



PARISH OF FINCHAMPSTEAD
AND CALIFORNIA

WEEK 2 – FROM 16 MARCH 2014

LENT WELL SPENT
... *at work and in society*

Bible readings – Amos 8. 4-7 (NRSVA)

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 practise 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.

Comment

Amos, like many of the other OT prophets, is clear that God will not tolerate sharp practice in business. An ethical approach prohibits a wider range of behaviour than the law ever can.

Acts 18. 1-4

18 ¹ Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. ⁴ Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

Comment

Paul, who often claimed the highest status as Apostle to the Gentiles, is not ashamed to work as a tent-maker. Work is an honourable part of human experience and is to be embraced by those who seek to follow Christ.

Luke 16:1-13 – the Parable of the Dishonest Manager

¹ 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. 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."

Context and comment

The parable of the dishonest manager follows immediately after that of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel, and just before the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The Dishonest Manager is a difficult parable to interpret and learn from because Jesus *appears* to condone the kind of unethical conduct he himself elsewhere, and the prophets before him, seem to condemn out of hand. That makes it particularly interesting to engage with.

Questions about the Parable

- 1 What is your immediate reaction to the parable?
- 2 What do you think is the most important point Jesus is trying to make?
- 3 What do we learn of the manager's character?
- 4 Why might the rich man have been pleased with the manager's apparently reckless strategy?
- 5 It has been suggested that perhaps the manager was foregoing his own commission, and not squandering more of the rich man's wealth; does this strike you as likely and, if so, in what ways does it alter your perception of the parable? How is Jesus using the manager's example?
- 6 How easy would the disciples have found it to extract the principal messages from the parable itself?
- 7 How do Jesus' questions in the final paragraph (v9 on) develop his teaching in the parable?

Questions about ourselves

- 8 How do you respond to this parable once you have thought about it a bit?
- 9 Where should we draw the line between dishonesty (v1-2) and shrewdness (v8)?
- 10 In which areas and in what ways should Christians learn from non-Christians how to behave (see v8)? How might we protect ourselves from stepping over a line? Where is that line?
- 11 Verse 9 implies that wealth is in some sense dishonest, or perhaps leads to dishonesty. What do you think about that? If wealth does tend towards dishonesty, how might we instead use it honestly or well?
- 12 In your own experience, how true are the maxims in v10?

13 Verses 11 & 12 seem to take us back to the basic facts of the parable (v1&2). To what extent are Jesus' questions actually statements and how might you respond to them?

14 What is the key word in v13? Why? And is there a way of coming satisfactorily to terms with what Jesus says in that verse?

15 More generally, in what ways does the whole passage help us think about our own two, or more, 'masters': God, work, family, social standing etc? How might this apply when we are under secular authority: at work, in the services etc?

16 What is wealth for? How has this passage confirmed or challenged your own ideas about it?

Jesus talks frequently about wealth and riches

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' (*Matthew 19. 23-25*)

See also the parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus (*Luke 16. 19-31*) and the Rich Farmer (*Luke 12. 16-21*).

Concluding Reflection

"The love of money," we know, "is the root of all evil;" but not the thing itself. The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it. It may be used ill: and what may not? ... [there are] three plain rules, by the exact observance whereof we may approve ourselves faithful stewards of "the mammon of unrighteousness."

The first of these is "Gain all you can." ...

the second rule of Christian prudence is, "Save all you can." ...

having, first, gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then "give all you can." ...

Give all ye have, as well as all ye are, a spiritual sacrifice to Him who withheld not from you his Son, his only Son ...

From John Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions* – Sermon 50 – the Use of Money. (The complete sermon is available at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.1.html>)