

Overcoming the Spirit of Mammon

Thesis: We are a people who overcome the spirit of mammon through faithful stewardship, generosity, and surrender to God and his ways.

Text: Luke 16:1-31

This morning, I felt led to talk about *Overcoming the Spirit of Mammon*. We are invited to live as people of the kingdom of God, rather than as people of this age who live according to the world's system, values, or mental models.

Let's face it: money talks. The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Money can become a rival to God for the love, devotion, and control of our lives.

Jesus taught a lot about money. In Luke 16, Jesus talks about money once again. Jesus often talks about those things which vie for our loyalty or devotion; they want to control us. There are ways of this world which will mold us into the image of the values of this world. With God helping us, we have to make intentional, willful, even "violent" or aggressive decisions to live like God wants us to live.

MAMMON (מַמּוֹן, mamon). An Aramaic word that is transliterated into Greek in the New Testament, meaning "wealth," "money," "riches," or even "property." The word מַמּוֹן (mamon) occurs four times in the New Testament, all spoken by Jesus. It is sometimes transliterated in English translations as "mammon" but is also sometimes translated as "money." The first occurrence of מַמּוֹן (mamon) is part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:24), and the other three are part of [Jesus' teaching in Luke 16, in which the underlying theme is to be faithful to God] (Luke 16:9, 11, 13). (John D. Barry et al., eds., "Mammon," The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

In Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13, "mammon" is personified as a rival to God for the loyalty of the disciple: To which master will obedience be given? In Luke 16:9, 11 the term designates material wealth or property. Mammon itself does not carry a negative value, as the parallel phrasing in Luke 16:11 makes clear: "If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches?" (Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Mammon," Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988, p. 1384.)

Let's read Luke 16.

Giving an overview of Luke 16:1-31

From a parable about money, Luke moves us to actual teaching about money; the chapter will end with another parable in which money is both part of the story and part of the point. This passage contains some of Jesus' strongest and most explicit warnings about the dangers of wealth, and experience suggests that neither the church nor the world has taken these warnings sufficiently to heart. Somewhere along the line serious repentance, and a renewed determination to hear and obey Jesus' clear teaching, seems called for.

The key to it all is in the opening verses [Luke 16:1-2]: it's about faithfulness. Money is not a possession, it's a trust: God entrusts property to people and expects it to be used to his glory and the welfare of his children, not for private glory or glamour. (NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 196–197.)

Putting the passage together, we find the underlying challenge [is] to be faithful: faithful in our use of money, faithful to God rather than money, faithful in our hearts not just in our outward appearances, faithful to the kingdom which has now begun with Jesus, faithful to our marriages. As soon as we begin to think of money, or land, or other people, as commodities we might own or exploit, we take a step away from our vocation to be truly human beings, God's true children, and towards the other master, who is always ready to accept new servants. (NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 198.)

Commenting on Luke 16:1-9

If we were faced with a first-century Jewish story we'd never seen before, about a master and a steward, we should know at once what it was most likely about. The master is God; the steward is Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property-manager, the light of God's world, responsible to God and set over his possessions. But Israel—as we've seen in so much of this gospel—has failed in the task, and is under threat of imminent dismissal. What then ought Israel to do?

The Pharisees' answer was to pull the regulations of the law even tighter, to try to make Israel more holy. This, as we've seen, had the effect that they were excluding the very people that Jesus was reaching out to. Jesus, in this parable,

indicates that if Israel is facing a major crisis the answer is rather to throw caution to the winds, to forget the extra bits and pieces of law which the Pharisees have heaped up, and to make friends as and where they can. That's what 'the children of this world' would do, and 'the children of light'—that is, the Israelites—ought to do so as well, learning from the cunning people of the world how to cope in the crisis that was coming upon their generation.

Thus, instead of hoarding money and land, Jesus' advice was to use it, as far as one could, to make friends. A crisis was coming, in which alternative homes, homes that would last (not 'eternal habitations' in the sense of a heavenly dwelling after death), would be needed.

This parable thus appears to be directed very specifically to the situation of Jesus' own hearers. How can it be reused in our own day?

Obviously it has nothing to do with commending sharp practice in business or personal finance. Rather, it advises us to set light to the extra regulations which we impose on one another, not least in the church, which are over and above the gospel itself. **The church passes through turbulent times, and frequently needs to reassess what matters and what doesn't.** The twentieth century saw the so-called 'mainline' churches in many parts of the world—the traditional denominations—in decline, with newer churches, not least in the Third World, growing and spreading. What should traditional churches do when faced with their own mortality? Perhaps they should learn to think unconventionally, to be prepared to make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the winds and discover again, in the true fellowship of the gospel, a home that will last. (NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 194–195.)

Considering the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

What does God care about? (From Faithwalking Foundations Module 6, Session 1, Ken Shuman, pps. 2-5.)

God cares about how every human being is treated. God cares about how his followers demonstrate love in the world. God cares about how those of us who have been blessed with plenty use our blessing to bless others.

God cares about the overlooked and the ignored in the world. God cares about social justice issues. Mercy, justice, and compassion are not "add-ons" to the

gospel—they are included in the gospel. God calls us to be unselfish and generous. God calls us to be peacemakers. God calls us to care and to take action. This is the responsibility of those who claim to know God and who want to follow Jesus.

Jesus tells a story in Luke 16:19-31 that I believe reflects the heart and character of God. This story is about a wealthy man who is unnamed and a poor homeless man named Lazarus.

Lazarus was lying outside of the rich man's front gate hoping to receive some scraps or leftovers from the table. The wealthy man never noticed Lazarus. Even though Lazarus was there every day, the wealthy man completely ignored him.

What are the sins of the wealthy man [in Luke 16:19-31]?

The rich man was self-absorbed. He was a greedy consumer in life. All he seems to be interested in is accumulating more for himself and for his own enjoyment. To enjoy the fruits of his labor was his only goal.

The rich man was irresponsible. He assumed that he was only responsible for himself and his own household. He felt no responsibility for the poor man lying on the street in front of his house.

The rich man was poor in humility. He felt that he was entitled to all that he had collected. His wealth was because of his own hard work and effort. He ignored all of the ways in which God had blessed him.

The wealthy man was poor in love and compassion. He had no empathy for the sick beggar in the street. He showed no compassion for the plight of Lazarus. His heart was not stirred at all.

The wealthy man was poor in generosity. He was stingy and selfish and unwilling to give anything away.

Jesus shows us the heart of this rich man to get us to look at our own hearts. Jesus invites us to “rethink” and then to “re-order” our lives—to repent. He hopes that our hearts and behaviors will accurately reflect his heart.

The rich man wanted Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them. Abraham said no. He said they already have the writings of Moses and the prophets. That's all they need. “Listen to what is written by Moses and the prophets.” What did Moses and the prophets say? You have been blessed to be

a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2-3). "Those who are chosen to be bearers of a blessing are chosen for the sake of all" (Newbigin, p. 32).

Moses:

As the people of Israel were preparing to enter the land God had promised, they were given the following instructions:

"When you happen on someone who's in trouble or needs help among your people with whom you live in this land that GOD, your God, is giving you, don't look the other way pretending you don't see him. Don't keep a tight grip on your purse. No. Look at him, open your purse, lend whatever and as much as he needs. Don't count the cost. Don't listen to that selfish voice saying, "It's almost the seventh year, the year of All-Debts-Are-Canceled," and turn aside and leave your needy neighbor in the lurch, refusing to help him. He'll call GOD's attention to you and your blatant sin. Give freely and spontaneously. Don't have a stingy heart. The way you handle matters like this triggers GOD, your God's, blessing in everything you do, all your work and ventures. There are always going to be poor and needy people among you. So I command you: Always be generous, open purse and hands, give to your neighbors in trouble, your poor and hurting neighbors" (Deuteronomy 15:7-1, The Message).

To summarize:

1. Don't look the other way pretending you don't see those in need. Look at them. Open your eyes and see the people around you.
2. Don't have a stingy heart, and don't listen to that selfish voice in your head. Be generous.
3. Your generosity triggers God's blessing. Give and it will be given to you is the promise of scripture (Luke 6:38).

Jesus said that you can't serve both God and money (Luke 16:13). Money and consumerism are God's biggest competitor, it seems. "For the love of money - and what it can buy - is the root of all sorts of evil" (1 Timothy 6: 10). Of course, none of us believes that money is our problem, do we? I am constantly confronted by my own selfishness and my own consumerism. I want the things that I want, and there is always something new to want. I'm anxious about having enough for retirement. The older I get the more that is on my mind. As a result, I become stingier and less generous. It gets easy to pretend I don't see those who are in need.

Living missionally is a call to join with God by using our money, our possessions, our voice, and our power on behalf of the poor. This is God's mission.

Other thoughts from Ken:

I am not responsible for every person in poverty near my home or around the world. It comes back to discernment. Are my eyes open for “who God has in my regularly in my life”?

I am reading in the text that the rich man didn't even notice Lazarus. God wants us to notice the people around us and their need.

I believe that the rich man was invited by God to be involved in the poor man's life, based on the story. He was so engaged in his own greed, that he no concern for the man who had nothing.

That is what I mean by irresponsible: He didn't listen to God. He didn't get in action around God's invitation to get involved.

It is irresponsible to close my eyes and not pay attention, to try to discern what God is doing.

Principle: We don't do this alone. We do it in community. I am constantly looking for who can do it with me.

1. Discern where God is at work and is calling me to join him.
2. Discern who is supposed to join me in what I am doing.

Points:

1. **We are a people who overcome the spirit of mammon through faithful stewardship, generosity, and surrender to God and his ways** (like tithing, giving, investing/ saving, sacrificing).
 - a. **Tithing:** *[God says] you are robbing me [in tithes and offerings]. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty. 12 “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty (Malachi 3:9–12).*

- b. **Giving:** *Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. 11 There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land (Deuteronomy 15:10–11).*
2. **What is our why?** Why do we surrender to the ways of the kingdom of God, like in tithing and giving?
- a. **To please the Lord.**
- i. *“The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him” (John 8:29).*
 - ii. *And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way... (Colossians 1:10).*
- b. **To obey the Lord.**
- i. *“If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15).*
 - ii. *Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19).*
- c. **To acknowledge that everything we have belongs to the Lord. We are stewards.**
- i. *The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it (Psalm 24:1).*
 - ii. *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2).*
- d. **To defeat the spirit of mammon and to say “no” to the god of materialism.**
- i. *The god of materialism says, “we never have enough; we must have more.”*
 - ii. *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:12–13).*
 - iii. *Then Jesus said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).*
 - iv. *Then Jesus said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for a man to gain*

the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" (Luke 9:23-26).

There are three other applications I want to make.

When we surrender to the ways of the kingdom of God, like in faithful stewardship, generosity, and tithing and giving:

1. **We disempower the fear** of "I don't have enough or won't have enough" through practicing the Sabbath and other spiritual disciplines which get us into the presence of God.
 - a. Sabbath says: "I am enough. I have enough. I have done enough."
2. **We express and embrace the nature of our God who is generous.**
 - a. *But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:7-9).*
3. **We care for the least, the last, and the lost whom Jesus loves** (Matthew 25:31-40).
 - a. One way to do that is to sow into missions and ministries in general, and to sow specifically into Myanmar.
 - b. *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:40).*

Summary:

With God helping us, we are a people who overcome the spirit of mammon through faithful stewardship, generosity, and surrender to God and his ways.

Ministry Time: