

Sell Your Possessions: Luke 12:33 and the Greco-Roman Utopian Ideal

Murray Vasser
Asbury Theological Seminary

How can the command, “Sell your possessions and give alms” (Luke 12:33), be reconciled with the fact that many Christians in Luke-Acts maintain significant possessions? In the first section of this essay, I review the various answers to this question which scholars have proposed and argue that none of these answers is entirely satisfactory. In the second section, I draw upon the insights of redaction criticism to demonstrate that Luke has intentionally set Jesus’ command in contrast with the parable of the rich fool, who hoards his superfluous possessions. In the third section, I draw upon the work of Abraham J. Malherbe, who demonstrated that Luke 12 develops a common Greco-Roman topos on the vice of greed. I argue that the extant literature bears witness to a prominent antithesis in first century thought between the vice of greed, expressed through hoarding, and the ideal of equality, expressed through sharing. In the fourth section, I demonstrate that Luke was influenced by this ideal of equality. I conclude that the command to sell possessions in Luke 12:33 should not be understood as a command to relinquish all possessions and embrace poverty, but rather as a command to relinquish all superfluous possessions and embrace equality.

Key Words: Acts, almsgiving, charity, equality, greed, Luke, money, poor, possessions, utopia.

In a chapter entitled, “In Search of a Christian,” popular author and activist Shane Claiborne considers “what it would look like if we really decided to follow Jesus.” He then describes his own personal quest to find someone who believed “Jesus meant the stuff he said.” Claiborne’s search eventually led him to India, where he encountered a man named Andy.

[Andy] used to be a wealthy businessman in Germany, and then he said he read the gospel and it “messed everything up.” He read the part where Jesus commands the disciples to sell everything they have and give it to the poor (Luke 12:33), and he actually did it. I had met some fundamentalists before, but only “selective fundamentalists,” not folks who took things like that literally. He sold everything he owned and moved to Calcutta, where for over ten years he had spent his life with the poorest of the poor.

Claiborne concludes, “I had gone in search of Christianity. And I had found it. I had finally met a Christian.”¹

This provocative passage raises an important question. Does being a Christian really require one to “sell everything”? Must Christians part with their cell phones, their computers, their cars, their homes, and their businesses? Of course, such a reading of Luke 12:33 is incompatible with the notion that Christians “have a stewardship responsibility” to “[produce] more than they consume” and contribute to a “flourishing economy” which “lifts people out of poverty.”² One must typically own something to engage in value creation and economic exchange. Nevertheless, the observation that absolute divestiture is counter-productive hardly solves the interpretive question. Jesus, after all, was crucified, and there is nothing prudent or practical about the lifestyle encapsulated in the command to pick up a cross and follow (Luke 14:27).³

However, the meaning of Luke 12:33 is not as obvious as Claiborne implies, for the reader encounters scores of people in Luke-Acts who respond positively to the message of Jesus and yet do not “sell everything.”⁴ This apparent discrepancy has sparked extensive scholarly investigation, but a satisfactory solution which preserves both the unity of Luke-Acts and the radical force of Jesus’ command has not yet been offered. In this essay, I will suggest that the significance of the Greco-Roman utopian ideal has been overlooked in the interpretation of Luke 12:33. Building on the work of Abraham J. Malherbe, as well as the insights of redaction and literary criticism, I will seek to demonstrate that Luke 12:33 is not a command to relinquish all possessions, but rather a command to relinquish all superfluous possessions.⁵

A Brief Survey of Scholarship

There is widespread agreement that Luke 12:33 is directed to Jesus’

¹ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 71–77.

² Economic Wisdom Project, “A Christian Vision for Flourishing Communities,” 9 (<http://oikonomianetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Economic-Wisdom-Project-10-2014-small.pdf>).

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the RSV.

⁴ See Luke 9:4; 10:5–7, 38; 19:8; 24:29–30; Acts 2:2, 44, 46; 4:32; 8:3; 9:39; 10:6; 11:29; 12:12; 16:15, 34; 17:5; 18:7; 20:7–8; 21:8, 16.

⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe, “The Christianization of a *Topos* (Luke 12:13–34),” *NovT* 38.2 (1996): 123–35.

followers in general and cannot be restricted to the twelve or the seventy.⁶ Walter E. Pilgrim, who understands Luke 12:33 as “a command to sell all,” affirms that it is for “everyone who would call themselves followers or disciples of Jesus.”⁷ Nevertheless, Pilgrim argues that Luke understands this command as “a call limited to Jesus’ time”; now that “Jesus himself is no longer present, a new form of discipleship is called for (cf. Luke 22:35–38).”⁸ Therefore, while this command “functions with exemplary force for wealthy Christians in Luke’s day,” the third evangelist does not intend for his readers to actually implement it.⁹ Instead, Luke presents Zacchaeus, who is allowed to retain some of his possessions, as the “paradigm par excellence for wealthy Christians in his community.”¹⁰

However, as Thomas E. Schmidt observes, “If the argument . . . is universal, the inference from it can hardly be otherwise: when is the Rich Fool not a rich fool, or to whom among the little flock is it not the Father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom?”¹¹ Nothing that Jesus affirms in Luke 12:22–32 changes after the ascension. The command of Luke 12:33 is not predicated on some temporal aspect of Jesus’ earthly mission; it springs from the reality of God’s provision for his people. Furthermore, even if Pilgrim is correct in his assertion that the requirements for discipleship changed radically after the ascension, the story of Zacchaeus is prior to the ascension. Pilgrim affirms that the command in Luke 12:33 was directed to “disciples in the broadest sense of the term”; why then did Jesus not require Zacchaeus to obey it?¹² Furthermore, if Jesus really demanded complete divestiture, why did he share the possessions of his friends (Luke 9:3–5; 10:5–7, 38–42; 24:29–30)? As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, throughout Luke hospitality “is a sign of acceptance and faith,” and

⁶ So Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1981), 98–99; Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 90–91; Thomas E. Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 135–36; Christopher M. Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 3–4; Thomas E. Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001), 16–18; Kyoung-Jin Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 14–17.

⁷ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 123, 101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹ Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth*, 36.

¹² Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 49.

yet it obviously requires one to possess “a house, or at least a room.”¹³

Schmidt, like Pilgrim, argues that the historical Jesus did indeed demand absolute divestiture. However, instead of suggesting that Jesus only intended this command for his first followers, Schmidt contends that the church simply failed to implement Jesus’ command. He speculates, “Deprived of the powerful and exemplary presence of Jesus himself, disciples were less and less likely to practice dispossession but no less likely to preserve and approve the teaching.” Thus the behavior of the early Church, which Luke describes in Acts, differs “fundamentally in purpose and extent” from the teaching which Luke preserves in passages such as Luke 12:33.¹⁴

Once again, however, the story of Zacchaeus and the hospitality passages pose a problem for this view. Schmidt argues that, while Zacchaeus retains half of his wealth, he does so “not in order to possess it but in order to make restitution.”¹⁵ The same argument is made by Robert C. Tannehill, who notes that Zacchaeus says nothing “about keeping a portion for himself.”¹⁶ However, while it is reasonable to infer that Zacchaeus would not have remained wealthy after encountering Jesus, nothing in the tax collector’s statement suggests that the restitution he offers will exhaust the remaining half of his fortune and leave him homeless. Furthermore, Schmidt does not explain how his view can be maintained in light of the hospitality passages in Luke.

James A. Metzger offers another suggestion for reconciling Luke 19:8 with complete divestiture. After noting that *μου* is placed between *τὰ ἡμίση* and *τῶν ὑπαρχόντων*, Metzger suggests that the possessive pronoun modifies *τὰ ἡμίση* instead of *τῶν ὑπαρχόντων*. Thus Zacchaeus is not offering to give half of his possessions, but rather all of his half of the possessions. The other half, Metzger suggests, belongs either to Zacchaeus’ wife or his children or both.¹⁷ This solution is ingenious but untenable. In Luke alone, the pronoun *μου* often occurs before the noun it modifies.¹⁸ Furthermore, if Zacchaeus really gave away everything, why would Luke not say so? Why preserve the awkward statement, “my half

¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 20.

¹⁴ Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth*, 165–66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁶ Robert C. Tannehill, “The Story of Zacchaeus as Rhetoric: Luke 19:1–10,” *Semeia* 64 (1993): 203. So also Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics*, 178.

¹⁷ James A. Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke’s Travel Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 175–76.

¹⁸ See 6:47; 7:44, 45; 10:29; 12:18; 14:23, 24, 26, 27, 33; 19:23.

of the possessions,” particularly when Luke provides absolutely no explanation to help his readers understand? Metzger’s harmonization is the sort of strained interpretation that emerges only among scholars pouring over the text; such a complex and non-intuitive reading would never have occurred to Luke’s original audience.

Faced with the difficulty of reconciling the various passages on wealth, Raj Nadella goes beyond Schmidt to propose that discontinuity exists, not simply between Luke and Acts, but within Luke itself. In a monograph entitled, *Dialogue not Dogma: Many Voices in the Gospel of Luke*, Nadella argues that Luke includes “mutually exclusive” perspectives on wealth and declares “the futility” of any attempt “to arrive at a unitary understanding of Luke’s views on the issue.” According to Nadella, the third Gospel “refuses to let any one perspective dominate the dialogue”; it is “more interested in accommodating disparate perspectives and in subverting a unitary worldview” than in providing “a consistent set of instructions.”¹⁹ Barry Gordon also argues that discontinuity exists throughout Luke-Acts, but instead of portraying Luke as a postmodernist seeking to undermine a “unitary worldview,” Gordon suggests that Luke is simply confused. Luke is unable to resolve the tensions which exist among his own biases against wealth, the Jesus traditions he has inherited, and the realities of the early church.²⁰

Few scholars, however, are willing to accept such a fractured view of Luke-Acts, a work whose author evidently possessed considerable literary and theological acumen. Given the numerous passages which indicate that some disciples retained some possessions, many scholars conclude that Luke 12:33 does not require complete divestiture.²¹ James R. Edwards suggests, “Luke does not understand Jesus’ teaching literally.”²² Robert

¹⁹ Raj Nadella, *Dialogue Not Dogma: Many Voices in the Gospel of Luke* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 109–10.

²⁰ Barry Gordon, *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 67–70.

²¹ So Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 18; Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics*, 129; Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke’s Theology*, 24; Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 52–54; François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. Donald S. Deer; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 222; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 377.

²² Edwards, *Luke*, 377.

H. Stein likewise argues that while Luke 12:33 is on the surface a command “to sell all one has,” it is “overstatement” or “hyperbole.”²³ However, when Jesus gives an almost identical command to the rich ruler in Luke 18:22, he means it quite literally. Furthermore, Luke states no less than four times that the earliest followers of Jesus literally sold property (Acts 2:45; 4:34–35, 37; 5:1–2). The reader of Luke-Acts is thus led to understand Luke 12:33 as literal.

Johnson, however, argues that while the command may be literal, it is not necessarily mandatory. After asserting that Luke presents the “plainly inconsistent” ideals of “wandering destitution, almsgiving, hospitality, and a community of goods,” Johnson proposes that Luke is not attempting to mandate a particular mode of sharing for all Christians at all times.²⁴ Instead, the only mandate is that Christians must, “in some fashion, share.”²⁵ Passages such as Luke 12:33 thus exemplify the ethic required of all disciples, but offer only one of the many ways this ethic may be realized. Sondra Ely Wheeler, citing Johnson, explains further that while Luke 12:33 is a command to sell “all,” Jesus’ commands have “more the character of counsels aimed at achieving an end than of laws requiring obedience.”²⁶ However, even if Luke 12:33 is “counsel” instead of “law,” should not the counsel of Christ be followed? Furthermore, the reader of Luke-Acts cannot help but suspect that by reducing the radical command, “Sell your possessions,” to the ambiguous cliché, “Share with others,” Johnson has somewhat domesticated Jesus.

A more promising interpretation is offered by Dennis J. Ireland. Based on the literary context, Ireland suggests, “The actions called for in v. 33 are to be understood as the opposite of the rich fool’s actions.”²⁷ The same point is made by Matthew S. Rindge, who states, “[The command in Luke 12:33] has an important literary function in that it represents a constructive alternative to the rich man’s failure to act in the parable.”²⁸

²³ Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 97.

²⁴ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 22–23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁶ Sondra Ely Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 70.

²⁷ Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 182.

²⁸ Matthew S. Rindge, *Jesus’ Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13–34 among Ancient Conversations on Death and Possessions* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 190. Noland also observes that the command in Luke 12:33 is “in contrast to the rich man’s strategy” (John Nolland, *Luke* [WBC 35; Dallas: Word, 1989], 694).

Thus Ireland concludes that the focus “is on charity in contrast to selfishness, not on total renunciation.”²⁹ However, Ireland’s interpretation remains somewhat ambiguous. While he indicates that Luke 12:33 does not require complete divestiture, he does not specify how much property, if any, disciples are required to sell. Furthermore, while Ireland has noted an important feature of the text, the contrast with the parable of the rich fool hardly proves that Luke 12:33 does not enjoin total renunciation. After all, total renunciation would certainly entail “the opposite of the rich fool’s actions.”

In conclusion, this survey has examined five distinct options for understanding the command to sell possessions in Luke 12:33: (1) the command is not *universal*—it only applies to some Christians; (2) the command is not *consistent*—it conflicts with other passages on wealth in Luke/Acts; (3) the command is not *literal*—it is to be understood as hyperbole; (4) the command is not *mandatory*—it only exemplifies the proper attitude towards wealth; (5) the command is not *absolute*—it does not entail complete divestiture. For the reasons discussed above, I find the first four options unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the fifth option requires additional specificity and support, which this essay seeks to provide.

The Literary Context of Luke 12:33

The connection Ireland observes between the command of Luke 12:33 and the parable of the rich fool provides a helpful starting point for our investigation. This connection was noted as early as Augustine, who aptly observed, “The bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than [the rich fool’s] barns” (Augustine, *Serm.* 36.7 [Hill]).³⁰ Furthermore, several features of the text indicate that Luke intends his readers to make this connection.

First, Luke has apparently composed 12:21 as a bridge to link the parable of the rich fool to the subsequent teachings of Jesus. Most commentators agree that this verse was not part of the original parable in Luke’s source but is rather an “appropriate application” composed by Luke.³¹

²⁹ Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, 182. Similar observations are made by Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 131–32.

³⁰ This passage was brought to my attention by Edwards, *Luke*, 372.

³¹ Nolland, *Luke*, 684. So also Edwards, *Luke*, 372; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 971; Bovon, *Luke 2*, 204; Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, *Glaube Und Handeln in der Theologie des Lukas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 64–65.

“The sense of the parable is complete without it,” and “Jesus leaves most parables open-ended.”³² Furthermore, the somewhat ambiguous notion of being “rich towards God” (εἰς θεὸν πλουτῶν) appears for the first time in v. 21 and is not explained in the parable. As Joshua A. Noble observes, “There is broad agreement that Luke 12:33 spells out the thought of v. 21 more fully, indicating the concrete practice recommended is almsgiving.”³³ In a recent essay, Noble argues persuasively on the basis of the extant occurrences of πλουτεῖν εἰς + acc that this phrase in Luke 2:21 “should be understood as describing a transfer of wealth to God.”³⁴ The verb θησαυρίζω also occurs nowhere else in the gospels except in Matthew’s version of the saying recorded in Luke 12:33 (Matt 6:19–20). In Matthew the verb occurs twice, and in Luke 12:33 the noun form appears (θησαυρός). Thus Luke 12:21 functions as a “vorwegnehmende Zusammenfassung” of the instruction in Luke 12:33.³⁵

Nevertheless, I. Howard Marshall considers it “unlikely” that Luke composed 12:21 “as a transition to the next section” because “the thought of treasure in heaven is so far away (v. 33).”³⁶ However, such an objection fails to give enough credit to Luke’s skill in crafting an “orderly account” (1:3). After noting that ancient writers often utilized rough drafts, Craig Keener observes, “The Gospels are . . . undoubtedly polished products of much effort, carefully arranged to communicate their points most adequately.”³⁷ Note that in chapter 18, Luke inserts the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) before the stories of the children and the ruler, which he has taken from Mark. Thus the “principle of status transposition” expressed in Luke 18:14 provides a framework for reading the two pericopes that follow.³⁸ In Luke 18:15–17, children who are being dismissed become the standard for status in the kingdom of God, while in 18:18–25, a rich ruler who believes himself to be righteous fails to obtain salvation. Luke also appears to have sharpened this contrast by emphasizing the low status of the children and the high status of the man.

³² Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 971; Edwards, *Luke*, 372.

³³ Joshua A. Noble, “Rich Toward God?: Making Sense of Luke 12:21,” *CBQ* 78.2 (2016): 315.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁵ Horn, *Glaube Und Handeln in der Theologie des Lukas*, 65.

³⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 524.

³⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 74.

³⁸ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 653.

Thus Luke replaces Mark's *παιδία* ("children"; Mark 10:13) with *βρέφη* ("infants"; Luke 18:15) and specifies that the rich "man" (Mark 10:17) was a "ruler" (Luke 18:18). We have no reason, therefore, to doubt that Luke could have composed Luke 12:21 with the material of Luke 12:33 in mind.

In addition to the transition in Luke 12:21, Luke's redaction of the Q material in 12:33 appears to link Jesus' teachings on wealth back to his initial warning about greed in Luke 12:15. While Luke 12:22–32 and Matt 6:25–34 are quite similar, Luke 12:33–34 and Matt 6:19–21 differ significantly. Most scholars believe that Matthew's version reflects the original saying, which Luke has paraphrased with more freedom.³⁹ First, the vocabulary of Luke 12:33 is Lukan. Luke-Acts accounts for all four occurrences of *βαλλάντιον* in the NT, ten of the thirteen occurrences of *ἐλεημοσύνη* in the NT, and nine of the fourteen occurrences of *ὑπάρχω* for "possessions" in the NT.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Matthew's version preserves "plus de rythme et de parallélisme sémitique que celui de Luc," and is thus more likely original.⁴¹ Finally, the command, "Sell your possessions [τῶν ὑπαρχόντων], and give alms," recalls the warning which opened this section on wealth: "Beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions [τῶν ὑπαρχόντων]." Thus, in summary, Luke appears to have composed 12:21 and 12:33 in such a way as to connect the material in 12:13–21 with the material in 12:22–34.

Thomas D. Stegman offers an intriguing hypothesis which is worth considering here. Stegman argues that Luke structured 12:13–34 according to the template of a standard classroom exercise for developing a *chreia*. He suggests the passage contains all eight elements of the template:

³⁹ So Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 981; Bovon, *Luke 2*, 213; Léopold Sabourin, *L'Évangile de Luc: Introduction et commentaire* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1985), 251; Horn, *Glaube Und Handeln in der Theologie des Lukas*, 67; Roman Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 65.

⁴⁰ The word *βαλλάντιον* occurs in Luke 10:4; 12:33; 22:35, 36. The word *ἐλεημοσύνη* occurs in Matt 6:2, 3, 4; Luke 11:41; 12:33; Acts 3:2, 3, 10; 9:36; 10:2, 4, 31; 24:17. The word *ὑπάρχω* as "possessions" occurs in Matt 19:21; 24:47; 25:14; Luke 8:3; 11:21; 12:15, 33, 44; 14:33; 16:1; 19:8; Acts 4:32; 1 Cor 13:3; Heb 10:34.

⁴¹ Sabourin, *L'Évangile de Luc*, 251. The same argument is made by François Bovon: "[Matthew] preserves the Semitic antithetical parallel of Q, while Luke adapts the text to his language and his theology" (*Luke 2*, 213). However, the "almost perfectly symmetrical parallelism of Matt 6:19–20" makes Stephen Johnson suspicious that Matthew, as well as Luke, has modified the original saying (Steven R. Johnson, *Seeking the Imperishable Treasure: Wealth, Wisdom, and a Jesus Saying* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008], 36–37).

a note of praise ("teacher"; 12:13), the *chreia* (12:13–15a), the rationale (12:15b), a statement of the opposite or contrary (12:16–20), a statement from analogy (12:24–28), a statement from example (12:30a; 12:27), a statement by an authority (12:30b–32), and a closing exhortation (12:33).⁴² If true, Stegman's hypothesis would further strengthen the argument that Luke intended 12:33 to be read in contrast to the behavior of the rich fool. However, the hypothesis is not entirely convincing. As Stegman acknowledges, Luke is not composing; he is assembling pre-existing traditions. Furthermore, while the progymnastic exercise produces a speech *about* the words of a teacher, Luke is actually writing in the voice of the teacher. Finally, while interesting, the parallels Stegman suggests seem somewhat stretched. In addition to the conflated "statement from example" and "statement by an authority," the "note of praise" and "rationale" proposed by Stegman are significantly shorter than any attested in Ronald Hock and Edward O'Neil's collection, which Stegman utilizes.⁴³ Stegman's argument would be greatly strengthened if one could find other occurrences in Luke of this same template, but I find none. Nevertheless, Stegman's observations serve to emphasize the thematic unity of Luke 12:13–34; regardless of whether or not Luke was following a fixed template, Luke 12:33–34 provides a fitting conclusion to the discourse.

In conclusion, the findings of redaction and literary criticism indicate that the command in Luke 12:33 is a paraphrase of Jesus' teaching which Luke has deliberately placed in contrast with the behavior of the rich fool. Nevertheless, we are still left with the question of how the command in Luke 12:33 is to be understood. In Luke 18:22, Jesus gives an almost identical command to the rich ruler. The wording is so similar that some scholars believe this command shaped Luke's paraphrase in 12:33.⁴⁴ While Luke 12:33 may be ambiguous, in Luke 18:22 Jesus clearly commands complete divestiture, and Luke emphasizes this point by altering the command from *ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον* (Mark 10:21) to *πάντα ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον*. Furthermore, the command to relinquish "all" occurs also in 14:33. Nevertheless, in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37, Luke describes the disciples selling only a portion of their possessions and sharing the rest.⁴⁵ The question

⁴² Thomas D. Stegman, "Reading Luke 12:13–34 as an Elaboration of a Chreia: How Hermogenes of Tarsus Sheds Light on Luke's Gospel," *NovT* 49.4 (2007): 328–52.

⁴³ Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002).

⁴⁴ So Sabourin, *L'Évangile de Luc*, 213; Johnson, *Seeking the Imperishable Treasure*, 33.

⁴⁵ The following passages reveal that the Jerusalem disciples retained possessions: Acts 2:44, 46; 4:32; 8:3; 12:12.

under consideration in this essay can thus be framed as follows: should the command to sell possessions in Luke 12:33 be interpreted in light of the absolute divestiture commanded in Luke 18:22 or in light of the partial divestiture described in the early chapters of Acts? To answer this question, we turn now to the Greco-Roman context of Luke-Acts.

The Antithesis between Greed and Equality in Ancient Thought

In a 1996 essay entitled, “The Christianization of a *Topos*,” Malherbe compares Luke 12:13–34 with the oration, “On Covetousness,” by Dio Chrysostom. He concludes that the “entire text” of Luke 12:13–34, which opens with a warning against *πλεονεξία* (Luke 12:15), is “shot through with items” from the common Greco-Roman *topos* on the vice.⁴⁶ Along with other parallels, he demonstrates that the depiction of the rich fool in Luke matches “the typical self-centered, acquisitive covetous man given to gathering superfluities” discussed by the philosophers.⁴⁷ Malherbe’s stated focus, however, is on the “personal dimension” of *πλεονεξία*, not the “social dimension.” He briefly notes that Dio sketches “the antithesis between covetousness and equality,” but Malherbe does not discuss how prevalent this antithesis was in ancient thought or how this antithesis might contribute to the interpretation of Luke 12:33.⁴⁸ In this essay, I will build on Malherbe’s work by exploring this antithesis and its relevance to the command in Luke 12:33.

Note first that by *πλεονεξία*, Dio does not mean the desire of a poor person to gain equality with a rich person; for Dio, covetousness is the desire of one “to have more than his neighbor” (*Avar.* 20 [Cohon; LCL]). Thus Dio laments, “Not one man refrains from [covetousness] or is willing to have equality of possessions with his neighbour.” He then quotes an excerpt from the ancient poet Euripides: “At greed [*πλεονεξία*], the worst of deities, my son, Why graspest thou? . . . Thou art mad for her!—’tis best to venerate Equality” (6–9).⁴⁹ Like Dio, Philo also contrasts *πλεονεξία* and equality, presenting the words as near antonyms: “Our

⁴⁶ Malherbe, “The Christianization of a *Topos*,” 124.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 125–26.

⁴⁹ The original text of Euripides reads “ambition” (*φιλοτιμία*) instead of “greed,” but the context indicates that Dio’s paraphrase is warranted. In the poem, Jocasta is urging her son Eteocles to give up his attempt to take away his brother’s rightful portion. Immediately following the lines quoted by Dio, Jocasta notes that the daylight and the nighttime share the year equally without feeling “envy” (Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 531–48 [Kovacs, LCL]).

mind should change from ignorance and stupidity to education and wisdom, and from intemperance and dissoluteness to patience and moderation, and from fear and cowardice to courage and confidence, and from avarice [*πλεονεξία*] and injustice to justice and equality” (*QE* 1.4 [Marcus, LCL]).⁵⁰

This antithesis between covetousness and equality is pervasive in Greco-Roman utopian thought. Seneca describes a time when “the bounties of nature lay open to all, for men’s indiscriminate use, before avarice and luxury had broken the bonds which held mortals together, and they, abandoning their common existence, had separated and turned to plunder.” All “was divided among unquarrelling friends. . . . Not yet had the miser, by hiding away what lay before him, begun to shut off his neighbor from even the necessities of life; each cared as much for his neighbor as himself.” In the absence of greed, “armor lay unused,” and hands were “unstained by human blood.” This time of peace and abundance came to an end, however, when “luxury began to lust for what nature regarded as superfluous,” and “avarice broke in upon a condition so happily ordained, and, by its eagerness to lay something away and to turn it to its own private use, made all things the property of others” (*Ep.* 90.19, 36–41 [Gummere, LCL]).⁵¹

The mythical era described by Seneca is referred to as the “golden age” and associated with the reign of the Roman god Saturn or the Greek equivalent Cronus. Ancient writers routinely described this age as a time of peace and plenty, in which humankind enjoyed the bounty of the good earth in simplicity and complete equality.⁵² This golden age was also remembered every December in the immensely popular Saturnalia festival, which Plutarch identifies as the “greatest festival” of the Romans (Plutarch, *Quaest. rom.* 34 [Babbitt, LCL]).⁵³

One of the most notable features of the Saturnalia was the temporary liberty permitted slaves to dine with their masters and speak their opinions

⁵⁰ See also Philo, *QE* 2.64; Plutarch, *Lyc.* 24; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 9.12; Menander, *Mon.* 259.

⁵¹ This passage was brought to my attention by Pieter W. van der Horst, “Hellenistic Parallels to the Acts of the Apostles 2:1–47,” *JSNT* 25 (1985): 60.

⁵² See Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109–26; Plato, *Pol.* 272; Aelian, *Letters* 17; Aratus, *Phaen.* 108–14; [Seneca], *Octavia* 391–406; Fronto, *Eulogy of Negligence* 3; Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.6; etc.

⁵³ As the celebration drew near, Seneca noted that all of Rome was “in a sweat” (*Ep.* 18.1 [Gummere, LCL]), and when the festivities began, Pliny the Younger was forced to retreat into another room to continue his work, for “the roof resounds with festive cries” (*Ep.* 17.24 [Radice, LCL]).

openly.⁵⁴ Pompeius Trogus explains that during Saturn's rule slavery did not exist. Instead, "everything was held in common, undivided, as if all men shared a single family estate." Thus during Saturnalia, slaves are permitted "to recline with their masters" at dinner, "all enjoying a position of equality" (Justinus, *Epitome* 43.1.3–4 [Yardley]).⁵⁵ Plutarch likewise notes that this custom was understood by some as "a reminder of the equality which characterized the famous Saturnian age, when there was neither slave nor master, but all were regarded as kinsmen and equals" (*Comp. Lyc. Num.* 1.5 [Perrin, LCL]).⁵⁶

In a satirical dialogue between the god Cronus and Lucian, Cronus explains that, although Zeus normally rules, he "thought it best" for a few days every December to "take over the sovereignty again to remind mankind what life was like under me."⁵⁷ This, Cronus explains, is why Saturnalia is a time of rejoicing and merrymaking, and furthermore, why "everyone, slave and free man, is held as good as his neighbor" (*Sat.* 7 [Kilburn, LCL]). Lucian then complains that, despite the god's intentions, the festivities do not actually realize the fabled equality of Cronus' reign. He states, "[It is] most unreasonable for some of us to have too much wealth and live in luxury and not share what they have with those who are poorer than they while others are dying of hunger. . . . I hear the poets saying that things were not like that in old times." Lucian suggests that, instead of having a few days of silly frivolity, Cronus should abolish the current "inequality" and make "the good things accessible to everyone" (19). Specifically, Lucian suggests that Cronus should compel the rich to reach into "their bushels of gold" and "throw down a measure for us all" (21).

In addition to the annual celebration in December, certain institutions in the Roman economy stood as reminders of the golden age. In his *Roman Questions*, Plutarch offers the following explanation for why the Temple of Saturn was used as the public treasury: "When Saturn was king there was no greed [*πλεονεξία*] or injustice among men, but good faith and justice" (42 [Babbitt, LCL]). Macrobius offers a similar explanation:

⁵⁴ See Ausonius, *Eclagues* 23.15–16; Horace, *Sat.* 2.7.4–5; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 60.19; Seneca, *Ep.* 47.10–16; Lucian, *Sat.* 5; Tertullian, *Idol.* 10.

⁵⁵ This passage was brought to my attention by van der Horst, "Hellenistic Parallels," 60.

⁵⁶ Macrobius also states that in the golden age of Saturn, "The distinction between slavery and freedom did not yet exist, as is made plain by the fact that slaves are allowed complete license during the Saturnalia" (*Saturnalia* 1.7.26 [Kaster, LCL]).

⁵⁷ This passage was brought to my attention by van der Horst, "Hellenistic Parallels," 60.

The Romans wanted the temple of Saturn to be the treasury, because it is said that when he dwelt in Italy no theft was committed in his territory, or else because in his reign no one held private property. . . . Hence the money belonging in common to the people was placed in his temple, because under his rule all men had all things in common. (*Saturnalia* 1.8.3 [Kaster, LCL])

In the same passage cited above, Plutarch also explains that Saturn's rule was characterized by "abundant harvests"; thus the market-day, held every eight days, was "considered sacred to Saturn."

The golden age also featured prominently in political propaganda and critique. One poet extolled the justice, peace, and abundance of Nero's early reign by insisting, "The days of Saturn have returned" (*Einsiedeln Eclogues* 2.23–34 [Duff, LCL]).⁵⁸ On the other hand, Suetonius mentions a far less satisfied poet who, after lambasting Tiberius as a "cruel and merciless man," states, "You, O Caesar, have altered the golden ages of Saturn; for while you are alive, they will always be iron" (*Tib.* 59 [Rolfe, LCL]). Plutarch writes of the Athenian statesman Cimon, "He made his home in the city a general public residence for his fellow citizens, and on his estates in the country allowed even the stranger to take and use the choicest of the ripened fruits. . . . Thus, in a certain fashion, he restored to human life the fabled communism [*κοινωνία*] of the age of Cronus" (*Cim.* 10 [Perrin, LCL]). Philo also references the golden age in evaluating the early reign of Caligula. While describing the equality and prosperity which characterized the time, Philo exclaims, "Indeed, the life under Saturn, pictured by the poets, no longer appeared to be a fabled story" (*Embassy* 2 [Colson, LCL]).

Philo's familiarity with the utopian ideal is evident throughout his works, particularly in his description of the Essenes.⁵⁹ Philo states that the kinship all people naturally share "has been put to confusion by the triumph of malignant covetousness [*πλεονεξία*], which has wrought estrangement instead of affinity and enmity instead of friendship." The Essenes, however, have been able to reclaim this kinship by ridding

⁵⁸ Another poet wrote, "Amid untroubled peace, the Golden Age springs to a second birth" (Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogue* 1.42). Translators J. Wright Duff and Arnold M. Duff present evidence that both poems were composed in praise of Nero. *Minor Latin Poets Volume I* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 211, 319.

⁵⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1:1027; David L. Mealand, "Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II–IV," *JTS* (1977): 98–99. See also Philo, *Posterity* 1.116–19; *Moses* 1.313, 324.

themselves of all “inducements to covetousness [πλεονεξία],” for they “do not hoard gold and silver or acquire great slices of land” (*Good Person* 76–79 [Colson, LCL]). In fact, they do not “have any private property.” Instead, “they put everything together into the public stock and enjoy the benefit of them all in common.” As a result, while they live frugally without luxury, they have “food in abundance” (*Hypothetica* 11.4–11 [Colson, LCL]). In language far more reminiscent of Seneca’s ninetieth epistle than the War Scroll (1QM), Philo states, “As for darts, javelins, daggers, or the helmet, breastplate or shield, you could not find a single manufacturer of them, nor, in general, any person making weapons or engines or plying any industry concerned with war” (*Good Person* 77–78). Josephus also, in describing the Essenes, emphasizes elements which are reminiscent of the golden age. He states that they owned no slaves, devoted themselves “solely to agricultural labor,” and held their possessions in common (*Ant.* 18.5 [Feldman, LCL]).

In conclusion, the antithesis between greed and equality which Malherbe notes in Dio Chrysostom’s discourse is a common theme in Greco-Roman utopian thought. Of course, discussions of the golden age do not always include this theme. For example, while in *Saturnalia* Lucian discusses the golden age as a time of sharing instead of hoarding (see above), in another reference to the golden age he simply mentions that crops grew of their own accord, without the need of manual labor.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, while Greco-Roman utopian thought certainly includes other elements, the antithesis between greed and equality remains an important component. We turn now to consider the extent to which Greco-Roman utopian conceptions influenced Luke.

Luke and the Golden Age

In Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37, Luke describes the community life of the first Christians, stating that they held their possessions in common. As Richard I. Pervo notes, “Similarities in theme and diction between [these passages] and Greco-Roman utopian thought are widely recognized.”⁶¹ Johnson also points to OT echoes in these passages and rightly cautions against the assumption that Luke “is simply portraying the Christian community as a philosophic school”; nevertheless, he still agrees that

⁶⁰ Lucian, *Rhet. praec.* 8.

⁶¹ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 90. See also Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 8–9; Mealand, “Community of Goods.”

the Hellenistic utopian ideal influenced Luke’s depiction.⁶² Given the prominence of the golden age in Greco-Roman literature, when writers such as Philo, Josephus, and Luke “were commending the customs and practices of their religion to those for whom they wrote in Greek, it is only to be expected that they should portray members of a close knit Jewish sect as fulfilling some of the Greek Utopian ideals.”⁶³

Furthermore, in addition to the widely noted connections between the Greco-Roman utopian ideal and Luke’s language of communal sharing, Acts 2:46 contains another echo of the golden age which has been overlooked. In this verse, Luke states that the Christians ate their meals together *ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει καὶ ἀφελότητι καρδίας*. The word *ἀφελότης*, which is quite rare, occurs nowhere else in the NT or LXX. Modern translations offer a wide range of interpretations including “generosity” (ESV, NRSV, NJB), “sincerity” (NASB, NIV), and “humbleness” (NET, HCSB). However, the standard reference works, including BDAG, *PGL*, *LSJ*, and *MM*, all agree that *ἀφελότης* means “simplicity,” citing its usage in the extant Greek literature.⁶⁴ C. K. Barrett also notes that the Vulgate translates *ἀφελότης* with *simplicitas*.⁶⁵ To this we should add that the Syriac Peshitta renders *ἀφελότης* with the word *ܐܦܠܘܬܝܬܐ*, which also means “simplicity.”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, despite this unanimous evidence, commentators routinely point to the phrase *ἐν ἀπλότῃτι καρδίας* (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22) and allow the NT usage of the more common term *ἀπλότης* to dictate their interpretation of *ἀφελότης* (note especially Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, 13).⁶⁷ Ernst Haenchen asserts that in Acts 2:46, “The more sonorous *ἐν*

⁶² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (Mishawaka, MI: Scholars, 1977), 200; Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 119.

⁶³ Mealand, “Community of Goods,” 98.

⁶⁴ W. Bauer, “*ἀφελότης*,” BDAG 155; H. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. Jones, “*ἀφελότης*,” *LSJ* 288; G. Lampe, “*ἀφελότης*,” *PGL* 274; J. Moulton and Milligan, “*ἀφελότης*,” *MM* 95–96.

⁶⁵ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 171.

⁶⁶ Michael Sokoloff, “*ܐܦܠܘܬܝܬܐ*,” *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 189.

⁶⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 74; David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 164; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 24; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A*

ἀφελότητι καρδίας stands for the more usual ἐν ἀπλότητι καρδίας. Elsewhere too, Luke preferred longer to shorter expressions, even when they were not fully synonymous with what was meant.⁶⁸ However, the notion that ἀφελότητι is “more sonorous” than ἀπλότητι is rather subjective, and Haenchen offers no evidence to support his claim that Luke prefers length to precision. In any case, we are simply not justified in adopting entirely unattested meanings of ἀφελότης on the basis of the usage of a different word by different authors in different contexts. The word ἀφελότης means “simplicity,” and unless we have decisive contextual evidence that such a meaning is impossible in Acts 2:46, we must assume that Luke meant what he said. Moreover, the statement, “They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart” (NKJV), makes perfect sense in the context of Acts 2. As noted above, one of the most common elements in descriptions of the golden age is simplicity. Writers envision a time when humankind dwelt together in harmony, eschewing all luxury and enjoying the simple but abundant blessings of the good earth. Thus we have no need to invent arbitrary translations such as “generosity of heart” to make sense of Luke’s language.

A final point must be made here. Since Luke draws upon the ideal of a bygone utopian age, Eckhard Plümacher asserts that he is using “ein erbauliches Schema der antiken Literatur” to describe the “unwiederholbaren Anfängen der Kirche.” He suggests that Luke “schildert sozusagen das Saturnische Zeitalter der Kirche.”⁶⁹ Likewise, Johnson states, “A Hellenistic reader would recognize in Luke’s description the sort of ‘foundation story’ that was rather widespread in Hellenistic literature.”⁷⁰ From this Johnson concludes, “Luke is making a statement about ‘how things were in the primordial beginning’ . . . Luke is not proposing this picture as a concrete example to be imitated.”⁷¹

However, the fact that Luke echoes descriptions of a bygone utopian era does not mean that he considers the situation of Acts 2 and 4 to be “unwiederholbaren.” As noted above, Philo echoes descriptions of the

Commentary (trans. Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 192; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 59.

⁶⁸ Haenchen, *Acts*, 192. The same suggestion is made in Conzelmann, *Acts*, 24.

⁶⁹ Eckhard Plümacher, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller: Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 18.

⁷⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 62.

⁷¹ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 128–29.

golden age in his account of the Essenes, but he is obviously not providing a “foundation story.” Moreover, the so-called “unwiederholbaren Anfängen” described by Luke evidently continued long after Pentecost. The *Didache*, an early compendium of basic Christian teaching for new converts, states, “You shall not turn away from someone in need, but shall share everything with your brother and not claim that anything is your own” (4.8 [Holmes]).⁷² In an apology to pagans, Justin Martyr confesses, “We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to every one in need.”⁷³ Tertullian likewise claims, “We . . . have no hesitation about sharing property. All is common among us—except our wives” (*Apol.* 11–12 [Glover, LCL]). If such statements did not contain at least some truth, they would hardly make for effective apologies. Furthermore, Lucian, a quite hostile source, describes the Christians as follows: “Their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another . . . Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property” (*Peregr.* 13 [Harmon, LCL]).⁷⁴ Note also that in 2 Cor 8:13–15, Paul calls for “equality” among believers.

Johnson argues that many passages in Luke–Acts assume private property, and he is certainly correct. He is mistaken, however, to conclude from this fact that the behavior described in Acts 2 and 4 is not presented by Luke as the normative behavior of the church.⁷⁵ The early Christians simply saw no contradiction between the notion of private property and the confession that they held all things in common. Immediately before stating, “All is common among us,” Tertullian describes the church’s collection for the poor: “Every man once a month brings some modest coin—or whenever he wishes, and only if he does wish, and if he can; for nobody is compelled; it is a voluntary offering” (*Apol.* 5). Justin, after explaining that Christians “bring what we have into a common stock,” explains the weekly collection for the poor as follows: “They who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit.”⁷⁶ The *Didache*, after forbidding converts to claim anything as “your own,” prescribes giving an amount which “seems right to you” (13.8).

In summary, Luke is evidently familiar with the mythic golden age in which humankind shared their possessions equally instead of greedily

⁷² Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 246.

⁷³ Justin, *1 Apol.* 14 (ANF 1:167).

⁷⁴ The passages from Justin, Tertullian, and Lucian were brought to my attention by Keener, *Acts*, 1028.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 129. See also *ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁶ Justin, *1 Apol.* 67 (ANF 1:186).

hoarding them. Furthermore, Luke knows his readers are also familiar with the golden age and thus describes the behavior of the disciples in Acts with language which echoes this ideal.

Conclusion

This study attempted to answer the following question: should the command to sell possessions in Luke 12:33 be interpreted in light of the absolute divestiture commanded in Luke 18:22 or in light of the partial divestiture described in the early chapters of Acts? Our findings may be summarized as follows:

1. The extant literature bears witness to a prominent antithesis in first century thought between the vice of greed, expressed through hoarding possessions, and the ideal of equality, expressed through sharing possessions.
2. Luke's depiction of the church in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37 was influenced by this ideal of equality. The life envisioned here is not a life of poverty, but a life of simplicity and sufficiency.
3. In Luke's paraphrase of the Q material in Luke 12:33, the same language used in Acts to describe the ideal of equality is deliberately set in contrast with material which exemplifies the vice of greed (Luke 12:15–21).

The command, "Sell your possessions," in Luke 12:33 should therefore be understood to prohibit hoarding, not mandate poverty.⁷⁷

What then of Jesus' words in Luke 14:33 and 18:22? First, the fact that Luke explicitly specifies "all" in these passages makes the absence of "all" in Luke 12:33 rather striking.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the inclusion of "all" in Luke 14:33 and 18:22 is easily explained. Consider the context of Luke 14:33 where Jesus says, "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple," only after saying, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus' words are shocking, but the point is obvious: allegiance to

⁷⁷ Compare with Pss. Sol. 5:16 ("If a man has too much, he sins" [Atkinson, NETS]), and Tobit 4:16 ("Give all your surplus to charity"). Note also that 1 Enoch 97:8–10 provides a close parallel with Luke 12:16–21, though in 1 Enoch, the emphasis is on the unjust acquisition of wealth.

⁷⁸ So Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 129; Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God*, 182–83; David P. Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (Linz, Austria: A. Fuchs, 1983), 153.

Jesus must trump everything else (see Matt 10:37). No sensible reader walks away from Luke-Acts thinking that Jesus literally requires her to hate her children. While all disciples must be *willing* to break with family for the sake of Jesus, not all are required to actually do so, for some have family members who also love Jesus. In the same way, while Luke 14:33 clearly requires all disciples to be willing to sell everything, there is no reason to conclude from this text that all disciples are actually called to sell everything. Just as the reader knows that Peter did not hate his mother-in-law (Luke 4:38), the reader also knows that Zacchaeus did not give everything away.

Secondly, consider the context of Luke 18:22. In this passage, the rich man, like Levi (Luke 5:27–28), is called to drop everything and follow Jesus full-time. This same call is simply not given to other characters in Luke, such as Zacchaeus. Ben Witherington argues, "For Luke, Jesus's specific teaching to the rich young ruler is broadened and applied to Jesus's followers in general. Accordingly, we must assume that Luke did not think that Jesus's advice to the rich young ruler was a special or exceptional case."⁷⁹ This is certainly correct, but Luke 12:33 shows us precisely how the command is "broadened and applied." The injunction which applies to all Christians is this: sell your superfluous possessions. For those like Zacchaeus who are called to be honest businesspersons, only some possessions may be superfluous. On the other hand, for those like Levi called to be itinerant evangelists, all possessions may be superfluous. Each reader of Luke-Acts who seeks to follow Christ must discern which of her own possessions are necessary for her calling and which are superfluous.

In summary, this study sought a satisfactory interpretation of Luke 12:33 which preserves both the unity of Luke-Acts and the radical force of Jesus' command. By attending to the Greco-Roman context of Luke-Acts, as well as the literary context of Luke 12:33, I have argued that the command, *πωλήσατε τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ὑμῶν*, should be read as a command to sell superfluous possessions. Thus Luke 12:33 is not inconsistent with other passages in Luke-Acts, for it does not forbid disciples to own property and conduct business. Furthermore, the command cannot be dismissed as hyperbole. According to Luke, Jesus really does forbid all who would follow him from retaining superfluous possessions. He really does command that such possessions be sold and the money given to the poor. Affluent Christians living in a world of poverty cannot ignore these words.

⁷⁹ Ben Witherington, *Jesus and Money: A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 94.