

September 21, 2025 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “God’s Gifts as a Means to Service”

Once again, good morning! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. Around church, you will find me in choir, at Salt & Light during dinners, and in the video discussion Sunday school class. The people that go with me are Brent Brewer, who frequently does video and sound for services, 13-year-old Alonzo, and 11-year-old Lillian. Outside of church, I teach and do research in the Department of Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU.

A few weeks ago, as is my habit, I read through the texts for this week’s lectionary to pick two or three as the basis for my sermon. I looked for what might be similar between the readings, or perhaps some contrasts that I could talk about. Back and forth among options, I found myself drawn again and again to the readings from Amos and from Luke. Maybe I had money on my mind since I had started taking a finance class this fall. Maybe I was excited because both readings contained Biblical units of measurement and I am that kind of nerd. Maybe I was in the mood for fire and brimstone—I have found that happens from time to time when parenting a teenager and a preteen.

I want to start with the reading from the Old Testament prophet Amos as that reading is more straightforward.

For some context, Judah and Israel split into two kingdoms around 930 BC. This Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom era lasted for about 200 years. In approximately 722 BC, Assyria conquered Israel’s capital, Samaria, and the ten Northern tribes were carried off into exile, never to be heard from again. Some 50-70 years before the Assyrians attacked, God called Amos, a shepherd and a fig tree farmer, to go and warn Israel. Amos was not the only prophet at this time. Hosea and Jonah were also working in the Northern Kingdom, while Isaiah and Micah preached in Judah.

The book of Amos has many similarities with the messages of other minor prophets, especially the warnings about following false gods and the calls to repentance. What is striking about Amos chapter 8 is how angry God is

about the way that the society has been treating the poor. Some of the wealthier Israelites were not just ignoring the needs of the poor, they were actively getting rich by cheating the poor—all while pretending to be religious.

The merchants targeted in this reading reminded me of the innkeepers in the book and musical, *Les Misérables*. *Les Misérables*, which occurs in the early 19th century in Paris, includes the storyline of Fantine, a single mother who works in a factory to support herself and her young daughter, Cosette. The management of the factory would fire Fantine if they knew that she had a child outside of marriage, so Fantine pays for an innkeeper and his wife to house Cosette at a place outside of the city. In the musical version of the story, there is a song called “Master of the House” that captures the questionable business philosophy of the innkeeper and his wife. Among the more polite portions of the lyrics are these, sung by the innkeeper:

Master of the house, keeper of the zoo
Ready to relieve them of a sou or two
Watering the wine, making up the weight
Pickin' up their knick-knacks when they can't see straight...

Food beyond compare, food beyond belief
Mix it in a mincer and pretend it's beef
Kidney of a horse, liver of a cat
Filling up the sausages with this and that...

Charge 'em for the lice, extra for the mice
Two percent for looking in the mirror twice
Here a little slice, there a little cut
Three percent for sleeping with the window shut
When it comes to fixing prices
There are a lot of tricks I knows
How it all increases, all those bits and pieces
Jesus! It's amazing how it grows!

As you can imagine from the snippets of the song, Cosette is not treated well. She is fed little and forced to work long hours cleaning the inn. On top of charging Fantine for Cosette's room and board, the innkeepers keep pretending that Cosette is sick. They send letters to Fantine demanding more money for expensive medicines for the child. Eventually, one of these

letters is intercepted by management. Fantine loses her position at the factory, and the situation becomes more dire from there. What is so repulsive about the innkeepers is that they have respectable standing in society as charitable “Christians” who have taken in an unworthy child.

Through the prophet Amos, God calls out multiple ways that the merchants’ behavior is heartless and unacceptable. For the poor of Amos’ time, bread, mostly made from barley, was the main source of calories and nutrition. The amount of grain a laborer could buy was the difference between just getting by and starvation. Grain was typically purchased by volume in exchange for a certain weight of silver. In this case, the merchants would sell one *ephah* (about 22 liters or 5.5 gallons) of barley for a shekel weight (about 11.5 g) of silver. An ephah was the size of 10 *omers*. From the book of Exodus, we learn that one omer was enough mana to feed one person for one day, so one ephah would be enough mana for 10 days. Later, we hear that an ephah of grain fed Ruth for about two weeks. At the time of Amos, a laborer could earn about 2-10 shekels worth of silver in a month depending on their skill level. This means that for the least skilled laborers, monthly wages would be enough to buy four weeks of grain for themselves. More skilled laborers could earn enough to buy food for themselves and a few others. For these families, there was no room for error or for waste.

The words of Amos describe four ways that the merchants cheated the laborers buying grain. First, the merchants used grain baskets that were slightly smaller than a full ephah. Second, the merchants used shekel weights that were heavier than standard so that buyers had to hand over slightly more silver to tip the scale. Third, the merchants used unbalanced scales to require yet more silver. These “little slices and little cuts,” to borrow words from the song, resulted in the poor getting less grain for their meager earnings. The ephah of grain might only last 12 or 13 days instead of 14, so more days of the month would be hungry days. If that were not bad enough, the merchants purposefully did not clean the grain as well as they should have. The too-small ephah baskets were partially filled with “sweepings”: dirt and chaff pieces that provided no nutrition. These things combined meant that laborers could work full time (six days a week from sun-up to sun-down), spend all of their earnings on the most basic grain, and still starve. Understandably, this made God angry.

The merchants had no excuse. They were not pagans following different cultural expectations. They had known God’s laws from childhood. They

were Israelites who obediently rested on the Sabbath and diligently observed the religious holidays. The merchants were not poor. Their actions were not done out of desperation for their own survival. They had everything that they needed. They chose to cheat the poor to enrich themselves. They chose to live their faith only one day of the week.

God's anger was for more than the merchants. God had sent Amos to chastise the Israelite society as a whole. If the society were functioning as God intended, the cheating grain merchants would not have lasted long. There should have been elders to whom the laborers could complain. There should have been priests, Levites, and other members of the religious leadership to investigate the charges of cheating and to punish the offenders. There should have been professional standards among the merchant guilds to ensure fair business practices. The only way that the unfair sale of grain to the poor could continue to happen is if the broader society were neglecting their duties to God and to their neighbors.

Studying the reading from Amos, one has a strong sense about God's expectations for how his people should practice. The admonition from Amos to the Israelites provides clear guidance for us. I found satisfaction in feeling that I understood what God wants and that those expectations match what I know of ethics and morals. All was in order.

Then...I turned to the Luke reading and was unsettled by the words of Jesus to his disciples. The Parable of the Unjust Steward, in verses 1-9, is a difficult one in that it appears to endorse unethical behavior. We read again from Luke:

¹Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So [the master] called [the manager] in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

³ The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵ So [the manager] called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶ 'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

⁷ Then [the manager] asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

[The manager] told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

As with other places from Scripture that did not make sense to me, I searched through the available commentaries for some insights. These verses gave headaches to many scholars, though they did have some ideas that help.

First, the scholars talked about the likely context for the story based on the types and amounts of the debts. The master was probably a wealthy man, the owner of large areas of land in which others worked and gave the owner a share of the produce. In the original Greek, the volume of oil owed was 100 *baths*. A bath held 8-9 gallons of oil. 100 baths worth of oil required about 150 olive trees to produce. Buying this amount of oil would take about three years' worth of wages. The manager had the debtor reduce the debt by 50 baths, a loss of about 500 denarii for the master. The amount of wheat owed by the second debtor was 100 *kor*. One kor was approximately the amount of wheat that an acre of land could produce. 100 kor would feed about 150 people for a year, and would cost seven or eight years' worth of wages. The manager had the debtor reduce the debt by 20 kor, again representing a loss of about 500 denarii for the master. These are not trivial amounts, even for a master who owned at least 100 acres of wheat and at least 150 olive trees. The loss of so much property would have upset the master greatly.

Another facet of ancient society played a role in the story, the idea of absolute agency. The manager was an agent, rather than a slave, of the master. This means that, to society, anything that the manager did on the

master's behalf would be considered the same as if the master had done the action. The master could not back out of commitments that the manager made nor unsay things that the manager said. To be a manager implied a high level of trust. In this case, when the manager changed the amounts of the debts, he put the master into a difficult situation. The debtors would not object to lesser debts and the master could not get the debts back once the manager had released them. The master should have been furious—first at losing money from the manager's initial squandering, second at losing more money from the reduced debts, and overall, at the manager's betrayal of trust. And yet, we hear in verse 8 that "the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." How could this be?

The answer to that question lies in the difference between admiring skills and admiring choices. The manager had acted very cleverly, using his master's own resources to ensure that he would have reciprocity from his master's debtors after his master fired him. I can picture the master fuming in anger while tipping his hat grudgingly at the manager for outsmarting him. By including the master's reaction in the parable, Jesus was making a point about the need for skill in worldly ways. Jesus does not want his followers' to be ignorant about business and finance. That is what is meant in the second part of verse 8, "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." The more skillfully we can manage the resources that God has entrusted to us, the farther those resources can go. Jesus, however, *also* wants his followers to make good and honorable choices, reminding us that worldly wealth is a tool not the goal. When wealth for its own sake is the goal, our choices become focused on the short term and corrupted. Instead, our choices should focus on the long term, which is our treasures in heaven.

I liked how one scholar paraphrased verse 9: "Put yourselves in a good position through your use of money, which so easily leads you astray, so that when this age is over, God will receive you into his eternal dwellings." Money, if it becomes our master, pulls us away from God. If God is our master, money is kept in its rightful place: a useful tool in this life.

In both of the readings from Amos and Luke, we are reminded of the eighth commandment, "you shall not steal". The Heidelberg Catechism provides a deeper explanation, in the form of a question and an answer:

Q. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

A. God forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. In God's sight, theft also includes all scheming and swindling in order to get our neighbor's goods for ourselves, whether by force or means that appear legitimate, such as inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition, God forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts.

As with most of the commandments, the simple words "you shall not steal", do not bother me much. My mind likes to limit "stealing" to theft and robbery, and I am comfortable avoiding those. However, in consider the longer explanation, I am reminded of the righteous young man who had asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?", then ended up walking away shaken when Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I have to admit that I am not untouched by greed and that I have squandered gifts which God entrusted to me.

As followers of Jesus, we need to ask ourselves: Are there times when our ephah baskets are too small and our shekel weights too heavy? Are there "sweepings" mixed in with the grain that we are selling? Do we see our material wealth as an end or as a means? How faithful are we as managers? How much do we need to pray the part of the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our debts"?

These are distressing thoughts. Thankfully, God's Word does not stop with Amos chapter 8 and Luke chapter 16. Three chapters later in Luke, we read of the redemption of a dishonest manager:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your

house today.”⁶ So [Zacchaeus] came down at once and welcomed [Jesus] gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

God knows that we cannot live up to His law or expectations on our own. As Jesus described to Zacchaeus, that was the point of his life on earth and his later death on the cross: to fulfill the letter of the law *and* the intent of the law in our place, and to remove the debts that stand between us and God. We can think of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter morning as the tearing up of a mortgage because it has been paid or the clearing of the liabilities column in a spreadsheet because accounts payable has no more invoices. Because of Jesus, we are in the clear.

So now what do we do? What is our Zacchaeus response to this gift of salvation? First, let us use the words of Amos to find and fix the weights and measures of our businesses, both those that use money and those that use other resources, like time, skill, or knowledge. We should aim for quality and honesty. We should seek out best practices for transparency, like having another person confirm inventories and money transactions, as a way to reduce temptation. We should participate in our professional organizations to hold each other accountable. We should reward integrity in our leaders and strive for laws that protect those with little power of their own. When we find mistakes, we should correct them as quickly as possible. All of these actions take time and energy, and at times, can bring discomfort and inconvenience. Let us ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to stay motivated and to know what to do.

Second, we should remember that the middle section of the Lord's Prayer has another line after "forgive us our debts": that line is "as we forgive our debtors." We need to remember that no one of us is immune to failure. There will be times when others have treated us with unbalanced scales or when they do not have enough silver to pay back what they owe. We know what it is to act out of fear and desperation. May God help us to be merciful and generous when we have the opportunity.

Finally, we should remember that God has given us resources to manage. We have a responsibility to learn how to invest and to use these resources. We must engage in the world, even as we need to remember that these resources are a means, not an end in themselves. Sometimes, past experience with not having enough to meet our needs makes money feel like the answer. The fear of scarcity is real and the quest for more money never seems to stop, even when we do have enough. At these times, may God calm our anxiety and teach us to rely on Him and His agents in our communities. Other times, we feel pressure from our friends and colleagues to seek after the status, power, and comfort that come with wealth. This can become a competition to reach infinity. The temptation to use our knowledge and skills to win is strong, causing us to forget that our knowledge and skills are intended to further God's kingdom, not to create our own kingdoms. May God help us learn to use our resources wisely, to take care of the needs of ourselves and of our families, and to be God's agents in the world to help others do the same. May we be found to be trustworthy when we have a few things and when we have many. Amen.

Let us pray.