



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Hazmats or Good Gifts?
(*Parables*, pp. 37-43)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.

Christian Reflection

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Wealth: Hazmat or Good Gift?

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. They are also good gifts with an equally positive potential.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21, 16:1-13, and 16:19-31

Responsive Reading

We are gathered by God's Spirit to hear the story
**that uncovers our competitiveness
and invites us to true community,**
uncovers our wrong centering
and invites us to a right centering,
**and uncovers our need to hoard and exclude
and invites us to share and include.**

We give thanks for this story that overcomes our timidity
and invites us to risk all for the sake of God's Kingdom.

**All: We will hear the story
that uncovers our self-centered despair and distrust
and invites us to hope.**

Reflection

Using three of his most memorable characters—a greedy barn-building farmer, a double-dealing middle manager, and the rich man in Hades—Jesus depicts the spiritual dangers of wealth. We begin to see why he warns his disciples, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (6:20b, 24).

The image which Jesus paints in these three parables about the use of money and our attitudes toward possessions is complex. Dorothy Jean Weaver calls attention to these facets:

- ▶ *Wealth is good and enables good living.* Jesus does not glorify poverty; it brings "evil things"—illness and perpetual hunger—to Lazarus in his lifetime (16:25). The rich man, like the wealthy farmer, can have "good things"—ease and fullness.
- ▶ *Wealth is transitory.* A farmer's retirement savings goes to others on the night he dies (12:20); a crooked manager suddenly faces bleak prospects (16:3); and a rich man's wealth is gone in Hades (16:23). The point is clear: "money, possessions, and the good life that they bring with them are at best ephemeral in character and in the end completely untrustworthy."
- ▶ *Wealth obscures moral vision.* The rich man knows Lazarus by name, but he looks past him day after day. "As long as he is wealthy and self-sufficient, he has eyes only for himself and cares nothing for the welfare of others." Similarly, "the possessions of the rich farmer have closed his eyes to the world around him and obscured his vision of people in need."
- ▶ *Wealth creates chasms between people.* "The inability to see others becomes an impassable barrier that separates people one from another and prohibits meaningful interaction," Weaver notes.



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The rich man's moral blindness toward Lazarus during his lifetime "now isolates him from human contact and comfort in his own time of need."

- ▶ *Wealth destroys moral character.* The bigger-barn-building farmer is driven by greed (12:15). "The lure of money and possessions... pulls the manager [in 16:1-13] inexorably into a moral quagmire, where one 'dishonest' deed follows another as he tries desperately to preserve his life and his lifestyle."
- ▶ *Wealth is a good gift.* The farmer who is "not rich toward God" (12:21) faces stern judgment. "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." The story of the wily manager ironically shows "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."

"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)," Weaver concludes. "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."

Study Questions

1. How are each of the main characters in these parables – the rich farmer, the dishonest manager, and the rich man – self-absorbed? How does this obscure their moral vision?
2. What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? Must a person be wealthy in order to be rich toward God? Do you agree with Weaver that wealthy persons can be rich toward God?
3. In light of these three parables on money and possessions, what are some of the main barriers today to a follower of Jesus being both wealthy and faithful?
4. "Faithfulness with money and possessions grows ultimately out of faithful 'listening' to Scripture," Weaver concludes. How is your congregation helping members to listen?

Departing Hymn: "O Young and Fearless Prophet of Ancient Galilee" (verses 6, 4, and 5)

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,
again to lead us forward along God's holy way.

Stir up in us a protest against our greed for wealth,
while others starve and hunger and plead for work and health;
where homes with little children cry out for lack of bread,
who live their years sore burdened beneath a gloomy dread.

Create in us the splendor that dawns when hearts are kind,
that knows not race nor station as boundaries of the mind;
that learns to value beauty, in heart, or brain, or soul,
and longs to bind God's children into one perfect whole.

S. Ralph Harlow (1931)

Suggested Tune: ST. THEOLDULPH

Wealth: Hazmat or Good Gift?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore Jesus' teaching about money and possessions in three Lukan parables.
2. To examine the spiritual dangers of wealth for us today.
3. To consider how we can be "rich toward God."

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O Young and Fearless Prophet of Ancient Galilee" locate the familiar tune ST. THEODULPH in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

"Michel Quoist reminds us that 'If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer.' Yes, that is precisely what we want to have happen. We want to *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer. Jesus told parables precisely to get people to do so." (E. Glenn Hinson, quoted in *Parables*, p. 61)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would use Jesus' parables to open our eyes, unstop our ears, and heal our hearts so that we might turn toward God and our neighbors in love.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Luke 12:13-21, 16:1-13, and 16:19-31 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This discussion of parables in Luke is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus' parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are "Hearing is Believing" (Mark) and "Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus" (Matthew).

The parables in this study—the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)—appear only in the Gospel of Luke.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager may be the most puzzling parable because the rich master commends the double-dealing manager for his shrewdness; and Jesus similarly urges the disciples to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (16:9). Brad Young offers a helpful interpretation of this story based on the first-century Palestinian context (quoted in *Parables*, 42). For more information on the Greco-Roman context of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, see the final section of David Gowler's "The Contexts of Jesus' Parables" (*Parables*, 16-17) and the accompanying study guide, "The Contexts of Jesus' Parables."

Study Questions

1. The rich farmer thinks only of himself as he considers what to do with his growing wealth. Neighbors who have needs are nowhere in his thought. Weaver highlights the self-centeredness of the farmer's private monologue (12:17-19) with her translation: "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.'"

The dishonest manager thinks in much the same way. This is Weaver's translation of his private monologue (16:3-4): "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."

The rich man intentionally ignores Lazarus' suffering during his life; though "the rich man knows Lazarus by name and reputation (16:24-25)," Weavers notes, "his eyes evidently glaze over day by day at the pathetic sight in front of his gate."

2. The phrase "not rich toward God" describes the selfish farmer (Luke 12:21). Weaver suggests Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) is an example of being rich toward God, for "his wealth becomes a good gift that enriches the 'poor' and provides extravagant restitution for those who have been 'defrauded' (19:8)." To be "rich toward God" is to use our money and possessions to love God and neighbor. A person with little money and few possessions can still use their wealth in this way.
3. These parables call attention to these barriers to faithful discipleship: (1) an inordinate attempt to guarantee our personal and family health, opportunities, and retirement with our wealth; (2) the temptation to close our eyes to the world around us and ignore people in need; (3) and the temptation to ignore how our choices about the use of money and possessions gradually change us (for better or worse) by modifying our desires, ways of thinking, and patterns of perception.

Encourage members to discuss specific temptations in their lives. Do they come from comparing their "success" with others', trying to live up to images of success in popular media (magazines, television, or movies), worrying too much about their own welfare, being too protective of family members' or friends' welfare, being too busy or distracted to notice others' needs, being overwhelmed by human needs in the world, and so on. Our temptations might not arise from selfishness, but from inordinate fear, despair, or lack of focus.

4. How does the congregation provide winsome small-group study opportunities for children, young people, and adults? Does a catechism or new member orientation group discuss the discipleship of wealth?

Consider how scripture passages on wealth are used in community worship – in responsive readings, scripture readings, sermons, hymns, and so on. If the congregation provides Scripture studies for special seasons (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter), do they address the discipleship of money and possessions?

What other practices of the congregation – e.g., offerings in worship, special mission offerings, local service and mission opportunities, short-term mission trips, community prayer for or sharing of members' economic needs, planning the congregation's budget – help members to listen to Scripture in regard to the use of wealth?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.