

Choices: Either One Not Both

Choices are often seen as either this or that; both when someone is presenting a situation or option to us or just when we encounter a situation in our daily living which seems to have two options. We often take one option over another without thinking about it because it just seems to flow out of whatever is going on in our lives. The latest choice evolves out of the past choices made. Choices made form a large portion of what we find in our scriptures—from Moses and Joshua's words to those folks moving through the wilderness from Mount Sinai to the teachings found in Jesus' many parables. The first psalm found in the book of Psalms opens presenting or describing choice as leading to two vastly different ways of living—the wise and the foolish. Sometimes we reflect back on choices already made as did Robert Frost in the poem *The Road Not Taken*. Frost's poem begins: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler; long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth. Then took the other as just a fair." Those verses create a clear image for us; one describing the reality of many choices...at the point where the choice is made what lies ahead on either one cannot be seen. Frost goes on to say the road not taken was being left for another day, yet at the end he doubted that it would be possible to come back and explore the other way. The prophets like Amos who spoke in the 8th century BC to the people living in Israel and Judah are not predicting the future like we tend to think of prophecy. Instead they are sounding a warning about the choices those folk are making and describing the consequences which will result from those choices. As they entered the land promised to Abraham by God, they made some promises of their own. They promised to choose to live a certain way; the way God revealed to them as the way to live abundantly. Yet although they have still proclaimed to be God's people, their behaviors have not resembled those of people living according to the values God revealed to them. The values God revealed about God's own self, righteousness and justice. Justice begins with the very nature of God and because God elected these people as God's own people, they were to reflect God's own character. That is, they must be a people of justice. God's vision of justice found within scriptures is very clear as a social concept—it has to do with the external ordering of society in which the most can live and thrive. When most people cannot thrive, in God's eyes that society that creates this situation is unjust. A just society requires a special concern for the powerless who cannot protect their own welfare. In Hebrew Scriptures the powerless are often described as the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, the needy and the poor. Although social justice is often derided as a new idea, the society that God envisioned being created by the people chosen to be God's own people was a just one. In the passage read from Amos today we discover that the people are claiming to be God's people. They are going in to participate in all the rituals established for the community; yet while there they are thinking of choices which are anything but just. Amos text today begins: "Hear this you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, 'saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?"' They are choosing to use the time set aside to honor God to contemplate ways to cheat by making false weights and balances for the transactions; seeking to defraud and create debt among the poor which will lead to servitude for them. They are trying out the path of both/and. Claiming to belong to God yet seeking to behave based only on self-interest. Today's passage seems to reflect God's

total frustration with this behavior as judgement is announced. God's chosen people have become consumed by their own pride and confidence in God's protection that they have lost their way and the purpose behind the law given to them at Mount Sinai. The time during which Amos spoke was one of peace and prosperity in the region as the empires of Assyria and Egypt were relatively weak and not threatening smaller nations. However, that prosperity was built on the backs of the poor. As God's prophet Amos was hypersensitive to the injustice of the society. He could not ignore what to most of the people—and often our own sensibilities seems trivial and just the way the world works. Those who profess to follow the Lord, the God of Israel, are to reflect God's own character which is one of justice and of mercy for those who are marginalized in the community. Sabbath rest is for everyone, not just for the wealthy who own land or heads of households, but for the slave and the foreigner, the poor and powerless. Simply observing the day of Sabbath is not enough if the justice and mercy exemplified by the Sabbath does not shape all everyday life. Sabbath was to shape behavior in the marketplace, on the street, and at the gate of the city—all aspects of life. It is not commerce itself that is held up for examination, but dishonest interactions. The choice given is to be sure we know the consequences of trying to do both/and in our everyday lives...to fail to question the "way it is always done" or that "just the way things are may not be the way things have to be" if we are careful in the systems we endorse and the choices we make so that they clearly reflect the guidance we have been given: that they are either/or choices not attempts to be both God's servants and active in the world's ways. This thought brings us to looking at that confusing parable Jesus narrated about what the text refers to as either the dishonest or shrewd steward. The usual approach to a parable is that it is a metaphor or allegory about God or God's reign. Upon this assumption, one finds and assign roles for the various characters in the story often with one representing God and God's views. That doesn't work real well here. There is a rich man, a manager or steward over the rich man's possessions and several mentioned as ones working under the steward. To understand the situation there are several things from the social and economic realities of the time not obvious in the story which are used to interpret it. One factor is that it was common for stewards, like tax collectors to add some additional charges to accounts. Another factor is that the Torah forbade the charging of interest. Some offer that the manager eliminated the added "tax" imposed on the debt in order to earn favor with the debtors; other just that he was not "mismanaging" the rich man's wealth by this process to gain favor. In that sense, the steward's actions classify as shrewd according to the world's values providing a reason for the rich man to commend the steward. Since the narrative is not clear on that or the basis of the original asking for an accounting it is hard to decide from the story just what interactions were taking place. What is clearer is the comments Jesus makes at the end of his story. One of the commentaries I read about this quoted a Bob Dylan song "Gotta serve somebody."¹ I was never a Bob Dylan fan or really that familiar with his work so I pulled the lyrics from an internet site. The theme of the song matched the title as it gave an extensive list of occupations covering everything from high ranking government officials to construction workers, some of the things listed didn't seem to make sense to me, but the refrain was a clear message: But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody. Well it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." In today's parable

from Luke, depending on the translation, Jesus says you cannot serve God and Mammon or wealth. Mammon serves as the personification of the accumulation wealth which according to Martin Luther in the 15th century is the “most common god on earth.” Throughout the gospel of Luke’s narrative Jesus’ ministry invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness. From the beginning with Mary’s hymn known as the Magnificat with its reversals of the world’s way and the story of the tax collector Zacchaeus who restores what he had “defrauded” people and is then restored to community—economic restitution is part of the joy and good news Jesus proclaims. There are many interpretive possibilities within the parable itself and the difficulty is deciding who, if anyone is residing in or moving to a desired place in God’s reign. In the portion ending the narrative Jesus personifies wealth three times to warn about the danger wealth poses as a god or idol. The same adjective of “unrighteousness” is used to describe both the steward and the wealth. The master’s word of commendation for the steward can be translated as prudent or wise as well as shrewd. The charges brought against the steward are not detailed; the master of the steward summons him after being told the steward was “squandering his property” deeming him untrustworthy. The steward is asked to give an accounting of his management because he has essentially been fired before actual charges have been made or a defense given. The steward then acts in self-interest to gain some protection from the disaster of being fired. He goes to those over whom he was steward and makes a deal reducing their debts. The story ends with this reduction but no gain to the steward is given. The ending statements also lack cohesion. First, whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. Was Jesus speaking of the steward being faithful to the rich man or being faithful about what rightfully belonged to those whose debts he oversaw? The parable doesn’t give a clear answer, just invites us into the question. A second statement is: If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust you the true riches? Does this mean the steward was being faithful in his actions to the debtors because the rich man’s wealth was dishonest? There is no comment about how the man became rich...but because of the concluding statement some believe the rich man’s accumulation of wealth might have been the issue. A third issue is contained in the question: “If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? Faithfulness with what has been entrusted to your care is obviously what is desired, but if the second part of the sentence implying not being faithful will deprive you of what is yours? Certainly, all in all a confusing story. But the final statement is straight forward: “ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave with either hat the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Martin Luther summed this up in a warning about Mammon 500 years ago. “Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property, in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man, also has a god—mammon by name, that is money and possessions—on which he fixes his whole heart.” Often in the parables we find in Luke the rich man makes foolish choices, depending upon what he had accumulated—trusting in things to provide security. There is a message here to remind us that we need to depend on God, not things. We need to be faithful in the gifts we have been

given. We need to make all our choices based on the ways of the God who loves us and blesses us, who offers mercy and forgiveness. Referring back to the road choice Robert Frost made—he took the one less traveled and says that made all the difference. The ways of God are often those less well traveled as they call us to rely on things other than possessions; to avoid the drive to success according to the world's standards and tend to the welfare of others. We seek to travel the path God reveals—to place our trust there and understand that all the gifts we have are both a blessing and a responsibility and set out priorities so that the choices we make along the way witness to whom we give our love and devotion. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ "Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan" (1979)