

Acts 2:44-45

Introduction

Last week, in Acts chapter two, we saw how “all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need” (2:44-45). If Moses could say to Old Covenant Israel, “[T]here *will be* [or ‘there *is to be*’; future (LXX)] no needy person among you,” then Luke can now say of this “end times,” eschatological people, “For there *was not* [iterative imperfect] a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). To what are we to attribute this astonishing new reality? We attribute it, on the one hand, to the Spirit poured out and to the resulting “togetherness” of Messiah’s people. But that wouldn’t be the whole story. Remember what Jesus said to the disciples before He ascended into heaven:

- Matthew 28:18–20 — “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to keep all that I commanded you...**”

There were many commands that Jesus gave to the disciples as our new, eschatological “Law-Giver.” But it’s Luke, more than any of the other Gospel writers, who emphasizes the commands of Jesus concerning wealth and possessions. We might remember from a sermon in Acts 1 (vv. 12-26) that it’s Luke—more than Matthew and Mark—who emphasizes the necessity of *prayer* for the coming of the kingdom. In the same way, the theme of wealth and possessions as these relate to life in Messiah’s kingdom is a major theme in Luke’s Gospel, far more so than in Matthew and Mark. When Luke, therefore, describes how “all those who had believed were together and had all things in common” and how “they began selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need,” he sees in this the people’s obedience to what Jesus had commanded. He sees the citizens of the kingdom living out, in practice, the teachings of Jesus their King. So we’re going to go back this morning to Luke’s first volume (his Gospel) and see exactly what were these commands and teachings of Jesus that are being practiced now in this end-times people.

We read in Luke chapter 18 about a rich young ruler who came to Jesus and questioned Him, saying:

I. Luke 18:18–22 — “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life [i.e., to be assured of entrance into Messiah’s kingdom; vv. 21-25]?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone [Jesus isn’t denying that He is *truly* good. Instead, He’s challenging the ruler’s ideas about what goodness is, and especially about the ruler’s own goodness; cf. Rom. 3:10-12]. You know the commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother.’” And he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.” And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, “One thing you still lack: sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven. And come, follow Me.”

Was Jesus calling the rich young ruler to become a pauper who must live now, and for the rest of his life, completely off the generosity of others? Almost assuredly not. We need to remember that wealth and possessions in themselves are not the problem, but rather our heart's attachment to wealth and possessions as this is often revealed in the collecting and storing up of wealth and possessions. There were many who followed Jesus who must have had their own independent means of support (cf. Lk. 10:1-7; 22:35-36). We know that there were women who followed Jesus and who provided for the twelve out of their own private means (Lk. 8:1-3). Most likely, Jesus was calling this man to sell *all* those "extra" possessions that he had been collecting and storing up and that were essentially a millstone hanging around his neck, keeping *only* what was needed for his "daily bread" (cf. Lk. 11:3). Jesus, who knows the hearts of all men, knows exactly what it is that's keeping this man from the kingdom—it was his love for his "stuff"; it was his heart's attachment to his possessions (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2-3; Heb. 13:5). And so it was out of His love and compassion for this man (cf. Mk. 10:21) that Jesus called him to sell all that he possessed and distribute it to the poor and come, follow Him.

Could this ruler have had eternal life without "literally" selling all his possessions and "literally" leaving his house to travel with Jesus? Technically, yes. What matters is the heart, and not the possessions themselves. And there were many others who did have eternal life and who were not traveling with Jesus. But once Jesus issues this call, now it's only obedience to this call that can give the true assurance of eternal life. And indeed, it was in order that this man might have the assurance that he longed for that Jesus gave him this special call. The question, then, is this: Do we hear in Jesus' words law or do we hear gospel? If Jesus was still walking this earth today in His state of humiliation and He came to you today and gave to you this same call, would you obey immediately with joy? Would you gladly sell everything you possessed and give all the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him on the road—knowing that He has nowhere to call home (cf. Lk. 9:58) and that He daily walks on the path of suffering and rejection by men (cf. Lk. 9:23)? Jesus' call to this rich young ruler was full of love, and mercy, and compassion. Yes, there was law in it. There was the commandment not to covet—not to be ruled by greed and the love of stuff. This law is assumed, but the call of Jesus—in itself—was not law (as in: "Do this in order to earn or merit your salvation"), but gospel. It was an invitation to enter the kingdom of God by faith, choosing to exchange the earthly riches (where moth and rust destroy) for the true and lasting riches of heaven (Lk. 12:33-34). It's only when we understand this that we can rightly interpret what happens next.

Luke 18:23 — But when [the ruler] heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

The ruler was sad because he had hoped to gain the assurance of eternal life, but now he couldn't have this assurance because what he loved more than treasure in heaven was treasure on earth. He didn't have faith to see in Jesus' call to him the riches of God's gospel grace. And so we read in verses 24-27:

Luke 18:24–27 (cf. 8:14) — And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And those who heard it said, "Then

who can be saved?” But He said, “The things that are impossible with people are possible with God.”

What we have illustrated here in the case of the rich young ruler is explained in Luke chapter 16. Jesus said:

II. Luke 16:13 (cf. 1 Tim. 6:5-10; 2 Tim. 3:1-2) — “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

There are many who, by the lives they live, would like to say to Jesus, “Yes, I can”; but Jesus says, “No, you can’t.” When Jesus says that we will either hate the one or love the other, He’s referring to the absolute and wholehearted rejection of one as master, and a correspondingly absolute and wholehearted submission to the other. We can ask ourselves the question, then: Do I hate and despise wealth as my master in direct proportion to my love and devotion to God?

While Matthew includes this teaching of Jesus about the impossibility of serving two masters (Mat. 6:24), the context in Luke is unique to his Gospel. After telling the parable of the unrighteous steward (Lk. 16:1-8; found only in Luke), Jesus concludes:

III. Luke 16:9-15 — “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves from the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will take you into the eternal dwellings. He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much, and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.”

As one commentator puts it, “One must use [wealth] in order to serve God, not God in order to serve a lust for [wealth]” (Stein, p. 52). So how do we serve God as our master with our wealth? How do we demonstrate our love and devotion to God with our wealth? By using our wealth, Jesus says, to make friends for ourselves who will receive us into the eternal dwellings after that wealth has failed; by seeing our “unrighteous wealth” always as a means to gaining the “true riches” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17-19). It’s only Luke who tells us about these words that Jesus spoke to a man who had invited Him to a dinner:

IV. Luke 14:12-14 — “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for it will be repaid to you at the resurrection of the righteous.”

We remember how Jesus said: “[I]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” In connection with this, we read in Luke chapter 6:

V. Luke 6:20–23 — And turning His gaze toward His disciples, [Jesus] began to say, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who cry now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and exclude you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For their fathers were doing the same things to the prophets.”

The kingdom of God belongs to those who are poor and hungry, and who cry. These are the ones who, when the kingdom comes in its fullness, will be satisfied and full of joy and laughter. But do all who are poor and hungry and crying automatically have a share in Messiah’s kingdom? Notice *why* these people are poor and hungry and crying. It’s because they’re hated, excluded, insulted, and scorned by men *for the sake of Jesus*. The assumption is that these poor are poor precisely because of their faith in Jesus and their obedience to Him. This explains why their material lack *now* is the sign of the greatness of their reward *in heaven*. This also explains why the economically poor came to be synonymous in the Bible with the poor in spirit (cf. Mat. 5:3) and why those who lack bread came to be synonymous in the Bible with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (cf. Mat. 5:6). In other words, “the poor” came to be a descriptive term for all the persecuted righteous even for those who are economically wealthy. This is why David, who was a king, could pray as one against whom the wicked plotted:

- Psalm 40:17 [LXX] — I am needy and poor. The Lord will take care of me. You are my helper and my protector; O my God, do not delay!
- Psalm 86:1 [LXX; cf. Ps. 109:21-22] — Incline your ear, O Lord, and listen to me, because I am needy and poor.

The poor, then, are those who (even if they have wealth), have renounced wealth as the source of their true security and happiness. “The poor,” in Scripture, is a theological category (versus a purely socio-economic category) for all who are truly righteous and who live by faith alone. The economically poor, then, who are not righteous, are not truly “poor” (not in the biblical-theological sense of that word) because they’re not truly poor in spirit.

If “the poor,” in Scripture, are *all* who are truly righteous and who live by faith alone, then who are “the rich”? Luke is the only evangelist who goes on to record these next words of Jesus:

VI. Luke 6:24–26 — But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and cry. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers were doing the same things to the false prophets.”

Jesus’ point is not that being rich automatically disqualifies a person from entering into the kingdom of heaven. The picture, here, is of those who look to their riches (to their wealth and possessions) for security and happiness in the present, and who are therefore unable to part with their riches so that the righteous poor might receive them into the eternal dwellings. “The rich” is

a theological category in Scripture (versus a purely socio-economic category) for all who cling to their wealth at the expense of the righteous poor and who are therefore (by default) the oppressors of those who live by faith (cf. James 1:9-11; 2:5-7; 5:1-6). Not surprisingly it's Luke—alone among the evangelists—who includes Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus.

VII. Luke 16:19–25 (cf. Lk. 6:20-26) — “Now there was a **rich man**, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. But a **poor man** named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table [“hungry”]; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom, and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things. But now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony [“mourn and cry”].’”

It's also Luke, alone among the evangelists, who includes the song of Mary, in which she exults:

VIII. Luke 1:53 — “[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent away the rich empty-handed.”

The only people who will inherit eternal life in Messiah's kingdom are the “poor” (as in the truly poor in spirit who live by faith), while all the “rich” (as in the self-sufficient whose source of security and happiness is their wealth and possessions) will suffer the eternal torments of hell. It's in this light that we understand the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 4 (only in Luke) and in Luke chapter 7:

IX. Luke 4:18 (cf. Isa. 61:1) — “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because **He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor**. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

X. Luke 7:22 — “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, **the poor have the gospel preached to them.**”

At times, Jesus would use the same parable on different occasions, tailoring it for different audiences and different purposes. In Matthew's account of the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus describes how the people whom the king invited to the wedding feast “paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire.” He then sent his servants out into the main highways to call as many as they found there to the wedding feast (Mat. 22:1-14). With this comparison in mind, the unique emphasis in Luke is obvious:

XI. Luke 14:16–21, 24–26, 33 (cf. 9:23-25) — “A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many. And at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ **But they all alike began to make excuses.** The first one said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it. I ask you, consider me excused.’ And another one said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out. I ask you, consider me excused.’ And another one said, ‘I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.’ And when the slave came back, he reported these things to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city **and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame** [those who are not slaves to their possessions]... For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.’” Now many crowds were going along with Him, and He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple [cf. Mat. 10:37]... **So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.**”

There are not two levels of kingdom membership, the first level being those who don't give up all their own possessions and the second level being those who do. What does Jesus say? “None of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.” To whatever extent the concept of a “vow of poverty” may be biblical, then we must recognize that this “vow of poverty” is required equally of all true Christians. But what is this poverty that's required of all of us? It's a poverty of spirit which is free from all attachment to wealth and possessions. It's foolish and irresponsible to give so much away that we ourselves become impoverished and dependent upon others. It's foolish and irresponsible to give so much away that in our old age we have nothing left to sustain us and we become ourselves (by choice) those who depend upon others rather than still being in a position to give to the poor and continue making those friends who will receive us into the eternal dwellings. We should remember that only a wealthy centurion would have been in a position to build the Jews their synagogue at Capernaum (only in Luke; Lk. 7:1-10). Only a wealthy “good Samaritan” would have been in a position to take such good care of the man who was beaten by robbers (only in Luke; Lk. 10:34-35). Only wealthy women could have provided for Jesus and the twelve disciples out of their own private means (only in Luke; Lk. 8:3). Only a wealthy man can give a luncheon or a dinner and invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, [and] the blind, who don't have the means to repay him (only in Luke; Lk. 14:12-14). Only a man whom God had blessed with riches could have provided such an honorable burial for Jesus (compare Mat. 27:57-60 & Lk. 23:50-53). Only a wealthy woman would have had a house large enough for the church to gather for prayer (Acts 12:5, 12-14). Only a wealthy man like Cornelius would be in a position to provide so abundantly for the poor (Acts 10:2, 4, 31). Not only do we need to hear Jesus' words about giving up “all” our own possessions in the context of examples like these, but in the context of Jesus' words to Zaccheus. Luke is the only one of the evangelists who recounts the story of Zaccheus, who, he says, was a chief tax collector and “rich” (Lk. 19:2). Luke alone tells us how Zaccheus received Jesus into his house and how he said to Jesus:

XII. Luke 19:8–10 — “Behold, *half* of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have extorted anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

We might ask why Jesus uses such absolute language (like “none of you can be My disciple who does not give up *all* his own possessions”) if this isn’t literally what we’re all required to do. The answer is simple. The absolute language represents symbolically the absolute heart renunciation of all our wealth and possessions as the source of our security and happiness. The absolute language represents symbolically the absoluteness of that faith by which we are to live and our pursuit (our “storing up”) only of heavenly treasure. Jesus’ absolute language, then, is not hyperbole, but must be understood precisely in terms of its true absoluteness (cf. Mat. 5:29-30). It’s in this light that we are to hear Jesus’ commendation of the poor widow in Luke 21:

XIII. Luke 21:3-4 — “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them. “For they all [‘the rich’; v. 1] put in their gifts out of their abundance; but she, out of what she lacked, put in all that she had for living.”

We should probably assume that this widow did not have children to feed, and that she went home to earn again what was necessary for her living (cf. Geldenhuys). Obviously, she wouldn’t have foolishly given away all her money only to have to beg money from others. But what this widow did do was give sacrificially, thus demonstrating the absoluteness of her devotion to God over money, and thus giving more in God’s eyes than all the combined offerings of the rich.

Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us about the day when someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me” (Lk. 12:13).

XIV. Luke 12:15-21 — Then [Jesus] said... “Watch out and be on your guard against every form of greed, for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear 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 many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you prepared?’ So is the one who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

As human beings, our hearts can become so invested in our possessions that we begin to think and live practically as if our life—as if we ourselves—consisted of these possessions; as if our money/things were extensions of who we are. In this case, we have not only God’s rebuke to the rich man (“You fool! *This very night* your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you prepared?”), but the reminder of the Apostle Paul:

➤ 1 Timothy 6:7 — For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.

“Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” Indeed, as Jesus says in Luke 9:

XV. Luke 9:25 — “[W]hat is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?”

When Jesus says, “So is the one who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God,” and, “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions,” we might hear predominantly law. We hear the prohibition of all covetousness and greed and materialism. But in this next passage, which again includes a section unique to Luke [bolded], we hear only Gospel—or we could say, Gospel law.

XVI. Luke 12:29–34 (cf. Mat. 6:19-21, 31-33) — “And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek, but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. **Do not fear, little flock, for your Father is well pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give it as mercy [meeting the needs of the righteous poor]; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven,** where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Conclusion

Where is your treasure? Where is your heart? Can we all say with David, the king: “I am poor and needy”? Are we all actively rejecting and renouncing—(utterly!)—all of our possessions as the source of our security and happiness? Are we joyfully making for ourselves with the “unrighteous wealth” “money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven”?

When Luke describes how “all those who had believed were together and had all things in common” and how “they began selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need,” he’s simply describing that which is of the very essence of life in the kingdom. They were selling their possessions and giving the proceeds as mercy—*why*? Because they knew that their Father was well pleased to give them the kingdom; because the kingdom with its true riches was ultimately the only thing that they were seeking.

Woe to the rich, for they are receiving their comfort now in full. But “blessed are the poor, for *yours* is the kingdom of God.”