

Exegesis of Luke 16:1 – 13

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Luke 16:1-9 – The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward

Perhaps no livelier debate about Luke has occurred than over the parable of the unrighteous steward in Luke 16:1-9, frequently used to teach the Christian stewardship of money and other resources. As some interpret it, this parable encourages Christians to use money to gain friends for themselves because that is why it was originally entrusted to us by God. This means that we can use money for ministry purposes, giving, and kindness. By extension, we should do occupational work where wealth and power are more redistributed than accumulated. Supposedly, we are then good stewards of this money that is entrusted to us by God. The steward in Jesus' parable is an example to us of how an ordinary, greedy man uses money for his own benefit. How much more we as believers, then, must use God's money for God's benefit. This interpretation is increasingly popular probably because of our contemporary exposure, directly or indirectly, to various streams of liberation theology.

It is worth mentioning that Calvin, centuries ago, suggested that almsgiving does not exhaust the meaning of the parable, that our real responsibilities are creational and thus extend into the management of our estate and our occupational work. Here is Calvin on the parable:

It is certain that no man is so frugal, as not sometimes to waste the property which has been entrusted to him; and that even those who practice the most rigid economy are not entirely free from the charge of unfaithful stewardship. Add to this, that there are so many ways of abusing the gifts of God, that some incur guilt in one way, and some in another. I do not even deny, that the very consciousness of our own faulty stewardship ought to be felt by us as an additional excitement to kind actions.

In Calvin's view, we steward everything from our natural abilities to our hard-earned money, from all our possessions to all of creation. He and his followers generalized and extended the stewardship concept. I have already highlighted the arguments against a creational interpretation but I mention Calvin again here because one cannot simply dismiss his views on this parable, especially when we are trying to articulate a viable theology of human work; Calvin had much to say about that.

Any casual reading of this parable brings a host of questions to mind. How are we to make parallels between the parable and any reality we experience? What exactly are we stewards of? In what sense could it be taken away? In what sense can we use money to make friends for ourselves, that we will be welcomed into eternal homes? How does this parable fit in Luke 15:1 – 17:10? How does it fit with the rest of Luke?

The objection can immediately be raised that we are attempting to 'allegorize' the parable. Is it always true that things inside Jesus' parables stand for things outside the story? Or are we just reading those links into a story whose basic message operates independently of such links? Calvin, in his commentary-harmonization of the Gospels, discourages trying to make these sorts of parallels:

Here it is obvious that if we were to attempt to find a meaning for every minute circumstance, we would act absurdly. To make donations out of what belongs to another man, is an action which is very far from deserving applause; and who would patiently endure that an unprincipled villain should rob him of his property, and give it away according to his own fancy? It were indeed the grossest stupidity, if that man who beheld a portion of his substance taken away, should commend the person who stole the remainder of it and bestowed it on others. But Christ only meant what he adds a little afterwards, that ungodly and worldly men are more industrious and skillful in conducting the affairs of this fading life, than the children of God are anxious to obtain the heavenly and eternal life, or careful to make it the subject of their study and meditation.

Green also questions the tendency to allegorize. However, I believe that in this parable, we are justified in looking for these strong symbolic links. Jesus himself invites the disciples to make at least one allegorical link to the parable. He parallels the debtors' homes with 'eternal homes.' In doing this, he at least suggests that the crisis of termination that faced the unrighteous steward parallels a crisis looming for the disciples. Furthermore, Jesus suggests that the financial actions of the unrighteous steward are an example of what he desires from his disciples.

Some of Luke's parables function with a 'how much more' logic intended to be clear and easily understood. These parables include the widow and the unjust judge, the friend at midnight, and the earthly father (Lk.18:1-8; 11:1-13). These parables are not 'allegories'; elements inside these stories do not stand for people or things outside the story. Rather, in these parables, a real world cultural practice is given as a baseline that God far surpasses. If an unjust judge will eventually vindicate a complaining widow who he cares nothing for, how much more will God vindicate His people who He cares very much for? If a sleeping neighbor will provide a midnight

visitor with hospitality supplies out of his sense of shame,¹ how much more will God provide you with provision out of His love? And if earthly fathers who are evil give good nourishment to their children, how much more will our sinless heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to His children? The progression goes from human to divine along the axis of lesser to greater.

Other Lukan parables operate as caricatures. Or better put, Jesus offers parables as commentaries on the situations in which he finds himself. For instance, Luke's last parable, that of the vineyard in 20:9-16, clearly caricatures the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus is on the verge of being killed and brings to a climax his ringing condemnations upon Israel and her leadership. The vineyard is the nation Israel with strong implications about the land as the desired inheritance, the hired vine-growers are Israel's leadership, the slaves sent by the owner are the Hebrew prophets of the past, the heir that the vine-growers plan to assassinate is clearly Jesus, and the removal of the vine-growers by the owner is Jesus' announced judgment on the nation. That the parable is unmistakable in its clarity and implication is evidenced by the reaction of the Pharisees: 'When they heard it, they retorted, 'May it never be!'

This is not the only parable to function this way. The parable of the two lost sons in 15:11-32 also caricatures Jesus' immediate situation. The prodigal younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners seated around Jesus at the table whose hearts are softening and being won over by his compassion. The judgmental older son waiting at the door represents the Pharisees grumbling about the company Jesus keeps while they stand at the threshold of the house Jesus is in. The remarkable father clearly portrays God, who allowed the sinners to depart and, through Jesus himself, welcomes them back joyously with open arms. The father entreating the older son is also representative of Jesus' appeal to the Pharisees to come into the house and join the party in table fellowship. Tightening this link is the fact that the older son's decision is omitted from the parable, leaving the Pharisees to judge the older son – and by direct implication, themselves – for not hearkening to the father's pleading and entering the house. Is this 'over-allegorization?' This 'allegorization' of Luke's parables is not unreasonable, since 'political satire' and 'caricature' better describe Jesus' strategy than does the word 'allegorization.' In fact, many of Jesus' parables in Luke operate this way (Lk.5:31-32; 7:41-47; 13:6-9).

Which type of parable is the unrighteous steward, if it can indeed be placed in only one of these categories and not the other? Does the parable fall into both categories? Or neither? Green basically attempts a 'how much more' comparison between the 'children of this age' and the 'children of light.' Under this assumption, the steward is simply the calculating, shrewd strategist serving as the backdrop to the greater generosity Christians ought to demonstrate. If a self-serving man in a crisis situation can appear generous for selfish reasons, how much more should Christians show others generosity for godly reasons? Green's interpretation has some appeal, since he suggests we do not have to overanalyze the troubling aspects of the parable, such as the steward's expulsion, his panic, his haphazard reduction in the debtors' debts, and the debtors' homes. Yet Jesus himself makes a clear link between the debtors' homes of the story and the eternal dwellings in reality. This gives at least some basis for suggesting that certain elements inside his story stand for other things outside it.

Moreover, several objections can be raised to Green's interpretation. Perhaps most problematic is the steward's stated motive, 'that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.' This motive is inexplicable if the rich master could just turn around to the community and tell all, which he certainly could have done. We have good reason to believe that the rich master was not a crook or a villain in the eyes of the community, since someone had approached him as an informant of the steward's original misconduct.² While the debtors might raise their eyebrows at the unexpected debt-forgiveness offered by the steward, no one in their right mind would want to house, let alone hire, a lazy man who became a thief. How could the steward expect the master

¹ Lukan scholarship is indebted to Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, for acknowledging the error in translating *anaideia* in Lk.11:8 'persistence' rather than 'sense of shame' on the basis of a cultural factor: hospitality is the responsibility of the village, not just the individual, therefore the sleeping neighbor has an internal shame-based obligation to respond to the needy friend. This shifts the meaning of the section significantly. The sleepy neighbor does not respond because of the needy friend's nagging persistence, but because of his internal sense of shame. Likewise, God does not respond to our prayers because of forces external to Himself, namely our nagging persistence; on the contrary, He responds to us because of an internal force that is even greater than the shame-based obligation of the sleepy neighbor, namely love for us. Although the meaning of *anaideia* is still debated, many commentators now follow Bailey.

² Joel B. Green dismisses this issue in his commentary because he sees the rich man as a negative character on the basis that all Lukan references to rich men are subjected to the theme of reversal. However, Green overlooks other parallels between this rich man and the (relatively wealthy) father of the two lost sons in Lk.15:11-32 or the (presumably wealthy) owner of the vineyard in 20:9-18, which I will argue below are more important in this instance. In these particular parables, it is the steward, the sons, and the caretakers of the vineyard who undergo the reversal.

to say nothing? He expects the debtors to have an uncompromisingly good impression of him – when they already have reason to suspect him of morally evil acts! – so much so that they would be happy to receive him into their homes not just temporarily as if he had done them a significant patronal favor, but ostensibly permanently to give him another job *managing their own homes*.

Parables operating with a ‘how much more’ logic are founded on a base of realism. The actions of the harassed judge, the sleeping neighbor with a sense of shame, and flawed earthly fathers all behave understandably from a human standpoint. The harassed judge, despite being unjust, nevertheless wants to be pestered no more. The sleepy neighbor, despite being inconvenienced, nevertheless wants to maintain the village’s (and his own within that) reputation for being hospitable. And flawed earthly fathers, despite being evil, nevertheless want to nourish their children. These are understandable motivations and realistic actions to the first century Middle Eastern mind. Yet where is the realism in the parable of the unrighteous steward? Why should the fired steward feel so confident about his plan? Bailey finds this so problematic that he believes that the steward knew from the start that the rich master would want to keep him employed after the cunning display of mercy. But this is not the stated motive of the steward, and Green correctly critiques Bailey here. The steward has already been released from service. If the master has fired him, then the steward cannot expect to be hired back.

Green’s solution is more satisfying than Bailey’s, but still inadequate. He argues that the steward is trying to become a patron of sorts to whom the debtors will owe a favor. The debtors will presumably ‘welcome him into their homes’ out of a sense of debt-obligation. Green believes the steward can be quite confident about this plan. But Green does not speculate on when the steward will overstay his welcome (a welcome based on one mere favor?) or when he will have to find another job or how he will render himself invulnerable to exposure by the master. In fact, Green seems to duck this question. However, what is remarkable about the parable is that the steward seems confident that he will be able to stay in the very same community without ever begging or working some other trade. The rich master has only to come forward showing the transaction to be illegitimate and the steward to be even more crooked than previously suspected. In a tight-knit community, this would be devastating. The debtors will no longer regard as valid their commitment to the unscrupulous steward, and will throw him out of their homes as quickly as he came in. One would imagine that the steward would have to travel a substantial way to find a job in a community where no one has heard of him, which would be a big risk and contrary to the stated motive of the steward.

There is only one solution to this dilemma. The steward must be banking everything on the good chance that the master will remain silent. The steward is hoping to put his master into a situation where the master will not say anything to the community because his own desire to both be and appear merciful to others will get the best of him. The master’s name was probably being circulated and praised by the debtors for his seeming generosity. The rich master wouldn’t want to ruin the atmosphere just created, nor the appreciation that is accruing to him. Thus, the master stays silent. Bailey draws a helpful parallel between the steward and the factory foreman of today. The foreman negotiates between the workers on the factory floor and upper management. If the foreman were to say that he had successfully extracted a day’s paid vacation from upper management, the workers would not only praise him but upper management, too, who would then be perceived as merciful. But whereas in an industrial culture built on contractual and temporary relationships, the foreman’s duplicity might be exposed or reversed by upper management with an apology for the miscommunication, in a Middle Eastern village culture where relationships are permanent and mercy is a publicly admired quality, the rich master would have stayed silent. So when the steward leaves the stewardship, he will leave as a hero of the community, having silenced the rich master in regards to the debt-forgiveness by placing him in a conflict of interest. The rich master will be silent even about the fact that he had fired the steward, so the steward will be able to pass off his termination as a voluntary departure! This explains why the steward can even hope at all to be an acceptable member of the community again, in fact, to be among the very debtors to whom he had lied. This is the only possible explanation of the parable that takes the story seriously *in its cultural context*.

This mutually reinforces another act of mercy the rich man had shown the steward earlier. The rich man could have committed the steward straight to jail or more severely rebuked him, but instead, he was merciful and simply fired him with very little berating. This cultural element is typically overlooked, but Bailey correctly sees in the rich man’s action a high level of mercy that the steward must surely recognize. Since he could have been dealt with much more severely, the steward is then informed by a gesture of uncommon mercy. This parallels the initial action of the father of the prodigal son, who did not take his son out to the city gates to be stoned for disrespect, but mercifully let the boy go. This act of mercy lends credence to why the younger son could even think of returning. The steward’s master being merciful initially provides a reasonable explanation for the steward’s plan.

Green’s exegesis also suffers from one more difficulty. He argues that Christians must use money to bring others into the kingdom just like the steward did. While this interpretation might be acceptable pragmatically –

since it implies that Christians must take seriously the use of wealth in the service of evangelism – it is dubious exegesis because it places the crisis of rejection upon the *debtors*, not the *steward*. In the parable, the crisis breaks on the *steward*; *he* is in the crisis of rejection, not the debtors. This presses a salvation question upon the steward and, if interpreted as applying to Christians in general, the Christian. Calvin struggled to make sense of this, as we shall see below.

I contend that an ‘allegorical’ (or better, a caricatured, satirical, or representational) interpretation is the only explanation that takes the story seriously *in its theological context*, not only in Luke, but also in the flow of biblical history. As we make our way through this knotty parable, the most important observation to make is that everything in this section (15:1-17:10) revolves around one theme: The gospel of Jesus is spreading out, in surprising ways, to include the rejected. Jesus is throwing a dinner party and eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners (15:1). The Pharisees are standing outside the door, muttering to themselves that Jesus is behaving inappropriately: ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them!’ Jesus then launches into three brilliantly designed parables: the shepherd and the lost sheep, the woman and the lost coin, the father and the two lost sons. What is emphasized throughout the parables is the joy of the seeker finding something or someone lost. Clearly Jesus is trying to expand his audience’s mind about the full extent of God’s love for those who are lost.

When we come then to chapter 16, Jesus warns *the disciples*, with the Pharisees still within hearing distance, about the change befalling national Israel because of the obstinacy of Israel’s leadership (v.1). I believe Jesus is teaching that God (the rich man) is disappointed with the way Israel (his steward) has been handling what was entrusted to them: land, nationhood, the Temple, the oracles of God (cf. Rom.3:2). Just as the steward recognizes that hard work and begging somewhere else are impossible, Israel must recognize that their survival is precarious. And as the steward recognizes that the debtors can take him in to their homes (v.4), so Jesus’ immediate disciples must recognize that outsiders and Gentiles can take them in to eternal dwellings (v.9), which is the Messianic community that Jesus is extending beyond the boundaries of Israel itself, and certainly beyond the boundaries of the Pharisees’ comfort zones. So, while the debtors believe that the steward is still acting under the authority of the rich man, the steward summons them and reduces their debt. The steward takes advantage of a peculiar time after his rejection but before the public has been notified about this. In the same way, Jesus’ immediate disciples must take advantage of this peculiar time where Israel has already been rejected, since the Law and the Prophets were in effect only until John the Baptist (16:16, see below). Nevertheless, they can reclaim their privileged status as God’s people by sharing what they have already lost: their privileged status as God’s people and their privileged status in relation to their land and material wealth. They must align themselves with Jesus’ extraordinary mercy as the kingdom of God spreads to all humanity.

We can also identify Calvin’s mistake. By locating the dynamic of stewardship in a relationship between the Christian and the creation and assuming that the steward in the parable represents a Christian facing a final judgment by God, who will render a verdict on the steward’s skill, Calvin encountered a difficult question. In this framework, does the Christian face a similar crisis of salvation because *s/he* may not have done enough almsgiving? Given Calvin’s theological posture, we can understand how uneasy he was with this idea. Calvin therefore backpedals, ‘But Christ only meant what he adds a little afterwards, that ungodly and worldly men are more industrious and skillful in conducting the affairs of this fading life, than the children of God are anxious to obtain the heavenly and eternal life, *or careful to make it the subject of their study and meditation.*’ (italics mine) Calvin tries to alleviate the anxiety of a Christian. He shifts the anxiety that would result from trying to ‘*obtain* the heavenly and eternal life’ by rightly dealing with wealth to simply ‘mak[ing] it [the heavenly and eternal life] the subject of their study and meditation.’ The ambiguity in Calvin’s phrasing is probably intentional. Does he mean that mere study and meditation are the vehicles by which assurance comes? What then of the almsgiving or stewardship of wealth? Or does he mean that study and meditation can now assure one of salvation in a dialectical tension with a constant striving to obtain it through the right stewardship of wealth? These questions go unanswered in Calvin because he makes the mistake of locating the parable in the Christian’s supposed stewardship of creation and cannot integrate the details into his theology of predestination.

The parable must instead be located in the context of Jesus in a dispute with the Pharisees over the relation between Israel and her land-wealth blessing. The steward in the parable uniquely represents Jesus’ first disciples, the ones who were leaving behind national Israel because their stewardship of land and wealth was over. They now have to join Jesus’ Messianic Israel. So important and urgent is Israel’s crisis in Jesus’ mind that even planning is not that important, since planning clearly is not important to the steward of the parable: He reduced the debts hastily and disproportionately, requiring eighty percent from one debtor but only fifty percent from another. Likewise, the disciples’ logical response should be to use any and all financial resources they have to win friends among the lost, since their separation from national Israel will mean expulsion from the synagogue and departure for Gentile countries. Jesus henceforth sends out his own followers as the true children of Abraham to the ends of the earth to

gather all Abraham's children. This agenda informs Jesus' poem of God and Mammon in v.10-13, the seemingly contradictory statements on the Law in v.14-18, and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in v.19-31. Finally, the anxiety surrounding the issue of salvation unravels fairly easily because the primary application of the parable is for Jesus' immediate disciples making the transition from the national Mosaic Israel to the international Messianic Israel.

Luke 16:10-13 – Who Is the Trustworthy Servant?

Following this parable on giving up Israel's wealth in favor of the kingdom, Jesus now expands on his counterpoint: what does it mean for the disciples to be trustworthy servants? The poem of God and Mammon consists of four oppositions, three of which revolve around trustworthiness in v.10-12 and one around servanthood in v.13. Verse 13 appears to summarize the previous three verses. The coupling of opposites in v.10-12 is as follows:

Very little (v.10a, c)	Much (v.10b, d)
Worldly wealth (v.11a)	True riches (v.11b)
Someone else's property (v.12a)	Property of your own (v.12b)

I have left v.13 for later consideration later because the serving of either God or Mammon seems to be a summary thought. This pairing in v.10-12 serves to underscore the diametrically opposed nature of the categories, and encourages us to treat them consistently. On the one hand, there is what Jesus calls 'very little,' which is 'worldly wealth' that belongs to 'someone else.' On the other hand, there is what Jesus calls 'much,' which is 'true riches' that is 'your own.' What the above table makes clear is that Jesus is comparing material wealth in the present (on the left) with something that is *not* material wealth in the present (on the right). In other words, Jesus is not saying there is a way to handle a small amount of money in such a way that God rewards you with more of it, although that erroneous idea is popular in certain traditions of preaching. That emphasis is found in column 1 of the second table, which is typically called a prosperity emphasis. Interpretation of this poem tends to map to one of the following three columns:

	Meaning in View 1	Meaning in View 2	Meaning in View 3
Summary Description	God gives you more money based on your faithfulness	God gives you wealth in the new heavens/new earth based on your faithfulness now	God gives Jesus' disciples spiritual wealth now by their sacrificing material wealth now
Very little	A smaller amount of actual money and wealth	Actual money and wealth	Actual money and wealth
Much	A larger amount of actual money and wealth	Eschatological reward	Spiritual riches now
Worldly wealth	Actual money and wealth	Actual money and wealth	Actual money and wealth
True riches	Actual money and wealth	Eschatological reward	Spiritual riches now
Someone else's property	God's resources	Actual money and wealth	Actual money and wealth
Property of your own	God's resources	Eschatological reward	Spiritual riches now
Affecting whom?	Christians	Christians	Israelites of Jesus' day, and by extension Christians today
True riches come after what event?	Obedient use of material wealth in the present	When eschatological rewards are distributed after the return of Jesus	Disinheriting one's self from national Israel and its wealth and following Jesus

As is shown above, the prosperity view (view 1) does not make a real distinction between 'worldly wealth' and 'true riches' and between 'someone else's property' and 'property of your own.' Such distinctions, though found in the text, are interpreted away because of the insistence that God rewards your use of material wealth with more of the same. However, it should be clear that the phrases 'very little' and 'much' in v.10 do not refer to quantities of actual money, but to the ultimate value of different forms of wealth. 'Worldly wealth' in all its forms is worth 'very little.' But 'true riches' is worth 'much.' We can therefore eliminate the first view.

The second interpretation is also popular but has less exegetical support than the third. It suggests that what believers do with material wealth now will be rewarded in the age to come by some kind of eschatological reward. This corresponds with an interpretation of the parable of the unrighteous steward in v.1-9 as applying generally to Christians anticipating the end of the age with the return of Jesus. Again, in the most general sense this idea is not wholly incorrect, but it does lead us down some inappropriate paths about the relation between Christians and the current creation. In addition, it is not exegetically accurate here; the specific elements of the parable and the poem of God and Mammon (e.g. a crisis of rejection, the threat to salvation, etc.) are difficult to overlook. Because we have already argued for locating the parable in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over the interpretation of Israel's wealth in the transition from national Mosaic Israel to international Messianic Israel, I believe the interpretation of v.10-13 that I have listed in the third column is the correct one. Jesus as the Messianic king and prophet *par excellence* is stripping from national Israel its land and agricultural blessings to be an international Messianic community. Israelites who do this will be given new spiritual riches which is 'property of their own.' In light of this crisis of Israel's transition, Israelites who would be Jesus' disciples must make a major departure from Israel's historic interaction with material wealth.

This interpretation does make preaching the passage more complex, but it does not diminish its power to address materialism in other contexts. Material wealth (mammon) of any sort is now an unrighteous force that lures people (Israelites or not) away from Jesus and Jesus' definition of the kingdom of God, therefore it merits a demonic category. It not only locks people into the law of reciprocation in relationships, which prevents them from sharing their wealth or status with the poor or the outsider (which is what Green emphasizes), it does much more. It promotes a desire for stability that the kingdom of God disrupts and challenges. And it also becomes an object of desire that all people, rich and poor alike, want to accumulate at the expense of accumulating heavenly treasure. This was especially true of Israel in Jesus' day. If the Jew has not been faithful in the use of the material blessing which God gave under the old covenant, the 'unrighteous mammon,' doing with it what the Law of Moses required and renouncing it when the time had come in Jesus, then how will the Jew be faithful in the use of 'the true riches,' (16:11) the messianic gospel message, membership in the messianic community, and the experience of Jesus' Spirit within? It is important to remember that the contrast is not between less material wealth and more of the same, as if God will simply give more wealth (whether in this life or the next) to a Christian who has demonstrated a certain good attitude. Rather, the comparison is between all material wealth and something else that is *not* material wealth but infinitely more valuable.

One point of comparison corroborates our conclusion. When stewardship is discussed by Paul or Peter, it always concerns a stewardship of God's grace or revelation in the gospel message (1 Cor.4:1-2, 9:17, Eph.1:9-10, 3:2, Col.1:25, Ti.1:7, 1 Pet.4:10). The word 'stewardship' as it occurs in these epistles concerns the teaching and purpose of Jesus Christ. That is what God owns and entrusts to us. This is what truly 'becomes ours.' It is not clear that God actively owns everything nor that He 'entrusts' such things to us today in the simple manner suggested by the 'stewardship of creation' idea. Luke's use of the 'stewardship' concept is different from subsequent use by Paul or Peter precisely because Luke is describing the epochal transition Jesus made in the stewardship entrusted and taken away from national Israel.

The stewardship given to Israel included a temporary and partial alleviation of the curse on creation; witness the seventh-day sabbath, the seventh-year sabbath, and the fiftieth-year jubilee sabbath in Leviticus 25. Their special relationship with the land seemed to serve three purposes: to remind us of what we lost in Eden, to physically foreshadow what would be spiritually true in Christ, and to foreshadow what would be physically and spiritually true in the New Jerusalem. Israel's stewardship was held in tension with their status as aliens and pilgrims on the land, since even they did not truly possess their own land (Lev.25:23). Hence, when Jesus Christ appeared, he stripped the symbols of Israel away, took away the special providence of God regarding the land, and they were no longer stewards of the land and other aspects of national Israel. The warning of Malachi 4:6, 'lest I come and smite the land with a curse' took effect after Israel spurned Jesus and John the Baptist. Those who believed in Jesus became stewards of the gospel because the stewardship of land was over. After Jesus, the Israelites and the Christians had to experience the full effect of the curse on creation and work *in an environment just like everyone else*. Jesus did not say that working to support one's self was unnecessary, hence work still has its place, but certainly he expected his people to be dramatically less bound to land and work than the Israel of Old Testament times. Given the original close association between land, wealth, and work from ancient and classical times, I believe it is possible to say that Jesus' teaching here definitely puts our work in a secondary or tertiary category to his program. We are to be completely flexible and content with providing for our own needs for food, drink, and clothing.

Expanding our thematic analysis to the rest of the New Testament, we find that Jesus Christ thematically fulfilled and eclipsed Israel's land as the agent of mediation of God's blessing, just as he fulfilled and eclipsed

Jerusalem as the meeting place between God and humanity. Paul's epistle to the Colossians (especially Col.2:17)³ and the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb.3:12-4:13) take up this theme. In the present, Jesus himself is the true land, the true rest, the true milk and honey of God's provision which Israel's land symbolized. Jesus himself became the mediation of God's blessing to the new humanity, specifically humanity's true rest and sustenance. Christ is the substance of which Israel's institutions were the symbol. This is why Jesus provoked such controversy in annulling Israel's special relationship with her land and favorable interpretation of her own material wealth, namely among Israel's staunchest nationalists, the Pharisees. And he simultaneously expanded the range of God's restoration, from just the land of Israel to the land of the whole world, and deferred that restoration to the age to come.

Luke 16:14-18 – The Law and the Prophets

The Pharisees in v.14, however, mock Jesus for his teaching on material wealth. Luke editorially attributes their mockery to their love of money in v.15. Jesus then responds:

You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God. The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed [or, 'in effect'] until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is urged to enter it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Lk.16:15-18)

The significance of this text for Christian ethics is enormous. At this point in the story, Jesus has to give a reply as to why he can overturn both the Pharisees' standards of Torah purity and their nationalist aspirations. On what basis can Jesus say these things? Only by defending his ministry as somehow continuous with God's will as expressed in Israel's Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets. But why does he give seemingly conflicting statements on the Law? Is the Law somehow abrogated after John the Baptist, according to v.16? Or is it even more indelible, according to v.17? How can both be true?

Green, Johnson, Moxnes and others see this section as simply reinforcing Luke's themes of almsgiving and caring for the poor. They make central the ethical continuity between the Law and the Prophets and the teaching of Jesus regarding the poor. Again, while I absolutely agree with these ethical concerns, I disagree with their treatment of v.16-18. Green believes that the references to the 'Law and the Prophets' in v.16 and v.17 as well as 'Moses and the Prophets' later in v.29 all refer to the ethical content of the Law, specifically regarding giving to the poor. Green contends that the Pharisees stand condemned because (i) they do not engage in table fellowship with sinners and (ii) they do not give money to the poor in the way Jesus desires, which are two symptoms of the same disease: they are ruled by Mammon, the law of reciprocity that prevents the advantaged from loving the disadvantaged. Green thus interprets Lazarus and the rich man quite differently from our study. He sees Jesus as strengthening the Mosaic Law, particularly on the issue of giving to the poor. His position is based on the Law's seeming permanence as an ethical standard stated in v.17.

My basic disagreement with Green hinges on what the phrase 'the Law' or more expansively, 'the Law and the Prophets,' means. I believe it sometimes refers to the *ethical material and covenant contract* given at Sinai (in some sense Exodus 19 – Leviticus 26) and at other times it refers to the overall *prophetic narrative of the Pentateuch* written by Moses (Genesis 1 – Deuteronomy 34) in which both the ethical material of Sinai is situated and the age of Messiah is predicted. This double usage is attested in Luke's writings. The Law is referred to in its ethical dimension in Acts 7:53 ('you who received the Law as delivered by angels and did not keep it'), 13:39 ('through him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses'), and implicitly 15:10 ('why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear'). On the other hand, the Law is referred to as a prophetic narrative in Lk.24:44 ('everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled'), and Acts 24:14 and 28:23 (where Paul tries to convince others about Jesus from both 'the Law of Moses' and 'the Prophets'). I believe this presents a better solution to the seemingly contradictory statements given by Jesus in 16:16 and 16:17-18. Hence on this particular issue I side with Douglas J. Moo and Frank Thielton against Green.⁴ If the phrase 'the Law' is as rigid as Green believes, then we must choose one fixed meaning over the other and accept the difficulties. Indeed, Green's preference renders him incapable of making sense of v.16. The phrase 'the Law' does double duty by referring on the one hand to the *ethical code* given to Israel through Moses at Sinai – in

³ See especially the translation by N.T. Wright in his commentary on Colossians

⁴ See Moo's commentary on *Romans* and his discussion with four other theologians in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*. See also Thielton's *Paul and the Law*.

this sense it was temporary as an ethical charter – and by referring on the other to the *Pentateuch narrative* which includes the giving of that ethical code in the midst of the narrative.

Interpreters eager to find a straight line of ethical continuity from Israel to the church, especially in the Law's concern for the poor, are well-meaning but have not seriously wrestled with the notion that this very Law, seen from another angle or applied outside its Israelite context, could be considered unjust or plainly impractical from various standpoints today. Thus we may not want to invoke Moses for those reasons. The widow, for instance, is usually held up as a good example of the Law's concern for the powerless. Yet why are widows not granted land directly under the Mosaic ordinances? Land ownership in Moses is familial and patrilineal. A male Israelite's portion of God's good land comes from his father. A female Israelite's portion comes through marriage.⁵ A widow is therefore left in a potentially precarious situation, depending on whether she has sons and whether her sons are Law abiding. Why is the widow not given the ability to own land herself? Why is land ownership not individualized and egalitarian in regards to gender? The same problem arises for orphans and aliens. Why are they to be dependent on the mercies of land-owning families and specifically men? Why are they encouraged to become a dependent recipient, since they are not empowered to be absolutely self-reliant? Is it not obvious that land being passed down through family lines and owned patrilineally is the very cause of these people falling into these desperate situations? Why is this embarrassing bias present? Why does the Mosaic Law create the very conditions that it tries to ameliorate, and that in a non-structural, only semi-effective way?

Before we rush to condemn Moses, we must pause over several considerations: One cannot say for certain that a different legal environment would have brought about more 'justice.' It is also possible that separating land ownership from the family and the father would have allowed for even more corruption and human misery than what we observe in Israel's history. We must not pass judgment on it because we think we know better. We must also recognize that the Mosaic ordinances are thus because they are informed by a creational paradigm. Human origins are tied to the land. The gift of a father to his sons and the blessing a wife receives through her husband – the enjoyment of an abundant land – are modeled after God's original arrangement with humanity (to marry, be fruitful and multiply). In effect, Israel's land practices portray Genesis 2:4 – 26. Adam was given the land from God, and Eve inherited it via marriage to Adam. This is the melody that echoes deep within the Mosaic vision of life, and correspondingly, Mosaic justice. Too, it probably informs the Christian eschatological metaphor, where Jesus inherits the new creation from his Father, and the church as Christ's bride inherits it through marriage to him. In Israel, the widow, the orphan, and the alien were not permitted to own a portion of Israel's land because that would interfere with Israel's unique window of insight into that creational ideal.

It is also true that the Mosaic legislation demonstrates a greater concern for the powerless than other ancient law codes. However, it is something else entirely to say that this was the most just situation along all metrics. Visions of justice always reference a larger picture with larger assumptions about human relations. This is true regardless of whether that vision is secular or religious. If we are discussing biblical paradigms of justice, then we must always be sensitive to the purpose of human relations in the will of God at that particular point in biblical history. This causes obvious difficulties when we claim that Jesus appeals to the 'spirit of the Law' by preaching 'concern for the poor.' Whether or not the 'spirit of the Law' is simply 'concern for the poor' is open for debate. Fortunately, I believe, we can bypass that entire discussion. Christians today can build more individual-centric institutions for widows, orphans, aliens, and others in contrast to the family-centric institutions we observe in the Mosaic Law. Jesus Christ makes this flexibility possible because he set aside the Mosaic Law and commanded us to love others in more rigorous and robust and thus, more flexible, ways. We need to remember, however, that these arrangements will have their weaknesses and downsides as well.

It is also significant that no interpreter advocating the ethical continuity from Israel to the church has actually demonstrated that this position can be held with convincing consistency. For example, no one in recent centuries has come forward to suggest that usury should be banned, that we should favor a rural way of life, that the family should take precedence over the individual in various matters, or that farmers should go beyond simple crop rotation to absolute year-long land sabbaths as a matter of true faith in the God who brings forth nourishment from the land. The socio-economic implications of these ordinances today, to name a few, are too staggering to imagine even though Moses is absolutely insistent that this is the intended way of life for Israel and, if there is a straight line of ethical continuity from Israel to the church, for us as well. Where are the spokespeople for this view? The fact that no one has come forward could simply mean that no one has had the time, but it could also mean, as I believe it does, that the position is really an incorrect and impossible one.

⁵ Numbers 36 describes the special case where daughters inherit their father's land. If a father has no sons, then his land will pass to his daughters, but those daughters must then marry within the family of their father so that the larger tribe will not lose the land.

Recent enthusiasm over the jubilee also tends to unduly influence exegesis on the continuity and discontinuity between Law and gospel. The Anabaptist writer John Howard Yoder, for instance, makes a proposal for Christian ethics very similar to what we propose, but we must qualify his claim that the jubilee is a basic foundation of Jesus' teaching.⁶ Jesus' refusal to arbitrate the land inheritance between two brothers (Lk.12:13-15) and his radical renunciation of Israel's land throw into question Yoder's understanding of Jesus' intent. The Mosaic jubilee (Lev.25:8-55), being absolutely impressed by the creational ideal and its translation into Israel's social structure, is meant to restore tribal and familial lands to their original owners, whereas Jesus' pilgrim posture suspended the Israelite creational ideal for a future era. The Mosaic jubilee also did not penetrate Israelite cities – Levites alone received their houses back in the jubilee, which is probably an anti-urban orientation taken up because of Genesis 1 – 11 – whereas Jesus surely meant his teaching to impact people in all forms of human civilization. So while Jesus may have used concepts also articulated by Moses in the jubilee, Jesus did not simply proclaim a Mosaic jubilee *per se*. Yes, forgiving debts is also a central part of Jesus' kingdom proclamation and hence, forgiveness of debt is always a good idea for Christians to do, not least in the financial realm. We can support forgiving Third World debt, for instance. Yet it is only because Jesus' teaching on forgiving debts goes above and beyond the jubilee that we can even consider such proposals.

While it is one thing to say that our contemporary situation is poetically similar in some ways to what was addressed before, it is something else entirely to read our contemporary situation back into Moses and Jesus and the relationship between the two prophets. Although Israel's historic sociological conditions (e.g. oppression, exile) and Law may be attractive models in the postmodern quest to help the poor and disadvantaged, the development of ethics out of these models tends to be quite arbitrary. Using Israel's historic sociological conditions as a lens on contemporary social events tends to oversimplify complex sociological issues. And certain basic questions about Israel's Law are avoided. What is the real foundation of Israel's Law? What is actually envisioned by Mosaic justice? What is the relation between Israel and the Genesis creation account and what do we do about that? We cannot simply pick and choose Scriptural fragments in an undisciplined manner before answering these questions. Although this selective pragmatism may have its advocates, it is not at all clear that we can do this if we pause long over the Old Testament material, not to mention the New.

The kingdom is a phase of biblical narrative anticipated and described by the Law and the Prophets. This best explains the reference to the Law's permanence in v.17 and the example (no divorce) intended to illustrate that permanence in v.18. On the one hand, the phrase 'the Law' refers to the narrative told by the entire body of Mosaic literature (the Pentateuch). Verse 17 ('it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail') is best understood in terms of the Law as a narrative brought to completion, or as a prophecy fulfilled, not in terms of Jesus or his disciples strictly maintaining Mosaic ethics. Jesus does not say, 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for my disciples to ignore one stroke of a letter of the Law.' Though Jesus may be using a Hebraism, at first blush the Law itself, not the disciple, is the actor/agent in view. As such, the Law is permanent *as a prophetic narrative* describing human history from creation to exile through Israel's convoluted creation to exile and anticipating God's fresh act of new creation when He restores his exiled people. Hence in Luke's writings, various prophecies from the *Law as narrative* find their fulfillment in Jesus: the prophet greater than Moses is shown to be Jesus (Dt.18:14-22 is quoted in Acts 3:22 and 7:37); the Messiah's influence going forth from Zion to the Gentiles is fulfilled (e.g. Isa.40 – 55 quoted often by Luke); and the references in the *Law as narrative* to a people who are not a people who provoke Israel to jealousy (e.g. Dt.32:21) find their fulfillment in the renewal of the covenant.

At the same time, Jesus' high view of marriage in v.18 challenges the divorce clause in the Mosaic ethical code (Dt.24:1) and reinstates marriage as it was originally in creation (without divorce), which came long before the ethics of the Revelation at Sinai. On the basis of this statement, it is difficult to say Jesus simply offers a rigorous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. His interpretation is so rigorous, after all, that he annuls it: Divorce is no longer permitted! Particularly significant is the parallel passage in Mark where Jesus explains this Mosaic divorce clause as God's concession to Israel's 'hardness of heart' (Mk.10:1-9, cf. Dt.29:4), which is healed in the new covenant via the new heart given to believers by the Spirit.

This change in ethical orientation favors our interpretation of Jesus' statement on superceding the Law: the ethical material of the Law, defined as the commands from Sinai, is superceded by Jesus' own teaching because of the epochal shift from national Mosaic Israel suffering 'hardness of heart' to international Messianic Israel celebrating 'newness of heart.' This ethical intensification illustrates the suspension or abrogation of the ethical dimension of the Law and the Prophets in v.16. Hence, 'the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed (or 'in effect')

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI. 1972), p. 64-77.

until John.’ Creational humanity is in part restored and in part redefined through the new creation inaugurated by Christ. Israel must now look away from its temporal provisions for human conduct under Moses and look instead upon a new reality, Jesus’ teaching.

The Old Testament itself anticipated a point in time when the ethics of the Mosaic Law would be surpassed and superseded. Isaiah, in the ‘restoration from exile’ prophecy of chs.40 – 55, had foreseen this change. The Servant of YHWH would overturn the Mosaic ban on foreigners and eunuchs (compare the difference between Isa.56:1-8 and Dt.23:1-6, note also that Luke narrates a eunuch entering the kingdom in Acts 8). The suffering of the Servant would somehow expand the original boundaries of the promised land (Isa.54:2-3). The Temple in Jerusalem would be relativized (Isa.66:1-2, quoted and applied in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:49-50). By inaugurating this period, Jesus as the Servant is bringing to pass what Isaiah envisioned. Jesus’ teaching on material wealth overturns the Mosaic tribal and familial arrangement of land provided in the *Law as an ethical charter given at Sinai*. He had already chosen not to arbitrate the land inheritance dispute between two brothers (Lk.12:13). He opened membership into God’s people to any who believed in him, offering them forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, thus relativizing the Temple. And of course, Jesus’ teaching on Israel’s food laws, circumcision, and the Gentiles is substantially different from what is stated in the *Law as an ethical charter*.

Having defined ‘the Law and the Prophets’ thus, we can make better sense of Jesus’ quizzical statements in v.16-18. Why does Luke describe the Pharisees as ‘lovers of money’ in v.14? Because the Pharisees believed that they were ‘the poor’ who, according to Isaiah and others, would be made rich. They looked forward to the restoration of the land to the oppressed nation, believing they were the first in line for such spoils. Hence, they most certainly did not want to hear anything implying that the patrilineal land arrangements they so cherished would be taken away from them. On hearing Jesus’ admonition to his disciples in v.1-13 regarding Israel’s wealth, they scoffed because it stood outside their expectations and their understanding of the Law. Jesus’ response to their mocking was to pierce the bubble of their self-justification. He simultaneously declared the very end of the Mosaic legal system by which they thought to guarantee this wealth for themselves *and* inaugurated God’s program of restoration which Moses and the Prophets anticipated for the entire world.