

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113 (112); 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much

Luke 16:1 Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ 3 Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7 Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Luke 16:10 “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 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.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The parable and the following sayings bristle with questions and a good deal of ink has been spilt explaining this text. What’s it about? The right use of material goods? How to face the *parousia*? Is the “Lord” really Jesus? Does it praise dishonesty? What is “dishonest wealth”, the mammon of injustice? Proclaimed properly, it should certainly puzzle those who hear it today.



KIND OF WRITING

The parable is really a kind of parabolic narrative, followed by sayings. It is found only in Luke, but may go back to Jesus because the social context is rural whereas early Christianity was urban. It is probable that the parable proper went from v. 1 to v. 8a.

With v. 8b, a series of later commentaries begins. V. 8b reflects early Christian language; v. 9 can best be interpreted as a prophetic comment on sharing of goods. The appended sayings in vv. 10-13 are linked by vocabulary, although a bit in tension with the parable (the steward has been dishonest in much!).

Vv. 10-13 are proverbial in style, reflection Israel’s wisdom tradition.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a

Thought for the day

The banking crisis is only one example of a wider “honesty deficit” in public life. Even people working for charities are sometimes found, unfortunately, to be lacking in integrity. As a result, the story of dishonest management will not lack contemporary echoes. It also means that the shock of story—the manager continues to fix the books for his own benefit—is just as much a shock today as it would have been in first-century Palestine.

If that were not enough, the ironic teaching drawn in v. 9 borders on the sarcastic, not to say caustic. No missing the meaning, in any case! But what is the meaning? It can’t be simply copy that distressing example of the manager. To act, not to delay, seems to be at the centre.

Prayer

I truly believe and I know, God of our hearts, that you love and desire all that I am. May your great love penetrate even the darkest parts of my life that I may know true conversion of heart and love you with my whole self.

profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. (Leviticus 25:35–38)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Luke is interested in money and there two associated texts in the Gospel: 12:42-48 (below) and the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19-31.

And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to

beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:42-48)

ST PAUL

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2Corinthians 9:6)

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:4)

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The parable is directed to the disciples only. The context is quickly narrated. It is never claimed that the charge is unjust. Manager is found only in Luke in the Gospels (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8).

Verse 2 The judgment is swift and so the manager must himself act swiftly. He is about to lose income, home and honour.

Verse 3 Interior monologue is typical of the Lucan special material. The manager quickly and realistically assesses his options.

Verse 4 The goal is to still have somewhere to live and to retain his social status.

Verses 5-7 The amount is considerable: about 450 litres or about 500 or 600 workdays. Is the manager continuing to act unjustly? Probably not. Agents in those days had considerable latitude and, most likely, we are to imagine him reducing his "cut" and so gaining favour with the debtors.

Verse 8a The master is not commending further dishonesty but rather the shrewdness of his employee. At this level, the parable is typically Lucan: a disreputable figure is held up as a disconcerting example (cf. Zacchaeus, the prodigal son, the good thief, all special to Luke). The point is clear: act now so that your future will be assured.

Verse 8b The language switches to that of early Christianity (cf. 1 Thess 5:5-6). It is an implied judgment: at least the children of this world act.

Verse 9 The opening words are very solemn: *And I say to you*. Very likely we are hearing here not the historical Jesus but an early Christian prophet. It does build on the parable—the manager did make friends for himself—but the end is eschatological. In the Lucan worldview, the friends are fellow Christians, who share their goods. The Jerusalem Bible fails here: money is not just tainted—rather effete?—but is the “mammon of injustice.” The prophetic assessment is clear. It is not, however, that money is bad in itself but rather that in the Kingdom there is no place for personal possessions. The Jerusalem Bible gets it right with “tents of eternity.” There is an OT background (cf. Ex 25-27), but the meaning is metaphorical in the context: to be welcomed home at the *parousia*. The next few verses preclude any misunderstanding of the message as praise for dishonesty. The full context for extra teachings runs from v. 10 to v. 18. The parable in vv. 19-31 the closes this section with a frame.

Verse 10 “A very little” is the superlative in Greek, i.e., the least. Faithful in a secular sense means reliable. The step to religious fidelity is easily made by the reader.

Verses 11-12 It is likely that Luke has made a duplicate in the second personal singular, in the negative and in the form of a rhetorical question so as to make a link with the preceding parable. The language here has a somewhat philosophical feel to it, with the generalisations such as “one who is faithful” etc. This works as a Hellenistic counterweight to the more semitic and even mythological mammon (present in the Greek). The rather open “who” can be taken to be God.

Verse 13 This *logion* or teaching is found elsewhere. Compare:

“No one 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. (Matthew 6:24)

Jesus said, “A person cannot mount two horses or bend two bows. And a slave cannot serve two masters, otherwise that slave will honour the one and offend the other.” (GThom 47a)

Luke has added the word for a domestic servant (repeated in the NRSV to sustain inclusive language). It *was* possible for someone at the time to have two masters, with predictable consequences. In Aramaic and Hebrew to love can also mean to prefer. For the final sentence, see the citations from Paul above. The key expression is “to serve” and has to do with the integrity of the person as a whole.

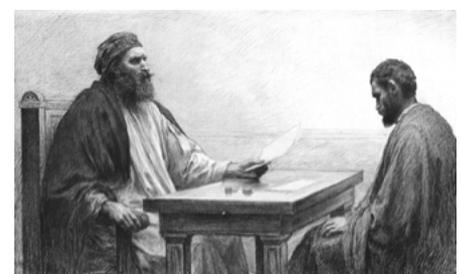
POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. As often with the parables of Jesus, this one is intended to shock in order to make us think. Jesus is not praising the injustice of the servant, but his purposefulness in preparing for the future. In your experience what difference does it make when you are purposeful and energetic instead of lethargic?
2. It was his master's call to account that galvanised the servant into action. What have been the experiences, or people, that have galvanised you into action when you had been somewhat halfhearted in your efforts?
3. Who have been the people whose energy, drive and astuteness have been an inspiration to you in how to handle difficult situations?
4. “No servant can be the slave of two masters”. When have you experienced the truth of this statement?

PRAYER

God our saviour, you call us into your service. Make us wise and resourceful: children of the light who continue your work in this world with untiring concern for integrity and justice.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth

1 Tim 2:1 First of *all*, then, I urge that requests, prayers, intercessions, and thanks be offered on behalf of *all* people, 2 even for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life in *all* godliness and dignity. 3 Such prayer for *all* is good and welcomed before God our Saviour, 4 since he wants *all* people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for *all*, revealing God's purpose at his appointed time. 7 For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle—I am telling the truth; I am not lying—and a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. 8 So I want the men to pray in every place, lifting up holy hands without anger or dispute.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Pastorals are concerned with community life, both in itself and in relation to the outside world. Hence, the insistence upon prayer and especially prayer for people in authority. (See last Sunday's notes for a brief introduction to the Pastorals.)

KIND OF WRITING

Outline of this public letter:

- 1:1-2 Greeting
- 1:3-20 Introduction
- 2:1-6:9 *Body of the letter*
- 6:20-21 Conclusion

Subsections with the body of the letter:

- 2:1-15 Proper worship
- 3:1-13 Leadership
- 3:14-16 A creed
- 4:1-5 Later times predicted
- 4:6-6:2 Instructions for leaders

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

In regard to our excerpt, the context seems to be the normalisation of the Christian movement. The followers of Jesus want to settle down and be part of surrounding society. As a consequence, something of prophet edge of Jesus himself and indeed of the very first generation has been lost. For example, the apparently peaceful relationship to the empire contrasts with Jesus' teaching about paying taxes and, even more clearly, with the wholesale rejection of the Empire in the book of Revelation.

RELATED PASSAGES

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you in case I am delayed, to let you know how people ought to conduct themselves in the household of God, because it is the church of the living God, the support and bulwark of the truth. And we all agree, our religion contains amazing revelation: He was revealed in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1Timothy 3:14-16 NET)

But now in his own time he has made his message evident through the preaching I was entrusted with according to the command of God our Saviour. (Titus 1:3 NET)

He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good. (Titus 2:14 NET)

From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to further the promise of life in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear child. Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord! (2Timothy 1:1-2 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 1-2 The prayer for rulers is embedded in a desire for prayer first of all for everyone. This includes the Roman emperor, referred to in Greek as a king (*basileus*). The purpose of this prayer is also clear—and in contrast to earlier perceptions of the Christian movement (see e.g. Acts 19). The historical Paul was not against such prayer, as we see in Rom 13:1-7. The stance seems to be that though the rulers be pagan the world is God's and, in some measure, they govern on God's behalf.

Verses 3-4 God is given the title saviour, with a range of meaning such as healer and deliverer. *Because* God is our saviour he welcomes such prayer. Again, *because* God wants all humans to be *saved*, such prayer is in complete conformity with the divine plan. The use of the word "all" is impressive (in italics in the text above).

In the context here, which is one of

damaging heresy, salvation is further defined as coming to "a knowledge of the truth." In earlier documents, truth (*alētheia*) could well be a translation of *emeth* meaning reliability or faithfulness. But here it points to revealed truth or doctrine. See 1 Tim 3:14-16 above.

Verse 5-6 This is a most interesting passage. The word "intermediary" translates *mesitēs*, a mediator. But it is correctly translated in the NET, because the Anselmian doctrine of substitutionary sacrifice is still a thousand years in the future. Jesus is our "go-between-God." The emphasis on "one" may go back to a gnosticising tendency towards many mediators on behalf of an elite, contrasting with one on behalf of all. The author does believe Jesus is divine, but underlines here his humanity.

The manner of his death is revelatory, that is, it discloses the heart of God. The use of the neuralgic word, "ransom", takes us back to Jesus own use in Mark 10:45, *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*. In turn, Jesus' use of ransom takes us back to the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. The servant suffers not *instead of* but rather *on behalf of*. The nuance is subtle yet essential.

Verse 7 The retrieval of Pauline tradition continues in this verse and the authority of the great apostle is evoked. Notice the heavy emphasis on the word "truth" (underlined in the text above).

Verse 8 This sounds like the start of a new section and so it is. The emphasis on "men" is accurate, because the pastor will go on to discuss women in vv. 9ff. Alas, his ideas of women's role and spirituality are retrograde even for the time and very *unlike* the historical Paul (see Romans 16 and 1 Cor 11:2-16). It is as well that the reading stops where it does!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In your own experience, what is the purpose or benefit of prayer of intercession?
2. How have you come to experience Jesus as our "go-between-God"?

PRAYER

God, you want us all to be saved and you have disclosed your very self in Jesus. Help us embrace your gift, your grace, with thankfulness and praise. Guide us so that all people may be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres!

Amos 8:4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
5 saying, "When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."
7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The burning desire for justice is characteristic of the eighth century bc prophets and Amos is a very fine example. His target is the repelling combination of religious hypocrisy and avarice. For once, a reading requires practically no comment.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a judgment oracle, showing the usual marks of biblical poetry. Parallelism can be seen in vv. 4, 5ab and 6ab. These illustrate the "uneasy synonymy" (R. Alter) of biblical poetry, once you notice that the repeat line is usually more intense or concrete or "causal." V. 7 is a bridge verse taking the reader to the varieties of punishment which make up the rest of chapter 8.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Amos is the first writing prophet to come down to us. His passion for social justice leads to thrilling invective against the oppression of the poor.

A complex tradition lies behind the book as we now have it. In any case, here is the outline:

- 1:1-2 Context of ministry
- 1:3-2:16 Oracle against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, and finally Israel
- 3:1-6:14 Invectives against specific groups of people.
- 7-9 Vision reports: locusts, fire, plumb line, summer fruit and YHWH at the altar.
- 8:4-14; 9:7-10 Oracles
- 9:11-15 Restoration of the house of

David.

Our reading comes from the extra oracle in 8:4-14.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!" The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the Lord. (Amos 4:1-3)

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts! Cross over to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory, O you that put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence?

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:1-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 Notice the intensification from trample to bring ruin and from the needy to the poor of the land. In biblical tradition, the poor belong in a special way to the Lord (Pss 14:6; 140:12; 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 61).

Verse 5 Two economic tiers operated in the eighth century BC (see the rather blunt 4:1-3 and 6:1-7 above). The combination of apparent religious observance and real injustice is plain. The New Moon festival is enjoined in Num 10:10; 28:11. It was a covenant holiday. The Law forbade buying and selling on the Sabbath (Exod 20:8; 23:12; 34:21; Deut 5:12-15; cf. Neh 13:15-22). The rich can hardly wait to defraud the poor by tinkering with the scales and measures. This is widely condemned (and therefore widely practiced): Lev 19:35-36; Deut 25:13-15; Mic 6:10; Ezek 45:9-12; Prov 11:1; 16:11; 20:23; Job 31:6.

Verse 6 Selling the poor for slavery was explicitly forbidden. The sweepings were contaminated grains from the bins and wagons.

Verse 7 This is an oath committing God to action—in any case, YHWH is a determined protector of the poor (Ps 82; Isa 11:4; Deut 24:14-15). God's swears earlier in this book: The Lord God has sworn by his holiness (Amos 4:2); The Lord God has sworn by himself (Amos 6:8). What does it mean to swear by Jacob's pride? It means God swears by his most precious possession, Israel.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The contrast between ideals and reality, principles and practice, is something we all experience...and yet the inner voice calls us to ever greater personal integrity.

2. We know that much of what we buy today is made in working conditions which would be illegal in our societies...a greater awareness should lead to some choices.

PRAYER

O God, you call us to live lives of integrity and justice. May we respond to your call with all our mind, with all our heart and with all our strength. Show us how to protect the exploited and to come to the help of all in need. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113 (112); 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

READINGS 1 AND 3

With its strong emphasis on social justice, the reading from Amos makes a good introduction to parts of the Gospel. However, there is much more to the Gospel than how to handle money, as we saw above.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 113 (112) goes well with the reading from Amos because it shows God's special concern for the poor. In God's eyes, there are no distinctions and he sets the poor in the company of the princes. Cf. *For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe* (Deut. 10:17; cf. 2 Chron. 19:7)

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Amos 8:4-7

Our short reading today should ring bells. It was written at a time of artificially rapid economic expansion, when a few became rich and the poor were exploited. People even "adjusted" the weights and measures to cheat at the market.

Second reading

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Why should we pray for everyone? Because God wants *everyone* to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth.

Gospel

Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the crafty steward was as disturbing in the first century as it ought to be today! It may help to remember that original parable may have ended with the praise of the steward (v.8a). The other sayings are really later reflections on roughly the same theme, in the light of early Christian experience.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 23 September

St Padre Pio

Ezra 1:1-6

Ezra (and Nehemiah) worked at the time

of the return from the Exile in Babylon. The book opens with the permission to return, granted by the Persian king, Cyrus the Great.

Luke 8:16-18

The first part of this reading is plain, especially if you consider that a lamp, in those days, meant a naked flame! The second part is more difficult, but certainly a warning against any hint of complacency or sitting on our "laurels"!

Tuesday 24 September

Ezra 6:7-8, 12, 14-20

The rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem was a huge event for the Israelites. Chiefly, it allowed worship to take place again. The prophet Haggai was involved and from Thursday onwards we read from his book.

Luke 8:19-21

It is remarkable that this passage was remembered because it shows Jesus in an apparently unfavourable light. It is likely, on that account, to be historical. The central teaching is super clear: *My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice.*

Wednesday 25 Sept

St Finbarr, bishop

Ezra 9:5-9

The context for the prayer in this reading helps. After the return from Exile, there was a risk of intermarriage and Ezra was very much against that, thinking it would bring another national disaster. Hence he does penance and offers prayer.

Luke 9:1-6

The Twelve are empowered to do *exactly what Jesus did*. Just like him, they are to depend on the providence of God and the kindness of strangers. Shaking off the dust is a prophetic gesture of judgement and rejection (cf. Luke 10:11; Acts 13:51; 18:6).

Thursday 26 September

Sts Cosmas and Damian, martyrs

Haggai 1:1-8

The prophet Haggai was active just after the return from the great Exile. The

reading gives a very exact date, the year 520. Haggai preaches the rebuilding of the Temple, because the prosperity of the nation depends on it.

Luke 9:7-9

The Herod here is not Herod the Great, as he was long since dead. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled from 4 BC to AD 39, sharing the rule of his father's realm with his two brothers. He makes a unique appearance in Luke's Gospel (only) at the trial of Jesus. Today's story catches nicely the callousness of the powerful, combined with the inevitable effect of Jesus, even on such unlikely people.

Friday 27 September

St Vincent de Paul, priest

Haggai 1:15-2:9

Our reading is a kind of divine proclamation for the rebuilding of the Temple. Reconstruction after catastrophe—the task of the Israelites—is also our task today.

Luke 9:18-22

We associate this story with Caesarea Philippi, but Luke gives not geographical context. Rather, the context is that of the prayer of Jesus, consistent with Luke's portrait of Jesus as a man of prayer. It is interesting that he spares the blushes of Peter by omitting Peter's rejection of Jesus' destiny.

Saturday 28 September

St Wenceslaus, martyr

Zechariah 2:5-9, 14-15

Zechariah wrote at roughly the same time as Haggai and faced the same problem of reconstruction. Using engineering language, the prophet assures the inhabitants that God will be the "measure" of the city.

Luke 9:43-45

The vain temptation to complacent admiration never really goes away. It is likely that whenever the church enjoys uncritical admiration that it is not at its most gospel.