

“What Do You Think It Means?”
Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

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A parable is not meant to be easy. A parable is not meant to tie up everything neatly with a bow. Parables are meant to make us scratch our heads, ponder, maybe help us think about things in new ways. Let me give an example.

One day, on the very first day of class, a seminary professor said, “There is only one requirement for this class. I don’t care if you come to class, do the reading, or participate. But to pass, you will have to turn in a paper on the last day of class before the bell rings. I don’t care what you do all semester, but you must have that paper on my desk before the bell rings on the last day of class. I give you my word, if you are even one second late, you will flunk.”

The semester goes by. Last day of class comes. Students get there early and put their papers on the professor’s desk. Then, the bell rings. Less than a minute later, a student comes rushing in. “Professor, I’m so sorry. I was on my way to class but there was an accident on the highway and it screwed up the traffic forever and I finally got free of it and now I’m here. I’m sorry my paper’s late.”

The professor said, “Wow, yes. Traffic can be horrible around here. You flunk.”

A few minutes later, another student came rushing in. “Professor, I’m so sorry. I had my paper ready to go last night but then my computer crashed. When I finally got it straight, my printer died. I had to wait until the library opened this morning to get in and print my paper. I’m sorry I’m late.”

The professor said, “Yes, technology is wonderful when it works. But when it doesn’t it’s a real pain. You flunk.”

Finally, about half-way through the class, another student came in. “Professor, I’m so sorry I’m late. My wife gave birth early this morning. A beautiful little girl. Our first child. We named her Ruth. Just as soon as I knew everything was OK, I ran out and came to campus. I’m sorry I’m late.”

The professor said, "Ruth! What a beautiful name. I'm so happy for you. You flunk."

Word of this got out to the student body. They were angry, furious! They formed a protest mob and marched to the administration building to demand the professor be fired. When they arrived, the professor stood on the front steps and told the students, "Listen! I made it very clear what the requirements were. One paper, on my desk, before the bell rings on the last day of class. I gave my word that anyone even one second late would flunk. Now if you can't trust the word of a seminary professor, who can you trust?"

And that's the end of the parable.

What do you think it's telling us? Does it make you wonder? When should we show mercy and when should we not? Does showing mercy dishonor everyone else who did it right? When are we the students? When are we the professor? Is the professor God, deciding who's on time and who's too late to get to heaven?

It's not neat. It's not pretty. It challenges our assumptions.

Luke's parable is about a manager. The manager has been caught mishandling funds. He's about to be fired. 'What can I do? I'm too old for manual labor. I'm too proud to beg.' The manager uses his position to ingratiate himself to those who owe him money, knowing that way they'll take care of him when he's fired.

Maybe the manager doesn't have a criminal mind, but he definitely has a feel for psychology, doesn't he? How would you describe the manager? Give me a one-word description of the manager. Is he shrewd, fraudulent, unfaithful, perceptive, decisive?

Are any of these godly attributes? When would we use them to serve God?

Jesus tells us to use worldly wealth to make friends for eternity. How would we do that? What would that look like? Give generously. Share. Help the poor. Pledge. Pretty much the opposite of our Amos passage. The point is to use our worldly wealth in a way that pleases God.

Next, Jesus talks about faithfulness. The manager was faithful, but not to himself. Just in case we don't understand, Jesus spells it out for us. Faithfulness matters. The manager is smart and decisive, but he is not faithful. If the manager had put that kind of energy into his work, he might have been promoted

instead of fired. We are called to be like the manager, but faithful. We are called to be smart and decisive and insightful, but also to be faithful to God.

OK. We get that. Faithfulness matters. But why can't we serve two masters at once? Is Jesus saying we must hate wealth? What do you think? Yes or no?

We don't have to hate wealth, but we do need to use it in a godly way. Worldly wealth doesn't have to be used for evil. It can be used in a godly way. We can use it for giving generously, sharing, helping the poor, building up our church. Pretty much the opposite of our Amos passage.

What do you think? What is this parable telling us? How can we be like the manager, but in a godly way?

Instead of being unfaithful, we can be insightful, decisive, and use worldly wealth to spread the good news of God. Amen.