

*Kingdom Economics*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Deuteronomy 8:11-18, Ecclesiastes 5:10-15, Luke 16:1-13*

Today's Gospel reading comes from Luke 16:1-13. Listen now to God's Word. "Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.'"

Does anyone really understand economics? There are plenty of economic experts out there, but there's no degree that can guarantee you financial success. Experts lose untold millions on the stock market each year. Bear Stearns, the investment bank and brokerage that fell apart at the start of the recent recession, was named the "Most Admired Securities Firm" by Fortune magazine two years in a row right before they collapsed. We can be wise in the way we make our investments and spend our money, but sometimes it seems we're just clueless when it comes to dealing with wealth.

Jesus' parable and teachings today are among the most debated of all His words. The story about the dishonest manager can be interpreted many different ways and has been by scholars and pastors for centuries. One can argue whether Jesus is somehow endorsing the deceitfulness of the manager or if the manager was actually acting in a moral way by reducing the bills of his master's debtors. But I don't think that's the point of the parable. If we understand the underlying point Jesus is trying to make, we can make a point of becoming wise about the economics of God's Kingdom. We can learn how to use the wealth we have to create true, eternal wealth that will never fade away.

The lynchpin to the parable is Jesus' commentary – the children of this world, people who aren't God followers, these folks know how to deal with their own kind. The manager in the story knows how to make everything work out for his benefit. He reduces the debts each person owes, which puts them in *his* debt and makes him their friend...and while he was still manager of the household, he was perfectly within his rights to do that. The master had to have been furious to lose so much expected wealth, but the amounts he was due were huge – this guy was equivalent to today's multi-millionaire – and so he doesn't lose a ton of money. And what's more, what the manager has done makes the master highly esteemed in the eyes of the community as a generous and gracious benefactor. In a sense, through the reduction of the debts, everybody wins. It was a shrewd move by the manager that made him a hero. In fact, it wasn't only shrewd, it was prudent. The manager was far-sighted enough to look at what he needed to do to survive and he did it.

But Jesus says that the children of the light – Christians, those who follow God – we don't know exactly what to do with what we have. We are still influenced by the secular society around us, and so it's confusing for us to know how to use God's blessings in the right way. Jesus is telling us that we need to become wise in the ways of Kingdom economics, that we need to be prudent in the way we manage our affairs with God. We need to be far-sighted in the same way the manager in the parable was and use our resources towards the future we know is coming, the eternity we will spend in God's presence.

There are three rules that I think we can see about Kingdom economics from today's lesson. The first is that *we aren't creators of wealth or owners of wealth but stewards that God is entrusting with His wealth*. In parallel to the story, God is the one to whom everything belongs. All the money and affluence of this world is His to give as He sees fit, not to spend it casually but to use it towards His purposes. Most people in this world never give God a second thought when it comes to their finances. But God wants us to see everything we have as His to use *through* us. In 1 Chronicles 29:11, King David stated, "Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all." In Exodus 19:5, God says, "Indeed, the whole earth is mine, and you will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

If we are caretakers of the resources God has given us, then it radically changes our outlook on what to do with what we have. If our wealth is for ourselves, then we would be free to spend it as we pleased. But if our wealth exists to further God's Kingdom, to use it on ourselves would be mismanagement at best and more like embezzlement. And just like the steward in the story, we have at times sinned with our resources. We haven't put them to good use. Sometimes we've wasted them; other times we've just put them to poor use. But in Jesus Christ, God is ready and willing to redeem all things, and He wants to show us how to use His resources so that we can be entrusted with the wealth of His Kingdom.

Jesus states that those who can be trusted with little can be trusted with much. It's not about how much we've been given; it's that we're trustworthy with whatever we have. We know that God will give us responsibilities in eternity. If we have been faithful here, we will be entrusted with true riches, some of which will be the "property of our own" Jesus mentions.

The second rule we must learn, then, is that *money is nothing more than a useful tool in godly hands, but it can become a dangerous idol*. In the final sentence of Jesus' teaching here, the meaning cannot be more clear – money as a master is nothing less than a false god. We can appreciate what money can do for us when used properly, in a godly fashion – when that happens, money is itself a servant. Money serves God's purposes. It can be good, and we'll see how in a minute. But if money becomes the master, it takes away our godliness. We become obsessed with it. We start to think that we must have more and more of it to survive, that it will save us and protect us and buy us love and happiness and whatever else we want. But money doesn't work that way. Money beyond a certain point is incredibly dangerous, lending us a false sense of security and allowing us to become confident in our own power rather than God's mercy.

Now some of you have told me you play the lottery. You're not going to like me saying this, but I pray you lose. Sounds terrible, doesn't it? But did you know that 70% of lottery winners have nothing to show for it within five years? And even amongst the 30% that do, they are much more likely than the average population to experience divorce, family squabbles, and even violent crime, often perpetrated by people they know. It's easy for us to say, "Just let me win and I'll prove the odds wrong!" But God knows our hearts and knows that in our sinful nature, money is a strong lure. The very desire to play the lottery says something about us, the thought that we could somehow be happier with more stuff. The truth is, we need less stuff and more God.

God doesn't want to be second place in your life. God isn't willing to be the guy you see once a week on Sunday mornings for coffee and music and a 20-minute chat. God loves you enough that Jesus died for you, and He's not going to be content with being off in one compartment of your life. He wants your entire life to be seen through Him and lived through Him. He wants every part of you – your wallet, your friendships, your work, your marriage, your family – nothing is off-limits to Him. And money is an area where we have to give Him control.

Back in September, we studied Luke 12, where Jesus told us, "Don't worry about what you will eat or drink or what you will wear. Your Father knows that you need these things. Instead, seek His Kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." This kind of simple trust in God can't happen if you've put your trust in money. And money will fail you eventually. It's a god that dies the same time you do. As Jesus says, we should hate money as a master. It separates us from the true love of God our Father.

So what's the solution? It's the third rule: *use the resources God has given you to expand His Kingdom so you will be welcomed when you arrive there yourself*. This doesn't change that salvation comes through faith and belief in Jesus Christ. But proof of our faith comes from obedience, and obedience to God in this part of our lives means spending our money to further the Kingdom in our midst. That can happen in all sorts of ways and through all sorts of organizations or even through money you spend personally to help others. But Jesus' words are clear: "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." He's talking directly about evangelism and sponsoring those ministries who bring people to faith and belief, who lead people into the Kingdom of God.

There are lots of people who want a share of your money, many organizations with worthy causes, everything from curing cancer to feeding the hungry, and many of them are truly noble efforts. We may feel led to support them in different ways. But as we do so, we also must think wisely about how we give. Are we giving as God has called us to give, to the church and to other Christian ministries that are actively in the business of saving souls for Jesus Christ? Sometimes souls are saved through a conversation over a warm meal or a backpack full of school supplies; sometimes it's through relief work or a missionary's travels. There are countless ways we can help it to happen, but we must be helping it happen.

It's hard to imagine, but I want you to take a moment to think with me about sometime in the far future, when you reach eternity with Jesus. There will be some people that you know waiting to see you as God welcomes you into His Kingdom...perhaps a loving spouse, a dear friend who shared their faith with you, family. But then there will be unfamiliar faces in the reception line...young faces, old faces, foreign faces. You will ask, "Why are you here to greet me? I don't think I know you." And they will reply in turn, "You gave some money to that missionary who came to Taiwan and told me about Jesus. You donated some clothes and a backpack to my classroom when I was young, and your love for us made me realize that God was real. You helped keep Church of the Covenant running so that, years after you were gone, I could grow up there and learn about repentance and forgiveness and salvation that God gave us through His Son." When that happens, when you learn of all the lives you touched because you were a faithful steward of the resources God gave you, there will be tears of joy all around. The faith you had that compelled you to give will be standing in front of you saying, "Thank you."

This passage couldn't have come at a better time for us to study as a church...I didn't plan it, but God has a habit of working those sorts of things out. Because as I talk to you today, Church of the Covenant has reached a crossroads, a place where decisions need to be made. I can tell you that I've kept close track of attendance over the last year, and I am pleased to tell you that our attendance in 2009 was the best it's been since 2006, and it's the first year we've grown in attendance since 2004! We also gained new members who we are so excited are a part of Church of the Covenant. Those are great trends.

But in terms of supporting the church financially, in terms of doing what Jesus teaches us to do in this passage, we're falling short. Quite frankly, right now we spend more than we bring in each month, and we are to a point where our General Fund is essentially depleted. Now many of you have dedicated monies to the Raise The Roof campaign, and those are still being held precisely for that purpose. There's plenty of money in the Deacon's Fund and in the Capital Fund that aren't affected. The session and the Administration Team looks at the financial reports each month, and there's been no mismanagement or lavish spending. We are still under Presbytery minimums for salaries. As a congregation, we simply aren't giving enough to support the basic ministry of the church. Right now, we have received 20 pledges for 2010 totaling approximately \$60,000...which is roughly 60% of what we need just to pay the mortgage and the utilities and the staff. Funding from the Presbytery is drying up quickly, as well. Ultimately, we have a choice to make...a choice whether or not we are going to follow Jesus' teaching in this passage and use the resources God has given us to fund the ministry we all enjoy at Church of the Covenant. This isn't a call to expand our ministries or to do something extravagant or wasteful; it's simply to fund what we already do.

As your pastor, I want to share with you a little of our own financial decisions regarding the church. I have no idea what anyone in the church gives and I don't plan to find out. I share with you our situation because in 1 Timothy 4:12, it calls for Timothy and other leaders in the church to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity." The Old Testament sets for God's people an expectation of tithing, of giving at least 10%, back to the Lord. That's for all people – not the priests or the spiritual leaders, but everybody. I'm paid a salary of \$37,500, and between our pledge to the general fund and to the Raise The Roof campaign, we've promised roughly 13.5% back to the church, a bit over \$5,000. I'm not going to lie to you; we've found giving as God expects on a salary like this can mean sacrifice. And yet I can also tell you that God's generosity to us is amazing. Whenever we have been in need, God has provided for us. I'm not telling you any of this to brag, but simply to say that you can do it too, not because any of us are great or perfect or anything, but because God will make a way when we step out in faith.

Some of us are in difficult situations to pledge more or give more. We might be in debt far deeper than any of us at the church know. We might be working one job scraping by. We might be married to an unbeliever who doesn't want to give more to the church. Some of us are making it on Social Security. There are many reasons not to give a tithe and really only one reason *to* give one – God asks it of us as a show of faith and good stewardship. That's really all the reason we need, which means we have to ask ourselves if we are willing to simply obey in trust, to trust in God the way He has trusted us with His resources. And so if you haven't turned in your pledge, I ask you to do it right away. If you have pledged, pray and ask God if He has more resources He wants to provide through you. I know that God has the resources for all that we do here at this church.

But more important than all the number crunching, there's the promise hidden in this passage...the promise that we have already talked about, the promise that those who are faithful with just a little will be trusted with much more. I believe this is true for the church as well. In our worship team meeting this week, we joked about getting to the point where we need a police officer to direct traffic for us on Sunday mornings because we'll have so many cars pulling in. But you know, it's possible. There is so much more God wants to accomplish through this body of believers. If we are faithful in the little things, I am confident God will entrust us with more. I believe that through our various ministries, there are hundreds, even thousands of people who will come to know the love of God through this church and what we do, people whose lives will be eternally changed. I don't just believe it, I am confident that God can and will bring it about. We just need to determine that we will be faithful and committed to God's Kingdom economics.