

19 Money, the Law and the Prophets

Luke ch. 16

Opposition to God and the rule of God is most entrenched in those who have money. For money means status and power, and the rule of God, the kingdom as Jesus proclaims it, overturns all status and power – not as a theory or a pleasant spiritual truism, but in concrete, immediate, challenging fact. The rich, the powerful and the elite of his time recognised it, and, since they could not accept a new way of ordering society that changed their whole status, they opposed him, with determination.

People with money quickly learn to define themselves by the power and status it gives them, and society, for them, becomes the natural, God-given framework for the exercise of their power. Unless they have a hard conscience, they prefer to convince themselves, and in any case they usually come of families and strata of society that have long since convinced themselves, that a society ordered to enhance their wealth, their reputation and their influence is in fact the best for all.

From the leaders of the Galilean village assembly, to the Victorian gentleman of means, to the successful man of business who makes a distinguished career in the United States Senate, there is little change, little difference. Money matters, and it must be defended, but the holders of money and power must also be seen as morally great and good, fit to lead the society they in fact lead, their wealth, their great family connections, their success being proof of a high moral as well as economic standing.

Conversely, an attack on them must be immoral. The Pharisees and the synagogue leaders of Galilee, the British ruling classes and the American moneyed classes all invested much in creating a moral, civic, political ethos where submission to money and power was identified with submission to God and all that is good. Serious criticism of money and power became an attack on society, radicalism, communism and rebellion against God. Whether it is the Law of Moses in Israel, or the established order maintaining Christian civilisation in nineteenth century Britain, or God-fearing and industrious enterprise discovering the very fulfilment of the Bible in the American way – there is always a combining of morality and money, privilege and goodness, power and Godliness. Those who are blest with power and wealth work hard to promote that ethos, and many deeply believe in it.

It was clear to Jesus, and it was very clear to Luke when he recorded the deeds and the teaching of Jesus, that money is the great obstacle and enemy of the kingdom of God. It's the hold that money gets on us, either because of the comforts and luxuries it makes available to us or because of the power it puts in our hands. It pampers our bodies and our egos. It's not surprising, then, that as he continues towards Jerusalem and the crisis that awaits him there, thoughts about wealth and power, and the danger they hold for his disciples, become even more urgent.

Property and money are a strong theme in Luke's gospel, and it's clear that the message of Jesus confronted a world in which money had the influence, the power of attraction and command, that it has in ours. From the time that he was asked to settle an inheritance dispute and gave his warning against the lust for wealth and its false security,¹ Jesus returned frequently to the theme. Even when wealth isn't directly the point of his story, it can be the context in which the point is made, for he moved in a world where wealth was important and he knew it could ruin his disciples. He knew it was at war with the kingdom of God. However, he is not without humor on the subject, and it's only our lack of humor that might make the next story difficult for us.²

A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for embezzlement. The man was found to be dipping into his master's money. He was a clever man, on whom his master had relied implicitly, and he knew how to cook the books. So when the master said to him "I will have to let you go. Bring me your accounts, all in order." He knew that the game was up and he had to take urgent thought for the future. A lucrative job was suddenly at an end – with no prospect of references – and there wasn't much on offer for an estate manager dismissed for embezzlement. He didn't have the muscle for manual labor and he had too much self-respect to go begging for a living. He had to make friends, good friends, very quickly, for he needed someone to welcome him when he was homeless.

So he called in his master's debtors. The rich man was in the habit of dealing with wholesale traders, who, I suppose, borrowed large quantities of produce when they had the opportunity of a sale and repaid the debt when they had made their profit. One of them owed a thousand gallons of olive oil, and the steward said to him, "Here's the account. Let's make it five hundred and you can put your signature to that." Another owed a thousand

¹ 12: 13 ff

² 16: 1 – 8

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bushels of wheat, and the steward said to him, "Here's the account. Let's make it eight hundred and you can put your signature to that."

Clever man! Jesus praised the astuteness of the villain and remarked that it is a pity the good people of the world are not as alert and prompt as the villains. We miss the point if we think that Jesus could not possibly have praised anything about a man who is a villain. We have what is called a "Victorian" attitude to moral stories (tho I think it is considerably older than Victorian). In a moral story, we think, the moral can only be right if we learn good behavior from the behavior of good characters. But our attitude lacks imagination and fails to see that even the villains, in their own way, can wake us up to the reality of our predicament in life and in history. A burglar can teach us about the coming of the Son of Man.³ As we will see, a tyrant can teach us about our commission from God.⁴ And a crafty villain can teach us something about resourcefulness, the need to be alert to our need when the crisis is breaking about us.

Jesus' advice is that we should make use of money, not to indulge ourselves or to boost our ego but simply to get friends. Using money as he teaches us, to benefit the poor, makes us the friends we will need at the doors of eternity, for the time will come when money will let us down, and it's then we will be glad we have already done away with it in favor of the needy.

Welth and property are ours to use, but the paradox is that they are not really ours. What we own is things, and at one remove from things, money, which can be exchanged for things. Such things are not part of our own personal reality; they are not what we are, tho in our foolishness we imagine that we are what we own. The whole psychology of welth, of possession, is misguided, deluding us that things, which come under our control, somehow make us who we are, that if we control more by possession, we are more. In fact, reality is quite the opposite. The things we own are not our own. They have their own existence apart from us, and our real "own" is what we are.

The great mystery, the challenge to our selves at the coming of God's rule, is that our self is something still to be given to us. We are not yet what we are to be, and God has yet to make us all that we are. God has yet to give us that full reality which is our true person, our true and own identity. It takes us back to that extraordinary request we are to make: to ask for the Spirit of God, to ask not for what we may have, but for what we may be, and that

³ 12: 39 - 40

⁴ 19: 11 - 27

being to be nothing less than the fullness of God, the ultimate adventure of God, taking place in us.

The paradox is that what we “own”, our possessions, are not our own. They are objects which we happen to have in our possession. If we can't be trusted to use such things well, who will entrust to us the reality that is our own, our uttermost self that God wishes to give us? Who will entrust to us that reality in which we truly become owners and rulers, our self, brought to life by the reality of God for us, opening up to us the power and adventure of all that we may be?

These are the reflections that the behavior of the crooked manager sets off in Jesus' teaching. We don't really own our possessions, but we should try to be at least as smart as the villain. What possessions we have we should use to make friends, according to the will of God. For only so can we be ready for the “tents of eternity”, to be welcomed there where what we have is what we are, and utterly inalienable from us.

What started as bit of a joke in fact leads us into a profound estimation of the human condition: our relationship with wealth and our potential relationship with God, in which our real wealth will be discovered.

Here again, when Jesus speaks of the “tents of eternity” it would be easy just to suppose he means heaven as we think of it, that “other life” beyond the sky for which the soul is destined. But the language, altho it is mystical and of the future, is rooted in the Israelite memory of a nomadic past, a time when God dwelt with them, his tent among theirs, in their journeys thru the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula.⁵

We must not allow our interpretations to separate present reality from the ultimate reality of the kingdom, diminishing the importance of the present. What Jesus is saying increases the importance of present reality. It is the use of what we have by way of possessions in our present life and society that prepares us for the greater reality we are coming to be, in the kingdom of God.

I tell you, make friends out of misbegotten wealth, so that when it no longer serves you they will welcome you into the tents of eternity. One who is faithful in small things will be faithful in greater matters and one who betrays their trust in small things will fail in the greater as well. If you have not behaved faithfully with this defective wealth, who

⁵ Exodus 35 - 40; cf. John 1: 14

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will entrust you with the real thing? And if you haven't been trustworthy in what belongs apart from you, who will give you wealth of your own? (16: 9 - 12)

At the coming of God's rule we find that our possessions are not really ours, and if we cannot handle what is only temporarily under our administration, who will give us what is permanently and fully ours, our true self in the kingdom of God?

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In fact, a decisive choice is before us. The truth is that, far from being "ours", money quickly becomes our master, and instead of us deciding what to do with money, money decides what to do with us. There are few insights of the gospel that our present world illustrates as clearly as it does this one. Money is not only our master, but our god. Money rules all, and every other drive, vision or conviction must give way to the demands of money. As Mrs Thatcher taught us, even the kindly interventions of the good Samaritan are by courtesy of money.

Money has its own laws, to which all other principles and laws must bow. If economics will not allow it, it is forbidden. If the necessity is economic, if it is demanded by the rules of money, all other needs and goals must yield to it. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we built up the nation state as the supreme good; in the course of the twentieth century, we learnt to put money on a higher pedestal, and the nation-state remains only as an excuse for those who must be persuaded to go and die for the ambitions of money. We once had visions and ideals: science, education, democracy, the rule of law, justice, freedom and equality; we once had plans for a paradise on earth. Now we concede that money must overrule them all.

It used to be thought that money mastered only those depraved and obsessive characters whose humanity collapsed into the avarice of Scrooge or the arrogance of Citizen Kane. Now we concede that the very structures of our society are not law or love or even kindred, but money: the economy, the markets, growth and the maintenance of consumer confidence. Once a home was a place for a family, a secure environment where you learnt to quarrel and to love in safety, and the value of a property was the people it sheltered. Now a house has become a gambling chip, the inflated marker of wealth to which both of a couple will mortgage a lifetime of work in the hope that the value of what they have bought will increase beyond the price they pay for it.

For a time, we strove among ourselves for better forms of government, and in the struggle money was often on one side: aristocracy against the populace, vested interests against democracy, Liberal against the old guard Tory, Conservative against Labour, capitalism against socialism. Democracy and the ever expanding franchise became our opportunity to participate in the great debate between vested interests and visionary ideals, and sometimes we mite vote with our hearts for a better country and a better world, and sometimes we mite vote with our pockets, fearful for our own interests. But now, all sides bow to money. There is no proposal for government that does not put itself forward as best wisdom in the service of money. The duty of every government and every form of government is to please those arbiters whose remit is money. When candidates come forward for the highest posts, to be voted in as President or to lead their party to a parliamentary majority and the coveted role of Prime Minister, the question put to the voters (especially here in the United Kingdom) is: Which party is most likely to receive the pat of approval from the emperors of the market?

Every other achievement can only follow as a spin-off from the success of money: food for the hungry, care for the needy, the defence of human rights, security and opportunity for children, space and leisure to grow in, respect and protection for the old. I don't think we were ever so wise or so good as to set aside money in order to embrace these ideals, but at least we told ourselves that the ideals were something greater than money, and that we would pursue them alongside our service of money, with enthusiasm and dedication. Now we know better. Every ideal must wait till the economy gives its nod of approval, each must demonstrate the manner and extent of its profitability, show a return of value in money, and above all promise not to upset the confidence of the markets.

Once we thought that profit had a purpose. Having made money, you could spend it in living, and in doing good. Money, which had its place, could be turned over to something more to the point, once it is made. A person, a family, a country could grow in the space and the resources they had found. Now we learn that the only legitimate application of money is to make more money, and to create such fantasies that people will accept a higher money value on properties, prospects, enterprises, futures, ideas, systems, so that even when money is not being made, it feels like money is being made. We manage to believe that value is being added. For we cannot now think, or have any confidence in the future, unless the future holds out more money for those who make decisions about the future. You cannot serve two masters, and money has asserted itself as the master.

It was Jesus who warned us, long before this happened:

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No one can be the slave of two masters. He will hate one and love the other, respect one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (16: 13)

And yet the devotees of our systems for power and wealth try to deny it. What makes the teaching of Jesus so trenchantly political for us is that the most powerful nation among us, the one that most other nations acknowledge and follow, is established precisely on the principle that you can serve, simultaneously, both God and money.

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The Pharisees believed that they could reconcile the service of God and money. Didn't they love God? They kept God's law meticulously. And if they were wealthy, wasn't that a sign of God's blessing? their reward indeed for their careful observance of God's Law. At any rate, the Pharisees were certainly fond of money. They ridiculed Jesus' teaching.

The Pharisees were the respectable side of Israel's elite. The Herodians, having power from Rome, could afford to be dissolute and disreputable. The Romans laid claim to civilisation and law, but again, having the army to uphold them as the very rulers of the elite, they had no need to make a particular show of pious virtue. The Pharisees, on the other hand, and other elements of the native Israelite ruling class, having no power of arms, had to maintain their respectability as a basis for their influence in society; and proof of their respectability was as much their wealth as their public piety. They were not happy with a teaching that called for the renunciation of wealth.

The elite, the recognised leaders of society, expect to be looked up to. But God sees thru their show and is not impressed. The Law, by which the Pharisees set their reputation, had stood with the Prophets as the pillar of Israelite faith and society, but the Law gave rise to an elite, a select few who had the leisure to study it, the skill to interpret its demands, and the time to organise everyone's observance to their best advantage. Now something new has happened. Since the time of John the Baptist, the good news of the kingdom of God has hit Israel, and everyone and anyone comes pushing in, as if there are no longer any qualifications. It's very unsettling for those who wanted the approved of God to remain a distinguished club of the few.

The Law and the Prophets have given way to something that is open for anyone who will take it. And yet it's not because the Law is without

significance. Jesus tells them that the sky and the earth would pass away sooner than a single dot or comma of the Law lose its validity.⁶

Jesus has so often clashed with those who pride themselves on their adherence to the Law of God, and present themselves to the common people as its qualified interpreters, that he might seem to be opposed to the Law. But that is far from the case. If the crowds of Galilee are now thronging into the kingdom of God, pushing their way in without waiting to be qualified and approved under the Law, it's not because the kingdom abrogates the Law, but because it fulfils it. The masses may be by-passing the complex of careful provisions that the Pharisees and other devotees had built up to ensure unfaulted compliance with the Law, but that is because they recognise the kingdom, which is the Law's fulfilment, and need no other permission to make their way in.

Jesus continues with the theme of money, only in a markedly different way. He has spoken of it several times in the context of the kingdom: the challenge and the freedom to give it up, the life lived by simple trust in God, and the impossibility of serving both God and the demands of money. It is the kingdom, Israel's coming new life under the rule of God, that makes all this both possible and urgent for everyone. But urgent it is, even for those who haven't accepted what he says about the kingdom, for altho the kingdom gives a new opportunity and a new challenge to live up to it, the will of God is already there in the Law and the Prophets.

He tells the story of a rich man⁷ who dressed in luxury clothes and the best of fashion. His every meal was a banquet. But outside his gates sat a beggar, a wretched man, covered in sores, who would have been glad to receive the scraps from the rich man's table. The beggar died and was carried by angels into the company of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried in Hades, where he suffered great torments. He looked up, and, seeing Lazarus in the company of Abraham, he cried out: "Father Abraham, have pity on me. Let Lazarus dip his finger in water and bring me a drop to cool my burning tongue, for I am in great torment here." But Abraham replied to him: "Don't you remember, my son? In your life you had every comfort, while Lazarus suffered. Now he has the recompense for his sufferings, and you have your return. In any case, a huge chasm has been fixed between your place and ours. No one, even if they wanted to, could cross it either way.

⁶ 16: 17

⁷ 16: 19 - 31

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The rich man had another plea. He had five brothers still living, all as wealthy as he had been. “Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to warn my brothers so that they don’t come to this terrible place.” Abraham’s reply was brisk and to the point. “They have Moses [the Law] and the Prophets; they should listen to them.” But the rich man wouldn’t let it rest there. “No father Abraham; but if someone were to come back from the dead, they would listen to him.” This time, Abraham’s reply was final: “If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not listen even to someone who rises from the dead.”

Our habit of hearing the gospel in little pieces almost guarantees our failure to appreciate this particular story. There must be many Christians who know the story of “Dives and Lazarus” by heart, but do not know where it comes in the gospels or its context in Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

It comes just after some brief references to the Law, meant to explain that the kingdom is the fulfilment, not the denial of the Law. And it comes in response to the ridicule of the Pharisees who thought they were strong on the Law and the Prophets, but were most unwilling to break with the present structures of society and lose the privileges of wealth. It is a deliberate assertion that the critical message of the kingdom, its challenge to the rich, is there in the Law and the Prophets. Everything is focused on that message. The joyful company in which Lazarus is rewarded is not the beatific vision of God but “the bosom of Abraham” the father of Israel. It was in fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham that the Law was given and the prophets sent.

In other words, Jesus is giving a warning of judgement not in terms of the kingdom but in terms of the Law and the Prophets, for those who claim to respect the Law and the Prophets. If they will not listen to these, it’s no wonder they will not listen to the message of the kingdom. They wouldn’t listen even if someone were to rise from the dead for them.

In this story, Jesus is not trying to give us a portrait of the after-life. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a story, and a “parable” type of story at that. In a parable, as in a joke, the point is at the end. The rest is there as a setting, to lead up to the point and to ensure that you get the point. And here the point is that, in the very Law and the Prophets that the elite claim to respect, the rich are obliged to take care for the poor.⁸ Even without the kingdom, the rich are held to account by the Law of God. Now the Law, and

⁸ e.g. Exodus 23: 20 – 27; Leviticus 25: 35 – 43; Deuteronomy 24: 14 – 22; Amos 2: 6 – 8; Micah 2: 1 – 3, 8 – 10; Isaiah 1: 16 – 17; 10: 1 – 4

most of the classical prophets say nothing about an after-life.⁹ The Jerusalem priests, or the most influential of them, did not believe in a resurrection of the dead.¹⁰ But the Law and the prophets both say much about the duty of care for the poor.

Jesus was using a story (which, I believe, already existed in other versions) to make that point. Jesus is not interested in a history or geography of the after-life, but only the fact that whatever may appear to be the case (for the rich do die in comfort and the poor do die in misery) there is an accounting and a reckoning to face. The Law commands our care for the poor, and the prophets frequently reminded and warned Israel that this was Yahweh's will for them. Such commands and such warnings will not be irrelevant to the life and death of rich and poor in Israel.

There are Christians who would point to this story as proof of their doctrine of an eternal hell, but it is not that.¹¹ In Hades the rich man is still sensitive to family affection and intercedes for his brothers, wanting them to be spared his fate – a very improbable scenario for the hell of traditional Christian teaching, but one which aptly makes the point that Jesus wants to get across. He is using a common story, recast in traditional Jewish terms, to make the point to some of his most traditionalist opponents.

Nor, as I suggested above, is the paradise of Lazarus the same as the Christian heaven, and the idea of a conversation between the two is quite foreign to Christian theology. The setting of reward and punishment in an after-life is not there to give Jesus' listeners a knowledge of the after-life, except to tell them that there will be a reckoning, and that the Law and the Prophets themselves will condemn the selfishness of the rich.

The Law and the Prophets concur with the message of the kingdom, and that message will become even sharper as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, and the crisis.

⁹ This is mentioned only once, in Daniel, the last of the "great" prophets.

(Dan. 12: 1 – 4)

¹⁰ Luke 20: 27 – 40

¹¹ The proper reference of the parable is mentioned by Pope Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (44).