

Sermon 2007 Stewardship 1 (Proper 20)

Text: Luke 16:1-13

Theme: "Beating the Devil at His Own Game"

This weekend we begin our annual Stewardship emphasis. The theme we are using is "Giving 101" and we will be going back to the basics of giving. My friends, we are a generation of self-focused, me-oriented people who drive big new cars, pay thousands of dollars for our children to play various sports and live in multi-bedroom, \$400,000 homes; and we throw a fifty in the offering plate and drop a dollar in the Salvation Army Bucket at Christmas and think we have done enough as we go home to sit in our easy chairs and watch our giant TVs. Listen to what the prophet Amos says to us:

Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end...
The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
"Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. *Amos 8:4 & 7*

It is not okay with God for us to pretend that there are two worlds; the church and the real world. It is not okay for us to treat money as though it is part of the real world and we can do as we like with "our money." It is NOT "our money." It is God's money and our challenge is to figure out how best to use it to serve him.

So first of all, hear this. One thing I know about giving is that no amount of yelling can make a person let go of their money or their time or their talents. As one of you said to me last year..."you can say whatever you want Pastor, but you're not getting anymore money out of me." Believe me; I don't have any fantasy that anything I say will make you let go of your stuff. But there are a few things I do believe with all my heart.

1. Like rain and sun on your garden make your vegetables grow, so God's Word and the Holy Sacraments make your faith grow big and powerful.
2. The stronger your faith, the more your heart seeks to give. Faith gives. It gives money, praise, love, time, talent. Faith gives. It's just what faith does.
3. The more you give, the more you get. Hoarding of anything, money, love, time, whatever, leads to stagnation. If you want more of anything, give what you have away.
4. The only things of real value in this life are relationships with God and with others and nothing else really matters in the end, not the endless hours you spent worrying; not the energy you wasted being self righteous and angry; not the

hundreds of thousands of dollars sitting in IRA's, TSA's and 401K's.

Jesus told a pretty interesting story today in the Gospel according to Luke. First of all you need to know that money is never neutral to Luke. Money is always negative. Jesus sees money as one of the big problems in the Christian walk. So Jesus says that there was a rich man who found out that his manager was cheating him and decided to fire him. The manager then went out to his boss' big commercial accounts and cut the bills.

Dishonest? Yep. He cooked the books so that his boss' vendors would be indebted to him and hire him. And his boss couldn't say a word because it would make him look stupid to let a manager do this to him. Pretty ingenious huh?

Jesus commends him. And you say – whoa! How can Jesus commend someone for sinning? He's not commending him for sinning. He's showing us that money is nothing of itself folks. IT IS JUST ONE TOOL that God gives us to do the work he has given us to do. The problem comes when we start worshipping money. If a gardener decided to kneel down in front of his shovel and rake and worship the yard tools instead of using them, not a lot

of gardening would get done right? Likewise, when we start worshipping the tools God has give us to do his work, nothing gets done and we get stuck.

So, remembering that money is always negative in Luke, the rich man in the parable was also negative and the manager used his own god against him. That's what Jesus is commending. Jesus encourages us to use the things God gives us against the devil, not falling into the temptation of worshipping the gifts but always worshipping the giver, God.

Jesus warns us that the Devil will use the things of this world, that which is created, to try and lure us away from God. That is his oldest trick, and most successful I might add. "Look at the fruit Eve – see how good it is for eating and how pleasing to the eye? You can be like God." When we begin to turn to worship created things, we turn away from God and the Devil knows that. Jesus warns us not to be so stupid as to fall for the same old trick again and again and again.

Be faithful. If you have just a little, be faithful with a little. If you have much, be faithful with much. Being faithful means

using the things of this world, money, time and talents to serve God. Maybe you have to get creative to do that.

One of you teachers told me last week about how you found a sneaky way to share your faith in the public school classroom and then the kids began talking about their faith as well. That ticked the devil off! That's the way to use his tools against him.

One of you told me how you refinanced your home and decided to use the difference from the lower payment to finally be able to give 10% to God. There you go! That's the way to irritate the devil!

Another of you keeps a Bible in plain sight on your desk and reads from it during lunch. Co-workers come up and ask you about the Bible and you have the opportunity to use your lunch time to witness your faith. Oh my goodness, is the Prince of Darkness mad now!

And all of you who begin to give, to give more than you think you are able to give, find that the well will not run dry; because you can't out give God. It is when we begin to tell ourselves that money and time and abilities and care and love are our commodities and that they must be guarded and preserved

that everything begins to run dry. As long as we remember that they are all God's gifts to us to be used in his service, we always have more than enough.

The Land of the Buckets is a far away place. In the Land of the Buckets, everyone had a pail of fabulous, ice-cold, crystal spring water and a dipper. For generations, the favorite activity in the Land of the Buckets was to sneak up behind someone and add a dipper full of water to their bucket without them noticing. This went on and on and on and no matter how much anyone drank of their water, no matter how many times they gave dippers full of water away, their bucket was never empty. One day, a certain person decided, "Why should I give away my water? What if my bucket runs dry? I'm not going to play this silly game anymore!" And one by one, everyone in the Land of the Buckets began to feel likewise and no one played and soon, one by one, buckets started to run dry. The more the water ran out the more those with water left hoarded and rationed what they had, until there was no water left and soon, they all perished, and the Land of the Buckets was no more. AMEN.