

Message: “Tossing Our Debts”¹

[Please watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09RUuTAM2H0>]

I love this video. Not because I identify with “Agent Jon Schmidt” or because Esperanza and I lost track as to how many times we’ve watched the Jason Bourne movie series. I love it for what it represents.

What do The Piano Guys, a Mormon duet, have to do with a message you hear in a Methodist Church? Let me illustrate the connection with a question: how many of you recognized the music? The Bourne Vivaldi was originally a concerto for two cellos, re-arranged for cello and piano. It’s classical music. Antonio Vivaldi was a former Catholic priest who wrote music in the early 1700s. And yet, most people who hear it associate the piece with the Bourne movies of today. Something old has become something new, meaningful and relevant.

That’s what scripture is. The text is ancient, yet it contains the narrative of a being and life filled with majesty, power and love. It’s the story of humanity’s experience of God, which is timeless. It’s something old, always becoming something new, meaningful and relevant for each generation. It does so by changing lives, households and communities for the better. Each week we’re blessed to spend time reflecting on how our lives are changed and look at new ways to live by faith. This is God’s blessing. And we do so even when the teaching is difficult, like today’s is.

Keep reading. That’s the best advice for today’s Scripture reading, Luke 16:1-13. Don’t stop at verse 13. It’s easy to think the verses suggested are a complete story. And as usual, this is accurate. There’s enough here - more than enough - to hear the powerful and effective teaching of Jesus. It also fits well with our sermon series, “Having Words with Jesus.” These are difficult words that need some reflection to help those of us with the furrowed brows. Context matters. What happens before and after gives shape and depth to the narrative.

So keep reading, at least one more verse. *“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all of this, and they ridiculed him”* (Luke 16:14).

¹ Material drawn from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/having-words-with-jesus/fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-preaching-notes>

Let me quickly note this isn't supposed to be another opportunity beat up or to hate on the Pharisees. There's far too much of that.

The lazy approach allows us to squirm out from under the gaze of the one who is calling us to examine our own hearts. Reading verse 14 is supposed to catch all of us. We all heard the parable of the dishonest manager. We all rolled our eyes, or raised our brows, or snorted at the hyperbole Jesus tosses out. So, let's admit it, we ridiculed Jesus in our own somewhat respectful way.

We too are lovers of money; more than we'd like to admit.

So, this parable is one we all need to wrestle with. I believe the text itself wrestles with the parable. Verse 8 introduces what some commentators consider "a gloss over" by emphasizing the way the world is – "*the master commended the dishonest person for being clever.*" Then verses 10-13, "*Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven't been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?*" This seems to be a contradiction to the very point of the text, which may be to act "shrewdly." The gospel writers or editors stumble over Jesus' parable just as assuredly as we do.

Oddly enough, that's good news for teachers. It relieves us of the responsibility of explaining what Jesus was trying to say. That's a scary proposition at the best of times. Can you imagine saying, "I think what Jesus was trying to say ..."? Yikes. If we aren't explaining, what are we doing? We're listening. We're leaning in. We're examining our hearts.

So, what is Jesus talking about? He's talking about money in the way he always talks about money - as though it isn't nearly as important as we make it out to be. We have a problem with money. As one pastor was heard to say, "We print the words 'In God We Trust' right on the god we trust." We have a problem with money.

When Jesus talks about "worldly or dishonest wealth," what does he mean? Is this business a shady operation? Are they dealing with illegal products, or skipping out on taxes or permits or the like? Not at all. Dishonest wealth, or "unrighteous riches" is the currency used by some to do business. It's the money in your wallet right now, the money in the

offering plate. It's the coin of a world that is passing, making way for a new way of living, a new age of being. Worldly wealth is riches which are limited and bound to the way things are in a broken world.

Jesus says to use it well. Use it for the kingdom of God. Use it for the kin-dom of heaven. Use it for purposes it really isn't designed for. Use it to build community and to value people. Use it to rescue people rather than to enslave them. Use it to lift folks up and not push them down. Use it to give away and not to hoard.

Those are the "laws" Jesus is telling us to break. You know, the laws of money: getting all you can, no matter who gets hurt. This law measures your value by how much you have, what you produce and what you consume. This way of living always desires more. It says, "Those who have the money make the laws."

John Wesley gave us three simple rules about how we can use money to give honor to God:

- ***Gain all you can*** – we're free to gain so long as we do no harm.
 - ***Save all you can*** – saving shifts our focus from spending
 - ***Give all you can*** – not using what we have is wasting our gift.
- Not sure about an opportunity? Go to God in prayer: "Lord, you see I'm going to spend this money on ... and you know I'm acting as your trusted steward."² If you can make this prayer with a good conscience then you'll know your expense is right and good.

Jesus says God has made the laws we are to live by, and they are to love God and love neighbor, even when it costs us something.

He isn't asking us to set up pyramid schemes or get-rich-quick schemes or get into loan sharking or anything unsavory. He isn't asking us to engage in unscrupulous business practices to gain a following. He is saying, "*Don't use money the way it's usually used.*"

Then, whether it's a gloss added later to mute this parable, or whether it's a part of Jesus' refreshing way of living in this world and working for the kingdom at the same time, take small steps. Jesus says it won't be easy. Learn to be faithful in the small things, the daily things, the quickly forgotten and passed-by things.

² <https://www.eaforchristians.org/blog/john-wesley-the-use-of-money-12>

Then the big things, the true riches – relationship, family, hope, joy, justice and peace - will be yours as well. Be faithful in the things that don't really belong to you - remember "give Caesar what is Caesar's"? Learn to be faithful with what others have and you'll be faithful with what is your own.

And what is your own? Your soul, your salvation, your connections, your passion for justice, and your ability to see the face of God in the other person, that's what is yours. That's the currency of the kin-dom.

Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God.

Luke 16:1-13 (CEB)

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 accounting 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.”