

“You Cannot Serve God and Mammon”: Economic Relations and Human Flourishing in Luke

By Raymond Pickett

Abstract: Economics is essentially a matter of value, and capitalism is a system of value creation in which the individual is valued at the expense of the community and the cosmos. In contrast to this, Luke tells the story of Jesus as a vision of salvation that is covenantal and communal, encompassing every dimension of life, including the economic. God and mammon represent two antithetical wellsprings of value and desire that orient intentions and actions in different directions. Mammon represents the realm of self-justification, self-reliance, self-aggrandizement, and in our own disenchanted world the “buffered” and disengaged self, while God represents the domain of human flourishing characterized by interdependence and sharing.

Key Terms: economics, value, salvation, community, human flourishing

Engaging Luke on Economics

The Gospel of Luke has more to say about economic realities, including poverty and wealth and the use of possessions, than any other New Testament document. There is some debate about whether or not Luke presents a coherent economic vision because of the ostensibly incongruous demands Jesus makes regarding his followers’ relationship to possessions. For example, in a discourse on the cost of discipleship Jesus states without qualification, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14:33). However, there are several people of means in Luke’s narrative who have some relationship with Jesus and his ministry in Luke-Acts, and it is not at all apparent that most of his followers have relinquished all of their possessions.

Oikonomia

Perhaps an even greater challenge in appropriating what Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke about wealth and possessions to contemporary contexts are the profound differences between the ancient economy and the current market system. The term *economy* comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “household.” The Greek term *oikonomia* referred originally to “household management,” and only by extension to political economy or what is called economics in modern English usage. In the world that Luke and all the Gospels depict, economic discourse and activity pertain primarily to the domain of the household, that is, the acquisition, distribution, use, and sharing of the basic necessities of life. In current usage the word *economy* is used mainly to describe the political economy, that is, the economic system embedded in the state.

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This may at first seem to be an insurmountable obstacle in any attempt to relate Jesus' teachings on economic relations to today's complex world of high finance. After all, Jesus did not propose an economic model to replace the existing one, and even if he had it would not be easy to parlay his message to transform late global capitalism. Yet Aristotle, who taught that economics is concerned with both the household and the *polis*, provides a framework and some practical guidance for reflecting on how Luke's presentation of Jesus' teaching on economic relations might engage current economic realities and challenges.

Aristotle and Eudaimonia

For Aristotle, the primary meaning of economics is the action of using things required for the "good life" or *eudaimonia*. In Aristotle's works, *eudaimonia* was used as the term for the highest human good, and a more accurate translation would be "human flourishing." *Eudaimonia* is the aim of practical philosophy, including ethics and political philosophy. My aim here is not to invoke the whole of Aristotle's economic theory as a means of correlating Luke's depiction of Jesus' teaching on economic matters to current economic issues, but rather to propose that Aristotle's notion of "human flourishing" is a constructive conceptual category for reflecting on economics as it relates to other important aspects of life.

In modern society, most views of the "good life" would be construed in individual terms as physical pleasure or honor, two of the main uses of wealth in antiquity and today. However, in *Politics*, Aristotle argues that to lead a flourishing life, it is imperative that people embrace their responsibility in the community or *polis*, thereby protecting the interests of their personal lives and community, as well as instilling virtue in oneself through civil servitude and leadership. Aristotle maintained the important connection between the personal and the political, the public and private, as interdependent

domains of human activity, including economic relations, that has been foundational for western democratic societies but has for various reasons eroded over time. Moreover, in addition to recognizing that household economics was embedded in the political economy, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he also affirms that economic dealings are subject to a conception of justice.¹ Allocation of scarce resources was a moral issue to Aristotle, who was concerned with having enough useful things to supply the needs of the household and the *polis*.² In other words, he emphasized the ethical dimension of economics, that is, how the acquisition, distribution and exchange of resources impacted the life of the community.

The reason for appealing to Aristotle in interpreting the economic material in Luke is the need for a more holistic model that holds together these various dimensions and spheres of life so as to illuminate the underlying values of economic practices and their social, political, and spiritual repercussions. Aristotle's treatment of economics is not without problems. Nonetheless, his use of the classical conception of "human flourishing" (*eudaimonia*) provides useful scaffolding for discussing economics in relationship to issues of ethics and the *polis* in the overlapping and interdependent public and private domains. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has retrieved the idea of human flourishing to set up his exploration of how a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God became one in which faith is one human possibility among others. In the introduction he observes, "Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life what makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for?"³

A Secular Age

In modern societies, possessions and wealth play a crucial role in the predominant cultural conception

of human flourishing, or what constitutes a fulfilled life. Taylor's book is a tour de force that describes the monumental transformation in the modern conception of human flourishing that was initiated by the Reformation and that redefined the modern sense of self. I want to succinctly summarize the basic plot of the complex story Taylor tells because the new sense of self that emerged from this paradigm shift has profound implications for the modern understanding of the uses of wealth and possessions.

Taylor describes the transition in terms of the notion of disenchantment that Max Weber associated with the rise of capitalism and modernity. The disenchantment of the universe was characterized by a fading of God's presence and the emergence of what Taylor calls a "buffered self." The enchanted world of antiquity and the Middle Ages was a world of spirits, demons, and moral and external forces that impacted peoples' lives. According to Taylor, "the process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world, and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans; and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, etc., are situated 'within' them."⁴

The distinction between the enchanted world of antiquity and the disenchanted world of modernity is important because reading the New Testament necessarily involves a confrontation between these two worldviews, which posit different assumptions about reality and shape our relationship to it. If we do not negotiate the tension between them, then we will invariably construe these ancient texts that presuppose an enchanted worldview according to our own disenchanted perception of reality. On the other hand, if we interpret Luke and other New Testament documents mindful of the differences, then there is always the possibility that they can facilitate critical reflection on modern assumptions about God, how the world works, and how we understand our relationship to both that can lead to transformation—not only of the "buffered self" but of the world. Toward that end I want to highlight and then negotiate what Taylor regards as an es-

sentia distinction between the self-understandings associated with the two worldviews.

The Enchanted World

Taylor contrasts the modern universe of buffered selves and minds with an enchanted world that "shows a perplexing absence of certain boundaries which seem to us essential."⁵ A key distinction is expressed in this quote:

The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement. And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one's whole surroundings, natural and social. But living in the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors was inherently living socially.

These two respective anthropologies have corresponding theological perspectives. In the enchanted world, where the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not clearly drawn, Taylor observes that the "social bond at all [these] levels was intertwined in the sacred," precisely because the sacred was located outside the self and was inextricably bound to social experience.⁶ In the enchanted ancient world individuality was conceived of and experienced as a nexus of relationships to people, social groups, and nature that formed a sacred cosmos.

By contrast, Taylor contends that in the disenchanted world, meanings are in the mind. However, sociological analysis since Émile Durkheim has maintained that meaning and the sacred are always social. Following John Boli, I want to suggest that the sacred social order that structures individual action in western culture is primarily represented in the economic realm, and that as a totalizing reality it has had a corrosive affect on social life and the public sphere precisely because in the economic realm it is the individual, not the cosmos, that is most sacred.⁷ While one of the great gains of the Enlightenment was acknowledgement of the value of the individual and individual freedom, the unlimited growth of late capitalism in the modern era has been a driving force behind the increasing

alienation, isolation, and disengagement of the “buffered self.”⁸

Individualism and Value

Boli’s article is helpful in framing the discussion because he posits that in modern societies the market economy is a moral order with its own rationality that is grounded in the sacred.⁹ According to Boli, the monetarization of social life is not essentially an economic process, and capitalism is not essentially a system of production and exchange but rather a model of value creation.¹⁰ The underlying issue in discussions of any aspect of economics is always that of value, that is, how value is defined and who or what authorizes the standards of value.¹¹ From a social science perspective it is the sacred social order that identifies the cultural sources of value or worth.¹² Boli’s contention is that what is of most value in the dominant economic order of capitalism is the individual.

Applying Durkheim’s model of society and the sacred, Boli contends that in western culture the “individual is sacred, surrounded by notions of ultimate worth and inviolability and the giver and receiver of ritualistic affirmations of the venerability of the bounded self.”¹³ What he designates “economic religion” has little to do with materialism or consumerism per se. He contends, “For the most part, we do not consume the goods we buy. We display them, flaunt them, hoard them; we incorporate them into the self, liberate ourselves with their aid, use them to confirm our understanding of reality, build our personal relationships around them.”¹⁴

Individual and Community in Luke’s Vision of Salvation

Questions of value are at the center of any discussion of economic theory and practice, though they often may be shrouded in the specifics of ideology and policy. They are also at the center of

Jesus’ proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God in Luke. I want to consider a few key passages in which Jesus engages economic relations that reflect Luke’s perspective on value in the kingdom: in particular, how wealth and possessions are used either to increase individual value in the context of the cultural system by obtaining honor, or to benefit others in ways that promote interdependence and solidarity.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus as a story of salvation.¹⁵ From a biblical perspective salvation is covenantal and communal, and it involves every dimension of life including the social, political, economic, and the spiritual.¹⁶ However, the first entry for “salvation” in the *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “the saving of the soul; deliverance from sin and its consequences and admission to eternal life, brought about by Christ.” This is also the definition of salvation in the popular imagination. Not only does this individual view of salvation detach what is believed to be the spiritual essence of a person and play it off against material existence, it also dissociates a person’s destiny from the environment and network of social relationships in which identity is embedded.

These communal and individual conceptions of salvation are very different and betray a fundamental challenge in interpreting Luke as a narrative of salvation. Luke is saturated in the language and imagery of the Jewish scriptures. The canticles in particular invoke the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants and frame the narrative in terms of the restoration of Israel. In other words, Luke’s story of Jesus concerns the salvation of a people, the covenant community, and addresses the question of who comprises the people of God and what is the pattern of life that befits their life together. But it is difficult to appreciate the communal and social aspects of Luke’s vision of salvation when in western capitalist societies individual identity is often valued at the expense of the community. Hence Luke is typically read as a narrative of personal salvation; that is, as a script for individual followers of Jesus, rather than as a blueprint for a communal way of life.

Jesus’ teachings on the use of wealth and possessions in Luke often find expression in the narrative

through characterization. Characters in the Gospel either demonstrate divine beneficence against the grain of cultural norms by giving without expecting anything in return (Lk 6:35), or they use resources to enhance their own honor, status, and power in accordance with Greco-Roman cultural codes. In Luke-Acts the reciprocity ethic, and the patronage system that is predicated on it, is the tacit and predominant cultural frame of reference against which the narrative operates. Many, if not most, of the main Lucan themes such as hospitality, economics, and even prayer should be interpreted as challenging the reciprocity ethic and demonstrating various ways people exemplify divine generosity without strings attached.

The Way of Discipleship

Two passages, one at the beginning of Luke's travel narrative and one at the end, feature characters who epitomize Jesus' teaching on economic relations. The travel narrative (Lk 9:51–19:27) begins with Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem, and on this extended journey he provides instruction in the way of discipleship. Most of Jesus' teaching about wealth and possessions occurs in this section of Luke. Also prominent is an emphasis on abandonment of the securities of life in this world to follow Jesus (10:4; 12:33–34; 14:33; 17:33; 18:22).¹⁷ In Luke 10:25–29, an exchange between Jesus and a lawyer sets up the parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:30–37. It is here in Luke that Jesus summarizes Torah with the double command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Jesus cites the double love command as a hermeneutical principle that provides both the proper motivation and key attribute of kingdom behavior.

In response to the lawyer's sarcastic question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a provocative story in which a Samaritan is exemplar of the command to love God and neighbor. Since Jews and Samaritans were antagonists, the Samar-

itan is a surprising example of someone who heeds Jesus' exhortation to "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Lk 6:35). Something needs to be said about the Greek verb "to love" (ἀγαπάω) because it tends to be sentimentalized in English. The first definition in the standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament is "to have a warm regard for and interest in another."¹⁸ It would be unreasonable to presume that Jesus was calling for feelings of affection toward one's foes. Rather he is proposing that his followers, for the sake of their own self-interest and the kingdom of God, take an interest in others—even, or perhaps especially, their enemies. This is in contrast to the lawyer Jesus was talking with who is portrayed as "wanting to justify himself" (Lk 10:29). The distinction between justifying oneself and taking an interest in the other is a criterion according to which characters are evaluated in Luke, and there is often an economic dimension. Along with caring for his enemy, the Samaritan in the parable also gives the innkeeper two days' wages and promises to cover any further costs (Lk 10:35).

At the close of the travel narrative Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, is a recipient of Jesus' hospitality in his own house. The onlookers who observe Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus complain that he is a "sinner," but in this condensed and climactic passage he is portrayed as a transformed sinner who gives half his possessions to the poor (Lk 18:8). What is striking is that salvation here takes the form of his restoration to the covenant community: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9). Salvation is conceived of in the present tense as belonging to the people of God, and this entails concrete expression of love of God and neighbor.

At the other end of the same spectrum is the parable of the rich fool, which Jesus tells in response to a request that he resolve a dispute over inheritance. The wealthy man in the parable who receives a windfall harvest only to hoard it is the antithesis of Zacchaeus. He is an unfavorable example not because he is wealthy or has a surplus of goods, but precisely because his life *does* "consist

in the abundance of possessions” (Lk 12:13–21). Particularly interesting is Luke’s use of soliloquy in his characterization of the man as one who has no one to talk to but himself: “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry’” (Lk 12:19). In other words, the man is graphically depicted as alone and isolated from the covenant community with which he should have shared his good fortune.

“You Cannot Serve God and Mammon”

This is one of several passages in the travel narrative that betrays a negative perspective on wealth and possessions. Before taking a closer look at Jesus’ critique of wealth in Luke, it is important to underscore that, in line with Jewish biblical tradition, there is nothing inherently immoral about wealth per se. In the Deuteronomistic and Wisdom traditions in particular, wealth is typically associated with blessing. The prophets call the wealthy and powerful to account for injustice that causes or contributes to the suffering of the poor. In a first-century imperial context in which a small percentage of elites controlled most of the resources, the prophetic emphasis on justice is certainly an aspect of Jesus’ engagement with economic issues. But as Luke Johnson has noted, possessions in Luke-Acts also have a symbolic function.¹⁹ Given Jesus’ concern to address physical and material needs in the Gospels, the claim that the symbolic dimension is the most important aspect of Jesus’ teaching on wealth and possessions seems exaggerated. Nonetheless, the extent to which a character’s use of wealth and possessions demonstrates love of God and neighbor does seem to be paramount in Luke.

Covenant Infidelity

In Luke 11:37–44 some Pharisees are indicted because they are “full of greed,” “neglect the justice and love of God,” and “love to have the seat of

honor.”²⁰ These are dispositional traits of covenant infidelity in Judaism and in Luke, and they are tied to economic practices that are criticized in the Gospel. In Jewish tradition greed is frequently associated with idolatry.²¹ The logic of the identification is that the greedy trust in their own wealth rather than God. In the biblical and Jewish tradition idolatry is the ultimate expression of unfaithfulness to God (cf. Deut 29:16–28).

The second reason Jesus censures the Pharisees is for being preoccupied with their own honor. The desire for honor was a core characteristic of Greco-Roman society, and that is the crux of the matter. Ironically, the Pharisees are depicted as exemplifying Greco-Roman norms and values rather than Torah values.²²

This passage throws into sharp relief a collision between the law and the prophets, the validity and authority of which is assumed by both Jesus and the Pharisees, and the Roman way of life, especially as it was epitomized by elites. The contrast between covenantal values and practices and Roman mores seems to be central to Luke’s perspective on economic matters, and honor is a constant focus throughout. In Greco-Roman society men competed for honor as a limited good. It was a zero sum game with honor functioning as a form of social capital that allowed a person to elevate himself above others. The individual quest for honor here is incongruous with the covenant community, which is to be characterized by solidarity and interdependence. As Moshe Greenberg observes, “the society envisaged by Torah lacks a strong, prestigious focus on power; on the contrary, dignity and authority are distributed.”²³

Writing about honor and degradation in Roman society, David Graeber says that honor is not the same as dignity. Rather honor is surplus dignity. “It is that heightened consciousness of power, and its dangers, that comes from having stripped away the power and dignity of others; or at the very least, from knowledge that one is capable of doing so.”²⁴ The antidote for preoccupation with one’s own honor and status, Jesus advises, is almsgiving: “So give alms for those things that are within” (Lk 11:37). Almsgiving is the antithesis of the self-aggrandizement associated with honor in that it

was a practice motivated by concern for others.²⁵ In Jewish scriptures, in the period 200 BCE to 150 CE righteousness becomes associated with almsgiving.²⁶

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is an important practice in Luke-Acts that is a preeminent mark of covenant fidelity (cf. Lk 12:33; Acts 3:2, 10; 9:36; 10:2, 4, 31; 24:17). In Luke 16:14–15 Jesus admonishes some Pharisees for being “lovers of money,” and comments: “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God (16:14–15). The term that is translated *lovers of money* (φιλάργυροι) means greedy or avaricious, and the term that is translated *abomination* (βδέλυγμα) is associated with idolatry. So again the Pharisees are depicted as exemplars of unfaithfulness to illustrate the danger of greed as idolatry, which is set in contrast with faithfulness as it finds expression in concern for those in need.

That faithful versus unfaithful use of material resources is the pivotal issue is explicitly stated by Jesus in his interpretation of the parable of the unrighteous steward:

Whoever is *faithful* in a very little is *faithful* also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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 (Lk 16:10–13).

This parable is both interesting and challenging on a number of levels that cannot be explored here, but a couple of observations are crucial for understanding its significance in Luke 16, the whole of which deals with economic relations. First, despite the number of interpretive difficulties posed

by the parable, Jesus clarifies the message he wants to communicate at the end: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (Lk 16:9). The phrase *dishonest wealth* is a translation of *unrighteous mammon* (μαμωνᾶ τῆς ἀδικίας), which associates the accumulation of material resources with idolatry and unrighteousness. Second, arguing from the lesser to the greater Jesus makes the point that if this unrighteous steward used his master’s wealth in a clever and subversive way to win the favor of debtors, how much more should the faithful use material resources to foster relationships and support the community. That is to say, the purpose of material resources is to cultivate relationships, not acquire honor.

The crux of the discussion of economic relations in Luke 16, though, is the following statement of Jesus: “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” (v.13). God and mammon are objects of desire and allegiance that are incompatible. This caricature of the Pharisees as greedy, and the absolute polarity between God and mammon provide pivotal clues to Luke’s working conception of the connection between disposition and practice in economic relations in the context of covenant faithfulness.²⁷ Serving mammon is exemplified in particular by greed, idolatry, hubris, and the quest for honor, all of which are discredited by Torah. They are antithetical to love of God and neighbor because they are rooted in self-reliance and a corresponding disregard of others. In Luke this posture is conveyed by the verb that is translated *justify* (δικαιώνω), which is covenantal language. The expert in the law who asks Jesus “who is my neighbor” wants to “justify himself” (Lk 10:27).

Self-Justification

The verb *to justify* in the biblical tradition typically has God as the subject, but here the reflexive pronoun *himself* (ἑδιος) is the subject of the verb.

The reflexive pronoun indicates a self-referential attitude that is concomitant with the avarice, hubris, and desire for honor emblematic of those who affirm the law and the prophets in principle, but whose disposition and practice do not demonstrate God's justice and love. The same phrase occurs in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which is told to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Lk 18:9). In contrast with the Pharisee, who was praying by himself thanking God that he is not like other people, is a tax collector who beats his breast as an act of repentance and in humility asks for God's mercy: "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In Luke 7:29 the tax collectors and all the people who repented and were baptized by John "*justified God*" rather than themselves while, the narrator reports, "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Lk 7:30). God and mammon are put into direct opposition to one another because those who trust God as the source of their de facto dignity grasp at some level, intuitively if not cognitively, the relational and interdependent nature of identity, while those who "justify themselves" are involved in a continuous struggle to secure their identity through external means in ways that undercut their sense of belonging. God and mammon represent two antithetical sources of value that shape behavior in very different ways.

Certain Pharisees in Luke are a cipher for unfaithfulness because they trust in themselves and live life on their own terms. Much of Luke's characterization of unfaithfulness occurs in the context of passages that focus on economic relations, and emphasizes that those who do not live according to the law and the prophets diminish the quality of life for others. The hungry poor suffer because of the neglect of God's love and justice. The faithful, by contrast, are those who have in humility turned their hearts to the Lord, trust in God's kindness, and embrace Jesus' teaching and embodiment of the law and the prophets. Almsgiving is the practice that best exemplifies this interior disposition,

but more generally it could be any act of solidarity that exemplifies God's unconditional beneficence toward humanity. Mary, the Samaritan, Zacchaeus, and the gentile Cornelius in Acts represent people whose thoughts and actions are aligned with God's purpose and bear witness to God's justice and love.

Toward the Practice of Solidarity, Interdependence, and Hope

Jesus reproves certain lawyers and Pharisees in Luke because he says they reject God's purposes, even though from their perspective they are serving God. Luke consistently renders God's purposes and kingdom in images of healing, hospitality, and being restored to community, that is, as *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. Those who reject God's purposes are not, in principle, against such things. Rather, it is a matter of being entrenched in a cultural system that is at odds with the presence and power of the One who is the very source of life. The kingdom of God is not to be confused with the socially constructed worlds we inhabit; the Creator of heaven and earth does not preside over the empire or the market. Jesus does not propose an alternative political or economic system. He does not even offer a thoroughgoing critique of the current one, because the problem with political and economic systems is not that they are inherently evil, though some are more humane than others, but that as systems per se they are not concerned about people or creation.

Jesus' enactment of the kingdom of God as a vision of human flourishing in Luke is predicated on an awareness and embodiment of the divine presence *in* and *for* the world through the power of the Spirit that strengthens our connection to God and to one another. In summing up his teaching about the appropriate use of wealth and possessions, Jesus presents his followers with the radical choice between God and mammon, because mammon represents the realm of self-justification, self-reliance, self-aggrandizement, and in our own disenchanted world the "buffered" and disengaged self. The word

mammon is a transliteration of the Aramaic word *mamona*, common in the Jewish Targums and the Talmud for wealth, possessions, or gain, but it is derived from a root with the meaning "that in which one trusts."²⁸ God and mammon represent two antithetical wellsprings of value and desire that orient intentions and actions in different directions. As Graeber observes, value "is something that mobilizes the desire of those who recognize it, and moves them to action."²⁹

The association of mammon with idolatry is rooted in the desire to secure the value of the self through material or economic means. This is an insatiable desire that is deformed precisely because life is itself a gift from God. God says to the rich fool, "This very night your life is being demanded of you" (Lk 12:20), implying that the "soul" or life force (*ψυχή*) is not one's own possession, and begging the question of the role of wealth and possessions in Jesus' vision of human flourishing. Everything Jesus teaches about economic relations in Luke is oriented to life together in communion. It is a practical vision that finds expression primarily through practices of hospitality and solidarity, such as almsgiving.³⁰ The eschatological kingdom is depicted as an inclusive banquet celebration where there is enough for everyone. It is proleptically realized even as Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors, those who were devalued in his society, and restores those on the margins to the covenant community.

Jesus' extensive teaching on the appropriate use of wealth and possessions in the Gospel of Luke anticipates and points toward the portrait of the Jesus community in Acts 2:43–47 and 4:32–35, where "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4:32). The term *one's own* (*ιδιόκτητος*) is used seventeen times in Acts and several times in the Gospel. In his study of this important term in Luke-Acts, Aaron Kuecker observes that members of the early community did not consider their possessions to be their own, but they did consider their fellow community members to be their own.³¹ What Luke is describing here is not a form of proto-communism in which people relinquished their possessions, but rather an

impressive level of communal solidarity in which relationships with group members were privileged over relationships to personal possessions.³²

The representation of human flourishing in Luke-Acts characterized by solidarity, interdependence, and sharing is set in contrast to the Greco-Roman patronage system, and to our own totalizing economic realm that values the "buffered" and "bounded" self above the common good. This is a political issue and not just a matter of personal piety. It is a matter of some urgency that we discern the social and spiritual ramifications of the predominance of economic reality, and discover ways of living together in the alternative communal reality of the kingdom of God within the present world order.³³ Gilian Rose's definition of the political task is pertinent here:

Politics begins not when you organize to defend an individual or particular or local interest, but when you organize to further the "general" interest within which your particular interest may be represented . . . politics does not happen when you act on behalf of your own damaged good, but when you act, without awareness, for the good of all—this is to take the risk of the universal interest.³⁴

The politics of the kingdom of God is oriented to the flourishing of all creation while the political economy is essentially competitive. It privileges the interests of an elite minority at the expense of the majority, much as in the Roman Empire. Jesus calls his followers to disengage themselves from the ways of the world for the sake of the world. The church must, of course, negotiate the economic system of exchange as it carries out its mission, but unless it can disentangle itself from market system values and practices, it will find itself in the unenviable position of those who reject the purpose of God (cf. Lk 7:30).

Endnotes

1. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5.
2. In Book 1 of his *Politics*, Aristotle notes that consumption was the objective of production, and the surplus should be allocated to the

rearing of children, and personal satiation ought to be the natural limit of consumption (Pol. 1257a4–5, 30–41; 1257b29–35, 39–41).

3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16.

4. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29–30.

5. *Ibid.*, 33.

6. *Ibid.*, 43. The term *sacred* for Taylor points to “the belief that God’s power is somehow concentrated in certain people, times, places or actions” (76).

7. John Boli, “The Economic Absorption of the Sacred” in *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior*, ed. Robert Wuthnow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 94.

8. This experience of alienation was the first topic that Marx dealt with in the early philosophical and anthropological writings in the mid-nineteenth century, and this was a constant theme throughout his economic and political writings. See his discussion of “alienated labor” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 120–134.

9. Boli, “The Economic Absorption of the Sacred,” 94.

10. *Ibid.*, 95.

11. See David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 115.

12. *Ibid.*, 106.

13. *Ibid.*, 99.

14. *Ibid.*, 108.

15. The nouns *salvation* and *savior* occur in the first chapters of Luke in the Magnificat (1:47), three times in Zechariah’s prophecy (1:69, 71, 77), the birth story (2:11), Simeon’s song (2:30), and the preaching of John the Baptist (3:6). The verb *to save* (σώζω) occurs seventeen times in the Gospel and several times in Acts.

16. In her book *Paul Was Not a Christian*, Pamela Eisenbaum points out that one of the fundamental differences between Judaism and Christianity is that ancient Judaism is not a religion of salvation and yet “Christians assume that personal salvation is the fundamental question of religion—all religion.” See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 88–89.

17. See James Resseguie, *Spiritual Landscape: Images of the Spiritual Life in the Gospel of Luke* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 40–41.

18. F. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

19. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 40. Johnson suggests, “the importance of possessions, above all, lies in what they mean to the one claiming possession and the way they symbolize the human response to reality.”

20. The Pharisees in Luke are not so much historical figures as caricatures. See Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 152.

21. The First Commandment, Deuteronomy 6:4–5, 8, and 32, as well as the golden calf incident along with several other passages provide the conceptual background of the understanding of greed as idolatry in biblical Judaism. See Brian Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 70–79. See also Joel Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” *Interpretation* (2006): 155.

22. Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press,

2010), 68. Schwartz maintains that Jewish social relations were animated by a core tension between biblical solidarity and Greco-Roman exchange-based social values such as patronage and debt slavery. He observes that “for the Pentateuchal legislators, one of the points of the covenant between God and Israel seemed to be that by making God the only true sovereign . . . it extricated Israelites, in ideology if not in practice, from the entire nexus of dependency and honor.”

23. Moshe Greenberg, “Biblical Attitudes toward Power: Ideal and Reality in Law and Prophets” in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. E. Firmage, B. Weiss, & J. Welch (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 103–105.

24. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 170.

25. In Jewish scriptures and traditions almsgiving is an expression of covenant righteousness. Care for the poor was a trademark feature of Judaism (cf. Deut 24:10–22). In many early Jewish works it is an important mark of Jewish identity. In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is spoken of as the God of the poor (Ps 68:5, 10; 109:21–22, 31; 140:12; Isa 41:17), and benevolence to the needy imitates the character of God. See Roman Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield University Press, 1993), 46.

26. The earliest reference to “righteousness” as “almsgiving” is probably the Greek translation of Daniel 4:27: “Redeem your sins by almsgiving (Ἐξαργυρώσατε τις αμαρτίες σας με ελεημοσύνη) and your iniquities by compassion on the poor.” Tobit virtually identifies “almsgiving” with “righteousness.” Sirach strongly denounces greed and a perverse interest in wealth and advances the notion of redemptive almsgiving. Among many exhortations to care for the poor and needy is a striking parallel with Luke 6:35: “You will then be like a son of the Most High and God will love you more than does your mother” (Sir 4:1–10).

27. Jesus’ statement in 16:17, “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped,” indicates that covenant fidelity is defined throughout Luke according to the “law and the prophets.” This is corroborated by the account of the rich man and Lazarus in 16:19–31. The rich man is an elite Jew who also neglects the justice and love of God by refusing to share resources with Lazarus. When from Hades no less the wealthy Jew implores Abraham to send Lazarus to his father’s house to warn his brothers of the eschatological consequence of covenant infidelity Abraham replies: “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them” (16:31).

28. C. E. Evans, *Saint Luke* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 602.

29. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, 105.

30. Halvor Moxnes emphasizes that in Luke’s Gospel, “almsgiving has structural importance and serves as a symbol for his vision of a new society. By focusing on Luke’s view of almsgiving and hospitality, his ideals for society will come into focus, including his views of how this society ought to be organized.” Almsgiving is a central practice in biblical Judaism that was regarded as an act of solidarity and not just a matter of charity. See Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom*, 119–123.

31. Aaron Kuecker, “The Spirit and the ‘Other’, Satan and the ‘Self’: Economic Ethics as a Consequence of Identity Transformation in Luke-Acts” in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce Longenecker and Kelly Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 87.

32. *Ibid.*, 84.

33. See James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227–254.

34. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Become the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.