

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)
September 23, 2007**

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Dishonest Wealth; Honest Work?

This week's reading from Luke's Gospel follows a string of Lucan readings from previous weeks. And like most of them, it is somewhat unsettling, and certainly challenging.

The parable of the dishonest manager seems, at first, to leave little room for us to “put ourselves in the narrative.” After all, how many of us would ever admit to cheating another person...especially if that person is our employer! And to make the parable even more disturbing, the owner praises the manager for the way he handled his profits (verse 8)—whether we read the parable to suggest that the manager cheated himself, the customers, or the owner! There must be more to this parable than a commendation of dishonesty.

As most biblical scholars agree, this parable—like many in the surrounding chapter in Luke's Gospel—must be understood in the context of the coming Kingdom of God. These early followers of Jesus believed wholeheartedly that the Kingdom would be realized very soon. And the urgency in many of Jesus' words in these parables suggests that he believed the same. He wanted his followers to know what was coming and to be prepared for its arrival. The kingdom, Jesus preached, would change everything as it was known in this world. The kingdom, he preached, was for everyone—not just religious leaders, experts in the Law of Moses, and those upright citizens in first century Palestine. The kingdom would include tax collectors, the poor, the disenfranchised, and even non-Jews. And this Kingdom of God was coming fast. So Jesus often urged his hearers to be prepared, and he used parables to drive home his point.

So read again the parable in Luke 16:1-13. Faced with the loss of his job, the dishonest manager acted decisively to provide for his own future. The manager had no time for reconsideration, for negotiation, for estate planning, or for financial counseling. He knew what he had to do, and he did it. Now whether the actions with his owner's customers were admirable or not, he is praised for his foresight, his quick decision, and his boldness. As the epitome of the famed trickster, the manager made his mark in the world...and was rewarded.



Money makes friends! Jesus used the parable to make a stern point: disciples are to make friends by means of wicked or dishonest wealth. What?! Read in the context of Luke's overall view of wealth, these "friends" must refer to those who have little means of wealth themselves, that is, the poor and disenfranchised. As long as the end result of one's wealth is that these are cared for and the work of serving others is accomplished, Jesus seems okay with the idea that the wealth may be gotten in less than ideal means.

Simply stated, Jesus suggests in this parable that wealth is not the goal after all; serving others and loving them into the Kingdom is our ultimate goal. And we are to do so not lackadaisically or as if we have all the time in the world; we are to do so urgently and with the highest of priority. The Kingdom, after all, is at hand.

That understanding helps to clarify Jesus' final words: we cannot put our energy into serving God and serving wealth at the same time (verse 13). One will always be more important than the other. And given the immediacy of the Kingdom, we must be faithful in preparing ourselves for this future...and looking out for the future of those around us as well, helping them in whatever way we can to set their hearts and eyes on God.

This week's Reflection was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Translations Officer in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Dominican Republic – With thanks to God for the expansion of the Bible Society's small printing press, and with prayers for their campaign against family violence; **East Caribbean** – With thanks to God for the success with youth work and for the progress to increase Creole Scripture reading and for the Scripture-based literacy project; **Puerto Rico** – With thanks to God for the 250 cyclists participating in the "Pedaling for the Hope of Our People" project and for the celebration honoring the elderly; **French Antilles** – With thanks to God for excellent Scripture distribution figures and for the new edition of the Louis Segond Bible, and with prayers for the January 08 launch of the diglot (Creole/French) New Testament and of the program *You Are Not Alone*, designed for young people.

Activity Corner: "Commitment/Action" Cards

Supplies needed: Bible; index cards (3" x 5") or writing paper; pens/pencils.

Read together Amos 8:4-7 and Luke 16:1-13. In the Amos passage, what injustices are mentioned? Compare verse 6 with Luke 16:5-7 and discuss how those who are in debt are treated. What differences can you find? What does the Luke passage teach about the Kingdom of God in relation to our "debts" and the price Jesus paid? Read 1 Timothy 2:1-7. What does this passage say about God's love?

Distribute index cards (or writing paper) to each member of your household. On one side, invite them to list injustices that they may be aware of in your community that cause people to become marginalized or disenfranchised. On the reverse side, encourage each one to consider how their "wealth" can be used to help others and to make a commitment



to take action pertaining to at least one of these injustices. Or encourage members of your household to act as a group. An example may be to contact local government officials and advocate for affordable housing, educational opportunities, etc., or to start a food pantry in your church or community.

Conclude by reading together Psalm 113 and offering a prayer in praise of God's goodness.

