

September 18, 2022, Second Sunday of Creation Season  
Serve God and Creation

The parable from this morning's gospel reading, sometimes referred to as the parable of the dishonest manager, is truly one of the most complicated and confusing parables in our scriptures

As you read through the commentaries for this pericope – this section of text – you get a lot of “I have no idea what exactly this means, but here are some possibilities”

How is it that a manager, who is getting fired for mis-management, who then goes around to those who have a debt with his boss and cuts those debts by different percentages so that when he is unemployed they will “welcome him into their homes,” is commended by Jesus in the story as being “shrewd”

I had to look up the definition of “shrewd” again just to make sure I wasn't missing an undertone with that word, but Google defines “shrewd” as “having or showing sharp powers of judgment; astute”

Could there have been a sense of sarcasm here that we all missed? Something tongue-in-cheek?

From what the scholars can tell, no – Jesus is serious

Some commentaries speculate<sup>1</sup> whether, in cutting those debts, the manager was cutting out his take of the debt – apparently debt in the Roman Empire was so typically compounded where not only was there interest (which remember, according to the Bible is not allowed in most cases because of how it preys on the vulnerable<sup>2</sup>) but different people would add different amounts over the life of a debt and take cuts along the way

So, perhaps, the manager was dishonest because he was taking a cut of the master's wealth and he was shrewd because, when called out, he went to the debtors and made their debt more honest

Another commentary, taking some creative license since we get little direct instruction from Jesus, wondered if perhaps the manager was “dishonest” in that he had gone around all the time cutting people's debts because he thought they were unfair and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-luke-161-13-2>

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35, and Deuteronomy 20:19

burdensome and therefore he was short changing his boss all the time, and when he found out he was losing his job he went out one last time to cut some debts as best he could before leaving.<sup>3</sup>

It's a little far-fetched, but it's an interesting interpretation!

It sure would be helpful if Jesus, in telling this parable, had said "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly by..." fill in the blank

His parable and explanation seem to take on the shape of a funnel in this instance, where, after the parable, Jesus asks some rhetorical questions to get us to think about his point and, ultimately, at the tip of the funnel we are given what may be the actual point of this whole dialog which is Jesus' comment: "you cannot serve God and wealth"

In whatever ways the manager was dishonest and risked him losing his job, it sounds like he was serving wealth and not God – and in cutting the debts of his boss' debtors he was acting more shrewdly towards serving God

Earlier translations of the Bible used a personified version of "wealth" at the end of this text, calling it "Mammon" – "you cannot serve God and Mammon" – turning wealth into a being, an entity, an idol

To be honest, I miss the translation of the Bible that used "Mammon" because I think it addressed what was really at stake in this text more so than simply money: it addresses idolatry (which Google defines as "extreme admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone") – the idolatry of wealth

When wealth, money, and privilege are admired, loved, and revered so extremely as to forsake our relationships with others, God raises a big red flag

You cannot serve God and Mammon – you cannot serve God and wealth

As I thought about that line in relation to our Season of Creation – this season in which we're trying to listen to the voice of creation, I wondered how we might feel if we altered that last sentence of today's gospel to read: "You cannot serve God's creation and wealth"

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2365-notes-to-the-children-of-light>

In a way, this reading of this morning's text gave me permission to continue to judge and get angry at the large corporations who exploit the earth for the sake of large profits – oil companies, gas companies, mining companies – “yeah, did you hear that big oil? You're Mammon! You're an idol and I don't mean that in a good way! Down with you! Serve God not wealth!”

Can't you just hear me at the next Climate march?

And yet, I know that, on a personal level, I often choose comfort and my own personal well-being, over making decisions that might impinge on that comfort or require me to give something up, including my own wealth, for the benefit of God's creation

There should be protestors outside my door holding my own sign up to me!

“You cannot serve God's Creation and Mammon – You cannot serve God and wealth”

The debt structures of the Roman Empire were designed to help the rich get richer, and, to be honest, our society today is not much different

Our society has woven a wonderfully intricate narrative together that has utterly defined the way we live and structure our lives which is that wealth is not just important for day to day survival it is *the* goal towards which all of our actions, behaviors, and patterns should be directed

Every aspect of our lives should be geared towards gaining wealth – we may not say it so explicitly, but it's the underpinning of so much of society – what jobs we take, what groceries we buy, what investments we make

Can we hear how that sounds in comparison to what Jesus taught?

God's narrative rings a little differently – God's narrative is “every aspect of our lives should be geared towards loving God and loving our neighbor” (remember, that's how Jesus distills the commandments in Matthew 22: 37-40)

And lest you think that my next comment is some sort of invitation to give up all our wealth and start a St. Bart's Monastery, remember this is about idolatry not simply money

It's about priorities, it's about where we give our attention and efforts, it's about how we love God and love our neighbors with all of the gifts God has given us *including* our wealth

As I listen for the voice of creation in all of this, it's not just about getting angry and yelling at the fossil fuel industry – although that feels good sometimes – it's about thinking about the decisions that even I and my family make in caring for, serving creation – serving God

It's kind of amazing how on the nose Jesus' 2000-year-old comment can still be for our society today – we still struggle with this balance between wealth, power, and privilege and serving God and our neighbor

You know that creative commentary I mentioned where the author playfully wondered if the manager was dishonest by being compassionate from the get go

That author is Debie Thomas who I often read and reflect on, and she had another interesting reflection on that manager which was: "When the manager realizes that he's in trouble, he springs into action. He doesn't wait around, he doesn't despair — he hotfoots it out the door"

She goes on, "I wonder if this means we can do a better job of engaging the crises, issues, injustices, losses, and failures facing our generation, facing our Church, facing our world, here and now."

Could we show more shrewdness, could we show sharper powers of judgment, could we be more astute when it comes to the crisis of the climate and God's creation by springing into action – not waiting around and wallowing in despair, but hotfooting it out the door?

Our society is actually quite shrewd, quite astute, at serving wealth – we are so good at it!

Imagine if we used those gifts towards serving the climate, God's Creation!

What if, rather than making a statement in the negative (a la "you cannot serve God and wealth"), we finish that sentence by making it in the affirmative?

You can serve God and...Creation!

We can serve God and Creation

We can serve God and Community!

We can serve God and Creativity!

In fact, would God not rejoice if we spent our time in service to such things?

As I prayed over this text this week and truly tried to listen to what Creation was saying in relation to this difficult text, the phrase that I kept hearing was “pick me”

Whether that was God or Creation or both, I’m not sure – but, it did sound like a plea I needed to listen to – I did feel called out, but most of all, I felt invited

You can serve God and Creation!

May it be so. Amen.