Knowing what I know about well dressed young men who come to your door in order to read the bible, I initially wanted to just shut it down. Look, you're not going to get anywhere with me. I've got a seminary degree. I work at a church. My soul isn't on the market, etc.

But something came over me. I believe it was the Holy Spirit. I decided mine should not be just one more door closed in their faces. They were demonstrating a sincerity of faith which I find laudable, and though I would almost certainly disagree with much of what they had to say, that was okay. Jehovah's Witnesses deserve to be treated with respect like anyone else, right? Besides, wouldn't it be nice if Episcopalians were even half as well versed in the Bible.

We discussed theology and biblical interpretation for an hour and a half. I offered a few different ways to think about things. They offered a few different ways to think about things. I didn't change my mind about anything, and they probably didn't either, but I did learn more about them. And by the time they walked away, I was certain that our interaction was holy. Whether it was holy simply because someone gave them the time of day or because each of us had a chance to share what is true about our faith, I don't really know.

But I'm happy I did it, and I think Episcopalians have more in common with Jehovah's Witnesses than what I previously realized. It's not enough for a merger, but still, we share an anticipation for the coming of God's kingdom. Not a vague metaphorical kingdom that lives in our hearts. But an actual kingdom with Jesus Christ at the helm which rules heaven and earth with the truth of mutual respect, love, sharing, courtesy, etc.

Today's gospel lesson presupposes that its audience is eager for this kingdom. And it presupposes that we know that in this kingdom, things are reversed.

The poor are rich. The givers receive. The pardoners are pardoned. The victim is the victor. Even understanding kingdom logic, this is easily among the most difficult parables in the gospels. Most of us are left with befuddlement when we hear it or read it.

Just *what* exactly is being said here?  
*Why* does Jesus appear to encourage dishonesty?  
What *exactly* does that last part with God and wealth and faithfulness with much or little have to do with the shrewd manager?  
Just what in the story are we being asked to integrate into our lives?  
If you're a little puzzled after hearing today's passage, it's okay. It just means you paid attention.

Now keep in mind that Luke is a theologian and an editor. He's not reporting chronology like a historian. He's doing his best to use the sundry resources at his disposal.

To tell his side of the story. Keeping that editing in mind, it appears that what we're really dealing with in one lesson is 2 distinct streams of content without an obvious link. We have the parable of the shrewd manager on the one hand and disparate sayings of Jesus about money on the other.

And in between, an ambitious attempt by Luke to construct a theological bridge that links them. Everything in the passage which seems to commend dishonesty belongs to that bridge. It doesn't really commend dishonesty. More on that later.

It's helpful to read for context and flow. This parable comes immediately *before* more teaching on money and immediately *after* the story of the Prodigal Son. So Luke's audience is riding a pretty great wave at this point. You can always return to God.

No matter what you've done, true repentance is met with forgiveness and restoration. Now, here today, our main character, yet again, is a squanderer. That's two in a row. And just like the prodigal, this squanderer is faced with a difficult set of options. In both stories, choosing wisely involves swallowing the proverbial bitter pill. The prodigal had to face shame and humiliation and risk rejection upon his return home. The shrewd manager presumably has to forfeit his own commissions in order to settle-up with his master. He not only pays off his debt, but more importantly, he makes a few friends in the process. He will need their hospitality during his unemployment.

The manager is praised for being shrewd because he takes action to protect the most valuable assets in his portfolio—his friends. Jesus wants his followers—the children of light—to exercise the same clarity when considering their relationships with God.

He uses this parable to illustrate that all of us are squanderers. Squanderers of Time. Talent. Treasure. Most of all, squanderers of relationship with God. We simply don't make the most of it. As God's people we should value God the same way the manager values his friends. Our situation is like his if we think about it. We need God's help. So why not come home to God like the Prodigal. Why not forsake financial gain in order to salvage our relationship with God?

Now we might begin to understand something of Luke's reasoning when he tries to segue to teachings on money. The connection is there. But we must avoid the mistake of trying too closely associating the dishonest behavior of the manager With the term—'dishonest wealth.' They are barely related.

Here, 'dishonest wealth' really just means material wealth...

Though many profiteers do practice deceit just as the dishonest manager did, We risk missing the point of what's being said if we read this and try to argue that all material wealth is somehow eventually linked to deceit, Though it may well be.

Instead, what is dishonest about wealth is that it's a bait-and-switch scam. If we allow it, Wealth seduces us. Inflates our ego. Then it addicts us. And like any addict, we begin patterning our lives around our addiction. We start making moral compromises for a quick fix. We eventually find ourselves possessed by our possessions.

Duped by the fleeting allure of that which won't bring true fullness of life, the honest riches. The honest riches, on the other hand, endure forever. We must pick make the tough choice. God or wealth. No servant can serve two masters. Luke's theological bridge goes something like this: Christian Discipleship requires tough, all or none, go for broke choices.

Repentance and Sacrifice. It requires using money as a means to God rather than as an impediment between you and God. Using money as a *means* to God? You might be skeptical. But Luke's bridge says that very thing twice. First, "Make friends for yourselves using dishonest wealth "

Here the metaphorical parallel to 'friends' is of course God—the one who can help us. Second, "if you aren't faithful with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" If you can't give material wealth, you can't receive spiritual wealth.

In both occurrences, the upshot is 'Save your life' Be shrewd with your money. Use it to serve God.

Though I know it makes some people squirm in the pew, I actually enjoy preaching about money. Because it gives me the chance to preach from the heart. I have discovered in my own spiritual life That I find deep and enduring joy and contentment in the practice of tithing.

So I know exactly why Luke wants us to be shrewd with money:  
 It requires repentance and sacrifice. It is a challenge, but doing right with money is an excellent way to demonstrate that God is really a priority to us. Holding fast to a challenging giving commitment, Is not only rewarding beyond belief, (in other words it yields *honest* wealth) but it sends an unmistakable message to God.

Nowadays many of us write checks electronically or have automatic debits set up for our giving to the church. And there is an understanding that just because you don't put anything in the plate doesn't mean you don't give. You might be transferring stocks and bonds on Thursday afternoons. Who knows? But I hope and pray that offering plates are never omitted from the service. The Jehovah's Witnesses took great pride in the fact that no offering plates are ever passed in their meeting halls.

My response was, you're missing out on a great blessing. You see, there are important theological lessons embedded in the passing of the offering plate *during* worship. For one, the act of sacrificial giving is itself perhaps the most powerful act of worship we possess as individuals. Secondly, it sets our hearts right for communion. Our communion with God at the altar is not a one way dispensation.

Like a holy pepsi machine.  
 It's a tri directional relationship.  
 God gives Godself to us; We give ourselves to God, we give ourselves to each other.  
 It really is that simple.

After church, I hope you'll stay for the town hall meeting in Morrill Hall  
 Where you'll hear the joyful stories of the shrewd managers in this parish.  
 God is at work here. And the kingdom is in our midst.  
 Amen.