"SELL YOUR POSSESSIONS AND GIVE TO THE POOR." A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON JESUS' TEACHING REGARDING PERSONAL WEALTH AND CHARITY

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"If you want to be complete, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." ~ Matthew 19:21

"Sell your possessions and give to the needy." ~ Luke 12:33

"Therefore, anyone who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."
~ Luke 14:33

INTRODUCTION

Today's reader of these strong commandments of Jesus, especially in the global West, cannot help but react in some way. That reaction may be guilt over not obeying, like a low-grade fever that spikes up when these commands are heard anew. Or the reaction may be guardedness or defensiveness, offering reasons why these statements don't mean what they seem to say. Or, least likely but still possible, some readers may immediately drop everything and sell all that they have so as to be true disciples of Jesus.

Each reaction is understandable and has adherents in the Church today as well as throughout Church history. What is clear is that Jesus' teachings are strong and stark and must be addressed one way or another.

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Any Christian reader of Holy Scripture will want to understand and obey what Jesus teaches. This willingness to hear and follow is necessary, but it is not sufficient. It is necessary in that a posture of receptivity is the precursor to faithful reading and application. But it is not sufficient in that the question of what exactly Jesus commands his disciples to do is not solved merely by reading the text. Although the text may seem straightforward and obvious, closer reading of these commandments in their context requires a more thoughtful and nuanced interpretation and application.

This essay seeks to provide just such a thoughtful and nuanced interpretation. We will proceed with a number of steps, first seeking to hear from the history of interpretation of these commands, how various parts and members of the Church have understood and applied their meaning. We will then to turn to a close analysis of Jesus' statements in their context in the Gospels. Finally, we will reflect theologically and practically on how these commands can be faithfully followed in today's culture in the West.

HEARING FROM HISTORY: THE CHURCH'S READING OF JESUS' COMMANDS

The commands of Jesus quoted above are not the only places in the Gospels where the connection between wealth and discipleship arises, but they are some of the clearest and most influential. Of special note is the memorable and weighty story of the rich young ruler, which appears at length in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 18:18-27). Examining how various readers have interpreted this passage provides an important line of sight into the Church's various ways of understanding wealth and poverty as part of the life of the Christian. Therefore, for our survey of the history of interpretation, we will focus on this particular story, especially in its Matthean form, which was the most dominant and influential of the Synoptic Gospels. Hearing how various readers throughout Church history have dealt with the story of the rich young ruler will provide solid ground to understand the assorted teachings of Jesus about wealth and poverty in the Gospels, including Luke 12:33 and 14:33 quoted above.

WAYS OF NAVIGATING JESUS' COMMAND TO THE RICH YOUNG RULER

Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler resulted in the command for him to sell all that he had so that he might be "complete" or "fulfilled."[1] The gist of this famous story is clear: wealth can be a hindrance to entering into eternal life or God's kingdom.[2] This can be seen by Matthew's comment that the young man went away grieving because he had so many possessions (Matthew 19:22). Moreover, Jesus made the meaning even more explicit: that it is very difficult for the wealthy to enter into God's kingdom, apparently because of this heart issue (Matthew 19:23-24). The disciples were shocked by this statement and turn of events (Matthew 19:25). Here we have a godly man, a faithful Jew, one who is apparently blessed by God with wealth and possessions, yet he fails to enter the kingdom. This weighty truth hangs heavily on the mind and heart of any subsequent reader.

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Despite the boldness of the claim that is difficult for the rich to enter eternal life, as Ernst Bloch wryly notes, throughout most of Christian history the Church has "widened the aperture considerably" in order to make it easier for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven and for the Church to live with this text.[3]

In the earliest Church, many assumed that Jesus' command to sell one's possessions applied to everyone in a straightforward way, especially in light of the common belief that Jesus' final return from heaven was imminent. Many considered that to possess anything beyond the basics of life was to be wealthy. Jesus' instructions to his disciples to take nothing extra on their missionary journeys (Matthew 10:9-10 and parallels) seemed to support this view. As the years rolled by, however, a greater variety of applications understandably arose.

An allegorical way of reading this story was very common throughout the earliest centuries of the Church, based on the interpretive practices widespread through the ancient world.[4] Hilary of Poitiers, for example, gave a salvation-historical reading of this story, with the rich man equaling Judaism in its attempt to hold on to the Law. Jesus confronted this attempt and also challenged Judaism to share its wealth with the poor, meaning the Gentiles who should also be recipients of divine blessings. Other allegorical readings abound, all of which make the issue of personal wealth less directly applicable to the Christian reader.

Origen (ca. 184-254) and Chrysostom (ca. 349-407), two of the most influential teachers of the early Church, who otherwise tended to approach thorny problems differently, offered a remarkably similar explanation: Jesus' radical command means that one should give some of one's possessions to the poor, but not all. As the Church evolved and became more established, the idea of itinerant, Spirit-led missionaries who owned nothing became less common and was certainly not the norm. Indeed, the same shift can already be seen within the pages of the New Testament. The Book of Acts shows a variety of faithful people who owned possessions, and the Epistles address those who apparently lived and worked in one place and often had wealth. These issues will be explored further below.

Ancient teachers of the Church began to emphasize that the issue in the story of the rich young ruler was not wealth itself but the right attitude toward one's possessions. Many theologians and pastors (such as Jerome, Ephraem, Euthymius, and Hilary of Poitiers) emphasized that Jesus did not say it is impossible, but only very difficult, for the rich to enter the kingdom. Christians sin when they are greedy or when they use their possessions to hurt or oppress others, but there is nothing wrong with wealth itself.

Probably the most positive example of this approach can be found in the influential pastor-theologian, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215). The purpose of his homily on Matthew 19 was to demonstrate that the rich can indeed be saved. He argued that it is superficial to read the text as an external command to give away all one's possessions, instead of as a statement about the soul. It is in the soul that love of possessions, anxiety, and worries occur, and that is what this text is teaching. As Clement said, "the real threat to salvation does not depend on externals." The rich man who is a slave of possessions in his soul can be far from the kingdom, but so can the poor man with his passions. According to Clement, one should aspire to poverty of spirit, not financial poverty (Matthew 5:3). Wealth itself is neutral, neither good nor bad. Instead of abandoning wealth, one should make of it an instrument of righteousness.[5]

As the Church developed over time, another way of reading this story arose. It was connected to a broader theological turn that occurred as Christians wrestled with the high moral expectations and strong

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commands of the Bible overall. Specifically, a distinction developed between commands that apply to all Christians *(praecepta)*, such as the Ten Commandments, and those that are obligations only of the called clergy, priests, monks, and saints (the *consilia evangelica).* In this understanding of the teachings of the Bible—which Protestants opposed because of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers—the command to the rich young ruler to be "complete" *(teleios)* obviously falls into the category of the *consilia*. In this way of thinking, the command to sell all possessions and give to the poor need not be taken as a realistic or necessary obligation for most Christians. Not all clergy applied it themselves in the same way either, although some such as the Franciscans did so, and Matthew 19:21 became the foundational text for their vow of poverty.

Lest the distinction between the *praecepta* and *consilia* be dismissed as merely convenient, it should be noted that in its best form, it is an attempt to make sense of how the average Christian, burdened by daily living and sinful habits, can still be a faithful follower of Christ. The high commands of Jesus at every turn would otherwise serve only as words of condemnation and discouragement to the majority of believers. Moreover, theologians and preachers observed that in the Bible there were already two different callings given to people who followed Jesus. There were the apostles, who left everything to follow Jesus; but there were plenty of others who were not required to do so, such as Nicodemus, Gamaliel, and Joseph of Arimethea, who apparently owned property and possessions and remained in their roles in society.

As noted, the Protestant Reformers were united strongly against the idea of the *praecepta* versus the *consilia evangelica*. They saw this distinction as precisely the problem with not only the monastic tradition, but with all of the Roman Catholic Church—that the clergy attempted to earn their salvation through their works, and the salvation of lay people was necessarily mediated through others (sacerdotalism). So for the Reformers, the traditional interpretation of the story of the rich young ruler did not work. In its place they offered a number of other readings. For example, many saw the man as the prototype of a godless person striving to earn righteousness based on his works. At other times, Jesus' conversation with the man was seen as an example of the good use the Law, leading us to conviction of sin. Overall, Protestant interpretation has emphasized that Jesus' command is for all people (contra the *consilia* view), but that it was never meant to be understood as an external command; rather it is about our loves. Thus, the point of the story is that one should not love anything more than God, and one should love one's neighbor. Luther even turned Matthew 19:21 on its head against his monastic opponents (and former self) and said that the true command is *not* to leave everything and live like the monks who had to beg and live on the handouts of others. Instead, the right goal is to earn one's own keep and to protect and manage money responsibly; forsaking all possessions and neglecting one's family and responsibilities is the greater sin.[6]

In the post-Reformation era down to today, not much new interpretation of this story has happened. As the general economic status of all individuals rises in the global West, interest in this text wanes. Instead of wrestling with the troubling command, interpreters point to the text as an example of how Jesus admirably used pastoral skill to deal with people, and many continue to see the man's heart-focus as the issue in the story. Any more literal application would apply only to someone who is both wealthy and miserly and needs to hear Jesus' pointed challenge. Few would see themselves in this category.

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HEARING JESUS' COMMANDS

Knowing the background of the history of interpretation, we can now turn to the biblical texts for a more direct reading. We will examine the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-26 in its context of Matthew's theology. We will then turn to Luke 12:33 and 14:33, understood within Luke's broader arguments.

Matthew 19:16-26 and Matthew's Theology

> A man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good must I do to obtain eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only one who is good. If you desire to enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What am l still lacking?"
> Jesus said to him, "If you desire to be complete, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:16-26)

Every story in the Gospels exists in a historical, literary, and theological context. When we read a Gospel story, it is helpful to understand that there are aspects that are historically conditioned and different from our own historical and cultural context. At the same time, each story is crafted, shaped, and placed in a series of other stories and a larger literary structure, in this case in the Gospel of Matthew. This threefold context means that in the Gospel account, certain theological assumptions and arguments are being made that go beyond the specific story. Recognizing and understanding these three contexts is the key to reading any Gospel narrative well and wisely.[7]

From the historical perspective, we can observe that the interaction between Jesus and this young Jewish man sits directly on a key human question, framed here in its Jewish and Greco-Roman historical context. The question the man asks is a common one for any pious and sincere Jewish person: What does God want of me to be aligned with him and to experience the fullness of life he promises? This is not only a Jewish question, of course, but is universal to all religions. Indeed, it is ultimately the question of human flourishing that motivates all religions and philosophies.[8]

In this particular story, we see the juxtaposition or crossroads of two overlapping historical contexts: first-century Judaism and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition. The latter comes out most clearly in the key word that drives this passage, Jesus' exhortation for the man to be "complete" in verse 21. This Greek word *teleios* is very important and is evocative of the Greek philosophical tradition and its own answer to the great

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question of human flourishing. In effect Jesus pointed out that for the young man to obtain what he really wanted—complete and mature human flourishing—the young man must do more than keep a list of external commands, as good and divine as they may be. In this way, Jesus' teachings corresponded closely with his own historical context.

In addition to this important note on the historical context, we can also observe several key ideas by paying attention to the literary and theological context of this story. The first thing to observe is that the issue of salvation, entering the kingdom, and eternal life are all overlapping concepts and all very important ideas in Matthew. Throughout his Gospel account, Matthew, along with the rest of the New Testament, describes God's redeeming work through Jesus in a variety of ways, each of which contributes its own portion to the overall and elaborate tapestry that is redemption. This story is one clear example of the overlapping nature of these distinct descriptions: obtaining eternal life (v. 16), having treasure in heaven (v. 21), entering the kingdom of heaven (v. 23), entering the kingdom of God (v .24), and being saved (v. 25).

A second literary and theological note is that this idea of having treasure in heaven is part of a larger and important theme of reward and recompense in the Gospel of Matthew.[9] This is particularly relevant for the broader question of wealth and Jesus' commands. The promise to the young man in Matthew 19:21 is but one instance of many times that Jesus promised people great rewards in God's coming kingdom. For example, Matthew used the noun *misthos,* "reward," ten times (as compared to five times in the rest of the Gospels combined). Sometimes *misthos* is used negatively, warning against loss of reward (6:1, 2, 5, 16), and at other times positively as a promise (5:12, 46; 10:41-42; 20:8). The same is true of the word "treasure," *thesauros* (6:19, 20, 21; 12:35; 13:44, 52; 19:21). Closely related, God the Father is depicted as rewarding or recompensing people *(apodidomi),* either good or bad (6:4, 6, 18; 16:27; implied in 18:35; 20:8; 21:41). This is all relevant because it is our first hint that the pervasive use of terms related to money, treasure, and reward are functioning as metaphors; that is, the language related to money is being used to speak to something larger, deeper, and more important than mere financial concerns.

This leads to a third and final literary and theological observation. Woven deeply into Matthew is the exhortation to internal, whole-person righteousness. It is no overstatement to say that for Matthew a major goal was to teach disciples of Jesus that to be true followers they "must have a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees" (5:20). What this greater righteousness looks like is unpacked most fully in the Sermon on the Mount, but also more broadly throughout the whole Gospel. In short, it means being people of Godward-directed, Christ-believing, kingdom-oriented, whole-person virtue or character, all by grace. Jesus taught that true righteousness is about the internal person, who one is on the inside, what kind of tree one is as manifested by what kind of fruit one produces (3:10; 7:17-19; 12:33). True righteousness is a matter of the heart, which in Greek parlance means the whole person, not just the emotions (cf. 6:21).[10] Most succinctly, true righteousness is being *teleios,* complete or whole (5:48). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus constantly called people to this kind of whole-person, heart-mind-actions character. It is precisely the disconnect between the internal heart and external behavior that was constantly under attack by Jesus, hence his recurrent conflict with Pharisees. Jesus considered them "hypocrites" not because they were behavioristically immoral while claiming they were not, but because they were righteous on the outside but not on the inside (6:1-21; 15:1-20; 23:1-36). Jesus played the same exhortational role that the prophets sent by God did in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa 29:13, quoted in Matthew 15:8).

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With this meta-theme in Matthew in mind, we can consider anew the story of the rich young ruler. The man is to be commended for his external righteousness; he had faithfully kept the commandments of God and was apparently wise and blessed as a result, both financially and in terms of standing in his society. By normal human standards—including apparently the perspective of Jesus' disciples—this man was worthy of eternal life, of entering into God's coming kingdom. However, according to Jesus, he still lacked something crucial and foundational. He was not *teleios;* he was not whole or complete (cf. 5:48). What he lacked was not something that could be put in the external behavior column of his life. The gap between his externally righteous behavior and his completeness was apparently an issue of his heart. Fulfilling what Jesus had already proclaimed—"where your treasure is there your heart will be also" (6:21)—this young man went away sorrowful in his heart because he had much wealth. The issue was not money in and of itself or giving to the poor as a behavior, but, consistent with all the other stories and teachings in Matthew, completeness/wholeness/righteousness is a matter of the heart, of the internal person in his or her commitments, values, and treasures.

The reason Jesus commanded this particular would-be follower to sell what he possessed and give it to the poor was precisely because this was the man's heart-treasure issue. Many others in Matthew followed Jesus without being commanded to leave everything, precisely because their heart issue was different. The centurion who came to believe in Jesus was commended simply for his obvious heart-deep faith, and no extra demands were made upon him (8:5-13). The same was true of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28). Likewise, as a negative example, even the Pharisees were not commanded to give away their possessions to the poor; their heart issue/problem was different—seeking the praise of others (6:1-21).

All of this makes clear that the reason Jesus required the selling of possessions for the rich young ruler is that this was the spiritual heart-ailment that Jesus the great physician diagnosed. And though it is not argued in quite the same way, this confirms much of the Church's historical interpretation, especially the stream from Clement of Alexandria noted above.

Luke 12:33, 14:33 and Luke's Theology

When we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we find the same interpretation in the parallel version of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-27), but we must also consider some other strong statements related to selling one's possessions.

> "Sell your possessions and give to the needy" (Luke 12:33, ESV).

And even stronger:

> "Therefore, anyone who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33, ESV).

The first thing to observe is that the Gospel of Luke (along with its companion volume, Acts) has much to say about wealth and poverty as they relate to Jesus and godliness. In Matthew the language of reward and treasure is frequent though almost entirely metaphorical. While metaphorical references to wealth occur in Luke as well, the third Gospel also has a well-recognized emphasis on the poor in contrast to the rich, with the former portrayed as in God's favor and the latter as in danger. For example, in one of the songs that

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serve as an overture to Luke's Gospel, we hear that God has exalted those in a lowly state and "he has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich away empty" (1:53). Then throughout Luke we find many parables and teachings that sit directly on the issue of money: the parable of the rich fool (12:13-21), the parable of the unjust steward (16:1-13), the story of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), the repentance of the tax collector Zacchaeus (19:1-10), and the account of the widow's mite (21:1-4). In the book of Acts the issue of wealth continues to be discussed. The early Church exhibits the habit of sharing with each other to help meet each other's needs, even across ethnic and racial lines (Acts 2:42-47; 4:33-37).[11] In this the Church models the kind of approach to wealth and possessions that Jesus commends in the Gospels. So for Luke the topic of wealth and poverty and Christian discipleship cannot be seen as only a metaphor for following Jesus; there are real issues at hand concerning money and its negative effect on souls. It is always important to hear the voice and witness of each individual Gospel writer and not be too quick to collapse their messages into one. Nevertheless, it is not wrong to assume that the same heart/internal righteousness focus in Matthew is also at work in Luke and particularly in these passages. This consistency will prove to be important as we examine two of the strongest statements about possessions and discipleship.

In the case of Luke 12:33 and its command to "sell your possessions and give to the needy," we must interpret the statement in its literary and theological context. First, unlike the specific instruction to the rich young ruler, 12:33 is apparently a more universal statement in that it exists in a series of general teachings to all of Jesus' disciples; it has a more general and universal feel and application than the specific command to the Jewish young man. Nevertheless, attending to the broader context shows that even this strong and generalized statement must be qualified in its application.

Note that 12:33 and its accompanying statement in verse 34 ("For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also;" cf. Matt 6:21) form the aphoristic conclusion to a lengthy section all dealing with the heart issue of trusting in wealth. This section begins with the parable of the rich fool (12:16-21) who is foolish precisely because he "lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" (12:21, ESV). Rather than a teaching against planning and sound business or farming practices, the point of this parable is that one must always be aware of and wary of the heart issue problem of treasuring something more than God. Evidence that this is the best reading is found in the concluding aphorism, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" in 12:34. But this reading is also indicated by what we can call the "front-loaded nimshal" of 12:15. Typical in many of Luke's parables is an introductory statement that explains the point or take-home application (the "nimshal") of the parable is that is about to be given.[12] That is the case here, with 12:15 serving as the introductory explanation: "Pay attention and be on guard against all kinds of greed for life is not found in the abundance of one's possessions." The point of the parable (and really this whole section) is the heart issue of what one values most, concluded again with a reiteration in 12:34.

Between Luke 12:15-21 and 12:33-34 is material nearly identical to that found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-34). The point of these teachings is to encourage disciples that anxiety over money, wealth, and possessions is irrelevant to the real heart issue—that the heavenly Father knows our needs, cares for us, and will provide. Our part is to seek him and his kingdom, allowing God to take care of our external and physical needs. In this vein, Jesus then said to his disciples, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:32-34,

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ESV) In this context the hyperbolic and metaphorical intent of the command to "sell your possessions" should be clear in the same way that disciples are told not to think about what they will wear or eat or drink (Luke 12:22, 29). The command is not to live recklessly and insensitively to the realities of life—buying clothes, buying and preparing food—but the focus is on the heart issue of anxiety about these real-life matters. The same is true with the command to sell one's possessions. It is not an absolute statement but an invitation to the freedom of living in a way that seeks first God's kingdom rather than the riches of this world (Luke 12:21, 31).

By the time we arrive at Luke 14:33—both in reading Luke and in our discussion in this essay—much ground has been covered, and the argument has been made that issues of wealth and discipleship are ultimately matters of the heart, even while acknowledging that there is a real potential danger in possessing wealth precisely because of its great potential for heart control. Nevertheless, Jesus' command in 14:33 is perhaps the strongest and starkest statement about wealth and what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and it must be faced with openness and receptivity. Followers of Jesus in his own day and down to today are meant to feel the weight of Jesus' bold statement; it should not be quickly or summarily dismissed.

Once again, paying attention to the context offers the best opportunity to hear the message that Jesus in Luke intended to convey. Luke 14:33 is the aphorism or "so what?" statement that concludes the pericope of 14:25-33. The sense of this section is that disciples must weigh and choose carefully when deciding to follow Christ. To make the decision lightly would dishonor both the issue and the Person at issue. To be a disciple means to follow as a whole person the One whom Christianity regards as the center of the universe, the God-Man Jesus.

The call to weigh and choose carefully is full of high and exalted metaphorical images and analogies meant to convey the significance of the matter. Jesus said that one cannot be a disciple who does not "hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life" (Luke 14:26, ESV). To be a disciple means to carefully consider the costs, illustrated by a building project (14:28-30) and a king going out to wage a potentially losing battle (14:31-32). All of this concludes with the similarly hyperbolic statement that one must "renounce all things" or one cannot be Jesus' disciple. That this is meant metaphorically and hyperbolically is evinced by the parallel to the necessity of hating all of one's family (12:26). A literal application of this could not be farther from the meaning of Jesus, who is the teacher and model par excellence for loving others.

This hyperbolic, heart-issue interpretation is also evidenced by the verb choice in the statement. Luke 14:33, with its high and strong language, does not say baldly that one must sell or give away all of one's possessions to be a disciple, but rather that one must renounce, forsake, or take leave of them. The verb *(apotassomai)* in its most common usage refers to formally saying goodbye when departing (e.g., Luke 9:61). But it can also be used figuratively, as here in 14:33, to refer to letting go of those things that are precious to us, entrusting them to God. The figurative point here, along with the many other metaphors (such as hating one's family), is that one's possessions must not have a binding hold on one's heart, affections, or life decisions.

This reading is finally confirmed by the variety of ways in which Jesus called people to follow him in Luke's Gospel. As with Matthew, it is important that if the calls to sell everything are taken as literal, absolute statements, rather than the principle of weighing and choosing, it would be inconsistent with the wide

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variety of calls to discipleship we find in Luke. For example, the first four disciples/apostles left behind their fishing gear (Luke 5:11), but the next person cleansed and converted by Jesus, a former leper, apparently returned to his normal life (5:12-16), as did the paralytic (5:17-26). The same can be said of the centurion in 7:1-10 and the widow and her son in 7:11-17. Possibly the most telling example is the famous (short) story about another new disciple, Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Like the rich young ruler and Levi (another tax collector; 5:27-28), Zacchaeus was apparently wealthy, and his encounter with Jesus radically changed his heart and attitude toward money. But Jesus made no demands upon him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Rather, out of his own initiative, Zacchaeus chose to sell half of his (apparently extensive) possessions and give the proceeds to the poor while also paying back anyone he had defrauded with generous interest (19:8). The call of discipleship and its effects on each individual concerning wealth and possessions proves to be a heart issue to be worked out in various ways according to one's calling.

We also have additional insights from Luke's follow-up work, Acts. Here we find the same pattern: different people were called to handle their giving and possessions according to the perceived call of God on their lives (inevitably more subjectively determined after Jesus' physical ascension). For example, Joseph-Barnabas without compulsion sold a field that he owned to help with the fledgling Church and its needs (Acts 4:36-37). There is nothing to indicate he sold all of his possessions in this situation, nor that he was required to. By contrast, the story follows of a couple who also sold a field as an offering to the Church, with the apparent difference that they indicated that the purchase price was all donated, when in fact it was not (Acts 5:1-11). The Apostle Peter condemned them, not for keeping a portion back for themselves, but for their public deceit. Indeed he rightly noted that they could do what they wanted with the field and with the money (5:4a). The issue was their heart of deceit (5:4b).

Overall, taking into account the historical, literary, and theological context, we see once again that even the apparently strongest statements that Jesus made concerning selling one's possessions to be a disciple need to be understood with proper qualification and nuance that take into account the whole story.

HEARING AND HEEDING THESE COMMANDS IN THE 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL WEST

Just as the biblical texts are situated in historical, literary, and theological contexts, we are likewise situated as readers and hearers. All hearing is contextualized or situated. A contextualized hearing is not necessarily a compromised or lessened one; it can be, but the act of contextualization into a new culture by itself does not necessitate a loss of meaning. Meaning is application applied in particular times and places and cultures. As the theologian John Frame points out, good theology is something that is new in every generation and place; it is the faithful reading and application of Scripture in the here and now.[13] The Word of God was not only alive in its origins but continues to speak into our now.

It is appropriate, then, that we conclude this essay by offering some pointers toward what a faithful reading of these ancient texts might look like in the 21st century global West, the place where I and many of my readers are situated.

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The first observation is that in the preceding analysis of these three biblical texts, it was necessary to make strong arguments against literalistic readings; but this approach can begin to feel like special pleading. That is, at every turn the argument was that these high and strong commands of Jesus don't mean what they seem to say and don't really apply to us. Stepping back from a place of relative economic ease and luxury, and aware that I personally don't want to sell all my possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, we should at least consider that our counter-desires may color our interpretation. The constant refrain that these commands do not apply can begin to sound like Gertrude's line in *Hamlet:* "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." In other words, non-literalistic readings appear as overly convenient ways to avoid the commands of Jesus.

This is a fair concern and gets at an important application for today's readers. While I believe the interpretations offered above are good and wise readings which correctly interpret Jesus' focus on the heart over external actions, we are always in danger of muting and enervating these texts, taming them to our own will instead of God's. Instead, we should feel the pinch and push and pull of these commands just as much as the people who originally heard them, even if the application to our bank accounts differs from theirs.

After all, the point of Jesus' commands is that our hearts can and often are deceived regarding our possessions, with deadly effect. Even if we understand that the solution is not necessarily selling all of our possessions, we must still be willing to face any application that is just as radical (at its root) and which feels just as heart-surgical and shocking. This requires an honest evaluation of our lives, including our finances and possessions, to detect how we may fall into the same heart-treasure-traps as the rich young ruler and other would-be disciples. We must not forget that the Bible talks a lot about money and that it is not treated as merely *adiaphora,* or completely indifferent or neutral. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, as Paul told us (1 Timothy 6:10). We cannot substitute any other noun for "money" and speak the same truth. Money, wealth, and possessions have special power that other things in the world do not, precisely because they promise to meet our most basic needs as well as some of our loftiest desires. After all, Jesus reminded us in the parable of the sower that fruit is often choked out in soil that is thorn-infested. He explained that "the deceitfulness of riches chokes the word" in our lives, resulting in a failed crop (Matthew 13:22). While it is important to properly hear Jesus' commands and recognize that not every believer is required to sell one's possessions to become a disciple, we should not swing the pendulum so far the opposite direction that we deceive ourselves into thinking wealth and possessions are outside the realm of God's commands and correction in our lives.

Balancing these thoughts with a more positive counterpart, I will offer two ways in which we should consider and utilize whatever wealth and possessions God gives us. These two ways can be summed up as viewing our wealth (1) for employment, and (2) for enjoyment.

By *for employment* I mean the mindset that God gives his creatures wealth and possessions so that they might employ them for the good of the world, including those in need. The Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, speak much about the importance of care for the poor and those in need (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 15:11; Psalm 82:4; Proverbs 19:17; Isaiah 1:17; Matthew 5:42; Galatians 6:2; James 1:17; 1 John 3:17-18). While Jesus' commands do not require each individual to sell everything to be a disciple, they still reflect a positive aspect of Christian discipleship: caring for those in need. In this way all Christians are called to employ whatever goods they have for the good of others. The practical outworking

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is a matter of wisdom, not a matter of rules and regulations. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7) and Christians are under no compulsion to meet every need that presents itself. Even giving up all of one's wealth and possessions would not meet all the needs of the world! But Christians are under obligation to be motivated by a heart of love and compassion for others. This fulfills the second greatest commandment, that we love one another. Therefore, followers of Christ today should intentionally adopt a mindset that what we own is a gift given to be employed for the good. This is summed up in parable form in Jesus' teachings about the talents (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-28). Each person has been given a gift and must choose how to employ it.

By *for enjoyment* I mean that Christians should exercise wisdom regarding wealth and possessions by recognizing that God gives his creatures all things for their enjoyment. This can be a difficult concept for many Christians to embrace, especially those who are serious about helping the poor and aware of the great needs of the world. It is always easier to fall off one or the other side of the knife-edge of truth than to walk on it. It is much easier to treat money and possessions as *adiaphora* on the one side or as evil on the other. But the truth is that God is a God of pleasure and enjoyment. All the good of creation is from God; there is nothing good that does not come from him. We must not become ascetics, denying the goodness of creation either in principle or by practices that treat wealth and possessions and their pleasures as evil. We will always have the poor with us, and we should care for them. But caring for the poor is not the opposite of enjoying all that God has created for our good.[14] Moreover, we know that if you are heeding God's call for your life and accumulate wealth in the process, your wealth is a signal of good stewardship and the good employment of your time, treasure and talents.

As with the employment of our wealth, so too with its enjoyment; we must pursue wisdom. There are no clear rules and regulations and laws about how much the Christian can enjoy the world or how to balance enjoyment with sacrificing to help others. Rather, Christians are called to a life of heart-examining wisdom. We have come full circle back to our biblical texts and their interpretation. The call of discipleship is a call to hear Jesus' commands, examine our hearts, and follow after him. For some this will mean giving up much of this world; for others, not. But in all things the call is to heart-level hearing.

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[1] Both terms are far better glosses for the Greek word *teleios* than the traditional English rendering "perfect." The idea is not "free from blemish or fault" as the English "perfect" indicates. Rather, *teleios* indicates the final, mature, satisfying state of the soul that one can achieve by a right orientation to the world. For more discussion of this word, see my essay "A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing" <http://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Pennington-A-Biblical-Theology-of-Human-Flourishing.pdf> and my book *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming).
[2] It is important to understand that from a biblical perspective, "entering into eternal life" is synonymous with entering into or being a member of God's kingdom. Both ways of speaking are found with the same referent throughout the

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Gospels; and in some stories they are explicitly used as synonyms, such as Mark 9:42-50 with its threefold "enter life . . . enter life . . . enter the kingdom of God."
[3] Quoted in Ulrich Luz, *Hermeneia Series: Matthew 8–20* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 518. The following discussion is based largely on Luz's helpful summary of the history of interpretation of Matthew 19.
[4] One helpful introduction is John O'Keefe and Russell Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).
[5] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 520.
[6] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 521.
[7] For a fuller exploration of how to read the Gospels, see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).
[8] See my essay "A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing" <http://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Pennington-A-Biblical-Theology-of-Human-Flourishing.pdf>.
[9] See Blaine Charette, *The Theme of Recompense in Matthew's Gospel* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
[10] See, for example, the entries on "heart" or *kardia* in *NIDNTT* or *EDNT*.
[11] See Art Lindsley, "Does Acts 2–5 Teach Socialism?" http://tifwe.org/resources/does-acts-2-5-teach-socialism/.
[12] For a helpful explanation and discussion of the *nimshal* or "moral of the story" of parables, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).
[13] See John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987).
[14] A very helpful and balanced book along these lines is Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

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