

Sunday, September 19, 2010: Luke 16:1-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-7

by [MacKenzie Scott](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue

Why does the master commend the steward in the Lukan parable? Perhaps he's being shrewd, using the waning moments in his forfeited position to make people obligated to him so he can ask for favors later. But since we assume that "master" in these parables means God, it's puzzling that the master commends deceit.

Perhaps the master is a rich man. He doesn't dismiss the steward because of his dubious character but in order to hire someone less wasteful who will make the master richer. In that case, the steward is a victim of shrewd business practices. His waste of goods can be blamed on bad luck or lax management instead of dishonesty. His only failing may be that he's replaceable, and the lesson he learns is that money talks.

In that case the master's commendation is in character—he is rich enough to overlook the losses and glad to affirm the principles by which he's lived. The steward begins to appreciate the power of position and money, and if he hasn't exploited it as successfully as he might for the master, at least now he can exploit it for himself.

Luke regards money as a problem. The parable preceding this one is about the prodigal son, who squanders his inheritance and then is restored to his family. In a later parable, a rich man and a beggar find their fortunes reversed in the afterlife. The power of money to make men do wrong is present in all the stories.

All three parables include someone in a humble position seeking favor from people with power. The prodigal comes back prepared to accept slavery. The disgraced steward exploits his vanishing advantage to secure his future. Dives wants Lazarus to warn his prosperous brothers to be more generous to the poor, but the request is denied—the brothers already have Moses and the prophets telling them the same thing, and they aren't listening.

The gospel's audience would have included persons of means, but early Christianity spread especially quickly among the humble. Many who first heard this lesson via Luke might have been pleased to find the haughty rich either open to kindness or paid back for their greed, but the lesson they could take for themselves had to do

with making their way—and making a way for Christianity—in a world in which they had a low status.

Believers are to be realistic—shrewd and tough-minded about the ways of the world and convinced of the values of heaven. This combination will help them negotiate the temptations and opportunities of life so that they don't bring destruction on themselves or derision on their faith by failing to speak the language of their contemporaries. Persons "puffed up" with visionary aspirations or blithely confident of God's easy overcoming of evils might fail to engage outsiders on terms understood by all, and this would be a danger not only to disciples but also to persons disposed to disbelief. Nobody likes someone who comes across as holier than thou, and people resist listening to those who seem to underestimate the difficulty of life.

Christians will find a way to win the hearts of others through the humility that they exhibit. Like the unjust steward, lowly persons can and should find opportunities to ingratiate themselves with others. People need people; and if the believer doesn't need to be tolerated or assisted or respected by the outsider, the outsider still needs the chance to recognize the richness and rightness of the believer's life.

The inability to serve both God and mammon is a stumbling block for the prosperous, who are afraid that the choice is between discipleship and security. But these scriptures affirm a humble life and suggest that by relying on the cultivation of relationships, a humble life may encourage a different way of framing the problem.

First Timothy hopes to help Christians make a good appearance in the world, for their safety and for the world's salvation. After all, if Christians are seen as hostile to persons in power and contemptuous of those with whom they don't agree, how are people who have power or who entertain different ways of seeing the world going to be drawn to Christianity? How can a constructive dialogue begin?

Regarding others as persons valued by God and worth befriending—from a posture of lowliness and seeking the other's good—is the disciple's calling. It is not an end-time ethic, not a self-sorting out from a world under judgment. It is the right approach for the era before God brings down the curtain. Regarding oneself as a humble person with some power to help others is a faithful way to imitate Christ in a world not yet resolved into sheep and goats. It also gives disciples a chance to engage those who do not yet share their faith, but who may see in Christians' offering up of their advantages a compelling example of life in another kingdom.