'More than the sum of our possessions': Reflections on the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)

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It is quite certain that there is no good without the knowledge of God; that the closer one comes, the happier one is, and the further away one goes, the more unhappy one is.

Blaise Pascal

To a large extent, Western societies have adopted the ideology of consumerism, with its premise that human flourishing and happiness are necessarily bound up with the acquisition of wealth and the material possessions which it is able to deliver. Mammon, in a myriad forms, has become one of the reigning idolatries of our time. His shrines are thronged with devotees. Has all the eager devotion produced the happiness promised? The evidence suggests otherwise. Unhappiness and discontent have probably never been as pervasive in our Western world as now. At the same time, we are witnessing an ever-widening divide between rich and poor, both in our own society and around the globe.

Scripture, in general, and Jesus, in particular, have much to say about the relationship between money, Christian discipleship and human flourishing, in the perspectives of God's kingdom. The aim of this paper is to explore some of these connections, in large part through the lens of a sometimes neglected parable of Jesus.

I. THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL: CONTEXT AND EXPLANATION

Of the four evangelists, Luke appears to be the one with the greatest interest in possessions or wealth and their implications for discipleship. This theme is prominent throughout both his Gospel and Acts, with some reference to money and material goods in almost every chapter of both. For Luke, as Snodgrass points out,

> …the first question regarding discipleship is what one does with money… His concerns for the poor, denunciations of the rich, and discussions of attitudes toward wealth and its use repeatedly emphasize that discipleship in the

> kingdom of God requires a major redirection of how one thinks about and uses material possessions.[1]

Luke T. Johnson comments that 'Luke sees possessions as a primary symbol of human existence, an immediate exteriorisation of and manifestation of the self'.[2]

In this context, the parable of the Rich Fool is the first of three parables — the other two in chapter 16 are those of the Dishonest Manager (16:1-13) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31) — with a particular bearing on this theme. Each of the three begins, interestingly, with exactly the same words: *Anthrōpos tis plousios* ('a certain rich man'), except that for mere grammatical reasons our man is in the genitive. In the parable, remarkable for its brevity, restraint and terseness, Luke is clearly concerned to advance the theme in which he is so interested: 'How do possessions relate to discipleship?'

The context in which the parable is situated is striking. Let me for now just highlight the fact that it is one in which Jesus is instructing his disciples to remove fear or anxiety from their lives. In the preceding context (vv. 4-12), he assures them of the great value they have to God, of God's care for them, extending to the numbering of the hairs on their head, and tells them that even if they find themselves as his followers brought on trial before the authorities, there was no need to fear because the Holy Spirit would come to their help, supplying the necessary words. With the living God at the centre of their lives, anxiety lacked any substantive basis.

Then, in the verses immediately following the parable (vv. 22-34), Jesus returns to the same subject of worry/anxiety and repeats to the disciples what he earlier had said about the value God attaches to them and his care for them, concluding that since God supplies all their needs, the only treasure appropriate for them to amass is the heavenly kind, and anxiety should have no place in their lives. In the context, then, the emphasis falls on the reality of God, his valuation of and his loving care for human beings, and the implication of this for the attitudes and behaviour of the disciples. The relevance of these perspectives to our theme will emerge.

In the middle of all that God-centred material is situated our parable, with its story about a very different set of concerns. Someone in the large crowd gathered around Jesus and the disciples suddenly raises an anxious, and probably angry, voice: 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me' (v. 13). We need to attempt to situate

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1 Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 389.

2 Quoted in op. cit., p. 714.

the man's request in the first century social world of Palestine. Stephen Wright points out that,

> …along with other ancient agrarian societies, the Near East of the first century was marked by stark disparity between a small wealthy ruling class and a large number of peasants who barely eked out a living from their plot of land. The rich maintained and enhanced their status and wealth by exacting tribute from the poor.[3]

It was largely a two-tier society, lacking a prosperous middle class, although a layer of bureaucracy had developed as necessary for the purposes of collecting tribute.

The person in the crowd who requested Jesus to arbitrate in the family dispute, in all probability belonged to the lower tier of society. 'Wealthy families,' as Wright says, 'would have had their own means to get what they wanted and probably would not have resorted to seeking advice from a wandering teacher'.[4]

He points out that 'the poor in Israelite agrarian culture had precious little patrimony. Inheritance laws were designed so that each in a large family would receive a share with, of course, the largest reserved for the eldest'.[5]

The anxious demand of the anonymous man might therefore refer to a situation in which (as could happen) the plot of land simply became too small to divide further. In these circumstances, family members might be driven off the land to fend for themselves in whatever way they could — and sadly not many options were available.

Jesus' reply, leading in to the parable, is striking. 'Friend (NRSV) — *Anthrōpe* — who set me to be a judge or arbitrator (*kritēn e meristēn*) over you?' (v. 14) He immediately steps back from taking the role of judge (the one Moses had been accused of taking on himself [Exod. 2:14]); or of arbitrator (*meristēn* — literally 'divider') — the role given by God to Joshua in order to divide the land (cf. Josh. 13-22). Kenneth Bailey makes the characteristically thoughtful comment: 'Jesus whose mission is about reconciling, demurs from the role of divider.'[6]

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3 Stephen I. Wright, 'Parables on Poverty and Riches (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 16:19-31),' in Richard N. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 218.

4 Op. cit., p. 221.

5 Ibid.

6 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 137.

What Jesus does rather, in typical fashion, is to call attention to the nub of the problem. He refuses to judge but invites the man to ask whether the dispute is not in fact fuelled by greed. 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed (*pleonexia*); for one's life (*zōe* as distinct from *bios*) does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' (v. 15) The implication is that if both parties in the dispute were to abjure greed, the main hurdle would be overcome, and a way forward could be found.

The term *pleonexia* ('greed', 'covetousness'), takes us straight to the central issue. Plutarch (*On Love of Wealth I*) makes the point that *pleonexia* never rests from acquiring more (*to pleon*). In that spirit, the writer of Ecclesiastes speaks of his giving free rein, because he was in a position so to do, to *pleonexia*: 'Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them' (2:10). In the event, the outcome for Qoheleth was deeply disappointing: it turned out to be so much *hebhel ureuth ruach* ('vanity [emptiness] and a striving after wind') (2:11).

The resonance of this in the first century world of Jesus' day, with its perception of limited good, is noted by Barbara Reid. By 'limited good' is understood 'that there is only a limited amount of any good thing, both tangible and intangible.' It follows therefore that 'anything that one acquires is someone else's loss. Contrary to modern capitalistic notions that all can increase in wealth, in first century Palestine the operating assumption is that everything is finite and cannot be expanded. If someone's share gets larger, someone else's decreases.' It follows, therefore, that 'desiring more for oneself is the most insidious of vices, and was utterly destructive of village solidarity'.[7]

Warnings against greed are of course found throughout the Bible. In light of the context of the parable (to which I referred earlier), what is especially interesting is the Scriptural identification of greed with idolatry. There is an interesting passage in Job 31 (vv. 24-28). Job states that to put trust in gold, confidence in silver, is nothing less than a crime to be punished by the judges. The reason, he adds significantly, is: 'For I should have been false to God above' (v. 28).

Falsity to God is the essence of idolatry. Greed is therefore tantamount to idolatry. Both Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus labelled greed the 'second idolatry'. Paul makes that specific identification in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5.

The dispute in the parable was over the family inheritance. The division of such inheritances among siblings inevitably bore potential for endless squabbling and bitterness. *Klēronomia* (with *meris*), of course, a

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[7] Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers: The Gospel of Luke, Year C* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 137.

term of rich connotations in Scripture. The reader is doubtless intended to hear echoes of the biblical texts in which it is used to speak about the relationship between God and the people. On the one hand, his people are God's *klēronomia*. In Deuteronomy 9:26, for example, Moses speaks of the forty days and nights he spent prostrate before the Lord, praying for the people: 'And I prayed to the Lord, "O Lord God, destroy not your people and your heritage [Heb. *nachalatekha*; LXX *merida*], whom you have redeemed through your greatness…"'; or in Psalm 28:9: 'Oh, save your people, and bless your heritage!' Conversely, God is the inheritance of his people, as in Psalm 16:5-6, and so on. And then we have all these great New Testament passages in which the theme is richly developed: 1 Peter 1:4; Acts 20:32; Ephesians 1:14, 18; Colossians 3:24; Hebrews 9:15, etc. The point is that to grasp the significance of this foundational spiritual reality is to relativize the importance of any and every merely earthly inheritance, and to provide the essential brake on yielding to powerful temptation and sliding into the sin of idolizing the creation in place of the Creator of all.

Two quite exceptional works on this subject are those of Greg Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*[8] and, more particularly in this connection, Brian Rosner's *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor.*[9] Rosner asks: 'In what sense are the greedy guilty of idolatry?' He points out that there have been many different answers to this question and he provides a thorough study of the history of the interpretation of the phrase, as well as of the origin of the concept of idolatrous greed in biblical and Jewish sources. Rosner concludes that 'a comparison of greed with idolatry teaches that to desire to acquire and to keep for oneself more money and material things is an attack on God's exclusive right to human love, trust and obedience.'[10] As Rosner rightly indicates (we'll return to the point), this striking biblical identification of greed and idolatry issues to our contemporary world a massive challenge, for its implications for a materialistic age are far-reaching.

In the passage, Jesus' warning against greed has a specific reason appended to it and this reason leads directly into to the parable. Greed is bad 'because one's life does not consist in the abundance (*en tō perisseuein*) of possessions' (v. 15b).

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8 G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

9 Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

10 Ibid., p. 173.

To perisseuein ('abundance') suggests 'the surpluses that sustained the wealth and status of the elite members of society'.[11] It is possible that the contrast Jesus is positing here is between *material* life and *spiritual* life. More likely (and let's remember he is almost certainly addressing in the first instance a person from the poorer half of society), the contrast is between life's luxuries and necessities. Palestinian peasants (the *ptōchoi*) should 'not be deluded by the harshness of their poverty into thinking that life (*zōe*) means having more than one needs.' In other words they are 'not to be deceived into thinking that the solution to poverty is to be found in imitating the delight of the elite in their excesses'.[12]

And so we reach the parable itself – the story of a rich farmer who enjoyed a bumper harvest which gave him an ample surplus (v. 6). The story, told in such a restrained and economical manner, is crafted so as to give us access into the farmer's inner thought processes (vv. 17-19). Two things need to be said about them. First, as more than one commentator points out, these are not the thought processes of a monster of evil but ones which are 'typical of a class of people and typical of a whole social system.' The farmer's thought processes are simply normal. As Stephen Wright says, 'They encapture the whole basis of an exploitative, agrarian society that seeks control over land and wants to use surpluses to finance luxury.'[13]

Secondly, the rich farmer's thought processes are profoundly self-centred. They are so entirely focussed on *numero uno*, and plans of further stockpiling of money and of what it can achieve as means to the supply of luxury, that he has no space left in his thinking for either God or others. God and neighbour apparently do not exist for him. As Anna Wierzbicka spells out, in the brief inner dialogue, known only to God and to us the readers, the rich man (in English translation) uses the word 'I' six times; 'my', four times; and the five sentences with a second-person subject ('you have', 'take your ease', 'eat', 'drink', and 'be merry') in fact refer to the same person as the six with an overt first-person subject. In fact all eleven of the man's sentences name himself as the subject; it is not just a question of 'me first' but of 'me and only me'.[14]

Barbara Reid makes the interesting point that the description of the man as speaking only to himself is startling in view of what she calls the,

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11 Wright, op. cit., p. 221.

12 Wright, op. cit., p. 222.

13 Wright, op. cit., p. 223.

14 Anna Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 389.

> …dyadic personality out of which Palestinians of the first century operated… One's self-identity is embedded in that of one's family, clan, village, occupation and religious group. A modern day western person's notion of individuality would be foreign to the people of Jesus' world.[15]

As Reid indicates, in that kind of society, 'every important decision was made in community, in endless dialogue with others. Every angle was examined, possibility weighted, scenario painted. In such a world, the isolation of the rich man is alarming'.[16] There is something strangely modern (or postmodern) about the lonely isolation of this sad figure.

And yet, on the surface, there was much sense in the plan he proposed to himself. There is no evidence that he is a brutal monster or, as has been suggested, that his purpose in building larger barns was deliberately 'to withhold his agricultural goods and thereby raise prices and exploit the poor of the land'.[17] Rather, he is seeking to protect his belongings, he aims to make his future as secure as possible and he aims to enjoy what he has acquired as the fruit of his labours. It looks a sensible and prudent course of action to pull down his existing barns and build larger ones to store up his grain and goods (v. 18).

The fatal flaw in his position, however, becomes clear. He has become an idolater in the proper sense of the term, who is consumed by his possessions and for whom the meaning and value of life had come to depend entirely on them. His own identity had become so tied up in his wealth that he and his possessions could not be separated. He had become so self-absorbed in his greed-fuelled acquisition of goods that neither God nor neighbour figured in his reckoning. He and he alone must be in complete and utter control of his current situation and future prospects.

In his soliloquy he addresses himself: *Psuche* (like *nephesh* in Hebrew, a word connoting not merely the 'soul' as a separate entity but the whole person as a vital, conscious, intelligent, volitional being), *anapauou* ('relax', 'take your ease'). The attractive prospect, secured by his relentless acquisition of goods, is essentially hedonistic: 'eat, drink and be merry', words which echo an epicurean slogan attested in various classical authors such as Euripides, Menander and Plutarch, as well as in Tobit 7:9. The same basic slogan appears in Isaiah 22:13 where it is held up to ridicule.[18] Significantly, the rich man omits the slogan's usual conclud-

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15 Reid, *Parables*, pp. 137-8.

16 Ibid., p. 138.

17 Mary Ann Beavis, *Jesus and Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p. 108.

18 Isaiah 22:12-14 is a passage reflecting God's anger with the people of Judah for refusing to return to him and for 'the cynical fatalism with which they

ing words (found, for example, in Isa. 22:13): 'for tomorrow we die'. His anticipation is of long, relaxing years of luxurious living with thought neither of gratitude to God or of care for neighbour.

And then, of course, the moment of shock strikes, with the appearance of the 'unexpected intruder' – a dramatic reminder to the man that God in fact had not ceased to exist. Rather, he has something to say to him and about him, and in one word – the very first – he gives the divine assessment of the man's life to date: *Aphrōn*! (v. 20). 'Fool!' We are clearly intended to hear loudly the echo of the opening line of Psalm 14 (13 in the LXX): 'The *aphrōn* says in his heart "There is no God".' The Hebrew is *nabhāl*, also the name of a figure in Scripture who invites close comparison with the Rich Fool of our parable (see 1 Samuel 25). Psalm 14:1 expresses a form of theoretical atheism. It is not clear whether the parable's rich man engaged in such abstract reflections but because he has placed all his trust, and has found all his security, in possessions, to all intents and purposes his way of life is that of a practical atheist, associated with an essentially idolatrous worldview.[19]

Wierzbicka comments:

> The thought of God doesn't enter his mind at all; but this non-existent God bursts into the parable, into the dialogue the *aphrōn* is having with his soul, and says something that is utterly unexpected – both to the protagonist and to the hearer. What the protagonist didn't expect in the least is the announcement of his impending death, and what the hearer didn't expect is God's perspective on the *aphrōn's* life.[20]

The hearer, she points out, might have expected something like:

> "You wicked man – don't you realise that your life is immoral – that this is a bad way to live one's life?"… But in fact, God doesn't take a moral and religious stand at all, and he doesn't condemn the man's life as immoral. Rather, he points out its foolishness, that is, its counter productiveness from the point of view of the man's own objectives.[21]

Kenneth Bailey comments:

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faced imminent disaster'. See *The Harper Collins Study Bible including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), p. 940.

19 Note Testament of Judah (T. Jud., c. 2nd century B.C.), in which the patriarch speaks to his child, saying that 'Love of money leads to idolatry', 19.1.

20 Wierzbicka, op. cit., p. 390.

21 Ibid.

> There is no accusing question, such as "What have you done for others?" or "Why have you failed to help those in need" Rather, God thunders, "Look at what you have done to yourself! You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone, and now you will die alone."[22]

God's final words to the rich man were in the form of a question: 'And the things you have prepared, whose shall they be?' Who is going to get all this stuff? As David Buttrick says, 'A Jewish audience hearing the parable will know the answer. Ultimately, the goods will be distributed to the hungry according to God's purposes.'[23] And this, we might add, is the God to whom they belong from first to last. 'The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,' affirmed the Psalmist (Psalm 24:1). All that any human being has by way of material possessions, they have entirely on loan from the One to whom they truly belong.

II. THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL: MESSAGE AND CHALLENGE

In the remaining time I would like to make some attempt at addressing the question of the parable's ongoing message and challenge for a 21st century consumerist society like ours. There are, of course, major differences between the social, political and economic situation of modern western capitalist societies and those of the first century Middle East. Some scholars have argued that it is impossible to cut Jesus' teaching loose from its original Jewish context. It is increasingly recognized, however, that this is a hopelessly narrow position and that the Gospel message can be transported into other languages and cultures without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth. As Luke Timothy Johnson says: 'The majority of Christians still expect a proclamation of the word of God that somehow is grounded in the gospel and pertains to the ultimate realities of their own lives.'[24]

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[22] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 67. As Wright says, Jesus has a more radical aim than simply to propose a redistribution of wealth. 'Jesus' refusal to adjudicate in an inheritance dispute entailed neither a dismissal of the rich as irretrievably wicked nor a detachment from the problems of the poor. On the contrary, his words called for a response that was immediately possible for both rich and poor. They must awaken to the illusory nature of ownership. Even the poor will find their security only in God, not in clothing, food, or drink (cf. 12:27-31).' Wright, op. cit., pp. 223-4.

[23] David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletical Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 190.

[24] Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 66. Quoted in Wierzbicka, *What Did Jesus Mean?,* p. 16. The work of Anna Wierzbicka,

I think the best place to start is Jesus' brief but pregnant comment at the close of the passage: 'So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God (*eis theon plouton*)' (v. 21). In light of the parable as a whole, these words suggest a number of reflections.[25]

Firstly, a careful reading of Jesus' nine words shows that the desire for, and the acquiring of, money and possessions, and their enjoyment, is not *per se* being censured. This should not be surprising for within the wider context of Scripture we meet a wide variety of men and women of faith who enjoyed the favour of God and who were rich – sometimes very rich – in material goods. Luke himself records various examples of men and women who followed Jesus and who were materially well-to-do. The desire for money may be an indication of greed but is not necessarily so.[26]

In Jesus' words, however, there *is* censure – two-fold censure – and to unpack this ever so briefly should help lead us down paths of contemporary application.

The first censure falls on a life of total self-absorption and self-interest. It is a life devoted entirely to fulfilling a deep desire for one's own good, expressed in 'storing up treasure *for himself*'. Now the parable has no quarrel with the rich farmer's desire for his own good, implicitly endorsing it indeed as natural and proper. The route taken to its fulfilment, however, is presented as profoundly wrong, and inherently incapable of leading him to the destination sought.

Vincent Miller points out the way in which 'advanced capitalist societies are marked by some of the most sophisticated systems for forming and inciting desire that the world has ever seen.' He quotes Tim Edwards

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of Polish origin and a distinguished linguist and practising Roman Catholic, deserves to be noted. She has written widely on the universals of language and thought and injected some much needed common sense into the discussion. Drawing on modern linguistic semantics, she challenges the notion that it is impossible to know what Jesus meant in his key sayings and parables. She aims to demonstrate the universal scope and abiding relevance of Jesus' teaching. Members of the 'Jesus Seminar' are among those who would profit from giving her work close attention.

25 Omitted by Codex Bezae and a few Old Latin translations, considerations of both external and internal evidence argue overwhelmingly for their authenticity. Interestingly, the 'Jesus Seminar' who use red, pink, grey and black beads, in descending order, to decide their collective view of the authenticity of the sayings attributed to Jesus, make this a 'red' parable.

26 Repeatedly, in Scripture, it is not the accumulation of wealth, but what one does with it, that is regarded as decisive.

to the effect that 'Consumer society "is simply desiring society".'[27] At the same time, as Miller recognizes, 'this concern about the cultivation of desire is something that capitalism shares with Christianity,' and 'this juxtaposition troubles easy distinctions between Christian and consumer desire. Both know endless, insatiable longing.'[28]

The cultivation, control and fulfilment of desire are at heart of both capitalist society and Christian community. The link between the two forms of desire is identified by Augustine in terms of the misdirection or redirection of a natural desire for God toward mere things, with desire itself at times preferred to the One who is able to fulfil humanity's deepest desires. Such misdirected desire reveals our 'deepest longings for transcendence, justice, and self-transformation'.[29] One part of the purpose of this conference, I take it, is to explore the similarities and differences in formation and focus between Christian and consumer desires and the real danger to authentic Christian desire of being distorted and exploited by a consumer culture.

As already noted, and as often observed, the forms of desire cultivated in both have a certain similarity of shape and texture and, as Vincent Miller says, this means that the 'conflict between Christianity and consumer culture lacks the definiteness of a head-on collision'.[30] 'Rather,' says Miller, 'it has about it as much drama as a train switching tracks and going in a slightly different direction.'[31] The two halves of Jesus' statement in v. 21, divided by the two words *kai mē*, represent Miller's two sets of railway tracks.

Track One

In a consumer culture, money holds a central place. Its grip on the modern imagination ('cash is the real thing') is pervasive. A work by Georg Simmel (1858-1918), one of Germany's first sociologists, *The Philosophy of Money*,[32] published as long ago as 1907, and described by

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27 Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 107.

28 Ibid.

29 Jason Clark, 'Consumer Liturgies and their Corrosive Effects on Christian Identity,' in Scott McKnight, Peter Rollins, Kevin Corcoran, Jason Clark, *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), p. 46.

30 Miller, *Consuming Religion*, p. 107.

31 Ibid., pp. 107-8.

32 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; originally published 1907). See Craig M. Gay, *Cash Values. Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today's*

Craig Gay as 'a neglected masterwork', argues that the key to money's distinctive 'alchemy' is 'its objective worthlessness combined with simple arithmetic'.[33] Money's value derives from its (mere) function as a means but as, significantly, Simmel points out,

> Never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as means … so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness.[34]

Craving for money, however, is not simply due to greed. With the increasing disappearance of traditions and traditional social distinctions, it both fills the void left by the passing of traditional society and itself 'actively creates this void by actively liberating people *from* traditional bonds.'[35] Money catalyses fundamentally new kinds of social relationships, enabling us to '"contract" our relations to others and to be related to others only insofar as we *choose* to be related'.[36]

There is a dark side, however, to this apparent liberation – namely that it has the effect of depersonalising social relations. As Simmel says,

> The more the unifying bond of social life takes on the character of an association for specific purposes [in which case people's achievements rather than their personalities become all-important], the more soulless it becomes. The complete heartlessness of money is reflected in our social culture, which is itself determined by money.[37]

Peter Berger helpfully expresses the point:

> The world created by capitalism is indeed a "cold" one. Liberating though it may be, it also involves the individual in countless relations with other people that are based on calculating rationality, "What is this person worth to me?", superficial … and inevitably transient.[38]

Simmel observes that while 'the money economy is remarkably productive and inventive', it seems to lack the ability 'to foster the development

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Society (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 63-72. For the purposes of this paper, I follow closely Gay's exposition of Simmel.

33 Gay, *Cash Values*, pp. 63-4.

34 Op. cit., p. 64.

35 Op. cit., p. 65.

36 Op. cit., p. 65.

37 Op. cit., p. 65.

38 Op. cit., p. 66.

of character, or at least not beyond fairly narrow limits. Writing in 2003, Gay comments:

> Just imagine what Simmel would have to say about this discrepancy today – when we have completed mapping the millions of lines of code that make up the human genome, while at the same time we are aware that the average individual does not read even one book a year, and even then not much above the reading age of a 10-year-old.[39]

Simmel concluded that 'the restless pursuits' that mark our modern age 'follow logically upon our intemperate reliance upon money today.' Modernity (and post-modernity)'s craving for excitement [Christopher Dawson in the 30s described the new age of culture – arguably still with us – as 'The Age of the Cinema'] can be explained in part by 'the flat and grey quality of our experience of the world crated by money'.[40] Simmel, with great clarity, perceived the link between the 'dawning of this new age' and 'the peculiar operations of the money economy'. If 'life itself has come to be experienced as a kind of malleable melange of commodified meanings, values and significations,' and culture, in postmodern understanding, 'a kind of game in which we simply rearrange meanings and values into new configurations, "trying them on for size", as it were,' then, as Gay notes,

> …we also find that we are increasingly at a loss as to what to do with our newfound freedom. For as money levels experience by making everything conveniently comparable in terms of simple arithmetical calculations, we begin to experience the world as a place devoid of *all* qualities and *all* purposes, as a place in which, as Simmel put it, "all things lie on the same level and differ from one another only in the area which they cover".

Money, 'which is supposed to be simply a means to an end, simply a tool to be put to use in the services of our purposes', in these circumstances 'eclipses whatever purposes we may once have had and eventually displaces them in a kind of "teleological dislocation". Money becomes *the only purpose*.'[41]

With characteristic insight, Kierkegaard, in the mid-19th century, had already recognised 'money's teleological dislocation of human purposes within bourgeois culture' and writes about it with sharp irony, concluding that 'in the end, therefore, money will be the one thing people

[39] Op. cit., pp. 65-6.
[40] Op. cit., p. 68.
[41] Op. cit., pp. 69-70.

will desire…'[42] Glenn Tinder's comment is apposite: 'The amount that a person owns (his worth!) can be precisely calculated, thus giving to the independence and security wealth supposedly provides an appearance of unassailable objectivity. Holdings in money can be indefinitely increased; one's barns become infinitely capacious. And since money is readily convertible into a variety of physical possessions and personal services, it adds to the charm of ownership the allure of power. 'It is not surprising,' concludes Tinder, 'that "the love of money" is characterized in the New Testament as "the root of all evils".'[43]

The parable of the Rich Fool speaks very directly to this situation of the 'dislocation of human purposes' which characterises a money economy and which was so strikingly anticipated by Kierkegaard and Simmel. Interestingly, Simmel makes reference to the 'intriguing similarities between money as "absolute means" and the traditionally religious conception of God as "absolute agent". There is little doubt, Simmel thought, that the feelings aroused in us by money are psychologically similar to those aroused in us by the notion of God.' Like God, money 'rises … above the whole broad diversity of objects; it becomes the centre in which the most opposed, the most estranged and the most distant things find their common denominator and come into contract with one another.' Simmel expressed the view that 'it is no wonder … that traditionally religious folk were so frequently suspicious of money. And,' he thought, 'it is no wonder today that in the absence of this traditional religious suspicion, money has so thoroughly captured the modern imagination.'[44]

David Wells speaks trenchantly of the modern enterprise of moneyed economies in terms of 'an ironic recapitulation of the first dislocation in which God's creatures replaced their Creator and exiled him from his own world. As it turns out,' says Wells,

> …we too have lost our centre through this transition…We may now have everything, but none of it means anything any more … Not only are we betrayed; we betray *ourselves*. Meanwhile, we also pay the price of destroying all interest in the Transcendent, the sole source of genuine meaning in life… We are like Yeats's falcon, increasingly oblivious to the voice of the falconer. The centre no longer holds. All is flung to the periphery, where its meaning is lost. We have become T.S. Eliot's "hollow men," without weight, for whom appear-

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42 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age & Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 184. See Gay, op. cit., p. 70.

43 Ibid., quoting Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: The Prophetic Stance* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p. 184.

44 Op. cit., p. 71.

> ance an image must suffice. This is what accounts for the anxious search for self that is now afoot …[45]

Attention to the witness of Scripture in general, and that of the parable of the Rich Fool in particular, would lead to an anticipation of this outcome. *Houtos ho thēsaurizōn heautō*, said Jesus (v. 21). In this light the pressing need for individuals, for the church, for society today, is the kind of deep *metanoia* of, for example, Romans 12:2, that will bring us off these tracks to nowhere, and onto those that represent the true meaning and purpose of human life. According to Jesus here, this is nothing other than to be *eis theon plouton* – 'rich toward God' (v. 21). Only with such a recovery will the purely instrumental use of money and possessions find their true place in the life of individuals and of society.

Track Two

'Rich toward God' (Lk. 12:21). It is an expression that suggests at least two thoughts. Firstly, is a reminder of where authentic human wealth really lies – in that relationship with God our Creator, Redeemer and Judge for which we were made. Down the ages it has been an observed characteristic of human beings that they are marked by a restlessness of desire. Augustine of Hippo famously expressed his own inner restlessness in the prayer: 'You stir man [*sic*] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'[46] In Book 10 of his Confessions, Augustine searches and interrogates all created things in a search for satisfaction, only to be told by them: 'We are not God' and 'He made us.'[47] As he ponders memory – or the unconscious mind – as a vast, boundless sphere of desires and hopes for happiness, as well as of fears and sorrows, Augustine recognizes that desire for God is part of the way humans have been made. It is an explicit signal of eternity – the eternity which the Rich Fool entirely omitted from his reckoning. The same basic thought is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, and in such Christian thinkers and writers as Pascal, C.S. Lewis (explored for example in his *The Pilgrim's Regress*) and James Houston who expresses the thought beautifully: 'There is an empty throne within the throne room

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45 David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 14.

46 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

47 Op. cit., p. 184.

of our hearts that only God can fill.'[48] Houston makes this relevant comment:

> Many people trivialize their desire for God, and settle for something that is inferior. When this happens, we exchange God for cheap idolatry, whether we worship work, money, sex or status. But they can never satisfy desire. It would be like trying to fill the Pacific Ocean with pebbles thrown into the waves. As Augustine said, the response of the ocean itself would be, "But I too am a creature, that God made me".[49]

The truth is, in Houston's words, that 'without God as the supreme expression of goodness, love and personhood, human beings can have no true exaltation or dignity, uniquely loved for our own sake… The uniqueness of the Christian faith is that it orients man [*sic*] to hope in God, to respond to his love and to rest in God alone as the only source of ultimate happiness'[50] – and, we might add, of ultimate security, as the One in whom the fear and anxiety (of which the context of the parable speaks) which drive our relentless acquisitiveness, find their deep healing. As Stanley Hauerwas expresses it:

> If one characteristic is to be associated with greed, it is the presumption that no matter how much we may have, we need "more". We need more because we cannot be sure that what we have is secure. So the more we have the more we must have in order to secure what we have.[51]

I am reminded of the words of the much-loved (fictional) skipper of a west coast puffer, Para Handy, to his mate, Dougie: 'You know, Dougie,' he said, 'if I had all the money I needed, I would never ask for a penny more.'

Greed in the Bible is based on the illusion that human beings can secure their own lives through material possessions. To the contrary, as Augustine saw, the only lasting treasure comes from God and neighbour. Obsession with money reflects humanity's attempt to discover human freedom, security and fulfilment without reference to God. Material goods, because created by God, are good in themselves, but they are not ultimate goods. Rather, in Augustine's terms, they are to be used on the

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48 James Houston, *In Search of Happiness. The Quest for Personal Fulfilment* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1990), p. 244.

49 Ibid., p. 243.

50 Ibid., p. 245.

51 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Can greed be a good?' First posted 9 June 2010. http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2010/06/09/2922773.htm. Accessed 29 April 2016.

path of return to God; God alone is to be enjoyed for his own sake.[52] As Augustine never tired of pointing out, the only lasting good that will never disappoint us is the everlasting love of God.[53]

Being 'rich toward God', then, is about a relationship of love with the God who has revealed himself in Jesus – the God who gives us and sustains us in life and who gives to human life its meaning and purpose. That relationship of love with God, however, necessarily entails another – a relationship of love with neighbour. For Augustine, again, the dual love of God and neighbour is the sum total of the message of Scripture: 'So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this love of God and neighbour, then you have not yet understood them.'[54]

The call to 'be rich toward God' might suggest a mere private spirituality, as self-focused in its way as the life-style of the Rich Fool. There is some evidence that the phrase was used as a metaphor for almsgiving. In any case, in light of the dual love command of Jesus and Scripture, private spirituality without charity, kindness and generosity is little worth. The question, 'What is our real good?' can be answered in light of Scripture as being 'to live in love *with* God' *and* 'to live in love *with* other people.'

For Calvin, at the very core of the will of God with which we are asked to align ourselves lies 'human solidarity'. Believing the creation to be infused with the Creator's generosity, and rejecting the idolatry of wealth in modern consumerist societies, Christians are bound to seek for ways in which that generosity can be made to work for all, especially those most economically disadvantaged. If everything created is – ultimately – God's alone, a right approach to money and goods must entail a commitment to social justice and active engagement in endeavours that aim at their equitable distribution. That this is not happening as it should is, as Hauerwas points out, a spiritual problem. Habits formed by modern societies shape us, he says, in such a way that 'acquisitiveness is assumed to be a character trait that is indispensable for continuous and limitless economic growth.' From that standpoint, he says, with the assumption that a capitalist system is divinely mandated along with democracy, 'the idea that a lower standard of living could be considered a viable alternative to economically driven policies of liberal democratic societies, is almost

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52 For the important Augustinian distinction between 'use' and 'enjoyment' (*uti/frui*), see Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by R.P.H. Green (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 8-10 (I.3.3 – I.5.5).

53 Op. cit., p. 25 (I.33.37).

54 Op. cit., p. 27 (I.36.40).

unfathomable.' 'What do you do with a bumper crop,' asks Hauerwas. 'Why, you give it away with a fine, free, gleeful carelessness!...You make sure the hungry are fed, the poor have funding, the aged are cared for, the sick are healed.'[55]

Brueggemann argues that the defining problem confronting us now is 'the conflict between the (capitalist) myth of scarcity and the (biblical) narrative of abundance. 'Jesus,' he says, 'demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity.' In his ministry, says Brueggemann, we see a 'subversive reordering of public reality.'[56]

There are times, I confess, when I moan, to myself at least, about the level of a minister's stipend. I look at some of those who were my peers at school and University who have already retired most comfortably. How desirable to have the means to retire comfortably whenever one chooses to do so! It's an exceedingly wicked thought, I know, and in indulging it I am revealed to be in person the Rich Fool of the parable. The truth is that in terms of the situation of the vast majority of people who have ever lived on the planet – as well as in the world today – I am incredibly wealthy. What I need to be doing, more than I am, is seeking more effective ways of sharing what I have with those who have not.

With reference to the transformative experience of Moses at the Burning Bush and its social, economic and political implications, Richard Rohr says:

> There is no authentic God experience that does not situate you in the world in a very different way. After an encounter with True Presence you see things quite differently, and it gives you freedom from your usual loyalties and low-level pay-offs – the system that gave you your security, your status, your economics, and your very identity.

He believes that Christians have tended to locate sin merely in the realm of the life of the individual while,

> Structural sin is accepted as good and necessary on the corporate or national level … Jesus spends little time trying to ferret out sinners [some of his latter-day followers appear to spend much time on that] or impose purity codes in any form. He just goes where the pain is. I dare you to try to disprove that![57]

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55 Hauerwas, op. cit.

56 Walter Brueggemann, 'The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,' in the *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.

57 Richard Rohr, 'Bias from the Bottom: Week 1. Liberation Theology. Sunday, March 20, 2016.' http://cac.org/liberation-theology-2016-03-20/ Accessed 29 April 2016.

Ilia Delio, a Franciscan scientist and theologian, writing about the subversive meaning of the incarnation, challenges the contemporary church to take the scandal and downward movement of the incarnation seriously and to let it re-arrange our priorities. Delio sees the 'problem' of immigrants, welfare recipients, the incarcerated, the mentally ill and the disabled, and all who are marginalised by main stream society, as a problem of the incarnation. In very challenging words, she writes,

> When we reject our relatedness to the poor, the weak, the simple and the unlovable…in the place of God we decide who is worthy of our attention and who can be rejected. Because of our deep fears, we spend time attention and money on preserving our boundaries of privacy and increasing our knowledge and power. We hermetically seal ourselves off from the undesired "other", the stranger, and in doing so, we seal ourselves off from God. By rejecting God in the neighbour, we reject the love that can heal us.[58]

Rohr says,

> We live in a cold time… The rejection of refugee women and children … fleeing for their very lives into the richest (per capita) continent of Europe, has suddenly brought our lack of basic compassion and mercy into sharp and urgent focus. The unloving, glaringly self-centred, and even cruel behaviour of so many Christians, Muslims and Jews, has exposed religious hypocrisy for all the world to see. We live in a cold time, and we must pray for the warming of hearts and opening of minds.'[59]

As Craig Blomberg suggests, one of the great needs of the contemporary church is to,

> …recover a biblical perspective on stewardship of material possessions. "Give me neither poverty nor riches," prayed the writer of the proverb; but, since most of us already have riches, we need to be praying more often "and help me to be generous and wise in giving more of those riches away".[60]

One simple observation in this light is that we need to look closely at the choices we make with our resources, not least in connection with the fre-

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58 Ilia Delio, *Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St Francis* (Cincinatti: Franciscan Media, 2011), p. 6.

59 Rohr, 'Bias from the Bottom: Week 2. Awakening to Mercy. Friday, April 1, 2016.' http://cac.org/awakening-to-mercy-2016-04-01/ Accessed 29 April 2016.

60 Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 253.

quently inordinate expenditure on weddings and funerals. As Snodgrass says, 'Christians should rethink what it means to be rich toward God in our public displays'[61]

Lest I leave the impression of a picture of unrelieved gloom, let me close with one or two examples of the way in which the church – the Church of Scotland to which I belong, in collaboration with others – is seeking to take seriously the challenge to be rich toward God in love for neighbour.

The Church helped establish globally the Fair Trade movement which now feels almost mainstream. This is an economics with people at the heart. My colleague Martin Johnstone, Secretary of the Church & Society Council points out that (I quote) 'twenty five years ago some of us were seen as weird (and were weird) drinking campaign coffee. Now it is unusual to be at many gatherings where there isn't a commitment to fair trade.'

Secondly, work is ongoing – through the Church and others – around affordable credit. This includes the work of the Carnegie UK Trust; the Churches Mutual Credit Union and Scotcash.[62] Other promising initiatives include participatory budgeting which are necessarily about economics in hard terms but are also about how people decide money should be spent. There are also interesting models like Social Investment Bonds.

Thirdly, the Church of Scotland has been heavily involved in the establishment of WEvolution[63] a superb little movement learning from women's self-help groups across the world and implementing this learning in Scotland. This is one of John Swinney's favourite organisations – it recently received a £225,000 grant from the Scottish Government – and it started when one individual (Noel Mathias) took 13 women from some of Scotland's poorest communities to India.

I should also mention the ground-breaking work of the Special Commission on the Purpose of Economic Activity whose 2012 report is well worth reading and available online.[64]

An interesting new development, reflecting this time constructive inter-faith cooperation, is a partnership between the Church of Scotland

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61 Snodgrass, op. cit., p. 401.

62 Relevant webpages are:
http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/changing-minds/enterprise-and-society/affordable-credit
http://cmcu.org.uk/
http://www.scotcash.net/

63 www.wevolution.org.uk

64 http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/9592/23_SPECIAL_2012_P3.pdf

and the Islamic Finance Council on ethical finance. This modest project reflects principles common to both faiths and aims to help the poorest in society. Islam, of course, forbids the charging of interest on loans and Islamic-compliant finance products eschew investments in alcohol, tobacco and gambling: a position shared by the Kirk. This initiative has been widely reported. This initiative has been widely reported, from the Financial Times at home to the Pakistan Observer abroad. Interestingly, our press-conference to announce the partnership occurred on the very morning of the Brussels terrorist atrocity. Some have commented that this modest initiative represented a little candle of hope in a very dark scene. For your interest, the Islamic Finance Council has been strongly influenced in its work by the Rev Henry Duncan, a 19th century Church of Scotland minister, and friend of Rev Robert Murray McCheyne, who established the first Trustee Savings Bank in Ruthwell. He is widely admired for having established ethical banking as a means of helping the poorest in society rise above the constraints of their circumstances.

These are all, I believe, laudable endeavours to make concrete the belief that economics should be at core about relationships, not money. Much more requires to be done. As Richard Hays writes,

> No matter how much hermeneutical squirming we may do, it is impossible to escape the implications of the New Testament's address to us: imaginative obedience to God will require of us a sharing of possessions far more radical than the church has ordinarily supposed.[65]

As Hays points out,

> …while the particular mandates and forms of expression may vary, the New Testament witnesses speak loudly in chorus: the accumulation of wealth is antithetical to serving God's kingdom, and Jesus' disciples are called at least to share their good generously with those in need, and perhaps even to give everything away in order to follow him more freely.[66]

Or in the words of Miroslav Volf,

> We embrace the conviction that God is an infinitely generous source of all good, but conveniently forget that we were created in God's image to be in some significant sense like God – not like God in God's divinity, for we are human and not divine, but like God "in true righteousness and holiness"

[65] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 468.

[66] Op. cit., p. 466.

(Ephesians 4:24), like God in loving enemies (Matthew 5:44). To live well as a human being is to live in sync with who God is and how God acts.[67]

We are, truly, more – far more – than our possessions, and the challenge is real and urgent to demonstrate meaningfully our belief that that is so. In so learning to live generous, anxiety-free lives of trust in a Heavenly Father in whom our ultimate security is found, we do well to have the summons and promise of Jesus ringing in our ears: 'But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt. 6:33).[68]

[67] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 226.

[68] The Archbishop of Canterbury has written an excellent book, for Lent 2017, on the theme of this paper. See Justin Welby, *Dethroning Mammon: Making Money Serve Grace* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Archbishop Welby's urgent call to enthrone Christ in our hearts and in our civilisation, and thus to dethrone Mammon, as the path to joy and freedom, is both timely and important.