

Wealth and Possessions in the Gospel of Luke

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Introduction

Luke's gospel proclaims the arrival, through Jesus, of God's "new order".

In fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, God's reign and kingdom was to be characterized by justice and peace. In Christ, God's grace was being offered to all irrespective of wealth or status. This was "good news" particularly for "the poor" (4:18; 7:22) — for society's marginalized, oppressed, and impoverished.

The kingdom's arrival precipitated something of a crisis in that it demanded a response:

Repentance was needed — a turning to God and alignment with his kingdom values.

Luke emphasizes the radical nature of true discipleship with implications for one's use of wealth and possessions. He notes the varied responses of rich and poor to God's grace offered in the gospel.

Luke composed his gospel for "most excellent Theophilus" — probably a Roman administrator¹ and recent convert — to confirm what Theophilus had already heard and been taught about Jesus (1:1-4).

Luke seeks to reassure Theophilus that God's grace is for outsiders — for Gentiles like himself.

But Luke also seeks to challenge him: Theophilus is not to abuse his authority in typical "Gentile" fashion (cf. 22:25-26), but must use his position and resources in a kingdom appropriate manner.

Though written for Theophilus, Luke likely also had in mind "other such well-placed Christians of means in the early church — those few but important figures who came to Christianity from the upper rungs of the social ladder."²

¹ Compare with the use of "his Excellency" and "most excellent" when addressing the Roman Procurators Felix and Festus in Acts 23:26; 24:3 (24:2 in ESV); 26:25.

² David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), p. 307. That Luke's intended audience was primarily Gentile is implied by his explanation of Jewish place names in 4:31 and 8:26.

Blessed are the poor

“Blessed are you who are poor, ...” So begins Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49).

Three further blessings follow — for those who hunger, who weep, and who are hated/excluded/reviled.

The converse conditions call forth “woes” that echo the Old Testament prophets.

An important motif for Luke, seen here also, is the reversal of fortunes that God’s rule initiates.

Matthew (5:3ff.) omits the woes and speaks of internal dispositions, in contrast to Luke who “describes objective conditions that will be or are being reversed by God.”³

So, Luke’s “poor” are, quite literally, the economically impoverished (14:13, 21; 16:20).

God’s grace is particularly for them (4:18; 7:22).

Yet also intended are the spiritually poor — the “humble” who trust God (1:52), “sinners” (5:32), and “little children” (10:21). Even wealthy tax collectors, socially ostracized, are potential beneficiaries.⁴

The “rich” (6:24) is likely a reference to the Jewish religious leaders. Luke notes how the Pharisees loved money (16:14) and status (20:46). From their Old Testament reading, they regarded wealth as a mark of God’s blessing. Wealth, in first-century Palestine, was inextricably tied to social status and influence.

Such leaders viewed themselves as holy, and they kept apart from “sinners”.⁵ They despised the poor and disabled.

Jesus had harsh words for these elite, but showed love and compassion towards the poor and marginalized.⁶

Jesus our example

Humble circumstances attended Jesus throughout his life. He was born in an over-crowded house and, with the guest room full, was placed in a feeding trough near the domestic animals (2:7).⁷ His parents’ offering of turtledoves or pigeons indicates their poverty at this time (2:24; cf. Lev 12:8).

During his ministry Jesus had “nowhere to lay his head” (9:58) — no home. He and his disciples relied for support on some generous benefactors (8:3).

Jesus’ single-minded focus on his task, and his aloofness towards possessions, serves as an example for his followers. Yet he was no ascetic; Jesus and his disciples seem to have enjoyed company and dinner parties (5:33-34; 7:34).

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina commentary series, General Editor Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 111.

⁴ D.L. Bock, “Luke, Gospel of”. In: *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 506.

⁵ The very name “Pharisee” derives from a Hebrew word meaning “separated”.

⁶ DeSilva (*Introduction*, p. 298) notes that Luke, more than other gospels, reveals “the heart of God for the lost and for the poor.”

⁷ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament series, General Editors Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee, and Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 129.

Sell your possessions!

Fitzmyer suggests that in Luke's gospel there are two separate attitudes towards material possessions.⁸

First, there is a "moderate" attitude in which Jesus advocates a prudent use of wealth to give assistance to those who are less fortunate. Examples might include, "Give to everyone who asks of you" (6:30, MEV).

Second, there is a radical attitude "which recommends the absolute renunciation of all wealth ... Material possessions are liable to stand in the way of [one's proper response to Christ], and Luke is concerned that they do not."

We will examine Luke's second (radical) attitude first.

On a couple of occasions, Jesus told (would-be) disciples to sell their possessions.

The first such instance is related in Luke 12:33.

In context, Jesus is instructing his disciples not to be like the Rich Fool who hoarded wealth for himself (12:16-21).

That parable was itself a warning against all greed and covetousness, including the sort exhibited by the man who wanted a share of his brother's inheritance (12:13-15).

Disciples must not be anxious about material provision, for God knows their needs and cares for them (12:22-30).

Instead they are to seek and promote his kingdom (12:31). By selling everything they will demonstrate their trust in his provision. And they will be investing in safe and inexhaustible heavenly "treasure" (12:33).

One's "heart" or focus is wherever one's treasure is (12:34).

The second instance involves the rich ruler and his enquiry concerning eternal life (18:18ff.).

Responding to his claim to having kept God's commandments, Jesus tells him to "sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (18:22). As a man of extreme wealth (18:23) he could not obey.

Wealth is such a hindrance, notes Jesus, that divine intervention is needed for the rich (and indeed for anyone) to enter God's kingdom (18:24-27).

We can see here that the rich ruler's moral sense is inadequate. He views both Jesus and himself as being good.

He is himself good, having (supposedly) always kept God's law (18:21). And Jesus is a "good" teacher (18:18).

But Jesus responds by trying to raise his conception of goodness: God alone is truly good (18:19).

Yes, this man had outwardly kept God's law. But two commandments are conspicuously absent:

Commandment No. 1 prohibits worshipping someone or something other than God (Ex 20:3).

Commandment No. 10 addresses one's attitude towards material things — our desires and motives (Ex 20:17).⁹

This man was oblivious to having seriously transgressed both commandments. Money was his idol. Love to God and the neighbor were not central.

This man's unwillingness to sell all and follow Jesus disqualified him from God's kingdom and from eternal life.

⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of his Teaching* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 138.

⁹ Paul in Romans 7:7-13 explains how he came to the realization of his sinfulness through consideration (particularly) of the tenth commandment. Paul could claim to be outwardly "blameless" (Php 3:6). But this commandment specifically addresses one's desires and motivations, convicting all of us of our sinfulness.

Peter and the disciples respond to all this by seeking Jesus' affirmation of their own faithfulness: unlike the ruler, they have left all to follow him (18:28). While not necessarily agreeing with their self-assessment, Jesus does agree "that this is precisely what constitutes discipleship and qualifies one for eternal life."¹⁰

The "many times more" (18:30) promised to disciples in this world relates "to the new family within which 'those who hear the word of God and do it' (8:21) are embraced."¹¹ Eternal life is theirs in the world to come.¹²

In Luke 14:33, Jesus declares that discipleship is conditional upon giving up everything.

DeSilva comments, "Discipleship means laying no further claim to your possessions as your own, but putting them entirely into God's discretionary fund."¹³

True discipleship requires radical devotion; before committing, one needs to carefully count the cost.

In comparison with love for God, one must "hate" the members of his own family and even his own life (14:26).

A disciples must carry his "cross" (14:27) — the ultimate image of self-denial.

A poor widow who donated "all she had to live on" (21:4) into the temple treasury is commended by Jesus above those who donated much larger amounts.

Trusting God's provision

Jesus urged his followers to trust God for their needs (12:22ff.). In his model prayer, Jesus taught the disciples to pray for "daily bread" (11:3). "Bread" might suggest basic needs, but the Greek *artos* can denote "food" in general.¹⁴ "Daily" perhaps recalls God's provision of manna in the desert where each morning the Israelites gathered just enough for that day (Ex 16:21). Jesus demonstrated total dependence on God in the first Temptation (4:3-4), the issue being, "Will Jesus follow the leading of the Spirit and manifest unwavering trust in God to supply his needs, or will he relieve his hunger by exercising his power apart from God?"¹⁵

In Luke 5:1-11, Jesus calls his first disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Henceforth they will be "catching men" rather than fish (5:10). Luke notes their obedient response: "they left everything and followed him" (5:11).

Concerning the catch of fish, Geldenhuys¹⁶ suggests that in addition to demonstrating Jesus' supernatural power, this miracle showed his concern for the disciples' material needs, with the fish likely being sold for the support of the disciples' families. Jesus thereby taught that if they obeyed and entrusted themselves to him, he would provide for their material needs.

¹⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 658.

¹¹ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 659.

¹² The Greek term *aiōn* (Strong's G165) can mean either "world" or "age" depending on the context. Here, as in Luke 16:8 and 20:34-35, "world" seems to be intended.

¹³ DeSilva, *Introduction*, p. 325.

¹⁴ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 442.

¹⁵ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 194.

¹⁶ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament series, General Editors Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 182.

In a similar way, Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000 (9:12-17) demonstrated his ability to provide for those who followed him.

The raising at Nain of the widow's son (7:11-17) demonstrates Jesus' concern for a widow who has lost her only means of support. Luke notes that Jesus "was moved with compassion" for her (7:13, Greek text).

In raising her son, Jesus restored the widow to wholeness.

The 12 apostles and 72 evangelists sent out by Jesus were to be focused on their task and unconcerned about material provision (9:3; 10:4). Their reliance was to be on God's provision shown in the hospitality offered by some worthy household in each village.

The dangers of wealth

Luke presents wealth as something dangerous. With wealth comes the temptation to seek for one's security or status apart from God.¹⁷ Wealth hinders entry into kingdom (18:25).

But for disciples there is an ongoing danger: wealth can hinder one's single-minded focus on the kingdom.

One's focus is on his/her "treasure" — wherever that is (12:34).

One cannot serve both God and money; one or the other will be our master (16:13).

In the Parable of the Sower, the seed that fell among thorns represents those who hear the gospel, "but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature" (8:14). Starting out well, they become distracted.

Likewise, in speaking of his 70 AD coming, Jesus warns his disciples to be alert: "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap" (21:34).

Wealth and life's anxieties represent a perennial danger for disciples.

Use of possessions as an indicator of one's response to God's grace

We turn now to Luke's "moderate" attitude to wealth referred to earlier (on page 2).

Luke presents several examples of people's responses to God's grace.

Rather than total renunciation of wealth, these (positive) responses involve a prudent use of wealth that grants assistance to those in need.

John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3) prepared the people for the coming kingdom.

Luke, uniquely, shows John's concern for the sharing of resources and not extorting others as indicators of true repentance (3:10-14). A changed heart shows itself in concrete action.

¹⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), *Theology*, p. 113.

Green comments:

... the behaviors for which John calls are not themselves the basis for membership in God's covenant people; rather, they are manifestations of that relationship. To put it differently, these are the natural outgrowth of lives reoriented around the God who is himself merciful (cf. 6:36).¹⁸

So also Zacchaeus, in promising four-fold restitution and giving half of his possessions to the poor, is demonstrating true repentance (19:8). Thereby he shows himself to be a true (spiritual) son of Abraham.

The woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume is another positive example (7:36ff.).

This "sinner" — probably a prostitute — had a sense of being forgiven much and showed her gratitude through her extravagant action (7:47).

Jesus accepted her gesture, publicly declaring her sins "forgiven" and sending her away "in peace" (7:47, 50).

Luke notes how certain women financially supported Jesus and his disciples and even accompanied them on their travels (8:1-3).

Almsgiving and compassion for the poor

Luke emphasizes that God's grace is particularly for the poor. Thus, all who would align themselves with God's purposes need to identify with the poor through almsgiving or showing hospitality. The two are related:

"For Luke, almsgiving was an expression of genuine social solidarity, of embracing those in need as if they were members of one's own kin-group."¹⁹

Our love to others, including enemies, is based on God's own kindness to the ungrateful and wicked (6:27-36).

For the Pharisees, meals "were used to advertise and reinforce social hierarchy."²⁰

Invitations were expected to be reciprocated.

The Great Banquet parable (14:16-24) was addressed by Jesus to the guests at a dinner party hosted by a prominent Pharisee.²¹ Jesus had just spoken on the necessity of befriending the poor and disabled who could not repay, and the eternal reward for doing so (14:12-14). One of the guests had evidently misunderstood; his response implies that only certain privileged persons — elite persons like himself and his fellow guests — would be invited to attend God's kingdom-banquet (14:15).

But Jesus via his parable reinforces what he had just said about outsiders:

Those who were first invited will offer ludicrous excuses and will be finally excluded from God's banquet (14:24).

In their place outsiders will be invited and admitted — the poor and marginalized of Israel (14:21) and, later, Samaritans and Gentiles (14:23; cf. 13:29).

¹⁸ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 178.

¹⁹ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 471.

²⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 545.

²¹ While initially Jesus is responding to the one guest who had commented (14:16: "But [Jesus] said to him"), in his wrap-up Jesus is addressing all of the guests (14:24: "For I tell you [plural]").

Earlier at this dinner, Jesus had healed a man with dropsy (14:1-4).

Not normally welcome in such a setting, the diseased man was probably a “plant” by the host to test Jesus, who (Luke notes) was being carefully monitored (14:1).²²

Green²³ and Hartsock²⁴ suggest that the nature of the disease (insatiable thirst of a person whose body is already swollen by excess fluid) provides an apt image of the dinner guests themselves: money-hungry Pharisees bloated by their wealth!

In healing the man, Jesus implicitly offers also to them the prospect of spiritual healing.

Jesus, while dining with another Pharisee, challenged his host’s notions of “purity” (11:37ff.).

Pharisees saw holiness in terms of external piety and separation from sinners, but inwardly they were “full of greed and wickedness” (11:39). Though concerned with tithing they neglected the true purpose of tithing — the care of the needy (11:42; cf. Dt 14:28-29). The cure for such greed, says Jesus, is to give alms to the poor (11:41), resulting in true purity. Such almsgiving “collapses the distance between the social elite and the needy”²⁵

The Parables of chapter 16

Both parables of Luke 16 are concerned with aiding the poor.

The first, **the Parable of the Shrewd Manager** (16:1-8a), is considered the most difficult of Jesus’ parables.

What is going on, for example, with the manager being commended for his dishonest behavior?

Well, to start with, we should note the striking verbal parallels between 16:4 and 16:9 (being received or welcomed into houses/eternal dwellings). These connect the parable with Jesus’ monetary teaching in 16:9-15.²⁶

Just as the manager responded cleverly to his crisis by making friends who would show him hospitality, so also are disciples (“the sons of light”, 16:8b) to use “unrighteous wealth”²⁷ to gain friends who will welcome them into heaven (16:9).

For Jesus’ first-century hearers, the crisis involved the kingdom’s arrival and its demand for repentance — which effectively amounted to a “visitation” by their Lord calling them to account.²⁸

The manager’s cleverness consisted in his (dishonestly) reducing the amounts owed by the debtors, thereby obligating them to reciprocate his “gift”. In contrast to such “worldly” behavior (16:8b; cf. 14:12), disciples are to use their wealth to make friends of the poor who cannot repay in kind. Such almsgiving (or debt-cancelling) will lead to being welcomed into “the eternal dwellings.”²⁹

²² Note that, after healing the man, Jesus sent him away. The man was not one of the guests!

²³ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 547.

²⁴ Chad Hartsock, “The Healing of the Man with Dropsy (Luke 14:1-6) and the Lukan Landscape,” *Biblical Interpretation* 21-3 (2013): 341-354.

²⁵ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 471.

²⁶ See Dennis J. Ireland, “A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13),” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989), p. 316.

²⁷ Literally, “unrighteous mammon” (also in 16:11) — perhaps called such because it is so often ill-gotten or used for ungodly purposes.

²⁸ Johnson, *Luke*, p. 244.

²⁹ Disciples will be welcomed thus when their wealth “fails” (16:9) — presumably meaning when one leaves it behind at death.

In Luke 16:10-12 Jesus notes that the way one handles “unrighteous wealth” reflects our inner disposition and determines whether or not we should be entrusted with something greater — with “the true riches”, presumably meaning some spiritual or kingdom-related responsibility, either in this world or the next.

Johnson notes that Jesus’ final saying (16:13):

... shows the profound seriousness with which Luke regards this symbolic use of possessions.

“Mammon” in 16:13 is personified as an idol, the service of whom is the rejection of God.

If giving away possessions in alms-giving secures a place with God, the worship of possessions and a clinging to them ... means separation from God.³⁰

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31) shows that actions in this life have eternal consequences.

There will be no welcome into “eternal dwellings” (cf. 16:9) for those indifferent to the needs of others.

The Rich Man represents the Pharisees who had just sneered at Jesus for his monetary teaching (16:14).

Lazarus was laid each day at the rich man’s gate — he’s a crippled beggar, hoping for some morsel.

Hatcher comments on how “Lazarus (‘God helps’) is aptly named [since] no assistance is forthcoming from any other quarter.”³¹ The rich man himself has no name, and Green suggests that “this is Jesus’ way of inviting his money-loving listeners to provide their own!”³²

Interestingly, the rich man’s crime was not his wealth *per se*, for Abraham was also wealthy.³³

His (and his brothers’) crime involved a failure to “hear Moses and the Prophets” (16:29-31) — failure to obey the Old Testament requirements to love one’s neighbor through alleviating his poverty.

Luke’s “reversal motif” is starkly realized in the final destinies of these two men.³⁴

Further Parables

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-37)

This parable shows the type of love needed in order to earn eternal life.

The question posed by the lawyer (in 10:25) is identical to that of the rich ruler in Luke 18:18; both men seek to know the requirements for inheriting eternal life.

In response, Jesus points both men to the requirements of God’s law.

³⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, p. 248.

³¹ Karen M. Hatcher, “In Gold We Trust: The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31),” *Review and Expositor* 109 (Spring 2012), p. 279.

³² Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 606.

³³ Genesis emphasizes the great wealth of Abraham (Gen 13:2) as well as of Isaac and Jacob (Gen 26:13; 30:43), and regards such wealth as God’s blessing (Gen 26:12)

³⁴ Jesus’ teaching here on the afterlife reflects the first-century Jewish belief in separate abodes for the godly and ungodly dead.

The following is an extract from *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, entry for “Hades”, by Timothy R. Phillips:

“Usually the details of parables should not be pressed to teach doctrine. In this case Jesus’ vivid description of the basic conditions of the godly and ungodly dead is indispensable to the parable’s point. ...

Hades is the place where the wicked dead reside and are punished. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man experiences torment in Hades. This is the intermediate state, for the bodily resurrection and the final judgment are still future. Jesus’ point is that Hades foreshadows the rich man’s final judgment. Similarly, Lazarus rests at Abraham’s side, connoting the joyous abode of the righteous dead (Luke 16:23).” (Via the Bible Study Tools website: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/hades>.)

But as this parable shows, the type of love required — unconditional and sacrificial, as demonstrated by the Samaritan — reveals the impossibility of obedience as a means of acquiring eternal life. Justification must instead come as God's gift to us — through God's forgiving grace and the crediting to us of his own righteousness (cf. 18:9-14).

Perhaps wishing to justify not loving everyone, the lawyer had asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (10:29). Neither the priest nor the Levite manifested love: The priest viewed the risk of corpse-defilement (cf. Lev 21:1-4) as outweighing his duty to aid the injured man. The Levite was worse — he discerned that the man was alive but decided against helping him (10:32). But the Samaritan, without regard for the man's identity, "had compassion" on him (10:33). He alone performed God's law of love — the sort of love that is to be shown even to one's enemies (cf. 6:35). A love that may necessitate utilizing one's wealth for alleviating suffering (10:35).

The Parable of the Ten Minas (19:11-27)

This parable is not so much concerned with the use of wealth as it is with kingdom-service to Christ. The servants (the apostles and others) are to work diligently while awaiting their Lord's return.

Possessions in Acts

Luke's sequel (the book of Acts) shows how Jesus' teaching on wealth was put into practice in the early Christian community. Luke notes concerning the post-Pentecost Jerusalem church:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.
(Acts 2:44-45)

Luke emphasizes their unity of purpose and mutual love:

All the believers were of one heart and one soul, and no one said that what he possessed was his own. But to them all things were in common. With great power the apostles testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on them all. There was no one among them who lacked, for all those who were owners of land or houses sold them, and brought the income from what was sold, and placed it at the apostles' feet. And it was distributed to each according to his need.
(Acts 4:32-35, MEV)

The account of Ananias and Sapphira (Ac 5:1-11) shows that this sharing was voluntary, not imposed (Ac 5:4). In Acts 6:1ff. we see how the Jerusalem church looked after its widows through a daily distribution of food. Later, Gentile Christians in Antioch held a collection for the needy Jerusalem church (Ac 11:29).

Luke also notes individuals who utilize their resources for the poor: Barnabas (Ac 4:36-37), Tabitha (Ac 9:37), and Cornelius (Ac 10:2). And Peter and John, though lacking any money, “give” what they can to the crippled beggar — healing in Jesus’ name (Ac 3:6).

Contemporary application

Luke’s treatment of wealth and possessions offers a radical challenge to modern western Christians. Unconsciously we have imbibed materialistic attitudes, and even a sort of “prosperity gospel” mentality. But rather than seeking security in wealth, we ought to recall Jesus’ injunction to trust God and seek first his kingdom. We need to affirm the self-denial intrinsic to true discipleship. And we need to love others as we love ourselves — to live simply so others can simply live! Living in a “global village”, our neighbor in need may well be someone on the opposite side of the world.

Jesus, in Luke, warns that our eternal destinies depend, to a degree, on the way we use our resources. Such warnings are especially pertinent for those of us who emphasize salvation by grace alone. We need divine assistance to put these things into practice.

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