

**Two Masters**  
**Amos 8: 4-7**  
**Luke 16: 1-13**  
**September 22, 2019**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC**

From the time we were young children if our parents taught us the importance of being honest, we hear this parable and we think *Jesus is off his rocker!* Seriously, did we just hear that “the master commended the dishonest steward?” Someone who worked for him that was a liar and a thief? Well, the answer is “Yes--that’s what the text says more or less.” And for that very reason--that this seems unreasonable, even scandalous, and not like other things Jesus said, people, including preachers tend to “avoid this text like the plague.”<sup>1</sup> I propose that is exactly why we should listen more closely to what happens here.

First, let’s remember why Jesus used parables. Earlier in Luke (8:10) Jesus said to his disciples,  
“to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God;  
but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive,  
and listening they may not understand.’ (Isaiah 6:9-10)”

Friends, let us seek to be among the disciples who are given to understanding by the Spirit’s teaching.

Second, let’s pay attention to where Luke places this story in his gospel. Most scholars agree this is one of those places where the numbering of chapters and verses is not helpful to us, for we would benefit from considering that Luke places this story immediately after the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The Prodigal Son parable is about *what is lost becoming found*, and it is a parable about *the value of one being found or saved*. Among many themes, It is a parable about *how God saves us*. What the Prodigal Son parable has in common with the Dishonest Steward parable is that *both have someone who receives property and squanders it*. The son receives his inheritance and squanders it on riotous living. The steward receives his master’s property and mismanages it in such a way that someone informs his master. The squandering on the son’s part leads to a life with pigs, which would eventually end in death. The squandering on the steward’s part should by law lead to imprisonment or slavery<sup>2</sup>, which can be said to be another kind of death.

*Both the son and the steward have an awakening of sorts*. The son realizes he might as well take a chance on going home to his father and asking for forgiveness. So he does and before he can ask for forgiveness, his father has compassion for him and calls for a celebration. The lost son is welcomed home.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 333.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 340.

The steward's "Ah, I know what I will do" plan is based on saving his own skin. He has squandered his master's property before, so now he chooses to be *shrewd which can also mean or wise or prudent*. The master commended his dishonest steward because he was *wise* with the master's money. That one word shift alone can help me realize why the master commended the dishonest steward. It could indicate a reversal in the dishonest steward's life. Reversals are common elements in Luke's gospel.

Reducing the amounts of debts owed to the master helped everyone regardless of whether that was the intent of the steward or not. I know at first I thought that it did not help the master's business, but I have changed my mind upon thinking deeper about his shrewdness and how it affects everyone.

First, by reducing the debts owed, the steward *gave relief to the debtors*. The 100 *baths* of olive oil owed, around 900 gallons equaled about three years of a farmer's wages. To reduce that by half was *significant to the point of life-saving*. The debt of 100 measures of wheat was also of great significance. Each *kors* or measure equaled 10-12 bushels of grain. That's 1000-1200 bushels of grain.<sup>3</sup> In those days, that was a massive loan for anyone to repay.

Second, the reduced debt *made the steward new friends with the debtors*, his wise use of money shifted their relationship from that of business associates to those of friends. Whether he was using his own cut of interest or cheating his master, it still endeared him to his new friends, thereby *giving him a place to land* on his feet when he would be without a job.

Third, this debt relief not only saved lives and gave the steward a place to be received, but it also *endeared the master to these debtors*. With the amount of debt relief being great, the debtors likely told others about the master's mercy. So the next time the debtors or anyone they had told about the master's generosity needed to borrow from someone again, they would remember the master's mercy and go to him. That would be good for the master's business in the long run.

*The steward took a risk* in using his master's wealth in such a way, but it was a risk he banked on based on his master's previous mercy. After all, the master had not thrown the steward in prison. The steward was wise in perceiving his master's true nature--that he was merciful and generous then and would continue to be merciful and generous in the future.

That is why Jesus said the master *commended* the dishonest steward. The master praised his steward's shrewd or wise use of money to win friends and influence people. I wonder too if it was because the master observed that the steward realized the master at his core was merciful and generous.

Money gotten by honest means or money gotten by unjust means is still a tool to be used in the service of God's purposes. Look how Jesus befriended even the tax collectors, known for their dishonesty, by sitting at table with them over and over again. Jesus wants his disciples to know

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

that he has “**come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance**”. (Luke 5:32) Jesus does not want to exclude anyone from his table, from the heavenly banquet, not even dishonest stewards who act shrewdly on behalf of their masters. He wants his disciples to be just as welcoming as he is. And he wants his disciples to be just as wise in making friends by the use of money as this dishonest steward is. Instead of using dishonest money to take advantage of the poor, Jesus wants his disciples to make friends in faithful relationships--based on equality rather than control.

Earlier I mentioned that the Prodigal Son story is a parable about how God saves us. The parable that immediately follows the parable of the Dishonest Steward is the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. With the word “rich” in its heading, it is obviously a parable about money. And one of its themes is how Money does not save us. With the parable of the Dishonest Steward lodged between the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus joins these two themes together into the Two Masters--how God saves us and Money does not.

I want to be clear that Jesus never said, “Money is the root of all evil.” That is not in the Bible. What is in the Bible is clearly written by Paul in I Timothy 6:10, “**For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.**” In the Amos text for today, the prophet does not condemn the use of money for the practice of buying and selling for commerce. Amos recognizes that commerce is necessary for daily life. What Amos and the law did condemn was “*dishonest commerce and commerce that disregards human life.*”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus describes to his disciples the responsibility to be faithful with money, with a little and with a lot. And he spoke about the responsibility to be faithful with *dishonest* money so that you will be entrusted with *true wealth*, which is treasures in heaven. What we do with money has eternal consequences. Jesus spoke about being faithful with someone else’s belongings so that you will be given your own. Jesus knew that the unfaithful use of money caused divisions and created oppressive structures that caused people to suffer. Finally, he said that no servant can serve God and Mammon. Mammon was the personification of money, property or wealth as “an evil deity or demon of greed.”<sup>5</sup>

This very issue of worshipping money was also what Amos was railing against when he said, with paraphrasing for today,

- “When will worship be over so that we can get back to work and make more money?”
- “Let’s charge higher interest rates, and levy membership fees on credit recovery offers.”
- “We can charge double or triple if we call our product ‘new,’ or ‘organic,’ or ‘local.’”
- “The poor will never see it for what it really is.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, “Commentary on Amos 8:4-7” from Working Preacher- Preaching This Week (RCL) [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4170](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4170) accessed 2019.09.20.

<sup>5</sup> Ruben R. Dupertuis, “Mammon” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, I-Ma, Vol. 3*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 781.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Jacobson, “Commentary on Amos 8:4-7” from Working Preacher-Preaching This Week (RCL) [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commenatry\\_id=1857](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commenatry_id=1857) accessed 2019.09.20.

**7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of my people: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.** And Jesus continues, the servant must choose one or the other, God or Mammon. To choose Mammon as one's master makes it *an idol of the heart* and makes the servant a lover of money, and all manner of evil will surely follow.

*Remember Oskar Schindler?* He was the Catholic German businessman, who was known for his extravagant living, and yet when he was faced with the opportunity to use his business to value human life, that of his Jewish workers, he did. Schindler made the decision that saving the lives of his workers was more important than making more money. He *shrewdly* increased the number of Jews he could save by adding a munitions factory to his enamel factory. He had the Jewish workers make munitions that would fail. *His profits from Nazi contracts were used to buy the lives of over 1000 Jews, saving them from the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz.*<sup>7</sup> Oskar Schindler died penniless in Germany, yet from what we learn in this text today and the historical record of his life we can believe that *he chose God as his master and has been entrusted with the treasures in heaven and welcomed into the eternal dwelling places.*

I wonder . . . Are we willing to learn from people whom we deem to be un-Christian but still display attributes that could be useful in everyday Christian life? As children of the light, those who believe and serve God as our master, we are to wisely steward the wealth, the property, the riches that we have been given to manage. What is that wealth, property, riches for you? For me?

For us collectively as the church, we too are sinful like the steward and called to act shrewdly, we are to give away the master's wealth of good news to make friends by sharing the love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace of Jesus Christ. And we are to remember that any material wealth we get our hands on can be tempting, but used wisely for the purposes of God, to care for the poor, the widows and orphans, and the preservation of human life, it can have eternal consequences.

Jesus tells us that it is in our daily living, in the small things, the ordinary tasks that we develop faithfulness. We can trust in God that some disciples along the way will be able to use great amounts of wealth and means on behalf of the kingdom of God, but it is in the small things like the mustard seeds where God sows faith in receptive hearts that each of us can become more shrewd on behalf of God as our master.

I'll say this again because I need to hear it again. As children of the light, those who believe and serve God as our master, we are to wisely steward the wealth, the property, the riches that we have been given to manage. What is that wealth, property, riches for you? For me? Jesus is talking about using wealth in a radically different way from what the steward used to do. Our wealth, our property, our riches belong to God, we are merely the stewards of them. What will we do with them so that our master will also commend us for being *shrewd*?

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<sup>7</sup> "Oskar Schindler" and related topics in Holocaust Encyclopedia from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/oskar-schindler> accessed 2019.09.20.

Let us pray.

Christ of the pilgrim path,  
and of every pilgrim heart,  
thank you for revealing yourself  
in situations we would prefer  
to pass by.<sup>8</sup>  
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

#### Charge & Benediction

I charge you to be shrewd with your wealth  
and make some new friends this week  
that you can influence for the kingdom of God.

Be prepared to give an accounting to him  
who stands ready to judge the living and the dead.  
Above all, maintain constant love for one another,  
for love covers a multitude of sins.  
Be hospitable to one another without complaining.  
Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,  
serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.  
Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God;  
whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies,  
so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.  
To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4:5, 8-11

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Millar, *An Iona Prayer Book* (Norwich, Norfolk: The Canterbury Press Norwich, 1998), 70.