

"The Use and Abuse of Money" Luke 16:1-15 Trinity 9 2023

Dear Friends in Christ,

We want our faith to be strong, certain, clear, constant. It is our prayer and fondest wish. But, sadly, faith sometimes seems weak, uncertain, cloudy, and intermittent. Why? In his Gospel, St. Luke writes in chapter 15 about two lost sons, both of whom were desirous of their father's farm and money. Then, St. Luke adds in chapter 16 the determined words of Jesus, "You cannot serve both God and money." And, if that were not enough, St. Luke continues by telling us about a very rich man who ignored a very poor man named Lazarus, who asked for the meagerest provisions that were table scraps of food given to the man's dog.

As we read through these passages in Luke's Gospel, we can feel your muscles tightening in response. Biblical discussions about money can feel judgmental, accusatory, pointed, personal, painful. Yet, Jesus raised the issue of money and stewardship with His disciples, while also well within the hearing of the Pharisees, whom St. Luke described as 'lovers of money'. And, by extension, Jesus' words are addressed to us, as well.

To help with the context of Jesus' words, let me ask you to join me in answering two questions?

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1. What is the best use for money. An economist once said that there are essentially three 'best uses for our money. 1. once a month pamper yourself; 2. once a year do something to create a lasting memory; and 3. be generous and give to a worthwhile cause.

2. What is the worst abuse of money? The author of '3 Ways to Misuse Money', asserts that the single worst misuse of money is to hoard it for yourself; second on his list is to use your money to harm other people; and, third, is to become self-important because you have money. Others have added that people – perhaps you, me – waste money on unused gym memberships, supporting bad health habits, too much fast food, purchases made on a whim, and lottery tickets.

(1) These accounts about the use and misuse of money are in the Bible because Jesus wants us to see the situation for what it is. Jesus declared, "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."

In the simplest sense, the misuse of money is a first commandment issue – "You shall have no other gods before Me." Perhaps this will help. A man – a parishioner of Pastor Robert Hall, a popular, well known British preacher in the early 1800's, to complain about Pastor Hall's sermon about the use and misuse of money. To help

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the man see the situation – the sin - Pastor Hall opened his Bible, found a passage with the name of God in it, pointed to the printed word 'God', and asked the man, "Can you see 'God'?" "Certainly," the man replied with a measure of irritation, "I can see 'God'." Pastor Hall paused to gain the man's full attention, and then laid a shiny silver coin on top of the word. "Can you see 'God' now?" he asked. The man looked blankly into Pastor Hall's face, said nothing, and then dropped his head in surrender. Indeed, the misplaced love of money hides God and His grace and goodness from us, leaving us poorer by far.

(2) Make no mistake, money, by itself, is not the issue. We need money to buy food, have medical care, send our children to school, purchase clothing, maintain safe, comfortable homes and more. To help his readers, St. Paul corrected that misguided thought by writing, "The love of money is the root of all evil." Or, think of it this way: A prize was once offered by a local newspaper for the best definition of the word 'money' that readers would submit. The winning definition was judged to be this: 'Money is a very useful commodity, and can purchase everything but happiness. It is a passport everywhere but to heaven.'

(3) Why did Jesus tell the story about the dishonest manager? Why did He tell about the younger son who took his father's money and left him? Why did He tell about a very wealthy man who would not help

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a very poor, hungry man? Not because He wanted to judge the disciples, the Pharisees, or us – judging us, condemning us is never His goal – but to warn us about the grave danger we face in distancing ourselves from Him and His love.

When we value money more than God's mercy and grace, we have made money our idol. We are not loving God with all our heart, mind and soul. The Bible tells us about Achan in the Old Testament, Zaccheus and Judas in the New Testament, money changers in the Temple and more. They are examples to warn us.

(4) The resolution to the temptation is clear. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." Remember? As God, Jesus had everything. Everything. The very world and all that is in it was – and is - His. Yet, He set it aside to come to earth as a baby in a crude manger, the child of peasants, to begin the task of procuring our salvation from sin – including the sins associated with money. By His sacrificial death on the cross, He paid the price for us in full. All that is His, He shares us with us by faith. In Him, we are blessed beyond measure! And, we are free to use His blessings – including money – in a positive way.

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we understood the value of the blessings God has given us in a way that keeps Him always as our first priority? To Him be praise, honor, glory and thanksgiving now and forevermore. Amen.