



September 21 - Mammon

While I was in college, I had a brief stint in telemarketing. It was not the job for me. I lasted about two weeks and then took a job in shipping and receiving for an agricultural seed company. During those two weeks, my job was to sell credit cards. There was a carefully crafted script, and we were required to offer at least two rebuttals. As you might imagine, the credit card company wanted to pull a profit. The low introductory APR would not last long and then the interest rate went rather high.

I hit the quota of sales each day, but not because I wanted to do so. I tried to talk people out of getting the credit card by pointing out the APR and other hidden fees. It did not work. Some were all too eager to dive in. With others, the reason for saying no was a change in life, whether the death of a loved one, or a change in relationship. I found myself providing an understanding ear. I should have known then that seminary may be in my future, but that is a story for another day.

When there is an imbalance in power, oppressive debt terms come into play. When abused, it is easy to cast judgement. If it is a credit card company, we are quick to blame the one who overextended themselves with the line of credit. If it is a payday loan place, we often do the same. Blame the one who took out the loan. If it is a loan shark, we turn blame unto the one offering the loan. We can even look at the workings of countries and the way that the Lutheran World Federation has spoken out publicly calling the unfair trade and investing practices that have destabilized Central America as “illegitimate debt” and calling it an act of violence against these countries.

Suddenly, we find that there is no clear-cut blame in this parable. How do we deal with that? Well, we leave the blame alone. Instead, let's look at what is happening in the text. The economic system of Jesus day is one of predatory lending. The “lord,” or person working with Rome, would have the power and would give loans to individuals. These were not fair loans at all. Generally, the interest rate would be 25% for money and 50% for goods. That would be the portion owed to the landowner, or “lord” in this context. The steward would take their portion in addition to interest.

If that was not bad enough, the terms of the loan were often hidden. In an illiterate culture, it was easy to hide fees and interest. The poor became even more impoverished. When they were not able to pay, then their possessions were taken from them until they had nothing. Those of means continued to get wealthier, and those with little had even less.

The steward goes around and trims the debt. Those in the context of Jesus would have recognized that the steward is basically canceling the interest portion of the debt. It becomes a 0% interest loan. That is the sort of deal that moves the power from the landowner to the poor. It lifts up those who are beaten economically and gives them the opportunity to change their lives for the better.

Jesus is offering the parable as a way of speaking to the economic reality that people faced under the thumb of the Roman Empire. With that in mind, maybe we need to rethink the closing sayings in this text. When Jesus talks about being faithful with what rightfully belongs to someone else, may it is not about the steward's actions with the wealth of his master. Maybe it is about his faithfulness with what rightfully belongs to the peasants. Maybe it is about restoring power and resources to the people who are oppressed under the current empire. Maybe it is about restoring a sense of hope with the masses instead of building on the wealth of the wealth. Jesus reminds us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon, translated as wealth.

Mammon goes deeper than just wealth. It is a personification of that which has our trust. For those who place their trust in resources, there will never be enough. For those who place their trust in God, there is already enough. You cannot serve both. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt