
God and Gold and Idols

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
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Proper 20B
Luke 16:1 -13

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. ,You cannot serve God and wealth."

Luke 16:13

It's a Saturday night in the neighborhood. The parents are out of town, and they have trusted their teen-aged children to be responsible at home alone. But the father has to return unexpectedly. You know the story. He walks into the door of his home and discovers all sorts of prohibited misbehavior.

The first thing the father can ask his child is, "What is going on?"

And the child responds just as innocently as you can imagine. "I don't exactly know, Dad. I was just hanging around, not doing much of anything, the doors were open, and all of a sudden, all these wild people were inside partying!"

It just sort of happened, didn't it? No one exactly planned for it. The place was open, and it got filled.

Do you remember the biblical story of the golden calf? In the Book of Exodus while God's people were wandering the wilderness? Moses was out of town, up on the mountain. But he came returned unexpectedly. He was astounded!"distraught!" to see all his people dancing around a golden calf.

I imagine he felt much like that father of misbehaving teen-agers. And so he asks Aaron, who looked like he was in charge, "Aaron, what is going on?"

And Aaron replies with a defense that would make any teen-aged child look good, "I don't know, Daddy Moses, we weren't doing much of anything. We just threw our jewelry into the fire, and out popped this golden calf." It's one of the great lines in scripture. You can read it at Exodus 32 (verse 24).

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?

Does anyone know how gold got to be so adored? We do not eat gold. We cannot drink it. It does not sustain our health. We do not construct effective shelter out of it. We cannot sew effective clothing from gold.

Why is gold so valuable?

It is valuable because we have socially agreed to give it great power. We buy it and sell it at great prices. We ascribe enormous value to it. And the more we ascribe value to it, the more powerful it becomes. It becomes powerful enough to change our behavior.

Look at how people have changed their lives for the sake of gold. Speculators and pioneers alike moved to California in the 1800's for the Gold Rush. People picked up and moved to North Georgia for the Dahlonega Gold Rush. People fought and scrapped for gold, with the same frenzy that sometimes shows up on the trading floor of the commodities exchanges. Gold""and the lack of it!""has caused people to change their lives in the last three years, too. What began as a glistening glob of metal has become precious, powerful enough to change lives.

The power to change lives 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 be become gods for us in this age. Our gods are what control us and govern our behavior. Obsessions. Addictions. Kings and emperors of ancient 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.

It turns out that "Mammon," is not just a word we heard in Sunday School long ago. "Mammon" was actually the name of one of the gods of Canaan. Mammon was the god of wealth, the god of craving and acquisition. It is "Mammon" that Jesus speaks about so definitively in today's gospel. You cannot serve God and Mammon, Jesus said.

We like to say "Mammon," because the word sounds foreign to us; and if it's a foreign-sounding word, maybe it does not apply to us. So, today, I want to re-name it. "Mammon" is really "gold." Jesus said, "you cannot serve God and gold."

Now, in and of itself, gold is not so bad. It's nothing, really. It's a glob of metal. And, in fact, many of us do great things with gold. This church, like so many other churches, like so many other great institutions""hospitals, schools and such""has done great things because we used gold. We used money. Money can buy good things. Wealth can be used 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.

It startles us that Jesus would lift up this admittedly dishonest manager as an 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, relationships are better.

Wealth, I repeat, is not all bad. Freedom for teen-agers is not all bad. Our using money to live comfortably is not all bad. Our using money to feed the poor and heal the sick is certainly good.

The danger is that something bigger than a glob of gold develops. Our healthy use of money gradually, and then suddenly, becomes an addiction. One day, money is our farm animal, our gentle work-horse, which we can keep under control, on our own schedule. But on the next day, that money suddenly transforms itself into a monster, controlling and grabbing us. And then it usually strangles us. Freedom, a good thing, can turn into a subtle monster, too, as Jonathan Franzen suggests in his novel, *Freedom*.

When money begins to control us, it becomes Mammon. Mammon demands that we serve it, rather than have it serve us. Mammon demands that it become god over us.

It is the god of gold which Jesus declares we cannot serve. No one can serve two masters, two gods, even those of us who are so good at multi-tasking; no one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and gold. It is impossible.

A few years ago, Arthur Brooks spoke here at the Cathedral. Brooks is the provocative writer and behavioral economist who often writes for *The Wall Street Journal* (now there's a newspaper devoted to money and gold!). One of his chief claims, which he delights in proving with statistics and data, is that the people in America who actually give money away are religious people. By an overwhelming margin, it is the people who practice religion who gave away the most money to charitable causes.

And they do not give it away for the tax deduction. Furthermore, he has discovered, these religious people""no matter what their denomination and no matter whether they are conservative or liberal""also give away the most to non-religious causes. In other words, it is practicing religious people who also support our hospitals, and PTAs and schools.

In an even more daring claim, Brooks says that these religious people are actually happier than non-religious folks"" by any measure that you define "happiness."

Arthur Brooks, however, does distinguish between religious people in name, and religious people in practice. Religious people in name, who do not actually attend church or synagogue much, have giving habits much like the average secularist. It is the people who actually attend church, who actually pray, who actually practice,""it is they who also give the most and who are the happiest.

What is it about practicing religious folks? Well, I believe that people who practice religion also practice putting God first in their lives. It takes practice. It takes practice to serve God and not Mammon.

And it takes practice to discern the difference between all the gods of this life. It takes practice to discern all the little gods we glance at in this life and the capital G God who lives beyond our small desires. This is part of what people like Jack Spong are saying these days. The God who is really God is beyond our definition. We cannot fully describe that God, but we know that our ultimate love and devotion and allegiance is to that God of love. That God is beyond money, and beyond lots of other perfectly good things""things like church and family and country.

We practice our Christianity so that we can tell the difference. We participate in church and ancient ritual so that we can tell the difference. If we don't make a discipline of it, if we do not stay in practice, then one day we will suddenly realize that Mammon has moved in. We will realize that money has become a god. We weren't doing anything much at all, and suddenly we are serving money instead of letting money serve us.

If we do not practice the art of giving, and the art of serving God, then one Saturday night we open the door and find all sorts of misbehavior ready to take over our home. If we do not stay in practice, one day we find that a golden calf has jumped out of the fire""out of control entirely.

Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and gold." 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 salvation and the mammon god of greedy gold. Today, we serve the God of generous salvation.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip