

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

So, this parable is a crash course in the Jesus School of Money Management.

Unfortunately, it can leave us feeling as though we should be in the remedial class.

Everything in it is so counter-intuitive. Just take the sentence: "If you haven't been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" How can "being faithful" and "dishonest wealth" even go together? It just doesn't add up.

This parable is part of a series of parables in which the person in charge is a metaphor for God—the shepherd with the lost sheep, the woman with the lost coin, the father with the Prodigal Son—so I think we have to assume that the rich man in this parable represents God. That makes it even more crazy-making when we hear the rich man commend the sneaky manager who’s been giving away the rich man’s wealth.

So, let’s go back over the story: the manager has been given notice because he’s been squandering the rich man’s money. That’s the problem: squandering. Not embezzlement or anything like that—it’s just that he’s using the money in ways that aren’t bringing any return. But when the manager knows his job is about to go away, he starts thinking of how to get the most use out of the rich man’s money while he still has access to it—some way of building a cushion to fall back on once he’s unemployed.

What he does, is to change the ledger books to slash the amount that people owe to his boss, thinking that, if he helps them now, they might help *him* in his coming time of need. As he does this, the manager *expects* his actions to get him into the good graces of his boss’s debtors. What he *doesn’t* expect is that his actions will get him into the good graces of his *boss*.

As listeners, we don't expect that, either—that's why we sit up and take notice.

After all, if what the manager was doing before was *squandering*, what do you call this? Well, his boss calls it smart management. Which tells us that the manager has misread his boss's expectations, all along. He misunderstood until this moment just what constitutes a worthwhile investment.

And so have we.

If we've never struggled financially, it's easy to downplay the importance of money. It's those who have never faced eviction or starvation who say things like, "money can't buy happiness." After all, it's hard to be happy when you're starving, or when you're ill but you can't afford a doctor, or when you don't know where you're going to sleep tonight.

If we downplay the power of money, if we don't see every dollar that passes through our fingers as an opportunity to create better lives for ourselves and others, then we're squandering our money.

In the same way, if we've never struggled financially, it's easy to downplay the importance of relationships. If we've never needed anybody's help to pay the rent; or never had to ask a neighbor to babysit in an emergency; or never had to reach out for a ride because our car has broken down and missing work could mean losing our job. For those who don't know financial struggle, relationships can feel

like a nice bonus: an optional luxury. When you're living on the edge, relationships can be a matter of survival.

So, when the careless manager knew he was about to lose his only source of income, it suddenly became clear to him what his smartest investment must be: his relationships with other people. He used his access to his boss's money to help them out. In return, he was counting on them to help him out in the future.

Of course, my first thought is: "But it wasn't his money that he was using! He was giving away somebody else's money!" And yes, he was. But so are we. We say it all the time, don't we, that "everything we have and everything we are comes from God." If that the case, then what kind of return does God hope for?

According to this parable, the investment God expects us to make is in relationships—and the return God anticipates is improved lives and strengthened communities.

Investing in relationships isn't just a good investment for the future: it actually starts paying dividends immediately, because sharing money literally buys happiness. Major studies on generosity have found that those who are consistently generous—no matter what their income—are happier than those who are not.¹

¹ Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Money is one of the most powerful tools we're given, for good or for evil. If we start seeing money as an end in itself, we're squandering our lives and setting ourselves up for a certain loss. After all, one platitude that *is* true is, "You can't take it with you." For that matter, as much as the market is fluctuating these days, any financial holdings we have might not even last through *this* life.

So, according to Jesus, we need to be shrewd in our financial dealings. That means we need to use whatever we can access to build strong connections for the future.

Most of us handle some amount of money every day. This parable challenges us to remember that every cent that flows through our fingers actually belongs to someone else—which is what Jesus means by the phrase, "dishonest wealth."

Therefore, we should hold it lightly—even loosely.

"You can't serve God and money," he says. Sometimes, we get mixed-up and think we're serving one, when we're really serving the other. When we say that everything is a gift from God that we should use well, we tend to get overly careful—because what if we end up wasting it?

The odd thing is, every parable Jesus tells about money teaches exactly the opposite. In the parable of the talents, the only one who gets in trouble is the one who hoards the money for *fear* of getting in trouble. In the parable of the sower,

we're told that he scatters seed all over the place—on good soil and bad, on rocks and roadways, just flinging it everywhere wastefully. And that's a *good* thing.

And then, this shrewd and sneaky manager, who spreads his boss's money to make friends for the future—and gets praised for it.

So in Jesus' book, that's good money management—because it benefits everyone.

In a few minutes, we'll take up the offering, just as we do every week. And just as we do every week, we'll sing "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow" as those offerings are carried to the table.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. *All blessings.*

Picture, for a moment, whatever cash you have in your wallet right now. In this parable, Jesus is letting us know: that's God's money.

Picture the latest statement you received from your checking account, or your savings account, or whatever investment accounts you may have. That's God's money, too.

Don't start sweating: I'm not about to ask you to put it all in the plate. That's not the point! Except that the lesson of this parable applies to whatever money the church has, too, which is: God intends for all the blessings God gives to *flow*, and

to flow in ways that spread the benefits of those blessings, and build up relationships.

So, are we using the money in our personal wallets and accounts to spread those blessings and build up relationships?

Are we using the money in our church accounts to spread those blessings and build up relationships?

It's all dishonest wealth: all of it. Because it all belongs to someone else. And the true owner has particular expectations of what should happen with that money, which is that it should bless the whole world.

That's the standard to which Jesus is holding us. It's the standard of the God to whom those gifts actually belong.

It's as though God created this whole world and all the creatures upon it, just in order to have someone to give things to. Praise God from whom all blessings flow and flow and flow.

However much has flowed to us, is meant to keep on flowing—shrewdly and generously—to buy happiness and friendship for ourselves and for this whole world.