

September 18, 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

What is Jesus thinking when he tells the parable of the unjust steward?

This week's other readings pose no problems in understanding. The prophet Amos is clearly on message: there are people who exploit and trash the poor, who use clever business practices by manipulating weights and measures or simply steal from the impoverished "the sweepings of the wheat" they are allowed to glean from a harvested field. With them, God is not amused: "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

There is also no mistaking the psalmist, who reminds us that God cares for these gleaners who have been cheated: "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap." Likewise 1 Timothy urges prayers and supplications on behalf of those in power precisely that they might ensure the well-being of those who are not, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."

Then we come to the Gospel text, and we wonder what in the world the master storyteller has in mind in telling such a confusing tale.

A rich man catches his manager red-handed in malpractice. Call it squandering. As a result, the manager is told, "You're fired!" The crook then quickly comes to himself and considers his options, deciding that he's not going to soil his hands or tire himself with actual labor. Instead, he'll make deals with his boss's debtors to ingratiate himself into their good favor. Do they owe the rich man for 100 jugs of oil? Then make it for 50. For 100 containers of wheat? Call it 80. No wonder he counts on being welcomed into homes all over town!

Everyone wins here except the rich man. The debtors get a break they had no reason to expect; the wily steward gets a group of people who now owe him a favor. Once merely the boss's agent, now he is lord bountiful. Instead of shame and disgrace, doors will open and drinks will be offered.

What, however, could possibly be the “good news” for the rich man, who has been shortchanged by the manager all along and now finds him cutting debts he is legitimately owed? None—and yet Jesus says that this man actually commends the crook who has been bilking him, “because he had acted shrewdly.” Cheated twice, he smiles! Could it be that he simply takes in the moxie of his crooked underling and admires his enterprise and ingenuity, the art of his deal?

As if to rescue the parable for future preachers, Luke has Jesus deliver a series of wisdom-like sayings that seem intended to sound “shrewd” in a godly way. Commentators struggle to make sense of them; with all due respect, I am utterly unconvinced that they do make sense. Jesus begins with an injunction to make friends with “dishonest wealth” (and with the children of this age who are so good at managing it) in order that when that wealth is gone, “they may welcome you into their eternal homes.” Huh? The sayings conclude with the familiar injunction against trying to serve two masters, which cannot be done: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Agreed, but don’t most of us try?

The wealthy get a bad rap in Luke, starting with Mary in her Magnificat. Jesus dispatches his disciples without provisions, warns them to be on guard against greed, enjoins them to lay up treasure in heaven rather than on earth (the domain of both thieves and moths). The exception to this rule is the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who seems to possess a great deal, including slaves who eat their fill in his home. And yet what we admire in his character is not his wealth but the freedom he has in giving things away: a robe (“the best one”), a ring, sandals, a fatted calf, and a feast.

But what if rather than trying to figure out what Jesus actually means in this week’s parable, we took its interpretation to another level—to the kingdom of God that he is always pointing to?

One way to imagine this kingdom might be to gather together the biblical characters who animate this reading and those adjacent to it. There would of course be the rich man, his shady manager, and those several debtors who each got a lucky break; there would also be Dives, Lazarus, and Father Abraham from Luke 16:19–31, along with the two impossible brothers and their long-suffering father from Luke 15. Add to the mix the wheelers and dealers scorned by Amos, now no longer making the ephah small and the shekel great; then add the poor and needy who once hid themselves in the ash heap but are now, says the psalmist, sitting among the

princely.

What if the point in the end is not to learn anything in particular but rather to extend a “welcome home” to the shrewd and the faithful alike, to everyone entrusted with those “true riches” that are the coin of God’s realm?

Might that be what the kingdom of heaven is like? Might the angels rejoice?