

# Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

September 21, 2025

Friends, today's parable is one of the strangest. Scholars have called it the most difficult, the most confusing, even the most frustrating of all Jesus' parables. And it doesn't help that our Bibles can't even agree on what to call it. The New International Version calls it "The Parable of the Shrewd Manager." The New Revised Standard calls it "The Dishonest Manager." Another translation says, "Faithfulness with Money." So, if the editors can't even agree, then perhaps we can give ourselves permission to admit: this parable is a hard one.

The story itself is unusual. We heard that a rich man discovered that his manager had been wasting his property. He called him in, told him to bring the books, and made it clear that he was about to be fired. The manager panicked. He knew he was too weak for hard labor and too proud to beg, so he came up with a plan. He called in the people who owed his master money. One owed one hundred jugs of olive oil; the manager said, "Make it fifty." Another owed one hundred containers of wheat; the manager said, "Make it eighty." The manager reduced their debts so that when he was unemployed, they would remember his generosity and welcome him into their homes. Dishonest, yes; but clever, also yes. And then came the twist: instead of condemning him, the master praised him for being shrewd.

What do we do with a story like this? Why would Jesus tell a parable that seems to reward dishonesty? The answer begins to emerge at the end of the passage where Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Now, the original word translated from Greek as “wealth” can also be translated as “mammon.” And Mammon was more than money. In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, mammon carried the sense of wealth as a master, wealth as a force, wealth that demanded loyalty. By the first century, mammon was understood to be almost a rival god. And that’s why Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth... or, God and mammon.” You see, he wasn’t just talking about being greedy. Rather, he was naming a choice of allegiance. Did people live under the power of the living God, or did they live under the power of wealth personified as mammon?

And that question is not confined to the ancient world. Today mammon wears many masks. Sometimes we call it “the market.” Sometimes “the economy.” Sometimes “financial security.” None of those are bad in themselves. But when they become the measure of our worth or the master of our lives, they enslave us. We can start to believe the lie that our value comes from our bank account, that our future is secured only by our savings, that what we own defines who we are. That is mammon at work.

And yet, we are reminded that God has already made a choice. God has said, “You are worth more than what you earn. You are not defined by your debt. You are beloved.” At the heart of our faith is this truth: God’s grace has already claimed you.

You see, this parable isn’t about earning God’s favor. It’s about what happens when God’s favor is already yours. The manager, for all his

dishonesty, recognized something important: relationships mattered more than ledgers. People mattered more than profit. In the end, that's what Jesus pointed us toward.

After all, we don't have to look far to see how mammon binds people and how grace brings release. Many know the crushing weight of debt—whether student loans, medical bills, or credit card balances—where every decision feels shaped by what is owed. And many have also witnessed what happens when debts are reduced or forgiven: the breath of relief, the sense of possibility, the reminder that life is more than a balance sheet. That's the contrast between mammon and God's grace. Mammon binds and weighs us down. God's economy sets free and opens possibility.

This is the pattern throughout Luke's gospel. Remember, in Jesus' first sermon, he declared good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. So too, Jesus' mother, Mary, sang a song called the Magnificat, which proclaimed that God lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Then, Jesus blessed the poor and the hungry. He told a rich man to sell his possessions and give to the poor. He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter God's reign. Luke doesn't soften the message. Wealth can be a dangerous master when mammon is at work. So, Jesus pointed to a different kind of economy—God's economy, where mercy is valued over money and relationships are more important than rules.

So, this parable is not about whether we chose God over mammon, as if God's place in our lives was up for grabs. The gospel is clear: God had already chosen us. God had already named us as beloved children. God had

already invited us into this economy of grace. And because God had chosen us, we are free to respond. Free to forgive debts. Free to restore relationships. Free to live generously. Free to resist mammon's lies. Free to breathe again. In Lutheran language, we are freed from selfishness, death, and the power of mammon, and freed for loving service to our neighbors.

That is what this strange parable reveals. It shows us what God's reign looks like, even when it doesn't make economic sense. When debts are reduced, when relationships are restored, when mercy comes before money, we are glimpsing God's economy. It may look weak to the world, but it is the strength of god's love.

And because we are freed, we are called to put love before ledgers in tangible ways. Jesus' teaching does not remain abstract—it takes shape in our lives, in our community, and in the ways that we stand with our neighbors. One of those ways today is by joining in our letter-writing campaign for peace and justice in Gaza as organized by ELCA advocacy. Just as Jesus pointed us toward valuing people over profit and mercy over money, so too we are invited to lift our voices for those who are suffering under systems of violence and economic control. This is part of our faith in action. Writing these letters is one way we live out our baptismal vocation: to stand with neighbors near and far, to seek reconciliation, and to embody God's reign of mercy in the world.

So friends, there it is, that's what this confusing parable reminds us. God has chosen you. God has set you free. And because you belong to God, you no longer need to serve mammon. You can live in God's strange and beautiful economy—where love matters more than ledgers, where mercy outweighs

money, and where relationships last longer than wealth. God has chosen you. God frees you. And God sends you to love. That is God's strange, confusing, and upside-down good news for all. Amen.