

Difficult texts: using dishonesty to enter heaven in Luke 16.9

Theology

2023, Vol. 126(3) 201–204

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0040571X231171283

journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx**Rob James**

Vancouver School of Theology, Canada

Abstract

In Luke 16.9, Jesus instructs his followers to make use of ‘dishonest’ or ‘unrighteous’ wealth. The problem for biblical interpreters is that Jesus appears to order his followers to be unrighteous in this regard. However, this is to misunderstand what Luke is doing with the word ‘unrighteous’. He does not use this word to qualify some particular wealth, but to emphasize that all wealth is unrighteous and therefore needs to be spent wisely and quickly to do good in the world. Holding onto it is bad for the soul.

Keywords

Bruce Malina, Bultmann, difficult text, Luke 16.9, parable of the dishonest steward, Philip Goodchild, Richard Hiers

The text of Luke 16.9 and the difficulty with it

Luke 16.9 is a difficult verse to interpret and it is set at the end of a difficult-to-interpret passage. Luke 16.1–8 tells the story of the dishonest steward, who, when he is about to be dismissed, decreases the debts of some of his master’s debtors to make friends for himself. His master then commends him for his ‘shrewdness’. In this short article, I will restrict the scope of enquiry to just Luke 16.9. This verse is so problematic that the question of whether it is now as the Evangelist first wrote it must be considered. The Nestle-Aland critical apparatus, which might be described as the ‘gold standard’ for working out textual problems, shows no more than a few words moved around in the verse, without any change in meaning. Even looking beyond the manuscripts that feature in Nestle-Aland, I note that the early sixth-century Syriac

Corresponding author:

Rob James

Email: rjames@vst.edu

Manuscript 2 from St Catherine's monastery does miss out one word altogether, but it is merely the initial 'and' in the verse.¹ Thus, even going to some lengths to find alternative words for this verse is a fruitless exercise. The verse is among the more solid in biblical tradition. Given this, it is not at all controversial to state that the verse itself reads – and, as far as we can tell, always has read – as follows:

Kai egō humin legō eautois poiēsate philous ek tou mamōna tēs adikias hina hotan eklipē dexōntai humas eis tas aiōnious skēnas

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous wealth so that when it fails they might receive you into the eternal dwellings.²

The word 'unrighteous' (*adikias*) can just as well be translated as 'dishonest'. This is what the NRSV translation opts for. Translating it as 'unrighteous' has the advantage of providing a contrast with those other occasions in Luke when the 'righteous' are referred to. The NIV translation of the verse sidesteps the difficulties by translating this not as 'dishonest' or 'unrighteous' but as 'worldly'. This obscures the issue as it is not actually what the text says; the text is clear that the *mamōna*, 'wealth', that is talked about is 'unrighteous'. It is quite deliberately presented as a bad thing, not merely a neutral fact of the world. The difficulty is that Jesus instructs his followers to use unrighteous, dishonest wealth to make friends who will welcome them into eternity. The apparent instruction to use dishonesty sits uncomfortably with most people.

Opinions on the text

In *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Rudolf Bultmann suggests that there are some biblical texts for which the 'original meaning' has become 'irrecoverable'; he places Luke 16.1–9 into this category.³ Bultmann does not comment specifically on verse 9, simply consigning the whole nine verses to an unknowable meaning, lost in the cultural context of the time. This seems altogether a too negative assessment of the likelihood of working out just what the message of this passage is. However, it underscores how difficult even the greatest of biblical scholars might find it to penetrate that meaning.

In terms of the overall parable, some have suggested that the steward makes the master look generous, increases his master's social standing, and earns himself a reprieve for doing this. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh write that the master 'risks serious alienation in the village, where they would have already been celebrating his astonishing generosity. If he allows the reductions to stand, he will be praised far and wide.'⁴ Alternatively, John Goodrich offers detailed evidence that debt relief at the time of Jesus was practised by the wealthy in order to encourage repayment; it was better to get some of what one was owed and make some profit rather than to have no repayment at all.⁵ Although various explanations are offered of the overall parable, these do little to help with verse 9 itself.

A solution to the understanding of verse 9 is offered by Richard Hiers. He suggests that, in the context of Luke's Gospel, the *philous*, 'friends', are the poor. Hiers proposes that what is being said is that 'those who wish to inherit the Kingdom should profit from the example of the sons of this world. They should now give what they have to the poor, for only such – the poor and their benefactors – can hope to be received into the Kingdom.'⁶ Furthermore, Hiers, following the early twentieth-century biblical scholar Alfred Plummer, suggests that reception into *aiōnious skēnas*, 'eternal dwellings', of verse 9 is a deliberate 'contrast to the uncertain and transitory houses of the debtors' in verse 4.⁷

Building on Hiers' solution

In his book *The Theology of Money*, Philip Goodchild reminds his readers that, in Luke, Jesus has 'good news for the poor'. Specifically on verse 16.9, Goodchild notes that wealth was there described as 'unrighteous'.⁸ This is all that Goodchild says about Luke 16.9, but it is possible to expand and generalize this point. Hiers takes us so far in this, but there is more distance to travel. The difficulty with this passage seems to be in the use of 'dishonest' or 'unrighteous' wealth. The problem in interpretation is that we expect Jesus to commend the use of 'honest' or 'righteous' wealth. If the wealth used is from good sources of income, we may think, not dishonestly obtained, then it is right to use it. But that is not the way Luke views money. Luke's theology has a particular focus on the poor. I suggest that, for Luke, all wealth is essentially *adikias*, dishonest, unrighteous. Precisely what 'wealth' means is not clear, but it may be taken to approximate to economic divisions that keep the poor in their place. The word *adikias* is therefore used in this verse not to qualify the concept of wealth, but to emphasize what Luke assumed to be true about wealth anyway.

If all wealth is essentially unrighteous anyway, then that reshapes how we understand this instruction from the Lukan Jesus. Some people have this essentially evil thing at their disposal. It is a thing that might, simply by its presence, have negative eternal consequences for someone. The rich man in the story later in chapter 16 does nothing actively evil. He does not give money to others, but neither does he actively oppress them. And yet, he ends up in a version of hell. His wealth has pulled him down. In this parable, Jesus implies that there was one way in which he could have escaped his fate. He could have given his money away. Similarly, in the story of the rich young man who is told that there is one thing he lacks and to give away his possessions (Luke 18.18–30), Luke has a slightly different text from that represented in Mark 10 and Matthew 19. Luke 18.24 talks of 'those who have riches' finding it difficult to enter the kingdom of God, rather than 'a rich person'. The story is present in the other texts and the meaning is roughly the same, but Luke adds emphasis to the point that the riches are possessed by a person, and that could change.

For Luke 16.9, if wealth is de facto unrighteous and dishonest and a polluting influence on the soul, then getting rid of it is an important part of discovering salvation. It is likely that this is what the verse means when it says *hina hotan*

eklipē, ‘so that when it fails’. This is the wealth ‘failing’. In other words, the wealth has run out. It is the image of a rich person who is rich in monetary terms no longer. Having got rid of wealth in the pursuit of goodness, they now find *philous*, ‘friends’, who make sure that they *dexōntai humas eis tas aiōnious skēnas*, ‘receive you into the eternal dwellings’. It is thus important to share out this dishonest, unrighteous thing that wealth is, for only in its dilution and dissipation can a person who has previously possessed it be allowed access to salvation.

Conclusion

Luke 16.9 is often assumed to be a difficult passage. But if we understand that, for Luke, all wealth was dishonest, unrighteous, then the meaning becomes clear. For Luke, there is no such thing as honest, righteous wealth. It would be oxymoronic for him to write of using your ‘honest wealth’ to do good things. The only option for the wealthy is to use their wealth, and quickly, to do good in the world, before they are dragged down by it. It is only by divesting themselves of their necessarily dishonest and unrighteous wealth that the rich can find access to *tas aiōnious skēnas*, ‘the eternal dwellings’. It is not explicit in this passage of Luke, but the surrounding passages strongly suggest that this spending should be for the poor. These are the *philous*, ‘friends’, such as Lazarus in Luke 16.19–31, who will welcome into heaven the previously rich, who have their wealth no longer and are thereby not tainted by its unrighteousness.

Notes

1. See <www.loc.gov/resource/amedmonastery.0027938619A-ms/?st=gallery> (Luke 16.9 is on image 99).
2. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
3. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, translated by John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), pp. 199f.
4. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 375.
5. John K. Goodrich, ‘Voluntary debt remission and the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16.1–13)’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 131, no. 3 (2012), pp. 547–66.
6. Richard H. Hiers, ‘Friends by unrighteous mammon: the eschatological proletariat’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (1970), pp. 31–36, here p. 36.
7. Hiers, ‘Friends by unrighteous mammon’, p. 32; Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St Luke* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1906), p. 386.
8. Philip Goodchild, *The Theology of Money* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 2.

Author biography

Dr Rob James is Associate Professor of Anglican Formation and Studies at Vancouver School of Theology.