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‘**Getting the vision clear -**

**Christians in Europe: our common calling’**

**Introduction**

The parable of the dishonest manager or unjust steward in Luke 16 is very provocative. No wonder that Julian, the “apostate” Caesar, in the fourth century started to blame the Christians, saying that in this parable Jesus taught his followers to be liars and thieves, and that noble Romans should reject all such corrupting teachings of Christianity. Nevertheless, the provocative question still remains with us: why does Jesus commend a dishonest steward to us? For he says that the rich man praised the dishonest manager for his prudence! But there is all the difference in the world between “I praise and commend the dishonest manager because he acted wisely” and “I praise and commend the wise manager because he acted dishonestly.” The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, adding “For the sons of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own generation (or in this age, *ayon*) than the sons of light.”

No wonder the apostle Paul is not satisfied. Even when congregations have made great progress in practical love, he prays that wisdom might guide their love in acting with kingdom concern. We can say that love is blind, when it lacks wisdom. See, for example, in Eph. 1:15-19:

“For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,**16**I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,**17**that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,**18having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know** what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,**19**and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might.”

It is remarkable that the same concern is there for the apostle every time. He prays that love should also encompass understanding and wisdom. Otherwise love, however big and sacrificial it may be, is still blind. You can find him praying for this in Eph. 3:14-21 and in Eph. 5:15-17, as well as in some of his other letters, such as Phil. 1:9-10: “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,**10**so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”; or in Col. 2:1-3: “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, **2**that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, **3**in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Wisdom is discerning, and especially for our topic, this is important, that wisdom consists in discerning God’s call. It is through God’s call that we are enabled for mission. If even marriage is part of our mission, how much more our call in every other area of life should be part of, and essential, in God’s mission (*missio Dei*). When I say that even in marriage we are called to our mission mandate, I am basically referring to 1 Peter 3:1-2: “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, **2**when they see your respectful and pure conduct.” You can win the soul of your husband by proclaiming the Word without words! How much more, then, do we have to discern in our other callings, in order to become partakers of God’s mission in every area of life where our calling is, and has to be, an embodiment of His kingdom!

**Discerning God’s Call: Purchasing, Gifting, and Inheriting.** Alternative methods of exchanging goods with a “Christ-Body Awareness.”

Since Old Testament times, the Judeo-Christian understanding of practicing fellowship among God's people has been based on *distinguishing* between three ways of exchanging goods: Purchasing, gifting, and inheriting.

In the Jewish halachic legal system, there are precise descriptions of how these three methods work in a casuistic order, broken down to everyday practical situations and challenges.

Purchasing is the exchange of goods on a level of just and reciprocal dealings, but without a personal link or relationship between those parties who exchange their goods. Fairness is important. You have to balance the value of what you buy with the corresponding value of with what you buy, i.e., money. The process is fair and righteous, yet objective, i.e., without a personal relationship. Once I have bought the goods, I walk away, and need have no further contact with the seller.

Gifting and inheriting are different. In offering a gift, or in leaving an inheritance, you have personal ties or a personal relationship with those to whom you are giving something. It is based on relationship – you cannot objectify the other party. *Relatio* = relationship, means I deal with you as a person and not as the object of my craving or interest.

The apostle Paul, with his Pharisaic upbringing, distinguished between these three ways, and focused especially on the second and third options to build up the New Testament understanding of how the church should function in its vertical and horizontal methods of reciprocity.

Examining from a closer perspective these three forms of legal acts, we can distinguish the following:

1.) For purchasing and for gifting, there is a need for merit, or for some kind of proportionality, in contrast with inheriting. While for purchasing you need some value given in exchange, and for gifting you need some personal merit or virtue, for inheriting you do not need either money, or kindness shown, or merit of character. Even those who are poor, or those who were not known or loved by the one who leaves the inheritance, can inherit.

2.) There is an even more surprising difference there, i.e., while for purchasing and for gifting, you need the will and consent of both sides, for inheriting, according to rabbinic law, neither side need will or consent. Moreover, the side who inherits cannot reject the inheritance. He or she cannot give it up, or cannot even give it away, at least not until it first moves into his or her possession.

So inheriting is not an issue of choice, but of belonging. Not accidentally, the Hebrew word for inheriting is *nachal*, which corresponds not only to heritage, but also means a river. The heritage indeed is like a river. It flows by itself and it is giving away/going further itself by itself. [Handing over itself by itself.]

Purchasing does not require any personal relationship between the buyer and the seller. Paying will put to an end to the buyer's relationship with the former owner.

Gifting needs and is based upon a deeper relationship. Both the one gifted and the gift-giver are exchanging their goods and they try to make their ties somehow memorable. A gift always reminds us of the person from whom we received it. It’s as if we keep something of that person and retain it for ourselves by the intermediation of the gift. But in the case of inheriting, it is not about making the ties of fellowship memorable. It is about the heir stepping into the place of the bequeather, stepping into the place of the one passing on the inheritance. It is not a commodity, not a property that is being transferred. Rather, the owner of the commodity or property is being exchanged. It is not that the country, upon his father's death, will belong to the prince, but that the prince will belong to the country.

**God's Big Story** is about his *kingdom*. But the Kingdom does not belong to us, rather we, the co-heirs of Jesus, belong to the Kingdom. The stage on which we are living tells the story of how the Kingdom of God invades the church and the world. The issue at stake is how can we be included into God’s Big Story?

In sharing the gifts and goods of God, we have to have both Kingdom Concerns and Christ-Body Awareness. When I talk about Christ-Body Awareness, I mean that, in the sense of our corporal life, we sometimes as individuals are not aware of the corporal body which we share with our Christian brothers and sisters. We might even have a distorted body-image and, as a result, anorexia might develop. But being aware of more than myself, being aware of the context of my existence, meaning the context of Christ’s Body in which I am incorporated, makes our calling fuller and puts it in a wider perspective. Then, if I have Kingdom Concerns, as well, I can be placed in the context of God’s Big Story. Christ-Body Awareness makes you sense your context in space, and Kingdom Concerns make you sense your context in time. To put it more precisely, you are placed in God’s space and in God’s timing. We belong to God in space and time, and we are his context to act in this world! We channel his Kingdom to this world.

Grace is like inheriting. It comes vertically, from top to down, from heaven to our earthly lives, and we cannot “grace God back.” Gifting is like acts of love within the Body of Christ. It comes horizontally, it is an active language of brotherly love within the Family of God. We can gift each other mutually. The vertically adopted sons of God, for the sake of his only Son, now can horizontally offer themselves to each other in the gesture of love, in true relationship, as they became kin to each other, for the sake of their Greater Brother!

So within the Body of Christ we must be aware of two facts. First that the vertical dimension corresponds to exchanging goods **via inheritance**. Second that the horizontaldimension corresponds to exchanging goods **via gifting**. However, both of these must exclude the *pitfalls* and *temptations* of exchanging goods **via purchasing**, in order to create genuine relationships within the Body of Christ and to avoid objectifying the other, or prostituting spiritual reciprocity.

Reciprocity is not equality in terms of egalitarianism. God gave every member of Christ’s Body the same grace, but not the same gifts of grace. The parable of the pounds, or minas, is about grace, each got one pound, or mina, to invest in (Lk 19:11-27); yet the parable of the talents is about the gifts of grace. One got five talents, the other one two, and the third one only one with which to do business (Mt 25:14-30). Can we imitate in our *diakonia*/charity work/mercy ministries both grace and the gracious exchange of our graces within the Body of Christ?

Reciprocity has to be achieved, despite temporary, or even permanent, differences. We read in 1 Cor 12:21-26: “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” **22**On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23**and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, **24**which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **25**that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. **26**If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” In other words, one part of the body may be poorer, weaker, unable to do as much (whether materially or socially or whatever), but treating it with “equal honor,” is not what is required. Rather, perhaps, its “greater modesty” has to be dealt with by bestowing “greater honor”!

In Ephesians 4 we read Paul urging us to grow into a spiritual maturity, which is linked with working out the unity of Christ’s Body. A grown up Christian is not blind in his love, in exercising acts of charity, handling everyone in an equal manner, but handling the weaker members as more indispensable, with greater modesty, and so achieving equality and oneness.

I have to have room inside of me for you, and the larger the need you have, the larger the room for you inside of me that I have to provide. Amelioration of someone’s need is not an outside and impersonal action, it is based on the acceptance of the brother inside of me, i.e., my identity is constructed in a communal way, you have to be part of me. The Hebrew word for God’s oneness is always *echad,* and never *jachid. Echad* means compound oneness or organic oneness; *jachid* stands for absolute loneliness. In the interpretation of Richard Wurmbrand, the great persecuted leader of the revival in Romania under Communism, the chapter in Matthew on the last days, especially the verses where we read, “one shall be taken, and the other left”, according to the Hebrew translation of the New Testament, means that one shall be taken who is not merely one, an ego, an individual person, but one who has the Other in him also. The Lord takes only those who are like this. The judgement “left” applies to the Ego, the selfish one who knows no Other.

We need to conquer the Promised Land, we need to take all the promised blessing with Jesus, despite the fact that it has already been given to us, and despite the fact that it has been promised that God Himself will conquer it for us. To let the Kingdom invade both church and society, we must look back at the Old Testament idea of God conquering the Promised Land through Joshua. The Holy Land was given to the twelve tribes as an *inheritance/promise*, and yet the tribes had *to cast lots* amongst each other to claim pieces of the land. These two things did not contradict each other. Conquering the Land was a communal act. Some of the tribes who occupied the land on this side of the Jordan had to go and help those who inherited land on the other side of the Jordan, and in this common fight they supported their brothers. It was an act of free giving and although it was a hard fight, they could offer it for their kinsmen as a free gift. Gifting makes the people horizontal distributors of God’s manifold graces. But we should not forget that being entrusted with distribution, in itself, is also God’s grace: “We want you to know, brothers, about **the grace of God that has been given among the churches** of Macedonia, **2**for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty **have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.** **3**For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, **4**begging us earnestly for the favor[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+8&version=ESV;NT-HU;VULGATE#fen-ESV-28920b)] of taking part in the relief of the saints— **5**and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” (2 Cor 8:1-5) Grace was given to enable them to give in grace and generosity!

What is important in the parable of the pounds or minas? The parable is not success-oriented. It is not about the financial success of the servants, but about their faithfulness in their business transactions. Faithfulness is the *highest currency* in God’s Kingdom, because it proves to be **relational** both vertically and horizontally! The Hebrew has two words for the self, for I. One is *ani*; the other one is *anohi*. *Ani* is used when the subject of the action is emphasized. But *anohi* is used when the emphasis falls not on to the actor, on the one who acts, but on the act itself. In order that God could be glorified in our charity work, God commanded that the action, not the actor, should be seen. How can that be achieved without a communal action in reciprocity? To take ownership of a project on a local level means we do it together in a heavenly team work, rather than when a single Christian hero is praised. Not speaking about the donor who, in addition to supporting others, may demand their praise as well.

**Conclusion: What is our common calling?**

1. What are the *responsibilities* of those on the *giving end* and on the *receiving end*? How should the donors and recipients relate to each other based on the above insights? Protecting each other’s sonship and divine-face dignity on both sides.

2. Our common call is *communal* and no longer *individual*, yet our *individual calling*/task is no longer *common,* but *unique*! As in the new mission paradigm today (i.e., ‘*from all parts of the world we are sent to every corner of the world*’); so is the new European context: *the church as a whole is called to serve the whole church, yet from every local congregation serving to every local congregation via the whole church to the church as a whole*.

3. For the sake of a/this holistic, communal, relational and diaconal mission we need to practice real fellowship (*‘koinonia’*).

4. What does it mean “to take ownership” in giving and receiving? How we can fight back either paternalistic and impersonal temptations or the power game idolatry? *Interdependency* instead of *co-dependency*. Running the risk of *addictive patterns*. Jesus came *to set free* the addicts!

5. The **incarnational model** of the *missio Dei/Trinity*. The *humility* element in the process of the incarnation. The *unique love* proceeding from the Cross; as, thank God, no alternative to it can be found in this world. The *theologia crucis* principle. The sacrament of giving and receiving.

6. What does it mean to be in Christ and “to be in each other”? The “perichoresis” principle in the Body of Christ and the flow of the goods, the giving-receiving reciprocity as the “blood circulation” of the Body.

7. (Some) more practical results: The blood of Christ was *given for you* and the body of Christ was *given to you*. The secret of *genuine* ***relational*** bonds. How can we relate to other members of the Body in giving *ourselves* *for* each other? How can we relate to other members of the Body in *giving ourselves to* each other? The Macedoniain model (2 Cor 8:1ff) and the *grace given* to them consisting in enabling and privileging them for the *grace of genuine giving*.