

## ***THE LONG ROAD TO GROWING UP***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 18, 2022*

*based upon Luke 16:1-13*

Have you ever been fired from a job? Don't raise your hand. If you did, did you know it was coming? And did you have that queezy feeling in your stomach? -- "They're going to come in and tell me to pack up my stuff and leave." Maybe even have someone escort you out of the building. Humiliating.

Now, maybe it wasn't a wrongful termination. Maybe you were young and not as mature as you are now. There's that panic that can set in. "What am I going to do now because my next possible employer's probably going to call my former employer for a reference. How am I going to live? How am I going to pay my bills? Will I have to move back in with my folks?"

If you've felt that, experienced that, the parable today may sound familiar, at least at the outset. Jesus is telling a parable (which is a little window on real life) about the guy who is getting fired and who deserved it, and who ends up getting congratulated by the man who fires him for swindling him out of a lot of money before the whole thing comes fully down. It's a wild story that comes from a crazy book. In fact, I wouldn't read it if I were you.

I mean, look, Jesus praises a swindler for his cleverness and then draws for us no moral lessons at all about graft. Some Christians in the 2nd Century simply found the story too disturbing to take seriously and denied that it was from Jesus. "There must have been some mistake."

Others, like Roman emperor, Julian, said, "It's Jesus' all right, and it shows that, far from being a God, Jesus is merely a man, and not a very worthy man at that."

So, let's review . . .

"Once upon a time . . ." Jesus said, "there was a rich man who had a steward; a kind of business manager, and charges were brought to the man that his steward was wasting his goods."

The problem here sounds like a simple personnel issue: malfeasance in the workplace. The steward will need to be let go. It seems that simple.

Complications set in when the steward is allowed a few extra days to audit the books and submit a financial statement. Between Friday and Monday, when the accounts were due, the steward goes around to all the rich man's debtors and cooks the books.

He marks down a percentage of all the debt owed by each, and thereby ingratiates himself with all the people to whom he would be looking for help in his impending unemployment.

"How much do you owe my master?" he asks one.

"A hundred measures of oil."

"Alright, take your bill and write down fifty."

"And how much do you owe?" he asks another.

"A hundred measures of wheat," comes the answer.

"Hurry, take your bill and write eighty."

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "It's hard to tell whether the steward was cutting out his markup, eliminating the interest charges, or just stealing from his master by lowering the debt." Any way you look at it I think it's reasonable, in the light of the economy of this parable, to view the steward in the most negative way.

By the end of the day he has lined his pockets and the pockets of his master's debtors at the rich man's expense. *And his master congratulated him on being so resourceful ????*

Well, the charming rascal is a favorite literary type. There is something in all of us that wants to see a gifted swindler get away with mayhem once in a while. Hollywood has made a mint on such characters – think of Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *THE STING*, or *CATCH ME IF YOU CAN* with Leonardo "Cappucino."

You may remember De Caprio playing the real life crook, Frank W. Abegnale, who "flew" for Pan Am, practiced law for five years in Louisiana as an assistant state attorney, masqueraded as a pediatrician in Georgia, was a very popular sociology professor at BYU, and did not graduate from high school.

He was perhaps the most successful con-man in history, and ended up spending five years in federal penitentiary. He was released when he agreed to advise the government on how to uncover frauds and forgers.

Abegnale begins his 1981 autobiography with the following story from his short career as a Pan Am "pilot."

*"Good morning Captain," the cashier said. The markings on my uniform identified me as a first officer, a co-pilot, but the French are like that. They tend to overestimate everything . . . I signed the hotel bill she slid across the counter, started to turn away and then wheeled back, taking a payroll check from the inside pocket of my jacket.*

*"Oh, can you cash this for me? Your Paris nightlife nearly wiped me out and it'll be another week before I'm home." I smiled ruefully. She picked up the [forged] Pan American World Airways check and looked at the amount.*

*"I'm sure we can, Captain, but I must get the manager to approve an amount this large. She stepped into an office behind her and was back in a moment displaying a pleased smile. She handed me the check to endorse. "I assume you want American dollars," and without waiting for a reply she counted out \$786.73. I pushed back two \$50 bills.*

*"I would appreciate it if you would take care of the necessary people, since I was so careless," I said, smiling. She beamed. "Of course Captain, you are so kind. . . please come back."*

It just goes to show that no con-man, in or out of the Bible, can work all alone.

That's why the Department of Justice is subpoenaing dozens of Donald's subordinates and corraling their iPhones.

Now, in Jesus' parable, when the landowner discovers what has happened, he finds himself in a terrific bind. He can jail the dishonest steward and reverse the damage done to himself – but the problem is there is already a celebration going in town.

His tenant farmers are all down at McMenamins eating tator tots and washing them down with pints of India Pale Ale to toast his generosity, and the steward's kindness. He can tell them it's a mistake, but that means he will end up paying for it big time with their everlasting resentment, or --- *he can act as if it was his idea in the first place.*

This is just what he decides to do. He shows unusual mercy, amazing grace and then. . . commends the steward for his cleverness. Unbelievable, or perhaps not.

Perhaps the steward knew all along what would happen if his master were backed into such a corner. Perhaps he knew that his master, when push came to shove, would be gracious, was gracious down to his toes. Perhaps that is one of the main points of the parable, I don't know. It's a mystery.

And then Luke reports an intriguing saying of Jesus he picked up somewhere, probably in a list of collected sayings of Jesus that we know were making the rounds in his day: "No servant can serve two masters, you cannot serve God *and* mammon."

Mammon – what a great biblical word. It's money, but, you know, it's more than money. It's the mystique of money, the essence of wealth. It's Las Vegas – it's Club Med. It's a week of daily golf at Pebble Beach and all that goes with it. It's the hubris of a company that names an automobile, *Infinity*. It's Halliburton getting all the contracts in Iraq without having to bid on them, and nobody really complaining. It's the smell of a magazine like *Vanity Fair* and the fact that you can't tell the articles from the ads, which is the whole point.

It's the new LIV Professional Golf Tour, backed by Saudi billionaires who pay big-name golfers huge sums just to show up in an effort to change the Saudi image from murdering thugs to sportsmen.

It's what Osama bin Laden hated so much because having come from a rich Saudi family, he had it, and then he didn't have it anymore, so he both wanted it and despised it at the same time.

Mammon is whatever shapes your dreams. It's whatever you expect to save you.

A favorite English professor of mine in college – Phil Eaton, was brought up dripping with it. In college he grew a beard and discovered the writing of Henry David Thoreau and became a convert to the anti-mammon movement going around in the 1960s.

In 1840, Henry David Thoreau, remember, had gone to live in a tiny cabin overlooking Walden Pond in Concord, MA. He gave up comfortable digs and took up a poor man's life confounding his friends and family who could not understand; his defense was a book he simply called, *Walden*

In it he says, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately; to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Living deliberately is, of course, all about choosing God and not mammon (which is always busy choosing us).

My friend, Phil wrote his doctor's thesis on *Walden*. I remember speaking with him in 1980. He'd been a full professor by then for 10 years and his father was still asking him when he was going to get "a real job."

In fact, that year his dad asked him if he could get him started in the newest sure fire money-making enterprise of the time. It was storage units; acres and acres of storage units. Phil realized immediately it was the complete antithesis of all he had chosen for himself.

See, the thing about mammon isn't just the "stuff" that it comprises; it's having to store it. Mammon isn't just having a dozen vintage Ford Mustangs – it's also where you put them.

It's endless shelving, and gymnasium-sized walk in closets, and twenty-car garages, and storing the Godzilla-bytes of data you need for keeping the photographs and video to itemize all those things for insurance purposes.

My mammon amounts to books. Every time I move I have parted with hundreds. I mean it, hundreds, and then, in a couple years, I find I've replaced them all.

Listen again to how Jesus puts this – “you cannot serve two masters, God and mammon.” It's not that mammon is bad. Jesus has been consistently misunderstood on this point. He did not condemn wealth in itself, or ambition.

He told one wealthy young man to sell all he had and give it to the poor, but that was a particular prescription for that particular human being, not a universal model.

What Jesus is saying is that wealth, or any form of mammon, doesn't work if we are looking to it for our ultimate fulfillment. It won't work in that case and never has, but people try and try until, you know, it eventually kills them, or kills their spirit.

Frank Abegnale himself said that all the stuff he collected with the millions he gathered in his elaborate frauds just led to elaborate worrying.

Whatever you're banking on as the fulfillment of all your dreams -- be it an antique automobile, your reputation, even your children – it's still the same. If you don't see it, and everything you have, as given to you temporarily by the grace of God, it will collapse on itself.

One of the basic insights in the wisdom of Jesus is that if you try to squeeze something infinite out of something finite you will not only be unsuccessful and frustrated, you will very likely squeeze the life out of that thing you love, as well.

The final truth of the whole mammon business is that you and I only deeply enjoy what we don't ultimately need.

Perhaps you saw the following in this week's news. I'll share it from the NYTimes.

*"A half century after founding the outdoor apparel maker, Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard, the eccentric rock climber who became a reluctant billionaire with his unconventional spin on capitalism, has given [his] company away.*

*Rather than selling the company or taking it public, Mr. Chouinard, his wife and two adult children have transferred their ownership of Patagonia, valued at about \$3 billion, to a specially designed trust and a nonprofit organization. They were created to preserve the company's independence and ensure that all of its profits — some \$100 million a year — are used to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land around the globe. Because the Chouinards donated their shares to a trust, the family will pay about \$17.5 million in taxes on the gift."*

You heard that right. Not only are they **not** getting a huge tax break. It's costing them millions in taxes to give Patagonia away.

*"Hopefully this will influence a new form of capitalism that doesn't end up with a few rich people and a bunch of poor people," Mr. Chouinard said in an interview. "We are going to give away the maximum amount of money to people who are actively working on saving this planet."*

The Times piece continues ... *"In some ways, the forfeiture of Patagonia is not terribly surprising coming from Mr. Chouinard.*

*As a pioneering rock climber in California's Yosemite Valley in the 1960s, Mr. Chouinard lived out of his car and ate damaged cans of cat food that he bought for five cents apiece.*

*Even today, he wears raggedy old clothes, drives a beat up Subaru and splits his time between modest homes in Ventura and Jackson, Wyo. Mr. Chouinard does not own a computer or a cellphone.*

*"I feel a big relief that I've put my life in order," Mr. Chouinard said.*

Chouinard didn't let being a billionaire ultimately define his life. Nor, I imagine, did he let having to eat cat food at 5 cents so he could pursue his passion of climbing rock faces define him, either.

All along his journey, up and down, he listened to the quiet inner voice we all have – the one that can easily become inaudible if we listen instead to what the world is telling us. Make no mistake, money or mammon will change us, if we let it, if we don't stay on top of it. Whether we have a ton of it or are in hopeless debt.

The secret is to understand the insidiousness of money and the incessant background noise it makes in our lives. Only being aware of this can we then hear our signature heartbeat and be who the creator called us to truly be.

Amen