Money Matters

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A woman finished shopping at a mall and was returning to her car in the parking lot. She found four men sitting in her car, so she dropped her shopping bags, reached into her purse and pointed a gun in their direction. “Get out of my car. I have a gun and I know how to use it.” The men did as they were told. They jumped out of the car and took off! The woman, somewhat shaken, loaded her bags into her car and attempted to put the key into the ignition. But it wouldn’t fit. Suddenly, it dawned on her. It was not her car. Her car was parked four or five spaces away. So, she shifted her bags to her own car and drove to the police station to turn herself in.

When she told the story to the desk sergeant, he broke out laughing. Four men were filing a police report in the next room about a carjacking by an old woman with thick glasses and white hair who wielded a handgun. No charges were filed. What she thought was her car belonged to someone else.

We talk about my car, my house and my cell phone. Let’s get one thing straight. We don’t own anything. Everything we own is on loan from God.

This summer, we’re focusing on Jesus’ teachings in any number of issues. Last Sunday, the subject was priorities, and the Sunday before that it was worry. Next Sunday, we’ll consider what Jesus teaches about divorce, and the Sunday after next, we’ll examine what Jesus says about forgiveness.

You may be wondering why I’m talking about money today. After all, it’s not stewardship season. Stewardship for those who are new to the church often functions as a code word for raising money. Typically, we conduct a stewardship drive in late fall to support our budget. So, why am I talking about money in the dead of August?

It’s an ideal time to talk about money, when a budget drive isn’t looming in the background. What we do with our financial resources has vital importance to God. As I express it in the sermon title, Money Matters!

I’m talking about money today, because Jesus talks plenty about it. Consider the following references from Luke’s gospel. Jesus inaugurates his ministry in Luke 4 by announcing that he has come to preach good news to the poor...
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(4:18). He asks, rhetorically, in Luke 9 what purpose it serves to gain the whole world if we end up forfeiting our very souls (9:25). He warns us in Luke 12 about the dangers associated with greed and reminds us that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (12:15). He calls upon his original band of 12 disciples to give up everything they own to follow him (14:33).

Jesus could hardly be called a materialist. So, why does he talk about money so much? I’ll let you in on where I’m going in this sermon. Jesus isn’t only concerned with what we do with our money. He’s also interested in what money does to us.

Of Jesus’ 38 parables, 16 of them deal somehow with money and possessions. One such parable serves as our Scripture lesson from Luke 16. It’s called the parable of the unjust servant or, alternatively, the parable of the dishonest steward. It’s undoubtedly the most confusing of Jesus’ parables. Scholars have long been baffled with why Jesus commends a dishonest steward as someone worth emulating. What’s up with that!

Okay, first the parable. The master in the story, a wealthy landowner, has entrusted his accounts to a manager, called a steward. This steward is charged with mismanaging his master’s assets. So, in verse 2, the master fires him.

This puts the steward in something of a bind. We have the benefit, in verses 3-4, of eavesdropping on what this steward is thinking. It’s called in English literature a soliloquy, in which we overhear this man talking to himself. He surmises that he’s too weak to dig and too proud to beg, so he conjures up an elaborate scheme. He offers to settle the master’s accounts with his debtors at a considerable write-off. He knocks one debt in half and cuts another by 20 percent. The debtors don’t know that he has been fired. They presume he’s making good on the master’s directives.

It’s an ingenious plan. It overjoys the debtors to benefit from such deep discounts. It certainly makes this steward look good, which will come in handy when he goes looking for a new job. And it makes his master look generous.

The decision of this steward also paints the master into a corner. He could call this steward out for mismanagement, but such measures will only make this master look bad; stingy, even. So, he decides to make the most of a bad situation and commend this former steward for his ingenuity.

Everything in the parable funnels down to verse 8: “The master commended the dishonest steward because he acted shrewdly.”

Jesus doesn’t applaud the steward’s ethical behavior.
“Aim at heaven and you’ll get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you’ll get neither.”
- C.S. Lewis

Indeed, Jesus doesn’t flinch at calling him dishonest. Rather, he extols his ingenuity. Whatever you say about the guy, at a minimum you can call him resourceful.

When I read about legendary bank robbers, I find myself appalled with their crime yet sometimes impressed with their ingenuity. Some years ago, a man used Craigslist to pull off a robbery. He posted an ad on Craigslist seeking workers for a road maintenance project in Monroe, Washington. The ad promised $28.50 an hour for a project known as Restore Monroe. Interested workers were asked to show up next to a Bank of America building wearing a yellow vest, safety goggles, a respirator mask and, if possible, a blue shirt.

A dozen people showed up at the appointed hour dressed accordingly to serve as decoys for a devious bank robber. The robber, who was dressed in identical apparel, stepped out from the crowd, approached a Brinks truck and disarmed the guards with pepper spray. He grabbed a duffel bag of money, took off on a 100-yard sprint to a creek where his getaway craft awaited him. He jumped into a pre-positioned inner tube and just floated away. He was apprehended a month later from DNA evidence left at the crime scene. Make no mistake, the guy is a first-rate crook, albeit a clever one.

Jesus declares in verse 8, “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” The children of this age are people who use every worldly means at their disposal to get what they want. Jesus contrasts them with children of light who seek to honor God by doing things the right way. But here’s the rub. The children of this age are more ingenious and resourceful than the children of light.

If you skip down to verse 14, Luke tells us: “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and sneered at Jesus.” These religious leaders are shrewd at making money. They invent ways of making money. You see, they love money.

Jesus calls these Pharisees out for being obsessed with making money and cutting deals when they should be investing their assets in furthering God’s work. If we invest all our resources in temporal pursuits, then temporal is all we’ll get. C.S. Lewis writes rather whimsically, “Aim at heaven and you’ll get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you’ll get neither.”

“No servant can serve two masters,” Jesus teaches in verse 13. “Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.” Maybe you’ve heard it said that money
Money binds us to what is temporal and blinds us to what is eternal.

Jesus talks so much about money because it rivals God for affection. Maybe that’s why we call it the Almighty Dollar. Money has an insidious way of binding us to what is material and temporal and blinding us to what is spiritual and eternal.

Let me return to something I said at the outset. Jesus is not only concerned with what we do with our money. He is equally concerned about what money does to us. You know of what I speak. Money does crazy things to people!

The steward is entrusted with his master’s possessions. We are stewards of the Master. We don’t own anything. Everything we own is on loan from God.

The best illustration of this principle was communicated in a children’s message some years ago. A minister called the children forward and presented each of them with a bag of Skittles. He told a story about the time when his daughter was young. He gave her a package of Skittles, which she refused to share with him. He observed that these Skittles really didn’t belong to her. He gave them to her and he could take them back. He could buy her more Skittles than she would know what to do with them all.

It’s the same with God. God gives us things to use for a time. These things don’t ultimately belong to us. They’re on loan to us.

Jesus begs us, in this parable, to use our ingenuity to further God’s work. He asks us to devote the same amount of time and energy to serving God as we do to making a living. How can we use our God-given capacities to further God’s work?

Some of you are highly skilled at connecting with people. How can you use your people-relating skills to introduce people to the good news of Jesus Christ?

Some of you are ingenious when it comes to making and managing money. How can you use your money-making skills to serve God’s purposes?

Some of you are creative artists, skilled craftspeople, imaginative writers, capable singers, gracious hosts, insightful lawyers; the sky’s the limit here. I’m inviting you this week to pray about such possibilities. Search the Scriptures for guidance. Consult with leaders in this church. Wonder aloud with trusted spiritual friends. Ask God to show you how you can use your ingenuity and resourcefulness to serve God.