



Week 5 – Money and Generosity

Jesus spoke in hyperbole a lot. I don't think he is telling us we have to take a vow of poverty, but we have to commit our resources to Jesus.

1. We have to see everything we have as if it's really God's money and we get to use it to help the Kingdom.
2. We give until it hurts. We should give until it causes us to have to make decisions about things like new clothes or a vacation.
3. We don't give last. It's the first thing we do each month. If we wait until the end of the month, we will end up with no money to give.
4. What are God's expectations about how we will view the resources with which God has entrusted us? (Talents)

Day 1 – Rich Fool – Luke 12:13-21

Someone from the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Jesus said to him, "Man, who appointed me as judge or referee between you and your brother?"

Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." Then he told them a parable: "A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and goods. I'll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, 'Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

Understanding the Passage:

Money and possessions rank among the most referenced topics in the Bible – money is mentioned more than 800 times and possessions are mentioned more than 1,200 times. Why does scripture talk about money so much? Because there is an undeniable connection between our faith and how we view money and possessions.

This parable is the perfect example of how humans are, as Rev. Adam Hamilton describes, "created to give, but tempted to keep." Why aren't we more inclined to give? There seems to be two main motivations to keep our resources to ourselves: fear and self-interest.

When we are fearful of the future or of not having enough, it is because we are putting the source of our sense of security in our possessions, not in God. We also suffer from a sense of self-interest that tells us that "I earned it so I should keep it." We want to save our money to buy ourselves things that we think will make us happy: we feel like we might "miss out" on a vacation or fancy bathroom remodel or a new laptop if we give too much away.

In the 1st century, the firstborn son was guaranteed a double portion of his father's inheritance. The man in the crowd who is asking Jesus to arbitrate the division of assets between himself and his brother is most likely the younger brother, someone who is unhappy with the amount that he is to receive.

The key to this parable is Jesus' response to that man in the crowd before he even begins telling the parable: "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." He is telling him, presumably the younger brother, that the point of life is not to accumulate wealth and possessions. We should not be fixated on the number in our bank account, whether it is large or small, because that means that we are not fixated on God.

Further, God asks the man in the parable, "now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?" The man should have been generously sharing his wealth all along rather than hoarding it – as St. Augustine said of this parable, "He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Which of your possessions would you find it hardest to live without?
2. How secure do you feel about the future? Where do you get that sense (or lack) of security?
3. If you were given a million dollars, what would you do with it?

Day 2 – Rich Man and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31

"There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

"The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. He shouted, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.'

"The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don't come to this place of agony.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.' The rich man said, 'No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.' Abraham said, 'If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

Understanding the Passage:

Most of the parables about money come from the Gospel of Luke. Luke clearly lifts up God's preferential option for the poor; that does not mean that God loves those who experience prosperity any less, but that God invites us to see where God is working with those on the margins and join in on that work. Luke also especially highlights Jesus' ministry to and with the outcasts and powerless, tax collectors and sinners, Samaritans and Gentiles, women, and most particularly the poor: those who have been set aside by society.

Luke speaks significantly of the dangers and responsibilities of wealth. He often points to what is sometimes called "the great reversal," in which the poor and powerless are lifted up and the rich and powerful are brought down. In this parable, the rich man wore his wealth on his sleeve – purple dye was the most expensive kind and linen was a precious fabric. He seemed to have never suffered and clearly experienced power on earth (as demonstrated by his assumption that he could order Father Abraham to send Lazarus to provide relief for him or to carry a message to his father's house) but is powerless in the afterlife. He was not concerned with the plight of others during his lifetime, letting Lazarus live just outside of the gate of his house and never giving him any food. On the other hand, Lazarus suffered his whole life but is raised to a position of power and comfort in the afterlife.

Immediately before this parable, in Luke 16:14, it says that the Pharisees, who loved money, sneered at Jesus for telling these parables about wealth. The Pharisees were unconcerned about the poor and those they considered worthless sinners. But we know that is not how God sees folks without means. In fact, Lazarus is the only character in all of Jesus' parables who is given a name. His name is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means "God helps." Lazarus spent his entire life with no help from anyone in the world except God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why do you think that Jesus gives Lazarus a name, but does not name the rich man? What is communicated in that action?
2. How does having money and possessions make us less sensitive to the needs of others?
3. Why do you think that Father Abraham said that the rich man's brothers would not believe even if they saw Lazarus?

Day 3 – Talents – Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27

Matthew 25:14-30

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant's ability. Then he left on his journey.

"After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

"Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, 'Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I've gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

"The second servant also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I've gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

"Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, 'Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours.'

"His master replied, 'You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven't sown and that I gather crops where I haven't spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don't have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. Now take the worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness.

People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.'"

Luke 19:11-27

As they listened to this, Jesus told them another parable because he was near Jerusalem and they thought God's kingdom would appear right away. He said, "A certain man who was born into royalty went to a distant land to receive

his kingdom and then return. He called together ten servants and gave each of them money worth four months' wages. He said, 'Do business with this until I return.' His citizens hated him, so they sent a representative after him who said, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' After receiving his kingdom, he returned and called the servants to whom he had given the money to find out how much they had earned. The first servant came forward and said, 'Your money has earned a return of one thousand percent.' The king replied, 'Excellent! You are a good servant. Because you have been faithful in a small matter, you will have authority over ten cities.'

"The second servant came and said, 'Master, your money has made a return of five hundred percent.' To this one, the king said, 'You will have authority over five cities.'

"Another servant came and said, 'Master, here is your money. I wrapped it up in a scarf for safekeeping. I was afraid of you because you are a stern man. You withdraw what you haven't deposited and you harvest what you haven't planted.' The king replied, 'I will judge you by the words of your own mouth, you worthless servant! You knew, did you, that I'm a stern man, withdrawing what I didn't deposit, and harvesting what I didn't plant? Why then didn't you put my money in the bank? Then when I arrived, at least I could have gotten it back with interest.'

"He said to his attendants, 'Take his money and give it to the one who has ten times as much.' 'But Master,' they said, 'he already has ten times as much!' He replied, 'I say to you that everyone who has will be given more, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for my enemies who don't want me as their king, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'"

Understanding the Passage:

Jesus told this parable after he entered Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) and wept over the city because he knew that the people refused to accept him as the Messiah. He turned to his disciples and gave them final instructions and encouragement. He told them a series of parables about staying faithful and being prepared for the coming Kingdom.

In the Old Testament, talents referred to a unit of measurement used for weighing precious metals (one talent equaled about 75 pounds). In the New Testament, the word talent comes from the Greek *tálanon*, which was a measure of money equal to 6,000 drachmas or denarii, the Greek and Roman silver coins. Some scholars estimate that a single talent would be the equivalent of 20 years' worth of wages for one of the servants.

The master gave each of the three servants different amounts of money, based on their *dunamis*, which is the Greek word for the inherent power given by God. The master recognized that all of the servants had differing levels of giftedness and he doled out the money accordingly. But both the servant who was given five talents and the servant who was given two talents were praised in the same way by the master. The praise was not about the specific monetary value returned to the master, but about the effort that they put forward to increase their investment.

This leaves us wondering... the master seemed to know that one of the servants did not have the same ability as the others. Surely the master should have seen these results coming. Why was he punished?

He was not punished because he did less than the others; he was punished because he did nothing. We all have different skill sets and gifts, and some of us are more talented in certain areas of our lives than others. But God does not want us to do nothing. Each of us is gifted in different ways and we are called to use those gifts to build the kingdom, which means we have to invest ourselves and push for returns.

Jesus was interested in the *use* of wealth. Many of us wonder, "do we have to give up every dollar we have?" This parable clearly demonstrates that having money and investing money to make more money is not the problem. But it is the way we view money that is important to God. Do we use our money to further the kingdom or do we sit on it for our own selfish purposes?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is a talent in our modern context? What kind of talents have you been given? Are you growing them or hiding them?
2. The parable says that each servant was given talents in accordance with their ability. Why does that matter?
3. What does this passage teach us about God?

Day 4 – Laborers in the Vineyard – Matthew 20:1-16

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

“Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

“‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

Understanding the Passage:

On the surface, this passage is about how it is never too late to receive the grace of God. You can develop a relationship with Jesus when you are a child (early in the morning) or when you’re a young adult (around nine in the morning) or later in life (around noon or three). But you can also put your trust in Christ at the end of your life (around five in the afternoon) and still receive all of the grace and mercy that was extended to those who have been Christians longer. This is an incredible reminder of the graciousness and generosity of God.

But parables are meant to call us to action, and while that interpretation is true and it teaches us about God, it doesn’t call us to a different sort of behavior. The first thing is that we are called to act like God – we can’t exclude people or look down on them because they are not yet Christ-followers or because they came to faith late in the game. It is tempting to think, “What is this new person thinking? They just became a Christian and a church member and now they want to make all of these changes to our church.” Or “Who does this person think they are telling me all about God? I have been a Christian way longer and I know about God already.” But the master pays these folks the same wage as the ones who have been around since the beginning of the day – their work (and experience) is just as valuable as everyone else’s.

We would also be well served to look at what it might be telling us about our inclination toward covetousness. The workers were coveting what the master chose to give to everyone else. They were not satisfied with the deals that they made with the master when they began their workday – they wanted more because they saw others get “more.” God is not in the business of doling out grace according to the world’s standards. If it were up to us, people would get paid different amounts based on the hours they worked – or they would have different amounts of grace and redemption

based on the length of their relationship with God. But God casts that system to the side and comes in with a better system – one that says that we are all worthy of marvelous grace, no matter how late we are to the game.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Can you think of a time when you felt cheated because you worked longer or harder than someone, but they got the same reward as you?
2. How does our human conception of fairness differ from God's conception of what is fair? On what do we base our conception of fair?
3. If you were a latecomer and started work at the end of the day but received the same payment as everyone else, how would you feel?
4. How is grace different than fairness?

Day 5 – Unjust Steward – Luke 16:1-13

Jesus also said to the disciples, "A certain rich man heard that his household manager was wasting his estate. He called the manager in and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give me a report of your administration because you can no longer serve as my manager.'

"The household manager said to himself, What will I do now that my master is firing me as his manager? I'm not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. I know what I'll do so that, when I am removed from my management position, people will welcome me into their houses.

"One by one, the manager sent for each person who owed his master money. He said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil.' The manager said to him, 'Take your contract, sit down quickly, and write four hundred fifty gallons.' Then the manager said to another, 'How much do you owe?' He said, 'One thousand bushels of wheat.' He said, 'Take your contract and write eight hundred.'

"The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted cleverly. People who belong to this world are more clever in dealing with their peers than are people who belong to the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it's gone, you will be welcomed into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven't been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? If you haven't been faithful with someone else's property, who will give you your own? No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Understanding the Passage:

This passage immediately follows the parables of the lost coin, lost sheep, and lost son. This is a continuation of that same conversation with the same Pharisees. The Pharisees were critical of Jesus hanging out with sinners – essentially telling him throughout his ministry that the sinners weren't worth his time. As a group, they devalued people and they overly valued money.

This parable is famous for being really hard to understand. But insights into first century economics gives us a new way to understand it. As Brian McLaren explains, Israel and Palestine were ruled and occupied by the Romans, who exploited the resources and people of Israel and Palestine. Most of the farmers were located in the northern part of Israel, and they were generally poorer than folks in the southern part of Judea. The Romans taxed the small farmers on their income from their olive oil, grapes and wheat to the point that the farmers could not afford to pay the taxes. The folks that lived in Judea would come up and tell the farmers, "we'll pay your taxes in exchange for a deed to your farm, but you can still live here as a tenant farmer and just make sure that we get a portion of the olive oil, wheat or grapes each year." They wouldn't make the trips themselves, so they would send their managers up to collect on what they were owed.

In this parable, the rich man sent his manager to collect what he was owed, but he was mad because the manager was doing a bad job. The manager is going to be fired so he decides to switch sides – he moves his loyalty from the rich man to the farmers. Through negotiations, he gets returns for the rich man, but cuts deals with each of the farmers in order to win their loyalty. He sees through an unjust economic system and works to profit those who are low on the economic pyramid. This parable essentially says, “we are better to use money in service of relationships than relationships in service of money.”

Jesus concludes this parable by saying, “you cannot serve God and wealth.” Money needs to be put into its proper place. Putting the welfare of the farmers ahead of the rich man’s accumulation of wealth is a demonstration of the proper order of things. Those who value the accumulation of wealth over the well-being of those who help them gain that wealth have it completely backwards.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What comes first in your daily decision-making: God or money?
2. What did Jesus tell us to use money for? What did he mean?
3. How does your faithfulness in small things affect your faithfulness in larger things?

Video Questions:

1. If someone looked at your calendar and your bank account, what would it tell them about where you’re spending your time and resources?
2. Do you have a storage unit? What are you keeping in it?
3. Have you ever noticed how the Gospel of Luke highlights God’s preferential option for the poor? What do you think about that?
4. Do you have a commitment to the poor? If so, what motivates it? If not, what do you think it would do to your faith to make that commitment?
5. Do you view the money in your bank account as God’s resources or your resources? What difference does it make?
6. If you don’t currently feel joyful about giving, what needs to change so that it is a joyful experience for you rather than a painful one?
7. What would it mean in your life to “give until it hurts”? What might God be asking you to give up so that you can give more of your resources away?
8. The theme for this week is money and possessions, but at the end of this week’s video, Pastor David mentioned that he hoards his time more than money. It is the resource he keeps to himself the most. Is that true for you? If you hoard your time as well, what small steps might you take to change that so that you can be more generous with your time?