

1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Kelley, Tim (1998) "Renounce my Possessions?: What does Luke 14.33 mean?," *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss3/8>

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"Renounce My Possessions?" What Does Luke 14:33 Mean?

BY TIM KELLEY

Perhaps you remember the old Jack Benny routine—

MUGGER: Your money or your life!
(*Impatiently.*) Hey Buddy, your money
or your life!
(*Waving his gun.*) I said, your money or
your life!

JACK BENNY: I'm thinking! I'm thinking!

One wonders what Jack Benny would have said to the words that we find in Luke:

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:33)¹

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. (Luke 14:33)

There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. (Luke 18:22)

Perhaps the Benny persona wouldn't even have to think about it.

The important question is, What do we say? How do we respond to these startling words? These are radical words, but they do not come from a Marxist revolution-

ary. They come instead from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Most of us are familiar with the words of Jesus to the rich ruler, and we have insulated ourselves from them by the reassurance that Jesus said them because the ruler loved his possessions and that we, of course, are not like that. Yet these other, equally disturbing, words are given not to a rich, materialistic young man but to all who would be disciples, and it is far more difficult to insulate ourselves from them.

Perhaps what we would wish, more than an explanation, is to have someone explain them away. Yet two observations suggest that some explanation is necessary. One is that in Luke, Jesus didn't tell everyone to get rid of all his or her possessions. Zacchaeus, whose story follows that of the rich ruler, wasn't told to sell everything. Instead, Zacchaeus determined to give half of what he had to the poor and promised to repay fourfold anyone he had cheated (Luke 19:8). That's a substantial offer, but it's not necessarily everything.² We are told that Levi left everything and followed Jesus, but the next thing we are told is that he provided a "great feast" at his house for Jesus (Luke 5:27–39). Peter told Jesus, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you" (Luke 18:28). Yet it is not altogether clear that Peter sold his house and left his wife and mother-in-law homeless. In fact, Mark suggests that Peter's house became a base of operations for Jesus in Capernaum (Mark 1:29–32).

The second observation is that Acts doesn't give us a picture of a church whose members have sold all their homes and given away all their possessions. Barnabas sold a field, but we are not told that that was all he had (Acts

4:36–37). Christians such as Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), Cornelius (Acts 10:48), and Lydia (Acts 16:15) still kept their homes. In fact, the charity described in Acts depended upon church members' having possessions, either to sell or from which to give. The church in Antioch is a clear example. Agabus and other prophets told of a famine that would come to Jerusalem. In response, "[t]he disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea" (Acts 11:29). That is very much like Paul's instructions to the Corinthians: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come" (1 Cor 16:2).

Does this mean that the words of Jesus were seen as too radical for the early church and were thus modified? That is one answer given by scholars who look at this question.³ Others say that the radical words were intended only for the full-time disciples and missionaries.⁴ Still others argue that they were intended only for the lifetime of Jesus and after that were modified to meet the more realistic demands of life.⁵

Do these radical words have any place in our teaching and preaching, or are we to so modify or marginalize them that they essentially disappear? They have certainly disappeared from the teaching and preaching of those whose message is that God wants everyone to be rich and happy; haven't the words all but disappeared from the teaching and preaching of most mainstream churches as well? Should they be recovered? Can they be recovered? Can we really hear these words of Jesus today?

Finding Context—God's Concern for the Poor

When Jesus announced himself to the home folks in Nazareth, he did so with a quotation from Isa 61:1–2 and 58:6: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, *to let the oppressed go free*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). Employing the language of Jubilee (Lev 25) from the Isaiah texts, Jesus announced that his ministry would be one of liberation.

When Jesus reassured John the Baptist that he was the One who was promised, he echoed the Isaiah text: "And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me'" (Luke 7:22–23).

In the Lukan beatitudes, the words of Jesus are straightforward and they differ from the more familiar words in Matthew: "Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh'" (Luke 6:20–21). Here, it is not the inner qualities of the disciple but the physical conditions of poverty and hunger that are stressed. In addition, Luke has corresponding woes: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24–25).

These words reflect a concern for the poor that one finds in the Old Testament. Throughout the law there are concerns and provisions made for the poor.⁶ Psalms rejoice that God cares for the poor,⁷ and wisdom literature counsels generosity and avoidance of greed.⁸ The neglect and abuse of the poor bring strong condemnations from prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Micah.

Yet there is another side in the Old Testament. Wealth is often seen as a blessing from God that brings responsibility.⁹ The same wisdom literature that counsels generosity warns against sloth and poverty itself,¹⁰ and Prov 30:8–9 cautions against both wealth and poverty. In no case is poverty as such blessed. The Lord loves the poor, but that hardly means that the Lord loves poverty or sees it as an ideal.

What about Our Possessions?

Obviously, we are not going to be much help to the poor in the long run if we sell everything and become poor ourselves. Paul had a different approach when he told the Ephesian elders, "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). In Eph 4:28, we find the same message: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy."

Yet before we reduce these powerful words of Jesus to a simple platitude that says something like, "If you have any extra, consider sharing it with the needy," we need to look again at them, especially the words in Luke 14:33: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

In Leviticus 25 there is great concern for the poor. Twice the theological foundation for that concern is given. The land is God's (Lev 25:23), and Israelites are God's

*To follow Jesus is to
acknowledge that all we
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at his disposal.*

servants (Lev 25:42). For the Old Testament, there is only one owner of the land and one Master of people—God. The concept of God as owner and his people as servants underlies this Lukan text.

Within the larger text (Luke 14:25–35), one finds the radical demands of hatred of kin and bearing one’s cross combined with the call to renounce possessions. The audience for these words was “great multitudes” (Luke 14:25 RSV), which appear to be the large groups of the uncommitted who were attracted to Jesus but had not become disciples. It was to potential disciples that these difficult words came.

Much has been written about the disturbing “call to hate” in this verse. In several texts in the New Testament, *hate* is used to speak of the radical separation of the world and the kingdom.¹¹ Most often it is the world that is said to hate those in the kingdom, but disciples as well are called to make radical choices that involve hate. In Luke 16 Jesus says, “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 mammon” (Luke 16:13 RSV). It seems best to understand *hate* in the same way here. Like the Levites who are forced to make a radical choice for Moses,¹² the disciples are called to make such a choice for Jesus. *Hate* describes the nature of that choice. It has nothing to do, then, with one’s feelings toward family, but is the choice of the kingdom over against all other loyalties.

What then of hating one’s “own life” in Luke 14:26? In Luke 9 Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Luke 9:24 RSV). A Johannine parallel even puts it in terms of love and hate: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25 RSV). In this case, the Lukan and Johannine messages are the same.

The cross-bearing message of Luke 9:23 is repeated here in Luke chapter 14. In Luke 9:23 it follows “let him deny himself.” Here, it follows “hate . . . even [one’s] own

life.” The call to bear one’s cross and the call to “say farewell” to all of one’s possessions (Luke 14:33) are closely related. As in 9:23, the bearing of the cross is a daily task. It describes the ongoing life of the disciple, both in the lifetime of Jesus and in the Lukan community.

Earlier, we noted that in Acts not every disciple was asked to sell all his possessions; it may be that the disparity between Jesus’ demands regarding possessions and what one actually finds in Acts will always be a puzzle. We may simply have to acknowledge that Jesus demanded one thing and the church gave another and that, while the church of Acts was sometimes close to what Jesus required (Acts 2 and 4), at other times it found creative ways to maintain the “spirit” of his words and still hold on to possessions.

Before accepting that conclusion, however, it may be worth examining Luke 14:33 within its context, and particularly the meaning of *renounce*. David Tiede suggests a structure to the text that may be helpful in establishing context:

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|-----------|---|
| 14:25 | Luke’s transition and introduction |
| 14:26 | Case #1: If anyone does not hate . . . it is not possible to be my disciple |
| 14:27 | Case #2: Whoever does not bear his own cross . . . it is not possible to be my disciple |
| 14:28–30 | Illustration: Cost of building a tower |
| 14:31–32 | Illustration: Cost of going to war |
| 14:33 | Case #3: Whoever does not renounce all . . . it is not possible to be my disciple |
| 14:34–35a | Similitude: Valuable and worthless salt |
| 14:35b | Conclusion: Let the one with ears hear! ¹³ |

If Tiede’s structure is correct, then verse 33 constitutes the third case and should be understood along the same lines as the first two cases.

If the call to hate one’s dearest kin is, as suggested above, a call to make a radical decision for the kingdom, that decision forms a commitment that stands above all others, even the most profound family obligations (Luke 9:59–62). Clearly, however, not all who followed Jesus (even in his lifetime) separated themselves from family. Mary, for example, was clearly a disciple (Luke 10:38–42), but she “hated” her sister Martha only in the sense that she chose the kingdom. She did not despise Martha or leave her. Similarly, Aquila was a faithful Christian but left neither his wife nor his possessions (Acts 18:2).

The call (in case #2) to bear the cross would find literal expression for many, like Stephen and James, who

gave their lives for the kingdom. But others, such as Paul, who managed to stay alive (at least through the end of Acts), had not necessarily chosen a lesser path. Luke's account of Paul's journey to Jerusalem in Acts suggests that he was following the radical call of Jesus. Yet he did not die in Jerusalem, and there is no account or even implication in Acts that he died as a result of his Roman imprisonment.

The two brief parables (Luke 14:28–32) illustrate not only the first two cases (Luke 14:26–27), but also the third (Luke 14:33). The parables challenged the potential disciples to be sure they were willing to go all the way. Like a person planning to build a tower or a king contemplating war, discipleship demands sober evaluation.

In Luke 14:33 Jesus says, "So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (RSV). The verb *renounce* (*apotassomai*) is found five other times in the New Testament.¹⁴ In each case it means "bid farewell." However, in each of the other uses, the term refers to people bidding farewell to people, not things.

The word *apotassomai* is capable of a wide range of meanings, including "delegate," "appoint for," "assign to," "set aside," "renounce," or "dismiss" someone.¹⁵ Here in Luke 14:33, it may mean, as the RSV translates, "renounce." This renunciation might include literal dispossession, but may rather suggest relinquishing ownership, which is acknowledging that God owns everything and that the disciple is only a steward. In that case, Acts 2 and 4 are not "adaptations" or "flexible applications" of Jesus' demands, as Tannehill suggests,¹⁶ but perfect illustrations of those demands: ". . . no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own . . ." (Acts 4:32 RSV).

For some, like the rich ruler, for whom wealth was given his ultimate allegiance, Jesus' demand entailed getting rid of everything. Yet for Zacchaeus, the Jerusalem church, the Antioch church, and others, it meant giving to those in need possessions that had already been surrendered to the kingdom. Throughout Luke-Acts the willingness to do this is at the core of one's willingness to hear the message of the kingdom.

All through the Gospel of Luke, Jesus uses the metaphor of master and servant. To follow Jesus is to acknowledge that all we own belongs to God and is at his disposal. If the master calls on us to get rid of all we have because it competes with our primary devotion, we are to do so. If there is a need, we give the possessions God has entrusted to us to meet that need. That is exactly what the earliest church did.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32–37 NIV)

Of course this understanding gives us "wiggle room" to rationalize if we are so inclined, and most of us living in our late-twentieth-century Western culture tend to be so inclined. Yet if we can hear the call of Jesus with the seriousness of these Lukan texts, our view of life and grace will be profoundly changed. We will discover, in the words of the Christian songwriter Michael Card, that "it's hard to imagine the freedom we find from the things we leave behind."¹⁷

Your money or your life? Exactly!

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Notes

¹Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

²Robert Tannehill assumes that "his response will leave him pretty much in the same financial state required of the rich ruler." *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986–90), 1:123–24. It certainly might if Zacchaeus has been dishonest, but why doesn't Luke make that clear? On the whole, Luke T. Johnson is correct: "This is an extraordinarily generous response, it is true, but not absolute renunciation. . . . We are not told that he sold his house, left all his possessions, and followed Jesus, or even stopped being a tax collector." *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 20.

³Essentially, Robert Tannehill takes this position but sees Acts as giving "flexible applications" to the radical demand of Jesus. Tannehill, 1:247–48.

⁴This is the position the German scholar Hans-Joachim Degenhardt takes in *Lukas Evangelist der Armen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965), 19. For a discussion of

Degenhardt's view, see John R. Donahue, "Two Decades of Research on the Rich and Poor in Luke-Acts," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 136–37. See also Francois Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-three Years of Research [1950–1983]* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1987), 392–94.

⁵Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), 108–13. W. E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 101.

⁶Exod 22:21–27; 23:10–11; Lev 25; Deut 14:28–15:18.

⁷Pss 9, 10, 12, 14, 22, 35, 69, 72, 82, 109, 113, 140.

⁸Prov 14:21, 31; 16:19; 17:5; 19:1, 17; 21:13; 22:9, 22; 28:27; 29:14.

⁹Gen 12:1–13:4; 26:1–17; 31:1–16; Job 1:1–3, 10; 42:10–17; Prov 3:33; Deut 28:1–14.

¹⁰Prov 10:4, 15; 13:8, 23; 14:20; 15:15; 19:4, 7; 20:13, 17; 22:7; 23:21.

¹¹Matt 6:24; 10:22; 24:9–10; Mark 13:13; Luke 1:71; 6:22; 16:13; 21:17; John 3:20; 12:25; 15:18, 19, 23; 1 John 3:13; Jude

23; Rev 2:6.

¹²See the difficult and disturbing demands Moses made of the Levites in Exod 32:25–29 and the later reflection upon this horrific choice the Levites were called to make in Deut 33:8–9.

¹³David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 269.

¹⁴Luke 9:61; Acts 18:18, 21; Mark 6:46; and 2 Cor 2:13.

¹⁵See Gerhard Delling, "apotasso," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–74), 8:33–34.

¹⁶Tannehill, 1:247–48. I would argue that to renounce ownership of all possessions is not the same as being willing to renounce all possessions if the situation demands it. The renunciation of ownership is in the present, not the future. It is to acknowledge that God owns all over which the disciple is but a steward. This may help to explain the meaning of Luke 16:1–9. See Thomas E. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels*, JSNTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 152.

¹⁷Michael Card, "Things We Leave Behind" from *Poietema*, (Birdwing Music, 1994).

Notes continued from *Biblical Criticism & Ministry*.

¹⁴Fitzmyer, 307. Raymond Brown cites eleven common elements (Brown, 34–35). For example, the common infancy tradition, following Brown, includes that the parents-to-be are Mary and Joseph, who are legally engaged or married but have not yet come to live together or have sexual relations; that Joseph is of Davidic descent; that there is an angelic announcement of the forthcoming birth of the child; that the conception of the child by Mary is not through intercourse with her husband; that the conception is through the Holy Spirit; that there is a directive from the angel that the child is to be named Jesus; that an

angel states that Jesus is to be Savior; that the birth of the child takes place after the parents have come to live together; that the birth takes place at Bethlehem; that the birth is chronologically related to the reign (days) of Herod the Great; and that the child is reared at Nazareth.

¹⁵Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 89.

¹⁶As quoted in Ramm, 93.

Notes from *Mary, The Model Disciple*.

¹Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

²Thomas Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 133.

³Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Prentice Hall, 1990), 681.

⁴Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)*, AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 358.

⁵Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 360.