

## Possessions (*ta huparchonta*)

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There is little question about the English translation of *ta huparchonta*: "possessions" is quite satisfactory.

The concept of "possessions" articulates the distinction between the self and its attachments. The question "Who am I?" in relation to what I have may be answered in two different ways. One may say, "I am a person who owns a home" or one may say, "I am a homeowner." The first implies that the home is attached to the self and the self can be its self apart from the attachment. The second implies that the self is defined by ownership of a home and cannot be separated from it without loss of identity.

### Parables of Jesus

The parables of Jesus must be seen not as social prescriptions but as vehicles of truth. Thus, when Jesus speaks of a king in his parables, he is not saying that monarchy is the ideal form of government or that it is a good form of government. He is dealing with the fact that monarchy is a known form of government which can be used to illustrate the truth which he is presenting. Similarly, when Jesus speaks of one's possessions, he does not affirm the legitimacy of private property but is acknowledging that the people whom he was addressing did in fact think and act in terms of owning things. Jesus is using that fact as an element in making his point.

In Matthew 24:47 (and Luke 12:44), the point is that if we serve God well in small things, he will give us greater avenues of service. This is made by contrasting managing the master's household with managing all of the master's possessions. Matthew 25:14ff makes the same point in a different way.

In these examples, the master remains the master. He is not diminished

by the wasting of his possessions. He is not defined by his possessions. (This is not the point of the parables but it is a significant assumption within them.) Similarly, it is an assumption underlying Luke 11:21 where the security of the possessions depends on the condition of the person, not vice versa.

The distinction between the person and the possession is made specific in Luke 12:15 where Jesus says, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." That statement is the key to understanding the way Jesus would have us deal with possessions. They are to be disposable attachments to the self.

And it is not only material possessions which are meant. In addition to things, we possess plans, ambitions, dreams, and prospects. Those, too, must be disposable attachments to the self. In Luke 14, there are two parables (vv. 28-30 and 31-32) of persons who had to abandon such attachments. After these parables, Jesus says, "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has (*pasan tois heatou huparchousin*) cannot be my disciple" (14:33). The possessions indicated here clearly are not material but are those intentions and proposals which the self has accumulated.

### Narrative Use

Luke 8:2-3 tells us that there were many women among the disciples and that these women provided for the group out of their possessions.

Hebrews 10:34 shows an example of not being defined by one's possessions. "You had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

Acts 4:32 gives another such exam-

ple, "no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own."

Among those who associated with Jesus, there were two who had almost opposite attitudes toward possessions though both were wealthy.

In Luke 19:1-10 Zaccheus shows a complex identity. He was a short man, a tax collector, and rich. But none of these things defined him. He got over being short by climbing a tree. He made up for the habits of his trade by giving back fourfold what he had improperly obtained. And he gave half of his possessions to the poor.

In Matthew 19:16-22 there was another one who came to Jesus. All we know about him is that he was young, obeyed the law, and had great possessions. Jesus told him to sell what he possessed and give to the poor. And the man could not free his self from its possessions.

In Luke 12:33, Jesus tells his followers, "Sell your possessions and give alms." And in 14:33, he says that one who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be his follower. These verses lie at the root of the glorification of poverty which has cropped up from time to time in the church. But Paul put all of this into perspective when he said, "If I give away all my possessions . . . but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Paul saw that it may be useful, even necessary at times, to give away possessions but it is not of greatest importance. When Jesus was asked about the great commandment, he did not speak of selling possessions and giving alms. He spoke of love. Love God with your whole self. Love your neighbor as yourself.

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