

Sermon notes

Background notes on
four passages in Luke's Gospel



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Introduction

The sharing of possessions in Acts is not simply a description of what happened but a theological statement of how things should be

'Luke consistently talks about money – but he does not talk about money consistently!'

It is often said that there are over 2000 verses on wealth and possessions in the Bible. A good percentage of those verses are found in the gospel of Luke for wealth is one of his key themes. By a rough count of verses something like 11% of Luke touches directly on wealth and possessions. When we look at the material that is unique to Luke the theme of wealth is even more sharp in focus.¹ Only Luke tells us of the generosity of Zacchaeus, the barns of the rich fool, the tension between Dives and Lazarus at his gate and the worldly wisdom of the shrewd manager. Where Matthew records, 'blessed are the poor in *spirit*' Luke's version not only says, 'blessed are the *poor*', he also adds 'woe to you rich'! Luke, like Matthew, uses Mark's account of the preaching of John the Baptist as his source material. However, only Luke records the advice given to those who come for baptism (Luke 3:10-14) which are explicit instructions about sharing possessions and earning income in a moral manner.

Sharing possessions

Also interesting is the treatment of wealth and possessions in the book of Acts. Luke presents a picture of the early church holding possessions in common - and of those who pretended to do so. Yet a reading of later parts of the Acts story and the epistles indicates that individual Christians also retained some private property. Indeed this mirrors the practice in the Essene community at Qumran where property was both shared and retained. The sharing of possessions in Acts is not simply a description of what happened but a theological statement of how things should be. Indeed the later chapters of Acts lose the emphasis on sharing and have a much greater stress on almsgiving (9:36, 10:2, 4, 31, 11:27-30, 20:35 and 24:17).

Perspectives

As Luke T Johnson observes, 'Luke consistently talks about money – but he does not talk about money consistently!' Unlike Mark, Luke casts the command to the rich ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor as a specific command to an individual. Yet the same command is also given to all disciples (Luke 12:33) and is reflected in those passages which portray a renunciation of personal possessions (5:11, 14:33, 18:28-29). Luke records Jesus' teaching that the poor, not the poor in spirit are blessed (Luke 6:20) while adding also 'woe to you who are rich for you have already received

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your comfort' (Luke 6:24). Yet this judgement on wealth and the command to divest oneself of all possessions stands in contrast to those women of substance whose giving supported Jesus' own ministry (Luke 8:1-3) and his evident use of the homes of his followers (4:38-39). Levi throws a party *after* he had left everything to follow Jesus (Luke 5:27-30) while Zacchaeus is commended for giving away just half of his wealth (Luke 19:1-10). The command to lend money (Luke 6:34-35, Matt 5:42) assumes, of course, that we have something to lend! The point is not that Luke's gospel is self-contradictory on the subject of money but that following Jesus faithfully around money is much richer than giving away our possessions.

Sharing meals

A key theme in Luke is the meal fellowship that characterised Jesus' ministry. In the Greek/Roman world of his day meals were commonplace, serving to cement social ties and build reciprocity. Not all who attended such meals would be social equals. The Younger Pliny is careful to note that despite the inequality of guests at his meals everyone is served the same quality of wine contrary to the practice of some to serve wine according to social status.

Note that in Luke Levi gives a 'great banquet' for Jesus (Luke 5:27-32) while the meals in Luke 7:36-50 Luke 10:38-42 are unique to Luke and there is no Synoptic parallel to setting the Pharisaic woes the meal-setting of Luke 11:37-54 or the eating references of 13:26 and 14:15. Key parables unique to Luke contain meal references: the lost sheep (15:1-6), the lost coin (Luke 15:7-10,) and the prodigal son which concludes with a feast while Zacchaeus repents in the context of a meal.

For Luke, Jesus' shared meals are sacraments of fellowship which blur the social distinctions between rich and poor and also serve to sustain the poor. (Luke 14:1-14). His point is that the gospel requires that discipleship recognises the temptations of wealth and the social divisions that inequality of wealth creates. Christians are called to meaningful and practical discipleship around their wealth and possessions. The precise shape of that discipleship is not proscribed but it is characterised by generosity which celebrates justice and not simply personal piety.

ⁱ Luke 1:51-53; 3:10-14; 6:24; 8:1-3; 10:1-16; 10:38-42; 11:41; 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 15:8-10; 15:11-32; 16:1-9,14; 16:19-31; 17:28-30,32; 18:9-14; 19:1-10; 21:34-36; 22:35-38

Seasons of Giving

It is possible to approach this sermon series by viewing each passage through the lens of the four seasons. These sermon notes do not explore this angle but it is the approach is reflected in both the bible study, *Seasons of Giving*, and also in the all age resources which accompany this preaching series. It offers a new perspective on these well known passages and allows them to speak afresh to us.

Autumn: this is the season of change. Life does not stand still, nor do our dealings with money: a new job or a lost job, a baby or children leaving home, a bereavement. Each change can mean that, like the rich ruler in Luke 18, we may hear a new word of God which does not deny past faithfulness but calls us to deeper discipleship and a new challenge to the place of money in our lives.

Winter: this is the hard season of cold, of life lying dormant and little obvious growth. So we ask, 'what is it that make generosity hard for us?' 'What are the things that hold us back from giving more than we do?' For the rich fool in Luke 12 there was a coldness of heart, no acknowledgement either of the God who gives all we have nor the needs of those who live in the community around us, or indeed half way across the globe.

Spring: this is the season of new life, of promise and in this season we can ask, 'what prompts us, moves us to generosity?' For Zacchaeus in Luke 19 Jesus' self invitation to his home was a springtime of the heart as he responded to grace with generosity and a desire to get his financial house in order

Summer: this is the season when nature is at its richest and we ask, 'what does good giving look like?' For a poor widow in Luke 21 giving in the place of worship meant a sacrificial giving which challenged even the outwardly generous giving of the wealthy and which challenges us to proportional giving but also to justice and righteousness in all our dealings with money.

Viewing these passages from the perspective of the seasons was inspired by a beautiful modern day parable from perhaps a rather unlikely source. Oscar Wilde's short story, *The Selfish Giant*, explores generous living as the seasons reflect the heart of the giant who first protects and then shares his garden having encountered a small child who many years later he will meet again.

This story and accompanying resources are explored more fully at [The Selfish Giant](#) in the Annual Review strand of Giving in Grace.

Luke 18:18-30 (NRSV)

The Rich Ruler

A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother."'" He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.'

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' He replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God. Then Peter said, 'Look, we have left our homes and followed you.' And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.'

Suggested readings

Dt 15:1-11 ■ 1 Tim 6:3-10

The rich ruler is the only person in the gospels to turn down a direct invitation to follow Jesus. The story connects discipleship and wealth in a powerful and uncompromising manner.

Although we talk of 'the rich, young ruler' the gospel writers describe him differently. In Matthew he is denoted as young only after his first introduction. In Mark he is simply a man. Here in Luke he is a 'certain ruler'. In all three gospels we do not actually know he is rich until after Jesus challenges him to give his wealth away.

Like Mark, Luke places this story immediately after Jesus command to the disciples to 'suffer the little children' like whom we must all enter the kingdom. The faith of a child and her entry into the kingdom is contrasted with the struggles of the rich to meet the challenge of discipleship. The ruler comes to Jesus with a central concern about future salvation: the phrase 'eternal life' in verses 18 and 30 frame the whole story. However, one who seeks future salvation is challenged to live out that salvation in the present and with reference to the difficult area of money and possessions.

While using Mark's version Luke edits the story to emphasise the ruler's wealth and also to make the story less personal, allowing him to make a more general point about wealth and discipleship. Luke completely omits Mark's account of a man running up to and falling down before Jesus and also any reference to Jesus loving the man. Instead, Luke's account starts with his status as a ruler. The Greek word 'archōn' carries negative connotations in Luke (1:51). He may have been a magistrate but the word is often linked to synagogue leadership (8:41, 49; 13:14) and his own religious claims suggest he was a religious ruler. The man addresses Jesus as 'teacher'; (see also 10:25 and 12:13) but it is the epithet 'good' that is challenged by Jesus. In asking, 'why do you call me good?' Jesus is not making a theological statement about himself but possibly simply pointing out that God is the only ground of salvation. However, it may be that the epithet reflects social convention by which the ruler seeks similar affirmation in return from Jesus. In the context of little children entering the kingdom appeals underwritten by wealth and status can have no substance.

The ruler both knows and keeps the commandments; the story infers nothing else. The commentators' note that the commandments recited by the ruler contain significant differences between the three

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gospels. In Mark the form of the commands is different to the Greek translation of the OT (known as the Septuagint). Luke follows Mark's wording but he inverts the order of the first two commands and he completely omits the fifth command in Mark. Matthew does the same as Luke yet he also uses the Greek OT form of words which Mark does not use.

The significance of this is that the form of the commands mentioned by the ruler may reflect some very early teaching or catechism of the church. There may well be similarities of language between this passage and the sharing of wealth in early church. *Diados* in v22 and *ta idia* in v28 are found also in Acts 4:32-35. Each of the commands touches upon *relationships* within the community of God and help us understand Jesus challenge to the ruler to give away all his possessions.

To the commands of the Law Jesus makes an additional requirement: sell all you have and give to the poor. Luke again reworks Mark's text. He loses Mark's opening instruction, 'go' and places the word 'all' (*panta*) emphatically at the start of the command. He also changes Mark's 'give to the poor' for the word 'distribute'. It may also be significant that Luke omits the phrase, 'if you would be perfect'. He may be wishing to avoid the notion that discipleship around money and possessions belongs to a higher or different calling than ordinary discipleship - as indeed it has been so understood sometimes in the history of the church.

For Luke, here as elsewhere (12:32-34 and 14:33), the giving away of wealth is for a purpose: to give alms to the poor. Such a purpose reflects the concerns of the OT law (Ex 23:11, Dt 15:1-11) of the prophets (Amos 5:11-27), wisdom literature (Prov 14:31; 19:17) and is coherent with Jesus own ministry manifesto (Lk 4:16ff). The issue, as noted elsewhere, is not the intrinsic evil in wealth but its gravitational pull. There is something about generous giving that frees us from that pull. Giving to the poor helps us to re-engage with others and such engagement with people is what is required if we are to be free to join this new company of Jesus' disciples.

The challenge in this story is both to relinquish the claim of wealth on our lives in order to be free to follow Jesus and to meet the needs of others. Freedom to follow, generosity and compassion help build the relationships that are at the heart of the new community of Jesus disciples. In Luke some disciples are called to total renunciation, others to use their wealth wisely. No distinction of merit is drawn between the two.

Interestingly, Mark tells us that the ruler turned away or went away sad and therefore Jesus addresses his words about the difficulty of the rich in entering the kingdom directly to his disciples. But Luke does not mention the walking away. As with the command to give everything away so here also the rich ruler is addressed directly by Jesus the second person singular. However, because Luke has lost Mark's more personal details Luke seems to be less concerned with the drama of one man's personal decision than with underlining the

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challenge of discipleship to wealth. In v28-30 Peter's words, 'we have left everything and followed you' consciously mirror the twin challenge to the ruler of v22: sell all and follow me.

What matters is not simply the future salvation sought by this ruler but living faithfully in the present around money. We do not have to sell all before we can follow Jesus. The nuances around financial discipleship in Luke and indeed in the whole of scripture are far richer than giving everything away. But discipleship requires both attitudes *and* behaviours that release us from the claims of wealth and status and orientate us to others and their needs. To inherit life in the future we must live this way in the present. Generous, baggage free living is a natural discipleship response to being called by Jesus.

Stewardship application

Thomas Aquinas writes about how a soldier will grease his sword and scabbard at all times so that it does not rust. This way he can draw his sword quickly when the enemy is before him. Aquinas uses this illustration to describe 'liberality' which sounds like generosity but is more akin to what today we would call financial capability, the right and proper planning and spending of money. But the purpose of this virtue of liberality is that when occasion demands we are *free to give generously* to those in need, a higher virtue. For the rich ruler money had rusted his soul such that when the challenge of discipleship and generosity is before him he is unable to draw his sword.

Leaders

We think that money opens doors for us, very often it does. But, as in this story, it can also close doors. As one writer says, 'This young man is not the hoarder in barns, the prodigal playboy, or one who disregards the poor in Luke's other stories (Luke 12:13-21; 15:11-32; 16:19-31). He has kept the law from childhood, yet he walks away from Jesus with a broken heart, knowing full well what he is leaving behind. Alongside his spiritual formation his relationship with money has shaped his attitudes and ultimately compromised his ability to follow Jesus.

Many of us Christians today struggle to connect faith and money. We learn to read the bible, say our prayers, worship and serve. But around money our decisions are largely driven by a consumer society and shaped by our 'money stories'. Our money stories are those accumulated memories and experiences that make up our emotional DNA around money and shape our actions and attitudes. The challenge is to reflect on how many of our life choices are driven by financial considerations rather than informed by the gospel challenge to faithful living and giving around money. We should reflect on our money stories, be aware of the power of money in our lives, whether we have much or little.

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Planned givers

What we do with our money is a normal and formative part of discipleship. The rich ruler is challenged to give his money away in order to find freedom to follow, freedom to engage with others. Such freedom is one of the joys of generous giving. If we want to release the grip of wealth our lives we need to release our grip on our money. We do that by giving generously. It may start as a command, as a discipline but it quickly becomes a joy, a way of life.

Generosity sets us free and that freedom includes openness to the needs of others and the blessing that they can bring to us. This quote from Henry Drucker is used elsewhere in Giving in Grace but bears repetition: *In this act [of giving] we disenthral ourselves by overcoming our slavery to possessions. We demonstrate that there are values in the world more important to us than our own selfish aggrandisement. True giving is an act of self-liberation. It becomes one of the major achievements of our life.*

Plate givers

It is entirely understandable that we read this story about a rich man and assume that when we talk about the rich the bible means someone other than me! But we should not forget that for Luke just having two cloaks was worthy of a challenge from John the Baptist! (Lk 3:10-11). For most of Luke's readers and for millions upon millions today life is a hand to mouth existence. Hundreds of millions live on less than £1 a day. These uncomfortable, challenging, awkward passages about the rich are talking about us! Rather than fearfulness that the gospel requires us to become poor there is a challenge in this story to make radical generosity a key aspect of our discipleship, not a sideshow to the main event of personal salvation. We can make a huge difference to the lives of other people by our own generous giving and that such generosity also transforms our own lives as we share generously with others. The challenge to the ruler is also consistent with Jesus' commands to give wealth away (12:32-34 and 14:33) and the practice of the disciples in 5:1, 28 18:28.

Luke 12:13-21 (NRSV)

Parable of the Rich Fool

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?"

Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Suggested readings

Eccl 2:17-26 ■ Col 3:1-11

This parable of the rich fool is one of those many money themed passages found only in Luke's Gospel. The greater the mass, the greater is the gravitational pull of wealth on our hearts and our lives (Randy Alcorn).

A request from the crowd for Jesus to settle a disputed inheritance shifts the focus of Jesus teaching in chapter 12 from faithfulness under persecution to faithfulness around money. His teaching moves from his disciples (12:1) to the crowds (12:13) and then back to the disciples in 12:22). Yet the words used by Jesus blur this transition. 'Life' is used in 12:15 with reference to the crowds and then reappears several times in 12:19-23 with reference to teaching to the disciples. Similarly, 'possessions' in 12:15 used to the crowds becomes 'goods' in 12:18 and then back to possessions in 12:33 but here used with disciples. There is no warning against greed for the crowd that is not applicable to those who follow as Jesus' disciples.

Judge and divider

The request for arbitration by Jesus is not unusual. Moses sets out the rules concerning inheritance (Deut 21:15-17, Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:7-9) and their interpretation was a matter for religious leaders. The firstborn son had a double portion of inheritance but all sons were entitled to something. At issue here seems to be a withheld or a disputed inheritance – familiar to us in, say, disputed wills - and the stakes are high. Land is wealth and social status. This request may be a plea for simple justice but given the place of wealth in Luke and, as discussed below, the use of 'greed' in verse 15 more likely this is about wanting more land. In either case, Jesus is not denying the importance of good financial arrangements but addressing deeper issues.

The gravitational pull of wealth

The questioner addresses Jesus as *Teacher*, a title used elsewhere in the Gospel (cf Luke 7:40). But while the title acknowledges Jesus' authority the request seeks to secure Jesus' support for his position regarding the inheritance. Perhaps we should note here the subtle, gravitational pull of wealth by which we invoke faith in support of our beliefs or practices around money and possessions. The issue which Jesus seeks to address is not that of rights but a much deeper question. Where does our centre of gravity around money really lie: with the Lordship of Christ or in our needs, desires or ambitions?

In Jesus' reply the use of 'man' is not discourteous (cf John 2:4) but

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serves to resist Jesus becoming 'triangulated' into a personal dispute. Indeed in Jesus' use of "judge" (*kritē*) and "divider" (*meriste*) there may be an echo of Exodus 2:14 where Moses is challenged as to his authority after killing the Egyptian. Jesus does not countenance any role in solving disputes - and neither should stewardship leaders.

All kinds of greed

Verse 15 marks the transition to the parable with Jesus warning against, 'all kinds of greed' (*pasēs pleonexias*). Now *pleonexia* is a strong word, used in the Greek OT to translate a Hebrew word denoting unlawful material gain. The word group appears 19 times in the New Testament, 15 of which are in Paul and in all but one case means striving for material possessions. In both Eph 5:3 and Col 3:5 the word is linked with idolatry. The presenting issue here, therefore, seems not to be the proper sharing of an inheritance but greed and the seduction of money causing tension between brothers. Indeed, the plural phrase, 'all kinds of greed' recognises the many, varied and deceptive ways in which our relationship with wealth can distort our attitudes. A reasonable hope and expectation of inheritance can become an entitlement, a gift becomes a demand. Such is the nature of money. It is indispensable, weaving itself into the fabric of life and so, 'as a means to so many different ends money becomes an end in itself'. (John Hull)

The heart of verse 15 is the contrast between life and possessions. The phrase, 'the abundance of possessions' (*perisseuein tini*) is difficult to interpret. It may mean to have in abundance or possibly to have more than enough. The paradox here, and why money is such a difficult discipleship issue, is that we cannot have life without 'possessions', expressed here by a participle of the Greek word *huparchō* with the meaning, 'what one has'. Our material bodies are how God made us and how we express ourselves within our world. The issue is not one of having or not having possessions but attitude and orientation.

Watch and guard

Accordingly Jesus instructs the crowd to both watch out for (*orate*) and guard against (*phulassesthe*). Both verbs are instructive. There is firstly a need to watch, to be aware, to be mindful of how easily we can become hostage to the aspirations of a consumer society. Secondly, the warning to 'be on our guard' suggests both alertness and action to be taken. What might those practical actions be?

What shall I do?

It is often said that there is no criticism of wealth creation in this parable or any suggestion that it is ill gained. Indeed a strand of the wisdom tradition sees wealth as the blessing of God and a reward for diligence and labour (Prov 10:4, 28:19). The criticism in the parable is only of the self centred attitude of the farmer. However, this is to miss the seductive nature of accumulated wealth. The notion of

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'rich' in Luke has negative connotations (1:52-53, 6:24) and here the farmer seems to be an exemplar of greed. His bigger barns store both surplus grain and "my other goods" (v18).

The heart of the story is the question in verse 17: *'What shall I do?'* That is, in a nutshell, the heart of stewardship and precisely the question we should ask! In the face of such abundance and in a world where millions are poor, how should I live? What principles should guide my decision making? The problem in our parable is that the rich farmer answers that question with no reference to anything or anyone outside of himself.

Luke captures this powerfully in the way the farmer poses the question, "What shall I do...I shall do this" (*ti poiēsō...touto poiēsō*) The use of soliloquy, talking to yourself, is a literary way of gaining insight into the heart, the inner thoughts of a person (Lk 16:3, 20:13). Six times in v17-19 the personal pronoun 'I' is used along with 'my barns', 'my grain' and 'my goods'. Even his plans for the future are self centred. The trinity of eat, drink and be merry comes from the OT (Eccl 2:24, 3:13, 5:18) where it has the sense of comfort for the worker and is the gift of God. But here (as in The Wisdom of Sirach 11:19) there is no sense of gift, only of self reward. This farmer has secured his own future without any reference to God who in OT thinking is the ultimate owner and giver of the land.

Concern for others

Missing in this story is not only any reference to God but also any concern for the wider community. Although the wisdom tradition values diligence, hard work and wealth it also recognised the ultimate giftedness of all prosperity (Eccl 5:19) and with that the requirement to protect the poor (Dt 15:1-18; 24:10-15) But for our farmer the wider community are invisible, nothing is shared, no gift is recognised. Note that an understanding of generosity arising from this passage is wider than giving alms to the poor. It is about justice and righteousness in our business dealings.

It is for this that the farmer is a fool. The word references neither intelligence nor faith. It is used in the OT for those who deny God in their practice (Ps 14:1, 53:1; Prov 14:1). He addresses his soul as though he were its ultimate owner, speaking of its comfort and its future. Outwardly religious; inwardly self referential and blind to the needs of others and the right honouring of God with our material possessions. . The word "soul" is taken up by God while "this very night" stresses immediacy and urgency. There is an ironic contrast between the abundance stored in his barns and the little time that he has left. The verb "required" (*apateō*) is in the third person plural as a way of speaking about God or the angel of death and stresses that this life is loaned not owned. There is a greater claim on this man's life.

The issue is not having but holding too tightly and our reluctance to be generous. Such foolishness diminishes our life and that of others.

When we give away in a regular, planned way what the world sees as ours we are making a powerful statement that what we have belongs not to us but to God and he has a first claim on it through our giving.

Stewardship application

In the mid-1800s, some prospectors in the California gold rush who thought they had made their fortune learnt that their discovery was not gold but iron pyrites: fool's gold. Our farmer's money made a fool out of him and can do the same to us. Our modern consumer culture is not just about having more than enough; it's about having more than others. The issue is not having but holding too tightly and our reluctance to be generous. Such foolishness diminishes our life and that of others.

Leaders

Personal discipleship in the area of money is not exhausted by careful management of money, nor by tithing. God is the ultimate owner of all that we have and wealth becomes our centre of gravity when we come to believe that what we have is ours. We cease to receive with gratitude and give with joy from what is gifted to us. This assertion of ownership lies at the heart of what Paul calls the love of money. As philanthropic thinker Paul Shervisch notes, Christian thinking about money is not a renunciation of wealth but the renunciation of self. We are caretakers, stewards but never owners. How might we feel if asked to list our most valued possessions and then sign them over to God? The hard message is that ultimately our mortality shatters the illusion of ownership.

Planned givers

We live in a consumer society. Highly professional advertising shapes us to expect an affluent lifestyle while even innocent programming around finding a new home can create a sense of disillusionment with what we have. The one way communication of TV is especially powerful, creating the illusion that people are more affluent than is actually the case. We need to find practical ways by which we can practice Jesus warnings to be mindful and to guard ourselves: critical awareness as we watch and read, the disciplines of contentment and gratitude, care with credit and a workable household budget are some ways forward.

Plate

The invisible people in this story are the poor who depend on the rich farmers grain and his practice of justice in business. Very often our hearts are moved to enormous generosity by scenes and stories of tragedy that play out in our newspapers and our TVs. Such generosity is part of what it means to follow Jesus and it is nurtured by the practical discipline of giving in a planned manner, through envelopes or standing orders. But there is something else. When we give away in a regular, planned way what the world sees as ours we are making a powerful statement that what we have belongs not to us but to God and he has a first claim on it through our giving.

Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

The story of Zacchaeus

Suggested readings

Isa 1:10-18 ■ Acts 4:32-36

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

The story of Zacchaeus is familiar, so much so that we can miss the significance that Luke attaches to the story. The story comes at the end of the so called 'travel narrative' which forms the central core of Luke's Gospel. Right at the start of the travel narrative three would be followers of Jesus are challenged 'as they moved along the road' (Luke 9:57). The motif of travel or of journey for Luke represents discipleship, hence his description in Acts of early Christians as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2, 19:9).

As the other bookend to the travel narrative Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is a model of what real discipleship is all about and the story captures three important themes in Luke's gospel. The first theme is Luke's concern to connect discipleship with issues of wealth and possessions and explored in the introduction to these notes. The second theme is that of salvation. Luke alone in the synoptic gospels calls Jesus 'Saviour' (Luke 2:11, Acts 5:31, 13:23) and the heart of the Zacchaeus story is Jesus' declaration that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus. We note that for Luke salvation is a present reality not a future event although Luke 21:28 does allow a future element. The final theme is that of repentance and conversion. The noun 'repentance' (*metanoia*) is used once in Mark and twice in Matthew but five times in Luke's Gospel six times in Acts. The verb is used twice in Mark, five times in Matthew but nine times in Luke's Gospel and five times in Acts. Conversion (the verb is *epistrephein*) is used once in Matthew and Mark but a total of 13 times in Luke-Acts. Repentance, conversion and discipleship around money are the proper response in Luke to hearing about Jesus, a response modelled by Zacchaeus.

Positioned at the end of the travel narrative the story of Zacchaeus picks up earlier themes in Luke's gospel. As with Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35ff.) a man seeking Jesus is hindered by a crowd. The rich ruler (*archōn* in Greek; (Luke 18:18ff) would not give his money away and follow Jesus. Here Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector (*architelōnēs*, unknown in secular Greek) who shows great generosity. The despised nature of tax collecting and the potential for fraud is reflected in the challenge to honest practice in Luke 3:10-14, material found only in Luke, and underlies the contrast in the parable of the humble tax collector and arrogant Pharisee in Luke 18:9ff. The reader knows that Jesus is a friend of tax collectors but Zacchaeus is also a wealthy man and in Luke's Gospel the rich don't do heaven well. Zacchaeus is a man of contradictions.

The nature of discipleship is that it is something we do for ourselves but not by ourselves.

Found by Jesus

The one who seeks Jesus is himself sought and found by Jesus. Bartimaeus wanted to see Jesus, as does Zacchaeus. Yet looking up in to the tree Jesus sees and invites Zacchaeus to share a meal with him. The nature of discipleship is that it is something we do for ourselves but not by ourselves. The story conveys a sense of both purpose and urgency. The English translations "it is necessary" or "I must" come to your house today do not quite capture the force of the Greek *dei* which expresses divine purpose, Luke also neatly captures in grammatical form the urgency in the instruction to Zacchaeus, "hurry and come down..... so he hurried down" (*speusas katabēthi....speusas katebē*). We should note also the use twice of the important word 'today' (*sēmeron*), used twice. In verse 5 it expresses the immediacy of the invitation Jesus extends to Zacchaeus. In verse 9 'today' is used theologically to declare the presence of salvation in Zacchaeus' home. This is the word that is used in Luke 4:21 at the Nazareth sermon which inaugurated Jesus' ministry in which he declared good news to the outcast and marginalised.

What did Zacchaeus actually promise?

Although this is one of the best known and loved Gospel stories there is a key question of interpretation at the heart of this story. This is verse 8 where, traditionally, Zacchaeus promises to give half his wealth to the poor and repay those he has defrauded. Some scholars believe that verse 8 is actually an addition by Luke himself and does not belong to the original story. Certainly without verse 8 the story still has a clear flow and meaning. If Luke did insert it then it serves to underline the importance that Luke attaches to the issue of wealth and possessions.

However, assuming that verse 8 is integral to the story there is still a question of how to understand it. The difficulty is that the verbs in verse 8 are both in the present tense "give to the poorgive back four times as much" (*didōmi...apodidōmi*). The traditional reading of the story treats these verbs as futuristic presents, translating them as, "I will give... give (or pay) back." On this traditional reading having received Jesus into his home Zacchaeus is a now changed man. His commitment to putting his financial affairs in order and being generous to the poor is evidence of his change of heart.

However, an alternative way of reading verse 8 takes the *present* tense of the verbs at face value, Here Zacchaeus is not saying *what he will do in the future* but declaring to Jesus and the critical crowd *his current practice*. If Zacchaeus finds that he has inadvertently defrauded anyone he repays four times as much and his current practice is to give half of his possessions to the poor. On this reading Zacchaeus' repentance is not part of the gospel story and Jesus declaration that salvation has come to his house is a vindication of a godly son of Abraham marginalised by religious leaders and popular judgement.

Luke makes a clear link between how we relate to money and possessions and our discipleship.

Generosity is not a precondition of grace but a result of grace finding us. At the heart of all our thinking about giving is not the language of obligation but that of invitation.

On balance the traditional reading seems preferable. The force of 'today', the declaration of salvation and Luke's characteristic concern with money as part of discipleship suggest the response of Zacchaeus is more appropriate to a generosity that demonstrates repentance than a vindication of current practice. Note also the way the term Lord is used in Luke. From its first occurrence in Luke 7:13 Lord (*Kurios*) increasingly takes on the meaning of Jesus authority. Here Zacchaeus addresses Jesus as Lord in sharp contrast to the rich young ruler for whom Jesus is a "good teacher".

The point is that this Lordship of Jesus extends to and is directly related to the realm of our money and possessions. Whichever reading of verse 8 we choose Luke makes a clear link between how we relate to money and possessions and our discipleship. The challenge is simple and blunt. In the realm of our money and possessions, who is Lord, self or Christ?

Repaying fraud

The OT law is very explicit about what to do in the event of fraud. Lev 6:2-5 stipulates repayment of the original amount plus 20%. Exodus 22:1-4 provides for fourfold or five fold restitution for a stolen and slaughtered animal and double for an animal still alive. Zacchaeus offer of fourfold restitution matches or exceeds the most generous provision of the law. His is not a calculated generosity but the response of one who is gripped by grace and for whom financial integrity is hard evidence of a changed heart.

Stewardship application

In the film *Sleepless in Seattle* the central character describes meeting his recently deceased wife in this way, 'it was like coming home to a place I had never been before' In his own distinctive way Luke captures in this story of Zacchaeus the sense of homecoming, welcome, purpose, belonging, acceptance and love.

Leaders

Generosity is not a precondition of grace but a result of grace finding us. At the heart of all our thinking about giving is not the language of obligation but that of invitation. Maturity in giving will never grow as a response to financial need but when it is rooted in a spirituality of grace and response. That is why in Philippians 4:15 Paul talks about a partnership of both giving and receiving. This story challenges us to ask about what motivates our generosity. Is it the financial needs of our church, the benefits we receive from its ministry, our joy in its sacred space or is it the experience of receiving grace, of meeting Jesus? Have we made that connection which Zacchaeus instinctively made between being gripped by grace and responding with grace filled generosity?

...to be a faithful steward of money is about our lifestyle, our integrity and right dealings with what is entrusted to us.

Planned givers

Generosity for Zacchaeus was expressed not only by giving half his possessions to the poor but in repaying those he had defrauded. Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal giving, however generous. Giving everything away is not the only model of giving and financial faithfulness in the Bible. Indeed it can be an abdication of responsibility. For Zacchaeus, and for us, to be a faithful steward of money is about our lifestyle, our integrity, our right dealings with what is entrusted to us. As it is often said, stewardship is as much to do with the 90% that we retain as it is the 10% that the Bible invites us to give.

Plate givers

It is no accident that Zacchaeus meets with Jesus over a meal. Such meals were characteristic of Jesus' ministry, as noted in the introduction. Meals were important in Jesus' day and for us food is an important part of the welcome we extend to others and of the shared life of our families, including our church family. We might even say that a meal is a kind of parable of the Kingdom of God in action.

We can give generously of our wealth, we can do right with our wealth and we can also share our wealth with others in two ways. The first is by extending hospitality to others, a rich and warm welcome and food is one of the ways we do that. A warm and welcoming church with facilities for all age ranges and needs is key to that welcome but it also costs us money. Secondly we can share, as Zacchaeus did, by giving to the needs of others and that is what our church seeks to do in our mission giving outside off the walls of our church. The story of Zacchaeus is not about generous giving into a vacuum but about open hands and open hearts to the community, to the poor (Dt 15:1-11)

Luke 21:1-4 (NRSV)

The Widow's mite

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

Suggested readings

Neh 10:31-39 ■ 2 Cor 8:8-13

Few passages in the bible speak quite so directly about giving as this story of a widow's gift of all that she had. What implications does this have for our stewardship teaching?

This story has been taken to prove that giving is a matter of the heart and that God is not interested in the actual amount that we give. It is a short step from here to justify both a small gift when more is possible and to justify secrecy in giving which finds confirmation in Jesus' teaching about giving in secret.

Yet this story begins with Jesus positioning himself where he can see what people give, as indeed can others. The action takes place in the temple treasury where, it seems, there were a number of rooms for keeping valuables. There were also 13 trumpet shaped receptacles for offerings of different types in a room off the court of women. It is possible that offerings were declared verbally to the priest and this is how Jesus knew what was given. There is nothing in the story to suggest that his knowledge of the gifts was in any way supernatural.

It is worth noting at the outset that the privacy of much of our giving practice is in sharp contrast to the joyful, processional and public nature of offerings in many parts of the world wide church, including many here at home in the UK.

The immediate context and the story itself Luke finds in Mark's Gospel; Matthew omits it completely. Immediately preceding the story is the trenchant criticism of the religious leaders and their love of show and status. The passage concludes with the suggestive text, 'they devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers' (Lk 20:47a). Indeed the money related stories of temple cleansing and the widow's gift may almost be understood as bookends to passages in which Jesus is critical of the religious leaders.

In retelling the story characteristically Luke focuses on the giving of the rich. In Mark Jesus watches the crowds giving their *chalkon* or copper coins and notes many rich givers putting in large amounts. In Luke, by contrast, Jesus looks up and sees *only* rich givers. However, interestingly Luke drops Mark's stylistic reference both to 'many' (*polloi*) rich and their large sums (*polla*) and instead speaks of their *offerings* (*ta dōra*). Luke also changes Mark's description of the widow as poor (*ptōchē*) with the word 'needy' (*penichra*) but leaves the former word on the lips of Jesus. These changes are surely more than stylistic and are intended to underline the worship context in which the action takes place and to contrast show and status of the

Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal generosity. .

The act of generous giving is always a prophetic challenge to inequalities of income and opportunity.

wealthy and religious with the quiet piety and poverty of the widow. Earlier commentators suggested that the two *lepta* which the widow gave was the minimum that could be given but apparently a single *lepton* was acceptable as a gift. If this is true, the widow could have given less than she actually did. In addition the change from poor to needy in v2 may just be intended to suggest that the widow did have some resources on which to live. The point of the story is not, therefore, that the widow gave absolutely *all* that she had and that there is virtue only in divesting ourselves of all that we have. Rather there is a contrast between the sacrificial gift of a poor widow with the showy giving of the rich which is part of a seeking after status.

The word 'widow' in 21:2 is anticipated by the preceding passage which criticizes the teachers of the law for devouring the houses of widows. It is not clear what is meant by 'devouring houses'. It may be that the scribes charged a fee for legal advice or that they abused hospitality offered to them. Alternatively, it may be that the scribes were mismanaging the properties of widows having been appointed by their former husbands to care for an estate on their death. In any event, the contrast in Luke's story is powerful: the scribes as legal experts on the one hand, the widow as a vulnerable person in society on the other. In the OT the widow was expressly protected by the Law (Exodus 22:23; Dt 10:18, 24:17, 21; 2 Kings 4:1-7) yet here they are the victims of those charged with interpreting the law to God's people.

Given the immediate context in both Mark and Luke we should be slow to interpret the story of the widow's gift as model act of sacrificial, personal generosity and piety. Some commentators take the view that Jesus is implicitly not contrasting showy wealth and pious generosity but actually criticizing the very system by which care for the temple takes all that the widow has. Such a reading is strengthened by the observation that nowhere does Jesus explicitly approve of the widow's gift.

This is probably to read too much into the story. Wealth and status in Luke are often in the firing line and the temple in Luke is treated positively. Nor should we evacuate the story of personal meaning or negate the piety and generosity of the widow's gift. The gospel calls us to radical giving and in this gift the widow is the exemplar of discipleship. Yet as a widow she is to *receive* care and protection yet here those charged with this care and with the wealth to make showy gifts are those accused of devouring widow's homes. Discipleship around money is not exhausted by personal generosity. There has to be a challenge to our attitudes, to giving in proportion to our income, to our love of external things and our commitment to justice and ethical dealings with money.

Stewardship is more than the generous, personal response of the individual to what God has done in and for them. The act of generous giving is always a prophetic challenge to inequalities of income and opportunity. The personal generosity of the widow who gives all she has is a standing judgment on those who give much but retain for

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themselves more than enough to exhibit show and status.

There is a real sense in which our giving is truly measured by what have after we have given. In that sense the widow has indeed given a great deal more than the wealthy. It remains true that as a percentage of income those on poorer incomes give more than those on larger incomes

Stewardship application

Sir Moses Montefiore was once asked how much he was worth. Pausing for a moment Sir Moses spoke an amount of money. Surely he was more wealthy than that commented his questioner to which Sir Moses replied, *'You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. You see, we are worth what we are willing to share with others.'*

The truth is that we cannot detach talk of the giving heart from the gift that reveals the heart. Our giving is a measure of our heart and what we give to others reveals our hearts. No gift, however, is ever a proxy for justice and righteous dealing with money and with other people.

Leaders

There is a challenge in this story to connect our personal commitment to generosity to shared commitment to justice and righteousness around money. In a world of poverty our giving is more than a personal expression of love and gratitude. Giving is countercultural; generous giving is a prophetic act. It challenges our preoccupation with wealth and calls us again and again to remember the poor and to act with justice in all our dealings.

Planned givers

The widow's gift was small in cash terms amount but it was entirely consistent with the condition of both her income and her heart. And here is the challenge for us today. Can we say the same about our own giving – that what we give reflects both what God has given to us and our relationship with God?

Plate givers

There is always a danger of driving a mental wedge between our talk of being generous and the gift that we actually give? Do we too easily talk of a generous attitude while actually giving a gift that is inconsistent with generous living?

Such O my soul, are the miseries that attend on riches. They are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed with danger and lost with grief. It is hard to be saved if we have them and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we love them but we shall love them inordinately. Teach us O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage conscientiously the goods we possess, and not covetously desire more than you give to us. (Augustine sermon 133)