

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Only One Will I Serve”**

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Jesus said, *“No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.’ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him”* (Luke 16:13-14).

Jesus says it’s impossible for a servant to give his wholehearted devotion to two masters. You cannot turn left and turn right at the same time. You cannot serve a master here wholeheartedly and a master there wholeheartedly. It is our nature that we can be loyal and faithful to one master and only give secondary and hollow attention to the other.

You cannot be a servant to both God and money. You might think you can. Jesus disagrees. The danger for us, of course, is hiding our love and devotion to money with only a *show* of service to God.

Money is an idol most of us struggle with. It’s so easy to put our confidence and trust in money and the sense of security it gives. We’ve been trained to think money will fix what ails us. Throw enough money at it, and the problem will go away. Have a musty basement? Install a drainage system around the house, and a new ventilation system within the house.

Have a dog that doesn’t listen to you? Throw some money at it and send it off to a doggy boot camp.

Work got you down? Money can fix that. You just need to win the lottery and hand in your two weeks’ notice.

Money is the greatest idol in the land, for the poor and for the rich. And the lesson of Jesus here is quite simple: you’ve got to topple the idol of money. It’s either Him or money. It can’t be both. If one tries to serve both, sooner or later the tension will become unbearable, and one will win out, probably the one that was on top all along.

Think of Judas Iscariot. A follower of Jesus on the outside, a lover of money on the inside. Remember how he complained about the woman pouring precious perfume on Jesus’ feet? “It should have been sold and the cash given to the poor!” he said. But John tells us, “He cared nothing about the poor. He was a thief and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (Jn. 12:6).

For three years Judas followed Jesus and most of the time looked the part. But his fondness for money eventually came out on top, so he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

You cannot serve God and money. It never works. Ananias and his wife Sapphira tried. The earliest Christians did not consider their possessions to be their own but rather held in common with other Christians. So, for example, Barnabas sold a plot of land and donated the proceeds to the work of the apostles. Likewise, Ananias and Sapphira were a wealthy couple who sold a piece of property and pretended they were offering all the proceeds as well. However, they withheld a portion. That was certainly within their rights, but they made it appear that they had given all, when in truth they were trying to serve two masters. It didn’t end well for them.

No one can serve two masters. One of the partners of the Apostle Paul was a man named Demas. He’s mentioned just three times in Scripture. In Philemon he is called a “fellow worker” (1:24). And Paul tells the church in Colossae that Demas greets you (Col. 4:14). Clearly, Demas is playing the part well. But when Paul’s imprisonment in Rome starts to drag on, Demas figures this is not what he signed up for. Paul writes, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim. 4:9).

The tragedy of all these individuals is still being lived out today by those who try to serve both God and money. In the Parable of the Sower Jesus said there are some who receive the Word but then “the deceitfulness of wealth chokes the Word, making it unfruitful” (Mt. 13:22).

In our text, Jesus was addressing His disciples, warning them about all this. The Pharisees were also listening. They did not like what Jesus was saying because, Luke says, the Pharisees were “lovers of money.” Their fondness of money fit well into their theology. The Pharisees regarded riches as the rightful reward for their faithful observance of the Law. Conversely, they also believed an impoverished person must have done something to deserve their poverty. The Pharisees saw Jesus as poor. This means God was displeased with Jesus and his teaching. So, the Pharisees ridiculed Jesus.

It’s not all that different from the prosperity Gospel peddled by popular T.V. preachers. They seem to think of God as a means to an end and following Him as the way to get rich. But Jesus never promised wealth to those who

follow Him. In fact, He said it's harder for a rich man to get into heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Why would he want all His people to be rich and therefore less likely to be saved? Jesus promises suffering and persecution and division and various trials. He never promises health and wealth. It's bad enough for a man to think himself a good man. It's worse when he points to material prosperity as proof of his goodness. This American heresy is now being preached to impoverished people in African villages. Can you imagine the spiritual damage that does to people. Those who preach the prosperity Gospel are trying to serve two masters. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. Stay away from them.

Theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as simply one's object of ultimate concern. By this definition, there are no non-religious people in the world. Everybody is devoted to something or another. For some it's money. These people no longer own their money; their money owns them and drives them like a master drives his slave.

For others, it's their children. The children become all-consuming masters of the parents' attention and energy, and they can give only lip service to God.

Many younger people no longer have a big investment portfolio as their master. They are devoted instead to the experiential, to traveling and fine dining and concerts and the like. They've only exchanged one form of servitude for another. In either case, there's no end to it. In Ecclesiastes 5 Solomon teaches that if you love money, you'll never have enough of it (v. 10). Therefore, Solomon turned to experiences. He indulged himself in every way. He got singers and had many concubines. He denied himself no pleasure, but in fact became enslaved by his pursuit of pleasure. Ultimately, he declared it meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Eccl. 2).

The devil once tempted Jesus with wealth, together with all the kingdoms of the world. It'll all be yours if you only worship me. Jesus said, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Mt. 4:10).

Similarly, just above the imposing front doors of Highclere Castle in southern England is a saying etched in stone: "Unc jai serviray". It's old Norman French for "Only one will I serve." It's the motto for the Earls of Carnarvon who have resided in that castle for centuries. Every day they were reminded of it. "Only one will I serve." But the question is, "Who is the "one": God or King? The guides say it depends on who the king is and who the Earl is.

"Only one will I serve." For you, let that one be only the Lord Your God. It's like Joshua 24: "But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (v. 15).

Have singular focus on Him. Why? Because He has singular focus on you. His aim is your salvation and mine. It's extraordinary: He calls us servants, and tells us He is our Lord, and yet He came to serve us and to give His life as a ransom to us.

No vice is more demanding than greed and covetousness. You'll work yourself to death trying to satisfy it. Instead, let Jesus care for you through the Gospel. Let Him serve you. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take **my** yoke upon you, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Don't live under the heavy yoke of greed. Live under His grace. He's already done all the heavy lifting. He's already carried the cross to Calvary. Paul wrote, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Put on His yoke, then, the yoke of the Gospel, which is light and easy, for salvation is by grace. It makes me think of those baptismal shawls we wrap around babies to signify they've been wrapped in the righteousness of Christ. Those shawls are light as a feather. His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

Earlier I spoke of Judas and others who tried to serve both God and money. There was a time when Saul, as an influential Pharisee and persecutor of the church, enjoyed prestige and honors and wealth. Like his colleagues, he probably thought his wealth was a sure sign of God's favor and approval. However, when Saul became the apostle Paul, he gave it all up, also his financial security. He had to depend on the charity of others and on his tent making skills. He writes, "Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish [that word rubbish means human waste or dung] . . . I count it all as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own . . . but that which comes through faith in Christ" (Phil. 3:7ff). Your righteousness also comes through faith in Christ.

Don't let your joy and confidence depend on something that can be taken away and one day, will be taken away. Instead, let Him care for you through the Gospel and enjoy the life He gives you, a life of godliness with contentment. Amen.