

Squandering and scattering

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Every time I come to the parable of the dishonest manager, I'm baffled. Superficially it just doesn't add up. Does Jesus really commend as our role model "a manager of unrighteousness"? So this narrative makes us listen extra carefully and read extra slowly, as we figure out in what way this parable depicts the kingdom of heaven. As with any storytelling, the choice of language and the particular detail given will provide the clues—usually in the first couple of sentences.

This is the fourth parable told by Jesus in continuous sequence, prompted on the one hand by tax collectors and sinners "coming near to listen" and on the other by Pharisees and scribes grumbling (Luke 15:1-2). We hear a story of a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son and then . . . a dishonest manager. The connections between the first three seem pretty natural: they are all cases of "lost and found." Are we to view the fourth under the same heading?

It is the repeat of an uncommon Greek verb, *diaskorpizo*, that serves as segue between the third and fourth parables, a thread translated here as squandering. The lost son "squandered his property in dissolute living" (15:13); while the dishonest steward was "squandering his [master's] property." More commonly the same verb describes "broadcasting or scattering something such as seed" (e.g. Matt. 25:24, 26). Put this way, we may recognize Luke's trademark interest in the ownership of property and the way possessions are handled. Both of Luke's squanderers are "scattering" property. Depending on your point of view, they are dispersing it generously or carelessly—certainly publicly—and acting as if what belongs to whom is irrelevant. Is it that here we gain a preview of Luke's showcase description of the distribution of property among Christians after the resurrection, where no one claimed anything they had was just theirs but held everything in common among them all (Acts 4:32)?

In viewing the parable of the dishonest manager in economic terms, I am deeply indebted to Ched Myers of [Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries](#). His booklet “The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics,” as well as his speaking ministry, is threatening and invigorating. Prepare for a whole new way of thinking about money. Myers would describe the principles for which the dishonest manager is congratulated in terms of keeping money moving. Money is a resource so long as it is given or spent—scattered or broadcast—especially for providing to those in need and releasing people from debt. Thus it builds the kingdom of God, whereas a privatized account that protects against all forms of dispersal stands in the way of growing the sort of relationships and serving the kind of purposes that matter.

The dishonest manager realizes that generosity is the best investment. He gets himself out of a hole by building social capital. It is irrelevant, apparently, that he gives away money that does not belong to him—at least the God-figure in this story does not mind. It’s as if the rich man turns to the manager he fired to discover the secret of true riches: generosity.

Does it take the experience of personal bankruptcy to name the possibility of a whole new economic order? That is what happens here. Economics, from the root *oikonomia* (the Greek for “household management”) relates to putting your house in order. The “squanderer” is about to lose his home, his job and the shirt on his back, at which point (Dare I suggest like the prodigal he “comes to his senses”?) he says to himself: “I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” The same phrase crops up again at the end of the parable, to underline the message. It’s time to change economies. Forget “my economics”: it is time to invest in somebody else’s. Forget “my household”: it is time to think about other people’s households. . . . time to squander that which is squirreled: money should be kept moving. It is time to handle it as the overflow of God’s abundant grace: to scatter it freely, to the end of making friends and setting people free—just as God does with his grace.