

Money, Justice, and Unearned Privilege
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I'm delighted to be with you all this morning. I've known Ken and Emily both for many years now, and I have enormous respect for who they are and the fruitful things they're doing in the world. Including, of course, this church community. So it's an honor to be here.

We're going to take a look at a story about one of Jesus' favorite topics. What's this fav topic of Jesus? Money. Money. Money. The gospels are full of stories about Jesus and money. This is fitting because money is an incredibly far-reaching reality in our lives. Money is a very elastic metaphor, and for good and ill it affects pretty much everything from people's livelihoods to politics, war, Michigan football which sometimes feels like war, marriage, religion, and more.

One of the big issues related to money that Jesus interacts with is justice. How does money relate to justice? Are there *just* ways of dealing with money? And what about unjust systems that favor some over others, that provide financial privileges and advantages for only some people over others? This morning we're going to look at one of Jesus' parables related to money and justice.

When I was growing up, my parents offered me all kinds of lessons about money. Some of my earliest memories are of me and my sibs going to the bank with my mom. I watched, amazed, as she pulled up our van to a drive-up station, put slips of paper into a container that was magically transported with a mesmerizing whizzing sound, through a tube, to some person in the building, sitting behind a window who could still talk to us somehow. And they would do some kind of magicky thing, and then send back money! And suckers for each of us came with it! This is powerful stuff for a kid if you think about it. Adults are like gods. They have such cool stuff. They get money from magic tubes.

Some of the lessons I received about money came through the stories my parents told. There was one very powerful family story related to money that I often heard repeated. My dad grew up in a family where money was very tight. Later I would ask if he was poor, and he would kind of shrug, because almost everyone in his small

town in southern Indiana was basically facing the same economic realities. To him, the word “poor” is a judgment of comparison. If they were “poor,” they didn’t really know it. They just knew they didn’t have a lot of money and virtues like frugality, thrift, practicality, and hard work were emphasized above almost every other virtue.

On weekends my dad would go to his Grandparents’ farm to work. The emphasis was always on “work”—and it was hard work. My dad’s mom, my Grandma, grew up on this farm, and whenever I asked her about her childhood, she would say, “Well, it was a hard work.”

On those work weekends, my dad would have to do all kinds of tasks. He would have to clean up the chicken coop which meant confronting his fears of the aggressive chickens. Some of them can be nasty, and they’re big and powerful. He had to work the gardens by watering, pulling weeds, and harvesting when the time came. And then there were a host of other miscellaneous clean up tasks and errands to be done.

He was not paid for this labor, though he remembers being rewarded with the best homemade desserts this side of the Mississippi. Fresh picked strawberries baked into a dessert, loaded with fresh cream on top!!

This constellation of stories related to my dad’s growing up where money was tight and then working on the farm included a number of lessons: the importance of family, overcoming fear, practical living, and of course the connection between hard work and financial security or prosperity.

But there’s an enormous issue that my dad’s stories never touched on: justice. And as I’ve revisited the stories my dad told me, I’ve become more and more curious about issues related to justice. For example, my dad never told me how his family came to possess the land on which they farmed. Why and how did my dad’s family come to own it? Who lived on the land before his family, generations ago? What were the political, social, and economic systems that factored into my dad’s family having this land, farming it, and passing it onto their children?

As I’ve asked these questions, I’ve come to see my family’s history as deeply intertwined with the history of the United States. For example, the land was in fact

inhabited by other people before my white, European ancestors came. The Osage, Miami, and Shawnee—three indigenous groups of people—all had some claim to my dad's family's land at different times. But they were forcibly removed or killed so that European settlers could occupy and own the land. (You can look up any address with [this great online tool](#).)

Another dynamic related to justice and my family's farm land is that my great grandparents and their parents were considered to be *white*. Because my ancestors were considered white, they were allowed access to land that was denied to other people. They could buy it, and in some cases claim land grants that no person considered not white could receive. Imagine it—free land! Free land because society decided and believed you were white.

You could enjoy the wealth and prosperity and security of that land. And then you could pass that wealth onto your children and your children's children. And the people who were not considered to be white? Out of luck. They received no such benefit. And their children received no such advantage or privilege of that unjust wealth being passed down generationally. Justice—or injustice—is cumulative unless corrected.

Speaking of injustice, that same bank that sent money to my mom in magic tubes participated in denying bank loans to people of color while awarding loans to white people even when the households were in the same income bracket. My parents indirectly earned interest from that unjust system.

As I've wrestled with some of this family history and the history of the United States, I've had to confront an uncomfortable truth about my socio-economic status: I have a lot of unearned advantages that I have inherited or received because of injustice. Oppression, war, and unjust laws all played a significant role in the making of my own advantages and inheritance.

What's complicated is that some of the reasons I have the inheritance I have is because of some very good virtues. Virtues that can be celebrated and honored. The thriftiness and frugality and hard work of my ancestors made so much possible for me. Those good virtues are just as real and true as the systemic injustice that played a large role.

What am I to do with this? How should I live and how should I use the advantages and privileges afforded to me given that systemic injustice played a huge role in bringing it all about? That's what I'd like to invite us to wrestle with a bit this morning.

Now, I don't know how much these tensions that I'm raising resonate with you. For some of us, if we're just having a hard time making ends meet, we're not thinking so much about the tensions exactly, but more just how to keep afloat in harder times. For others of us who do find ourselves in relative financial security or prosperity, these may be exactly the questions or tensions we're invited to wrestle through. So I want to both acknowledge the potential differences of experiences among us, but I also don't want to let anyone off the hook so to speak. We all participate in complex political and financial systems, and to greater and lesser degrees we share responsibility for them.

So let's turn to Jesus. And we are going to take up one of Jesus' stories. We're going to look at one of his parables, and it is a bit cheeky, messy, and ironic.

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV)

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. 2 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.' 3 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. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 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.' 8 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. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unjust wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Let's talk about the manager: this guy is piece of work.

This manager has come under his master's suspicion for some shady, or maybe incompetent, business dealings. And the rich master demands a full account before he fires him, so the manager goes back to his office and gets to work. And he gets an idea. One by one, he calls on his master's debtors and begins cancelling part of their debt.

What's hilarious is that the manager is so bad at his job that he doesn't even know what is owed! Generally speaking, it's probably a good idea for the manager of an estate to keep an accurate account of what's owed to that estate. He's so bad at business, he could be president. #sorrynotsorry

So the manager has to ask, hey remind me what you owe my boss. They tell him. And then he slashes it to a lower amount, buying the good favor of these debtors with money that is not his own.

Now, put yourself in the position of the rich master for a moment. Let's say you own a good size company. You've invested your life into it, tons and tons of time and resources. Your success relies on this company and how it does. And you come to realize your manager—your COO—is terrible, so you fire him. And on his way out, the COO starts cooking the books to let people out of what they owe the company. How do you feel? You're outraged. You want the guy arrested for fraud and to pay back what he's essentially stolen from you, right.

Here's where the story takes an odd twist. Jesus says that the master *commends* the dishonest manager—he praises him!—because he acted shrewdly or wisely! Slow hand clap: nice job. You're pretty smart.

On top of that odd twist, Jesus seems to be offering the manager as a model to imitate. Jesus wraps up the story with, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unjust wealth." In other words: this guy! This guy! do what the manager did! He did it well. Do that.

I got to tell you: it's really tempting to just end the message right here, inviting all of us to become crooked, stealing managers that gain as much unjust wealth as we

can and going out and spending the money on friends, becoming more and more popular with money that is not our own. And on and on. And when asked what we're doing, our defense is so simple: **The Bible tells me so.**

So, what is Jesus doing with this story? Let me off some helpful cultural background related to this story. In Jesus' time and culture, when a loan was made, a bond would be written in the amount owed, figured in terms of wheat or olive oil or other goods. And then a certain amount would be added as interest.

The reason they did it this way was because according to the law of Moses in the Bible, people were prohibited from charging interest. There are a number of places where it's written, but here's one from Deuteronomy 23:19, "You shall not charge interest to your brother or sister—interest on money or food or anything that is lent out." Making money off money—or collecting interest—was seen as way of gaining unjust wealth and it was illegal.

The loophole to not collecting interest was in these bonds. It's not clear exactly how it functioned as a loophole, but it did. So in the parable, what's happening is that the manager is likely cutting out the interest on the original loan. The first debtor says he owes 100 jugs of olive oil, (or the equivalent amount in cash) but half the amount—50 jugs—is interest on an original loan. For the second one, the equivalent of 20 containers out of 100 containers of wheat was interest on the original loan.

So the manager is cutting off the interest and saying, just pay the original loan amount.

This. Is. Genius. Because it places the rich owner in a bind. If the owner complains about the manager's dealings, he would have to openly admit that he was in charging interest on his loans. And it would have maybe landed him in court.

So the master has been tricked, but he can't really cry foul or he'll be in a bit of his own trouble. And he's genuinely impressed by his manager's actions. And he commends him for it. Very shrewd indeed.

And meanwhile, the debtors are just loving the manager. Right?! This guy! This guy! He's my new buddy! I owe him like fifteen favors after this one.

This cultural background is helpful because we now can see that Jesus is making a dramatic point, not about dishonesty, but about acting shrewdly in the midst of a complex and already-unjust financial system.

And then, Jesus uses this story as a springboard into a crucial lesson about money and injustice. After the parable, he goes on to say this:

10 “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is unjust in a very little is unjust also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with unjust wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 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.”

Boom. Mic Drop.

Jesus uses the phrase “unjust wealth” which he repeats from a few verses before this one.

Now, there’s some disagreement about what Jesus means here by “unjust wealth.” Some interpreters think Jesus is only talking about ill-gotten gain—like in the parable, it’s any money or wealth gained directly through stealing or coercion or illegal activity.

But other interpreters take this phrase much farther and consider Jesus’ phrase a critique of pretty much all wealth. Jesus is saying, the argument goes, that all wealth is somehow unjust, somehow compromised. This is not a reassuring idea, but I think there may be some fruitful things to consider from this perspective if we can hang with it for a moment.

To wrestle with this a little bit, let me go back to my dad’s stories about growing up working on his family farm. Was the wealth of that land *just*? If we consider it on a personal level, then we might look at the individual people and the virtues practiced. They worked incredibly hard. They were frugal, practical, and generous people.

At the same time, the land and wealth they did enjoy was land and wealth belonging to Indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed, or killed. And the land was made available to them because they were considered to be white. From that perspective, is the wealth just or unjust?

I can engage in the same kind of reflection with my own money and wealth today. On individual, personal level, I can name all the ways that I have worked hard and come into employment as a pastor and receiving a paycheck. And I'm grateful.

On the other hand, I can also name how my race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. have afforded me advantages that many other people have not received.

I don't know about you, but when I start examining myself and the world from this perspective, it can mess me up. I feel all kinds of feelings that are not easy to deal with. I experience anxiety, frustration, even despair. I mean, if I can trace all my wealth and money to some point of injustice, what am I supposed to do? Throw our hands up and say, "whatever"?

So there are two things I've found helpful in dealing with this stuff. The first is to **be a part of a community of learners**, related to money and justice. Jesus tells this story to his disciples, which is one community of learners. And we are invited to be like them.

The community piece is so crucial because it's in related to other people with different stories, different backgrounds, that I'm able to hear very different experiences of the world's systems. I'm also able to process with others and learn from them how we're approaching various complex systems and what our responsibility is as participants in them.

So community—be a part of community that's committed to learning about money, about justice, about how we might confront some of the injustice of our time.

Secondly, I've been really helped by wrestling through Jesus' final sentence: you cannot serve both God and wealth. And I think: "Why not?" Man, that's hard! And it helps when I bring this whole mess to Jesus in prayer and other contemplative practices. I do this pretty regularly because I'm anxious about this stuff pretty

regularly. I will simply name before Jesus how awful the world is, how bad it seems to me, the history of the United States has been. He's like, I know! I will tell him how it feels kind of gross and embarrassing to be rewarded for being white and rich. But And then I feel more embarrassed because of this sort of privileged pain I experience—first world problems or whatever. But it's real. It's happening in me. Jesus knows it's happening. My parts all know it's happening. So I might as well own it.

And as I bring all this stuff before Jesus, I sense God's nearness. I sense God's presence and spirit. I sense God's comfort and peace. I sense God's encouragement to continue facing the stark realities of the world even though it's hard. I sense God asking me to take responsibility not for all that is the case and why, but to take responsibility for what I do today with where things are.

And as I engage in this, I feel some of the burden lift even while I still claim what I am responsible for. And I feel new empowerment and new security. I feel free—free to say all that is unjust and free to act justly. I'm free to try things out—see what works and what doesn't. I'm sure I'll make mistakes, and I'm sure I have a lot more to learn.

But Jesus' invitation to me becomes clear: use your unjust wealth wisely. Use your unjust wealth to make friends. Use your unjust wealth in ways that cultivate Jesus' values. Jesus' values of sharing power with the poor, of unmasking powers of domination, of caring for creation, of establishing justice and peace, of compassion and generosity.....

We're going to close today by simply taking a moment for a simple prayer practice of bringing ourselves and our wealth—whatever level that may be—before Jesus.

Open in prayer: Jesus, we hear you use that phrase “unjust wealth,” and we're aware of just how much of the systems of the world are based on a long history of injustice. Given that, we want to present ourselves before you and ask for your help.

Go ahead and take a moment to name before God whatever feelings are raised for you as you consider your own level of wealth and how you've got there. Anxiety, frustration, joy? Whatever it is is fine. Just take a moment to name that.

How is Jesus responding to what it is you're naming?

What's your sense of God's invitation for you? How might you use whatever wealth you have wisely or shrewdly? How might you work towards justice and peace?
Amen.