

# The Gospel of Luke:

## the relationship between salvation, discipleship and wealth

Jesus said, "... one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."  
– Luke 12:15b

Much of the teaching in the Gospel of Luke describes the implications of the kingdom of God for Christian discipleship, including its implications for the pocketbooks and possessions of believers. – The NIV Stewardship Study Bible (pg. 1,313)

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**Everence**

## Welcome

### Why Luke?

Why is addressing the topic of money and stewardship important? If for no other reason, because the prophets, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament epistles talked more about this subject than any other – with the exception of the kingdom of God. There are more than 2,300 references to money and possessions in scripture and if we attempt a balanced study of the Bible, we cannot avoid this important aspect of discipleship.

Luke the gospel writer highlights stories from Jesus that address issues of wealth, poverty and generosity – many of which are not included in the other gospels. We will not be able to reference every stewardship text in the Gospel of Luke; we have limited this series to 14 key passages and lessons that Luke highlighted.

### How to use the material

This facilitators guide will provide you with background information that you can pick and choose from to teach this series. It comes with *teacher tips*, *introductory commentary* on each of the 14 key texts and *discussion questions*.

At the end of Session VI is an *Appendix*, where you will find *student handouts* that can be printed and distributed to members of your class. The handouts include the same questions written in this guide. We have written in the facilitators guide a few scriptures but not all of them, so encourage students to bring their Bibles so you can read them together before starting a discussion. We hope you enjoy this study and are encouraged in your own discipleship and stewardship practices.

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.* – 2 Timothy 2:15 (NRSV)

#### **Beryl Jantzi**

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## Session I: An introduction to Luke's gospel

### Teacher tips

As you share these words of introduction with the class, acknowledge that it can feel like we are embarking on a fairly heavy topic. There's no sidestepping the fact that Jesus has some fairly strong things to say about how his followers are called to serve the underserved and side with the dispossessed. But scripture also teaches us that there is no greater place to be than where God is at work with his people.

Anyone who has traveled to third-world countries and experienced the hospitality of some of the poorest in the world has also witnessed some of the deepest and most authentic joy. Ask at the beginning of this first session whether any class participants have had this kind of experience. I believe there are great lessons to be learned from these challenging texts that might open our eyes to a new and deeper joy than what privilege and materialism could ever begin to accomplish. So let's keep our minds and hearts open as we take a new look at some familiar and challenging texts.

### Introduction

Luke was a gentile and was probably writing to a predominantly gentile audience. This becomes especially interesting as we consider which stories he included that the other gospel writers did not.

This study will give special attention to the very real contrast between the rich and the poor, which was present in Luke's day as well as our own. Luke, an educated physician, demonstrated great concern for the dispossessed and recognized that Jesus called on his followers to side with the poor. He seemed comfortable engaging with the social elite of his day without compromising the ideals he professed, which included speaking out for the voiceless – be they children, lepers, women or Samaritans. Over the next six weeks, you will be invited to consider how the ministry and teaching of Jesus in first century Palestine relate to first-world Christians living in the 21st century.

More than any other New Testament writer, Luke addresses themes of wealth, poverty and how following Jesus has implications for how we address the disparity and inequity in our world. Closely related to his concern for the poor, Luke highlights teachings from Jesus about greed and hoarding. Whereas in Matthew, eight beatitudes are identified (5:1-12), in Luke only four are identified (6:20-26), along with four "woes" with contrasts between: the poor and the rich, the hungry and the well-fed, those who weep and those who laugh and those of low and high regard within society. The emphasis in these contrasts is that those who desire to follow Jesus must share in the plight of the poor, the sorrowful, the hungry and the socially outcast.

### What's in Luke's gospel but not the others?

In Luke alone, we find the following stories that other writers do not mention:

- the Good Samaritan
- the Publican and the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray
- the rich man and Lazarus
- the lost coin
- the prodigal son
- the unjust steward
- the rich fool who tore down his barns to build bigger barns
- the story of Zacchaeus.

Each of these parables and stories illustrates what Luke considers essential characteristics of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was not trying to raise opposition to the Roman government, nor was he lacking empathy for or understanding of those whom the Jews regarded as foreigners. Luke places the highest value on personal integrity, regardless of a person's race or nationality. For example, although many Jews looked with disfavor on the Samaritans, Luke emphasizes that of the 10 lepers Jesus healed, only the one who was a Samaritan expressed his gratitude. And again in the parable of the man who fell among thieves on the road to Jericho, a Samaritan befriended the man and saw to it that he was given proper care.

### *The great reversal*

Only Luke includes the moving prayers of Mary and Zechariah in the opening stories of Luke 1 and 2. These describe what some have called the great reversal, with the powerful brought low from their positions of power and the lowly in Israel exalted. Similarly, the parables of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-23) emphasize that those who spend their wealth simply to improve their own lifestyles or standards of living do so at their own risk. The unjust steward (16:1-13) is commended for his shrewd use of wealth. This is a challenging text, but one clear message is that believers should use their resources to build relationships that contribute to kingdom objectives.

Luke was a physician, but doctors in the ancient world did not enjoy the high socioeconomic standing they do today. Luke is most likely writing to a Christian church in the larger gentile world that is beginning to experience upward mobility into the middle or upper class. He is helping them recognize the dangers of materialism and a key way of avoiding greed and consumerism through generosity and faithful stewardship of material possessions. All of these themes prove crucial in today's world as well, where the chasm between rich and poor continues to expand.

### **Questions for discussion:**

- What words or phrases might we use today from Mary and Zechariah to describe our perception of what God desires to do in our world?
- As you consider the list of stories that Luke included in his gospel that the other gospel writers left out, what does this suggest about Luke's passions and his understanding of Jesus?
- What examples of "great reversals" might Luke write about if he were living today?
- Who are the people you know who are living in counter-cultural ways in order to reflect the new vision that Mary and Luke seem to be talking about?

### **The way of generosity**

*Generosity is giving freely without anxiety or thought for your own or another's deserving; sharing what the world would call "yours" because you cannot conceive of behaving another way. – Exploring Stewardship with the Saints: St Luke the Evangelist – The Way of Generosity, by Sarah McGiverin*

Luke is *generous* in his inclusion of people, without regard to financial status, nationality, gender or position. Not only are all welcome at the table, but anyone might turn out to be the hero of a story in Luke. There are many unique examples of this in Luke, including:

- The generous women who accompanied Jesus (8:2-3)
- The good Samaritan (10:25-37)

- The selfless shepherd (15:1-10)
- The wayward son (15:11-32)
- The foreigner, Samaritan leper (17:11-19)
- And many others

Luke is only able to write the gospel at all because of the education and opportunities he had. The mere fact that he is literate means he is a person of privilege. However, at the same time, in his writing of the gospel, Luke rejects the very idea of privilege, making it clear that Jesus did not value people of privilege any more highly. On the contrary, Jesus held up a child - perhaps the least privileged sort of person in most societies of his day - as an example of what we were called to become as Christians (Luke 18:17).

#### Questions for discussion

- Who are the unexpected heroes in the stories of Jesus used by Luke?
- What does this suggest about Luke's understanding of Jesus' message?
- In what ways does our congregation express generosity in how we reach out beyond our own socioeconomic group to reflect God's love for all?

### Heaven, eternal life and worldly possessions

On two occasions in Luke, Jesus is asked what one must do in this life to inherit eternal life. So what does Jesus say? Does he offer a four-step program to get right in God's eyes? Does he talk about being born from above as he does in his meeting with Nicodemus in John 3? Not here, he doesn't. In Luke 10, it's a lawyer who comes with the question and Jesus asks the lawyer what is written, for this is surely a learned man. The lawyer gets the answer right when he says to love God and love your neighbor. But the man isn't satisfied and asks, "Who is my neighbor?" This question gets Jesus to tell another story about another unlikely hero - a Samaritan.

In the second case, it is a rich ruler who comes to Jesus (Luke 18:18-30). Jesus tells the man that he needs to keep the commandments but adds a second requirement. "Sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor." The man is not happy to hear that because he is very rich. Then Jesus says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." Luke was part of the elite of society, so he no doubt sees himself as privileged by societal standards but as equal to all by the standards of Jesus.

It's interesting that both of these stories from Luke 10 and 18 begin with seekers coming to Jesus, asking about eternal life. The responses of Jesus in each of these situations suggest that how we manage our resources has spiritual significance. According to Luke, the spiritual and material aspects of life are interconnected.

#### Questions for discussion

- What is the link between the spiritual and the material in your life and in our lives together?
- Why did Jesus respond to a question about being saved the way he did in Luke 10 and 18? Why not just share a four-step program for becoming a Christian?

## Session II: What it means to be blessed

**Luke 1:26-56: The announcement to Mary**

**Luke 2:21-40: Presentation in the temple**

### Teacher tips

You might begin the class by asking the question, “What does it mean to be blessed?” Is it about being viewed by God as special and being cared for and happy? Or is it more than this? Statements of blessing in scripture are quite broad in nature. They are at times about enjoying pleasures of life, but it can also mean that God chooses people for especially challenging roles. To be entrusted and chosen to carry out a special mission is not taken lightly by God.

The material blessings we enjoy from day to day are temporary, but the spiritual blessings available to us in Christ encompass time and eternity. As the Psalmist said, “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.” (Psalm 146:5). Looking at people given special callings in today’s lessons may challenge us in what it means to pray for God to “bless” us or those we love.

*I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?*  
(Tevey, from *Fiddler on the Roof*)

My favorite musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, describes the life of a Jewish man and his family in 1905 during very difficult days in Russia. At one point, all of the Jews living in the town of Anatevka are told they must leave. Tevey has a very down-to-earth theology and piety as he regularly looks up to heaven and talks to God as he would a close friend. At one point in the musical, Tevey looks up and says, “I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?”

### Being chosen and blessed

Being chosen and blessed has taken on different meanings for the Jewish people over the centuries. God’s goodness and grace can often be more evident during times of testing. Consider this aspect of blessing as we go through today’s study.

It’s not unusual to hear people say with the best of intentions how “blessed” they feel or how “blessed” they are because of something good that has happened. But being *blessed* and being *chosen* isn’t always an enviable thing. In Luke 1:48, Mary declares, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.” This expression of blessing shows up again in Luke 2. After Jesus is born, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised. The old priest Simeon meets them and shares a prophetic “blessing.”

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34b -35).

To be blessed is not just about receiving recognition and favor; it also includes responsibility and sacrifice.

### Questions for discussion

- How often do we take this dual reality of blessing to heart when we pray for God's blessing on our life or the lives of our loved ones?
- Consider the implications of blessing as described in the gospel of Luke 1-2. How often do we ask God to "bless" us or others?
- How do you think Mary might have responded to Simeon's comment, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too"? All parents experience both joy and sorrow. What would it feel like to include these words from Simeon in the parent/child dedications in our churches?

### Simeon's blessing

Simeon was the presiding priest in the temple as Mary and Joseph went to consecrate Jesus on the eighth day following his birth, as was the Jewish practice. Simeon is a righteous, God-fearing man whom God placed in that setting for this specific meeting.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout ... and the Holy Spirit was upon him." (2:25)

Simeon is a Hebrew name which means "hearing" in Hebrew. Simeon recognizes immediately that Jesus was special. He had been expecting to meet the Messiah in his lifetime and now that time has come. What a blessing! But what a challenge as well, because he has some challenging words to share with Mary and Joseph. Simeon's comments to the parents of Jesus have four parts. Ask yourself as you reflect on these words whether this is your idea of "blessing."

1. **"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel."** How people respond to Jesus and his message will determine their destinies. Many of Jesus' contemporaries receive his message and are saved, but members of the religious community, by and large, can't bring themselves to believe that Jesus is God's Messiah.
2. **"and to be a sign that will be spoken against."** Jesus is God's sign to his people, but he was rejected. Who wants to hear that their son will be rejected by his community? We all want our children to be well thought of and looked up to, but such was not the case for Jesus.
3. **"so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."** Those who reject Jesus and oppose his message will one day be humbled. Jesus will one day will reign beside his heavenly father and judge the world.
4. **"And a sword will pierce your own soul too."** Through the Holy Spirit, Simeon can see the deep anguish that Mary will feel as her son is rejected by the nation's leaders and ultimately crucified. What a privilege it was for Mary to bear and raise the Son of God! But it also comes with such a burden.

Often in scripture, it is assumed that the only way to live into the blessing is if we are filled with the spirit to accomplish the task at hand. Again, is this what we have in mind when we ask God to "bless" us or those we are close to?

### Questions for discussion

- Identify a time when you were given a task that seemed bigger than your abilities to accomplish. How did it turn out?
- Have your greatest and most important challenges been events that you sought out or events that simply came to you uninvited?
- Any life event or transition brings with it joys and challenges. Make a list based on the life experiences of your group and highlight blessings in two categories: joys and challenges. How did each of these contribute to your faith and growth as followers of Jesus?
- What do we learn from the accounts of Mary's song and Simeon's blessings that can help us follow Christ more closely?

### The meaning of this text and how it applies to life

1. Sometimes God allows difficulties to come our way and in the moment, it's hard to see the redeeming aspect that only reveals itself over the long term.
2. Jesus is presented to Simeon, the priest, and consecrated by his parents even while he is a baby. Rituals of blessing are important functions for the church today as well. Rituals of parent/child dedications, baptisms, graduation celebrations, weddings and funerals remind us of rites of passage that can bring losses and growth opportunities.
3. Simeon played a minor but significant role in communicating God's calling and blessing for both Jesus and his parents. He was sensitive to God's voice and available when God's call came to him.
4. God had promised Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died (2:26). But Simeon needed to be patient in waiting for the fulfillment of this promise. We cannot rush God and God's timing. Living faithfully, doing the daily duties assigned to him, proved Simeon to be faithful in small things which led to this life fulfilling opportunity.
5. God is generous with grace to meet us during our times of struggle.

## Session III: What do we value?

**Luke 6:20-26: Blessings and woes – teachings to live by**

**Luke 8:1-3: Women benefactors**

**Luke 9:10-17: Working together to feed thousands**

### Teacher tips

Luke takes the familiar beatitudes from Matthew 5 and places four of them in contrast to four “woes” (Luke 6). How does this change the emphasis on these New Testament virtues? From the beatitudes, we move on to a group of women who used their financial means to support the itinerant preacher Jesus. These women benefactors only get a passing reference in Luke, but it merits some broader conversation on issues it raises. We conclude with the story of how small gifts can be miraculously increased when placed in the hands of the master.

Time may not allow you to cover all three texts equally, so decide which topic may be best suited to your group and focus on that one. Even if you don’t go in depth with each text, mentioning the key points of these stories and why Luke chose to include it will reinforce the significant emphasis Luke has on managing well the gifts we are given so many can be blessed – not just a few.

### Luke 6:20-26: Blessings and woes – teachings to live by

Looking at his disciples, he said:

**Blessed** are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

**Blessed** are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

**Blessed** are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

**Blessed** are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

But **woe** to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

**Woe** to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.

**Woe** to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

**Woe** to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

In Luke 6, Jesus takes a very untraditional and non-Jewish approach to what brings happiness or blessings in this world. Concerning Luke’s description of the beatitudes, F.R. Maltby said, “Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble.” Or as commentator William Barclay suggests, the question Luke’s version of the beatitudes leaves us with is, “Will you be happy in the world’s way, or in Christ’s way?”

Instead of studying each of the blessings first (verses 20-23) and then each of the woes (verses 24-26), we will look at a blessing and then its corresponding woe. They come in pairs, as you can note above.

### *Blessings and woes*

What sets Jesus' blessings and woes apart here in Luke is that they are 180 degrees contrary to reason. You'd expect someone to say, "The rich are fortunate ... but too bad for the poor." Instead, Jesus says just the opposite. He must have gotten a lot of attention with this message.

### *Poor vs. rich (6:20, 24)*

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (6:20)

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." (6:24)

The first surprise is Jesus' word of the blessedness of the poor, and a hopeless future for the rich. I'm not sure the poor would agree, and the rich would probably be confused as well.

But Jesus is talking about a different kind of wealth than finances. In western culture, we have a tendency to worship money, and Christians, too, can value life in monetary terms. If we make a low wage, we feel bad about ourselves; if we make a lot of money, we tend to feel good and valued. But money is a very poor indicator of spiritual well-being. It's difficult in our context not to associate our net worth with our self-worth. Jesus is in essence challenging our money-based value system and calling it worthless.

Why does Jesus say the poor are blessed? Aren't there any rich believers? Of course, but Jesus is creating a contrast to make an important point to his disciples. Those who are wealthy can possess a false sense of security because of their wealth. Their needs don't seem as desperate as those of the poor, and they are less inclined to look to others or God for help. The rich tend to be self-satisfied. The poor, on the other hand, are often forced to look beyond themselves to meet basic needs. This includes looking to their neighbors, their faith community and to God. People of financial means might be more inclined to look to the Almighty Dollar to meet their needs, while the poor can only look to God Almighty.

Jesus was admonishing his disciples "to preach good news to the poor" (4:18), and the poor heard Jesus' words gladly. It was the rich religious establishment that felt threatened and resisted his teachings. Is this because the poor saw that in the message of Jesus, they had everything to gain while the wealthy had everything to lose? Would the same be true today?

Why are the poor so blessed? Because their faith and trust in God is enhanced by necessity. The poor become the heirs of God's kingdom because they join with Jesus. Why are the rich to be pitied? Because in their self-sufficiency, they have separated from Christ. The rich have already received whatever comfort they can expect. Their comfort comes from their wealth. But what a blessing the poor have, for the whole kingdom of which God is Master opens up to them.

### *Hungry vs. well-fed (6:21a, 25a)*

"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied." (6:21a)

"Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry." (6:25a)

The second pairing of blessings and woes is much less abstract than wealth. It refers to being hungry. Have you ever had to go without food for a significant amount of time? Have you ever had to cut

down on what you bought at the grocery store because you just couldn't afford more? That's what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is appealing to the basic instinct to survive, the hunger for food many of his listeners can easily identify with. As an agrarian society, many of them had faced very lean years where there wasn't enough food to go around. They knew what hunger was. Jesus is saying that the tables will turn. God will sustain us when times are difficult. In a few chapters, we will see Jesus providing food for those who hunger.

### *Weeping vs. laughing (6:21b, 25b)*

The third blessing/woe pair is weeping and laughing.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (6:21b)

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." (6:25b)

Who has never wept? Who has not felt the pain of disappointment and loss, of rejection, of struggle? We all have. But the caricature of the well-to-do is of those who are always enjoying themselves. They are not weighed down by the struggle to survive.

Many believe Jesus is talking about a different kind of weeping than just from pain and struggle. We see a theme in the Old Testament and New Testament of those righteous people who grieve for the unrighteousness they see all around them. God directs the Prophet Ezekiel: "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it." (Ezekiel 9:4)

The kingdom Jesus came to establish stands in stark contrast to much of what western culture represents. What Jesus is teaching in the blessings and woes is a radical corrective to the pursuit of materialism and the pursuit of more.

### *Hated vs. praised (6:22-23, 26)*

The fourth blessing and woe in this text differs from the first three. The first three contrast present struggle with future reward. The fourth pair is not a now/later contrast, but a hate/love contrast. Money is deeply entrenched in the average non-Christian's motivational system; so is popularity.

"Blessed are you when men hate you,  
when they exclude you and insult you  
and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.  
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,  
because great is your reward in heaven.  
For that is how their fathers treated the prophets." (6:22-23)

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you,  
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." (6:26)

The desire to be liked is so strong. Our children long to be liked, our teenagers ache to be loved, and we adults still struggle with rejection. Jesus makes it extremely clear in this passage that if we are obsessed with popularity and acceptance, we may be severely deceived.

Many prophets in the Old Testament were killed when they went against popular culture (and the king) and said what God told them to declare. Being a prophet was never easy, but God honored those who spoke his words at great personal risk.

### *The trap of popularity*

Jesus is speaking both to his 12 disciples as well as others who followed him. “Men and women,” he is saying, “don’t seek popularity and acceptance. Those are false paths.” Jesus is saying not to seek popularity, but to seek faithfulness. We are not to seek persecution. But if persecution comes “because of the Son of Man,” that should be counted a badge of honor rather than something we avoid at all costs. Our value system is based on love for and faithfulness to God, not the opinions of the community, either good or bad.

### Questions for discussion

- Should the blessings and woes in Luke 6 be read literally or metaphorically? How does the way we read these texts change their meaning for us today?
- How convincing are Jesus’ comments about blessings and woes? Do you know people who have taken these teachings seriously enough to change their attitudes and behaviors regarding caring for the poor and hungry?
- What does Jesus mean by his use of the words “poor” and “rich” in this passage? Does he intend these words to be taken literally or figuratively?
- What, if anything, is wrong with being rich? Is it wrong to pursue wealth?
- Why do we seek to please people? Why is pleasing people such a trap for Christians?
- Does the desire to be popular or well liked change as we get older?

## Luke 8:1-3: Women benefactors

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus traveled extensively. This group of women that followed Jesus was diverse in background but united in common commitment to Jesus. Some of the women had questionable backgrounds; others were from respected and prominent families. We know that Mary Magdalene had lived a very troubled life. The gospel records that Jesus freed her from seven demons. Joanna, wife of the king’s chief financial officer, held significant social and political standing. What brought them together and united them in a bond of friendship and common service? Certainly, Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God had transformed these women to the point that they contributed to his ministry with money, as well as their moral support.

Each brought her gifts and resources to Jesus. Paul the Apostle reminds us that the Holy Spirit gives his spiritual gifts to each and every one for the common good of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7). While God needs no one, he nonetheless chooses to work in and through each of us for his glory. No one is unimportant or unnecessary in God’s economy.

As we think about the many opportunities to serve Jesus, we cannot overlook the importance of financial support. While Luke 6 highlighted the cautions and dangers of pursuing money, Luke 8 seems to indicate that if we see wealth as a means to serve the kingdom rather than an end in itself, it can perform much good. Let's not be quick to judge people who have done well as entrepreneurs. God has blessed people to earn money so they can in turn support the work of building the kingdom.

#### Questions for discussion

- Are there a few benefactors who carry the majority of the giving for your congregation?
- Luke doesn't seem shy about identifying those who have the resources to serve in this way and are willing to do so. What lesson might we learn from this observation made by Luke?
- What motivates you to give your money away to a cause or ministry?

### Luke 9:10-17: Working together to feed thousands

This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Throughout Luke, Jesus teaches that living in God's kingdom means looking to God, rather than human effort, as the ultimate source of the things we need for life. Our work and involvement is always a participation in the grace of God's provision.

Jesus demonstrates this in actions before he teaches it in words. In the feeding of the five-thousand people, Jesus takes responsibility for meeting the crowd's need for food. He does it because they are hungry. Exactly how Jesus works this miracle is not stated. He makes use of ordinary food – the five loaves of bread and two fish – and by God's power, a little bit of food becomes enough to feed many people. This action by Jesus is a validation of what he says in Luke 6:21 about those who are hungry being fed. Perhaps Jesus performed this miracle to authenticate his earlier teaching.

Some of Jesus' disciples (the fishermen) were in the food-service profession and others like Levi the tax collector were in civil service. Jesus calls on his disciples to get involved by organizing the crowd and serving the bread and fish. Jesus incorporates, rather than replaces, the ordinary human means of providing food, and the results are miraculously successful. Human effort alone can do good or harm. When we do as Jesus directs, our work is good. As we often see in the Gospel of Luke, God brings miraculous results out of ordinary work – in this case, the work of providing the necessities of life.

Later, in Luke 12:22-31, Jesus teaches about God's provision.

I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear ... Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?"

Since worrying cannot add so much as an hour to your life, why worry? Jesus doesn't say not to work, only not to worry about whether your work will provide enough to meet your needs.

People may have enough to live on today, but they can still face the threat of hunger at any moment. It is difficult to reconcile the hard fact of poverty and starvation with God's promise of provision. Jesus is not ignorant of this situation. "Sell your possessions and give to the poor," he says (Luke 12:33), for he knows that some people are desperately poor. That's why we must give to them.

Perhaps if all of Jesus' followers used our work and wealth to alleviate and prevent poverty, we would become the means of God's provision for the desperately poor. But since Christians have not done so well at this, we will not pretend to speak here on behalf of people who are so poor that their provision is doubtful. Jesus values the poor as much as those who are not poor.

#### Questions for discussion

- What are ways we show the poor in our neighborhoods that they are valued by God and by the church?
- How do we use our careers and skills to alleviate the pain of others?
- What would happen if Christians made a committed effort to alleviate poverty and hunger?
- Where would be a good place to begin addressing hunger in your community?

## Session IV: Helping others and helping self

**Luke 10:25-37: The Samaritan**

**Luke 10:37-42: The sisters**

**Luke 12:13-34: The pitfall of prosperity**

### Teacher tips

Today, you will want to help the students think about any connections there may be between the parable of the Samaritan and the two sisters. They are placed one before the other, which might suggest they're positioned to reinforce a certain principle. We also will ask the students to consider the three main characters in the Samaritan story: the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. Which of the three might we most identify with? Is it possible that Jesus was setting himself up as the hero of the story and if so, why would he have chosen to be the Samaritan – a member of a despised religious sect? We will also briefly look at Martha and Mary and consider the pros and cons of our western work ethic.

The story about the wealthy farmer also invites the listeners to look at their own lives and consider whether they've placed value in things that have no eternal significance. Help the class approach these stories as first century listeners. How would these stories have impacted the contemporaries of Jesus and how do messages of these lessons translate into our own day?

### The Samaritan

This session focuses on the very familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, which is followed by the story of Jesus' interaction with the sisters Mary and Martha.

The story of the Samaritan in Luke 10:25-42 begins in a very similar way as the story in Luke 18:18 about a ruler who approaches Jesus. In the Samaritan story, it's a lawyer who approaches Jesus and asks a question and in the second, it is a ruler. Both prominent people ask, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Equally interesting is that in his responses to these questions, Jesus comes back with very clear directives about helping our neighbor and being willing to give what we have to help those in need.

Luke regularly presents lawyers, expert interpreters of the law, as antagonists to Jesus. The lawyer in chapter 10 is "testing" Jesus. The lawyer may call Jesus "teacher," but he really is putting himself in the position of grading Jesus' answer. Jesus quickly changes the dynamic of the situation by posing a question back to him and grading the lawyer's response with, "You have given the right answer."

The lawyer, however, wants to "justify" himself. He poses a challenging question to Jesus, but Jesus once again turns the tables by telling a parable, resulting in yet another question that the lawyer reluctantly answers before being dismissed.

- The lawyer asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" After their exchange, Jesus says, "**Do** this, and you will live."
- Asked which of the three travelers proved to be the true neighbor, the lawyer is feeling trapped. Unwilling to even utter the name "Samaritan," the lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy."
- Then Jesus says to him, "Go and **do** likewise," and we have a direct answer to the lawyer's initial question about what must be **done** to inherit eternal life.

From a Jewish perspective, a Samaritan would be despised and rejected, and in the story, he is identified as one who heals and who promises to return later to pay any additional costs that remain. Some have suggested that Jesus tells this story as the Samaritan. He comes to heal when others walk by. He will return to provide payment for any additional needs of the injured man. If we think of Jesus as the Samaritan, the rest of us are the priest, the Levite of the man in the ditch – in which case, we are all in need of either the master’s healing, forgiveness or both.

This same tension between helping and being helped appears in the Mary and Martha story. Remember, Jesus told the lawyer to love God and neighbor: “Do this, and you will live.” At the end of the parable, he told the lawyer, “Go and do likewise,” meaning to show others mercy. Martha sure looks like the *do-er*, and both in that culture and in ours today, Martha would be commended for her caring nature. Jesus is sympathetic to Martha and her busyness, but he is also very clear that her worries and distractions are not good. Jesus is looking for those who are willing to see him for who he is and take time to listen and embody his message – like Mary. Mary recognized what Jesus needed most – mercy and attention – and provided that for Jesus. Mercy always trumps busyness.

#### Questions for discussion

So what is Jesus trying to communicate if we look at these two stories together?

- Why did two religious people pass by the injured man on the road? Is our tendency to help those we are most familiar with and are most like us?
- With Mary and Martha, we see each woman serving Jesus as they like to be treated. Do we serve in the same ways, rather than looking for what our guest really needs in the moment?
- Did Jesus tell the lawyer to “do likewise” (Luke 10:37) with the awareness that he would never be able to “do” it right or do it under his own power?
- Is Martha like the priest and Levite – so busy and distracted that she misses what Jesus really needs?
- Do we tend to serve and help others based on what is comfortable and familiar for us rather than what’s best for those around us?

#### Luke 12:13-21: The pitfall of prosperity – bigger barns

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

### *Money and mediation*

Money can often create more problems than it solves. Someone approached Jesus and said, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” (verse 13) Now Jesus is confronted with a choice. Will he get down into the nitty-gritty of the inheritance dispute or not?

He says (verse 14), “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” In other words, my calling is different from what you are asking of me. I do have something relevant to say to you, but I’m not the one to be drawn into the details of this dispute. And then he gives a warning about placing greed for money above other things, such as a relationship with his brother. He says (verse 15), “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

He sees a man losing his grip on his portion of the inheritance. And he sees in him some evidence that the hazard of the inheritance is deceiving the man. This is why Jesus refers to “the deceitfulness of riches” in Matthew 13:22. This inheritance had become a distraction to the man. This is why money is so hazardous. It tries to deceive and distract us.

### *Building bigger to store more*

It is not a bad thing when your “land produces plentifully” (verse 16). It is not a bad thing when your business prospers. It is not a bad thing to receive a promotion and with it, a pay increase. It is not a bad thing when your investments increase in value. That is not the evil in this parable that brought about the farmer’s spiritual and physical death. He is not called a fool for being a productive farmer. God knows this broken world needs productive farmers and profitable businesses.

Why, then, is he called a fool? That’s the question in this parable. Not only a fool, but a fool who loses his soul. (verse 20) “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you.’”

The way the farmer wanted to use the increase of his riches gave no indication of God being the one who provided the increase. Psalm 24:1 reads, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” The farmer wrongly assumed that the crops and the added abundance were all for himself. The farmer tore down perfectly good barns to build bigger ones to hoard what wasn’t his to begin with. That might be OK – if you recognize that God is the Lord of the land and of the harvest. But what does the farmer say? “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” (verse 19). Clearly, this is not what God expects.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:32, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” But there is a God, and there is a resurrection. Therefore, we are to live differently, which includes having concern for others.

What’s wrong with this man’s way of handling his riches is that he fails to use them in a way that shows he treasures God and others more than riches. The man failed to see when his “enough” was met and where his increase was intended to be used for others’ needs rather than his own extravagance. God is honored as we reach out and serve others, not as we build bigger barns and houses and investments while others suffer in want.

The early church father Ambrose said, "The bosoms of the poor, the houses of the widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last forever." What a difference it would have made for the farmer in this story if this advice was taken to heart.

#### Questions for discussion

- What do you perceive to be the main message of this story of the farmer building bigger barns?
- How does the story of the farmer building bigger barns address the subject of how much is our "enough" and how generous we can be while tending to our needs? Do you know how much is your "enough"?
- How much of our giving is limited because we are concerned about our future needs rather than other people's current needs? How can we work at this challenge?
- Was it the farmer's wealth or the manner in which he managed the increase and the attitude he projected that led to his demise?

## Session V: Perplexing parables

**Luke 16:1-15: The shrewd manager**

**Luke 16:19-31: The rich man and Lazarus**

**Luke 18:18-30: The rich ruler**

### Teacher tips

Jesus clearly wanted his listeners to think deeply about worldly wealth and eternity and how they are connected. All three of these parables address the relationship between how we view and manage money. In Luke 16:14, Jesus challenges the Pharisees and his listeners with the words, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this and they ridiculed him.” Are the financial resources we acquire in life to be an end in and of themselves or a means by which we can serve others and build relationships so we can invite others to join us in eternity? These are the kinds of issues we are forced to look at as we listen to the master draw us into these stories with multiple layers of plots and themes.

Perchik: *Money is the world's curse.*

Tevye: *May the Lord smite me with it. And may I never recover. (Fiddler on the Roof)*

### The parable of the shrewd steward (Luke 16:1-15)

Some of the more challenging parables told by Jesus had to do with money. This story of the shrewd steward may be the most challenging. In this case, being shrewd does not mean deceptive or underhanded. It suggests more the idea of someone who is clever and creative.

There are a number of cultural and religious explanations that come into play with the telling of this story. Jews weren't allowed to charge interest to fellow Jews (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19) but this was worked around by inflating the actual cost of an item being sold. A person would be allowed to pay for the item over a specified period, but there wasn't any distinction between the amount that was considered principal and interest.

When the shrewd steward in this story reduced the debt of individuals owing money to the rich man, (16:6-7) some suggest he was actually just reducing the amount owed back to the original cost before it was inflated to include “interest.” In that day, everyone would have known what was going on, and the rich man couldn't do anything without identifying his own complicity in this gray area of religious and business practice.

All of this aside, there is another key lesson from this text. At the end of the story, Jesus says, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” (verse 9) Wealth and money – while part of this world – will not be part of the new Jerusalem. Jesus concludes that we use wealth to build relationships – to invest in people. Relationships come before profits and bank accounts. The steward was not a legalist about debt and repayment. What he ended up doing placed him in good standing with his neighbors, and even his boss respected his clever way of serving others and fulfilling his duties.

In Luke 16:10-13, Jesus offers more insight into this story about shrewd management.

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (mammon).”

God always meets us where we are and as we are and encourages us to grow up from there. If we prove to be faithful with small tasks, we will be offered more significant roles and challenges. God never offered a part-time disciple position to anyone. Now that doesn’t mean that we all have to become missionaries and leave home – unless, of course, that is the call that has been placed on us. God also needs businesspeople and nurses and teachers and carpenters to work in and serve in local communities. But all that we do needs to be focused on making a difference with those we meet in our workplaces and in our neighborhoods.

Being a disciple means everything we do has implications as it relates to our witness to the world around us. That’s why we need to place God above the pursuit of all other things including earning and storing up money. The Greek word used by Luke is mammon. The meaning of this term cannot be fully understood with our English translation of money and wealth. Mammon was the name of a pagan deity of Jesus’ day. In essence, Jesus was stating that mammon is an idol worshipped in his day, and you can’t have that kind of view of money and still be a disciple of his. We sometimes use the phrase “the Almighty Dollar.” We also use the phrase “God Almighty.” Well, which will it be? That’s the challenge of Jesus. Only one can be God of our life.

### Questions for discussion

- What are some examples of how we use money to build relationships?
- If you own a vacation house, a boat or enjoy expensive hobbies, how can these be used for building relationships as well as providing relaxation and renewal?
- In what ways is using money to build relationships good? In what ways is it inappropriate?
- How can money be used to reap eternal benefits for you and for others?
- In what ways does culture seduce us to think of money with godlike qualities?

## Luke 16:14-17: The law and the kingdom of God

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all of these things and ridiculed Jesus.

And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.”

Jesus wasn’t shy about confronting the Pharisees, who were apparently known to be susceptible to the allure of money just like some religious leaders today. The “prosperity gospel” is a popular term to describe a view that God wants everyone to be rich and well off. How prevalent is this in your community or among your Christian friends?

### Questions for discussion

- What do you think led Luke to say the Pharisees were lovers of money?
- What might people say you love by observing the way you live?
- How much pressure is there in your community to buy into the prosperity gospel that some churches have been seduced to promote? Were the Pharisees living into that same kind of misguided thinking? Is that why Jesus was so hard on them?

### The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

Like many these days who buy into the prosperity gospel, the rich man wrongly saw his material riches as evidence of God's love and blessing. He also believed the poor street people, including Lazarus, were cursed by God. Not only do riches not get someone into heaven, they have the power to separate a person from God in a way that few other things can. Riches are a seducer of this world that can draw us away from the greater calling to serve others rather than satisfy our own pleasures. It is certainly not impossible for the very rich to enter heaven (many heroes of the Bible were wealthy), but Scripture is clear that it is very hard (Matthew 19:23-24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 18:24-25).

True followers of Christ will not be indifferent to the plight of the poor as the rich man in this story was. God loves the poor and is offended when his followers neglect them. In fact, those who show mercy to the poor are, in effect, ministering to Christ personally (Matthew 25:35-40). Christians are called to live into the life that Jesus spoke to and modeled.

#### *The rich ruler (read Luke 18:18-30)*

**The rabbis had a saying, "The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come."**

#### **There is still one thing lacking (Jesus)**

The Messianic Jewish scholar of the 1800s, Alfred Edersheim, wrote,

"What the rich man lacked was earth's poverty and heaven's riches; a heart fully set on following Christ: and this could only come to him through voluntary surrender of all. And so this was to the test. For this man it was his wealth; for us it may be something different." What is it in your life that has the potential to become an idol that could rise up and challenge your loyalty to God? Can you name it? Do you monitor its power and influence?

**Sell all you have:** In Luke 18, Jesus tells the man that his wealth is the barrier in his case. His wealth was not evil in itself, but in his case it kept him from full reliance on God. It gave to the man – as it can give to us – a false sense of security in our own ability to provide all that we need. Jesus had asked him about the last five Commandments (Luke 18:20) that dealt with man's relationships with others (Exodus 20:12-17), but the ruler's problem was the first half of the Commandments (Exodus 20:2-11) – those dealing with man's relationship with God. Obedience would demonstrate his faith in the person of Christ, and that faith alone could bring the man the righteousness that would admit him to eternal life. It's not what we own or hold onto that reflects security and faithfulness. Rather, it is what we set free and surrender which allows God to have primary reign in our life.

**Very sad day:** Mark says that, “at these words his face fell.” (Mark 10:22) The word Luke used was sadness (verse 23). The rich ruler seemed to really care about Jesus and wanted to follow Jesus. This was not an easy decision for him. Jesus’ explanation to the crowd was that the rich ruler relied on his wealth, not on God. The man was unwilling to give up his wealth, despite Jesus’ command. Jesus showed him that he had violated the first set of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-4). The rich young ruler was an idolater, and his wealth was his idol.

### Questions for discussion

- Note the number of references in chapters 16-18 that talk about rich people and poor people. Luke seems to hit home on this subject time and again. What do the stories about rich Pharisees, the rich man and Lazarus, and the rich young ruler have in common? What’s the point Luke wants to emphasize?
- Why did Jesus reference only half of the commandments and not all 10 in his question to the ruler (verse 20)?
- What area of your life is closest to becoming an idol? Are we any different than those people of Jesus’ day and the temptations they faced?
- How do we keep ourselves from reliance on self and our own abilities vs. reliance on God?
- Besides money, what are the attractions of this world that can take the place of God?

### Camels and needles (Read Luke 18:25)

Jesus watches the young man walk away, and says, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:24). This statement astonished the disciples. In the Jewish world of the first century, riches in this life were considered a sign of a blessing from God. If a person like this was to be excluded from the kingdom of God, what chance did anyone else have? It is in this setting that Jesus shares this well-known image: “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:25)

#### *A gate or a needle?*

Some scholars have suggested this imagery of a needle was a reference to an actual gate on the Jerusalem wall. It was called Needle Gate and was the smallest gate accessing the city. It was kept open each day later than any of the main entries. A merchant with a camel loaded with goods could enter the city after curfew through this gate. The narrowness and low height of the so-called Needle Gate might require the merchant to unpack his camel and even require the camel to lower itself to crawl through the entrance. The analogy is obvious, that if one wished to enter through the eye of the needle (gate), one had to drop the burden of worldly goods and humble oneself to crawl through the opening.

While this may make sense, other scholars suggest that there is another possible explanation for this phrase, “eye of the needle.” Since the phrase used here has an indefinite article, “*eye of a needle*” Jesus clearly may have meant a needle that someone might use for sewing. This makes the illustration sound all the more impossible, which may be why the disciples were so confused by what Jesus said.

To suggest that “needle” meant a gate implies that we can get through the eye of the needle by our own work – as challenging as it might be. All we have to do is become less worldly and more humble. There’s nothing wrong with striving not to be consumed by this world’s material benefits, nor can we go wrong by trying to be more humble. But the mistake is thinking that we can somehow work hard and earn admission to the kingdom of God through our actions. The scriptures make it clear that salvation is not by works, but by grace. (Romans 6:23). One cannot earn a gift.

#### Questions for discussion

- What do you think was Jesus’ intention in using this illustration of the needle and what do you take as the main meaning from this parable?
- In what ways do we communicate that salvation is something we can earn or merit?
- Do we associate material wealth with divine blessing in the way we view money or treat people of wealth?
- How have you heard this parable explained in other settings or in sermons you have heard?

## Session VI: Taxes, ten minas and tithes

**Luke 19:1-10: Zacchaeus**

**Luke 19:11-27: The parable of the minas**

**Luke 21:1-4: The widow's offering**

### Teacher tips

We can't leave a discussion on money without talking about taxes and tithing, now can we? One of the intriguing issues you will be looking at has to do with whether Zacchaeus was already a believer – perhaps a convert of John the Baptist – when Jesus arrives at his house. Read carefully the description of this point of view below as you consider if this changes how you may have viewed Zacchaeus in the past.

Perhaps Jesus stopped by to validate the transformation that already had been at work. If Zacchaeus wasn't a new believer already, why don't we hear Jesus saying to this tax collector, "I don't condemn you; go and sin no more?" Neither does Jesus in this account ask this tax collector to leave his position. Is this to suggest that a reformed tax collector committed to following Jesus is better than a corrupt tax collector bent on taking advantage of the people – even if he is collaborating with Rome?

As always, we are left with at least as many questions as answers. Rounding out this class discussion, we do some comparison of two stories often associated with each other – the 10 minas from Luke 19 and the 10 talents from Matthew 25. Finally, the Luke 21 story of the widow cannot be fully appreciated without looking at the Luke 20:45-47 account of Jesus talking with the Pharisees and criticizing them for not attending to the needs of widows. On the heels of this confrontation, here comes a widow (Luke 21:1-4) to make her contribution to the temple treasury. Coincidence? I don't think so. Enjoy the reading and challenge of God's word.

### The tax collector (Zacchaeus): zealous generosity (Luke 19:1-10)

Dave Barnhart, a creative teacher and preacher, offers some interesting insights on this familiar story about Zacchaeus, who is described as a "chief" tax collector. In Jewish tradition, scripture is not merely read and applied – it is debated and examined from multiple angles. Like a gem, the sages say, "The Torah has 70 faces." We turn it around and examine each angle carefully. It's quite possible that the writers of the New Testament expected their audiences to do the same. Maybe that's why we have four Gospels. Each is a unique gem with a unique story and perspective. The story of Zacchaeus lends itself to multiple interpretations. Since many of us probably have a fairly traditional understanding of it, let's use our imagination to see if there may be new lessons to be learned.

A tax collector was a greedy combination of embezzler and extortionist, and a traitor to his people because he collaborated with the occupying Roman Empire. This is why they are lumped together with prostitutes and other sinners. Jesus uses tax collectors in parables designed to shock his audiences. (Luke 18:10). Although Jesus counted a tax collector among his disciples (Luke 5:27), the most notorious tax collector in the Bible is Zacchaeus (Luke 19), a man despised by all.

Tax collection by members of the oppressed population was an ingenious tool used by the Roman Empire to both collect income and turn local populations against each other. The tax system was essentially a series of contractors and subcontractors who offered bids to Roman officials to collect money from an area they knew well. A tax collector knew what you did for a living and who your relatives were. As a "chief tax collector," Zacchaeus would have supervised lower-level employees for his area.

Being a chief tax collector was tricky work. You had to be rich and bid high for the right to collect taxes from certain communities. You needed to collect enough to pay the Romans what you promised to raise, as well as additional money that served as your own income. If you didn't raise enough taxes from the people to pay off the Romans, the difference would have come out of your pocket.

The Zacchaeus story is usually told with the assumption that what the crowd believes about Zacchaeus is true: He is a crook. But what if he isn't? What if he was already in the process of changing? When Zacchaeus learns that Jesus wants to dine at his house, he is happy to welcome him, but the crowd murmurs against him. He stops, turns to Jesus, and says: "Look, Lord, I *give* half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." (verse 8).

The Common English Bible and King James Version (in contrast to the NIV and NRSV) accurately translate verse 8, "Jesus, you hear the nasty things these people say about me, but look – I *already give away* half of everything I have to the poor. And if anyone can show me that I've cheated them, I return four times as much. I'm an honest man, Lord, in spite of what they say."

Zacchaeus, according to the Greek, is speaking in the present tense, which means he is *already being a generous man*, even before the visit by Jesus.

There are other clues that support this reading of the story. Luke doesn't include any of the usual language common to his other repentance stories (5:20, 7:47, 15:21, 18:13). Is it possible that Zacchaeus is one of the reformed tax collectors who heard John the Baptist's instructions to take no more than his fair share (Luke 3:12-13)? Luke also gives us his name: Zacchaeus, which means "pure."

Read from this perspective and with this interpretation of the Greek, Jesus' statement that "Today, salvation has come to this household," sounds very different. Zacchaeus, like Mary who sits at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:42), is a sinner who becomes a disciple, welcomed in from the margins. Like the blind man in the previous story (Luke 18:35-43) and Levi (5:27), he becomes part of Jesus' followers. Perhaps this is a story about celebrating one who already has been redeemed and reformed.

### Questions for discussion

- How does this new possible reading of a familiar story change the lesson to be learned?
- Is it possible that Jesus came to the home of Zacchaeus as a way of validating change that had already taken place and helping bridge Zacchaeus back into the community?
- How does this speak to how we can use wealth and social standing to do good by sharing resources with the poor?
- Why do you think Jesus doesn't ask Zacchaeus to leave the tax collecting profession? Could it be because it is better to have a reformed believer in this role rather than a corrupt unbeliever?
- If this interpretation is accurate and Jesus didn't call Zacchaeus to leave his role as tax collector, what is the message about the need for God's people to be active and engaged in roles of influence?

## Luke 19:11-27: Minas and pounds and generosity

As we prepare to transition from the story of Zacchaeus to the story about the minas, let's make a couple of comparisons between the two. Zacchaeus voluntarily gives up half of what he has and promises to restore four-fold to any he has defrauded (19:8). And the parable of the minas or pounds (19:11-27) suggests it is possible even to invest money and make more of it, as long as a person recognizes that he or she will be held accountable for all of it, because all of it is on loan from the master.

The parable of the 10 minas is similar to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30. Some people assume that they are the same parable, but there are enough differences to warrant a distinction:

- the parable of the minas was told on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem
  - the parable of the talents was told later on the Mount of Olives
- the audience for the parable of the minas was a large crowd
  - the audience for the parable of the talents was the disciples by themselves
- the parable of the minas deals with two classes of people: servants and enemies
  - the parable of the talents deals only with professed servants
- in the parable of the minas, each servant receives the same amount
  - in the parable of the talents, each servant receives a different amount (and talents are worth far more than minas)
- in the parable of the minas, the servants report 10-fold and five-fold earnings
  - in the parable of the talents, all of the good servants double their investments
- in the former, the servants received identical gifts;
  - in the latter, the good servants showed identical faithfulness

The emphasis that Jesus is making in Luke 19:11-27 is about lordship. Whose are we? Are you of this world or part of the kingdom of God? The parable about the minas isn't about some geographical destination for the kingdom. It speaks to the condition of one's soul.

### Questions for discussion

- Here again, faithfulness is tied to how we use resources of time and finances. Why do you think Luke keeps using stories from Jesus' life that communicate this recurring theme for what it means to follow Jesus?
- How does our sense of fairness and God's view of "fairness" align in this story and other stories we have read in Luke?
- Do you want God to be "fair" with you – or with your family members?

## Luke 21:1-4: the widow's offering

We find this short story about the widow bringing her gifts to the temple taking place while Jesus was sitting, and probably resting. Prior to this, Jesus was denouncing the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 20:45-47) in the covered colonnade of the temple, which was open to the general public, including Jewish women. His criticism of the religious rulers was regarding their mistreatment of widows.

The treasury area was also in the colonnade and consisted of 13 fluted boxes connected to the wall. Men and women would walk by and drop their offerings in one of these receptacles. These boxes were called *shopheroth*, or trumpets, because they were shaped like trumpets, tapering upward into a narrow mouth, or opening, into which the alms were dropped. Some of these “trumpets” were marked with inscriptions, stating how the offerings would be used. Luke 21:1 reads, “And he looked up, and saw the rich men putting their gifts into the treasury.” It is not improbable that some of those coming by while Jesus is resting were some of the same people who heard his sharp words moments earlier in Luke 20:45-47.

Jesus defends the widows and denounces those who mistreat them. He also honors this one particular widow who by special revelation he knows was giving “out of her poverty all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:3)

Maybe Jesus intentionally positioned himself in this public spot in the temple, where all different types of people are allowed to walk, so he can both see and be seen as rich and poor alike passed by to make their donations. As Jesus watches, those who sat through his passionate challenge are again humbled by this unconventional Messiah rabbi who sided with the poor.

There is no fixed percentage in the New Testament of what Jesus’ followers are told to give away or to keep. There are references to tithing (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42, 18:12 and Hebrews 7:4-9) but no direct command as to what amount New Testament believers are to give. The point is that believers must be good stewards of all we manage (1 Peter 4:10).

### Questions for discussion

- How do Luke 20:45-47 and Luke 21:1-4 reflect Jesus’ concern for widows?
- Jesus doesn’t seem concerned about either the privacy of the widow or the rich people who passed by. How does this story relate to the level of secrecy we associate with our own giving practices?
- What is the connection between Jesus’ understanding of “gospel” (good news) and his concern for the physical well-being of the poor and widows?
- Do we as the church view the concerns for justice, salvation and gospel as one and the same or do we keep them separated?
- What is your church doing for widows? Were the needs of widows in Jesus’ day similar to needs of widows today? Should the church still pay special attention to this group of people and if so, how? Are there other groups today that fit in this category for special care by the church?



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## Appendix

### The Gospel of Luke:

#### The relationship between salvation, discipleship and wealth

## Session I: Introduction to Luke's gospel and its message on faith and finances

### *The great reversal*

#### **Questions for discussion:**

- What words or phrases might we use today from Mary and Zechariah to describe our perception of what God desires to do in our world?
- As you consider the list of stories that Luke included in his gospel that the other gospel writers left out, what does this suggest about Luke's passions and his understanding of Jesus?
- What examples of "great reversals" might Luke write about if he were living today?
- Who are the people you know who are living in counter-cultural ways in order to reflect the new vision that Mary and Luke seem to be talking about?

### *The way of generosity*

#### **Questions for discussion:**

- Who are the unexpected heroes in the stories of Jesus used by Luke?
- What does this suggest about Luke's understanding of Jesus' message?
- In what ways does our congregation express generosity in how we reach out beyond our own socioeconomic group to reflect God's love for all?

### *Heaven, eternal life and worldly possession*

#### **Questions for discussion:**

- What is the link between the spiritual and the material in your life and in our lives together?
- Why did Jesus respond to a question about being saved the way that he did in Luke 10 and 18? Why not just share a four-step program for becoming a Christian?

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## Session II: What it means to be blessed

### Luke 1:26-56: The announcement to Mary

### Luke 2:21-40: Presentation in the temple

#### *Being chosen and blessed*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- How often do we take this dual reality of blessing to heart when we pray for God's blessing on our life or the lives of our loved ones?
- Consider the implications of blessing as described in the gospel of Luke. How often do we ask God to "bless" us or others?
- How do you think Mary responded to Simeon's comment about a sword piercing her own soul? In truth, all parenting brings this double-edged sword into our experiences. What would it feel like to include these same words in the parent/child dedications in our churches?

#### *Simeon's blessing*

##### **Questions to ponder:**

- Identify a time when you were given a task that seemed bigger than your ability to accomplish it. How did it turn out?
- Was it something that you sought out or did the task/calling pursue you?
- Any life event or transition brings with it joys and challenges. Make a list based on the life experiences of your group and highlight blessings in two categories: joys and challenges. How do each of these contribute to our faith and growth as followers of Jesus?
- What do we learn from the accounts of Mary's song and Simeon's blessings that can help us follow Christ more closely?

## Appendix

### The Gospel of Luke:

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### Session III: What do we value?

**Luke 6:20-26: Blessings and woes – teachings to live by**

**Luke 8:1-3: Women benefactors**

**Luke 9:10-17: Working together to feed thousands**

#### *Blessings and woes*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- Should the blessings and woes in Luke 6 be read literally or metaphorically? How does the way we read these texts change their meaning for us today?
- How convincing are Jesus' comments about blessings and woes? Do you know people who have taken these teachings seriously enough to change their attitudes and behaviors regarding caring for the poor and hungry?
- What does Jesus mean by his use of the words "poor" and "rich" in this passage? Does he intend these words to be taken literally or figuratively?
- What, if anything, is wrong with being rich? Is it wrong to pursue wealth?
- Why do we seek to please people? Why is pleasing people such a trap for Christians?
- Does the desire to be popular or well liked change as we get older?

#### *Women benefactors*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- Are there a few households in your congregation that carry the majority of the giving for your congregation?
- Luke doesn't seem shy about identifying those who have the resources to serve in this way and willing to do so. Why is this?
- What lesson we can learn from this observation made by Luke?
- What motivates you to give your money away to a cause or ministry?

#### *Working together to feed thousands*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- What are ways we show the poor in our neighborhoods that they are valued by God and by the church?
- How do we use our careers and skills to alleviate the pain of others?
- What would happen if Christians made a committed effort to alleviate poverty and hunger?
- Where would be a good place to start addressing hunger in your community?

## Appendix

### The Gospel of Luke:

#### The relationship between salvation, discipleship and wealth

## Session IV: Helping others and helping self

### Luke 10:25-37: The Samaritan

### Luke 10:38-42: The sisters

### Luke 12:13-34: The pitfall of prosperity

#### *The Samaritan and the sisters*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

So what is Jesus trying to communicate if we look at these two stories together?

- Why did two religious people pass by the injured man on the road? Is our tendency to help those we are most familiar with and are most like us?
- With Mary and Martha, we see each woman serving Jesus as they like to be treated. Do we serve in the same ways rather than looking for what our guest really needs in the moment?
- Did Jesus tell the lawyer to “do likewise” (Luke 10:37) with the awareness that he would never be able to “do” it right or do it under his own power?
- Is Martha like the priest and Levite – so busy and distracted that she misses what Jesus really needs?
- Do we tend to serve and help others based on what is comfortable for us, rather than what is best for those around us?

#### *The pitfalls of prosperity*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- What do you perceive as the main message of this story of the farmer building bigger barns?
- How does the story of the farmer building bigger barns address the subject of how much is our “enough” and how generous we can be while tending to our needs? Do you know how much is your “enough”?
- How much of our giving is limited because we are concerned about our future needs rather than other people’s current needs? How can we work at this challenge?
- Was it the farmer’s wealth or the manner in which he managed the increase and the attitude he projected that led to his demise?

## Appendix

### The Gospel of Luke:

#### The relationship between salvation, discipleship and wealth

## Session V: Perplexing parables

### Luke 16:1-18: The shrewd manager

### Luke 16:19-31: A rich man and Lazarus

### Luke 18:18-30: The rich ruler

#### *The shrewd manager*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- What are some examples of how we use money to build relationships?
- If you own a vacation house, a boat or enjoy expensive hobbies, can these be used for building relationships as well as providing relaxation and renewal?
- In what ways is using money to build relationships good? In what ways is it inappropriate?
- How can money be used to reap eternal benefits for you and for others?
- In what ways does our culture's view of money take on a godlike quality – the Almighty Dollar?

#### *The law and the kingdom*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- What do you think led Luke to say the Pharisees were lovers of money?
- What might people say you “love” by observing the way you live?
- How much pressure is there in your community to buy into the prosperity gospel that some churches have been seduced to promote? Were the Pharisees living into that same kind of misguided thinking? Is that why Jesus was so hard on them?

#### *The rich man and Lazarus*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- Note the number of references in chapters 16-18 that talk about rich people and poor people. Luke seems to hit home on this subject time and again. What do the stories about rich Pharisees, the rich man and Lazarus, and the rich young ruler have in common? What's the point Luke wants to get across?
- Why did Jesus reference only half of the commandments and not all 10 in his question to the ruler (verse 20)?
- What area of your life is closest to becoming an idol? Are we any different than those people of Jesus' day and the temptations they faced?
- How do we keep ourselves from reliance on self and our own abilities vs. reliance on God?
- Besides money, what attractions of this world can take the place of God?

#### *Camels and needles*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- What do you think was Jesus' intention in using this illustration of the needle and what do you consider the main meaning of this parable?
- In what ways do we communicate that salvation is something we can earn or merit?
- Do we associate material wealth with divine blessing in the way we view money or treat people of wealth?
- How have you heard this parable explained in other settings or in sermons you have heard?

## Appendix

### The Gospel of Luke:

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## Session VI. Taxes, ten minas and tithes

### Luke 19:1-10: Zacchaeus

### Luke 19: 11-27: The parable of the minas

### Luke 21:1-4: The widow's offering

#### *Zacchaeus*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- How does this new possible reading of a familiar story change the lesson to be learned?
- Is it possible that Jesus came to the home of Zacchaeus as a way of validating change that already had taken place and helping bridge Zacchaeus back into the community?
- How does this speak to how we can use wealth and social standing to do good by sharing resources with the poor?
- Why do you think Jesus didn't ask Zacchaeus to leave the tax-collecting profession? Could it be because it is better to have a reformed believer in this role rather than a corrupt unbeliever?
- If this interpretation is accurate and Jesus didn't call Zacchaeus to leave his role as tax collector, what is the message about the need for God's people to be active and engaged in roles of influence?

#### *The parable of the minas*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- Here again, faithfulness is tied to how we use resources of time and money. Why do you think Luke keeps using stories from Jesus' life that communicate this recurring theme for what it means to follow Jesus?
- How does our sense of fairness and God's view of fairness align in this story and other stories we have read in Luke?
- Do you want God to be "fair" with you – or with your family members?

#### *The widow's offering*

##### **Questions for discussion:**

- How do Luke 20:45-47 and Luke 21:1-4 connect to reflect on Jesus' concern for widows?
- How does this Luke 21 story speak to our concern for secrecy regarding giving practices? Jesus doesn't seem concerned about either the privacy of the widow or the rich people who passed by.
- What is the connection between Jesus' understanding of "gospel" (good news) and his concern for the physical well-being of the poor and widows?
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