

Jesus the carpenter, the prophet, the Son of God, the Risen Christ ... You never hear “Jesus the economist” or “Christ the market analyst.” That would sound odd, improper, out of line, sacrilegious.

There’s a reason for that. It’s convenient to keep the two spheres separate – economy and ethics, markets and morality, Christianity and commerce. In the usual view, Jesus was too otherworldly to offer reliable financial advice.

After all, he flung away all “good sense” about the pursuit of shelter and security. Don’t worry about the future, he counseled – the Lord knows your needs. Don’t store up your treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves steal, he warned.

That sort of advice will not win you an economic Nobel or an appointment to the Federal Reserve. From the point of view of the unfettered pursuit of untold riches, faithful discipleship only complicates things. It puts a damper on the fun and profit.

Then, just when we all learned to trust the gilded finance experts and leave religious restraint out of it, the world of money hit a brick wall. The solemn belief in a strong, self-correcting market proved false. An inexcusable crisis landed on us all, exacting a painful human toll in the wake of reckless institutional lending practices, poor accountability, and bad personal habits of overspending.

Lately rereading the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ other sayings about the economy – yes, the economy – I realize we should have been listening to this improbable economics commentator all along. If we had, we would have kept our perspective. We would have stayed wary of false promises of quick wealth. We would have remembered the frailty of human behavior and the flaws of human institutions.

We would have kept a tighter grip on reality.

Jesus spoke about the world of business, money and property remarkably often. The parables drew on images and conditions from work life – for example, the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16), or the Talents (Matthew 25). Then there’s this from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6: 24):

“No one 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.”

Every serious churchgoer must face that passage. The dilemma looks psychologically true but severe, uncompromising and impossible from a pragmatic viewpoint. The traditional responses to it have been many:

- Give away all your wealth and become a hermit.
- Join an alternative community with its own economy inspired by primitive Christian ideals of sharing.
- assume Jesus didn’t mean it literally; spiritualize its meaning and hope for forgiveness.
- Ignore it completely.

Surely there's another way for the millions of us going about our daily workplace tasks and family responsibilities: don't dread the hard sayings. Confront them, wrestle with them, trust that they are not hopelessly demanding or irrelevant.

Let them sink slowly into the bones despite the harshness. The body of Christ is a mystical idea, but it is also practical: the body of Christ is each human body carrying around the Word on earth. Belief is a matter of embodiment, getting the body moving in certain directions, following the Christ figure, despite all contradictions. I must aim to take his hard words as a daily touchstone, a way of staying alert to divine presence and avoiding schemes that would throw me off the main road and needlessly increase anxiety and risk.

A year before the financial crisis, a friend informed me I needed to modify my routine savings plan so that it earns 15-20 percent a year, or else fall behind in the sweepstakes of long-term wealth. Even in good times, that struck me as an unrealistic goal, a fantasy in fact. Pursing such lofty returns would require risky investments and 24/7 worry. I ignored the sage advice. My friend with his complicated strategies lost half his savings a year later.

Every moment, the example of Jesus stands by whispering restraint and skepticism whenever the housing bubble spreads its fevers. The example of Jesus stands up for the soul whenever financial experts reduce human beings to "profit-maximizers" who pursue happiness solely inside a pot of gold, as if people were coin-operated machines.

The voice of Jesus is always there, but we've filled the contemporary world with noise and visual dazzle. So many things take up much psychic space now – email and web sites and big pushy personalities on the cable news networks telling people what to think, and then there's the 10,000 choices for the cell phone ring tone to ponder!

Get real, we are told. Keep it real. The economy is about the real world. But there was nothing real about the inflated values of homes and stocks that were supposed to go up and up indefinitely. They vanished at the first sign of trouble. There's nothing real about the dogma of unlimited growth. There's nothing rational about a financial system that becomes addicted to risk, damages society catastrophically and rewards its overpaid CEOs anyway.

The gospel message daily poses questions for facing reality: Am I losing my life to minor obsessions and status anxiety? Am I giving my loyalties to a boastful phony empire, or God's economy? The soul knows how to answer, and the healing of the world depends on it.