

The parable we study today was almost banned in Boston. It's that upsetting, outré, out of the box, off the wall. We can stamp this parable *UNEXPECTED*. I have built what I say this morning around the unexpected: an unexpected affirmation of wealth, an unexpected story, and an unexpected proposal. To ease you into the unexpected story Jesus told, and to set you up for His unexpected affirmation of wealth, I will start with an unexpected proposal for which I take no responsibility beyond this sermon.

An Unexpected Proposal

I propose that Brandywine Valley Baptist Church sponsor a golf tournament. Not everyone cares for golf. Not everyone can play golf, but many do, and millions of people like to watch golf. This tournament I propose would be free to all, who want to play a round of golf or to watch other people play a round of golf. This tournament would offer a golf clinic put on by a professional golfer to help people improve their game. It would be preceded by a banquet, featuring the professional golfer, who would not only tell good stories, but would also tell his audience how central Jesus Christ is to his existence and how central He can be to their existence.

Everyone who registers for the tournament would know up front that the professional golfer who speaks at the banquet will talk about his faith in Jesus Christ, and everyone who registers for the tournament has to go to the dinner in order to play in the tournament or watch others play.

What would make this tournament unique would be to call it The Brandywine Valley Baptist Church Million Dollar Golf Tournament. Every person would in theory have a shot at a million dollar prize. It would work like this. Whoever makes this tournament happen would designate one of the par 3 holes on the course as "The Million Dollar Hole." Everyone that day who scored a hole-in-one on that hole would win or share \$1 million. "The Million Dollar Hole" would be the hook that catches people's interest and brings them to the event.

And where, you ask, will BVBC get a million dollars? The tournament organizers would buy an insurance policy. There are insurance companies that will insure the payoff, if someone scores a hole-in-one. The premium is surprisingly low – until you remember how difficult it is to score a hole-in-one.

And how would BVBC justify such a tournament? The answer takes us to the unexpected story Jesus told in Luke 16:1ff. Please join me there.

An Unexpected Story

Let's read the story first in verses 1-8. **Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'**

"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg. I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job, people will welcome me into their houses.'

"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

"'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

“The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.’

“Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

“A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

“He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’”

You can see why he lost his job. You can see why people in debt liked him.

What’s hard to understand is verse 8: **“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”** That’s a showstopper. He was defrauded, and he commended the guy. Why would he do that?

Jesus doesn’t help us. He wasn’t interested in why the master commended the manager who cheated him. He made it clear that the manager’s behavior was shrewd and dishonest, and he paid for it by losing his job. Jesus left us thinking that the master wasn’t too smart. That’s how the world works. People use money to feather their own nest, even if they have to be shrewd and dishonest to do it. And sometimes other people admire them for doing it.

It is an unusual parable. You can see how it might disturb the delicate sensibilities of the bourgeoisie of Bean Town. The powerful point Jesus was about to make would disturb them even more violently. Verses 8-9: **“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”**

In other words irreligious people use money in shrewd ways to benefit themselves in this world. Why don’t the Jesus people use money honestly to benefit other people in the eternal world to come? The proposal of a million dollar golf tournament is one idea of how to do that. BVBC doesn’t make any money on the tournament, but perhaps dozens of people hear the gospel of Christ, and perhaps many of them receive everlasting life as a result of that golf event. If you don’t like that proposal, that’s okay. How do you want to use money to advance the gospel?

That’s the point of the parable, especially verse 9: **“Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it (your wealth) is gone (and someday it will be gone; you will die, and you can’t take it with you), you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings (in the presence of God)”** by those people who came to faith in Jesus because you put on a golf tournament in Wilmington, DE.

Are you surprised that Jesus would tell a story like this parable? I sometimes wonder if we think He was so spiritual, so heavenly-minded that He wasn’t aware of how the world takes care of business. Jesus was a wise man, and He was a realist. He didn’t know everything, but He connected the dots better than anyone else. In particular He connected money with the eternal affairs of heaven in a way that irritates the daylights out of us and forces us to rethink how we use our money.

An Unexpected Affirmation of Wealth

This parable real surprise is its unexpected affirmation of wealth. In a *Christianity Today* article titled “Blessed Are the Broke” a woman tells of the time when her families financial rollercoaster ride from boom, when her husband’s first quarter prophet one year was for “far more” than it had made the year before;” to bust where they were “done, broke, out of money, out of credit;” to a more stable existence where they “can now work

to pay off debt and pay bills on time.” (All quotations are from: Caryn Rivadineira, *Christianity Today*, “Blessed Are the Broke,” October 2014, 58)

That’s the background. Now, I want you to hear three statements she made about their financial rollercoaster ride. She said of their boom years: “... The uninterrupted prosperity of summer homes and promotions and perfect health, of never having to ask or rely on God for anything, don’t often lead us closer to him.” She said of their bust years: “Having to depend on God, learning to keep our eyes peeled for him, and experiencing his presence, His sustenance – finding him a good amid the bad – is a blessing.” Finally, she said of their present, stable time of life: “But as we step farther away from the deepest, darkest moments of our desperation, I’m afraid I’ll lose touch with God.” (Ibid)

The underlying message of her story is this: “Money is dangerous. Maybe you are better off, if you don’t have too much.” It’s hard to argue with that. But if you have money, are you just supposed to feel bad about having it?

Conversations outside Christian circles often convey the message that you should feel bad about it. Think about Occupy Wall Street and “the 1%.” Think about discussions that focus on the growing economic gap between the haves and the have-nots in this country. Think about the fact that more than half of all working Americans have not seen a genuine rise in their paychecks in the past six years, and their buying power is actually less than it was six years ago.

Just in case you weren’t feeling bad enough, the New Testament says: **the love of money is the root of all evil.** (1 Timothy 6:10) Jesus said: **It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.** (Mark 10:25) We will read later in our passage today: **“You cannot love God and money.”** (Luke 16:13) So, if you have enjoyed pay raises and promotions and are well off, how are you supposed to feel about the blessing of your wealth?

The parable of the dishonest manager doesn’t contradict the problems created by disparities of wealth. It doesn’t take away the danger that wealth poses for a personal relationship with God. But it does give us an unexpected and much-needed perspective on the wealth that millions of people in this country and around the world enjoy. This perspective is rooted in a liberating principle and qualified by a warning.

The liberating principle comes to us courtesy of verses 11-12. Jesus said: **“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”**

The principle is clear: If you have worldly wealth, it is a trust. God entrusted you with it to see if you will use your money shrewdly to benefit other people in eternal ways. Think about that for a minute. You don’t have to feel guilty about having wealth, if you have the eternal perspective that God has entrusted you with your wealth.

It’s not enough just to say, “God has blessed me.” When the woman saw the first quarter check that was bigger than their previous year’s earnings, she wrote: “I hugged him, and I expected nothing less. My husband is brilliant and hard-working, and we had dedicated the company to a God who blessed that kind of ingenuity.” (Ibid) Such “blessing” talk severed from a sense of trust turns into religious fluff. Where is the awe that asks, “What has God entrusted me to do for the kingdom of God with my wealth?”

Jesus' warning in verse 13 reinforces this eternal perspective. **“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”** We serve God and love Him, when we determine to use our wealth honestly to benefit other people in eternal ways.

Take Aways

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will learn what God's authority looks like in human life. Watch Jesus, and you will see God's priorities on display. And as we learn from this unexpected parable, God's priorities will contradict our priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. Jesus is pouring out the new wine of heaven in our generation. It remains to be seen, if disciples then and disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence in their experience, including their experience with money.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 helps us to make God's priorities our priorities: **“Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’”** It's easy to think that, because you got where you are, because you are smart, clever, and you work really hard. No one can take that from you, but it's not the whole story. Deuteronomy goes on to say: **“You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.”** (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

Where do you think your smarts, cleverness, and stamina came from? And what about that mentor, who helped you along the way, and what about the people who opened doors for you that you couldn't open for yourself? Things beyond your control are just as much a part of your success as intelligence, cleverness, and hard work. God gave you the strength to make your wealth, and He put those lucky breaks along the way to help you be a success.

When we look at success like that, then we are better prepared to see our wealth as a trust given to us by God, and we are open to the idea that we can use that wealth honestly to make an eternal difference in peoples' lives.

So, how could you use money honestly to do that? How about a \$1 million golf tournament? How about building a friendship over a cup of coffee that you pay for? How about supporting Brandywine Valley Baptist Church financially? I know that people say they don't like organized religion. There is some merit in that. My hunch is that many people say that, because they just don't like religion. Organizations are to action what a microphone is to speaking. They magnify the action. This church is awash in goodness. It is open to good ideas. It will take risks. Why not support it financially? It will magnify dramatically your efforts to make an eternal difference in people's lives.

I came across the following in conversation with a friend. It shows why the dishonest manager's discounts would make customers happy. It sheds no light at all on why the master would commend the dishonest man for defrauding him.

When they hit oil on Alaska's North Slope, places like Anchorage, AK became boomtowns. And in Anchorage on W. 25th Avenue Chilkoot Charlie's became the bar of choice. The locals call it Koot's. It displays a distinctive sign that says, "We cheat the other guy and pass the savings on to you."

You can see why it is the bar of choice. Do you know how many people feel they are paying too much to buy a car or a house, or when they pay their taxes? The message of that sign says, "We know how you feel. We're on your side. We help you get back some of what's rightfully yours." Customers are glad that Koot's Bar and Restaurant is sticking it to the people, who usually stick it to them. That's the way the world works.