
Hazmats or Good Gifts?

BY DOROTHY JEAN WEAVER

Jesus' striking parables on wealth in the Gospel of Luke paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of money and possessions on our lives. These are clearly "hazmats," or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. At the same time, they are good gifts with an equally positive potential.

If you have been to Jerusalem, you know the spot – Jaffa Gate, one of seven large entrances in the sixteenth-century wall surrounding the Old City. The gate is well known to tourists since it leads into the Christian Quarter and to David Street, Jerusalem's tourist street *par excellence*. It is also a natural entrance into the Old City for local people coming from West Jerusalem. One way or another, there are always lots of people at Jaffa Gate.

Everyone knows this, including the beggars. The long, paved walkway leading to Jaffa Gate regularly is peopled with folks sitting on the ground beside the path, their hands outstretched as they call out softly to the passersby. And for me the questions persist: What should I do? How should I respond to their pleas? From where should I take my cues? What does Scripture have to teach me?

I find myself thinking of Jesus and his story about the rich man and the beggar outside his gate. Jesus had a lot to say about money and possessions, the "stuff" that we collect with such urgency and hang onto with such tenacity. And Jesus' words about "stuff" were always memorable.

The Gospel of Luke brings us three striking parables of Jesus concerning money and possessions: the Rich Fool (12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). All three parables paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of "stuff" on human lives. As Jesus tells the stories and as Luke recounts them, money and possessions are

clearly “hazmats,” or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. At the same time these stories point to equally positive potential in money and possessions.

STUFF IS GOOD AND ENABLES GOOD LIVING

This is perhaps the single most obvious conclusion to be drawn from these Lukan parables. The rich farmer of 12:13-21, who has an “abundance

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of possessions” (12:15) and “ample goods” (12:19), anticipates a life of luxury and ease in which he can “relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry” (12:19). And the rich man of 16:19-31 is depicted as living in just such luxury. This man is “dressed in purple and fine linen” and “feast[s] sumptuously every day” (16:19).¹

And the good life is indeed “good.” Abraham reminds the rich man of 16:19-31 that during his lifetime he has received his “good things” (16:25). By stark contrast Lazarus, the poor man – who is “covered with sores” (16:20), afflicted by dogs (16:21), and perpetually hungry (16:21) – has received “evil things” during his lifetime (16:25). Money and possessions and the lifestyle they enable are “good things” in the world of Jesus’ story, while poverty and its associated ills are “evil things.”²

STUFF IS TRANSITORY

As Jesus depicts them here, money and possessions are not evil. But wealth is clearly a transitory reality, one that can disappear far more quickly than it comes. The rich farmer, who has spent a lifetime “storing” his worldly possessions (12:17, 18) and now has “ample goods laid up for many years” (12:19), discovers that his diligent efforts to prepare for a luxurious retirement will be wiped out in a single night, the night of his death (12:20). All the things that have belonged to him – “my crops,” “my barns,” “my grain and my goods,” and “[my] ample goods” (12:17-19) – will in an instant belong to another whose identity he does not even know (12:20).

In similar fashion the rich man of 16:19-31 discovers to his dismay that the “good things” he has received during his lifetime are not gifts that he can carry with him into the afterlife. The luxuries he once enjoyed day by day disappear when he dies and are nowhere in evidence in Hades, the afterworld to which he has come (16:23; cf. 16:24, 25, 28).³

And the dishonest manager, who has been “squandering” his master’s property (16:1) and no doubt living well at his master’s expense,⁴ suddenly

finds himself facing bleak economic and social prospects (16:3): "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg."⁵ As Jesus makes clear in these stories, money, possessions, and the good life that they bring with them are at best ephemeral in character and in the end completely untrustworthy.

STUFF OBSCURES MORAL VISION

If money and possessions are transitory, they are also harmful to moral vision, obscuring the sight of others in need. Throughout his luxurious life the rich man of 16:19-31 scarcely notices Lazarus, the poor man lying outside his gate. While the rich man knows this beggar by name and reputation (16:24-25),⁶ his eyes evidently glaze over day by day at the pathetic sight in front of his gate. Clearly he does nothing to relieve the hunger and heal the wounds of Lazarus. No crumbs "from the rich man's table" satisfy Lazarus' persistent hunger pangs; nor does the rich man rescue Lazarus from the dogs that "lick his sores" (16:21). As long as he is wealthy and self-sufficient, the rich man has eyes only for himself and cares nothing for the welfare of others.

Likewise the rich farmer of 12:13-21 considers no one but himself as he ponders the dilemma of his expanding wealth. His private monologue is filled with "I-statements," "my-statements," and "you-statements" addressed to his own soul:

And he thought to himself, "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place [where *I* can] store *my* crops?" Then he said, "*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and [*I* will] 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; [*you* must] relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" (12:17-19, emphasis and bracketed retranslations mine)⁷

Here, as with the rich man of 16:19-31, the rich farmer exhibits no need for anyone beyond himself. He does not consult any outside parties, but speaks only to himself. Neither does he consider alternative options for resolving his difficulties. Sharing his wealth with those who have need is nowhere in his thinking. His vision extends only to himself and his personal retirement fund. The possessions of the rich farmer have closed his eyes to the world around him and obscured his vision of people in need.

STUFF CREATES CHASMS BETWEEN PEOPLE

In the end, the inability to see others becomes an impassable barrier that separates people one from another and prohibits meaningful interaction. During his lifetime the rich man of 16:19-31 scarcely notices the poor man lying at his gate, but after his death he discovers that the visual barrier he once erected to shut out unpleasant sights has now turned into an impen-

erable wall. While the rich man now has perfect vision, so that he can “[look] up and [see] Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side” (16:23), he is incapable of bridging that distance.

In the midst of his “torment” and “agony,” the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water for his tongue (16:24). But Abraham turns down the rich man’s plea with a stern reminder that fortunes are now reversed (16:25). And he likewise explains that Lazarus cannot do the rich man’s bidding: “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us” (16:26). The rich man’s inability to see human need during his lifetime has ultimately created a “great chasm” between himself and others that now isolates him from human contact and comfort in his own time of need.⁸

STUFF DESTROYS MORAL CHARACTER

If money and possessions obscure moral vision and create “chasms” between people, they also destroy moral character. Jesus introduces the story of the rich farmer (12:13-21) with a warning to the crowd about the dangers of greed: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (12:15). The story about the rich farmer then illustrates the greed which is his own ultimate downfall and leaves him empty-handed at the end of his life. The implications of this story are clear. To spend one’s life worrying about possessions and building “bigger barns” to house them is literally, in the vernacular of the text, to lose one’s “soul” without any ultimate gain: “You fool! This very night your [soul] is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (12:20, bracketed retranslation mine).

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13), in spite of its surprise ending, paints a similar picture with regard to the corrosive impact of money and possessions.⁹ The manager of this parable, when entrusted with his master’s “property” (16:1), succumbs to the temptation to help himself to the largesse and to live the good life at his master’s expense. The lure of money and possessions overwhelms all instincts to do what is “right” (*dikaion*)¹⁰ and pulls the manager inexorably into a moral quagmire, where one “dishonest” (*adikias*) deed follows another as he tries desperately to preserve his life and his lifestyle. Jesus then follows up the parable with a series of aphorisms contrasting those who are “faithful” in handling possessions with those who are “dishonest” (*adikos*) (16:10), or “not faithful” (16:11, 12). As Jesus tells the story, it is clear that money and possessions present humans with an often irresistible temptation to engage in dishonest living, a lifestyle that then becomes increasingly more dangerous and risky as one dishonest act leads to the next.

But the ultimate image of the moral decay brought about by money and possessions lies in Jesus’ parting words to his disciples: “No slave can serve

two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. *You cannot serve God and wealth*" (16:13, my emphasis). In the end the greatest moral degradation caused by money and possessions is the destruction of the human capacity to serve God. And this, Jesus says, is the direct consequence of "serving wealth." For Jesus' disciples, faithful Jews who live daily with the scriptural command, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him" (Luke 4:8, cf. Deuteronomy 6:13), the alternatives are stark and the challenge is profound.

STUFF IS A GOOD GIFT

As Jesus illustrates in these parables, money and possessions are truly "hazardous materials." But wealth is also a good gift with great positive potential for all those who are "rich" toward God and their neighbors in the human community. This message shines through the words of Jesus in surprising but unmistakable fashion. Take the story of the Rich Fool (12:13-21), for example. Here Jesus tells a sad story about a rich farmer "who stores up treasures for [himself]" and is "not rich toward God" (12:21). In the end this farmer faces stern judgment and ultimate loss (12:20).

But Jesus' words suggest the potential of a very different story, one about a rich farmer who *is* "rich toward God" and generous to his neighbors. This story, the one that Jesus hints at, is a joyful one, no doubt very similar to the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus, a high-ranking Jewish tax collector, has made a career of "defrauding" others (19:8b), becoming "rich" at their expense, and without question earning their intense hatred (19:2, 8b). But when

Zacchaeus encounters

Jesus, his money and possessions do so as well. And now his wealth becomes a good gift that enriches the "poor" and provides extravagant restitution for those who have been "defrauded" (19:8). In response to this astonishing transformation in Zacchaeus and his money, Jesus announces, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9).

In similar fashion, the puzzling little story of the dishonest manager (16:1-13) points to the positive potential of money and possessions. By revising the bills of his master's clients, the dishonest manager enriches the lives of others by reducing their indebtedness (16:5-7). And in this way he builds human relationships that ensure his own "welcome" into the "homes"

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of others (16:4). In response the master “commends” the manager for his “shrewdness” (16:8); and Jesus likewise urges his disciples to “make friends for [themselves] by means of dishonest wealth” so that they may find a similar “welcome” in the “eternal homes” (16:9).

Brad H. Young offers a helpful analysis of this story based on first-century Palestinian cultural understandings:

The original hearer of the parable knew that the primary characteristic of the wealthy master is generosity. The householder in the story must be magnanimous.... [And] because the landowner is wealthy and magnanimous, he forgives the debts and commends the steward. All the people are blessed by the steward’s cleverness. The master will be praised throughout the land for his noble generosity. The landowner is full of grace. He shows compassion. The village is alive with the praise of the generous landowner. He will not try to punish the dishonest steward. Instead he acknowledges the steward’s cleverness.¹¹

The implications of Jesus’ story are clear. Money and possessions, even when depicted as “dishonest wealth” (16:9), are good gifts with positive potential for blessing others and opening the door to one’s own blessedness. Just as the story of Zacchaeus concludes with a word of “salvation” (19:10), so the story of the dishonest manager concludes with words of “welcome” both earthly and “eternal” (16:4, 9).

STUFF IS A CALL TO FAITHFUL LIVING

Jesus’ teachings about “stuff” are neither simple nor simplistic. The portrait he paints of money and possessions is multifaceted and complex. Wealth can build “great chasms” between humans (16:26) and lead people to ultimate “torment” (16:23, 28) and “agony” (16:24, 25). But wealth can also become the source of blessing for others (16:5-7; cf. 19:8) and an open door leading to ultimate “welcome” (16:4, 9) and “salvation” (19:10).

Jesus’ parables about “stuff” are above all else a call to ongoing faithfulness in the everyday use of money and possessions. He implicitly commends those who are “faithful in a very little” and depicts them as “faithful also in much” (16:10).¹² The faithfulness that Jesus commends takes both broad and specific shape. In broad terms, Jesus calls his followers to “serve God” instead of their wealth (16:13) and to be “rich toward God” rather than “storing up treasures for themselves” (12:21). In specific terms, Jesus challenges his followers to open their eyes to the needy on their doorsteps (16:20-21) and to bless others with their wealth (16:5-7; cf. 19:8).

If any questions remain as to the faithful use of “stuff,” Jesus sends his followers to “Moses and the prophets” for ongoing instruction (16:29, 31). Faithfulness with money and possessions grows ultimately out of faithful “listening” to Scripture. It is a challenge of a lifetime.

NOTES

1 Purple dye was very expensive in the ancient world. Consequently only royalty and wealthy people could afford to wear purple. "Fine linen" was also a luxury item, associated in Revelation 18:12 with gold, silver, jewels, pearls, purple, silk, and scarlet.

2 While Jesus elsewhere depicts money as "dishonest wealth" (16:9), the characterization of money in that instance emerges from a focus on the "dishonest" character of the manager who handles the money.

3 Though the narrative line of this parable speaks about the afterlife, it would be a mistake to read the parable as doctrinal teaching about the afterworld. The details of the story surely reflect first-century Jewish concepts of life beyond the grave, but this parable of Jesus concerns itself above all with the world of present human existence and the ethical decisions that people make within this world.

4 Cf. Luke 15:13, where the younger son in similar fashion "squanders" his inheritance in "dissolute living."

5 In the "honor-shame" culture of first-century Palestine, where public "honor" is the greatest good in society, the "shame" of begging for a living is a prospect too demeaning even to consider.

6 The rich man refers to Lazarus by name (16:24); and Abraham calls the rich man to "remember" what he already knows, namely that Lazarus received "evil things" during his lifetime (16:25).

7 The dishonest manager carries on a closely parallel monologue as he ponders his options: "Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that *my* master is taking the position away from *me*? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what [I will] do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome *me* into their homes'" (16:3-4, emphasis and bracketed retranslations mine).

8 The reminder in footnote #3 applies to this parable too.

9 Many think this is the most difficult to interpret of all Jesus' parables, for he appears to applaud the shady business dealings of a dishonest manager who cooks the books of his master and reduces the bills of his master's clients to get himself out of trouble. See the discussion of this parable later in this article.

10 Thus, for example, "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" (Luke 12:57).

11 Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 247.

12 Conversely, Jesus warns those who are "not faithful with the dishonest wealth" or that which "belongs to another" that they will receive neither "true riches" nor that which is "[their] own" (16:11-12).



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