The Rich Young Ruler or the Generous Centurion: Early Christianity and Worldly Possessions

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The title and subtitle of my presentation need some explanation. The latter ("Early Christianity and Worldly Possessions") is perhaps clearer and also more grandiose. However, I do not intend to cover the broad topic of attitudes toward possessions in the early Christian period for that would require more time than I have. Instead, the subtitle helps focus the discussion of two important NT texts. Also, I will not do a full exegesis of these but will examine them in relation to possessions and the mandate, if any, which they warrant. In other words, what do these texts say about worldly possessions and what can a modern, educated reader learn from them.

The title ("The Rich Young Ruler or the Generous Centurion") refers to two well-known NT passages, one from the triple gospel tradition (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and another from early Christian lore and incorporated in the Acts of the Apostles. The first is better known as "the Rich Young Man" and the second as "the Cornelius" episode. Both deal with persons of means and both have something to say about possessions and attitudes toward possessions. Clearly, the plot of the first story and the narrator's point of view in the second make these texts and their message antithetical. The first is told to give all away in order to follow Jesus and the second, before being admitted into the Christian community as the first Gentile convert, is praised by the narrator of Acts for his generosity.

If I might anticipate some of the concerns of the presentation I would pose the following questions. Is there a Christian approach to riches or an ideal Christian way as regards possessions? Is there one ideal for some and a lesser status for others? In other words, what does the New Testament, more specifically, the Jesus and early community tradition say about possessions, their use, and their relation to discipleship and "inheriting eternal life"?

For my presentation I have chosen two paradigmatic NT passages. The first, the RYM, is chosen from the Jesus tradition. It is a text that deals with an episode in the Master's life, a story that has been told and retold, written down and incorporated by Mark into a vita of Jesus and

later edited and incorporated into further lives of the Master, those of Matthew, Luke and the not-very-well-known Gospel according to the Hebrews. **[see handout: RYM]** The title of the paper, however, reflects the Lukan version of the story, "The Rich Young Ruler," since the second passage, reflecting community lore, is also taken from Luke, i.e., Luke's story of the early years. Thus, we will be able to examine passages that relate both to Jesus' life and to that of early disciples. For methodological reasons, therefore, texts from different traditions and periods and yet by one writer have been chosen. If the RYM passage forms the basis of many later discussions of possessions and discipleship, it should be noted that it is problematic on several counts. It occurs in the never-to-be-repeated life of the Master and is ignored in the earliest church tradition (Acts, NT epistles, and the early Church Fathers). Only in Acts, following the gospels, does one find an attempt to discuss community of goods. Is the RYM episode, therefore, an unrealizable ideal for the Christian then and now, unless one opts for a monastic or community structure? What is the meaning and function of this episode? Why was it remembered, included in the Master's life by successive writers; and then why forgotten in the next few centuries? How does this text and its interpretation relate to what one reads about the early Christian communities?

This presentation then has three parts **[see handout: Outline]**: 1) The first consists of a discussion and exegesis of the RYM passage in its three developmental levels: the Jesus, early church, and gospel levels. An attempt is made methodologically to expose the meaning of the episode as it made its way from the presumed Jesus-level, through the early community's use of the episode, to the repeated editing of successive gospel writers. 2) The second part focuses on Acts and more particularly the Cornelius episode to discern what early Christians thought or presumed about worldly possessions. 3) Following a few general observations about Christian beginnings, the movement's membership, and its various communities' attitudes toward Roman culture and worldly possessions, it will be the function of this part to offer some overall observations and conclusions.

1. The Rich Young Man (Mark 10 par) & the Gospel Tradition **[text on handout RYM]**

Both according to accepted methods of biblical exegesis and according to the 1964 Vatican document ("The Historical Truth of the

Gospels" [in Fitzmyer, Catechism]), one is duty bound to examine a text in its developmental context. That is, one must employ proper methods of exegesis (source, form, and redactional analysis) in order to understand the material's three levels of meaning or Sitz im Leben. The goal therefore of this first section will be that of examining what the RYM passage means first in the gospels where it appears (how it functions in the stories and theologies of these writers), then to inquire about the early, pre-gospel communities' use of this episode (why it was remembered and how it shaped early thought), and finally to speculate about the passage's shape, meaning, and function in Jesus' life. Basic to this methodological perspective is the realization that thought, culture, and writing are complex segments of reality and that they are intimately interrelated. What Jesus thought and said back there in an oral setting to a Palestinian audience was remembered, retold, and reapplied in new later, cultural and language settings, and finally incorporated into lives of Jesus by various community leaders as they reflected on his meaning in their lives. Thus, elements of the Jesus tradition (its stories, sayings, and claims) are rarely simple data of a bygone age; instead they are tiny elements of a broader puzzle whose meaning is multifaceted.

First, we turn our attention to the question of sources. Following the classic solution of the Synoptic problem, namely why Matthew, Mark, and Luke have so much in common in terms of order, content, and language, we insist that Mark is the source of both Matthean and Lukan versions of the RYM episode [see handout: RYM]. They have borrowed both the text (very literally) from their Markan source, introducing some minor changes, and have set this episode in a setting similar to that of their Markan source as well, i.e., in all three Jesus receives and blesses children prior to the episode and in all three there follows a discussion about riches, the kingdom, and those who have left everything to follow Jesus.

As regards Mark's source, little can be said with certainty. The episode seems to have been an independent tradition edited by Mark to fit into a journey structure. From the beginning of 10:1 ("he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan") to 11:1 ("they drew near to Jerusalem"), Jesus and his disciples are on the road. Owing to a few infelicities of organization (Jesus withdraws to a "house" in 10:10 for private comment to the disciples), it is necessary for the author to resume the journey language at the beginning of the story: "as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up..." (10:17). The journey motif then is Markan as is the placing within that journey of the RYM

episode and its subsequent discussion of possessions. Beyond this, only a form and redactional study of the Markan version will furnish more information.

What then do the form critics say about this pericope? As few recent scholars fail to point out, the two great form critics, M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann, classify this narrative as a pronouncement story (i.e., paradigm or apophthegm). A "pronouncement story" might be defined as

> a brief narrative which presents an encounter between Jesus and someone. The setting is general and vague; the details, sufficient only for telling the story. And finally, its distinctive feature is a culminating statement or pronouncement of Jesus. [paraphrase from Kee, Understanding, 84]

Thus, the story exists to highlight or provide a setting for the dominical saying. What scholars fail to point out or to emphasize is that these two scholars agree on little else in regard to the RYM passage.

Dibelius classifies this passage as a paradigm "of a less pure type," for it is an exception to the rule "of brevity and simplicity" (it adds the details of "running," falling at the feet," eager homage, and Jesus' affection for the man) and more importantly that the story's main interest and conclusion is Jesus' saying in v. 25: "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Following this, other sayings of Jesus are "worked up (by Mark?) into a little dialogue." For Dibelius, therefore, the focus of the episode is that of "riches and the impossibility of buying or working one's way into the kingdom. [Dibelius, Tradition, 43, 50, 56]

Bultmann on the contrary calls this episode "a genuine apophthegm" which "is accurately constructed and conceived as a unity." Vv. 23f would constitute supplementary material which was joined to the RYM episode prior to Markan composition. Bultmann notes that the key saying of the pronouncement story is not v. 25, as Dibelius claimed, but v. 21b: "you lack one thing, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The focus for Bultmann, then, is not so much "riches" as riches and their bearing on discipleship. [Bultmann, History, 21, 48]

From the outset then we have very different opinions about the character, shape, and focus of the RYM episode in its primitive context. It may have been focused on riches and their relation to entry into the kingdom (Dibelius) or on riches and their relation to discipleship

(Bultmann). So what does redaction criticism say about the changes this episode underwent at the hands of the gospel writers?

First we focus on Matthean redaction and use of the RYM episode. Matthew, as opposed to Luke, has modified the Markan discussion about who is good by simply not calling Jesus "good teacher." More significant for our purpose, Matthew transfers the adjective "good" to "good deed," speaks of "having eternal life" in place of the Markan "inheriting eternal life," adds "if you would enter life," modifies the Markan "know the commandments" to "keep the commandments." The "entering" terminology emphasizes continuity with the following discussion about a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven (vv. 23-24), that of "having eternal life" draws a closer connection with the verse about "having treasure in heaven" (v. 21), that about "keeping the commandments" forms a parallel with the man's later claim "all these I have observed" (20), and the Markan term of "inheritance," first omitted in the young man's question, reappears at the end of the discussion in v. 29: "inherit eternal life." These changes along with several others indicate Matthew's special perspective upon and use of the RYM episode. These added modifications are: the man's added question ("which," i.e., commandment, in v. 18), Matthew's crucial addition of a new commandment ("you shall love your neighbor as yourself" in v. 19), the further modification "what do I still lack?" (v. 20), and the important qualification of Matthew: "if you would be perfect" (v. 21).

The key therefore to Matthew's use of this episode is that the love-commandment becomes the principle of interpretation of the Law on the one hand and that imitation or following of Christ on the other becomes the source of a new or greater righteousness by which one gains, enters, or inherits eternal life. **[Barth (in Bornkamm, Tradition, 104)]** The rich young man is not faulted for his behavior nor denied righteousness but, in his awareness of his own shortfall, is invited to perfection or a greater righteousness by a more intense love of neighbor and fellowship with Jesus (i.e., sell, give to poor and follow me). To explain this Matthean idea of perfection or greater righteousness, we would remember what Jesus says in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). In Matthew the old and the new are always required, like the householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (13:52). In the present case the old is the righteousness that comes from observing the commandments, the new is the greater righteousness, the perfection which comes from an

even more demanding or greater love of neighbor and an imitation of the lowly Master whose life of suffering was God's miracle. The RYM episode in Matthew is not about riches really but about the greater righteousness that Christian discipleship requires as the means to eternal life.

What about the Lukan version of the story? Here too there are some modifications of the Markan episode, though almost all of these are minor and of stylistic rather than theological import. Several, however, merit our attention: addition of "still" in "one thing you still lack" (v. 22), change of "give to the poor" to "distribute to the poor," and insistence: "sell all that you have." The last-mentioned contrasts neatly with Luke's remark that "he was very rich" (v. 23).

In more general terms, Luke chapter 18 is designed to answer the question of 18:8:

> who will be found faithful when the Son of Man comes? in other words, [the chapter] deals with the qualifications required for entry to the kingdom and demonstrates in a radical manner that entry is on the basis of divine grace and human faith. **[Marshall, Luke, 677]**

There follow "qualification" episodes: that of the tax collector and Pharisee, that of the little children, our passage concerning the Rich Young Ruler and the disciples, that of Bartimaeus, and, on into chapter 19, that of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Thus, Luke has retained the Markan story along with its interpretation, though from the more general Lukan context and theology, we can say that the episode's "purpose is to reinforce [the gospel's] earlier teaching that the way to the kingdom is by loving God and one's neighbor [i.e., the two great commandments, 10:25]. Luke shows concretely that this is realized by obedience to the commandments and limitless charity." **[Marshall, 683]** One can see why Luke says "distribute to the poor" rather than simply "give to the poor." Luke insists here as in other parts of Luke-Acts that attachment to riches makes entry into the kingdom impossible, for one cannot serve both God and riches/mammon (16:13). Luke is interested less in riches and poverty, than in "the disciple's right use of material possessions." **[Fitzmyer, Luke, 247]**

What then of the Markan version of this episode? Since there is no extant source for us to judge Markan redaction a different approach is required. If Bultmann, as earlier noted, concluded that Mark 10:17-30 was shaped during the pre-Markan or oral period, more recent scholarship tends to attribute the connecting of these pericopes to the gospel writer.

After surveying the various Markan linking devices and typical locutions, H.C. Kee concludes that "the passage is composed of two pericopes (10.17-22 and 28-31), with editorial material and detached sayings stitched together by Markan editorial technique." **[Kee, Mark, 39]** Mark then would have brought together the RYM episode and other sayings of Jesus by which the reader was to interpret the former.

Jesus' sayings in vv. 25 and 27 are crucial to this gospel's interpretation of the episode. Thus, Mark concludes: the man did not own his possessions but was possessed by them, for not even the rich ("whose prosperity is usually...regarded as a sign of blessing" **[Marshall, 688]**) can gain entrance into the kingdom. Entry is the result of a divine gift (v. 27). Mark, however, does not advocate "an absolute denunciation of wealth...[but makes] a relative judgment that commitment to following Jesus must have a radical priority over devotion to one's possessions." **[Kee, Mark, 154]** Community problems (clearly stated in the interpretation of the parable of the sower, 4:19) called for a strong lesson about false reliance on possessions and human achievement rather than reliance on God's action in the believer.

What about the early church and its use of the RYM episode? It is my guess that the story originally stood as a simple response to the question of "inheriting eternal life" and Jesus' answer: "sell, give to the poor, and obtain treasure in heaven." The early community would have added the discipleship theme: "come, follow me" (v. 21). Just as the call stories concerning Jesus' early followers took on the eschatological tone of absolute surrender in the telling ("and immediately they left their nets and followed him"--1:18f), so other stories became paradigmatic of the Master's call to itinerant preaching. In the hands of Mark or preferably of earlier story tellers this episode became a sad reminder of failure in discipleship; "he went away sorrowful." He heeded neither the urgency nor the radical character of following a teacher who had no place to lay his head nor any Master but God. Such a negative conclusion to the story also allowed Mark later to find an excellent contrast to the Twelve who did follow.

In the context of Jesus' ministry this story has a striking resemblance to that of the great commandment passage as it appears in Mark 12:28-34. ["plot"] In fact it is this passage which allows us, with some confidence, to speak of the shape, content, and message of the original RYM story. Interestingly the point of departure of one (the RYM's "inheriting eternal life" or "entry into the kingdom of God") becomes the point of arrival of the other (the great commandment's "you are not far

from the kingdom of God"). Both are focused on adherence to the commandments and both pay special attention to the One God. While the great commandment text delineates clearly the duty to God and neighbor, that of the RYM, if it focuses on the commandments which relate to the neighbor, returns finally to duty to both God and neighbor. Giving the proceeds of/from one's possessions to the poor underscores the duty to neighbor; and proper treatment of possessions stresses one's dependence upon God. In both cases, the scribe and the rich man, there is a positive reaction on Jesus' part, either Jesus is said to love him or to recognize the wisdom of his answer. On the Jesus-level, the RYM episode, therefore, demonstrates once again Jesus' concern that God and neighbor, not himself, be the focus of religious devotion and action. **[Donahue, "Theology," JBL 101 (1982)]** The RYM episode's focus then is not the giving up of possessions (not even to follow Jesus) but one's attitude toward possessions, i.e., their use with the neighbor's welfare in view. Citing another passage from the Jesus tradition, one might quote Jesus as saying: "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." **[Matt 6:21/Luke 12:34]**

We therefore conclude from our analysis of the RYM episode that none of its NT usages advocates renunciation of possessions as an ideal for Christian life or discipleship. The passage is put at the service of the several evangelists' conception of salvation or inheriting eternal life, i.e., its source and nature as divine gift and its inheritance or entry as a result of complete dependence upon or submission to God (via Jesus) through care and concern for others. At all levels of interpretation possessions and their use become the litmus test of one's devotion to and dependence upon God. Neither the rich nor the poor can save themselves, this is possible only with God. **[Mark 10:24, 27]**

2. The Generous Centurion & Early Community Tradition

The graphic and hyperbolic language of the gospel tradition has often led biblical readers, especially as they focused on texts such as the RYM and the call texts, to do less than justice to the community's tradition vis-a-vis possessions. Renunciation of goods is in effect not the reality one encounters even in the gospels themselves; disciples have homes; rich women minister to Jesus' needs; there is no visible means of income for Jesus' traveling band. Further, when one examines the non-gospel literature, especially the Acts of the Apostles and various NT letters, one encounters an interesting and varied situation.

The RYM passage itself recedes into the background. What had made sense as a radical example of dependence upon God (rather than on possessions) and of love of neighbor became a paraenetic text for teaching about discipleship and about the nature of salvation. An episode that found its original and meaningful setting in the life of an itinerant or wondering preacher, such as Jesus was, became less appealing and indeed offered a poor model to a growing, diversified community. Only Luke in the initial chapters of Acts speaks of a community of goods; we will be back to this issue later. What must claim our attention initially is the attitude(s) which the early community adopted toward worldly possessions as it encountered the Hellenistic world.

Not only Luke in Acts but also other writers such as Paul, the authors of James, 1 Peter, and Hebrews, the Pastor, and John the writer of the Apocalypse adopted or assumed, minimally, a position toward worldly possessions, namely, "there is a neutral attitude towards wealth and possessions in the NT: neither prosperity nor poverty is a value." **[Talbert, Luke, 173]** These writers had at their disposal three distinct OT approaches toward wealth and poverty. 1) The classic Deuteronomic attitude shared by some Wisdom circles viewed affluence as the result of righteousness and poverty as the wages of wickedness. 2) "In other circles affluence was associated with evil, while the poor could be regarded as the righteous whom God vindicates" (the prophets and some Wisdom circles). And a third view held neither as ideal (both offered pitfalls); instead possessions in this view were a practical matter that should be governed by need. **[see Paul in Phil 4:10-13; Talbert, 173]**

The first attitude, that wealth signals righteousness, is routinely rejected by NT writers and is clearly the background for Jesus' statement and the disciples' response in Mark 10. Jesus' statement about the difficulty, even impossibility, that a rich person enter the kingdom of God brings about the question: "then who can be saved?" If God's favored ones, the wealthy, cannot be saved, who can? Of course, Mark insists with v. 27 that only God can save a human being, whether rich or poor.

One often hears that the NT, especially Luke, opts for the second; wealth is associated with evil and poverty with righteousness or with God's predilection. Such an impression is off the mark. Indeed, the NT, and especially Luke, is both critical and often condemning of the wealthy and sympathetic toward the poor, but this attitude owes to the reality of the subject; the rich (who proverbially rely on wealth not God) need radical advice and warning, while the poor (oppressed, rejected, and

neglected by definition) require all the help and assistance they can get. Now, to turn this around and make it a theological principle, is to falsify both the scriptural texts and theological inquiry.

Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, presents a paradigm of how the early church coped with worldly possessions. By writing about the early years of the movement, Luke was forced to consider many issues the community faced, not the least being a presentation of its structures as it evolved in geographical and numerical terms.

> Luke employs three ecclesial models: a) that of the idealized Jerusalem community of the early chapters, b) that centered around Antioch and its missionary activity, and c) that reflected in the Miletus speech to the Ephesian elders...and look[ing] forward beyond the apostolic period to Luke's time. [Richard, Jesus, 176-77]

Each of these structural models offers a distinct approach to worldly possessions.

The first of these, the community of goods, has certainly received the greatest attention over the years. It is clear to most recent scholars that this is a Lukan construct to portray the early never-to-be-repeated years as an idyllic time, like all beginnings and all ideals, but one which, in the real world, that of the ambivalent human condition, is doomed to failure; witness the greed of Sapphira and Ananias, note the intensification of opposition in Jerusalem, ending in Stephen's death and subsequent dispersal of the community, and remember the murmuring among the Hellenists "against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution;" all of this takes place within chapters 4-7 of Acts. Luke's portrayal of the early church and its community of goods owes more to a theory of origins and of ideal fellowship than to history. Goods are not evil but are held in common for the good of all, whether in an idealized or a socialized society.

The second structure, that of the missionary church, is never spelled out in Acts, though hospitality forms an essential element of missionary support for Paul and colleagues on their missionary journeys. Also noted is the work of individual missionaries at their regular trades (Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla as tentmakers [18:3]), and the appointment of elders in the churches. [14:23] There is little by Luke to express how the missionary endeavors were financed or how the individual communities were structured; but it is clear that community of goods no longer obtains. Community members are normal wards of the Roman

state, whose use and dependence upon worldly possessions are presumed.

The third model is less clearly defined for it receives even less attention than the former. In Paul's farewell speech at Ephesus (Acts 20 [vv. 17f]) Luke hints at some of the future problems (in actuality the writer's time) which will surface as the community becomes more structured. Elders will control the communities and will bear the burden of overseeing orthodoxy, of helping the weak, and, contrary to Paul, of receiving payment for their toil. [20:33-35] Here too proper use not the giving up of possessions is in view.

What therefore is Luke's attitude toward possessions in Acts? This brings us to the second crucial text for this presentation, namely, that of the generous centurion or the Cornelius episode. This lengthy text (all of chapter 10 and half of chapter 11 [see handout: Cornelius]) not only plays an important role in Luke's vision of the community's growth but also provides a balanced estimate of Luke's positive approach to riches. We turn therefore to a relatively detailed analysis of the Cornelius episode for the light it sheds both on Luke's attitude toward riches and that of the early community as it confronted the cosmopolitan culture of the Roman masses.

After having recorded the admittance of both Jews and Samaritans into the community, each with an accompanying bestowal of the Spirit (Acts 2 and 8 respectively), Luke presents the Cornelius episode where Gentiles are first accepted into the community. First the narrator offers "simultaneous" vision episodes, Cornelius at Caesarea and Peter at Joppa. There follow joint episodes to bring the parties together; first Cornelius' envoys, after explaining why their master summons him, fetch Peter to Caesarea where Peter, after explaining why he has come, encounters Cornelius. There follows an exchange of speeches, first by Cornelius who retells his vision and then by Peter who tells Cornelius about Jesus of Nazareth. The first part of the episode concludes with a Gentile pentecost. The second act follows and consists of Peter's report in Jerusalem, which responds to the criticism of the circumcision party by recalling his vision, that of Cornelius, and the new pentecost. All then approve because it is neither wise nor possible "to withstand or hinder God" (11:17).

This episode then is both lengthy and surprisingly complex. Both elements alert the Lukan scholar to the important and indeed paradigmatic character of a text in Luke-Acts. Length and complexity of Lukan episodes and thematic ensembles are often a key to the crucial

role these play in the overall narrative; and so it is for the Cornelius story. Now, it is not my intention to attempt an exhaustive treatment of this episode's function in the narrative development of Acts but rather to underscore some of its principal features and emphases as a means of appreciating more fully the author's description of Cornelius as a representative or model Gentile character.

This episode represents the official beginning or opening of the third major mission field, the first being the mission to the Jews, the second that to the Samaritans. All three mission fields are marked by manifestations of the Spirit, i.e., pentecosts; and all three occur in Palestine, i.e., Judea and Samaria. [see Acts 1:8b] As in the other two episodes, both Peter and the other Jerusalem authorities are involved. Among the peculiarities of the Cornelius episode which have a bearing on our discussion are the following: the choice of a Roman centurion as the principal Gentile character, a focus on the man's prayer and almsgiving, a stress on divine initiative throughout the episode, the repetitive character of the themes of hospitality and of the righteous or devout Gentile, in general the threefold telling of many events, and the repeated mention of Cornelius' household (even servants, soldiers, relatives, and close friends).

All of these themes have a bearing on Luke's attitude toward riches. The choice of a centurion as the representative Gentile in this episode is presumably related to and an extension of the Markan episode wherein a Roman centurion in the name of the Roman intended readership confesses Jesus to be Son of God (Markan passion [15:39]). Luke puts this character on the stage to capitalize on the universal reputation of the omnipresent Roman soldier (he was everywhere and therefore could serve as a universal type). At the same time Luke describes the soldier in terms favorable to both Judaism (he is" well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation" and is a God fearer) and also favorable to universal/Gentile piety (a devout man who prays, gives alms, and does what is right and so is acceptable to God).

Of particular concern to us is the threefold statement of Cornelius' prayer and almsgiving and the points of view these represent (this is a contribution of modern literary theory, i.e., study of point of view). The episode begins with the narrator's presentation of Cornelius: he is a man who "gives alms liberally to the people and prays constantly to God" (10:2). Two verses later the same themes are presented in slightly different terminology and representing a different point of view; an angel in a vision tells Cornelius: "your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God" [v. 4]. Still a third time, the themes are noted,

again in slightly different terms: "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God" (v. 31). The speaker this time is Cornelius himself who is recounting his vision to Peter. Thus, we have both the narrator's (Luke's) and divine points of view concerning Cornelius. Further, the two texts conveying the divine point of view vary both in content and context. The first, in terminology reminiscent of OT sacrifice, speaks of prayer and alms ascending (as odor?) as a memorial before God and marks God's acceptance of Cornelius and impartiality toward all flesh. The second (v. 31) further stresses the acceptance and answering of Cornelius' prayer and reward for his almsgiving. The first is conveyed to Cornelius; the second through Cornelius, to Peter. However, lest the second seem self-serving (that Cornelius is calling himself such), Luke prepares earlier for the message by having the Spirit tell Peter: "accompany [Cornelius' envoys] without hesitation; for I have sent them" (10:20; 11:12). Thus, when Cornelius recites his vision, Peter knows it is authentic.

What therefore can we conclude from this analysis of the Cornelius episode about Luke's treatment of possessions? A wealthy, or at least well-to-do centurion is chosen for the paradigmatic Gentile episode. He is the head of a household (twice [10:2; 11:14]) and has servants and soldiers who wait on him [10:7] and do his bidding. Further, through his benefactions he has become "well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation," in fact he is the perfect counterpart of the centurion in Jesus' ministry of whom it is said "he loves our nation and built us our synagogue," Luke 7:5). Cornelius is the man whose almsgiving and devout character is presented by Luke as that of the ideal Gentile. Such a judgment is offered by Luke as God's point of view and the motive for God's intervention in his life. Possessions when rightly employed render a person "acceptable (dektos) to God" (10:35). It is not the giving up of possessions which Luke envisions but the sharing, proper use of, and attitude toward money and goods. "In Luke-Acts the purpose of wealth is found in its being shared" [Talbert, 141] and in the Cornelius episode Luke presents the best the Hellenistic world could offer, one who has but is not possessed by riches and thus one who is also open to God's action. A major Lukan theme is human openness "to see or find God" (Cornelius is such), though, proverbially in Luke, the poor are more open than the rich.

A similar study could be made of other NT writers who adopt what we have called a neutral position vis-a-vis riches. Paul sees money as a means to accomplish his missionary task (Phil 4:10-13) or in the case of

the well-known collection as a means to "remember the poor," as "aid for the saints," or as "being of [reciprocal] service...in material blessings." **[in Gal 2:10 & Rom 15:25, 27, respectively]** The author of Hebrews speaks of Christians as "joyfully accepting the plundering of [their] property" in view of a better and abiding possession (10:34). Others such as the writers of the Pastorals, of Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, especially in their use of household or domestic codes, advise proper and sober use of wealth, even slaves. Of course, one should not forget the biting statements of James concerning the rich who proverbially oppress people, drag them into court, and blaspheme the Christian name (2:6-7). Such statements, however, are consonant with that author's pessimistic vision of the human being as basically duplicitous and almost always subject to the worst human urges. Nonetheless, following good works piety, it is this same author who insists that one employ ones possessions to help the ill-clad and those lacking in daily food.

3. Overall Observations, Summary, & Conclusion

Originally, a discussion labeled: "Christian Beginnings, Its Membership, and Attitudes toward Possessions," was to precede the concluding observations. Owing to the length of the first two parts, I decided to offer a brief statement of that discussion before offering concluding reflections on what our two passages, as typical of NT tradition, say about worldly possessions.

There has been much rethinking lately of our explanation of Christian beginnings. In place of the earlier romantic view on the one hand that most early Christians came from the poor, uneducated, and dispossessed masses and on the other that the church thrived despite and because of incessant persecution by Jews and pagans, (in place of these) modern historical study posits a far different and more sober version of the beginnings. Onomastics (study of the names of early Christians), archaeology, and a closer, more critical reading of both Christian and Roman sources paint a far different picture. Early Christians were not particularly poor and many seem to have come from the working and reasonably well-to-do classes. At Corinth in particular (we know this because Paul offers us such information) the Christians are clearly well-to-do, educated, and socially mobile; they can indulge in public banquets, legal proceedings, the latest hair and dress styles, and employ current, popular, philosophical and religious ideas. Also recent study shows that

persecution, in the sense of pursuing and killing, is rare in the Roman period until we approach the great persecutions prior to the time of Constantine. Alienation not persecution was the major problem of early Christians, for they had to deal with being foreigners in their own society. They, as Christian converts, no longer shared the religious, social, and cultural ideals of their Roman neighbors.

Thus, early Christians in a variety of communities in many different geographical and social milieus were forced to come to grips with the vicissitudes of daily life in the Roman empire. In many cases there was full alienation (the Book of Revelation) but in most cases, apparently, Christians learned to combine their varied heritage to cope with life in their Roman communities. Hospitality, concern for the poor, the widow, the sick, and assistance to fellow believers in need marked the thinking of early Christians both in the NT and later periods. Thus, in the early second century Justin Martyr (Apology 1,67) can say:

> And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widow, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word, takes care of all who are in need. [Talbert, 155]

So much then for what would l have been the third part.

I return then to the basic concerns of this lecture, the attitude(s) of the Jesus tradition toward possessions, especially as exemplified in the RYM episode and the attitudes of the early community as seen in the Cornelius event. The RYM episode was chosen as representing a radical stance within the early tradition which seems to demand complete renunciation. Indeed, there are other passages which support such a stance. I have already mentioned the call-texts where disciples leave all behind to follow the Master; also one can refer to isolated sayings such as Luke 14:33: "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." The RYM however provided us with a broader canvas for a detailed examination.

I might summarize my analysis of the RYM as follows. Beginning with the Jesus level (going the opposite direction of my earlier analysis) we saw that the story of the RYM was a theological one; Jesus' message was that one should depend on God not possessions. In a typical Jewish setting a man expresses his concern about inheriting eternal life. He is directed, in typical Jewish fashion, to the commandments, in this case

those that concern the neighbor. Since he is an upright person Jesus is said to love him; he might have stated here as on another such occasion: "you are not far from the kingdom of God." [12:34] The answer to his quest is found in Jesus' pronouncement: if you are willing to depend entirely on God (the symbol or test is use of goods for the neighbor) then you will inherit eternal life. The message of the episode in its early recitation is a theological one, as happens in so many passages of the Jesus tradition (see especially the "Our Father"; nowhere is Jesus' agency mentioned). Usually Jesus preaches not about himself but about God.

At the oral or early church level we presume that the story receives a christological interpretation; in fact, this is what Christian faith demands and postulates, an agency role for Jesus. It is particularly the discipleship theme which is added ("come, follow me"). This would be consistent with other call stories. A clue to this is the uneasy tension between vv. 21 and 22, that "Jesus loved him" on the one hand and that "he went away" on the other. This is a romantically, sad ending and points to preaching as its origin. Besides, pronouncement stories do not usually record Jesus' reactions and this one has the character of later expansion, namely, the sad realization that many do not heed the call of the Master. Further, Mark 12:34 ("you are not far from the kingdom of God") bears this out.

On the Markan level we see a return to the original theme of dependence on God but now with the added dimension of the danger of riches. This last concern has emerged because of the expanded story of the man's sad refusal. Mark seizes this opportunity to add two dominical sayings: one that speaks of the impossibility of the rich to save themselves (the camel & the needle's eye [v. 25]) and one that insists that only God can grant salvation [v. 27]; neither the rich nor the poor can save themselves. Additionally, to the man with possessions who, sadly, did not follow, Mark contrasts the twelve who, not without self-interest, did follow Jesus.

Matthew takes over the Markan text and makes several changes to highlight a new theme, that of Christian perfection or greater righteousness. The Christian must adopt the demands of the Jewish Law, understood as love of God and neighbor, and in addition must imitate the Master; this is the way to eternal life. The role of possessions in this view is manifold: fellowship with Jesus has its requirements, as does love of neighbor; these in their turn reveal dependence upon God rather than possessions.

Finally, Luke borrows the Markan text, makes few changes, and basically accepts the source's interpretation. This episode for Luke, along

with several surrounding pericopes in chapters 18-19, make concrete the conditions for entry into the kingdom: reliance on God rather than self (the Publican & Pharisee), childlike faith and trust (Jesus & the children), proper attitude toward God, neighbor, and possessions (RYM & the twelve), following Jesus as he goes to Jerusalem (the healing of blind Bartimaeus), and the disciple's proper use of wealth (the Zacchaeus story).

The RYM episode then has undergone various changes in the tradition's evolution and proper interpretation requires recognition of its complexity and richness of meaning. On the other hand, the analysis of the Cornelius episode does not encounter a complex developmental history but rather an intricate structure and precise context within Acts. When confronted with the challenge of depicting the momentous admission of Gentiles into the community, Luke chose or chose to describe this person as a well-to-do, God-fearing, generous Roman soldier. Minimally, wealth was not a hindrance (true also of the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8); positively, Cornelius' generous almsgiving receives threefold approbation: that of the author, representing the Hellenistic world, God's approbation and reward, and finally Jewish acceptance, in the person of Peter who, after being told of Cornelius' prayer and almsgiving, declares that such a person "is acceptable to God." For Luke then, dependence on God, following Jesus, and concern for the neighbor should have a bearing on one's use of possessions.

What then can we conclude from this lengthy analysis of two crucial NT texts? "There are two main concerns regarding possessions: first, that the individual's heart be right [first toward God, i.e.,] that there be no idolatrous attachments to things; second, that the structures of life in the community of faith reflect the values of the faith," [Talbert, 174] i.e., that "the purpose of wealth is found in its being shared." [Talbert, 141] Furthermore, these texts, as well as others, underscore, on the one hand, the nature of salvation as gift and not human striving or earning and, on the other, warn about the insidious danger of idolatrous attachment to riches (one would remember the "Rich Fool" of Luke). [12:16f]

But paraenetic materials aside, one notes in the Cornelius episode and generally in the New Testament numerous attempts to grapple with the problems of the real world without succumbing to its dangers. Wealth is neither a sure sign of divine blessing nor insidious evidence of basic corruption. Possessions instead are basic human facts, extensions of one's body and one's needs. They are a given, and not an evil one at

that (Christianity is not Gnostic). They are the gifts of a good God and their use the crucial issue. They must not replace the giver and must be employed with the neighbor in view. A person who looks to God and neighbor (like Cornelius who prays and gives alms generously) is indeed "acceptable to God."

There is a mandate which emerges from this study and that is the rule of the two great commandments (dependence on God and love of neighbor), thus theology and morality. This is the duty of the follower of Jesus, thus christology. The Christian, any human being, is called to the sharing of possessions. This then is where I reach the end of my analysis, for "the shape of the mandate...is as diverse as life's circumstances and requires not an ideology but hard thinking about the inevitable symbolic shape of our lives." **[Johnson, Possessions, 138]**

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Handout: Outline

The Rich Young Ruler or the Generous Centurion: Early Christianity and Worldly Possessions

Introduction: Choice of Topic and Texts

1. The Rich Young Man (Mark 10 par) & the Gospel Tradition
   - Methodology: source, form, redactional analysis
     3 levels of material: Jesus, oral, written
   - Source: Mark as source & Mark's source
   - Form of episode: pronouncement story
   - Redaction analysis: Matthean interpretation
     Lukan interpretation
     Markan interpretation
   - Analysis of oral & Jesus levels & their focus

2. The Generous Centurion & Early Community Tradition
   - Community versus Jesus tradition
   - 3 OT approaches to wealth and poverty & NT reaction
   - How the early church coped with worldly possessions according to Luke's account in Acts
     a) community of goods
     b) the missionary church
     c) the post-apostolic community & its elders
   - Analysis of the Cornelius Episode (Acts 10-11)
     structure, context, characteristics
     Hellenistic, Jewish, & divine points of view
     the devout, almsgiving centurion as representative Gentile convert
   - Observations on other NT writers

3. Overall Observations, Summary, and Conclusion
   - Christian beginnings, membership, possessions
   - Attitudes of Jesus tradition toward possessions
     RYM: Jesus, oral, Markan, Matthean, Lukan levels
   - Attitudes of early community toward possessions
     Cornelius the ideal Gentile convert (almsgiving)
     attitude toward God, Jesus, neighbor
   - A brief conclusion

Handout: RYM

The Rich Young Man

Matt. 19:16-30	Mark 10:17-31	Luke 18:18-30
16 And behold, one came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." 19 He said to him, "Which?" And Jesus said, "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, 19 Honor Your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 20 The young man said to him, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.	17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother."' 20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." 21 And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me." 22 At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.	18 And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother."' 21 And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." 22 And when Jesus heard it, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 23 But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich.

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To Matt. 19:16-24 cf. Gospel according to the Hebrews (in Origen's Latin *Commentary on Matt. 15:14* -- The second of the rich men said to him, "Teacher, what good thing can I do and live?" He said to him "Sir, fulfil the law and the prophets." He answered, "I have." Jesus said, "Go, sell all that you have and distribute to the poor; and come, follow me." But the rich man began to scratch his head, for it did not please him. And the Lord said to him, "How can you say, I have fulfilled the law and the prophets, when it is written in the law: You shall love your neighbor as yourself; and lo, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are clothed in filth, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, none of which goes out to them?" And he turned and said to Simon, his disciple, who was sitting by him, "Simon, son of Jonah, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

To Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19 cf. "Gospel of the Naassenes" in Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies,* V.7.26 "Why do you call me good? One there is who is good--my Father who is in heaven--who makes his sun to rise on the just and on the unjust, and sends rain on the pure and on sinners." (cf. also Matt. 5:45.)

Handout: Cornelius

Acts 10-11 The Cornelius Episode

10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was
known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household,
gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. 3 About the ninth
hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to
him, "Cornelius." 4 And he stared at him in terror, and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he
said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5
And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; 6 he is lodging
with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." 7 When the angel who spoke to
him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among
those that waited on him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to
Joppa.

9 The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter
went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10 And he became hungry and
desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and
saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by
four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of
the air. 13 And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said,
"No Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." 15 And the
voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call
common." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to
heaven.

17 Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had
seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry
for Simon's house, stood before the gate 18 and called out to ask whether Simon who
was called Peter was lodging there. 19 And while Peter was pondering the vision, the
Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 Rise and go down, and
accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them." 21 And Peter went down
to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your
coming?" 22 And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man,
who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to
send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." 23 So he called
them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from
Joppa accompanied him. 24 And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius
was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen 'and close friends. 25 When
Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But
Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." 27 And as he talked with him,
he went in and found many persons gathered; 28 and he said to them, "You your-
selves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of
another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or
unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent
for me."

30 And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth
hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, 31
saying, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered
before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is
lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.’ 33 So I sent to you at once,
and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in
the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

34 And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no
partiality, 35 but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is
acceptable to him. 36 You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good
news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 37 the word which was proclaimed
throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached:
38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he
went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was
with him. 39 And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews
and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised
him on the third day and made him manifest; 41 not to all the people but to us who
were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the
dead. 42And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the
one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets
bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through
his name."

44 While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.
45 And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed,
because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For
they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can
any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit
just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus
Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

11 Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the
Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem,
the circumcision party criticized him, 3saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men
and eat with them?" 4 But Peter began and explained to them in order: 5 "I was in the
city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, something descending, like a
great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came down to me. 6
Looking at it closely I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of
the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ 8"But I said, ‘No,
Lord: for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9 But the voice
answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call
common.’10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 At
that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from
Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them without hesitation. These six
brethren also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us
how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and
bring Simon called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be
saved, you and all your household.’ 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on
them just as on us at the beginning, 16And I remembered the word of the Lord, how
he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’17 If

then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" [18] When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life."