

George Caird in his commentary on St Luke's Gospel says that the parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16.1–13) 'bristles with difficulties' – and indeed it does! Jesus seems to commend sharp practice, and advises his followers to use their wealth to gain friends. Is this to be taken at face value? Is 'the Lord' who commends the devious actions of the steward Jesus, or the steward's master? And if it was Jesus, how does his commendation of sharp practice square with the the rest of his teaching?

George Caird offers two possible interpretations of the parable: on the one hand, he says, it may be a parable of crisis. When the time comes after Jesus' death and the disciples are under threat, they must be as wily as the steward in making friends for themselves, even to the point of 'buying' protectors, as the steward did. On the other hand, it may be a comment on the devious practices of the Pharisees who, by legal fictions, evaded the prohibition in the Law of Moses on taking interest from fellow Jews on loans of any kind. Of the two suggestions, the second appeals to me as the more likely; so, what was it about?

Today's first reading (Amos 8.4–7) sets the context. Amos thunders against those who let their desire for money trample over all other considerations and, indeed, over the Law of God. Outwardly they may keep the festivals and honour the sabbath, but in truth religious observance has no real place in their lives; all they are concerned about is when they can start making money again, saying 'When will the new moon be over that we may sell again; and the sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale?' They cheat and scheme giving small measure, making the ephah small and the shekel great' (the ephah was a measure of grain), buying the poor for silver, and selling the sweepings of the wheat. In righteous anger Amos denounces them: 'Hear this, you that

trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land,... the Lord has sworn I will never forget any of their deeds.'

The divine concern for justice is not about fair dealing in the courts, though that was important, but about social justice – fairness in the distribution of material goods. These few verses from Amos are just one example of God's special concern for the poor which runs throughout the scriptures. Its against this background that Jesus tells the parable of the dishonest steward.

Charging interest on loans bears especially hard upon the poor, as we know in our own day with the scandal over pay-day loans. It results in a transfer of resources from the poor to the rich, precisely the opposite of what the Law intended. The Pharisees, however, had found a way around this prohibition. 'They argued that the purpose of the Law was to prevent the poor from destitution, not to prevent the lending of money for the mutual profit of lender and borrower. There were some situations in which a loan could be regarded as a business partnership and interest as the fair sharing of the profits of an enterprise.' Wheat and oil were the two commodities most used for the working of this legal fiction, and it is these that Jesus uses in the parable. The document stating the amount owed would include the interest along with the capital, so, on paper, the loan looked as though it complied with the law, only the parties knew the true situation. So the first debtor actually owes just fifty jugs of oil, the other fifty are interest, and when he comes to the steward with the note of what he owed, he is told to tear it up and write a new one with the actual amount that he owes. And likewise with the second debtor whose debt is reduced to the eighty bushels of wheat that he actually borrowed.

Its all very devious; the Steward has used the legal fiction to his advantage. By getting the debtors to re-write their promissory notes his actions have the outward appearance of complying with the Law, refusing to accept interest on the two loans, but at the same time he

places the two debtors under an obligation to him which he can call upon after he has been dismissed. On this reading of the parable it is his master who commends the Steward for his astuteness; in ratifying his Steward's actions he too appeared to be piously observing the Law against usury. As George Caird comments, 'He was, in fact, no less a son of the world than his steward, and, like many another rich man whose wealth had been amassed without too much scruple about business ethics, he was ready to make capital by a munificent gesture, especially when no other course was open to him.'

Understood in this way, the parable is an attack on the hypocritical practice of the Pharisees, who, by a creative fiction, managed to keep their religious obligations from interfering with their business; by contrast Jesus calls for a whole-hearted service of God. Those who want to follow in the way of Jesus, need to show the same single-minded determination in seeking God as the steward showed in acting to protect his future.

So, it seems, the parable is not so much about condemning unethical business practice that seeks to comply with the letter of the law whilst completely evading its spirit – though it is tempting to explore that theme in the light of the banking crisis and the affairs of Sports Direct – as it is about challenging the priorities of those who say they are Jesus' followers. The set of sayings that follow the parable make the challenge clear. Four sharp questions face us –

1. *How do we use our wealth?* The difficulties really bristle here! What did Jesus mean when he said, '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.' It is beyond belief that Jesus is suggesting that we resort to dishonesty to curry favour with others or with God. The clue is in the term 'dishonest wealth.' This modern translation is misleading. The old translation is 'unrighteous mammon', which meant any money that was not used in the service of

God, regarded by the Pharisees as tainted. When Jesus says, 'make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon' so that you may be *welcomed into the eternal home*, he is saying that all our wealth, not just that given to God, must be used as though in his service. If the sons of the world use their wealth to bind people to them, so the faithful should use their wealth in ways that bind them to God.

2. *How do we behave?* 'Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much, and he who is dishonest in very little is dishonest also in much.' Jesus warns us against cutting corners; the little things are ethically just as important as the big things. As George Caird says, 'all the opportunities of this world are tests of character,' and how we behave in small matters shows whether or not we are fit for larger responsibility.

3. *Where are our hearts fixed?* 'No slave can serve two masters...' The way we deal with our worldly wealth shows where our hearts really are. We have a choice; no one can serve two masters; you cannot serve both God and money. It is not that wealth is evil in itself, but that with money comes menace. It is the love of money that is the source of evil, not simply its possession. (1 Tim 6.10) It is described as unrighteous by Jesus because it is the great rival of God in the devotion and service of mankind. 'Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven...' (Matthew 6.19-20)

4. *Where do we want to end up?* - like the steward and his master, ensnared in devious, hypocritical practices that come from the love of money, or enjoying the freedom that comes from the love of God? If the latter, then we need to show the same determination in seeking God in prayer and service as the unrighteous do in using their money to win friends and influence.