

September 22, Ordinary 25C (Luke 16:1-13; Amos 8:4-7)

## Jesus is talking to two different audiences.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [September 11, 2019](#) issue

There's a Chris Rock interview in which he compares the careers of standup comedians to musicians. There are profound similarities; after all, they are both performers. In both fields, the role of practice—including public practice, in front of people—is paramount to growth. The major difference? Most comedians don't make it before age 35 or so, which is when most musicians (especially rappers) are considered old.

The similarities between ministry and comedy are also striking. You can be considered too young for ministry. You only become a better preacher by, well, *preaching*. Both standup comedians and public theologians have to make persuasive arguments with confidence (i.e., sell their material). The last thing Chris Rock said in the interview made me think about Jesus. I'll paraphrase: the best comics can work multiple audiences in the same room. Sometimes you tell a joke and half the crowd won't get it, but you didn't do it for them.

This may be the best way to approach the parable/sermon in the first part of Luke 16. It is, on the surface, a wildly ambiguous text for a lot of reasons. There's the parable itself, in which an already dishonest manager performs new acts of questionable moral substance—and then the boss he just cheated responds by praising him. This is the moment when you expect Jesus to say, "Don't do that." (Because all parables are either "do this" or "don't do this," right?) But Jesus' commentary is instead basically, *Look how much smarter this guy is than you all.*

And then his ethical exhortation is . . . to use dishonest wealth? To make friends with dishonest people? To become like the dishonest manager? After which he seems to quote some older sayings, one of which says to be faithful with dishonest wealth.

What's going on here?

These parables about money are tricky, and not just because they have been used to support anti-Semitism. I don't think this one presents a money-hating, socialist Jesus who encourages his disciples to defeat the system by any means necessary. Despite the common pairing of this text with Matthew 10's "wise as serpents, innocent as doves," reading Jesus as telling us to "do what you gotta do" would be inconsistent with almost every other part of the Gospels.

What I think he's doing is talking to two different audiences.

In the parable, he is talking to the disciples. But he is also surrounded by others, whom Luke refers to as tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees. This is part of a sermon series of sorts about money, doing right with it, and getting a second chance to do right when you haven't. Imagine hearing this right after the prodigal son parable, and it makes a lot more sense. Jesus talks to the crowd, pauses, talks to his disciples, and in verse 9 talks to the crowd again.

"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth," he says. In other words: *If you've been dishonest thus far, use what you've gained to do some good.* He's not telling disciples to be dishonest; this is a sermon for the dishonest already among them. The dishonest manager isn't praised because he becomes dishonest; he is praised because he finally figures out how to do some good for his boss. It is his decision to change that is of note here—the same as it was in the prodigal son parable just before.

In our time this might sound like, *Do some good, you dishonest people, even if it means you have to take a loss to finally get on the right track.* Who might Jesus be speaking to today? Can the folks who foisted the housing bubble and ensuing crash on our economy hear this with contrite hearts? Is what Jesus is asking of them really that difficult? It's a moment in which Jesus offers a coda of care and concern for those who have actively exploited people. As believers, can we offer that same compassion?

It's clear the audience of Amos 8 would have appreciated a little tenderness from their prophet. But after all of their exploitation of the poor—strategic exploitation, going as far as to calculate for their best return—Amos is having none of it. "Hear this" is less "hear ye, hear ye!" and more like a sage matriarch sitting you down to tell you what a knucklehead you've been. "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds," says Amos, transposing YHWH's voice in the first person—it's some scary

stuff. And whereas Jesus takes a more poetic route, Amos leaves nothing to the imagination.

Both approaches are useful and necessary as we endure a form of capitalism that operates with less and less moral vision. We need the type of prophetic leadership that Jesus and Amos offer here—to speak directly to systems and people that deny and subjugate others, to remind them of their power and their privilege and their responsibility to God and God's people. All money is not dishonest, and all dishonest money can be made honest again. This is the truth of God carried across thousands of years.

No joking.