

## Dishonest Mammon (Lk16:1-13) 22Sept19

This is *almost* the kind of Bible reading I like. I appreciate when there's difficulty and we really have to wrestle with it to find some good news from God for our lives. I particularly *dislike* readings that become simple lessons, like that we should be nice to each other.

I say I *almost* really like it because even with trying to wring out stray drops of God's goodness, this remains confusing and obscure. Liberation theologian and historian Justo Gonzalez nicely summarized:

It is not uncommon to see on our church windows portrayals of a father receiving a son who had strayed [which was the story just before this], or of a sower spreading seed, or of a Samaritan helping the [person] by the roadside. But I have never seen a window depicting a man with a sly look, saying to another, 'Falsify the bill, make it less than it really is.' Yet it is precisely this sort of man that the parable turns into an example...a man who is undoubtedly a scoundrel; and yet it praises him and his wisdom!\*

That idea of a sly scoundrel in stained glass rejuvenates some of my fondness for this odd parable. Again, anything that smacks of too much holier-than-thou piety doesn't get traction with me, but finding a down-and-dirty God tussling through the real muck of our lives is exactly what we need. We're in trouble and God isn't much help if God can't operate in shady deals or keeps God's hands clean from the sly scoundrels and remains removed from fraud and other suspicious economics.

And this is definitely economics. The actual Greek word for this manager is economist. A direct explanation from that word is that he keeps the household in order. This economist, however, may not have been keeping very good order. It's said he squandered the resources. Maybe he was an old-time embezzler or the new model of self-serving capitalist.

Or maybe he was actually doing things right and the accusations against him were false. This is still the place of vulnerability: the boss has power

to fire the workers. Without some sort of union muscle or labor law, there's little protection for those underdogs. Positions are terminated without cause. Whole plants are shuttered at the whims of the stock market or of CEOs. Boards redirect funds. Prejudice plays into performance reviews and people are scorned.

Whether or not the guy in the story was actually squandering the property, the master decided to get rid of him. In this ancient case, the relationship was even more fraught and dangerous because the employee was a slave, which we'd quickly say doesn't provide ideally supportive conditions.

This desperate and so-called dishonest manager decides to reach out to his peers. He knows others who are in dire circumstances as well. These peasant farmers and laborers were indebted and maybe indentured to this master. It's estimated that in that time and place 35-40% of agrarian produce had to be given over in fees and taxes.

And even though it was directly prohibited by biblical law, still one writer observed that "Rich landlords and rulers were loan-sharks, using exorbitant interest rates to amass more land and to disinherit peasants of their family land."\*\* Perhaps that's also economically familiar?

This manager knew these people could hardly afford to live. He knew it because his was that uncomfortable position of having to collect from them, to reach deep into their threadbare pockets and demand what they owed.

He offers a startling reversal of that. Nobody knows what the numbers mean, why he reduces 450 gallons of olive oil and 75 bushels of wheat, why the manager took ½ off one and 20% off the other.

It may be the similar value of 500 denarii, equivalent to a pretty unpayable debt of 500 days' wages, maybe even owed by a whole hungry village barely scraping by.

It may be that he was eliminating the hidden interest, in which case the master's praise

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\* Justo Gonzalez, *Luke*, p190-191

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\*\* Barbara Rossing at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2982](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2982)

could've been putting on a show of gratitude for paying attention to the law of God and of the land.

It may simply be that those amounts were all they could afford to pay. In that case, it could've been that the master's compliment meant it was shrewd to get cash-in-hand versus a lingering IOU.

Or maybe the master just observes it was a clever plan to get on somebody's good side, but it's not a compliment and fires him anyway.

The place of the master and what is resolved in the story remain confusing.

For one thing, it's worth noting that the Gospel of Luke is always on the side of the poor, the side of slaves, the side of the dispossessed. The constant refrain is forgiveness of debts, reversals of fortunes. The righteous are those who support the poor, and justice means sharing.

But here is a strange twist where the manager is called dishonest, a word that can also be translated unrighteous or unjust. Is the manager "unjust" for breaking down the abusive economic system, but following God's justice? Jesus' mother Mary sings before his birth how the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty, how God's arm scatters the haughty. That word scattered is the same word in today's reading for squandered. But was the manager's squandering that he dispersed and redistributed his master's wealth to others? In the end, did this manager manage not to squander and scatter but to gather and support?

Then there's the capper line. Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth—or unjust mammon—so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Is he being sarcastic: "Sure, go ahead and make friends with cheats and see how well it helps you in the end"? Is it a comment on subverting an already corrupt economic system? Is the suggestion to make friends an emphasis on community instead of exploitation for selfish gain? Does Jesus just like sly scoundrels?

I know that's a lot of thoughts, a lot to sort through. And we ask, so what?

Certainly we can feel the relief, the surprise, the amazing grace of debt forgiveness. You may know burdens of student loans or bad mortgages, of regrettable credit card purchases. You can almost certainly feel the emotional weight of indebted feelings, of not being able to repay somebody and not being good enough to earn your way back to an equal standing, even if it's just because of a small kindness or your thinking you don't measure up. We shouldn't forget developing nations saddled with loans from the International Monetary Fund where they can't even pay the interest with 100% of their GDP.

Jesus may commend subverting those systems, to offer surprising forgiveness, to be part of the reversal of debt structure, to shock others with generosity. He knew the manager was in a risky place and there is an element in this story of sabotaging the dominant structure for a new form of justice. With conniving grace, Jesus will make friends with the sly scoundrels. And Jesus longs for that relief for you, especially when things are desperate.

Without direct clarity from the story, or the emphatic insistence of Amos, we do have the final sentence: you can't serve God and Mammon. It's more helpful to keep that old word than to try to translate in money or wealth. Mammon is connected to a Hebrew word for profit and becomes its own god.

So we may realize that worshipping our God cannot be equated with bowing down to profit. Whatever this story is of cheating and tricking and trying to come out with friends while eliminating debts, in the end a structure that is built on profit is proclaimed by Jesus to be in direct opposition to our God.

This, of course, implicates our economy immensely. We're sometimes convinced that the purpose of life is making more money and that equates success or failure. We are living in the reality of a system built around profit. Workers suffer because the system is built around cutting costs to maximize profits. Families falter because student loans are more about profit than about education and potential. Nations linger in hunger

because of interest and debt. Even our identities are subjected to marketing that tells us we're not good so that a profit can be made by selling us products allegedly to improve. The #GlobalClimateStrike led by youth on Friday is exactly caused because quarterly profits of fossil fuel companies and shareholders have been seen as more important than life on this planet.

It is clear and easy to see the sin, to see that such reckless selfishness is not God's way. If our pursuit is profit, is the bottom line, we are serving Mammon and not devoted to God and not following Jesus.

But when you're indentured to the rich landowners, what are you going to do about it? How do you get away from oil companies and bosses and corporations that lock you in to an economic structure of subservient debt?

Jesus says you can begin being faithful in very small things. That's something.

The challenge we have today is that this system is big and mean.

The blessing you may wrestle from today is that our down and dirty God is invested in overturning the rotten corrupt selfish system. "The captive to release, to teach the way of life and peace, it is a Christ-like thing" (ELW 686). And even when it doesn't go as God intends, still from the beginning to the end, this is God's creation, God's world, God's kingdom. We are living in God's economy, God's household, not fending for ourselves, but held in God's trust fund of life.