

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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Sermon: “*On What—or Whom—are We Most Focused?*”

Amos 8:4-7 (The Lord condemns disdain for the poor and dishonesty at their expense)
Psalm 113 (Praise for God who uplifts the weak and gives children to the barren)
1 Timothy 2:1-7 (Timothy urges prayer for all leaders and that all might know Christ)
St. Luke 16:1-13 (Jesus teaches the parable of the dishonest steward)

Joe Valachi was a gangster who worked for various crime bosses in the Mafia during the mid-20th Century. He handled mostly low-level criminal activities such as numbers rackets and gambling. In 1959, Valachi was arrested for dealing heroin, along with his crime boss at the time, Vito Genovese. At one point during an argument in the cell they shared with four other mobsters, Genovese grabbed Valachi and kissed him on the cheek.

That action, in Mafia culture, is called “the kiss of death,” indicating that a contract has been established for the death of the person kissed. It harkens back to the image of Judas kissing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, identifying Him to the Temple guards for Him to be executed. Valachi realized he was marked for death by anyone who wanted to collect the money for killing him. The contract on Valachi was \$100,000—*mucho dinero* in the early 1960s.

At a time when the average yearly salary was \$8,000, minimum wage was \$1 an hour, gasoline was 32 cents a gallon, and a new house cost \$15,000, there weren't a lot of millionaires in all the United States. Yet Valachi had known around 50 millionaires in the Mafia before going to prison.

But now, the money and connections were no longer available to Valachi. He realized he was about to be killed by his own boss and had to find a way out of his predicament. He had himself put in solitary confinement and nearly starved because he refused to eat, fearing his food might be poisoned. After being released from solitary, he killed another prisoner, mistaking him for one of the contract killers out to get him, and was sentenced to life in prison.

Eventually Valachi decided on a way to forestall the inevitable. He contacted the FBI and offered to trade what he knew for protection. In 1963, he testified before Congress, revealing for the first time the existence of the *Cosa Nostra*—literally, “Our Thing”—which was the insiders' term for the Mafia. He disclosed previously unknown information about the Italian-American Mafia, including its structure, operations, rituals, and membership. His testimony to federal authorities and the general public was the first major violation of *omertà*—the Mafia's code of silence—and the first concrete evidence that the Mob existed. His shrewdness in using what he knew, in order to gain his own safety, allowed him to outlive Vito Genovese. Joseph Valachi died in prison of natural causes in 1971.¹

This morally corrupt, murdering hoodlum used every trick in his book to wisely protect his physical life. In doing so, he showed more determination than many of us Christians show in seeking to protect our spiritual lives. But would any of us say that Joe Valachi was a good guy, whose example we should follow? Or that by testifying about the crimes of his boss, his own behavior was any less reprehensible? Of course not.

Yet there have been put forth all sorts of excuses—even from clergy—about the dishonest but shrewd manager in today's Gospel reading. Some claim he was eliminating the interest that his boss had been charging, making the transactions legal again. Others say he was taking away the amount the customers were overcharged so that his employer couldn't fire him without incurring their wrath or loss of business.

But the Gospel says the rich man commended the manager for acting *shrewdly*, not *honestly*. Yet nowhere does St. Luke tell us the boss relented and kept the deceitful steward in his position. Rather, his employer commented on the shrewdness by which the manager ensured future lodging and employment by making so many customers feel indebted to him.

Those customers would have all been quite wealthy. Since the average first-century laborer wasn't buying 100 jugs of olive oil or 100 containers of wheat, surely one of them would be willing to hire the manager in some capacity after he saved them 20 or 50 percent on their bills—or so he reasoned.

But this guy is lazy, prideful, and a coward. He protests that he isn't "strong enough to dig." Well, if you're not strong enough to dig, you'll get stronger after digging for a while. He's also "ashamed to beg," without realizing that *no one* is proud of begging. Aware that he's losing his cushy job and high position, the manager doesn't want to *do anything*—except sponge off the presumed good will of his boss's customers after he illegally reduces their debts.

Jesus is not pointing to this despicable steward as a person we should emulate, or as someone who has chosen wisely. The last two sentences of the passage explain it for us: "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."

The manager chose *his* master: wealth. And dishonest wealth, at that. He had been swindling both his boss and his customers. Squandering his employer's property is what, today, we would call embezzlement. The manager had become a slave to wealth, making it his primary focus and purpose. The Greek word used is *mamonia*, which in older Bible translations is rendered as "mammon." Wealth usually makes us think of money, but mammon is more inclusive. It means all our stuff: our money, cars, houses, savings accounts, stock portfolios—all our stuff. We can't worship and serve our stuff and also worship and serve God.

At least the manager who worshipped *his* stuff was dedicated to, and fixated on, keeping it. We, on the other hand, who claim to worship God instead of the things of this world, can, at times, show far less dedication toward keeping the relationship with *our* professed Master. Compared to the single-focus the steward has toward *his* master—money and position—is *our* daily attention to Christ as intensely concentrated?

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, when St. Paul declares, "Follow [me] as I follow Christ," he points unmistakably to which Master he serves. Yet how many of us would be comfortable inviting others to follow us as we follow Christ? Would we need to add the caveat, "except when I ...*[fill in the blank]*"?

"Follow me as I follow Christ, except when I lose my temper and lash out at others."

"Follow me as I follow Christ, except when I gossip maliciously about my neighbor and relish it."

"Follow me as I follow Christ, except when I lust after porn on the Internet."

OK, you get the idea. Jesus provides this example of the highly focused, shrewd manager to show us how much effort, dedication, and creativity *we* should apply to serving Jesus in *our* lives and relationships; to point others to Christ as He commands us to do; and to live lives of such evident faith in, and devotion to, God that this can be observed clearly, even by unbelievers.

Why the Lectionary leaves out verses 14 and 15 of today's Gospel passage, I don't know, because they fill in an important part of the story. After Jesus says we cannot serve both God and wealth, St. Luke tells us: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So [Jesus] said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by humans is an abomination in the sight of God.'" If you want a bumper-sticker version of the choice Jesus is pointing out, it's: "Hoard or Lord?"

This parable of Jesus' has other implications for our lives as His followers. Notice, not until the manager realizes he's going to lose his job, does he begin to do something about it. And in our spiritual lives, often the impetus for change is a revelatory moment that rips away the emotional and spiritual façade we've built around us, and we realize we're at a turning point in our lives—one that God wants to guide us through.

Second, until the crisis, the manager had little concern about his future. We, too, tend to rededicate our lives to God only when we suddenly become worried about our eternal destiny.

Third, the shrewd steward used his creativity to swindle his boss and gain favor with his customers. Christians, however, are expected to use *our* smarts to lead others away from sin and to salvation; to comfort the sorrowing and provide for the needy; and to take stands for justice and peace.

Standing on a street corner with a bullhorn shouting “Turn or burn! Get right or get left!” isn’t terribly creative, and yields questionable results. However, fellowship meals at church; Bible studies that relate to current situations; and social activities in the parish that are both entertaining and edifying are just a few examples of using our creativity to bring others into Christ’s kingdom.

Fourth, in verse 8 we see that the boss, impressed by his manager’s shrewdness, grudgingly admits it. But if we use our imaginations and talents to further the goals of *our* Boss, King Jesus, we will hear more than a grudging admission. For Christ will joyfully exclaim so that all of heaven can hear: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant!”

Fifth, Jesus warns us in verses 9 through 12 that, unlike the manager who was unfaithful in things both large and small, Christians should be faithful in small matters so that God can then trust us in bigger ones. Serving Christ, even in little ways—taking out the trash after coffee hour, planting flowers in the church yard, or sending a get well card to a sick parishioner—strengthens our Christian character such that we, with God’s help, can build on it even further.

Sixth, Jesus says every one of us must choose between God and our stuff. Are we increasing our hoard or serving our Lord? Looking for more space or seeking more grace?²

We should not mistake the parable of the dishonest—yet clever—manager as Jesus commending to us a good example. Rather, Jesus is teaching us that if we show as much dedication to *Him* as the deceitful steward showed toward the things of this world, we *will* be able to more comfortably invite others to follow us, as we follow Christ. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. “Joseph Valachi” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Valachi), 23 August 2022 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Valachi> 12 September 2022.

² Adapt. Austin Mansfield, “Hoard or Lord,” [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/hoard-or-lord-austin-mansfield-sermon-on-call-of-the-disciples-112076), 22 September 2007 <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/hoard-or-lord-austin-mansfield-sermon-on-call-of-the-disciples-112076>> 12 September 2022.