

Money—The Excellent Gift

Luke 16:1-15

John Breon

What's the first job you got paid for? I remember getting a small allowance when I was young and I probably got something for some chores. But the first job I remember getting paid for was shoveling snow off the sidewalks at a senior citizens apartment complex. Dad was on the board there and he hired some of my friends and me to clear the sidewalks on some snowy days. When I was in junior high, I started mowing yards and earning some money that way. In high school, I was also a cook at Ron's Drive-In, a local burger joint. I've earned money hauling hay. One semester in seminary, I worked for the housing office painting dorms. I've even sold my old comic books on eBay to earn some money.

My first pastoral appointment was as a student pastor at Springer and Gene Autry. I was kind of amazed at the salary I earned for doing what I love—studying, preparing messages, and preaching. I soon learned there's a lot more to pastoral ministry than just preaching. But it was still kind of hard to believe that I was getting paid for this. Now, I've come to accept that reality! I hope you get paid to do what you're called to do and that you love doing.

Today we're looking at earning money. John Wesley said money is "an excellent gift of God." For some reason that phrase made me think of my grandmothers. For Christmas, Grandma Jessie often gave us an afghan that she had knitted. Then I remember when a Christmas present from her was a card with a \$5 bill in it. We called my other grandma, Mammy. When I was home from college and went to her house, as we said goodbye, she would sometimes slip a \$20 bill into my hand—gas money or whatever. I don't know if those were "excellent" gifts, but looking back I think maybe they were.

Can we acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God, even an excellent gift? And that we're called to use God's gifts in the right way?

Wesley declares that one important part of the right use of money is to "gain all you can," or, as our stewardship guide puts it, "*earn* all you can."

Wesley was drawing on Jesus' teaching in and around this parable in Luke 16.

I heard about a young salesman who walked up to the receptionist and asked to see the company's sales manager. Ushered into the office, he said, "I don't suppose you want to buy any life insurance, do you?"

"No," the sales manager replied curtly.

"I didn't think so," said the dejected salesman, getting up to leave.

"Wait a minute," said the sales manager. "I want to talk to you." The salesman sat down again, obviously nervous and confused. "I train salespeople," said the manager, "and you're the worst I've seen yet. You'll never sell anything until you're more positive and show some confidence. Now, because you're obviously new at this, I'll help you out by signing up for a twenty-thousand-dollar policy."

After the sales manager had signed on the dotted line, he said, "Young man, one thing you'll have to do is develop a few standard organized sales talks."

"Oh, but I have," replied the salesman, smiling. "This was my talk for sales managers" (James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* 96).

We can chuckle at the young salesman's cleverness. But at the same time, it makes us a little uneasy. It doesn't seem quite honest.

Jesus' parable and his comments following it also make us uneasy. Jesus uses as an example a steward or manager who was about to be fired because he's been wasting the owner's possessions, squandering his property—like the prodigal son squandered his inheritance (Lk 15:13).

When the owner discovers this, he's ready to fire the manager. When the manager hears that he'll soon be out of a job, he wonders what to do. He's too weak for manual labor and too proud to beg—which would have been about the only options at that time. Then he comes up with a clever plan to make sure people will welcome him and that he'll be taken care of when he's out of a job. The manager calls in the people who owed money to the owner. He reduces their debt by as much as fifty percent. Then, out of gratitude or obligation, these debtors will later welcome him.

The parable's twist comes in Jesus' closing comments: The owner was *impressed* with the manager's cleverness or shrewdness and *commended*

him. Even more surprising, Jesus uses the shrewd manager as an example for his disciples. He says we can learn something from the way the people of this world deal with each other. In their way, children of this world are wiser about such things than the children of the light are. "Children of the light" are Jesus' disciples, people of God's kingdom.

Just as the shrewd manager used money to secure his future, Jesus tells his disciples to make friends of worldly wealth, or unrighteous mammon, in order to be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Does it disturb you that Jesus uses a dishonest person as an example for his disciples? Jesus doesn't approve of the manager's dishonesty. He simply sees in the manager's actions a lesson to be learned. If people of the world can show such creativity in dealing with a crisis, how much more should the people of God's kingdom be creative. If the world can be so devoted to making some money, how much more should God's children be devoted to God. If people who belong to the present evil age can use money for selfish gain, surely people who belong to God's kingdom can use money to bless others and glorify God.

Jesus isn't calling us to imitate the manager's dishonesty, but to learn from his shrewdness. We don't often use the word "shrewd" to describe discipleship. "Clever Christians" or "shrewd saints" doesn't sound quite right. "Shrewd" can be a negative description, meaning crafty or underhanded. But it can also be a positive word. It means sharp, keen, astute, intelligent or perceptive. Those are qualities Jesus wants his disciples to have. Jesus wants us to be able to deal creatively with reality, to come to grips with crises, to be energetic and wise in planning ways to handle life's problems and to use money and possessions.

I like how Eugene Peterson translates verses 8-9:

Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your

attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior. (*The Message*)

Jesus goes on to contrast his disciples with the dishonest manager. He was unfaithful with little, with worldly wealth. But Jesus says that whoever is faithful with little can be trusted with much. If you're not trustworthy in handling unrighteous wealth, you won't be entrusted with true riches.

Then Jesus says that we have a decision to make. Who will rule our lives? Will the Lord be our God or will Mammon be our god? There's no way to serve both. "Mammon" is the Aramaic word for wealth, riches, possessions. Money and possessions either serve us or we serve them. Jesus often warns us about the dangers of wealth and possessions, but here he shows that it's possible to manage goods in ways that are appropriate to life in God's kingdom.

The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. ...Life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely this week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. (Fred Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation Commentary*)

One of those "frequent and familiar" things we give attention to is money. Wesley points out that the Bible doesn't say "money is the root of all evil," but that "*the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil*" (1 Timothy 6:10). Jesus does talk about "unrighteous wealth" and he says we can't serve both God and Money. That points to money's dark side. The love of money, greed, does lead to evil, to abuses of power and oppression of people.

A man was going through his checks at income tax time. Does anybody still write checks? This man was going through a painful divorce. He and his wife had drifted away from the Lord and each other. Reviewing what they had spent during the past year shook him. He said, "I've just gone through what we spent last year. If I would have done that six months ago, I could have predicted the dilemma I'm in now. So much money was spent on our own pleasures and luxury, and a pittance on the needs of others. Our self-indulgence has distorted our values. No wonder we lost our purpose and direction" (Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Autobiography of God* 206).

But Jesus not only warns about the dangers of money, he also talks about *using* unrighteous mammon. That highlights the good side of money. We can place money and possessions under the lordship of Jesus, then they can be used to bless people, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to spread the gospel, to support all kinds of ministry. The good we can do with money is limited only by our prayerful imagination and our willingness to put it to use for God's kingdom.

John Wesley preached on Luke 16:9—"I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"—more than two dozen times. His published sermon on this text is called "The Use of Money." (You can find it online if you search "John Wesley The Use of Money.")

Wesley summarized the right use of money, Christian stewardship of money, as *gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can*. He was calling people to diligence, frugality, and generosity. Today, our focus is "gain all you can" or "earn all you can."

Let's hear from someone who puts that into practice and helps others learn how to as well. This is a clip from a video in the *Earn. Save. Give.* material we're using.

VIDEO: Session 2, start 1:36, end 4:40

Wesley says to gain or earn all we can, but not at the expense of our life and health. We're to gain all we can without hurting our mind, without engaging in any sinful trade or anything that's against the law of God or

country. We earn all we can without hurting our neighbor. And, if we love our neighbors as ourselves, we won't harm them physically or spiritually. Wesley says to work, to live out our calling, with honesty, energy, and intelligence, "by honest wisdom and unwearied diligence" ("The Use of Money," point I, sections 7-8).

Will we acknowledge God's generosity? Will we trust God to provide what we need, including the ability to earn all we can in ways that are consistent with God's kingdom? Will we show gratitude to God? Will we use God's excellent gift of money for the good of people and the glory of God?