

Once upon a time, in a biblical economics class, a curious seminary student asked *Why gold?* Why did gold or silver become a universal standard of value when, though they are pretty and shiny and relatively rare, gold and silver are too soft to make tools or weapons or anything that would have been truly useful to primitive humans? For that matter, why do our dollar bills, which are really just pieces of paper, have value? And the answer is *because we say so*; we made it up; money has value only because we all decided to treat it like it has value. It's sort of like we are all believing in something that isn't really there. Collectively, we put our faith in money; we all agree that this piece of paper, which by itself is almost useless, can be turned into a bag of groceries, a pair of sneakers, or a car. If we really think about it, it's absurd, but not more absurd than today's gospel.

This may be Jesus' most confusing parable, but it's also right in line with the themes that run all throughout Luke's gospel: God casting the mighty down from their thrones and uplifting the humble; filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty; Jesus promising the kingdom to the least, lost, and lowliest, denying entrance to the rich who have a better chance of driving a camel through the eye of a needle. Anyone who tries to tell you that God doesn't care what you do with money is trying to sell you something.

In Jesus' parable, a manager is accused of squandering his master's money, but before he is kicked out of the office, he devises a way to save himself from destitution. He cancels large portions of the debts owed to his boss, hoping that the debtors will in turn be generous to him when he is unemployed. The master actually commends the manager—not for having been dishonest but for being shrewd in his problem solving and handling of what was really other peoples' money.

It helps to know something about finances in the ancient world. First, these quantities of oil and wheat are huge amounts in the scale of their economy, representing years of work. It is possible that the manager had originally overcharged them in order to take a cut for himself. It is also possible that these debts were the result of high interest rates, which at the time could reach as much as 50%. And if that was the case, it's critical to know that although that kind of predatory lending was common, in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and throughout the prophets, God absolutely forbade charging interest. Maybe the manager was waiving the portion he planned to keep for himself. Maybe the manager was trying to make his boss look good by forgiving the illegal, immoral interest that he shouldn't have charged in the first place. Maybe the manager's motives were less than altruistic; in any event, I can't imagine that the debtors *cared* why their debts were forgiven, only that they were no longer crushed under a burden that they never would have otherwise escaped.

Unfortunately, the math in this story doesn't sound outdated: subprime mortgages and pay day lenders; exorbitant interest on credit cards and student loans; CEOs making billions by underpaying their workers; bankruptcy from medical bills even with health insurance. Does God have an opinion

about what we do *systemically* with money? Absolutely. There's no reason for us to even read these stories if we aren't going to ask how they speak to the struggles that exist in our world right now.

When money, which is an inanimate object, is credited as the source of evil, it's not because of the money itself; it's because of us: We're supposed to love people and use money, but sometimes we mix up our priorities and use people to feed our love of money. The manager began to sort out that confusion when he realized that he'd better start valuing relationships over profits. Did it take him until a point of crisis to see the error of his ways and make a change? Yes. But he also did exactly what we're all supposed to do, what we all *pray* all the time that we will do: Forgive us our debts as we forgive others. Other translations of the Lord's Prayer that say *sins* or *trespasses* make us think more of spiritual transgressions, but praying for the forgiveness of *debts* reminds us that our relationship with money *is* spiritual, not just practical.

There is an ongoing debate about whether churches should be taxed like businesses instead of exempted as non-profit organizations because it's clear that some churches are making quite a profit—and reinvesting it in themselves instead of in people who could use their help. The Christian church in America has survived and thrived as a wealthy and powerful institution for as long as it has in part by compromising our faithfulness to scripture passages like this one, by claiming we *can* love both God and money or claiming that rightly loving God will result in us getting more money. But Jesus is pretty clear that it's a choice: serve God or serve wealth—we can't do both. We're called to prioritize God above economic interests. But in practice, what does that mean?

Jesus says, *And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own.* At first, it sounds like that applies to the manager, who by forgiving all those debts did not take faithful care of what belonged to his master. But if those debtors had been cheated or exploited, then perhaps those huge sums that represented the manager's premium or the master's outrageous interest rightfully belonged to the debtors—and in the end, the manager did the faithful thing by giving back to the workers what they had earned and what they needed for their own livelihood. He was faithful to the people, not to the pursuit of wealth. Why else has God put us here if not for the sake of one another? Why has God blessed us with resources if not for us to share with others who need them too?

This is not an easy passage—to understand or to put into practice. But if we can all agree that this piece of paper has value, that we can turn it into a book or a pizza or a few hours of electricity, couldn't we also agree that the people God has placed in our lives are more valuable than this? Wouldn't it be life-changing *in a good way* if we reordered our thinking to better reflect God's desire for our lives, including how we use money? How we answer that question tells us which master we trust.