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September 22, 2013

Prudent Use of Wealth

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Prudent Use of Wealth

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This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for September 22, 2013 for Cycle C:

Am 8:4-7; Ps 113; 1 Tim 2:1-8; Lk 16:1-13

PRUDENT USE OF WEALTH

Lawrence E. Frizzell

An assiduous reader of the Gospel will notice any number of passages which provoke a variety of questions. An effort to search for the meaning of a biblical text will begin with an act of prayerful openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teaching authority of the Church. Then careful study of the passage in its context will help to elucidate its message. "The interpreter must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and within the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express..." (Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on Divine Revelation* #12).

"The parable of the dishonest manager" is among the very puzzling passages of the Gospel according to St. Luke. The man was accused of being incompetent and squandering the property of an absent landlord. To assure a future for himself after his dismissal he told the debtors to rewrite the promissory notes so that they would be on record as owing much less. Did the master condone dishonesty when he praised the man for acting prudently? Does a rascal become an example of the prudence that "the children of light" must emulate in the spiritual order?

In recent decades, detailed analysis of the economic practices of the Middle East in the time of Jesus has shown that the manager had considerable power in disposing of the landlord's property. He added his own "commission" when lending money or in exacting payment of produce by tenant farmers. This manager had been untrustworthy in some way, but in his last act he was merely canceling the portion of payment that would come to him personally. Dismissal punished him for misdeeds of the past, but his initiative with regard to the future offers the insight that good relationships are worth more than material wealth in any of its forms.

"I tell you", Jesus remarked to his listeners, "use the 'mammon of dishonesty' to make friends so that, when it gives out, you will be welcomed into dwellings that are everlasting" (Lk 16:9). The Hebrew and Aramaic term "mammon" (wealth, money) is transposed into Greek and then into English. Very often, preoccupation with material goods will lead to unrighteousness of some sort, so Jesus counsels against hoarding and selfish use of riches. Indeed, the only way that one may take them into the context of eternity is by transmuting them into charity (see Luke 14:12-14).

The evangelist then added other teaching concerning "mammon" to drive home the point of the parable (see Lk 12:42-44). As we mature to adult responsibilities, each of us must learn that God's gifts are to be shared. Thus we consider our vocation in the Church and in "the world" to involve a stewardship over material and spiritual resources. Are we faithful in the application of "our" possessions to the true needs of those placed in our care? Ultimately everything must be seen as a service of God; otherwise the person will be controlled by the lure of riches and fall into idolatry.

"You cannot serve both God and mammon!"

The question of ordering our lives to the goal of true happiness was faced by the prophets and sages throughout Israel's history. In the eighth century B.C. Amos criticized the rich and powerful nobles of the Northern Kingdom. They were unjust toward the poor laborer, reduced the weak to slavery and cheated when they sold the produce extracted from the earth. "The LORD has sworn... 'Never will I forget a thing that they have done'" (Am 8:7).

God's passionate love for the poor, the oppressed and the persecuted was already known to Israel. The Law of Moses included a prohibition that expressed the golden rule. "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once slaves yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry!" (Ex 22:20-23).

Like the great teachers of Israel in every age, Jesus sought to foster justice and good order as a dimension of his call for a response to divine love in life. It is never too late to set things right so that one can become worthy of the kingdom. Prayers of the poor are heard by God -- will they plead for justice against oppressors? Or will those with power and wealth provide occasions for the less fortunate to pray for them as benefactors?