

Profit and loss: Sunday, September 23, Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

Recently several pastors and seminary students told me that they will do “whatever it takes . . . to be effective in ministry . . . to turn their church around . . . to work for the kingdom.” While moved by their commitment, I worry about the moral danger they are courting and their seeming misunderstanding of kingdom “ways.” I wonder if their passion for Christian ministry is being reframed by the instrumental, entrepreneurial drive of the business world.

“The end is preexistent in the mean[s],” wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” When we fail to recognize the close connection between our goals and the ways in which we seek to reach them, we are in danger of losing those goals. We become comfortable with moral shortcuts and gradually conclude that small acts of dishonesty and minor indiscretions don’t matter when the purposes are sufficiently large. An approach to ministry bounded only by “whatever it takes” invites moral as well as spiritual disaster.

At the end of the parable of the dishonest manager, Jesus teaches that those who are faithful in little are faithful in much, and those who are dishonest with earthly resources will be untrustworthy with more significant responsibilities. According to Jesus, the small details matter. They set the pattern and structure within which we learn to handle the more substantial and eternal concerns.

Our relationship to “mammon” tests our faithfulness. Whether justly or unjustly acquired, various forms of wealth can become our master, shaping and filling our lives in a godlike manner. Particularly in this society, where consumption drives the economic system and where economic values shape even family and church decision-making, the idolatrous dimension of mammon is both ubiquitous and subtle.

We can use our resources and our access to resources to build relationships or to destroy them, to help people or to hurt them. Jesus observes that the children of this

world often understand the significance of wealth better than those in the religious community do. Worldly people know that they can use resources to gain friends or to lose them, to make a place for people or to shut the door on them.

A virulent form of faithlessness is evident in the passage from Amos. Although engaged in their practices of piety, the people have little sense of the connections between their faith, their use of resources, and their relationships, whether with others or with God. Amos speaks a particular word of judgment to businesspeople who use their power within the system to pursue unjust gain and to crush those who are vulnerable. He is not addressing common thieves or criminals.

What makes their deeds especially troublesome is that these people appear to play by the rules and are able to maintain their place in the community by observing the religious and cultural traditions. Although their practices are profoundly dishonest and exploitative, the entrepreneurs wait for the new moons and sabbaths to pass before they engage in business. They take from those who cannot resist them, and they use the legitimate communal structures to get away with their exploitation. They employ standard units of measure but secretly distort them to increase their profits. They mix the sweepings in with the grain to make additional profit.

I wonder if those businesspeople were always destructive and dishonest or if they started out as responsible community members. Did injustice and dishonesty creep up on them—perhaps as wealth became more and more important, or as they were less scrupulous about small acts of dishonesty, or as they discovered they could get away with it? Or perhaps they grew bolder when other people didn't notice their corruption or couldn't protest against it. But God noticed, says Amos. And God will not forget.

How we use mammon is a clear and accurate indicator of our priorities. While we might speak frequently of justice and compassion, it is what we actually do with our resources that expresses our deepest commitments. Perhaps our faithfulness might benefit from an occasional use of the "publicity test." Would we be comfortable if our friends and fellow church members knew the specifics of our decisions concerning money and resources at home, in business and at church? In particular, would we be willing to show our checkbooks and investment portfolios to a faithful, impoverished Christian in another part of the world? So much of our misuse of mammon is possible because our choices escape scrutiny. For most of us, what we do with our resources is a very private matter. Furthermore, rarely do we see such

decisions as central to our piety or to our friendships with poor people.

The dishonest manager described in Luke 16 used his position to reduce other people's debts so he could gain them as friends and assure himself a place at their tables. Jesus does not commend the manager's practices, but rather his insight into the connection between resources and relationships. When we consider our wealth and economic practices—even the means we employ to accomplish good ends—as peripheral to the kingdom, we are ignoring Jesus' warning that it is impossible to serve God and mammon. Unfortunately, we risk losing the true riches in the bargain.