
God and Mammon and Relationship

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 20 – Year C

*Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters.
... You cannot serve God and wealth.”*
—Luke 16:13

You cannot serve God and wealth. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

But, of course we do. We serve two masters all the time. We serve three, and four, and countless other masters, pretty much every day, all of them pressuring for a piece of our energy, a piece of our soul.

Even here at church, where we come to express our service to God, even here, we are also interested in money. We need money to make sure the building is still standing and safe and comfortable, money to make sure the sound system is working, money to pay the various managers who present this service, this music, this beautiful morning.

The same sort of money maintains our homes and buys food for us to eat. It's money that pays our school teachers and public service workers. It's money that pays for our cars and sports and books.

It's money that most all of us try to earn when we work each day, running businesses, practicing law and medicine, managing finances and investments. We are serving the careful stewardship of money. One might easily claim that we are serving mammon.

The word “mammon” did not start off being such a bad thing. It meant “abundance.” It meant “wealth,” which people of work and integrity were supposed to have.

Remember the great commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy, the Shema? It says: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” When later Jewish rabbis wrote interpretations of that verse, in a book called the Mishnah, they said that the word “might” actually means “money.” Thus, “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your money” (Berakhot 9:5).

Money is supposed to be a good and necessary thing! But Jesus knew what can happen when we become too careless and thoughtless with good and necessary things. He had read scripture. We have, too. Remember the golden calf? The followers of Moses offered one of the funniest excuses ever for why they ended up worshipping a golden calf one day. When Moses returned from prayer that day, he was enraged to find his followers dancing around the golden calf. “What happened?” he asked. “We don't know,” they answered, “we just threw our jewelry into the fire and out came this golden calf.”

Like the followers of Moses, without intentionally meaning to, we end up obsessed and worshipping a false god. Not many of us set out to do wrong. Not many of us set out to misbehave. Not many of us intend to worship gold.

But we do. How did that happen, anyway? Well, because money really does have the power to change people, and that is an

enormous power. If something is powerful enough to change our behavior, we often call that “something” a god. Gods change us; that’s why we call them “gods.” A god—or an idol—is anything powerful enough to change the way you act.

And lots of things can become gods for us in this age. Obsessions. Addictions. Kings and emperors and leaders of countries. Political extremism. College football. (Well, maybe not college football!) Every age in our civilization has its favorite gods. Money is probably a tempting god in almost every age.

Again, in and of itself, gold is not so bad. It’s nothing, really. It’s a glob of metal. Money is just a piece of paper. Money these days is simply an electronic digit in our online bank accounts. But it carries something that can be used for good. This church, like so many other churches, like so many other great institutions—hospitals, schools and such—has done great things because we used money for the good.

We see that principle in the curious parable of the gospel today (Luke 16:1-13). Jesus seems to be praising a dishonest manager. The manager got into trouble for crossing his boss, so then he decided to fudge the books, making friends for himself. He uses dishonest wealth for something good.

Maybe it startles us that Jesus would lift up this admittedly dishonest manager as a positive example. But the deeper lesson is that wealth is not the final standard. Money is not the goal. There are some things in life, there are many things in life, greater than money and gold. For the dishonest manager, friendships and relationships are better.

So, there is one other word I like to use instead of money, or gold, or mammon. It is the word “currency.”

A current has energy. The current of a river, or the current of a conversation, has energy. An electrical current certainly carries energy. Well, this money stuff carries a lot of energy. Even if our monetary exchanges are accomplished only by check or electronic transfer, each of those exchanges is currency. The current of our money carries and creates energy.

Money, at its best, carries a current. And the current it carries best is that of relationship. Money is about relationship. When any of us exchanges money, we are really engaging in relationship. That’s why the Church has every right and reason to talk about money: because we are in the business of relationship. Right relationship is what we call righteousness.

The church exists for holy relationships, a holy relationship with God, certainly, but also holy relationships with each other, relationships of trust, truth, and long-term commitment.

Almost all of Jesus’s parables about money are really about relationships. Consider today’s strange story about the dishonest money manager (in Luke 16:1-13). When he heard he was to be fired, he went to the debtors and discounted all their bills, so that they owed less. Maybe he was dishonest on a mammon level, but Jesus actually praises the dishonest manager on the relationship level; he had “made friends for himself with unrighteous mammon.” Jesus was praising the man’s ability to make friends, to engage in relationship.

The church needs that kind of current. Healthy churches need the energy of holy relationships. And money is always, always, a sign of that current. The currency of money carries energy, and that energy can be holy indeed.

At one particular church where I served many years ago, I remember an important stewardship call. The person I was visiting was not especially active at the local church—in fact, I had rarely seen him at church at all—but he was said to be a nice guy. I had met him a few times previous to our visit, and he was direct-speaking old Southerner.

We talked about life, about ourselves, and about the church. Finally, he looked me in the eye and declared, “You just want my money, right?” The question startled me into an answer just as direct as his question. I peered right back at him and proclaimed, “No, we want your heart!” The Church could have used his financial generosity, to be sure, but what the Church really needed was him: his heart and his soul.

Ultimately, all of us put our money where our heart is. The money is a sign of our relationship. The money carries the current of our relationship.

Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Which is to say, you cannot be in ultimate relationship with both the God of love and the mammon of empty acquisition. Use money, but do not let it use you. Money is either at our service, or we are in the service of money. We cannot serve both the God of generous relationship and the mammon god of greed and

isolation. Today, we serve the God of righteousness, which is, after all, always about relationship, holy relationship.

AMEN.

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