

The parable Jesus tells to His disciples in our Gospel text this morning can be one of the trickier ones to understand. It's main character is this manager who steals from his master and is described as "dishonest" – or more literally, "unrighteous" – and yet is commended by his master. What's going on there? Is Jesus commending unrighteousness to us?

Well, no. It all comes down to the main point, which Jesus makes at the very end: "You cannot serve God and money." As we unpack that point, we'll see how this parable serves as an example of that statement, that we might better understand what Jesus is teaching to His disciples and apply it to our own lives.

Again, Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money," or to use the older term, "mammon," which is the original language and perhaps you've heard in older translations like the King James Bible.

I'm going to use "mammon," because that word contains more than just the idea of money. Mammon also includes your property, your stuff. This would be things like your house, your car, your clothes, your phone, your toys, your food – all the physical items you have. By extension, it can also include your lifestyle – how you live based on how much money you have. Perhaps we could simply define mammon, then, as your money and whatever your money can get you.

What does God teach us about mammon, then? Three things come to mind as far as what the Bible says. The first is that all our mammon, like everything we have, is a gift from God. James reminds us in his Epistle that every good gift comes to us from the Father. And Paul rhetorically asks the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?"

We are tempted to think that our mammon, our possessions, are ours because we've earned them. Perhaps the Lord did give them to us as a reward for hard work, but they still ultimately come from God, who gives to each as He knows is best.

Second, the Scriptures teach us that mammon, like everything else of this world, will pass away. In the Gospels, Jesus teaches that earthly treasures will all eventually perish through things like moth and rust, and that they may also be stolen by thieves.

Even if your mammon is really long-lasting stuff, it's still only stuff of this life. You can't take it with you. As Paul writes to Timothy, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out." So mammon comes from God, but is only something of this life, not the next.

Third, the Bible warns us that mammon is a strong source of temptation. Shortly after the words from Paul we just heard, he writes further and says this: "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition." Or think of the rich young man, who wants to follow Jesus, but loves his wealth, his mammon, more than than Jesus and is unwilling to give it up.

You might wonder, how can mammon be a source of temptation if it's a gift from God? Remember, though, every idol starts off as a gift from God, but then we value it more than God and place it above Him. Material goods, knowledge and wisdom, earthly peace and reputation, even our own friends and families – all blessings from God that we're often tempted to value more than God Himself.

So mammon is both money and all the stuff money can buy. It comes from God, but is only for this life, and it's a potent source of temptation. That temptation is the very thing Jesus warns about: "You cannot serve God and mammon."

What then does it mean to serve mammon? To serve is to devote oneself to something, to see it as valuable and important, to sacrifice for the sake of it. To serve mammon is to treat it as a god.

Now, we might think that we've got no worries there. After all, we've got crosses hanging on the walls of our homes, not dollar signs. And we fold our hands and pray to Our Father who art in heaven, not to the money in our wallets. So mammon isn't our god, right?

Well, we often forget what it means to treat something as a god. Martin Luther helpfully writes on this in his Large Catechism, where he says, "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress." A god is something or someone who we think that, as long as we have it, we'll be okay.

"If I have enough money in my bank account (a number which, interestingly, always gets larger), then I'll have security." "If I can just get that new car or camper or vacation home or whatever, then I'll finally be able to enjoy myself." "If I can just retire to that place I've always wanted to, then I'll be able to spend my days in peace." The mammon, whatever form it may take, is what we think will ensure us the good we desire.

Serving mammon is to direct our lives, our efforts, to getting more of it, even if that means giving up other things. You can tell what's truly important, what someone serves, by seeing what he is willing to give up for the sake of something else.

Serving mammon means giving up the other gifts God gives us for the sake of getting more mammon. Friends, family, peace, these are all sadly offered up to the idol of mammon, thinking that it's more valuable or will bring a greater good.

One thing we sacrifice in service of mammon is our time. You and I only have so many days on this earth. It's like a bank account of which we don't know the balance and from which we can only make withdrawals. If we're spending those finite days in chasing after wealth because we think that wealth will make us happy or fulfilled, then we're serving mammon.

Especially, when we give up the things of God, such as time spent in the Word and prayer, or gathering together as the Church to receive the gifts of God, for the sake getting more of the things of this world, then we're serving mammon.

Yes, sometimes you do have to work a Sunday, and sometimes the only job you can find to provide for your family requires you to work on Sundays. But these are things that Christians should seek to avoid, or to get out from under when they can.

To freely choose a job that requires you to work Sundays over one that doesn't, just because the Sunday job pays better or has better benefits or whatever, that's serving mammon. Or to encourage the children in our lives to pursue careers, hobbies, or lifestyles that will put stumbling blocks before them, making it difficult for them to be faithful Christians, that's serving mammon. When the things of God are given up for the sake of the things of this world, that's serving mammon. And as Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and mammon."

What then should we do with mammon, especially since it is God who gives it to us? To put it simply, instead of serving mammon, we should use mammon to serve God. We should realize which is important and which is not, which is eternal and which is perishing, which is righteous and which is unrighteous, and act accordingly. This is the shrewdness that is commended to us by Jesus in the parable.

The parable isn't that stealing is okay; that would go against clear portions of Scripture, such as the Seventh Commandment. No, the manager is commended because he acts shrewdly, realizing what doesn't matter and what does and acting accordingly.

Once he's fired for the wasting of his master's goods, he realizes that those goods are very soon to be lost to him, and nothing can change that. In shrewdness, then, he realizes that having authority over his master's goods is no longer important to him; ensuring that he has somewhere to go when he's thrown out is important.

He is not serving mammon by seeking more of it through stealing, he's using that mammon that he still has authority over to serve others so that they might receive him. He uses what is going away for the sake of lasting benefit. That is what is commended to us by Jesus.

Our material blessings, our mammon, doesn't remain forever. It's going away. So, instead of clinging to it, letting it be a stumbling block and source of temptation, we are to use it for the service of God. As Jesus says, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth (mammon), so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

We can't use mammon to buy a place in heaven, an eternal dwelling. That's why it's called unrighteous mammon – it can't get or lead to righteousness. But it can be used for the sake of God's kingdom here on earth – making eternal friends through the spread of the Gospel.

This can take many forms. It can be supporting this local congregation, that God's Word and Sacraments may be shared here in our community. It can be supporting mission efforts around the globe, that the Gospel might be shared with all nations. It might be supporting godly schools, that our children could grow in the saving faith rather than having it attacked by those they are supposed to honor and respect.

And the use of mammon to serve God isn't only in the church or church-specific functions. When mammon is used to carry out the vocations that God gives to us, that's a proper use of mammon. When parents use mammon to care for and raise their children that God has given to them, that's a proper use of mammon. When Christians act in faith and use their mammon to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, that's using mammon to serve God.

In these, perishable wealth is spent, not for the sake of selfish gain or pleasure, but for the sake of sharing the love of God with the neighbor whom God has given to us.

This sacrificial love and valuing the eternal good of others is seen in Jesus Christ Himself. Consider these words from Holy Scripture: “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, as has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Now, unlike the dishonest manager, Christ had no guilt of His own. He is perfect, never having committed any wrong. Yet He saw us, humanity, as so important, so precious in His sight, that He was willing to give up everything for us, and see doing so as a joy! He sacrificed much more than mammon for us, as we confess in the Small Catechism: He redeemed us “not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.”

Unlike the manager writing off some of the debtors’ bills, Christ paid ours in full. Because of His love for us, His willingness to sacrifice for our sake, we have been granted a place in those eternal dwellings He spoke of in our Gospel. By His faithfulness, we are entrusted with the true riches of paradise.

Those riches are what we are to strive for as Christians. Our mammon is passing away; it will not last, and neither will our lives in this world. Let us therefore use what God has given us to serve Him and care for our neighbor. As Scripture exhorts us, let us count all worldly gain as loss and use it to press onward toward the goal for the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus.

To Him be glory, now and forever, amen.