

**Wealth Management**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Luke 16:1-13**  
**9-22-2019**

Imagine a rich man. He had a manger. They always do. This fella had more money and more lands than he knew what to do with. He had so many resources, he couldn't actively manage them all himself.

Now, I know this story is set in the first century, but I didn't live back then. So, I'm gonna fast forward to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I obviously didn't live back then either, but they're a little closer to my imagination. And I envision the monarchs of Europe. Think about old King George of England. All thirteen colonies were his. His! To my knowledge, he owned a set of lands he'd never even actually laid eyes upon. And not only that, he decreed that all the lands between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were his, too, even though few if any English envoys had made it to Tennessee and Missouri, let alone modern-day California. That is power. That is land ownership. That is wealth.

Now maybe the rich man in our story wasn't quite as rich as a king, but he was rich enough to be absent, and to have others do his bidding for him. So, there was a manager, not a very good one, but a manager nonetheless. And this manager was charged with making the master's lands profitable – that meant leasing them for commerce and collecting on the profits. And like most managers of the day, this manager would have most likely been paid by receiving a percentage or commission of the master's lease.

But news got back to the master that his manager was not hitting his objectives, and the master decided it was time for a change. And that scared the manager, because once you've had a desk job, and all the privileges that go with it, you don't want to work in the fields, and you don't want to have to beg. So you feel trapped, indentured to the pursuit of wealth, the thirst for which cannot be quenched.

So what did the manager do? He went to all of his clients, and he renegotiated their contracts, offering them much more favorable terms. This most certainly meant the loss of his commissions, but more than likely, it also meant the loss of profits for his master.

And while that wasn't the most profitable decision, it was a clever one. Offering favorable terms to his clients endeared the manager to them, and secured a future relationship. At the same time, the manager renegotiated his contracts before the master could relieve him of his duties, and therefore, the master was obliged to honor the contracts of his tenants, or face anger and resentment for reversing the terms.

And in an unexpected twist, the master commends the manager for making a shrewd decision in a perilous moment.

I like this parable. It's not so straight-forward, but I suppose that's why it's a parable!

No, Jesus is not telling you to dupe your bosses on Monday morning, or to game the system. I think Jesus is pointing out the absurdity of the economic systems of his day.

Our first inclination is to side with the master: “Oh that poor man, what’s rightfully his has been squandered! How can the manager do this to him?!?” As a matter of fact, for many years, this has been known as the parable of the dishonest manager.

We think this, despite the fact that an absentee land lord, someone who has never worked the land, let alone lived on it, or been connected to it, and simply owns it by title, is, in this system, entitled to all of its wealth. What, exactly, does one individual do with a hundred jugs of olive oil, and a hundred containers of wheat, which by the way would fill up an entire Walmart, except hoard it, and create an environment of scarcity, one where wealth is reserved for the few, and subsistence is afforded to the masses?

Sharon Ringe suggests that the manager, wittingly or not, has now helped to redistribute wealth. The people that work the lands will have a little more. And even the significant reduction of the master’s cut will not reduce his abundance in a meaningful way. Fifty jugs of olive oil and eighty containers of wheat are still enough to fill a Walmart, and feed its shoppers, too.

But there’s an even more crucial element at play here. Prior to his little scare, the manager was perfectly content to exist in this arrangement. He worshipped wealth, even though it’s a fragile, volatile thing. His pursuit of wealth isolated him from his clients, because he put a need for profits ahead of their wellbeing. And his status as manager, even if he had been a good one, made him dependent on the whims of his master. Sure, profits may be good this year, but eventually the investors will grow weary.

But what happens when your world gets rocked, when you find out you are no longer the manager? You’ve got to make a choice. Do you think about how to create a connection with your neighbors and the community that sustains you – in other words do you seek a way to love God and love neighbor? Or do you continue seeking to make wealth your master, even though in this vassal system, it will eventually be your downfall?

The manager, again, even if it’s not in the most conventional or righteous of ways, determines that his future, his long-term wellbeing, is primarily dependent on the relationship he has with his neighbors. He chooses to serve them, to connect to them, and in so doing, also chooses to serve God above wealth. And should his status of manager ever disappear, he will still have the support of his community to find the resources he needs.

And to me, this parable reveals the remarkable, mysterious, messy, mixed-up, contradictory, simply perfect nature of God and God’s kingdom. No, this isn’t a story of equity, or fairness, or honesty, or predictability. Like all of Jesus’ parables, it’s a story of grace.

Sons who squander inheritances, bridesmaids who run out of oil, managers who get a little loose with the numbers, can still, in their awkward, imperfect, completely human and completely fragile ways, still find the presence of God, still choose to live into the potential God gives them, still choose to be part of God’s beloved community. And living in such a way, connected to God, land, and neighbor, ensures a future of enough-ness.

Let me put it another way. A bumbling, stumbling, unworthy manager, can find a moment of pure presence, maybe it’s shrewd, maybe it’s poetic, maybe it’s clutch – but an unworthy manager can live a worthy moment, and find grace from his master. And such a grace does not nullify our own grace and

fulfilment, as one would expect in a world believing the myth of scarcity, but rather, such a grace enhances, fulfils, and sustains us all, each time it's offered.

Sardis Baptist Church, our master is not wealth, nor is it the system that creates and distributes such wealth. Our master, and by master, I don't mean a presence that dominates and controls us, but I mean the presence we follow and serve out of love and hope, our master, our source, our reason for being is God. And when we serve God, that is, when we love God and our neighbors as ourselves, we prioritize a system built on enough-ness over a system built on scarcity. And we discover that our wealth is not in things, but is in the love we receive from God and one another.

Whether honest or dishonest, efficient or inefficient, may we be managers who eventually pursue the wealth of God.

May it be so. And may it be soon.

Amen.