

## **Lessons for Living a Life: Lose to Gain**

*A sermon preached on Luke 16:1-13 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 22, 2019*

### I.

I remember hearing a slogan years ago that, as slogans go, must have been a good one, because it has stuck with me through the years! It came in the first of the year, in January, when ‘new year, new you’ aphorisms were everywhere you turned, it seemed – countless industries ready to capitalize on the post-holiday slump. This one was from Weight Watchers, and it asked the consumer to consider this: “what will you gain when you lose?”

What will you gain when you lose? They were of course asking the diet-curious to wonder what else in their life they gain when they lose weight, it seems. But because it has stuck with me through the years, I have found myself unconsciously applying that wondering about gains and losses to all sorts of situations. What do you gain when you lose your independence when finding a partner? What do you gain when you lose your game face, your emotional shield, your defenses that would keep vulnerability at bay? What do you gain when you lose the identity you had always carried, or the relationship that defined a season of your life, or the certainty you relied on about God, about your family, about your opinions on all matter of things? What do you gain when you lose your life as you’ve always known it?

### II.

It’s the kind of question that prods us to consider things we’d sometimes rather not, a question like so many in our gospels that turns the world as we know it upside down. For in God’s world, the last are made first,

the low are lifted up, and the powerful are brought down. It's the kind of world that can't talk about debts without forgiveness, sin without grace, enemies without love. It's the kind of world that asks, "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"... the kind of world that says, "Yet whatever gains I had, they are loss because of Christ"... the kind of world where Jesus uses a man with too much money, a conniving manager, and those whose debts have been relieved to give us a glimpse into the coming kingdom.

"There was a rich man," Jesus begins, in the first of three such opening lines of Lukan parables. That rich man was like a CEO who summoned his manager because the manager was losing money – the rich man's money! "Squandering his property" Luke tells us, using the exact same verb he uses in the chapter prior to describe how the son we call 'prodigal' used his share of the inheritance. Based on what we know of 1st century labor practices in the Roman Empire, we can assume this means that the manager wasn't getting enough labor out of his workers, that the manager just wasn't working them hard enough to turn the kind of profit the rich man wanted.<sup>1</sup> He calls his manager in, berates him, and dismisses him with a final request that he turn in his receipts, that he account for his property the manager was overseeing.

Facing so total a loss of income and identity, he manager seemed to be terrified. "What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me?" we hear him say. "I'm not strong enough to dig the land, and I **am** too

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, [https://vimeo.com/336184174?utm\\_campaign=VigLink&utm\\_source=affiliate&utm\\_channel=affiliate&cjevent=2838769fdd1e11e98144028f0a240611](https://vimeo.com/336184174?utm_campaign=VigLink&utm_source=affiliate&utm_channel=affiliate&cjevent=2838769fdd1e11e98144028f0a240611).

proud to beg for money.” No telling how long the manager schemed to come up with a plan. But in a flash of inspiration, he figured out how he might gain future favor and place and care even as he’s lost job and livelihood and safety. One by one, the manager called in all who owed his master money, all who were in the debt of the rich man. “How much do you owe?,” the manager asked each one. “A hundred jugs of olive oil,” said one... “a hundred containers of wheat,” said another. Shrewd and dishonest though he may be, the manager reduces the amount owed, seemingly garnering favor from them in the process. And although this manager lost the rich man’s money by forgiving debts that weren’t approved in the process, the rich man couldn’t help but to acknowledge such cunning behavior and commended the manager for his cleverness, saying “for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

Now some who read this parable would say that the manager either reduced from the debt what would amount to his commission in order to invest in future favorable treatment or falsified debts to the master in order to garner hospitality among the indebted who might let him stay on their couch when the guy loses his job and needs somewhere to land.<sup>2</sup> But either way, it seems like Jesus is elevating cunning behavior and somehow trying to draw a moral conclusion praising dishonesty! This curious story isn’t made much clearer as Jesus concludes with several telling statements about money and wealth, like “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p191.

whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

### III.

Now I just wish that Jesus knew this would be the kind of passage to give preachers some Saturday night heartburn for generations. This is the kind of passage and conclusion that causes ripples of discomfort in churches like ours all around the world. Didn't he know that when we start talking about money, we all start wiggling uncomfortably in our seats?! Because we know the kind of world we live in. We know this world, we know what it takes to survive, we know what we need to make it through the day.

Because we know this world, don't we? We've navigated through the depression of '29 and the recession of '08, we've seen the schemers and the scramblers try to squeeze every dollar they can from a sale, a job, a deal, a trade. We know when we're being played by someone we thought we could trust. We look to the market, the hustle, the job, the deal, the shareholders, this client or that one – not just to line our wallets for frivolity, but to make it through the day and make us feel secure. We know this world.

As one theologian said, it's a world in which "we've put "in God we trust" on the god we trust."<sup>3</sup> And it was St. Augustine asserted that God gave us people to love and things to use, and original sin manifests itself in our

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<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *ibid.*

penchant to confuse those two, loving things and using people.<sup>4</sup> It's that kind of confusion that reminds me if ever we Christians think we're immune to the hunger for bigger barns or the thirst for more work, more money, more capital, more security for the kingdoms of this world, we must hear truth from Jesus when he says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth..."

Now – what might sound to us like Jesus advice and even permission to head for the slot machine or the blackjack table or the pyramid scheme needs a little closer look. Because in the original Greek, what some translations define as "dishonest wealth" can be more accurately translated "the money of this unrighteous age." Meaning – the money isn't corrupt, but the culture around it is. For to Jesus, there isn't good money or bad money. There's just money – Mannon, in the Greek – and every penny of it becomes an invitation to "make friends for ourselves with it."<sup>5</sup>

For if all money is just money, then it sounds to me like Jesus is inviting us to summon our shrewd selves and clever minds to consider how we use it for the sake of the coming kingdom of God! Children of this age are more shrewd in their investments and dealings than the children of the light, Jesus says, so you who are preparing for God's new world that turns the world as we know it upside down – where the last are made first, the low are lifted up, and the powerful are brought down, where debts are forgiven, where grace is offensive, where love abounds – this kind of world demands us to

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by David Lose, "Wealth and Relationships," <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/>.

<sup>5</sup> With gratitude to Tom Long for this clear read on the text, found in his sermon "Making Friends," <http://www.pas.rochester.edu/~tim/study/MakingFriends>.

invest our resources as unabashedly and shrewdly with the currency of love. We must be as tenacious with our mercy, as unequivocal with our hospitality, as bold with our love, as boundless with our compassion as those who act as if they've never seen one who was lost and is now found, one who was dead and now is alive. "Make friends with the currency of this age," Jesus says, "so that when this age passes away, you will have invested in the one to come. For what will it profit us to gain the whole world but forfeit our life... life for all the age?"

#### IV.

It's like the story of Esther — not Esther, the brave sister in scripture, but Esther, the decades-long bookkeeper of a school of theology. You could say Esther lived simply. She rented a bedroom and bathroom from a family who became like her own. She had some mobility challenges which made her far less interested than your average person in the type of household stuff that would, quite literally, encumber her physical and spiritual movement in the world. She came into work and did her job with diligence and expertise. Her income was modest, which, when you take these pieces of Esther's story together with one another, made for an interesting scenario when word got out that the IRS decided to run a thorough tax investigation on her. The problem, though, was clear — her charitable donations just didn't add up. It seems that the IRS simply could not believe that anyone would give away so much of 'their own' money, year after year after year.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Story told by Ellen Davis, "One More Squanderer," *Preaching the Luminous Word*, p268.

## V.

Tom Long once said, “All the money we have — the money in our wallets and purses, in our checking accounts, that money that fuels the stock market — all money — is like Confederate money in 1863; it is still negotiable, but it is the currency of a doomed sovereignty. If we continue to invest in the doomed sovereignty, woe are we. But money still has a little shelf life, still has a little time left; so invest it, but this time invest it in God’s future, the world that, even now, is emerging by the grace and power of God.”<sup>7</sup>

With that in mind, it’s not an accident, I don’t think, that this parable follows the three stories of that which is lost — lost sheep, lost coin, lost (or ‘prodigal’) son. You remember — what once was lost, now is found. But where that story was told to Jesus’s detractors, this story is told to his disciples. It’s almost like he’s reminding us — us his disciples, us his church — what **we** must lose to gain. We have to lose the trust in anything less than robust, muscular investment in the coming kingdom of God. We have to lose the desire to measure ourselves with the yardsticks of this world, ones that would trick us into thinking that some people are better than others because they’re worth more, that certain folks are more deserving of dignity because they have more, that abundant life is in short supply.

Oh yes, we have to lose.

But what will we gain when we lose?

To some people, it just looks like a folded grave cloth in an empty tomb. To others of us, it looks like life — life that never, ever ends!

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Long, “Making Friends,” <http://www.pas.rochester.edu/~tim/study/MakingFriends>.