10am HC Sunday 21st September 2025

Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13, 1 Tim 2:1-7 – Christian stewardship

We're in the middle of Creationtide, when we are encouraged to think about our stewardship of the world around us, and about stewardship more generally. Now you might be wondering what we can learn about good stewardship from a parable about a dishonest manager, who seems to be being praised by Jesus for looking out for his own interests at the expense of his former master's interests.
Surely that is like giving an award for services to health to chemistry teacher Walter White, from TV's *Breaking Bad*, when Walter starts up his little side-hustle, manufacturing and dealing drugs?

Given how many of Jesus' parables are about money, and wealth, and stewardship, you'd think that it would be easy to use Jesus' parables to put together a set of guidelines that might help Christians to know how to approach the subject of money. For anybody who would like to know more about what the Christian faith has to say about money, I recommend the thought-provoking book by Justin Welby, former Archbishop of Canterbury, called "*Dethroning Mammon: making money serve grace"*. But Justin Welby's book doesn't aim to be a comprehensive set of guidelines enabling Christians to know how to spend their money. And I don't think that Jesus was setting out to offer anything like that in his parables, either.

Jesus' parable about the dishonest manager only appears in Luke's gospel. Luke places it immediately after Jesus' parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the two brothers.

Three separate stories, all with a focus on the joy in heaven when the lost have been found. And the parable that we heard today also puts the focus on heaven – the eternal home – and on the manager's good sense in being generous and in building relationships that look to the future. Let's have a look at it together.

We're not told why the manager felt able to reduce the debts due to his former master: we don't know whether he was perhaps taking it upon himself to waive interest that the master shouldn't have been charging, or to waive his own commission. But really, the basis for the reduction made by the manager doesn't matter.

The key fact is that the traders that the manager is dealing with would have been massively grateful to the manager for what the manager has done for them. That debt of a hundred jugs of olive oil would have been the equivalent of 3 years' wages for the labourer on the average wage. The debt of one hundred containers of wheat would have been the equivalent of 8 to 10 years' wages for somebody on the average wage. The manager was being hugely generous to the people he had decided held his future in their hands. Hence the admiring comment which concludes the parable, about the manager having acted so shrewdly.

In the UK, we perhaps feel a little bit uncomfortable with the idea that the manager should receive any praise at all for putting the interests of his prospective clients ahead of the interests of the rich man who's just given him his marching orders. And yet, we're very familiar with the idea of going on gardening leave in the transitional period between leaving one job and then beginning another, and with the idea of businesses protecting their goodwill with restrictive covenants to stop their salespeople nicking all their customers. So we do know get that it can be tricky, in business, to work out where the lines are to be drawn.

But we shouldn't get distracted by our questions about how the rich man might have felt about what the manager was doing. Because the nub of this parable is the manager's own lightbulb moment when he works out how he is to have a future at all. We have a full insight into his thought processes, for he says 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. [I've got it!] I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."***

This is a parable to encourage Christians to be generous with what God has given you, <u>because</u> you are keeping your eyes on your future in heaven. As with so many of the parables that appear to be about money, the focus is instead on telling us something new about God or about God's kingdom, or on offering us a new insight into our relationship with God. And having been given that new insight, we need to be changing the way that we live in the here and now, because we know that our true home is in heaven.

So how are we to know what we should be doing with our money? If we want to know the kind of ethical approach that we should be taking towards our handling of money, we need look no further than our reading from Amos. Amos saw the economic oppression of the poor and needy as evidence of how far the people of Israel had drifted away from God. They saw seasonal festivals and Sabbath observance as an annoying disruption to their relentless pursuit of profit. They sold people short measures. They charged over the odds. And they drove the poor into penury for paltry amounts; for as little as the cost of a pair of sandals.

All of this was flatly contrary to the legal code given to the Israelites when they left Egypt and slavery behind, and began living together as a new community. God's law calls for integrity in business, and for mercy for the vulnerable. God has told us what is good, and what he requires of us. In the words of the prophet Micah, God requires us to ***do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God***. Walking humbly with God means opening ourselves up to God's influence over us, by the work of his Spirit through any of the ways that God can speak to us.

So what does acting with justice and kindness look like, for you, in 21st century Cambridge?
It is the people in the poorest parts of the world who are the most vulnerable to climate change. How might the decisions you make, about how to live or how you vote, affect the people who have most to lose from climate change? How might the choices that you make, as a consumer, affect people working in conditions of modern slavery? Where could you be making more ethical choices?

Writing to Timothy, Paul sets out a new framework for the way in which the new communities of Christians are to live. Christians live in the way that will be best for the fulfilment of God's desire for ***everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth***; that truth being that Jesus, as mediator between

God and humankind, gave himself as a ransom for all. Paul urges Christians to be praying that Christians ***may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.***

If we think about what that means for our handling of money, it means keeping wealth and possessions in a proper perspective.
It means not letting work become overwhelming, to the point where it crowds out everything else.
It means thinking about what our lives look like to others, and consciously avoiding the kind of behaviour that looks like we are trying to keep up with the Jones's.
It means making the effort to get on with colleagues at work, perhaps especially if we are in a work setting which makes it difficult to express Christian beliefs or to articulate explicitly Christian values.
It means being willing to be seen and to be known as a Christian, not just in relation to what we do with our money, but in every aspect of our lives.