

Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ

Lecture 15

Jesus' Teaching concerning Money and Possessions

Introduction

- It is astounding that approximately 15% of all Jesus' teaching had to do with money and possessions – this was the topic about which Jesus taught more than any other subject
- Who were the majority of people listening to and receiving Jesus' teaching? The very poor.
- In what context? Not in the context of a democratic society or a society with a large middle class – rather in a society with a rich, dominant, oppressive ruling class (minority) and a poor and oppressed majority with very few personal rights – a few “haves” and many “have-nots”
- However, the issue of money and possessions is never just a problem for the rich – *materialism* is not about how much money you have in your bank account or how many possessions you own – every man in every society around the world has a strong pull towards materialism – and that is exactly what comes through strongly in Jesus' teaching – the poor can be as materialistic in their minds as the rich – setting one's mind and heart on “having” things or having more things, on becoming secure and comfortable in this world – *materialism is rather an issue of the heart* – see Mark 7:20-23 (“greed”); Col.3:5
- Jesus' teaching builds on the OT teaching on this subject – especially what we read in the wisdom literature such as Proverbs concerning riches and poverty – this particular theme or topic is one aspect of Jesus' teaching that Luke highlights
- We can also say that Dr. Luke was a champion to the poor, the dispossessed, the weak, the little people in society – see Luke 12:1-34; 16:1-31; 18:18-34; 21:1-4 – it's interesting to ponder why this might be the case – certainly he had come under the strong influence of Paul's teaching and preaching as one of Paul's most favourite and constant travelling companions (N.B. all the “we” verses in Acts) – cf. Gal.2:9-10 – also Luke would have been impacted by Paul's passion to help the believing Jews in Jerusalem in their time of great financial and material need

– hence the “collection” he organised from among the Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor which he and his companions took to Jerusalem to distribute to the poor in Jerusalem – cf. Luke 6:20 & v.24

What then are the fundamental aspects of Jesus’ teaching concerning money and possessions?

The heart of Jesus’ teaching concerning money and

possessions:

Luke 12:13-34:

vs.13-21 (cf. 1 Tim.6:6-10)

- Jesus’ response to a man in the crowd who asked Jesus to step in and fix up a family property or inheritance dispute
- Jesus’ response indicates that His main business isn’t on that level – “Who made Me an arbiter or judge in such matters?” asks Jesus
- Jesus goes straight to the heart of the issue – the greed of the human heart – covetousness, the desire to have what other people have for one’s own personal gratification and pleasure – Jesus says: Beware of every form of greed! – did Jesus make this comment because He could see greed in this man’s heart? Possibly – Jesus uses this as a teaching moment rather than just slamming the questioner for asking the question
- See that Jesus directs this admonition to everyone in the crowd, not just to the questioner – He says that they should all should recognise the presence, danger and threat of this sin in their own hearts
- The parable is very much directed to a rich man who (like many Jewish businessmen) has his mind and heart set on building up his business – one can hardly imagine that Jesus was critical of his being industrious or wanting to make his business a success – the problem was not with becoming successful or even rich but rather because his mind was totally consumed with his desire to get for himself more and more riches which would then give him more and more power and more and more comforts and earthly securities (see v.19) – cf. Jesus’ teaching in the parable of the sower in Luke 8:4ff (v.14 “The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by

life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”) – money is neutral; it's the *love* of money that is the root of all evil (cf. 1 Tim.6:6-10)

- Jesus says that God called him a “fool” – not a “fool” as we might use the term but according to the understanding of “foolishness” in the OT wisdom literature = morally corrupt, not wise – the man who loves God and lives for eternal values is “wise” whereas the man who lives for himself and for the things of this world (i.e. make such things his consuming passion or “idol”) is “foolish” because of the consequences, including forgetting God as he pursues a life of riches so that he isn't ready to give an accounting of his life and actions to God (v.20), striving to get a name for himself and power through his riches and possessions (cf. God hates pride that is so often associated with being rich and owning a lot)
- Jesus' main application point – see v.21 – lay up treasure in heaven; be rich towards God (see James 2:5) – make this your focus in life above all else

vs.22-34

- Jesus then addresses the issue of anxiety which is a related problem:
 - for the rich – anxiety over the barns and their possessions, how their money is faring on the stock exchange et al
 - for the poor – will they have enough food for tomorrow? or clothes to put on their children? etc.
- Jesus teaches His disciples that anxiety over such earthly matters as food and clothing are the Father's concern – the call is to trust in Him and to throw off anxiety which is a form of unbelief – anxiety and faith do not mix (v.28) – notice how God takes care of the fields and birds of the air et al and we are of far greater value in His sight (made in God's image) than all the birds, even the smallest and most common sparrow or the ravens – He also compares God's ability to “clothe” the lilies of the field which He does with such awesome glory – *“Of how much greater worth are you to these!”* Jesus' method of teaching is to drive home a fundamental truth by comparison or contrast – look at these everyday examples (some of which were probably right around Jesus as He taught) and then knowing that we are of far greater worth to God, trust in Him to provide all our needs
- Jesus also focuses His teaching upon *covetousness* = what man “seeks” after from his heart (the flow on temptation: look, seek/desire, take/have) – that is, what he seeks from his heart – see vs.29ff – Jesus then teaches His followers

instead of just seeking after food, clothes, houses et al, His followers were to entrust all their human needs to God (not to be irresponsible and do nothing) and to seek after God's kingdom (v.31; "kingdom" means God's absolute sovereign rule over our lives and hearts – to let God be God, to let Him dictate whether we are rich or richer or poor or poorer – let Him also have sway over all our possessions, our money et al) – an admonition with a promise: "And all these things shall be added unto you."

- There will always be the struggle to follow Jesus' teaching because we will fear lest we won't have enough or will be in some way lacking materially in the here and now – such a belief is a denial of faith in Christ – so Jesus says: Don't be afraid – God will provide all your needs
- Jesus then goes on to spell out another consequence – sell your possessions and give to the poor – obviously He is speaking to people who have possessions to sell, to people like this rich man who asked Jesus this question – the essential teaching is that money and possessions are all a part of this world that falls apart in some way or another (Second Law of Thermodynamics) – wears out, loses its value – give them away now, don't just store them up for the future as they will be totally wasted – let others enjoy the benefits in the here and now

Luke 16:1-31:

vs.1-13:

- One of the most important principles for the interpretation of a parable is that each parable is intended to teach one primary truth – it distorts the meaning of the parable when all the incidental details are slavishly examined and an application forced
- **vs. 1-4** "Manager" (*oikonomos*, v. 1, often tr. "steward") is a broad term for an employee or agent who was entrusted with the management of funds or property. Mismanagement was possible, as in this parable, because strict accounts were not always kept. When word came from others--"What is this I hear about you?" (v. 2)--he had to "give an account" (*apodos*, cf. [Matt 12:36](#); [Heb 13:17](#); [1 Peter 4:5](#)). The manager's plight (v. 3) was that he had a respectable "desk job" but could do little else. His decision, therefore, is made with a view to his personal security after his dismissal. The word "welcome" (*dexontai*, v. 4) will be dealt with in the comment at v. 9.

- **vs. 5-8a** *As already noted, the bills may have been written in terms of commodities rather than cash, perhaps in order to hide the actual amount of interest. The amounts owed were large; the wheat is said to be equal to the yield of about one hundred acres (Jeremias, Parables of Jesus, p. 181). The difference in the percentage of reduction may be due to the difference in the relative value of the two commodities. The actual value of the reduction in each case has been computed to equal about five hundred denarii, roughly eighty dollars, or sixteen months' wages for a day laborer. The meaning of v. 8a, as noted above, is not that a manager is commended for an act of dishonesty but that a dishonest manager is commended for an act of prudence. (EBCNT = Zondervan's Expositor's Bible Commentary of the New Testament, electronic version)*
- J.Jeremias (The Parables of Jesus, pp.181-182)
 - An owner of a large estate who lives abroad – represented by a steward or manager
 - No bookkeeping or audit was known in the East (see v.1) – the manager's actions only became known via the grapevine!
 - The debtors are either tenants who have to deliver a specified portion (half, third or a quarter) of the yield of their land in lieu of rent, or they are wholesale merchants who have given promissory notes for good received
 - Amounts:
 - 100 baths of oil = 800 gallons = the yield of 146 olive trees = debt of about 1,000 denarii (*denarius* = a Roman silver coin representing a worker's daily wage)¹

¹ 6.75 δηνάριον, ου n: a Roman silver coin equivalent to a day's wage of a common laborer—'denarius.' ς φειλεν α τ κατ ν δηνάρια 'who owed him a hundred denarii' Mt 18.28.

The practice of translating terms for coins with specific monetary values has differed widely in different languages at different times and in different contexts. One of the most serious problems has been the recent rapid inflation which has taken place in many parts of the world and which has thus made traditional renderings relatively meaningless or even absurd. For a number of years the silver content in an ancient denarius was equivalent to twenty cents U.S., but the value of silver has changed appreciably within recent times, and therefore any calculation based upon the value of silver content in ancient coins is misleading. Furthermore, in ancient times silver coins had proportionately far more buying power than the equivalent amount of silver would have today. Therefore, a number of translators have attempted in some measure to relate coinage to buying power, or perhaps better, to earning power. For example, in Mk 6.37 the reference to 'two hundred denarii' is sometimes translated as 'the equivalent of 200 days' wages' or even 'eight months of a laborer's wages.'

In Mt 18.28 the reference to 'a hundred denarii' is designed primarily to indicate the contrast between the enormous sum owed by one servant in contrast with the very small amount owed by the fellow servant. In this instance the contrast may be expressed in terms of 'thousands of denarii' in contrast with a 'few denarii.' In such a case the equivalent coinage may be turned into a local currency, for example, 'thousands of dollars' in contrast with a 'few dollars.' In a number of cases translators have attempted to avoid any specific reference to a particular coin and have simply spoken of 'silver coins' or 'gold coins' without indicating particular values. Under such

- 100 cors of wheat = 120 quarts = yield of 100 acres = debt of about 2,500 denarii
 - The above meant very heavy obligations & debt
 - “The remission (400 gals. of the oil and 24 quarters of the wheat) is approximately equal in the two cases, since oil is much dearer than wheat; its value in currency would be about 500 denarii.” (p.181)
- The manager or steward has the promissory notes in his own keeping. He lets the debtors make their own alterations or perhaps lets them make out fresh notes – hoping that the fraud will go unnoticed because it is in their handwriting
- **V.8:** Why was the manager commended? On the surface “Because he had acted shrewdly” – but does the text say that his shrewd was dishonest?
 - EBCNT: *But was his shrewd act not dishonest? The text does not say that the manager's action in writing off the debts was dishonest. Rather the word "dishonest" may be used here because it serves a double purpose. First, it refers back to his initial act of mishandling the master's funds. Yet even one who had thus acted could do something commendable. Second, it introduces a chain of words using the same root. "Dishonest" (adikos) is recalled by "worldly" (tes adikias) in v. 9 and reappears twice in v. 10 and once in v. 11. Ellis suggests that adikia is a "technical theological expression," equivalent to a term used at Qumran describing the character of that age. When adikia is applied to people, it is because "they belong to this age and live according to its principles" (Ellis, Gospel of Luke, p. 199).*
 - Footnote: *9 adiki/av (mamonas tes adikias, "worldly wealth," lit., "the mammon of injustice" or "of unrighteousness") is probably a Semitic expression used idiomatically to signify money. Adikias probably carries the thought, found in the Qumran writings, of that which characterizes the godless world (Ellis, Gospel of Luke, p. 199).*
 - *The reason the manager was now commended, though he had previously acted dishonestly, may be that he had at last learned how one's worldly wealth can be wisely given away to do good. This assumption is reasonable if Fitzmyer's suggestion (Semitic Background, pp. 175-76) is correct that the amount taken off the bills in vv. 5-7 was not part of the debt*

circumstances a marginal note is sometimes employed in order to indicate the relative value of the currency. (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains)

owed the master but rather represented the interest the manager himself was charging. Though this would have been contrary to Jewish law ([Exod 22:25](#); [Lev 25:36-37](#); [Deut 15:7-8](#); [23:19-20](#)), charging a poor Jew such interest (actually usury) was often rationalized. The bill would be written in terms of the commodity rather than in monetary figures, with the interest hidden in the total. By law a master could not be held accountable for illegal acts of an employee. So the master in the parable was in a position to view the manager's activities objectively. If this explanation is correct, the manager's transaction was not illegal. In any event, the master would lose no money if the amount forfeited was simply the interest the manager would have gained. Furthermore, such a forgiveness of debts would hardly have hurt but would probably have helped the master's own reputation. Therefore, the master admires the manager's shrewdness. The manager knew his job and reputation were gone because of his previous mishandling of funds. He needed friends; and, by foregoing the customary interest, he won friends among the creditors. Jesus then uses this story to show that the "people of the light" could also accomplish much by wisely giving up some of their "worldly wealth."

- **EBCNT:** "... Jesus uses the story of the manager's actions not to commend graft but to encourage the "prudent use of material wealth"."
- **EBCNT: vs. 8b-9** The contrast between those who belong to (lit., "are sons of") this age and those who belong to the light (v. 8b) is familiar from Qumran (1QS 1:9; 2:16; 3:13; cf. [Eph 5:8](#)). Christians do not belong to this evil age, but they can nevertheless make responsible use of "worldly wealth" (v. 9, cf. Notes). The "friends" may not refer to any particular people but simply be part of the parable's imagery (Danker, *Jesus*, p. 174). Usually they have been understood as being poor people, for whom Jesus (and Luke also) had a deep concern, and to whom we are here urged to give alms (cf. [12:33](#)). "Worldly wealth" should not be stored up for oneself (cf. [12:21](#)), since one day it will be "gone."
- **Vs.10-12:** Jesus' teaching focuses upon faithfulness (N.B. Some commentators question whether these words of Jesus occur in this same setting or are from another teaching setting):
 - A call to faithfulness in small things as one proves one's readiness to be entrusted with large details by being faithful in the smaller issues of life – cf. righteous in small matters and righteous in large details (v.10)

- A call to be faithful in the use of one's money ("unrighteous mammon") as it has a definite connection in spirit with the way we handle "spiritual riches" (v.11)
- A call to be faithful in managing other people's belongings – once again one's preparedness to be entrusted with more worldly wealth is shown by how one manages one's own wealth and possessions (v.12)
- **V.13:** Jesus' teaching in this Scripture is basically identical with the same Scripture in Matt.6:24 – one can say that Mammon or worldly riches has the very real potential to become one's "master" (*kyrios*) – for the follower of Jesus, the true Master says that it is impossible to serve two masters, hence a decision must be made – one cannot have Jesus and serve Him and at the same time serve Mammon – his loyalty to the one must take precedence over the other at all times – whenever Mammon becomes the all-consuming "director" of one's affairs, this infers that a choice has been made (even though unconsciously) against Jesus and eternal riches and for Mammon and temporal riches – one cannot serve both – this certainly must be considered one of Jesus' foremost teachings on wealth and possessions, i.e. what the attitude and stance must be for His followers

vs.14-17:

- The Pharisees' reaction to Jesus' teaching was to sneer and mock – Luke adds the commentary that they were "lovers of money" (cf. 2 Tim.3:2) – Jesus knew their hearts and exposed them – once again it is clear that money is not the issue but the LOVE of money, the desire to get and to have, greed in the heart – sometimes people are very successful in covering it up – even in Christian circles greed and a desire/love for money is to be found, even among Christian leaders – cf. Demas (2 Tim.4:10 "because he loved the world") – this certainly was a very real problem in Judas Iscariot's life so that he kept helping himself to the disciples' money – John 12:4-6
- They received an equally strong response from Jesus:
 - Jesus accuses them of trying to justify themselves before men – make themselves appear to be outwardly very holy and good and righteous – whereas in their hearts, there was darkness, greed, self-seeking, self-serving – the motives of their hearts even in their religious observations and rituals were "unrighteous" and "unholy" – not for God's purposes but for their own – what a huge danger this is for all Christian workers –

spiritual workers, God's servants, are in a very vulnerable position because they hold "spiritual authority and power" over people's lives and so they can misuse, abuse that spiritual authority for their own good and self-aggrandisement – this is one of the lowest forms of sin in God's sight and certainly one that meets with God's strong condemnation, i.e. to use one's spiritual authority and position to attain wealth for one's self

- The call to all is to keep examining one's heart – cf. Ps.139:23-24 – to let the Spirit of God bring the evil hidden away in the heart to the surface so that it can be confessed, forgiven and thus swept away in the depths of the sea – see Micah 7:19

vs.19-31:

- This passage should probably be read and taken literally – there is no word in the opening verse to indicate that it is a parable
- A comparison between the fate of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus:
 - The condition of the two men:
 - The rich man living in great splendour, wealth and gaiety – v.19
 - The poor man in dire need, covered with sores, barely surviving because of his abject poverty – sitting at the gate of the rich man begging and hoping in vain even for a few crumbs – vs.20-21
 - The rewards of the two men:
 - The poor man died and was received into Abraham's bosom – secure and at peace – v.22
 - The rich man died and went to Hades (the world of the dead) – in great distress and pain – vs.22-31
 - Dialog with Abraham – focus of v.25 is upon how he lived during his life in this world and how it affects what he experiences in the world to come – the rich man received good things – NLT: "you had everything you wanted" (versus the bad things that Lazarus rec'd – NLT: "Lazarus had nothing") = in the broader context, such a message speaks about what the rich man did with his riches, how he used them for his own personal gratification rather than for himself – he certainly didn't act with compassion for the poor nor with generosity – he had already received his reward (Jesus often

makes this point: “They have received their reward” [Matt.6:2], meaning, their only reward is what they may enjoy in this short-lived life versus those who suffer in this life but then enjoy eternal rewards in the life to come such as was Lazarus’ joy)

- Application – riches and wealth are given in order to become a blessing to others – God expects us to be good stewards of our earthly riches – how one blesses others through one’s wealth will clearly affect one’s life in the hereafter – see Matt.25:34-40

Luke 18:18-27:

- Jesus’ encounter with a rich, young ruler with the question about how he could find or obtain eternal life – he was a good living person who had been seeking to keep the commandments (sincerely) – in Mark’s Gospel we read that when he responded to Jesus’ question correctly, Jesus looked on him with love (Mark 10:21) – he had lived a good life as far as keeping the commandments was concerned – interesting that in Jesus’ reference to the commandments (Luke 18:20), no mention is made of the Tenth Commandment
- Jesus once again sees in the man’s heart, the *heart* of the issue – his riches were for him his first love, the idol of his heart – continuing to answer this man’s question (showing the relationship between having eternal life and following Jesus), Jesus tells him to go away and sell all he has and give it away to the poor in order that he might have treasure in heaven – it is clear that earthly treasures are a serious barrier to a person’s having and enjoying heavenly treasures – the message is not that all people should give away all their riches (such an understanding is not supported by other passages in the Gospels or elsewhere in the NT) – rather that if a person desires to follow Jesus, he/she must give Jesus the first place in their hearts and lives – their first love (cf. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart”) – in Jesus’ teaching, wealth and possessions are a serious and potentially dangerous rival, so before coming to follow Jesus, one must surrender one’s rights to one’s wealth, to distribute and use it as one desires apart from Christ – to follow Christ, is to place one’s self under His absolute and totally Lordship which includes all that a person is and all that a person owns

- The response of Jesus' disciples – this teaching is immediately seen as being far too strong and demanding by Jesus' disciples – Jesus' response:
 - Yes, it is hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God – for a rich person because of his riches thinks and acts like a “king” – whereas to be a citizen in God's kingdom is to place one's self under the rule of King Jesus – if He says, “Sell all....” then that's the way it must be for He knows what is best and why such a command is given – teaching by hyperbole (verse 25) re. “eye of the needle” - Note: *The idea of applying “the needle's eye” to small gates seems to be a modern one; there is no ancient trace of it. The Lord's object in the statement is to express human impossibility and there is no need to endeavor to soften the difficulty by taking the needle to mean anything more than the ordinary instrument.* ²
 - “Who then can be saved?” (v.26) The disciples' question goes back to the original question raised by the young ruler – Jesus comforts them that what seems impossible with man is possible with God (vs.26-27) – on the outward appearance of things, it appeared to the disciples that such a teaching would shut many people out of God's kingdom – but Jesus responds by teaching them that though it might appear impossible to man to enter God's kingdom, nothing is impossible for the God who changes men's hearts, even the most proud in their worldly wealth – cf. Acts 17:4,12
- Jesus then responds to the concerns and anxieties of His disciples – the demands that Jesus is making leave them wondering about their own future – so Jesus pauses to make a special application of His teaching for His disciples (vs.29-30) – they had given up everything, including the possibility to become rich and comfortable in life – some are indeed asked to give up everything in order to serve Christ – from all outward appearances, they might have been left with nothing, totally dependent upon the kindness and generosity of others – they may be tempted to look around at the well-to-do-ness of others, how secure they appear in this world and regret their choice to follow Christ – so in these final verses, Jesus tells them that they have received a very special reward and in the life to come will receive even greater rewards – so His beloved disciples to whom He would commit the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel should keep comforting

²Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. 1996. *Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words* . T. Nelson: Nashville

themselves in this truth and not feel either jealous of those who have so much more or who have status and power in this world offered by their wealth

Luke 21:1-4:

- Through this incident, Jesus praises the giving and generosity of the very poor – their tendency must have been to look at how little they had to give to God and so feel as if it had no worth – whereas the very rich had an equal problem in that they were able to give large amounts to the temple giving them the feeling of being more noble and of greater worth in God’s sight
- Jesus uses this teaching moment simply to teach His disciples (and through them God’s people in all ages) that the monetary value or the size of the gift to God isn’t the main point in God’s eyes – rather it is a giving of one’s all – the widow (who had no status, very poor, barely surviving) gave everything she had to God and received God’s blessing in return – whereas the rich giving large amounts, with fanfare, noticed by many, received little blessing from God
- Once again the key issue is not the amount or the size of the gift but rather the state of the heart – when we give generously and with a truly thankful heart as David did (see 1 Chron.29), whether our gifts be with large or small, God is honoured and we are blessed – cf. Prov.14:20-21 (*“The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.”*); 22:9 (*“A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.”*); 28:20 (*“A faithful man will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.”*)

These notes were written and prepared by Rev. Graham M. Roberts, M.Th. for the B.Min. “Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ” course at the Asian College of Cultural Studies – February 2004.