

Whenever the Ninth Sunday after Trinity nears, many a preacher gets nervous. It might be the most challenging parable because in it Jesus tells of a dishonest rascal who gets fired for not doing his job faithfully, and before he turns in the books, hands over the accounts, he changes the debts owed so that those people can see what a good thing this steward has done for them, and will be moved to take care of him upon the loss of his job. And Jesus then says that the owner commends this dishonest man for his shrewdness.

This parable is, in fact, quite easy to understand if we simply let it stand on its own terms. What, in this parable, does the cheating steward value? What is his goal, what does he want above all else? He wants to be taken care of, to not have to beg or forced to do physical labor for which he is unfit. He wants to ensure that when the day is done and he is jobless, he will have a place to stay and be fed and sheltered. So in the time he has, using the position and resources that are soon to be gone, he does whatever he can to ensure that he will have that.

Our Lord then makes this comment: **“the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.”** The “sons of this world,” are unbelievers. They do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things, their god is money, worldly comforts and security. They are mistaken in their judgment of what really matters, but they know what they want, and they pursue it with a determination that puts the sons of light, believers, to shame.

Several years ago, during a political contest, a major player in one party pushed aspersions, lies, about the other party’s candidate. At the end of the day, that major player’s party won several important offices, maintained control of several levels of the national government. But it also came to light that these stories about the opponent were, in fact, untrue. The fact-checking website PolitiFact rated the allegation by this major player as “Pants on Fire,” false. He was asked about it and said, “Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” He valued his party remaining in power, and used whatever he could, even when it was outright lies and slander against a person’s reputation, charging him with a crime, to ensure that it turned out his way.

This person, by the way, was not a Christian, he was a member of an anti-Christian cult. There was a time when our nation had enough sense of decency, regard for honesty and telling the truth, that such a person would be compelled to resign in shame. This person did not know the truth, did not value it. But boy you have to at least admire the determination, the going above and beyond, to the max of whatever might work, to ensure that what was valued was attained.

Sadly, though he enjoyed all that for a few years, he died not knowing the priceless treasure of Christ’s righteousness, not knowing of that kingdom that cannot be shaken, cannot be voted out, overthrown, that cannot be earned or schemed into, but is freely given.

But you do. You know that whatever goods or money is given you in this life, that is what Jesus means by the term “mammon,” it is not yours. You know that you are but a steward, not the owner, nothing you have is yours, but rather is entrusted to you for a time, to use for the sake of your Master. You know what is of true value and worth, and your life shows that whatever you have, it is used to serve that end, towards what really matters, what cannot be taken away even when all else, your very life, ends. Right?

You've felt mammon's temptation. You've sought security from earthly possessions. You've trusted it and sought your good from it when you know you should trust in God above all things and seek your good from Him. You've acted like the owner when in fact you're the steward. That's a sin against the true God. Repent. Repent and realize that you've got the true riches of which St. Peter writes, **"you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."** The blood of Christ is your wealth, by which He has blotted out all your sins and shown you the favor of God. That is the one thing that is needful, the treasure to regard as most precious above all else.

So what do you need mammon for? You're right not to desire it. You're right to regard it with suspicion. Having riches can quickly become like handling hazardous material, or Tolkien's one ring that consumes the mind. As Christians we realize that we're stewards of what in fact belongs to God. It's not wicked in and of itself such that we must heap up our money and set fire to it. Our Lord gives a second clarifying comment after the parable: **"make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home."** Jesus teaches us how to use our money and possession. We're going to put it to good use, but in such a way that corresponds to faith in Christ and to our goal of eternal life.

We have far different motives than this steward in the parable, or any power-obsessed politician. We have an eternal rather than an earthly goal. You can't take mammon with you to eternal life. But in eternal life there will be those who passed before you in the faith. There will be those whom you benefited with your mammon while you had it, and who will give you a warm welcome as you pass into the inheritance of the saints. Now this doesn't mean that we buy our way into eternal life. It's only because of faith in Christ that we make right use of mammon instead of trusting it like a god, and it's by Christ our righteousness that we're saved, not by our use of mammon. At the same time, the fact remains that when we enter eternal life, there will be those who will greet us because we used our mammon for them.

What does this look like? How could I use money, how could I use possessions in this life in such a way that someone will thank me for it in eternity? I can think of three examples. First, use your mammon to support your congregation. This doesn't seem like a great thing. We think of great generosity as the philanthropist who has millions of dollars and builds new research wings for children's hospitals or funds clean water for Africa. We never imagine that we could be philanthropists. But the word philanthropy simply means "love of man," and what better way to love your fellow man than to support the Gospel for his sake in a given place? Every faithful congregation is a beacon of the Gospel in the midst of a dying world. By supporting our congregation you not only ensure that you'll get to continue hearing the good news of eternal life in Christ; you also provide others with a place to hear the Word, that they also may believe and be saved.

I've pointed out before; there is no one here in this congregation who was alive, probably no one even related to the people who built this congregation almost 100 years ago. In the middle of the great depression they put what money they had to ensuring that this building would be here for you, people they did not meet or know. If you love and value what you receive here, you want what you have for your children, for other people you may never meet in this life, you have the means to ensure that is possible. When you use mammon to support the Gospel, you are the world's greatest philanthropists.

There are those who will receive you warmly into heaven because you spent mammon in order that the Gospel might continue in this place.

Second, use your mammon to support the education of young Christians. You see the need as clearly as I do. How many children walk away from the faith in which their parents are raising them because of schools that promote rebellion and unbelief under the guise of critical thinking, that promote immorality under the guise of freedom of expression, that promote atheism under the guise of science, that don't even mention God and thus teach children to suppose that He doesn't exist, in a word, schools that reject the Word of God and replace it with the vain imaginings of man?

We have opportunities to raise our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Not just through schools and education, but through the many opportunities for faith formation here in our congregation. You as parents, future parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, can better learn the truth and how to confess and teach it to children. Christian children who benefit from your mammon, even as simple as your time spent in Bible Class and your efforts and talking about what you know of Christ and the truth of His Word, will thank you in the eternal dwellings of heaven that you used the stuff of earth to care for their eternal wellbeing.

Third, use your mammon to care for one another. As you learn of needs yourself or as your pastor brings them to your attention, use unrighteous mammon to serve your purpose of Christian love. Jesus will commend His Christians on the Last Day, saying, "I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was naked and you clothed Me," and those three all involve spending mammon on a fellow Christian, which is nothing other than doing such good works for Christ Himself.

I bring up these examples in order to explain Jesus' words in a concrete way. Not so that we would place our confidence in our good works, obviously. In eternity it's others who bring up our good works, not us. For our part, we know that even the good we do is not completely pure, and we ever stand in need of Christ's riches that He gives to us. As long as we have a sinful nature, we will be inclined to use mammon wrongly, and to trust it and feel secure in it, to rejoice at the gain of it and lament at the loss of it, as if mammon were our life.

But He who had no place to lay His head, who asked a drink of water from the Samaritan woman, who hung poor and beggarly on the cross, who is yet the owner of all things—this Master of the house of God has mercy on us, His stewards. He takes away our sins. He wins our hearts with the true wealth of His Gospel. This wealth is our hope and trust, and having such riches, we despise all other riches on earth. Praise be to Him who has saved us and prepared for us a dwelling that will never pass away!