

## INTEGRITY OR DISHONESTY

Interesting in hearing and following, the three readings for this Sunday can be a bit confusing in that they seem to honor disloyalty or cheating. In the first reading taken from the prophet Amos we hear him condemning the people for openly cheating their fellow citizens, and to make matters worse, this was condoned by all the authorities, civic and religious. In the second reading, Paul writes to his coworker Timothy asking him to be sure to pray for all those in authority that they might exercise their authority in a true Christian manner for the good of all their subjects. Then in the Gospel, Christ tells his listeners a parable of how a trusted steward is found to be squandering his master's property and that he is about to be fired. But before this happens, he makes deals with all those who owe his master various amounts of money letting them each reduce the amount owed, in this way hoping that in the future they will remember how the steward did this and they in turn will then help the steward survive after he is let go. It is then that Christ seemingly begins to honor the dishonest steward for what he has done. All this certainly seems to go against everything that Christ has been preaching to all the people.

One writer on these three readings brings it all together in the word integrity, a much forgotten virtue in the business world yesterday and today. Honesty, a companion of Integrity is a virtue not too often present in business practices and once greed raised its ugly head and began to gnaw away at integrity, note how the financial world got not only themselves and all of their customers but the whole nation and even the whole world into the present day economic meltdown. Now certainly Christ in no way was trying to justify the business practices of his time, of all the times before and way into the future.

Another writer on these three readings takes a much different approach centering on the praise Christ gives to the unworthy steward in figuring out a way to survive the results of his fraudulent stewardship. Christ ends this parable by saying "The children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The writer goes on to explain that in the time of Christ it was common practice for managers or stewards to overcharge debtors and to keep the extra bit as what we today would call a commission, a fee for their services. When the dishonest steward realized he had been caught in this practice, he then used his head to solve the problems he would now face. In lowering the amount owed he in fact was removing his commission and returning it to the client with the hope that the borrower would in turn be kind to him for saving them much money. It is the ingenuity of the steward that Christ praises and then adds that the children of this world are often wiser than the children of the Christian world.

In many ways this is true. A Christian will come up with a great idea of how to get people more Christ but in carrying out the idea simply does a poor job, seemingly turning people away from Christ rather than bringing them closer. God has given everyone talents and abilities along with basic intelligence and he expects them to use these gifts no matter what it may be they are doing or attempting to do. Over the years of being a priest I have personally seen many a good idea simply get lost because persons in charge only go half way and not the whole nine yards. Their intentions are perfect but their efforts just lack it. And all too often they want to do it all by themselves rather than share their vision and get others caught up in the idea.

One of the greatest pitfalls a person can encounter in trying to get a good idea working is self-serving. This is where that old saying comes very much into play: "He must increase! I must decrease!" These words were first spoken by John the Baptist. Once he baptized Christ in the river Jordan, he then realized that his mission had come to an end. He had faithfully carried out his work making way for the Christ. Once Christ did appear, then He was all-important and John instinctively knew he now had to step aside.

In the time of Christ the people knew how the system worked and with no power to change it, they simply lived with it. What Christ was saying was: "Use your heads, use your talents. Put them to use in helping me spread the word. But at the same time, never do anything dishonest. Immersed in my teaching and using your instincts, talents, and abilities, then together we can make a difference in our own little ways."

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