

The measure we're measured with

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I'm going to be honest with you. This is a partly recycled sermon. Sixteen years ago, when preaching for a living was still in my future, I wrote a blog in which each week I wrote the homily I would have preached, had I been allowed to. I called it *The Back Seat Homilist*.

And on a routine internet search the other day looking up sources for this sermon, I stumbled upon an entry from that blog, a reflection that I wrote on today's Scriptures in 2007. It was essentially what I was planning to write in the first place. Which makes me wonder if I learned anything new in seminary.

So here it is, with some additions a special thank you to my younger self for thinking so far ahead.¹

Today's scriptures begin with a direct volley from the prophet Amos. The theme is clear and to the point: our relationship with the poor will be the measure of how well we serve God.

We should be squirming in the pew. Is Amos talking about us? Perhaps he is, according to Luke. It all depends on who your master is and whom you trust with your life. To set the scene, Luke paints a picture of Palestinian life that would have been very familiar to his well-to-do Gentile audience, living under Roman rule, according to commentator Robert J. Karris, OFM.²

A rich man, most likely an absentee landlord, has a steward whose job is to make binding contracts between the landlord and his debtors. These contracts include sizeable interest rates of up to a hundred percent. So if you borrowed 50 measures of oil, for example, you'd owe 100. That's how his master makes his money.

The steward's job, however, suddenly hangs from a thread as the master acts on hostile charges against the steward and prepares to fire him. To lose his job will plunge him into immediate poverty, so the steward devises a way to win the trust of his master's debtors and hopefully a place in their households. He has the bills rewritten to reflect only what the debtors borrowed and no more. Imagine what your credit card bill would look like if it only reflected what you spent, and not the interest! Most surprisingly, the master praises his servant's prudence and his shrewdness in securing his future. It doesn't say, however, that he gave him his job back.

This is not exactly an image of the Kingdom of God. But this story, drawn from the conventional wisdom of the time, highlights a few values that no disciple of Jesus should be without. If a member of this sinful generation can understand the merit of securing his future through the sharing of wealth, how much more should Jesus' disciples, who are called to share their possessions and live in loving community? If a member of this sinful generation can recognize how tenuous the support of earthly masters is, how much more should Jesus' disciples, who have only one master, God?

¹ Who's Your Master? Reprinted on the Blog "A Little Bit of Change"
<https://faithjustice.wordpress.com/2007/09/22/who-is-your-master/>

² Karris, Robert J. OFM. "The Gospel According to Luke." *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*. (1990)

Commentator Eric Franklin sees it as a cautionary tale for Jesus' followers: he writes "If only", says the parable, 'the sons of light had the same appreciation of the crisis confronting them in the drawing near of the Kingdom, and the same energy in meeting it' as did the steward from the parable.

Because the crisis that comes with the Kingdom is a question of whom you serve. Who or what is most important will determine if you will be welcome in the reign of God. You can't serve both God and your stuff. The enterprising disciple of means might recall that the poor hold the keys to the Kingdom, which they inherited it in the beatitudes. Best to invest in the relationship now.

"Faithfulness with 'unrighteous mammon' means using it in the service of the poor (v. 11)." Franklin writes in his commentary on Luke. "(Disciples) must free themselves from its shackles. They cannot be slaves to God and to mammon."³

The word mammon is usually translated as wealth or money, but literally means "that in which one puts one's trust."⁴ The implication is that trusting God with your life, making God your master, is a very different enterprise than trusting earthly structures or people. In fact, the two are in direct opposition. Because trusting God in the manner that Jesus did, requires one to give up all attachment to privilege and to economic security and to rely entirely upon the fruits of a network of loving, mutual relationships. Meanwhile, trusting earthly structures requires one to cling to wealth and economic security at the expense of human relationships, not to mention the future of the planet itself.

Does this sound familiar? Because I think it aptly describes the trap that has ensnared our culture, and we people of faith along with it. It is the reason that our networks of loving relationships tend to be quite small and heterogeneous, while our networks of economic relationships are global. This is why the conventional wisdom insists that we cannot live without a car, or a credit card, or an unlimited supply of cheap goods. It is why we tend to be so anxious about "what we are to eat and what we are to wear" to quote Luke 12: 22. It is why Christians will concede that war is acceptable when it defends our economic freedom. Or to paraphrase the prophet Amos, it is why we shop on the Sabbath and why we uncritically participate in an economic system that fixes the scales and buys "the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals."

Luke suggests that if we are wondering why our efforts as Christians seem so lackluster and our impact on the world so puny, our fruits so dry and tasteless, we might do well to ask ourselves – who is really our master, and who do we really trust with our lives?

Having God as master requires a much different sort of relationship to our culture, our possessions and to the people we live among. We must no longer be attached to them. That does not mean we reject them or live apart from them or condemn them as evil. We simply allow them no mastery over us. This

³ Oxford Bible Commentary – Luke, Eric Franklin

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198755005.001.0001/acref-9780198755005-chapter-63?rkey=vYCURk&result=50>

⁴ See also Franklin,

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198755005.001.0001/acref-9780198755005-chapter-63?rkey=vYCURk&result=50>

was the way that Jesus lived, and this was why Jesus was so infuriatingly free to love across all social boundaries and economic barriers.

When we can embrace the goods of the earth, not as idols to be served, but as gifts to be used in redemptive work and shared with those in need, we will be useful in helping to build the Reign of God. And ironically, we will be free of the stuff that weighs us down and renders us useless as disciples of Jesus.

John Shea describes this leaner, lighter freedom very well in this story.⁵

Once a king had two servants. He ordered the first one to do something. He refused, and was fired. The king ordered the second to do something. He obeyed and was promoted.

The loyal servant rose in the ranks and grew richer and even more favored by the King. One day he found himself wondering about that first servant, who had such little regard for his position. What ever happened to him? he wondered. So he set out to find out.

He went to the home of that first servant, but found he no longer lived there. He had sold that fine house and moved somewhere more affordable. The king's servant finally found his former peer living in what only could be called hovel in one of the worst parts of town.

Entering the shack he found the man sitting on the floor, eating a bowl of very thin soup.

The king's servant sneered at the man. "If you had learned to obey the king, you would not have to eat thin soup," he scolded.

Without looking up from his bowl the man replied: "If you had learned to eat thin soup, you would not have to obey the king."

Jesus was a thin soup kind of guy. He and his followers were itinerant. They had no permanent place to lay their heads. Sometimes they couch surfed with friends. Sometimes they got invited to eat at rich people's homes. Sometimes they were so hungry they ate the heads of grain during the Sabbath, and got in trouble for it as well. They were probably very thankful when they had five loaves and two fishes among them. I don't think Jesus routinely multiplied their lunch.

All of which is to say that Jesus made good use of the things that came his way. He was willing to receive what was offered him. He offered what he had – which was usually healing, and the Good News of a loving God. He wasn't attached to the things of this earth because as a devout child of Israel he knew that it all belonged to his Abba, all came from him.

What if we considered all we have, all we put our trust in, as actually belonging to God, just put it in our hands so that ones who need it most get it? How might this affect what we hand to the person who asks us for a handout? Dare I say, how might it affect our pledging or plate offering? How might it affect what charities we support and how much we give? How might it effect how we steward other wealth that has come our way – the resources that have been extracted from the land, the systems that allow us clean water and healthy food, or health care or justice?

⁵ Retold from Shea, John. "The Obedient and Disobedient Servants" in *The Legend of the Bells and Other Tales*. (1996).

What does our relationship to our wealth say about our relationship to God? Luke asks us this week. Next week, he will pick up the topic again with the question, what does our relationship to wealth say about our relationship to humanity?

Stay tuned. Amen.