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HENNIE LOTTER

When I needed  
a neighbour  
were you there?

*Christians and the challenge of poverty*



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Lux Verbi.BM, (Pty) Ltd, PO Box 5, Wellington 7654  
Telephone 021 864 8200  
*www.luxverbi-bm.com*

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Publication of this book was made possible  
by a generous donation from the  
University of Johannesburg

Cover design by ???  
Designed and set in 11.5 on 14 pt Jardine Light  
by Robert Meas

Printed and bound by ???

First edition, first printing 2008

ISBN - 10: 0 7963 0692 3  
ISBN - 13: 978 07963 0692 0

For Trix and Lisa  
with whom I share so much.

The research on which this book is based was undertaken for a  
doctoral degree in Theology at the University of Pretoria under  
the expert guidance of Professor Etienne de Villiers.



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# INTRODUCTION

## Christians and human suffering: the biblical imperative for Christians to care about human suffering

*T*he life and teaching of Jesus Christ suggest that all Christians should be seriously concerned about the plight of poor people. Why? Let me explain. Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith and role model for Christian behaviour in the world. In his life on earth he showed deep compassion for all people marginalized by society - for the poor, for widows, children, and the sick. Many of his stories and actions illustrate the extent to which he prioritized the relief of human suffering in his own ministry.

One such story is the famous parable Jesus told about the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). It is particularly important because it links the relieving of human suffering with eternal salvation.

Jesus tells the parable as part of a discussion with an expert in the law. The lawyer asked Jesus: "...what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 10:25) Jesus answers with a counter question, expecting the expert to know the answer. The expert did indeed know that to be in God's favour one must have a relationship of love with God and one's fellow humans. Jesus added that the lawyer must implement these commands and then he would have eternal life.

*When I needed a neighbour were you there?*

This background to the parable of the Good Samaritan is highly significant. It shows that according to Jesus:

- ▶ Relieving human suffering is a prime way of loving one's fellow humans, and
- ▶ Loving one's fellow humans is an essential condition for receiving eternal life.

Even a cautious conclusion drawn from this biblical text must accept that relieving human suffering belongs at the very heart of Christian practice.

The law expert's follow-up question is an attempt to determine the *scope of a person's responsibilities towards other humans*:

And who is my neighbour? (Lk 10:29)

His question assumes that one's responsibilities towards other people might be limited to a particular kind of human being, or a particular group of persons. The answer that Jesus gives shows that this assumption is wrong. According to Jesus, showing love towards other humans means being compassionate towards *any suffering person one encounters in one's everyday life*. (Lk 10:36-37)

In the parable, the Good Samaritan gives some of his time, his ability to care for a wounded victim of violence, and his money in an expression of neighbourly love. He continues his journey the next day and asks the innkeeper to take further care of the victim. He adds a promise to compensate the innkeeper on his return, for possible additional expenses. (Lk 10:33-35) There is no sign that the Good Samaritan was stretched beyond his limits by his attempts to relieve the victim's suffering. His efforts are within his caring capacities, financial means, and time constraints and it seems he could comfortably continue his normal daily activities after a brief interruption.

The emphasis in the ministry of Jesus on compassion for marginalized people was nothing new in ancient Israel. A constant theme in the Old Testament was an imperative to show concern for marginalized

people, especially widows, orphans, strangers, and poor people. As in the New Testament, caring for society's vulnerable members was tied to the central religious obligations required of the ancient Israelites.

In Exodus 20:2, God introduces the Ten Commandments by reminding the people of Israel that he had liberated them from slavery in Egypt. God says to the Israelites:

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

For the Israelites, part of the justification for obeying God's commands (whether stipulations, decrees or laws) was remembrance of the way God liberated them from Egyptian slavery. To remember that they themselves were humans who suffered as slaves in Egypt is used as moral motivation for the Israelites to take care of people suffering in their own society. Thus the stipulation in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 to leave part of the harvest for vulnerable people, is explicitly justified by the command that the Israelites must remember that they were themselves once slaves, i.e. that they were suffering, vulnerable people who were marginalized from mainstream Egyptian society.

It seems so obvious that Christians ought to care deeply about the suffering of poor people; however, this has been far from true in the lives of millions of Christians throughout history. Christians throughout the world have far too often ignored the biblical imperative to show deep compassion to those who suffer as a result of poverty.

I write this book as a political philosopher, and much of my research over the years has focused on the link between justice and poverty. *When I needed a neighbour were you there?* seeks to highlight the overwhelming evidence that involvement with poor people and the issues of poverty is a fundamental part of what it means to be Christian. I also seek to uncover ethical values in the biblical texts that can enrich our understanding of how best to deal with poverty.

This book is primarily directed at non-poor Christians to persuade

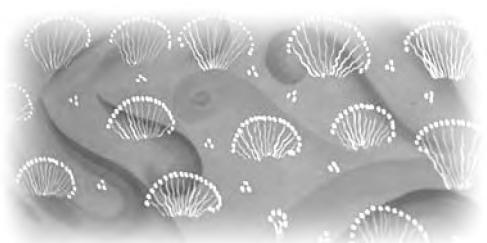
*When I needed a neighbour were you there?*

them to take the plight of poor people more seriously. It also aims to present biblical perspectives on poverty that can be empowering to those who personally face the challenges of poverty.




I

# THE REALITY OF POVERTY







## The dehumanizing effect of poverty

*P*overty is a major socio-political issue. Throughout the world millions of people suffer from poverty and its crippling effects. “Fifty-six percent of the world’s population is currently poor: 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 a day and 2.8 billion live on \$2 a day.”<sup>1</sup> Poverty has been called “the world’s most ruthless killer and the greatest cause of suffering on earth”.<sup>2</sup> The effects poverty has on human beings are so drastic that the phenomenon of poverty merits the undivided attention of governments, human and natural scientists, aid agencies, relief organizations, and ordinary citizens everywhere.

Surely it calls for urgent moral action if some people face much greater risks of losing their lives than others as a result of *avoidable* circumstances?

Preventable death is one of the effects of poverty. Many entirely avoidable factors contribute to the high mortality rate amongst poor people. Such factors are, for example, a lack of food, diminished resistance to disease as a result of inadequate diet, deficient or no medical care, and exposure to cold weather as a result of insufficient clothing or decrepit shelter. Non-poor people do not face any of these threats.

Besides preventable death, poor people face many other negative effects of poverty, including stunted physical or mental growth, lack of education, deprived opportunities for personal growth and development, and so on.



Christians live in a world where desperate poverty leads to starvation, preventable deaths, serious disease, damaged relationships, violated bodies, missed opportunities, and moral degeneration.<sup>3</sup> Many non-poor Christians seem either not to notice, or not to care. In view of this, it seems to me that all Christians are compelled to answer the following questions:

- ▶ Do we have any moral justification in turning away from the problems poor people face?
- ▶ Does the moral vision of Christianity have clear guidelines on whether Christians have responsibilities toward their fellow humans suffering from poverty?

Perhaps more important is the question whether Christianity has any special message for poor people themselves:

- ▶ Does God have anything to say to desperately poor people who live next to the extremely rich?
- ▶ Does God care about the suffering of poor people?
- ▶ Can God help them escape their poverty?

These are the issues I wish to explore in *When I needed a neighbour were you there?* I focus on the following question: *What message does the Bible have about poverty for us today?*

This simple question raises many complex issues that must be dealt with before a clear cut answer can be given. For example, we must determine what poverty is. We must find a way of distinguishing between those who are poor and those who are rich. Furthermore, we must find out why poverty is a moral issue worth serious consideration. What are the effects of poverty on people? We must analyse all the moral issues raised by a complex phenomenon like poverty.

Once we fully understand what poverty is, what its consequences are, and why we must take note of the moral issues involved, we can start asking what the Bible has to say about these issues. To eliminate personal bias, all possible texts dealing with poverty must be read and interpreted. Once that is done, we can try to put everything together into a coherent view about the biblical message on poverty. Inter-

preting the biblical texts, comparing them with current moral thinking, and adapting their message to our contemporary circumstances can help us design a Christian ethics for today that will guide Christians to live responsibly in a world where many countries have huge inequalities between rich and poor.

We thus begin by taking a careful look at the dehumanizing effects of poverty.

## 1. Poverty violates individual human dignity

The concept of *poverty* is usually applied only to humans. It refers to a condition that results in people not being able to live lives in which they can participate in the range of activities expressive of their nature as human beings. The cause of this is a lack of economic resources. Sometimes victims of poverty may not even be able to maintain their physical health.<sup>4</sup> To describe someone as “poor” thus indicates that a person has fallen below the standard of life thought appropriate for a human being in a specific society.

There are two levels at which one’s standard of living might fall below that of one’s peers:

- (1) *Absolute poverty* which implies that people do not have adequate economic capacities to provide food, clothing, shelter, security, and medical care to maintain their physical health.
- (2) *Relative poverty* which signifies that although people have adequate economic capacities to provide food, clothing, shelter, security, and medical care to maintain their physical health, they cannot participate in any other activities regarded as indicative of being human in their society.

Poverty results from the choices humans make about the structures of their society and from the social forces they allow to operate that produce an unequal distribution of resources. The levels of poverty and riches in society are the collective responsibility of its citizens. If it is true that poverty, as a condition that either causes a decline in physical health or an inability to share in the human social activities typical of our species, results from our choices and is our collective

responsibility, then it is entirely remediable. Poverty only exists through the collective choice of citizens who allow it to be.

Poverty reflects a condition in which human beings live lives below the standards their fellow citizens think appropriate for humans. Poverty also reflects the fact that non-poor citizens do not care enough about the victims of poverty to change the social order in a way that will prevent, ameliorate, or eradicate poverty.

People who are forced through a lack of resources to live below a generally accepted appropriate standard of life, experience a profound sense of denial of their human dignity. They feel that they are not regarded as human beings who ought to be treated with a certain minimum level of respect for their rights and concern for their well-being. If, in addition, their fellow citizens do not care about the degrading conditions they face, poor people suffer the further humiliation of being seen as not worthy of concern as human beings. This lack of care adds another blow to their dignity, as they are not shown the consideration proper to humans in similar degrading circumstances.

Thus, merely suffering from poverty constitutes a serious blow to one's sense of personal dignity, as it signifies a lifestyle judged inferior to what is appropriate for human beings in a particular society. Being ignored and allowed to continue suffering from poverty strikes another blow to poor people's dignity, as they are excluded from care appropriate to beings of their kind. People in Bulgaria correctly refer to "the humiliation and loss of status that accompanies a fall into poverty".<sup>5</sup>

No wonder that many poor people resist being identified as "poor". Some poor people "try to conceal their poverty to avoid humiliation and shame".<sup>6</sup> Others refuse to admit that being poor means by definition "to occupy an undesirable or negative situation (an unacceptable state of affairs)" and thus do not want to identify themselves "in such a negative, exclusionary and even stigmatizing fashion".<sup>7</sup> Some poor people refuse to take up available aid, so as to "maintain their independence or to avoid the shame of pleading poverty".<sup>8</sup> Their resistance to being depicted as "poor", or to describing themselves as living in poverty, is a brave attempt to keep their human dig-

nity intact. Worldwide, poor people invest a significant amount of their meagre resources in burial societies. Narayan et al interpret this investment as

a testament to the high priority that poor people assign to ensuring that at least in death they are respected and accorded dignity according to local rites.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Poverty harms individual lives

Who are the “poor”? Poverty is publicly observable in most cases and is easy to recognize, especially when poor people are encountered in their home environment. Some people come from families that have been poor for generations. Other people may be recently impoverished, due to retrenchment or a natural disaster, such as drought, flood, or volcanic eruption. Children usually make up a significant proportion of the poor, as the proportion of children to adults in poor societies is often higher than in more affluent societies.

Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, as especially oppressive patriarchal lifestyles increase their risks of becoming poor. Women are thought to “carry a disproportionate share of the problems coping with poverty”.<sup>10</sup> The United Nations Development Programme gives more details about women’s problems:

Women are disproportionately poor - and too often disempowered and burdened by the strains of productive work, the birth and care of children and other household and community responsibilities. And their lack of access to land, credit and better employment opportunities handicaps their ability to fend off poverty for themselves and their families - or to rise out of it.<sup>11</sup>

Non-poor people cannot shrug off concerns about poverty as if they will never personally be affected by it. In this respect, poverty is like disability: everyone faces the risk of becoming poor. John D. Jones says that non-poor people “face a variety of forces that can break into

their world, disrupt it, tear it apart, and plunge them into poverty".<sup>12</sup> A sudden natural disaster, like a flood, or a human disaster like war can impoverish the most affluent members of society. Unexpected loss of employment, sudden death, or the serious illness of an economically active household member can impoverish even rich people. Most at risk of suffering poverty are those with few resources who cannot absorb the impact of sudden changes like a downturn in the economy, retrenchment, death, disability, or illness of a household member. Poverty thus matters to every non-poor person, as a possibility they might encounter in future.

Poverty harms people's individual lives. In what follows I present common trends found amongst poor people throughout the world. I rely on comprehensive social science reports on poverty from different parts of the globe to identify the most often recurring patterns in poor people's individual lives all over the world.

### 3. Poverty harms people's bodies

Modern cultures invest a large amount of resources in improving medical care. This is done with the aim of avoiding any unnecessary, preventable suffering to the bodies and health of human beings.

Poverty, however, harms the bodies and health of human beings, especially in more severe cases. Poor people without sufficient economic resources to provide properly for their basic needs are vulnerable to the consequences of an *inadequate diet*. Studies of poor people's diets confirm that although only a small percentage of the poor do not have enough food to eat, most cannot afford a healthy and balanced diet.<sup>13</sup> While some poor people can manage to include proteins and vegetables in their daily food intake, very poor people's diets are severely deficient in basic foods needed for a healthy body.<sup>14</sup> In some situations poor people simply do not have enough good food to eat. Poor agricultural workers in Bangladesh, for example, describe

a vicious cycle in which inadequate food leads to weakness, reduced energy to work, and illness, which in turn reduces income, and the spiral continues.<sup>15</sup>

Not enough food or an inadequate diet leads to malnutrition, with negative effects on the bodies of poor people. Researchers note how strikingly often they encounter poor health as a result of malnourishment among poor people.<sup>16</sup> Malnourished people are constantly tired, both physically and mentally. Their ability to concentrate, work productively, and resist disease is significantly reduced as a result of malnourishment.<sup>17</sup> Many poor people, especially children, die from diseases that are triggered by malnourishment.<sup>18</sup>

There is no doubt about the links between inadequate food intake, malnutrition, inadequate sanitation, and many of the *diseases* from which poor people suffer.<sup>19</sup> The World Bank puts it simply:

The incidence of many illnesses ... is higher for poor people, while their access to health care is typically less.<sup>20</sup>

Narayan et al state that poor people “dread serious illness within the family” more than anything else, as illness destroys a productive household member’s labour power and income.<sup>21</sup> Illness in a poor family has direct effects, like “reduced income, increased insecurity of employment, and increased expenditure”, which may deeply affect and strain relations between household members.<sup>22</sup>

Lack of sufficient income to provide for urgent needs affects poor people’s ability to have *access to proper medical care*. Most societies believe everyone ought to have access to the basic medical care available in their society in times of physical need. Being unable to afford doctors in private practice, poor people have to rely on public health services. They often do not even use these services, as the location of the public health facility may be too far away for them to travel, the reduced rates they have to pay may still be more than they can afford, and the hours that public health services are open may not be accessible to working poor people.<sup>23</sup>

*When I needed a neighbour were you there?*

Some poor people are responsible for *harming their own bodies*. The widespread abuse of alcohol is a prime example. Poverty exacerbates alcohol abuse in certain poor communities and poor men abuse alcohol a lot more than women do. As far back as 1892, Charles Booth described the destructive role of alcohol abuse in poor communities. He wrote:

Of drink in all its combinations, adding to every trouble, undermining every effort after good, destroying the home and cursing the young lives of children, the stories tell enough.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Poverty harms people's mental well-being

We reject as immoral any attempts to make life unnecessarily more difficult for people than it already is. Life in the twenty-first century with its everyday problems is stressful enough even for those not facing the burdens of poverty. People without sufficient food to eat, who do not have enough water for household use, who do not have an adequate income, who are more at risk of disease and violence than others, and who do difficult work for low wages experience considerably *more stress* than others without such problems.

Lack of economic resources thus exacerbates stress in human beings. Sometimes the uncertainties of whether they will have an income and how much it will be, gnaw at their peace of mind. Peter Townsend notes that for poor people there may be

major changes in the possession of resources both in the long term, over the entire life-cycle, but also in the short term, from month to month and even week to week.<sup>25</sup>

Researchers consistently find high levels of stress and feelings of frustration and anxiety among poor people.<sup>26</sup> Worries about income, food, school fees, violence, keeping warm during winter, and the well-being of family members can negatively affect the mental state of poor people. Research suggests that poor people often dread the

future, “knowing that a crisis may descend at any time, not knowing whether one will cope”.<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Poverty harms people’s family and interpersonal relationships

Human relationships of all kinds are crucial to the proper development of the social aspects of our nature as human beings. To develop into ethical beings, it is essential for us to engage in mutually beneficial relationships of different kinds.

Poverty can have a devastating impact on such relationships. The dangerous mixture of stress about inadequate resources for need satisfaction and the negative self-image formed from feelings of personal powerlessness can wreak havoc in interpersonal and social relationships.

Family (household) relationships often suffer the most through poverty. Researchers refer to fractured or unstable families with broken relationships, especially where fathers and husbands are absent or children live apart from their parents.<sup>28</sup> Rural men and women often migrate to urban centres of economic activity in order to find jobs, leaving their children behind in the care of family members such as older children, grandparents, or uncles and aunts. Parents from urban areas send their children to live with relatives in rural areas because of a lack of space, time, and resources to take care of their children themselves.<sup>29</sup> Poverty thus creates conditions that make it extremely difficult for people to engage in deep, meaningful relationships with their loved ones.

Patriarchal gender relations, where men believe they must be in charge, can become particularly strained when families suffer from poverty. In patriarchal marriages women take full responsibility for managing and executing household duties, while men make decisions concerning household income. For poor women, unpaid work running the household takes up most of their time and energy, leaving them exhausted. Consequently they are unable to take proper care of their children, to engage in activities to generate income, or to utilize



opportunities for education or self-improvement.<sup>30</sup> Women do not have sufficient time “to rest, reflect, enjoy social life, take part in community activities, or spend time in spiritual activities”.<sup>31</sup> Thus women do not get a fair and equal opportunity to make lives of their own.

Violence against women in the domestic sphere results from conflicts over food or money, and the risk of such violence increases with rising levels of poverty and male unemployment. Poor women are often trapped in abusive relationships where they endure violence because they depend on the abusive male for money, food, and shelter.<sup>32</sup> Many women see no way out of abusive relationships, as they have nowhere else to go.

In a household, according to Narayan et al., “individuals both cooperate and compete for resources.”<sup>33</sup> The distribution of resources within a household can be a source of conflict, as some family members contest the fairness of both the procedure for distributing resources and the outcomes of such distribution. Townsend puts the issue simply:

It would be a mistake to assume that all resources entering a household are pooled and used equally by its individual members.<sup>34</sup>

The scarcity of resources to address multiple needs raises the stakes involved in distribution within the household. Decision making about and management of scarce resources often leads to destructive conflicts in poor households, or exacerbates existing ones.

Men often strongly tie their self-worth to their earning capacity and thus to their ability to take care of their family.<sup>35</sup> For this reason some men develop negative emotions, such as feeling “powerless, redundant, and burdensome” when they cannot contribute to household income and “may react violently”. Some men react to the loss of their role as breadwinner by “collapsing into drugs, alcohol, depression, wife-beating or by walking away”.<sup>36</sup>

The impact of poverty on families can disadvantage women in other ways as well. The pressures of sexual harassment and sexual abuse often lead to teenage pregnancies and early marriages which

rob women of valuable opportunities for education and put a heavy strain on the limited resources available to a poor family.

## 6. Poverty impacts negatively on child rearing

Moral sensitivities in many contemporary societies demand that children be educated by their parents and be treated decently so as to ensure that they have opportunities for optimal development as human beings. Within poor families, children often bear the brunt of the consequences of poverty. They are part of unstable and fractured families or live apart from one or both their parents. They are raised by people other than their parents. Lack of resources within households means that children may be malnourished, poorly dressed, and not have money for educational requirements.<sup>37</sup> Children are often forced to work to generate income and are thus deprived of educational opportunities, despite the fact that their parents recognise the value of education as a means of escaping poverty.<sup>38</sup>

The inability to be a parent continuously to one's children constitutes one form of neglect. There are others. When poor children live with their parents, the parents often do not have the energy to be sufficiently involved in their children's lives to give spiritual, moral, emotional, or educational guidance.<sup>39</sup> Although the parents may be physically present, they are emotionally or psychologically absent from their children's lives. Often the only way they are involved is either by venting their frustrations on their children or by enforcing overly strict and cruel discipline. Tired and stressed parents sometimes discipline children through cruel physical abuse, as they are too exhausted to use more appropriate verbal communication.<sup>40</sup>

Frustration can be expressed through various forms of abuse, and discipline is often arbitrarily enforced and accompanied by severe corporal punishment.<sup>41</sup> At times poor adults vent their anger and release their feelings of failure, frustration, and powerlessness through abusive and violent behaviour towards children.<sup>42</sup> A poor mother in Armenia provides an example when she says:

*When I needed a neighbour were you there?*

They reproach me for beating my children. But what should I do when they cry when they are hungry? I beat them to make them stop crying.<sup>43</sup>

In many poor communities we find parents who have contradictory relationships with their children. On one hand some of these parents place their children's well-being at risk by, for example, requiring them to work from an early age or by venting the anger and frustration caused by their poverty on their children. For some poor families, "the need to provide additional income takes precedence over education."<sup>44</sup> In the process, some poor parents force their children "into the most risky forms of employment", sometimes even prostitution.<sup>45</sup> But at the same time, through all their suffering,

poor men and women in communities around the world keep coming back to their deep longing for a better future for their children. Whatever happens, they say, let the children be all right.<sup>46</sup>

## 7. Poverty leads to stunted development

In virtually all societies human beings want their babies to develop into healthy adults, capable of playing a role that suits the talents with which they were born. Children, we believe, ought to have access to opportunities and resources to transform them into adults who become full members of their society, share responsibilities, and contribute to enhancing their society's quality of life. That poor people's physical and intellectual development may be stunted and retarded in various ways is almost too obvious to mention. Yet this is a fact neglected by non-poor people and needs to be mentioned explicitly. Any person's development is closely linked to economic resources and publicly provided opportunities that make education and training possible. Even the quality of parental upbringing presupposes, at least partially, adequate economic resources.

In most societies people have strong moral views on the need for children to have enough food and a proper education. If growing poor chil-

dren with developing bodies do not have adequate nutritious food, their development and growth are stunted, as noted above. Furthermore, poor people often find it difficult to acquire resources to provide schooling for their children if adequate public provision is unavailable, inadequate, or costly. The World Bank states that in some poor countries, “most children from the poorest households have no schooling at all”.<sup>47</sup> In some poor societies children are required to earn money by working like adults and this happens most often “at the expense of schooling”.<sup>48</sup>

To survive in contemporary, fast-changing societies, most workers need to engage in continuous education, upgrade their skills, and acquire the flexibility to be able to adapt to new work conditions. Failure to do so often results in unemployment. Lack of economic resources makes it impossible for poor people to personally develop their employability, or their low-level jobs do not include education and training as standard benefits.

As human beings we live in a broader society, in which governments provide services at different levels that require our involvement as prerequisite for enjoying their benefits. Part of our social development is to learn how to be informed about public services and how to become enabled to access them. Poor people often do not have opportunities to acquire such knowledge about the workings of their society nor to develop the competency to utilize them. They thus suffer from *social illiteracy*.

Social illiteracy means not having information about how your society works, not knowing what services and goods you qualify for, and being ignorant about ways to influence policy makers and public officials to legislate in your interest and do things for your benefit. This kind of illiteracy implies that poor people are often ignorant about the assistance they are entitled to request, do not know which officials are in a position to provide them with assistance, and do not understand how to lobby for aid.

## 8. Poverty increases vulnerability

One’s vulnerability depends on whether one is able to deal with the negative effects of shocks and changes and whether one can recover

from those effects.<sup>49</sup> Poor people's normal human vulnerability is increased by their lack of resources and income.

If their health is good and they have a decent education, they may have at least some resources to use in a recovery process. A further asset that some poor people have is the strength of the social networks they have established prior to such changes and the extent to which the people forming those networks have the capacity and willingness to assist them.<sup>50</sup> The absence of state or communal support increases vulnerability, when no mechanisms are put in place to "reduce or mitigate the risks that poor people face".<sup>51</sup>

In general, most human communities help vulnerable people to deal with, and recover from, the traumatic situations they face. However, such help is often not forthcoming, for whatever reason. The World Bank calls vulnerability "a constant companion" and a "constant feature" of poverty.<sup>52</sup>

Poor individuals, families, communities, or regions can be threatened by slowly occurring changes over a long term, such as drought or an economic recession. Drastic changes or shocks, i.e. "an unexpected event that leads to economic and social crisis", like floods or the death of productive family members, can be even more devastating.<sup>53</sup>

## 9. Poverty and unemployment

A major cause of poverty is unemployment, especially in situations where individuals have no social or family support. Poor communities are often characterised by the virtual absence of people who are formally employed. To be unemployed does not necessarily imply that people are unskilled or uneducated. Although many poor people are unskilled, some have skills that are not in demand by the current economy. Many poor people all over the world realise their need to develop their employability by learning new skills for gainful employment.<sup>54</sup> Even highly skilled people can become unemployed during times of economic recession, if employment opportunities shrink and companies start downsizing.

However, this does not mean that all poor people are unemployed and unable to find suitable jobs. Many poor people are employed, but the nature of their jobs contributes to their poverty. Some employed people do not earn wages that are sufficient to provide for their needs and those of their dependants.<sup>55</sup> Poor people are often full-time employees and signs of the “problem of the working poor are still widespread today.”<sup>56</sup>

Poor people are often inadequately qualified to be considered for better jobs. Common reasons for poor people’s lack of skills are that they find access to education difficult, as the costs involved are too high, the distance too far to travel, or the quality of facilities or teachers available to them inadequate.<sup>57</sup>

## 10. Poverty and moral values

Poverty erodes people’s moral values as desperation to make a living provides the incentive to behaviour that the rest of society regards as immoral. They are, quite simply, too poor to be moral. If you need to lie or steal so that you and your dependants can survive hunger and desolation, can you afford not to? In Bulgaria a poor person comments as follows: “Many people steal—you can’t starve to death.”<sup>58</sup> Some Roma Bulgarians openly acknowledge that they steal, with the justification that “theft is a solution to discrimination in employment and lack of work”.<sup>59</sup>

As a poor person’s body is often their only asset, they may try to protect its value through stealing when faced with constant hunger, especially the hunger of their children.<sup>60</sup> Poor people may argue that morally acceptable methods of earning a living did not work for them; they followed the rules of society to no avail; therefore they are in a position where making a living through immoral means becomes a serious option.<sup>61</sup> They do not have the material means to continue living a moral life.<sup>62</sup> In this way poverty becomes a cause of moral decay.<sup>63</sup>

Moral decay starts when desperately poor people are dishonest or tell lies in order to make a quick profit, to present a falsely good impression to prospective employers, or to get aid for which they do

not qualify (though which they do need for survival) from government or relief organizations.<sup>64</sup> Moral decay goes further when poor people decide to enter the “underground economy” by engaging in illegal trading of goods like alcohol, diamonds, drugs, or sex.<sup>65</sup> Others make stealing a career and steal food, cars, household goods, farm animals, or water, or become poachers who steal wildlife on farms or in conservation areas.<sup>66</sup> Poor people confided to World Bank researchers that desperation and hunger sometimes led them to engage in “anti-social and illegal activities”, such as “to steal, drink, take drugs, sell sex, abandon their children, commit suicide, or trade in children.”<sup>67</sup>

Once moral decay sets in through people contravening fundamental moral values for the sake of survival, the issue is whether they will stop before becoming serious criminals who inflict much greater harm on other people. If immoral behaviour leads to financial success and social power, it might become easier to slip deeper into immoral and criminal behaviour than to return to a moral lifestyle. For this reason, poor communities are often beset by serious problems of crime, from petty stealing to assault, rape, and murder.<sup>68</sup> Many authors regard crime as one of the “most tangible social consequences” of poverty.<sup>69</sup>

High levels of crime by some of their own members have devastating effects on poor communities. Poor people may lose some of the few material assets they have and so be further disempowered from engaging in entrepreneurial activities aimed at improving their lives.<sup>70</sup> High levels of fear and distrust, which erodes social cohesion and co-operation, may also reduce their quality of life.<sup>71</sup> Narayan et al. state that as a result of illegal activities,

the household and often the wider community must face the fear and anxiety that these means of coping bring in their wake.<sup>72</sup>

Criminal behaviour and lack of resources create insecurity among poor people. A consequence of a high crime rate is that investors able to create employment opportunities or improve facilities and services, avoid such areas, and opportunities of reducing poverty are thus reduced.

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## POOR PEOPLE AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

“*E*nvironment” may be defined as the surroundings with which we are in daily contact. These surroundings have three distinct aspects:

- (1) The natural environment as a *treasure chest of endless possibilities* offered by natural resources that have developed through millennia and are sustained largely without human ingenuity or intervention;
- 2) The *humanly cultivated, constructed, and built environment* that helps us to locate, extract, convert, and produce means for ensuring our survival and goods for enabling our flourishing, and
- (3) The human environment consisting of *people organized into societies* with whom we interact daily.

Let us look at these three dimensions of the human environment and how each is affected by poverty.

### 1. Environment as a treasure chest of natural resources

We can best appreciate the perspective of our natural environment as a treasure chest of natural resources if we note that we are totally dependent for our survival and flourishing on the resources provided by our natural environment. Food, water, shelter, materials, and almost everything else we need derive from a source within the natural environment.

The different ecosystems in our world provide humans with clean water, food, and materials for clothing, shelter, tools, and manufacture. Besides providing us with these resources, ecosystems also regulate our climate and prevent floods, for example. Furthermore we use ecosystems for recreation and inspiration. They provide us with business opportunities, present aesthetic landscapes, reveal awe-inspiring natural wonders, contain ancient traces of extinct life forms, and manifest expressions of forces beyond our comprehension and scope of action.<sup>1</sup> We humans have developed significant skill, insight, ingenuity, and competence in using the offerings of the natural environment to make impressive lives for ourselves.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the relationship between poverty and the environment is the inability of poor communities to access ecosystem services which could provide them with a decent standard of living.

There are literally dozens of reasons why poor people cannot appropriate what nature offers them. It may be that the number of people in a specified geographic area exceeds the available capacities of ecosystems in that area. The poor people struggling to survive might not have the knowledge, skills, or training required to adequately utilize whatever resources are available. A dominating government might restrict people's access to natural resources or an oppressive regime might prevent people's access to the knowledge and technology that could help them to properly harness natural forces for their own benefit. A wealthy, domineering class might have privileged access to ecosystem services and might be converting those resources into wealth for themselves only.

Whatever the reasons may be, the bottom line is simple: *poor people cannot access and utilize potentially available ecosystem resources in their environment.*

If poverty is defined as lack of economic resources, then it stands to reason that poor people will exploit to the maximum whatever environmental resources *are* available in their immediate surroundings in the hope of ensuring their physical survival.<sup>2</sup> For this reason poverty

often results in poor communities causing environmental degradation, and a vicious cycle ensues in which low quality environmental resources make the survival of poor human communities a desperate struggle.<sup>3</sup> The UNDP confirms that environmental degradation often leads to “continued impoverishment”.<sup>4</sup> The Brundtland Report thus justifiably concludes that societies where poverty is rife “will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes”.<sup>5</sup>

If poor people cannot satisfy their basic needs through accessing and utilizing available natural resources, then several consequences follow. They will place great stress on their available environments through depleting natural resources and degrading that part of their natural environment which they can make use of, in their efforts to secure a minimal livelihood. Furthermore, poor people are often too powerless to resist becoming victims of other people’s neglect and degradation of the environment. The result of all these factors is that poor people frequently become alienated from their natural environment.

## 2. Environment as the humanly cultivated, built, and constructed environment

Our “environment” as the humanly cultivated, built, and constructed environment, refers to the environments that human knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and labour have created through locating, extracting, converting, and consuming natural resources. This happens through various processes of cultivation, design, processing, manufacture, and production. We build houses, shopping malls, sport stadiums, concert halls, factories, roads, airports, and educational institutions. We construct dams, nurseries, abattoirs, fields, gardens, fences, parks, zoos, and game reserves. We cultivate plants, breed animals, build engines, design vehicles, and create computers to enable good human living. In many countries of the world the degree of human intervention in the natural world is so extensive that it is difficult to find pristine landscapes with no signs of human presence.

Humanly cultivated, built, and constructed environments offer us

far more functions than merely empowering us to locate, extract, convert, and produce means for ensuring our survival and enabling us to flourish. Other functions of these human designs and constructions include spaces for privacy, opportunities for recreation, places to engage in sport as participants or spectators, room for entertainment, buildings for shopping, specialized areas for healing such as hospitals and clinics, areas for meditation and worship, commercial properties for trading, public spaces for observation such as museums, zoos, and art galleries, quiet places for browsing and reading in libraries and bookshops, and many multi-purpose spaces that also serve as centres for socialising with friends and family.

Poor people's suburbs are mostly ugly places with little or no aesthetic appeal of any kind. In contrast to the "leafy" upmarket neighbourhoods of the middle and upper classes, most poor suburbs throughout history have been overcrowded, polluted, under-serviced, often un-planned, with poor roads and inadequate public spaces. Green areas such as parks and beautiful gardens are scarce in poor urban neighbourhoods. Small houses are lumped too closely together without appropriate private spaces for families or proper public spaces for business, education, sport, and recreation. The smart shopping malls, huge stadiums, beautiful gardens, cool clubs, graceful churches, and handy agencies of financial institutions and other necessary services are seldom found in the poorest suburbs. In addition, local government services are often shabbily rendered to poor communities.

Poor people have difficulty accessing adequate housing. This is confirmed in most social science studies on poverty. Overcrowding is common in poor homes, as is living in inadequately constructed houses that are often in desperate need of maintenance.<sup>6</sup> In India both "rural and urban groups identify dilapidated housing as a widespread problem".<sup>7</sup> Sometimes desperately poor migrant workers cannot even afford to rent a house or a room, but only a bed in a large communal room, which they share with their wives and children. This bed is called "home" and dramatically presents the problems of overcrowding suffered by many poor people.<sup>8</sup> Couples have no privacy, children have no place to play, storage room is minimal, and it is uncomfort-

able, if not impossible, to entertain visitors.<sup>9</sup> These are not optional functions of accommodation; they are essential factors in the maintenance of a healthy personal and family life.

### 3. Environment as the humans who surround us

We often refer to the people in a person's surroundings as being part of his or her "environment". All human beings are surrounded by other people. The members of one's household, one's family, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours form some of the significant others in any person's life. Other important people with whom most humans are in direct daily contact are those we meet through educational institutions or at work.

There is no doubt about the impact other people have on our lives. Just think of the knowledge and nurture others give us, the role models and heroes we emulate, the behaviour patterns and ideas we become accustomed to, the level of skill and resources displayed by many in our community and appropriated by us. Our fellow humans influence us by the lives they live in community with us. They provide us with options and possibilities that we can adopt, modify, develop, and explore. They enrich or impoverish our lives. Although the imprint made by other people strongly influences us, it never fully determines individuals, especially if a person's agency and autonomy develop sufficiently.

Who are the people forming the immediate, direct human environments within which poor people find themselves? To what kind of people are the poor exposed? *In many communities all over the world, large numbers of poor people live and move in a society populated almost exclusively by other poor people.* Even for those employed in well-to-do areas, their primary areas of socialization and recreation remain the poor communities they hail from. Whilst some employed adults may be exposed to people in the non-poor world, children in particular tend to be confined inside poor communities.

The impact of the human environment on poor people is thus most dramatic in the case of children. Any parent, rich or poor, can demonstrate exemplary ethical behaviour to his or her child and provide that



child with fun and laughter through humorous stories and light-hearted play. Likewise any parent, rich or poor, can fail their child through emotional absence or abuse, violent discipline, or through failing to provide guidance through responsible parenting. Although poor parents are just as capable as rich parents of providing these things for their children, they struggle to provide other valuable goods for their children. Children in poor communities often lack interaction with knowledgeable, successful adults who can be inspiring role models. If one looks at the interests, hobbies, careers, and organizations within well-to-do communities and compares them with what is available in poor communities, then the lack of economic resources for survival and the dearth of opportunities for human flourishing are clearly apparent. Poor communities show a lack of mutually enriching activities.

Furthermore, social science reports on poverty all refer to the negative impact poor people may have on one another. Humans have a strong need for safety and security in their environments. Alcohol abuse and interpersonal violence undermine a sense of security and personal safety within people's daily human environments, as discussed earlier.

In most societies human beings live in interdependency with one another. We need multiple interactions within our human environment for optimal human functioning. We are comfortable with our being dependent on others for some services and independent in providing other things for ourselves. Thus, in most contemporary societies, people disapprove of those who live in dependence on others despite possessing the requisite capacities to make independent contributions to their own welfare. Some researchers define poverty in terms of independence, or self-reliance. Foster refers to poverty as an "inability to be self-reliant", which directs attention to the "capability of families to meet some minimum level of living by means of their own efforts".<sup>10</sup>

Poor people with strong feelings of powerlessness tend to become dependent on other people, the state, or relief organizations for aid or to take care of them.<sup>11</sup> Even aid given with good intentions may be given in such a way as to stifle initiative and self-reliance and may, in fact, reinforce the wrong kind of dependency.<sup>12</sup>

Inappropriate ways of aiding poor people may also create an attitude of entitlement that persists beyond their time of need, inducing a sense that they deserve aid and have a right to it, regardless of whether they need assistance or not.<sup>13</sup>

From these remarks it becomes clear why “the manner of giving” can be important and why some poor people develop “resentment and humiliation” if treated as “a problem to solve”.<sup>14</sup>

It is a popular belief in many contemporary societies that everyone gets equal opportunities to make something of their lives, regardless of their background. The fact is, that people severely affected by poverty are often not able to share in such opportunities. Many poor people cannot visualize themselves as agents who can actively work and strive to change at least some of their circumstances. They have lost belief in their ability to influence events and they thus live with a consciousness of their own powerlessness and inability to influence or change anything.<sup>15</sup>

*Lack of power* is close to the heart of the experience of poverty for many poor people. Narayan et al. find “the extent to which dependency, lack of power and lack of voice emerge as core elements of poor people’s definitions of poverty” striking.<sup>16</sup> This attitude of being powerless and ineffectual also concerns the events and history of poor people’s own lives. Poor people often experience life as something happening to them and not as though they are co-makers of their own history.<sup>17</sup>

Lack of essential resources to live a decent life, feelings of powerlessness to change circumstances, and dependence on others lead poor people to develop a *negative self-image*, experience strong feelings of inferiority, and to resign themselves to their situation.<sup>18</sup> Their negative views of themselves due to their lowly position compared to others in society, and their inability to change that, give poor people feelings of fatalism, hopelessness, and resignation.<sup>19</sup> They accept their situation and lose motivation or willingness to even attempt any changes.

Part of living well within a human environment is social contact with one’s friends, acquaintances, and other members of the groups to

which one belongs. The offensive and dismissive ways in which poor people are treated by the well-to-do has been well documented. Well-off people who form part of poor people's human environment often do not aid or empower the poor, but compound the suffering already present in their lives. The dominant, influential, and powerful members of society often ignore the poor people they encounter, or treat them with disrespect. This isolates and alienates the poor from their surrounding communities. Poor people are sometimes blamed for their poverty, which is perceived by non-poor people as a condition which the victims of poverty have brought upon themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Another problem is the fact already noted that non-poor people often look down on poor people with contempt and show no sympathy towards them.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, non-poor people might feel ashamed of members of their own family, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national group who have become very poor and consequently ignore them or treat them with resentment.<sup>22</sup> As a result poor people might be uncomfortable in the presence of non-poor members of society and unable to engage with them on a social level.<sup>23</sup>

Poor people often feel that public officials treat them inappropriately, as they experience a "lack of civility and predictability in interaction with public officials".<sup>24</sup> Poor people have a clear perception of being discriminated against, discrimination based on their lack of economic resources to live lives defined as suitable for humans in their particular society. No wonder that poor people often feel humiliated and ashamed of their poverty and describe themselves as follows: "We are social outcasts ... we are like refuse, like animals, like a rubbish bin."<sup>25</sup>

People are often poor because governments at local, regional, and national levels deny them an equitable part of public resources. People impoverished in this way are not part of the politicians' priorities for public spending. Excluded people's needs are ignored and they are allocated vastly unequal shares of government budgets. Poor people are often adamant that they are subjected to "exploitation at the hands of the institutions of state and society".<sup>26</sup>

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## POOR AND RICH SHARING THE SAME WORLD

*P*art of the poor person's broader environment is the presence of those rich people with whom they share society. We cannot properly understand poverty unless we compare the meaning of the term *poverty* with the concept of *rich*.

*Poverty* is part of a set of dichotomous concepts, where *rich* defines a good condition desired by most people and *poor* a miserable condition. Poverty is never a freely chosen way of life - except by very few, usually for religious reasons. What light can a definition of the concept *riches* cast on the meaning of the concept of *poverty*?

In everyday language the concept *riches* refers to a condition of having a lot of money or possessions, or more generally, having abundant means considered valuable in society. Riches thus refer to valuable means and possessions of individuals, families, groups, or countries. People are described as "rich" when they are amply provided with money or possessions.

People who have large quantities of money or possessions are considered to have abundant means to fulfil their plans, projects, purposes, or dreams. They have more power to produce the outcomes most congenial to their plans, purposes, and wishes than other people. Rich people have the resources to influence and direct other people's lives.

The words “abundant”, “amply provided with”, and “large quantities” suggest that people are rich in comparison to other members of their society or to other members of comparable societies. They seemingly have more than others, or possess valuable things in excess of the degree to which others possess them.

When we apply the concept *rich* to particular actions or things, other dimensions of its meaning emerge that elaborate the meaning described above. When we talk of a mine “rich in iron ore”, we mean that this mine contains large amounts of valuable resources. A “rich imagination” produces many creative, new ideas. A “rich country” abounds in natural, material, or human resources that yield many things judged valuable. Similarly, “rich soil” can produce good crops because the soil abounds in qualities conducive to the production of good crops. Riches furthermore refer to qualities of great value that things or persons have in abundance. Examples include references to a person who is richly talented, the richness of our language, or to a country’s riches in petroleum.

An important dimension of the meaning of the concept *rich* is that things or persons so described possess something precious that is of great worth or value. Take the following examples:

- ▶ A “rich voice” is full and rounded and is particularly pleasing to the ear;
- ▶ “Rich food” has choice ingredients and therefore particularly strong stimulative or nourishing effects, and
- ▶ A “rich interpretation” of a musical work describes a highly developed or cultivated performance demonstrating superior skill, knowledge, and insight.

Note that riches play an important role in improving only some aspects of subjective well-being. Diener and Biswas-Diener point out that many aspects of subjective well-being cannot be improved by riches.<sup>1</sup> Money cannot usually buy love or happiness!

In summary, the concept *rich* refers to people who might:

- (1) Own large amounts of valuable resources and are amply provided with or have a lot of money or possessions and possess precious things considered to be of great worth, and

(2) Command abundant means considered to be valuable in a society and can use those means to exercise power over others.

*Rich* and *riches* can also refer to activities or performances that:

(3) Have qualities of great value, and

(4) Yield or produce things considered to be of great worth.

In stark contrast to the definition of the concepts *rich* and *riches* above, we have already defined one expression of the concept of *poverty* as *absolute poverty*.

*Absolute poverty* means that people do not have sufficient economic capacity to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, security, and medical care to maintain their physical health. In everyday language this means people do not have sufficient means to procure even the essential necessities of life. Such people cannot secure their survival and are dependent on others for help. Gifts, community assistance, allowances, governmental aid, or charitable relief stand between their bare subsistence and ill-health or even death.

We have also defined a second expression of poverty as *relative poverty*.

*Relative poverty* means that although people have sufficient economic capacities to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, security, and medical care to maintain their physical health, they cannot participate in any other activities regarded as indicative of being human in that society. People in this condition have no more than the barest necessities to keep themselves physically alive and functioning.

In everyday language the concepts *poverty* and *poor* are used with several meanings related to the ones above. These related uses are mostly metaphoric applications and focus our attention on individual acts or performances, rather than being descriptions of the lives of individuals or groups. Nevertheless, these uses further clarify the dominant meaning of the concepts *poverty* and *poor*.

One example is the meaning of *poor* as *lacking an essential property*, for example, when someone speaks of “poor soil”. The soil has a deficiency in the desired qualities and thus yields little and is



described as unproductive, inferior, and of little value. In the case of soil, the desired properties needed for a good crop are scanty and inadequate. Crops do not flourish in poor soil. The soil cannot be used with any success.

The meaning of *poor* and *poverty* in such contexts clarifies the ordinary language understanding of the condition of poverty as a situation where people lack means, experience deficiencies in the provision of their needs, and have scant access to adequate resources.

People in such unfortunate circumstances deserve some kind of sympathy, compassion, or pity. This is reflected in the use of the concept *poor* as referring to people who *deserve pity*, who are unfortunate, unhappy, miserable, and in need of people with whom they can share their negative feelings. For example, one could speak of the “poor fellow who was injured in a car accident”, regardless of this fellow’s socio-economic status. Here the focus is on the person afflicted by unfortunate circumstances or who has suffered an unfortunate calamity. This person deserves to be pitied. Again, this use clarifies the dominant use of the concepts *poor* and *poverty*. Poor people are often pitied, seen as miserable and unhappy, and regarded as unfortunate to be suffering under their desperate circumstances.

Everyday use of the concepts *poor* and *poverty* also suggests that poor people are sometimes *to blame* for their poverty.

The concept *poor* is often used to refer to a performance *unworthy* of a person’s position or ability. The cricket player played a “poor shot that cost him his wicket”, or the ballet dancer gave a “poor performance” of the lead role of Swan Lake. It could be that both stars gave performances far below their ability, or that they do not have the ability to perform according to the standards required of top performers in their field. This clarifies the condition of poverty by pointing to some people’s inability to provide adequate means for their survival, or to their below standard performance - for whatever reason - that fails to deliver the required goods. If these ideas are linked with the earlier definition, one could argue that poor people are forced by their condition to live a life below the minimum standards their society has set for a minimally decent human life.

The *insignificance and low status* of poor people are also reflected in the everyday use of the concepts *poor* and *poverty*. Sometimes we speak of someone as a “poor creature”, or refer to a person’s view as a “poor opinion”. This can mean that person and opinion are despicable, insignificant, humble, lowly, or of little consequence.

Sometimes people refer to themselves, their performances, belongings, or what they offer to others as being poor. In such cases they are either modest or apologetic, attempting to deprecate themselves, what they have, or offer to others. Again this clarifies the human condition of poverty by pointing to poor people’s *low position* in society, without substantial influence. As a result many people look down on them. For similar reasons many poor people resist identifying themselves as poor. To identify themselves thus, would be a negative portrayal of oneself as someone who cannot reach societal standards, a person with a pitiable problem in need of help. Poor people trying to live with dignity in a society prejudiced against them might not voluntarily want to adopt “poor” as a self-description.<sup>2</sup>

The concept *poor* thus refers to people who:

- Have insufficient economic means to procure the necessities of life or inadequate resources to participate in human social activities;
- Lack essential properties, have deficiencies in desired resources, or have access only to inadequate or scant resources;
- Have a low position in society without substantial influence, and
- Do not perform in a way that reflects their position or ability.

A comparison between poverty and riches reveals the following:

- *Rich* represents the positive

The meanings of rich and riches turn on positive terms such as precious, valuable, luxurious, prosperous, worth, and abundance. Rich people are described in similar positive terms, signalling the admiration they often receive. The focus is on their power to command a large share of valuable resources available in society or to use such resources to secure outcomes they prefer.

- *Poverty* represents the negative

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In the case of poverty, the focus is on negative terms like *inadequate*, *insufficient*, *deficient*, and *unworthy*. Social scientists typically use terms like the following in their descriptions of poverty: “deprivation”, “exclusion”, “insufficient”, “lack”, “dependent”, “unable to”, “loss of assets”, “too little”, “shortage”, “disabilities”, “incapacities”, and “fall below”. In contrast to the positive terms that unpack the meaning of riches denoting valuable qualities and characteristics in demand by many, the negative terms associated with poverty suggest something very different, and certainly not something freely chosen by anyone.

What exactly does this amount to?

Poverty as lack of economic resources makes it impossible for its victims to develop and deploy their capacities to engage in social life, disables people from giving their full input in employment, diminishes their range of activities as full members of society, and restrains them from utilizing opportunities for which they would otherwise qualify. Their lack of economic resources implies that there are some things poor people cannot acquire and some activities they cannot engage in because the prerequisites are absent: the enabling circumstances to make something of their lives simply do not exist. The support, circumstances, and resources needed to engage in a fully human life are not accessible to support their life's project. They are disabled in their quest to live a life worthy of humans as defined by society. They cannot empower themselves sufficiently to exploit the opportunities available to them as human beings seeking to live lives comparable to those of their fellow citizens.

## Endnotes

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## THE CHALLENGE OF POVERTY TO CHRISTIANS

*I*n light of the discussion above, it is clear that poverty is a major disabling condition that causes many hardships in the lives of poor people. Poverty is a dehumanizing condition that deprives its sufferers of many of the basic requirements that enable people to enjoy a good quality of life.

What then are the challenges that poverty poses to Christians? I have already established that poverty is a serious *moral issue* that demands the attention of all people, because it comprehensively affects its sufferers. What, by way of summary, are the main issues that contemporary Christian ethics must address?

### (1) *Poverty concerns matters of life and death*

Poverty may lead to death. Lack of food, water, shelter, or clothing can cause people to die. Food with inadequate nutritional value, water that spreads disease, shelter that offers no protection against the elements, and clothing that exposes people to cold weather can all cause diseases that lead to ill-health and eventually death, or severely increase people's vulnerability to disease and illness. The greater risks of crime in poor areas have similar consequences.

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**(2) *Poverty undermines the human dignity of people***

People who suffer from poverty live lives judged by their fellow citizens to be beneath the dignity of humans.

**(3) *Poverty means public humiliation for poor people***

Many poor people suffer public humiliation in a number of ways. Poverty is usually a condition visible for all to see. Non-poor people often treat poor people like dirt and blame them for their poverty or for simply being there. Their mere presence presents a moral challenge many people refuse to face.

**(4) *Poverty causes or exacerbates bad relationships***

Poverty often causes relationships to deteriorate within families, between friends and neighbours, within communities, and amongst citizens in a state.

**(5) *Poverty leads to squandered human potential***

Lack of money, energy and time, inferior opportunities, and social illiteracy can cause poor people's human potential to be wasted through lack of proper development.

**(6) *Poverty means more burdens and reduced quality of life for many people***

The physical, psychological, and sociological consequences of poverty stack up more burdens for poor people to carry through their lives than they would have to bear if they were not poverty stricken.

**(7) *Poverty shows people's inhumanity towards one another***

Poverty illustrates the negative side of humanity. Many non-poor turn

a blind eye towards the suffering of their fellow humans; some even exploit them and act unjustly towards them.

***(8) Poverty exposes widespread responsibility for conditions of injustice***

Many people are to blame for the suffering poor people experience in their daily lives. Some people are responsible for directly causing poverty and many more are responsible by choosing not to care or refusing to get involved. In a few cases poor people themselves are responsible for their poverty, but in many more cases non-poor people are responsible for exacerbating the circumstances and suffering of poor people.

***(9) Poverty often leads to degraded and wasted human and natural environments, and poor people often reside in such areas.***

Poor people struggle to make a living in their environment and as a result often place enormous pressure on the environment. Poor people often have limited options of where to live and must make do with degraded environments.

These, in summary, are the specific issues that a Christian ethical response to poverty must address.

How then does a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth deal with these issues? To answer this question, we must first look at what the Bible has to say about poverty and wealth.





II

# POVERTY AND RICHES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT









## POVERTY IN THE PENTATEUCH

*I*n Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells the parable of the poor man, Lazarus, and the rich man who refuses to show him any compassion. When they both die, the rich man ends up in Hades and the poor man in Heaven. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers who are still alive to change their ways, so that they do not also end up in Hades.

Abraham gives an intriguing answer. He says that the rich man's brothers have access to the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets) and that the Old Testament provides sufficient warning for them to live a righteous life. If they do not listen to the Old Testament, they will not listen to someone who has risen from the dead.

Abraham's answer implies that the Old Testament contains God's clear and definitive message on how to treat poor people. Nothing more is needed. What, then, is the message of Moses and the prophets?

In this part of *When I needed a neighbour were you there?* I want to discuss the awareness in the Old Testament of the circumstances of poverty, and its values for dealing with poverty and riches. I will first look at the Pentateuch, then the Prophetic writings, after which the Wisdom literature will be analyzed. This part of the book closes with a section on descriptions of the experience of poverty and wealth in the Psalms and historical writings.

## 1. God as first priority

In the Pentateuch God claims to be the first priority of Israel and wants to command the total allegiance of the Israelites. What does this mean? And what does it imply for values on poverty and riches?

God is presented in the Pentateuch as the one who elected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his followers. Their descendants would form a nation that would be God's special people. He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would have many descendants to whom God would give land to be their own. In return they had to worship him as the only God in the universe. He alone was God and the Israelites had to love him with all their heart, soul, and strength. (Dt 6: 4-5)

This command is fundamental. God was the absolute priority in the life of Israel, and God commands that the ethical orientation and lifestyle of every Israelite in all aspects of their lives must conform to this.<sup>1</sup> How to love and worship God are not only specified in the fundamental laws of God's covenant, i.e., the Ten Commandments. Other rules and values specified in the Pentateuch for individuals and the community are all intended as detailed applications of the Ten Commandments. For this reason they too express the scope of genuine love for God as the only God.

God's claim to be the only God and thus legitimately demanding the total allegiance of Israel rests on what he promised their ancestors and what he did to liberate Israel from Egyptian bondage. Both narratives of the origin of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) include God's introductory remark that God is the God of Israel who rescued them from slavery in Egypt. God's liberation of Israel from Egyptian oppression is frequently used in Deuteronomy to justify normative values. Two examples will suffice. The commandment to individuals, their households, strangers, and slaves to observe the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 is justified by reminding the Israelites that they were saved by God from slavery in Egypt. Similarly, the command in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 not to gather all the corn, grapes, or olives, but to leave some for the foreigners,

widows, and orphans, is given to Israel because they were once slaves in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> *In other words, God uses their own experience of being oppressed aliens in a foreign land to sensitize the Israelites, so that they will never treat anyone the way they themselves were once treated.*<sup>3</sup>

This way of reinforcing obedience to God's laws for Israel must also be used by Israelite parents when teaching their children to accept and obey the laws of Israel as a whole. When their children question them about God's laws, the Israelites are to answer as follows:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders - great and terrible - upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

(Dt 6:20-25)

If children ask their parents why God commanded them to obey these laws, they must answer them by telling the story of how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They must tell the children how God brought them to the land he had promised to their ancestors. Having chosen their ancestors, liberated the Israelite slaves from Egyptian oppression, and given them the Promised Land, God now demands their total allegiance. They must live obediently, according to his laws.

From the above it is clear that remembering God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery would ensure:

- (1) That the Israelites would remain aware that they must depend on God and his words to sustain them, not on food and water alone (Dt 8:3), and

(2) That they would have compassion for vulnerable people who were marginalized and oppressed in their society.

Keeping the memory of deliverance alive meant that the Israelites had to reflect on God's response to their oppression in Egypt, and to develop similar compassion towards people in need in their own society. God saw their slavery, heard their groaning, remembered his covenant with their ancestors, and was concerned enough to rescue them from Egyptian bondage. (Ex 2:23-25)

Whatever else the Pentateuch has to say about poverty, this perspective may not be lost. All values dealing with poverty flow from the demand that the Israelites must love the only God, the One who has saved them from oppression, with every part of their persons and in every aspect of their lives. Part of loving God is acquiring aspects of his nature. Good examples of such divine characteristics are the depiction of God as an impartial judge who does not accept bribes, and as a compassionate carer for widows, orphans, and foreigners. God expects Israel to express these values in daily life as part of what it means to live faithfully within the covenant between God and Israel.

## 2. God's promises to Israel

God often promises Israel the blessings of a good life in the Promised Land if they obey his commandments. These promised blessings are highly significant for an understanding of the Old Testament values concerning poverty. Not only do most of the blessings concern successful food production and creation of wealth, but one promise explicitly states that no member of Israel will be poor if Israel is obedient to God's commands. The condition attached to these promises is that the Israelites must live in complete obedience to all aspects of God's laws. If they listen to God's commands, obey them, live according to his laws, faithfully keep his commandments, love him, and turn back from worshipping other gods, then the specified blessings will follow.

These blessings fall into four categories of which two are directly relevant to issues of poverty:

- ▶ The promise of blessings of material prosperity in an agrarian context dominate. If the Israelites are obedient they will have abundant crops from the fertile land with enough water. The details of the kinds of crops are listed, such as corn, wine, olive oil, etc. Their barns will be filled with food and they will have more than enough to eat.
- ▶ Blessings of a more personal nature refer to personal well-being, blessings on their work, being prosperous, and having many children.
- ▶ As a nation, obedience will bring the Israelites riches, greatness, and God's help in defeating their enemies. One might describe this as blessings on the stage of world politics.
- ▶ There are also religious blessings as a result of obedience to God's commands: God will make the Israelites his own people. Obedience will lead to God keeping his covenant, showing love and mercy, giving them obedient hearts, and bringing them back from where they are scattered among the nations because of disobedience.

These promises are made in the unique context of Israel entering the Promised Land as God's chosen people or nation. The promises may be understood in two ways:

- (1) One could argue that God *intervenes in nature to control natural forces* like the weather to produce rain if the Israelites are obedient to his commandments.

This argument can be supported by God's promise to give rain at appropriate times and his threat that disobedience would lead to curses, such as drought. If this is correct, then the promised blessings are powerful incentives for obedience to God's laws. The curses, on the other hand, are strong threats of impending disaster that ought to instil fear in the people's hearts and thus prevent them from being disobedient.

- (2) Another understanding of these promises is that *God's commands contain values that enable a kind of living that is best suited to a good life for human beings.*

The promise that obedience to God's commandments will guarantee that no Israelite is poor, presupposes a community where no op-

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pression or exploitation takes place, where people do not steal one another's property, where poor people are appropriately taken care of, where honesty in economic life means paying just wages on time, and where dealers do not cheat with the scales when measuring the weight of their products.

To my mind both these interpretations seem valid, and we may thus conclude that blessings follow both from divine intervention in natural and human affairs and from ethical human conduct.

God's promises of blessings for Israel play an important role as incentives for Israel to obey his commands. The curses that will follow disobedience to his commands are sanctions or threats with a similar intention of reinforcing appropriate moral behaviour.

Incentives and sanctions are not the only measures in the Pentateuch in support of the preferred normative values. An explicit commitment to God is perhaps the most important motivating factor of all. The Israelites are constantly called on to make a commitment to love and worship Yahweh only. People committed to love God would want to serve him through obedience to his commands. These calls are made on various grounds. One is that Yahweh is the only God. Another is that he elected their ancestors as his people and promised them many descendants in a land of their own. A further ground for a strong commitment to God and a life lived according to his commandments is his role in the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression.

### 3 Provisions for the poor: commandments concerning the poor

What kind of ethical conduct towards the poor does the Pentateuch prescribe?

A basic general theme is the obligation *to be generous in helping fellow Israelites in need and to give to them freely and unselfishly from what one has available*. (Dt 15:7-11) The assumption here is that there will always be poor and needy people in society, and for that reason God commands the Israelites to be generous.

Another general theme is the *protection of vulnerable people in ancient Israelite society*. The Israelites are told not to deprive foreigners, orphans, and widows of their rights, nor to ill-treat or oppress them. (Ex 22:22-24; cf. Dt 24:17)

Foreigners were vulnerable as they were alone amongst strangers, without the protection of members of their family, clan, or tribe. Widows in a patriarchal society were vulnerable without a husband's income, possession of land, and protection.<sup>4</sup> Orphans are vulnerable in practically any society, unless given special care.<sup>5</sup> Besides general instructions not to violate their rights or exploit them, three categories of measures are mentioned to protect the poor in ancient Israelite society. These measures include:

- ▶ Sharing resources with poor people;
- ▶ Refusing to exploit poor people's powerlessness and treating them with honesty, and
- ▶ Special provisions for supporting poor people.

Non-poor Israelites had to *share their resources* with poor people in several ways. When harvesting grapes, olives, or corn, they were not to gather every part of the crops yielded. After they had picked olives once, they were to leave the rest for the orphans, widows, and foreigners to collect. The Israelites were not to cut the corn to the edges of their fields and the corn left behind in this way was to be set aside for poor people to collect. They were similarly instructed not to go back over their vines for a second time to harvest grapes. What remained was to be left for the poor to collect. These provisions for poor people are significant as the benefits were only available to poor people capable of, and willing to, collect whatever was left over from the harvest. (Dt 24:19-22)

Besides sharing the abundance of agricultural crops with poor people, the Israelites also had to *share their money* with poor people. The Israelites were commanded to be generous to poor people, which in this context meant lending them as much as they needed. (Dt 15:7-11; Lev 25:36, 37)

*Loans* played a different role in ancient Israel to the financial bor-



rowing we encounter today. Loans were regarded as a means to help poor people to recover from poverty.<sup>6</sup> For this reason God forbade the Israelites from charging interest on loans (Ex 22:25), as interest would only prolong the poor person's struggle against poverty.<sup>7</sup> In any case, no non-poor person was supposed to benefit from the suffering of a poor person, but rather had the duty to help them in their need.<sup>8</sup> Non-poor lenders could, however, take some personal possession of the poor person as a pledge or security that the loan would be repaid. This practice could obviously be abused, and various regulations were introduced to limit such abuses. Israelites were thus not allowed to take anything linked to the provision of basic necessities for sustaining life. For example, a poor person's millstone was off limits, as it was used to grind corn for staying alive. Similarly, poor people's cloaks could not be kept overnight as that would deprive them of protection against the cold, and widows' garments could never be taken. (Dt 24:6, 12-13)

Restrictions were not only placed on what could be taken as pledge or security, but also on the way that these pledges could be taken. Thus, when lending to a neighbour, the lender was not allowed to collect the pledge or security personally. The lender had to wait outside, to allow the poor person to bring the pledge or security outside by themselves. This was probably done to avoid embarrassing or humiliating poor people, and creating a sense of inequality in a community where all members were supposed to share equally in the covenant between God and his people. (Dt 24:10-11)

One way of ensuring an equitable sharing of resources in society was through *tithing*.

For two out of every three years, tithing meant that the Israelites had to set aside a tenth of the produce of their fields and eat it at the place where God had chosen to be worshipped. By eating this meal the Israelites brought honour to God and enjoyment to themselves. (Dt 14:22-29)

Every third year the tithe of their produce had to be stored in their towns for the use of the Levites, who owned no land, as well as for the use of the orphans, widows, and foreigners. (Dt 26: 12) These groups

were allowed to come and take all they needed, so that they would have enough food to eat, and thus survive. Through the practice of tithing the Israelite community took responsibility for providing the poor in their society with food. The goods provided by God's blessings were shared by all members of Israelite society.<sup>9</sup>

Closely linked to the idea of tithing were the *annual festivals*, especially the Harvest Festival and the Festival of Shelters, both of which make explicit provision for poor people. These two festivals had important similarities. (Dt 16:9-17) Both were linked to the time of harvest in an agrarian society, and the people attending each festival were required to bring a gift in proportion to the blessings that God had given them.

The aim of each festival was to honour God and to be joyful. The festivals were intended to reinforce the idea that all good things come from God and also to avert the danger that prosperous people would attribute their success to themselves and forget the Giver of their blessings.<sup>10</sup> The list of participants was identical in both cases. Significantly these festivals had to be celebrated not only with family members, but also with servants, Levites, orphans, widows, and foreigners. No member of the community was to be excluded from the festivities.<sup>11</sup>

A second series of commands dealing with poor people exhorts the Israelites *not to exploit the powerless position of poor people*, but rather to treat them with honesty. In a sense, these commands concretized two of the Ten Commandments, namely the commandments not to steal and not to give false witness. The latter becomes relevant in the task description of judges. Judges - to be appointed in all towns - were implored always to give impartial judgements that were fair, honest and just. (Dt 16:18-20) They were urged not to accept bribes because accepting gifts could blind the eyes of honest and wise men, leading them to make the wrong decisions. Bribes simply ruined the cause of those who are innocent. Analogous to the acceptance of bribes were signs of favouritism to poor persons in court, denial of justice to persons because they were poor, or fear of the rich leading to biased

judgements. All these practices were deemed wrong. The truth had to be heard and was to be decisive, regardless of the socio-economic status of the persons involved.

Another aspect of truthfulness and honesty concerned the use of appropriate weights and measures. Anyone selling products that had to be weighed, counted, or measured in any way, was commanded not to cheat their customers. (Dt 25:13-16) Their instruments for the measurement of weight, length, quantity, and volume had to be true and honest. If not, they were regarded as being more than dishonest and false. They were, in fact, also stealing from their customers. Using false weights and measures thus violated two of the Ten Commandments.

A further refinement of the commandment not to steal stated that there were several situations in which people would sin against God if they illegitimately acquired something belonging to a fellow-Israelite. Stealing is the obvious example, but three other refined forms of stealing are discussed. People would be stealing if they:

- ▶ Took things belonging to others by cheating,
- ▶ Refused to return something left as a deposit once the loan had been repaid, or
- ▶ Lied about finding a lost item belonging to someone else.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever was stolen in these ways had to be repaid in full, plus an added twenty percent, if the person was found guilty of using dishonest means. (Lev 6:2-6)

Another way of keeping something belonging to somebody else is by not paying them on time. The Israelites were commanded in general terms not to hold back the wages of someone they had hired even for a single day. However, this general rule was specifically applied to poor and needy hired servants, whether Israelite or not. (Lev 19:13; cf. Dt 24:14-15) They had to be paid for their work every day before sunset, because they needed the income and counted on receiving it. Withholding their wages would be taking away their ability to provide for the basic needs of themselves and their families. It was also a form of stealing.<sup>13</sup>

Several other measures in the Pentateuch were put in place *to safeguard the ability of poor people to provide basic necessities for themselves*. For example, in the prescribed animal offerings for different kinds of sin, provision was made for poor people. If they could not afford a sheep or a goat, they could offer either two doves or two pigeons. If the birds were still too expensive, one kilogram of flour would do. Similar provision was made for poor women who could not offer a lamb to offer two doves or two pigeons instead. This was an attempt to ensure that poverty would not stand in the way of people being able to restore their relationships with God through the prescribed offerings. (Lev 5:7-11; cf. Lev 14:21-22) <sup>14</sup>

Although women had a precarious position in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, at least two commands (besides those aimed at protecting widows) were directed at *protecting vulnerable women*. One protected (slave) women in polygamous marriages. When a man took an extra wife, he had to treat his other wife, or wives, as before. The first wife, or wives, had to receive the same amount of food and clothing as before and retain the same rights they previously enjoyed. (Ex 21:10) <sup>15</sup> If a man was unable to treat his wives in this way, he had to set them free without receiving any payment. This command ensured that women in polygamous marriages did not become impoverished as a result of not being the current favourite of the husband.

Another command which protected women against impoverishment came about through Zelophehad's five daughters, who negotiated with Moses in Numbers 27:1-11. These women challenged a command at the entrance to the tent of God's presence. Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders and the whole community of Israel were present. <sup>16</sup> Quite a daring thing for young women to do in a patriarchal society!

Their challenge arose from the fact that the commands of the Pentateuch disadvantaged them, as they were not allowed to inherit their father's property. When someone died without a son in ancient Israel, the closest male relative inherited the deceased man's land. Their argument for the right of daughters to inherit their father's land rested on the importance of the continuation of the male's name. Moses took

their request to God, and God modified the rules of inheritance so that daughters were placed second in line to inherit their father's land after their brothers.<sup>17</sup> If there were no daughters, the land would go to the closest male relatives of the dead man. Whether the main concern of the daughters was to preserve their father's name or to secure a means of making a living does not really matter. The fact is: they inherited their father's land, and with it a means of avoiding desperate poverty.

In an interesting twist to the story, they did, however, lose part of their freedom, without losing any aspect of the newly won right to inherit.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the allocation of land to the twelve tribes of Israel and the command that the land of each tribe should stay their own, the five daughters were only allowed to marry members of their own tribe. If they married outside of their tribe, the tribe would lose that land to the husband's tribe.<sup>19</sup> This was unacceptable, as it is explicitly stated that the property of each Israelite must stay attached to their tribe and that property may not pass from one tribe to another. The restriction of their freedom of choice in marriage partners makes sense in view of this concept of land holding amongst the Israelites. (Num 36:1-12) But despite this restriction, they won the important right of access to and ownership of their father's land, which safeguarded them against impoverishment.

*Land holding* was also affected by the *Sabbath Year* and the *Jubilee Year* or *Year of Restoration* that followed after seven cycles of Sabbath years. Laws in this regard implied that land in Israel could not be sold on a permanent basis and gave a landowner the right to buy back his land the moment he sold it. These laws also regulated land usage in a way that protected the poor.

If a person was forced, through poverty, to sell his land, he could get it back by one of three options:

- ▶ The quickest option was to have wealthy relatives who could buy it back;
- ▶ If there were no such close relatives, the second option was to wait until he had earned enough money to buy back the land himself, and

- ▶ The last option was to wait until the next Jubilee Year, when the land would be returned to the original owner or his descendants.

This last option determined the price a person had to pay if he decided to buy back the land. The sum paid would have to make up the income the new owner would have had from the harvests remaining until the next Jubilee Year, when the land would have reverted to the original owner in any case. (Lev 25:23-34)

The Sabbath principle had implications not only for land holding, but also for the *cultivation of the land*. Land could be cultivated for six successive years, but during the seventh year it had to rest. The Israelites were not allowed to harvest anything that grew on the land during the Sabbath year. Whatever grew on the land could only be eaten by the poor, whether it was corn, olives, or grapes. (Lev 23: 10-11)

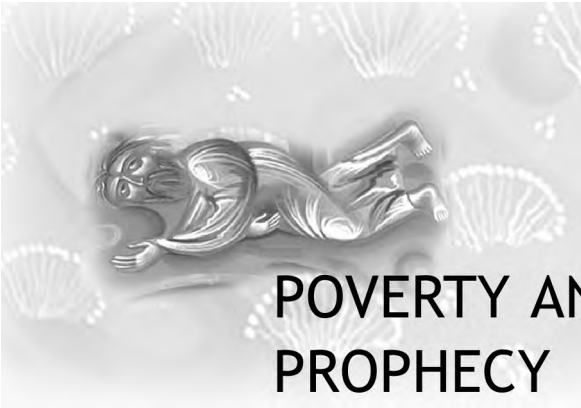
Poor people benefited from the Sabbath year in another way. At the end of every Sabbath year all money debts the Israelites owed their fellow Israelites were cancelled. This command did not apply to the debts of foreigners. (Dt 15:1-6) As loans were intended to enable poor people to escape their poverty, the Sabbath year accelerated that process by releasing poor people from burdens and obligations that had become oppressive and enslaving.<sup>20</sup> However, there was a real danger that people in a position to grant loans would refuse to do so close to a Sabbath Year. For this reason the Israelites were admonished not to refuse to lend poor people money because of the approaching Sabbath Year. Even considering such an idea was rejected outright.

## Endnotes

- 1 Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 98, 105.
- 2 John Hamlin, *A Guide to Deuteronomy*, (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 101.
- 3 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 127.
- 4 Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 478 and Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 146.

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- 5 Clements, *Exodus*, p. 146.
- 6 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 173.
- 7 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 173.
- 8 Hamlin, *A Guide to Deuteronomy*, p. 138 and Alan R. Cole, *Exodus. An Introduction and Commentary*, (London: The Tyndale Press, 1973), p. 125.
- 9 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 184.
- 10 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 117.
- 11 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 132.
- 12 Frank H. Gorman Jr, *Divine Presence and Community. A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), p. 43.
- 13 Hamlin, *A Guide to Deuteronomy*, p. 137.
- 14 W.H. Gispen, *Het Boek Leviticus*, (Kampen:J. H. Kok, 1950.), pp. 90, 91 and Gorman, *Divine Presence and Community*, p. 80.
- 15 Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary*, p. 469.
- 16 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God. A Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 149-150.
- 17 Martin Noth, *Numbers. A Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 211.
- 18 Noth, *Numbers*, p. 212.
- 19 See Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God*, p. 185.
- 20 Miller, *Deuteronomy*, p. 134.



## POVERTY AND PROPHECY

*M*any of the Old Testament prophets discuss issues concerning poverty. In their dealings with poverty, the prophets apply the values of Pentateuchal theology imaginatively to concrete situations in Israel and Judah.<sup>1</sup> Among the prophets, Amos stands out as the champion of the cause of poor people. Amos' reputation is justified by his strong focus on issues of poverty and riches.

In this section I give close attention to the network of themes running through the book of Amos and then compare Amos' message about poverty with other Old Testament prophets.

### 1. The fame of Amos as champion of the poor

The prophet Amos certainly deserves his reputation as champion of the poor for the scathing attacks he makes on wealthy Israelites who exploit their fellow Israelites.<sup>2</sup> Amos sharply criticised wealthy Israelites for their humiliating and oppressive treatment of poor people. To understand why Amos had this strong message of social justice, we have to reflect on the full scope of his message. The different parts of his message fit together in a network of associated meanings. This network is based on the shared understanding Amos and his readers had of the law of Yahweh and the defining moments of Israel's history, such as the election of Abraham, the exodus, the



wandering in the wilderness, and the conquest of the land of Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

I wish to argue that Amos' central theme is Israel's *failed relationship with God*.

God desired a special relationship with this nation that he had chosen to be his people, but because Israel did not live according to God's commands, they failed to respond appropriately. *God's commands required a lifestyle that integrated worship of God as the only God with demanding ethical guidelines on how to treat other people.*<sup>4</sup> Amos criticised Israel especially for their failure to follow God's ethical values for dealing with poor people.<sup>5</sup> Although they do worship God, their worship seems insincere, and their unethical behaviour towards the poor makes their worship unacceptable to God.<sup>6</sup>

In Amos' prophecy against Judah, the link between worship and ethics is clear. God accuses Judah of being led astray by other gods, of despising his teachings, and of failing to keep his commands. (Am 2:4,5)

However, the prophecies against Israel stress this theme even more strongly. The reason for the prophet's stringent criticism of Israel lies in God's history with this nation. As in Pentateuchal theology, Amos refers to the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. (Am 2:9-10) God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, led them through the desert, and gave them the land of the Amorites whom he had destroyed. Because God has personally chosen Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be his people, he judges their sins as being particularly awful and deserving of punishment. (Am 3:2) He regards his relationship with them as special. Israel was the only nation that he has intimately known and cared for. God's choice of Israel for this special relationship and his interventions in history on their behalf justify the punishment he is inflicting on them for their consistent refusal to live according to his demands.<sup>7</sup> The privilege of being elected to be God's people carries with it the responsibility to live as a holy nation.<sup>8</sup> Failure meant punishment.

God gave the people of Israel a chance to change their attitude, to return to him and to obey his laws. Their refusal to obey God is clear

in the statement that they have sinned again and again. (Am 2:6) God inflicted on them many of the curses mentioned in the Pentateuch, but despite these measures they still did not return to God. They did not respond to God's attempts to lead them to repentance and rededication.<sup>9</sup>

The accusation that they failed to return to God is repeated five times in Amos 4:4-12. Israel's inability to do God's will is emphasised by their failure to admit the seriousness of their situation. They refuse to admit that God's judgement on their sins is bringing a day of disaster and therefore they do not mourn over the impending ruin of their nation. (Am 6:1-14) Their insight into the state of their religious life is poor. As a result they cannot respond to God's invitation to return to him and receive life from him. The promise "you will live" is repeated three times, if only they would come back to God and do what is right. Again, worship and ethics are linked. (Am 5:1-27)

What made it so difficult for Israel to establish the right relationship with God and to obey all his commands?

The main problem seems to be that a group of Israelites lived a wealthy, luxurious lifestyle that depended on the exploitation and impoverishment of their fellow Israelites. This lifestyle involved the violation of several values concerning the treatment of poor people found in the Pentateuch. God's network of moral rules designed to protect the poor and vulnerable people in society were all violated so that the guilty parties could live lives of luxury. These violations represented a rejection of God himself, as well as the values he had commanded the Israelites to follow.<sup>10</sup>

Amos describes the luxurious lifestyle of the rich as follows:

- ▶ The rich Israelites have large houses, sometimes called mansions (Am 6:8), decorated with ivory, and built from fine stone, a material previously only available to kings.<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ Some people have more than one house, as winter and summer houses are mentioned. (Amos 3:15)
- ▶ Their houses are beautifully furnished, as they lie on luxurious couches. (Am 3:12; cf. Amos 6:4a)

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- ▶ The rich eat the best foods, such as veal and lamb, and demand wine, which they drink by the bowlful. (Amos 6:4b, 6)
- ▶ They enjoy feasts and banquets and live entertainment, as they compose songs and play them on harps. (Am 6:5, 7)
- ▶ They beautify themselves by using the finest perfumes. (Amos 6:6)

The lifestyle of the rich in ancient Israel during the time of Amos was based on a general attitude towards poor people that allowed rich people to violate God's commands and to exploit and oppress the poor. This attitude towards vulnerable people, such as the weak, the needy, and the poor is expressed by the fact that:

- ▶ Rich people oppressed, ill-treated, trampled on, and tried to destroy vulnerable people.
- ▶ They did this through cheating people out of their rights, twisting justice and turning it into poison, and turning right into wrong. Their honesty in dealing with other people was practically non-existent.

The rich people criticised by Amos disregarded the network of moral values found in the Pentateuch that prescribes acceptable behaviour towards the poor and other vulnerable people in Israelite society.

Amos spells out the details of the wealthy people's violation of the moral values found in the Pentateuch:

- ▶ The rich Israelites violated the commands about loans given to poor people to help them recover from poverty. They took the clothing given by the poor as pledge or security for their loans and used it to sleep on at places of worship. (Am 2:8) Clothing could not be kept overnight, as the poor needed it to keep warm. (Dt 24:10-13) To require clothing as a pledge was legitimate. To keep the clothing to enrich themselves was an abuse of God's commands.<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ Similarly, they drank wine taken from the poor unable to pay their debts, and they drank it in the temple of God. Both these deeds show disrespect to God as well as to the poor, as the sin has been committed in a place where God ought to be worshipped.

- 13 The rich people who granted loans to the poor did not allow them enough time to pay off their debt. Rather, they demanded immediate repayment and as a result many poor people had to sell themselves into slavery.<sup>13</sup> There were strict regulations aimed at trying to control slavery amongst Israelites and there was no general provision for Israelites who failed to pay their debts simply to be sold into slavery as in other ancient cultures. Although it was possible for Israelites to become slaves, a fellow Israelite was not allowed to be the initiator, making the other into a slave. At most Israelites may have been sold to, or sold themselves to, a fellow Israelite, but nothing more than that. In Deuteronomy the Israelite slave must be released after six years and be given generous aid in starting a new life. According to Leviticus, the Israelites should not make other Israelites, who had sold themselves as slaves, do the work of slaves. Rather, they should treat them as hired servants and release them and their families at the next Sabbath Year. Even before the required time of release, an Israelite slave had the right to be bought back by family or through his own earnings. (Dt 15:12-18; cf. Lev 25:39-55)

Amos criticised the rich for their attitude towards slaves in the light of the context of this cautious allowance that Israelites might become slaves and the specification of rules to safeguard a fixed time for slavery and the human dignity of such slaves. Amos says the rich sell honest people into slavery for not repaying the tiniest debts such as the price of a pair of sandals. (Am 2:6) The impression that the rich were actively seeking to enslave fellow Israelites is strengthened when he says the rich try to find poor people who cannot pay their debts, although the debts may again be very small. (Am 8:6a) Instead of helping poor people to stay out of slavery, the wealthy deliberately try to entrap them into becoming slaves for their own benefit.

In the context of the Israelites' experience of slavery in Egypt this behaviour is insensitive and unacceptable. God explicitly declares that Israelites may not become permanent slaves because they are his slaves. (Lev 25:44-46) To actively look for poor people unable to pay their debts - even very small ones - with the intent of enslaving them runs against the spirit of several moral values in the Pentateuch.

Rich Israelites not only tried to acquire human beings illegitimately, they also acquired property illegitimately. Amos accuses them of acquiring property through crime and violence, rather than legitimately buying property.

This attitude of acquiring things that did not belong to them, also manifested in their business dealings:

- ▶ They robbed the poor of their grain. (Am 5:11a)
- ▶ Instead of using the appropriate weights and measures (Dt 25:13-16; cf. Lev 19:35), they used false measures, tampered with the scales, and thus overcharged their customers. In this way they stole what belonged to their customers.<sup>14</sup>
- ▶ Sometimes they defrauded their customers by selling them worthless wheat at a high price. It is not surprising that Amos thinks that they do not even know how to be honest.
- ▶ Their dishonesty also surfaced in the courts. The rich hated anybody who challenged injustice and spoke the truth in court (Am 5:10), they prevented the poor from getting justice in court (Am 5:12), they took bribes, judged unjustly, and thus turned justice into poison. (Am 6:12) They used the judicial process to advance their own interests at the cost of the poor.<sup>15</sup>

Their dishonesty towards God made him say that he hated their religious festivals and their noisy songs. Despite appearances that they believed in God and were faithful in observing religious festivals, they made Nazirites drink wine and ordered prophets not to speak. When they observed holy days, they did so with an attitude of not being able to wait for the holy day to be over, so they could continue with their dishonest and unjust business practices. (Am 8:4-6) Instead of honouring and worshipping God, they simply endured the holy days, wanting to get back to their immoral behaviour as soon as possible.

Despite the harsh criticisms that the lifestyle of the rich invite, Amos keeps open the possibility that they may still accept God's offer to change their lives and obey his law. Amos advises the rich people to go back to God and do what is right, so that they will live. Instead of

performing religious festivals that God hates, bringing offerings that he will not accept, and making music that he won't listen to, Israel should hate evil, love what is right, and - as Amos says in beautiful and metaphoric language - allow

justice to roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!  
(Am 5:21-23; cf. 5:15)

The point he is making is that *an everyday life lived in justice is part of worship and must accompany other forms of worship*.<sup>16</sup>

Amos concludes with the promise that although God is going to destroy Israel as punishment for their continued refusal to live as his chosen people, he will restore Israel again, some time in the future. (Am 9:11-15)

Amos teaches that a right relationship with God is related to obeying God's commands on the way to treat other people, especially the poor.<sup>17</sup> To neglect the worship of God and to disobey the demands of right relationships with others, are both equally unacceptable to God.

To serve the God of Israel is thus a multidimensional and comprehensive matter: all aspects of religion must receive attention simultaneously - conversion from wrong ways, faith in the God of Israel, presenting offerings to God, singing songs of praise to God, respecting the Law and obeying its commands by caring for the poor in society and protecting the vulnerable people living with you. Nothing may be neglected, although truly worshipping God and ethical behaviour towards fellow human beings are the two core, interdependent priorities.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Amos, the poor, and the Prophetic tradition

Amos's dominant concern with the interdependence of religious worship and social justice does not necessarily receive the same emphasis in the other prophetic books. Nevertheless, similar issues are raised throughout many of the other prophetic books. To get a fuller picture of the prophets' concern with poverty in ancient Israel, links

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between Amos and the other prophets will be established. The other prophets sometimes also raise matters relating to poverty not addressed by Amos.

Like Amos, *Isaiah* clearly spells out the link between worship and ethics. In *Isaiah* 1:10-20, *Isaiah* describes God's disgust and aversion to all religious practice that is not accompanied by the believer living a life of justice as well.<sup>19</sup> God's irritation becomes clear when *Isaiah* quotes God speaking in the first person:

"The multitude of your sacrifices -  
what are they to me?" says the LORD  
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,  
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;  
I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.  
When you come to appear before me,  
who has asked this of you,  
this trampling of my courts?  
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!  
Your incense is detestable to me.  
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations. -  
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.  
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts  
my soul hates.  
They have become a burden to me;  
I am weary of bearing them.  
When you spread out your hands in prayer,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even if you offer many prayers,  
I will not listen.  
Your hands are full of blood;  
wash and make yourselves clean.  
Take your evil deeds  
out of my sight!  
Stop doing wrong,

learn to do right!  
 Seek justice,  
     encourage the oppressed.  
 Defend the cause of the fatherless  
     plead the case of the widow.” (Is 1:11-17)

God's advice through Isaiah for rectifying their failed religious life consists of their being willing to resolve the matter with God and allowing him to cleanse them from their sin. God promises them that no matter how deeply they are stained, he will cleanse them and make them white as snow again:

Though your sins are like scarlet,  
     they shall be as white as snow;  
 Though they are red as crimson,  
     they shall be like wool.(Is 1:18)

However, this “spiritual” element to restoring the relationship between God and his people is only part of the remedy for a failed religious life. The other part is living an ethical life by not doing evil, learning to do what is right, and practicing justice.

Isaiah specifies what it means to practice justice by referring to the familiar commands from the Pentateuch. The Israelites must help the oppressed people, defend the widows, and give the orphans their rights. They must exhibit God's concern for vulnerable and marginalized people every day of their lives.<sup>20</sup> They must not openly or tacitly tolerate any injustice against these groups.<sup>21</sup> Here Isaiah integrates worship and ethics, and emphasises their interrelatedness in living a life acceptable to God.

In Isaiah 58:1-12 the prophet returns to this theme when an apparently sincere group of believers questions the meaningfulness of their fasting because of God's lack of attention to them. They are portrayed as people who take pleasure in worshipping God every day, who are eager to know God's ways, and who want God to give them just laws, which they are willing to obey. Why then does God not respond favourably to their fasting?



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One reason is that they continue to do wrong things while they fast. To be truly religious and indifferent to social justice at the same time is simply unacceptable to God.<sup>22</sup> These people pursue their own interests while fasting and oppress their workers. They do not exhibit God's compassion for oppressed people.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, their fasting has negative effects on them. They become violent, quarrel, and fight with other people. But perhaps the more important reason for God not noticing their fasting is that they are practising the wrong kind of fasting. The kind of fasting that is important to God is social justice and caring for vulnerable people:

Is this not the kind of fasting

I have chosen:

To loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food

with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter -

when you see the naked,

to clothe him

and not to turn away

from your own flesh and blood? (Is 58:6-7)

Social justice includes eliminating gestures of contempt and evil words, putting an end to oppression, and getting rid of injustice. Care for vulnerable people means providing clothes to the naked, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and in general satisfying those in need.

Fasting that is alive with the spirit of the values of the Pentateuch leads to God's blessings. Such blessings include God's favour, presence, protection, response to prayer, guidance, and strength. According to Isaiah, believers fasting correctly will be like a garden with sufficient water, and the original readers of this text would have been empowered by these words to rebuild Israel after returning from exile.

There is a third section where the prophet discusses the intimate relation between worship and ethics in Isaiah 59:13-16. When the people confess their sins, they not only confess that they refused to follow God, rebelled against him, and rejected him. They also confess that they have not honoured the ethical values of justice, honesty, truth, and righteousness. Their turning away from God is linked directly to their oppression of other people. God's reaction to their confession is to note with displeasure and astonishment that there is no justice and that no one helps the oppressed. Again it is made abundantly clear that one's relationship with God and relationship with one's fellow human being are inextricably linked.

A similar link between worship and ethics is found in *Zechariah*.

*Zechariah* points out that the exile occurred as a result of disobedience. What is interesting to note is exactly which commands have been disobeyed here. *Zechariah* lists the demands of social justice, such as the injunctions not to oppress widows, orphans, or foreigners, or any one else in need. Added to that is the command to see that justice is done and to show kindness and mercy to one another. God's people refused to listen to these specific commands: they closed their minds and hardened their hearts. Stubborn disobedience to these commands made God angry enough to send them into exile. This suggests that *Zechariah* judged these commands to be close to the heart of the religion of Israel.<sup>24</sup> Obedience to God meant pursuing social justice. (*Zech* 7:9-14)

The prophet *Micah* echoes these sentiments and he states it very simply. What God requires of his followers is that they do justice, show constant love, and live in fellowship with God:

With what shall I come before the LORD  
 and bow down before the exalted God?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
 with calves a year old?  
 Will the LORD be pleased

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with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?  
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has showed you, O man,  
what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6: 6 - 8)

Worshipping God properly demands that one does justice to one's fellow human beings. Jeremiah echoes these sentiments by advising Israel not to boast of their wisdom, strength, or wealth, but rather to boast that they have intimate knowledge of Yahweh's constant love, justice, and righteousness. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)<sup>25</sup>

Believers in God are thus supposed to have the right priorities through having right relationships with God and their fellow human beings. This might help them to resist the negative influence of wealth that could tempt them to boast of their achievements. Jeremiah explicitly advises wealthy people not to boast of their riches, but rather to boast that they know and understand God.

*Ezekiel's* prophecy against the king of Tyre has a message of destruction. (Ezek 28:4-7) The king of Tyre collected many treasures through wisdom and skill, but became proud and judged himself to be as wise as a god. These attitudes are the cause of his coming destruction. *Habakkuk* adds to these warnings about the negative effects of wealth. In *Habakkuk* 2:5b<sup>26</sup> he says that wealth can make people greedy, so that they - like death - are never satisfied with what they have.

The Old Testament prophets reiterate many of the Pentateuchal values for dealing with poverty.

The prophets stress the *general protection that Israelites should give to widows, orphans, and foreigners*. These vulnerable people should be given their rights, defended when necessary, and be listened to and

judged fairly in court. (Is 1:23) They should not be ill-treated, oppressed, or taken advantage of. (Jer 7:5-7)

Similar values apply concerning *loans to poor people*. Money-lenders should not cheat, oppress, or rob poor people by forcing them to pay up their loans or by keeping whatever the poor gave them as security. (Ezek 18:12)

Ordinary Israelites are warned *not to cheat God by withholding their full tithes*. They are encouraged to bring the full amount so that there will be plenty of food available for the Levites who have no land and the poor and vulnerable people without means. (Mal 3:6-10)

The ethical values of *honesty, truth and justice* laid down in the Pentateuch are reaffirmed in the prophets. Cheating customers with false scales and measures is strongly rejected, as is getting rich through any dishonest means. No exploitation of poor and vulnerable people is allowed.<sup>27</sup> The emphasis is on the use of honest scales and measures. (Ezekiel 45:10a) Similarly, people must speak the truth in courts and make fair judgements that will give justice to the poor and vulnerable people, as doing this gives expression to the person's intimate knowledge of God. Making unjust laws to take property away from widows and orphans and thus denying them rights that justly belong to them, is rejected outright. (Zech 8:16-17; cf. Jer 22:16, Is 10:1-2)

The prophets often condemn leaders and ordinary Israelites for *taking other people's property and belongings through illegitimate means*. These people ignore all moral values. Leaders are accused of enriching themselves at the expense of the poor. (Is 3:14-15) Not only do they take advantage of the poor, they also murder people to get rich. Leaders steal other people's property, inter alia by driving them off their land. (Ezek 46:18) Ordinary Israelites pursue similar criminal behaviour in order to enrich themselves. Some rich people build their houses metaphorically with injustice, enlarge them with dishonesty, and eventually live in houses filled with loot. (Jer 22:13) Their wealth comes from cheating and robbing other people. Often such people take other people's houses, seize their fields, steal the coats off their backs, and do not pay wages to their workers. (Mic 2:1-2; 8-9)

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In such situations of injustice and criminal behaviour, God is the only guarantee of justice and care for his people. Ezekiel depicts God as the good shepherd who takes care of his vulnerable people. In a wonderful chapter on God (Ezek 34) Ezekiel contrasts the shepherds of Israel (the rulers of Israel), with God as the good shepherd. The shepherds of Israel only take care of themselves and cruelly exploit the sheep for that purpose. They do not tend the sheep by taking care of the weak ones, healing the sick, bandaging those that are hurt, bringing back those that have wandered off, or looking for those that are lost. Because of this failure by the leaders of Israel, God himself assumes the position as the “good shepherd” of Israel who will provide his people with protection and justice:

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.” (Ezek 34:11-16.)

God thus shows his character by explicitly siding with the vulnerable sheep of Israel whom he wants to care for and bless. Ezekiel explores the metaphor of the good shepherd in a way that resonates with other biblical texts about God as the good shepherd. See for example Psalm 23:1:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing.

Isaiah also echoes Ezekiel's sentiments that God is a shepherd to the poor of his people and the poor and helpless can flee to God in times of trouble for protection and comfort:

The poorest of the poor will find pasture, and the needy will lie down in safety. (Is 14:30a)

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall. (Is 25:4)

Later, in the New Testament, in John 10:11-15 Jesus picks up this image from the prophets and says that he is “the good shepherd”:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father– and I lay down my life for the sheep.

This vision of God as the Good Shepherd – who cares deeply for his flock and wants to take special care of those who are vulnerable – underlies the moral values shared by the prophets and the Pentateuch concerning the treatment of poor people.

## Endnotes

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## WISDOM, POVERTY AND RICHES

*T*he Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, provides rich contributions to the Biblical understanding and ethics of poverty. Besides expressing the *normative values* on poverty and wealth that are grounded in the Israelite faith in Yahweh, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes also give descriptions and explanations of various aspects of poverty and wealth. I call the latter *descriptive/explanatory* statements on poverty and wealth.

Like the Pentateuchal and Prophetic literature, statements containing promises (blessings and curses) are also found. Often these promises take the form of conditional statements, such as “If you do *x*, then *y* will follow”, therefore I call them *promissory/conditional* statements on poverty and wealth. These three broad types of statements on poverty and wealth will be used as categories to organize and summarize what the book of Proverbs has to offer.

The book of Proverbs contains short, pithy teachings based on observations and experiences gleaned from everyday life - almost a kind of proto-social science.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the descriptions and explanations deal with general tendencies or often-recurring patterns of behaviour, without claiming to be universally applicable. This implies that no proverb needs to be universally true and applicable everywhere. They only need to be true sometimes to have validity - as is the case with most generalizations currently provided by the social sciences.



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The proverbs are offered as practical guides for successful living.<sup>2</sup> Their aim is to make readers think about life and to stimulate them into assessing their own situations so as to determine the applicability of the proverbs.<sup>3</sup> As the proverbs are not meant to apply universally, readers must be sensitive to discerning whether they do in fact apply in the concrete situation of their own lives. Readers thus become active participants in learning from the collective human experience embodied in the wisdom of the proverbs.<sup>4</sup>

The following sections provide an overview of the understanding of poverty and wealth, as well as the moral values for dealing with poverty embodied in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

## 1. Descriptive/explanatory statements on poverty and wealth

The descriptive/explanatory statements about poverty and wealth in Proverbs do not present an idealised picture of poverty. The life conditions of poverty can be so serious as to destroy the people suffering them. According to Proverbs 10:15, "poverty is the ruin of the poor". The difficulty of their circumstances makes the life of poor people a constant struggle. Proverbs 15:15 goes on to say:

All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

Note the translation here of the Good News Bible (1992):

The life of the poor is a constant struggle, but happy people always enjoy life.

The German Bible Guten Nachricht similarly translates the first part of this passage as:

Für den Armen ist jeder Tag böse ...

According to Proverbs 31:6-7, the misery experienced by poor people makes them susceptible to the misuse of alcohol as a way to forget their misery, poverty, and unhappiness. Proverbs 28:3 says that the already difficult life conditions of the poor are exacerbated by the ruthlessness of people in more powerful positions. Leaders who oppress poor people are compared to driving rain that destroys agricultural crops. Poor people are also considered to be helpless against wicked rulers, who are judged to be as dangerous as a growling lion or a prowling bear. (Prov 28:15) Wicked people - presumably people with no moral conscience - are said to have no understanding of the rights of poor people. As a result some people make their living by taking cruel advantage of poor people. (Prov 29:7; cf. Prov 30:14)

Not only do poor people face difficult life conditions, but their human relationships are also often strained. They often lose their friends and find it difficult to make new ones.<sup>5</sup> Because society generally does not like the poor, even their neighbours come to dislike them and their family find no use for them. When the poor engage in conversation with the rich, they have to be submissive and beg politely. (Prov 14:20; cf. Prov 19:4, 6-7 and Prov 18:23)

However, not all aspects of the lives of poor people are judged so negatively. Whereas rich people's lives are often threatened, no one threatens the lives of poor people. (Prov 13: 8) Poor people often experience the love and kindness of believers who are generous to them. (Prov 31:20) Their lives sometimes have good qualities. Being poor is judged to be better than being a liar. (Prov 19:22b) Poor people sometimes have insight into character that surpasses the understanding of the rich who think themselves to be wise. (Prov 28:11)

Why are people poor? The book of Proverbs identifies several reasons, of which only two are not related to any kind of mistake or shortcoming on the part of the poor person. These two are the actions of unjust people with regard to land usage, and bad luck. According to Proverbs 13:23 unjust people in control of unused fields do not allow poor people to farm them, despite the fact that those unused fields could yield more than enough food for the needs of the poor. Proverbs

11:24 deals with the perplexing cases of people who are careful not to spend money freely yet become poor, although others who freely spend money become rich. Despite their good attempts at wise management of their money, they nevertheless become impoverished. In this case it might be luck or unfavourable circumstances that determine their impoverishment.

Laziness gets the most prominent place amongst the causes of poverty directly linked to the personal shortcomings of poor people. Lazy people sleep too much. As they sleep too much, their vineyards and fields are neglected. (Prov 24:30-34) The detrimental effect of too much sleep is demonstrated by a simile that says poverty will attack them like an armed robber while they are asleep. (Prov 6:9-11) Because of their laziness, such people never have money and thus they harm themselves. Instead of being able to think about other people's needs and to give generously, lazy people only think about what they themselves would like to have. (Prov 21:25-26]

Other personal shortcomings that cause poverty include bad behaviour, like eating and drinking too much (drunkenness and gluttony). (Prov 23:20-21) Negative attitudes can also lead to poverty. People unwilling to learn will become poor and disgraced. (Prov 13:18) People who are stupid enough to spend their money as fast as they get it will become impoverished. (Prov 21:20) Selfishness combined with an urgency to become rich can blind people to the danger of poverty suddenly striking them. (Prov 28:22)

The book of Proverbs has a very sober view of wealth. Wealth can protect the rich and can be used to save the rich person's life. (Prov 10:15) Because such statements are true some of the time, rich people imagine that their wealth can protect them like high, strong walls round an ancient city. (Prov 18:11) This, however, is not the case: the protection offered by a person's wealth cannot be that strong, as wealth is not as permanent as rich people imagine (Prov 27:23-24), as it may be lost in a flash. (Prov 23:4-5) In any case, there are limits to what wealth can do for one. When facing death, for example, wealth becomes meaningless, as it cannot do its owners any good anymore. (Prov 11:4)

Despite the limitations of wealth, it can attract friends to rich people.<sup>6</sup> Rich people have many friends, as everyone tries to gain the friendship and favour of the rich and famous. (Prov 19:6) Perhaps the status that wealth awards its holders causes many people to pretend that they are rich, while they actually have nothing. Some rich people, though, pretend to be poor, perhaps to avoid insincere friendships. (Prov 13:7)

As a result of their influential position in society, rich people can afford to be rude towards poor people, who need to speak to them in a submissive tone. They can treat poor people in this way because poor people are often virtually their slaves, being in debt to the rich. Not only do rich people treat others with contempt, but they also judge themselves to be wise, when often they are not. (Prov 18:23; cf. 22:7 and 28:11)

How significant is the manner in which rich people acquire their wealth? The book of Proverbs suggests that it is very important. Wealth acquired through dishonesty will do its possessors no good: it will lead its holders into the jaws of death and then disappear. (Prov 10:2) Proverbs 20:21 says that wealth easily acquired won't do the person any good and will in any case easily be lost, whilst Proverbs 13:11 says that the harder it is for a person to acquire wealth, the longer it will last. One reason why some people will never become rich is that they live a luxurious lifestyle with much wine and rich food. (Prov 21:17) On the other hand, a capable wife provides one reason why a man will never become poor. (Prov 31:11) Wisdom seems another good qualification for living in wealth and luxury, as wise people are rewarded with wealth. (Prov 14:24) Closely associated with this link of wisdom and wealth is the view that hard work can make a person no richer, as it is God's blessing that makes a person wealthy. (Prov 10:22)

## 2. Promissory/conditional statements on poverty and riches

Promissory/conditional statements on poverty and wealth can be analysed in two ways. One way is to analyse the themes in terms of the conditions that must be fulfilled to receive the promises (blessings or

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courses). A second kind of analysis looks at the categories of behaviour judged to be good and bad, as well as the categories of blessings and curses that are to follow. Such an analysis reveals the values embodied in the book of Proverbs on poverty and wealth.

The themes contained in the conditions of the promissory/conditional statements in the book of Proverbs are:

- ▶ The importance of wisdom;
- ▶ Ways of treating poor people, and
- ▶ The merits or not of laziness and hard work.

The first theme, *wisdom*, is discussed as follows:

To follow and acquire the teachings of wisdom will lead to a long, prosperous, and successful life that will also bring honour. (Prov 3:1-2,16; cf. 8:18-21) Having the foundations of wisdom, i.e., obeying and honouring God, will also lead to wealth, honour, and a long life. (Prov 3:9-10; cf. 22:4)

The second theme concerns *appropriate behaviour towards poor people*.

The book of Proverbs recommends that Israelites should be kind and generous to poor people. (Prov 11:25; cf.22:9) Being kind will lead to one's own happiness, whilst being generous will make you prosperous. Israelites should be willing to give of their resources to poor people, share their food with them, and be prepared to help where help is needed. (Prov 19:17) To give is like lending to the Lord who will surely pay you back, while you will be blessed for sharing your food. If you give help it is promised that you too will be helped. The king of Israel must defend the rights of the poor. (Prov 29:14) Such a king will rule for a long time.

However, according to Proverbs 22:16, 22-23 and Proverbs 28:8, exploiting poor people by taking advantage of them, charging them interest, or oppressing them can lead to curses such as losing your own wealth or your life. Ignoring the cries for help of poor people will result in your own cry not being heard. (Prov 21:13) If your attitude is so bad that you laugh at poor people and take pleasure in their misfortune - thus exacerbating their misery - you insult God and will be punished. (Prov 17:5)<sup>7</sup>

The third theme deals with *laziness and hard work*.

The message is simple. Laziness has negative consequences. Lazy people become poor, whether they just sit around or spend their time sleeping. Laziness may make you a slave or reduce you to such poverty that you end up in rags. Hard work will make you rich. Through hard work a person can earn a living, gain power, get a fortune, and have plenty to eat. (Prov 10:4; cf. 12:24, 27; 14:23; 20:13)

The alternative analysis of the promissory/conditional statements in Proverbs shows that the behaviour that God blesses includes:

- ▶ Obedience to God;
- ▶ Acceptance of the wisdom teachings;
- ▶ Being righteous and honest in dealing with others;
- ▶ Generosity and kindness to poor people, and sharing your food and giving some of your resources to the poor;
- ▶ Hard work and keeping busy.

Living lives characterized by these good qualities will have the following good consequences:

- ▶ Wealth and a long life (promised in different wording in various texts);
- ▶ Honour, success, and happiness will follow;
- ▶ Blessings from God and help in times of personal need are also promised in return for living an appropriately moral life.

Bad behaviour that must be avoided includes:

- ▶ Oppressing the poor in order to become rich;
- ▶ Taking advantage of the poor;
- ▶ Charging interest;
- ▶ Exploiting the helpless in court;
- ▶ Refusing to listen to the cry of the poor and closing your eyes to their needs, and
- ▶ Laughing at poor people, and taking pleasure in their misfortune.

These deeds are often done by people eager to get rich, or those who

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depend on their wealth when they ought to be depending on God. Being lazy, spending your time sleeping or just sitting around talking, is also rejected.

Bad consequences, or curses, that will follow bad deeds include:

- Losing your wealth and becoming impoverished;
- Angering God and your fellow human beings, and
- Having your own pleas for help ignored.

The values underlying the promissory/conditional statements are in line with the Pentateuchal and prophetic values concerning the treatment of poor people.

### 3. Normative statements on poverty and riches

The normative statements on poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs express moral values that individual Israelites ought to appropriate and implement in their lives. Three themes dominate:

- One theme concerns the supreme value of having wisdom;
- A second theme deals with cases when being poor is better than having wealth;
- The third theme consists of instructions on how to treat poor people.

The book of Proverbs judges *wisdom more valuable than anything else* that anyone should want. (Prov 3:15) Wisdom is closely linked with having knowledge, understanding, insight, and sound judgement. (Prov 2:1-5; 3:13; 8:12) According to Proverbs 20:15, having wisdom implies that you know what you are talking about.

Another important link is the one between wisdom, justice and righteousness. (Prov 1:1-6; 8: 20)<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 2:6-10 teaches that having wisdom enables one to know what is just. Wisdom is so important that people ought to search for it the way they would search for silver or a hidden treasure. (Prov 2:4) Acquiring wisdom is judged as being of more value to a person than gold, silver, or jewels. (Prov 3:14,15; 8:10-

11) Wisdom is thus more valuable than anything else a person could possibly desire.

Wisdom's value is seen in the beneficial effects it can have on a person's life. Wisdom brings psychological blessings, through making people's lives worthwhile, filling them with happiness and making their lives pleasant. Wisdom also gives blessings of a more material nature, such as wealth and a long life. (Prov 3:13-18) King Solomon is a good example of a person choosing wisdom as his first priority and having many other blessings, especially wealth, as a result.

It is wisdom itself that provides the basis for the second theme that expresses the view that *poverty is sometimes better than being rich*, despite the negative life conditions caused by poverty. The priority of living a moral life according to God's commands surfaces again. A series of contrasts shows that being rich without living a life of moral and religious integrity is not acceptable. It is far better to be poor and to live with integrity. Some examples of the contrasts are the following:

- ◆ Poverty and fear of the Lord are better than being rich and in trouble. (Prov 15:16)
- ◆ Poverty and being humble are better than being one of those arrogant people who rob others and share the loot. (Prov 16:19)
- ◆ The value of honesty is stressed by saying that being poor, but honest, is better than being rich and dishonest. (Prov 28:6)
- ◆ To be poor, but to live in a peaceful household, is judged to be better than to enjoying fine dining in households full of trouble. (Prov 17:1)

Despite the above teaching, Proverbs 30:7-9 says that the best way is to be neither rich nor poor. Rather, the ideal is to have just as much food as one needs. To have more leads to the risk that you might feel that God is not needed, whilst being poor has the risk that you might resort to theft that will bring disgrace on God.

The third theme found in the normative statements about poverty and wealth is the *appropriate treatment of poor people*. In line with the



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spirit of the Pentateuchal theology, appropriate behaviour towards people in need involves the following:

- ▶ Do good to people in need whenever one possibly can. (Prov 3:27)
- ▶ One must not tell people in need to wait, if one is able to help them now. (Prov 3:28) The emphasis is on doing what is possible for poor people within the time a person has available right now.
- ▶ Part of helping poor people is to speak up for them and to protect their rights if they are unable to do so themselves. (Prov 31:8-9)
- ▶ To show kindness to poor people and to give of your resources to them is judged to be a religious duty. To give is compared with lending to the Lord (Prov 19:17), and showing kindness is judged to be an act of worship. (Prov 14:31)

This emphasis on religious duties ties in with the basic motivation both the Pentateuch and Proverbs provide for helping the poor. Poor people share an important thing with their oppressors and with rich people. Poor people, their oppressors and rich people were all created by God - suggesting that they have an equal value as human beings before their Creator. (Prov 22:2)<sup>9</sup>

There are ways of treating poor people that are explicitly forbidden. All of these show the link between poor people and their Creator:

- ▶ To oppress poor people and to laugh at them is insulting to God. (Prov 14:31)
- ▶ God himself will argue the case of poor people who are taken advantage of. (Prov 22:22-23)
- ▶ Despising poor people is a sin and taking pleasure in other people's misfortune deserves (divine) punishment. (Prov 14:21)

In this way God protects the dignity of every poor person he has created.

## 4. Ecclesiastes, poverty, and riches

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes is generally known in theological circles as Koheleth. Although his personal identity is uncertain, he

is thought to have been well-versed in the wisdom tradition. His own contribution to the Wisdom literature is judged to be a critical questioning of the accepted beliefs and doctrines contained in the tradition.<sup>10</sup> Whether Koheleth significantly modifies the views about poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs is questionable.

Two themes emerge from Ecclesiastes:

- ▶ The injustice, oppression, and marginalization of poor people and
- ▶ The uncertainty and burdens of wealth.

Koheleth expands on these issues, rather than bringing anything new to what Proverbs has to say about them. He provides *descriptions of the injustice, oppression, and marginalization faced by poor people* without providing any normative evaluations. For example, he writes about the way oppression causes sorrow and grief for the poor. In Ecclesiastes 4:1 he says that despite the tears of the oppressed, no one is prepared to help them, as the power of the oppressors serves as a deterrent to providing help.<sup>11</sup> He becomes more specific when he discusses how government officials oppress the poor and deny them justice and their rights. (Eccl 5:8) The point Koheleth wants to make here is that within a hierarchical governmental bureaucracy it is difficult to locate those responsible for oppression and the denial of justice and rights. The reason is that their superiors in the hierarchy protect government officials.<sup>12</sup> No wonder that Koheleth urges his readers not to be surprised to see that government officials treat the poor unjustly, as they can easily hide behind other officials and thus escape being held responsible.

Koheleth depicts the marginalization of poor people in a beautiful little story. In this story a small town is attacked by the army of a powerful king. Although the army has surrounded the town and is about to start breaking down the walls, it is still possible to save the town and its inhabitants from destruction. However, the only person clever enough to save the town is a poor man, and no one could imagine that he might have been the hero of the situation. (Eccl 9:13-16) The lesson Koheleth draws from this story is that society does not think of poor people as wise, nor does society pay any attention to what poor peo-

ple have to say. This is a sad indictment on the way that poor people are marginalized and disregarded in society.

The other dominant theme concerning poverty and wealth in Koheleth deals with *the uncertainty and burdens of wealth*. One reason why people work to become rich is their inability to be satisfied with the wealth they already have. Another reason that Koheleth discovers is that people are envious of their neighbours and want to be better than them. (Eccl 4:4-6) A frantic lifestyle in pursuit of wealth in order to impress others does not make any sense to Koheleth. For him, possessing only a little with genuine peace of mind, is preferable to a lifestyle filled with endless activity which is like trying to catch the wind.

The desire for wealth can be a hard master. Koheleth tells the story of a man with no male relatives (son or brother) who lives alone, works very hard, denies himself any pleasure, yet is never satisfied with the wealth he has. Koheleth describes this man's life as miserable as there is no one with whom to share his hard work. He denies himself any pleasure from his hard work. His solitary quest for riches is empty. (Eccl 4:7-8) <sup>13</sup> Koheleth is convinced that the desire for money can never be satisfied, because it is impossible to fulfil the desire to get everything you want. In any case, those who become richer only gain more mouths to feed and worries that keep them awake at night. In contrast to them, ordinary workers at least sleep much better each night. (Eccl 5:10-12)

Koheleth is strongly aware that wealth can easily be lost. According to Ecclesiastes 5:13-14, people who wisely save money for a time of need can lose all their savings in some unlucky business deal. They might never recover from such a disaster and thus not be able to pass anything on to their children. Such events remind Koheleth of the fact that we can take nothing with us when we die. Koheleth finds it distressing that we leave this world just as we came into it; he says that the only thing we gain from our hard work is to live our lives in darkness and grief, coping with worries, anger and sickness the whole time. (Eccl 5:15-17) Some rich people are so unfortunate that they do not live long enough to enjoy their own wealth. Worst of all is that

strangers then end up enjoying the wealth that someone else worked so hard for. This, for Koheleth, is a serious injustice and altogether wrong and it makes life quite pointless. (Eccl 6:1-2)

Koheleth is not entirely negative about wealth. In Ecclesiastes 5:19 he makes the interesting observation that wealth is a gift from God that must be enjoyed. However, wealth and property as gifts from God for which a person must be grateful are also described as things that the person has worked for. What exactly the relationship is between God's gift and the rich person's work is unclear.

## Endnotes

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- 10 Wesley J. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations. The Five Scrolls*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 93.
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# VERBALIZING EXPERIENCES OF POVERTY AND RICHES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**N**ot all writing about wealth and poverty in the Old Testament has explicit normative intentions. Many texts simply express the *experiences* of Israelites with regard to wealth or poverty. These descriptive texts give readers a sense of the range of true life situations concerning wealth and poverty found in the Bible.

## 1. The Psalms

Although the Psalms are closely linked to the Wisdom literature, I want to discuss them under the category of “Putting experiences of poverty and wealth into words”. The reason is that the Psalms are vehicles for communicating feelings and experiences in relation to God. The Psalms tell us about the kinds of experiences the Israelites had, as well as the religious framework they used to interpret those experiences. The variety of experiences interpreted in terms of a characteristic religious outlook in the Psalms makes them useful

not only for prayer and worship, but also for meditation and reflection.

Many of the themes concerning poverty and wealth that surface in the Psalms are already familiar from other parts of the Old Testament. One good example deals with *wealth*. The uncertainty of trusting in your wealth and the superior value of choosing to serve God over being rich are mentioned. Wealth and riches cannot go with you when you die, therefore no one needs to be upset when someone else gets rich. (Ps 49:16-17) Riches are only useful this side of the grave. According to the psalmists, believers should not depend on their wealth, but on God alone. (Ps 52:7; 62:10) Evil people trust in themselves or their riches, and boast about their wealth. (Ps 49:5-6;13) Wealth is not the highest priority in life for the psalmist of Psalm 119. Delighting in God's law, desiring to obey it and following his commands is better than trying to get rich, possessing great wealth, or even having all the money in the world. (Ps 119:14, 36, 72)

God's concern for poor and needy people, such as widows, orphans, and strangers has been noted previously. The psalmists express their faith in God as a God who cares for and protects the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the widows, orphans, and strangers - all the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people of society. (Ps 35:10; 68:5; 146:7b-9) God defends their cause and their rights, and he judges in their favour. (Ps 103:6)

Sometimes the psalmists formulate God's relation to the poor in negative terms. The hope of the poor will not be crushed forever (Ps 9:18), nor does God neglect the poor, ignore their suffering, or turn away from them. (Ps 22:24)

The psalmists also lament the ways in which the poor suffer. This is expressed, for example in Psalm 109 by a psalmist who is himself poor and needy and hurt to the depths of his heart. (Ps 109:22-25) He refers to his knees that are weak from hunger and his body that consists of nothing more than skin and bones. The poor suffer contempt, are mocked by the rich, and scorned by their oppressors. (Ps 123:3) For these reasons, God's followers must also demonstrate God's special care for the poor. The people who show God's concern for poor people

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are called happy and are promised all kinds of blessings from God in return. (Ps 41:1-3)

The Psalms are well aware that there are wicked people who persecute the poor and try to entrap them. Wicked people do not think about being kind to poor people; on the contrary, they do not even hesitate to kill poor people. Nevertheless, in God's view the little that a good person owns is worth far more than the wealth of all wicked people combined. (Ps 10:2, 9; 37:14; 109:16)

## 2. The historical writings

The history of Israel presented in the Old Testament has several significant narratives about wealth and poverty. In the selection that I present below, I focus on issues such as the implementation of Pentateuchal laws, the wealth of some Old Testament believers, negative aspects of kingship as a system of government, the prevention of poverty, impoverishment through exploitation, and impoverishment through violence.

The book of *Ruth* presents a narrative that demonstrates how Pentateuchal laws were implemented *to protect women from poverty*. Many interpretations of the central themes of the book of Ruth are possible. One plausible interpretation is that the book revolves around two poor widows who take the initiative in order to secure their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws.<sup>1</sup> Women without the protection, support, and care of a man were very vulnerable in patriarchal ancient Israel. Men had all the decision-making power. The book of Ruth demonstrates how the Pentateuchal laws empowered poor widows to survive in a patriarchal society.

After the deaths of their husbands, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law return to Bethlehem. Naomi is in bad shape. She wants to be called Mara (which means bitterness), as she feels God has made her life bitter by afflicting her with all kinds of difficulties. However, Naomi and Ruth are knowledgeable about their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws. They get enough food to eat because Ruth knows

that she may gather corn in the fields of Boaz. She has a right to do so, as owners of fields were instructed not to cut the corn at the edges of the field, nor to return to cut the ears of corn that were left. They were to be left for poor people and foreigners. (Lev 19:9-10) Fortunately Ruth ends up in the fields of Boaz, who shows himself a faithful Israelite.<sup>2</sup> Boaz not only allows Ruth to gather corn in his field, but also makes it easier for her and supplies her with food, water, and his protection against unwanted male attention from his workers. (Ruth 2:8-9; 14-16)

The chance meeting with Boaz, a close relative of Naomi, directs her attention to two other commands found in the Pentateuch. The first states that the closest male relative must buy back the land of an Israelite who had to sell his land because of poverty. (Lev 25:25) The other command instructs brothers to marry the widows of their brothers who died without leaving a son. (Dt 25:5-6) Although this command only applies to brothers in the Pentateuch, in the book of Ruth it is applied, as in the case of the former command, to all male relatives.<sup>3</sup> Naomi makes Ruth aware of these commands and urges her to confront Boaz with his kinship responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> The initial blessing Boaz gave to Ruth after he met her was that God would reward her and protect her. (Ruth 2:12) When Ruth confronts him with a marriage proposal in terms of her rights, she holds him responsible for taking care of her. (Ruth 3:9)<sup>5</sup> God's commands to Israel provide Ruth and Naomi with protection and care in a patriarchal society. By claiming their rights in terms of these laws, they save themselves from desperate poverty.

Boaz's actions show how God's commands protect the most vulnerable members of Israelite society. He takes up the case of Naomi and Ruth with their closest male relative, who has the first option to execute the duties of kinship towards them. When this relative is not interested, Boaz takes responsibility for Naomi and Ruth himself. He legitimates his commitment before the court of elders at the city gate.<sup>6</sup> They preside over the negotiations between Boaz and the closest relative. Through the good deeds of a faithful Israelite, who acted according to God's commands, the two widows are safeguarded against a life of desperate poverty.



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Narratives about poverty are balanced by narratives about *wealthy Israelites who were also faithful believers*. In the New Testament Abraham and Jacob are listed in Hebrews 11 among the heroes of faith. What is perhaps not well known, is that Abraham already had wealth when God called him. (Gen 12:5) Later on in Genesis Abraham is twice described as a rich man, who owned much live-stock (sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and donkeys), slaves, silver, and gold. (Gen 13:1-2; 24:34-35)

The same is true of Jacob. Jacob had impressive business and farming skills. This is clear from his work for Laban, whose little wealth grew enormously once Jacob started working for him. Jacob eventually became a rich man, in the same wealth bracket as Abraham. (Gen 30:29-30a; 30:42b-43) Blomberg contends that in the Old Testament some of God's followers

may at times be enormously wealthy, but a major purpose of God granting them that wealth is that they share it with those in need.<sup>7</sup>

Solomon is the best-known example of a wealthy person in the Old Testament. God grants Solomon's request for wisdom to rule justly, but adds wealth and honour as well. (1 Kings 3:11-13) The descriptions of his wealth and the resources he employed to build a palace and the temple are overwhelming. The book of 1 Chronicles contains descriptions of the grandeur and splendour of the temple.<sup>8</sup> Both Solomon's wisdom and his wealth are interpreted as blessings from God.<sup>9</sup> However, part of his wealth and impressive building projects was based on the use of forced labour, though he used Canaanites and not Israelites for this. (1 Kings 9:15) According to the well-justified complaints of his subjects after his death, some of Solomon's wealth also seems to have come from heavy tax burdens he placed on the Israelites. (1 Kings 12:4)<sup>10</sup>

Samuel warned that *a monarchical system of government could become exploitative*. (1 Samuel 8:10-18)<sup>11</sup> Although his warnings did not deter the Israelites from opting for a monarchy, Samuel's warnings ring true

throughout many of the Old Testament descriptions of kingship. Samuel's rather stern opposition to kingship included warnings that a king would need soldiers, agricultural workers, weapons manufacturers, caterers for his palace, and makers of beauty products. For these purposes he would use young Israelites in his service. A king might confiscate the property of the Israelites to hand over to his officials, demand heavy taxes, and even eventually enslave some of his subjects. Despite these warnings, the Israelites chose to have a king and eventually did experience the tyranny of kingship.

Samuel's warnings had firm grounding in the narratives about the Israelites in Egypt. Joseph's tenure as second in charge in Egypt after the pharaoh illustrates how wise preventative measures against impoverishment can spill over into oppression and exploitation. Joseph's interpretation of the pharaoh's dreams leads to large-scale preventative measures against the coming drought to avoid a famine. (Gen 41:34-35, 54) The Egyptians were the only nation in that area who had the wisdom and foresight to prevent a catastrophe and thus had the means to sell food to their own people as well as to other nations during the severe drought. However, the wisdom and value of these preventative measures are blemished by the way the story concludes. (Gen 47:13-26) The Egyptian people had to buy the food stored for use during the drought. When they ran out of money, Joseph accepted their livestock as payment. Once they had no more livestock, they traded their fields for food. When all their land eventually belonged to the pharaoh, the Egyptians sold themselves into slavery to the pharaoh. The pharaoh exploited the desperate situation of his subjects and used a natural disaster to impoverish and enslave them. The subjects were only too grateful when Joseph gave them seed to sow on their fields - now the pharaoh's property - on condition that they pay one-fifth of their harvests to the pharaoh in return.

Another example of exploitative leadership is found among the returned exiles. Nehemiah stringently criticises Israelite leaders and officials who *exploit the bad economic conditions suffered by poor Israelites* after the Babylonian exile. (Neh 5:6-11) The poor Israelites

had many complaints. Some did not have enough food, others had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses to get money for food, while some had to borrow money to pay taxes. Some Israelites were desperate and felt helpless, as their fields and vineyards had been taken away from them. These people had to sell their children into slavery. Nehemiah's anger makes him accuse the leaders and officials of oppressing their fellow Israelites. Nehemiah commands them to stop forcing their fellow Israelites to sell themselves into slavery. Nehemiah himself attempted to buy back Israelites who had to sell themselves into slavery to foreigners. He wanted the leaders and officials to obey God and do what was right. In this case Nehemiah believed that the right course of action was to cancel all the debts of the poor Israelites and return their property to them. This would enable the poor to get started again and to rid themselves of poverty. As governor, Nehemiah realised that in difficult economic circumstances extraordinary measures are called for. When he saw the heavy financial burdens carried by poor people, he decided that he would not claim the allowance that he, as governor, was entitled to. Adapting one's behaviour in the light of an understanding of people's desperate economic circumstances is what Nehemiah expects from the leaders and officials as well.

The narrative about Nehemiah and the returning exiles refers implicitly to the *colonial conquest* of Israel by Babylonia. When King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem he carried away the wealth of the temple and the palace, and took the elite of society into exile as well. The royal princes, leaders, and skilled workers were taken away as prisoners. Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonian soldiers tore down the protective city walls and burnt the temple, the palace, and the houses of all the important people. Surprisingly, the poor people who were left behind did not suffer this loss. Apparently their houses were not burnt down and they were able to tend the remaining vineyards and the fields.

The book of Lamentations vividly depicts the devastation and horrific consequences of the Babylonian conquest. The book is addressed to God as a direct reaction to events of great suffering. The author pours out his heart to God about the suffering in Jerusalem that has

become so severe that it is incomprehensible.<sup>12</sup> It is especially the suffering of the children that is so terrible and difficult to accept.<sup>13</sup> The author of Lamentations does not have the words to express his feelings about the scope of suffering in Jerusalem. He also does not know how to comfort Jerusalem: the disaster brought about by the violent conquest feels as overwhelming as the ocean, and strips away all hope. (Lam 2:13) Happiness has been replaced by grief and the author urgently asks God to look and see their disgrace. (Lam 5:1,15)

The immediate effects of the conquest are hunger and a shortage of basic necessities. The effects of hunger are particularly severe on children. They cry to their mothers, fall in the streets as though they were wounded, beg for food, and die slowly in their mothers' arms. (Lam 2:11,12) The effects on adults are also severe. They burn with fever from hunger until their skins are hot as an oven. (Lam 5:10) People who ate the best foods die from starvation in the streets, while people who grew up in luxury scavenge through refuse looking for something to eat. Parents treat their children cruelly, allowing them to die from hunger and thirst, presumably because there is no food available. (Lam 4:3-4) Mothers even eat the bodies of the children they once loved: a worse horror is scarcely imaginable. (Lam 2:20a)

Basic necessities like water and wood for fuel have to be bought, (Lam 5:4) while the Israelites' properties are occupied by strangers and foreigners. (Lam 5:2) They are treated with disrespect in their own country by foreign soldiers. Many men were killed, and the women were raped - even at holy places like Mount Zion. (Lam 5:11) Elders are shown no respect, while the young men are forced to grind corn, like slaves. (Lam 5:12 -13) They are treated like animals, driven hard but allowed no rest, despite being tired. (Lam 5:5) It is no surprise that grief has taken the place of their former joyful dances. The calamities that struck Jerusalem as a result of foreign conquest - and I have mentioned only a few directly related to poverty - would surely drive happiness out of anyone's life. (Lam 5:15)

A final point to note is that although Israel suffered the impoverishing consequences of conquest, there were also times in its history when

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*Israel impoverished other people through violence.* Early on in the Old Testament narrative, Jacob's family, for example, avenged the rape of their family member, Dinah, by killing all the men related to the perpetrators and taking all the women and children captive. (Gen 34:27-29) Their next step was to loot their village. The narrative in Genesis emphasizes that they took everything in the village, the houses, and in the fields. This common practice in the Old Testament of warfare combined with looting must have impoverished many people.

## Endnotes

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- 5 Prinsloo, *Die Boek Rut* p. 68
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- 8 Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles. A Commentary*, (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 400.
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- 11 H.W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel. A Commentary*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), p. 73.
- 12 Claus Westermann, *Lamentations. Issues and Interpretation*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 86, 91.
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## CONCLUSION: CENTRAL OLD TESTAMENT THEMES ON POVERTY AND RICHES

**W**hat are the central themes found in Old Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate.

(1) *God must be the first priority for the ancient Israelites.*

The people of Israel had to acknowledge God as the only God and worship and obey him alone. Obedience to his commands was demanded in gratitude to him for liberating them from Egypt and electing them to be his people. They had to become like God through being holy and caring deeply for the vulnerable and marginalized people in their society. Worship of God meant not only performing religious duties, but living according to God's prescribed ethical values. Ethics and worship were inextricably linked and totally interdependent.

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**(2) *The Old Testament promotes the humane treatment of the poor.***

The Old Testament contains strong ethical values aimed at preventing dishonesty and favouritism. The emphasis is on poor people's status as children of God whom he has created. For this reason no one may insult, humiliate, exploit, or oppress them. If non-poor people do these things, God as the Good Shepherd will himself take up the cause of the poor.

**(3) *All non-poor Israelites are implored to help poor people generously and to give to them resources unselfishly.***

Care for the vulnerable and marginalized people of society is an imperative embodied in different moral values. The aim of this care is to relieve urgent basic needs and to help poor people to live non-poor lives again. Deist adds that the meaningfulness of poor people's lives will be enriched "by the fact that *God*, in the form of the rich, is *on their side* and not against them".<sup>1</sup> The ethical values of the Old Testament showed their force in the way they empowered poor widows (Naomi and Ruth) to safeguard their survival in a male-dominated society.

**(4) *The Old Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor.***

One kind of aid is *emergency poverty relief* where the focus is on provision for the urgent needs of poor people that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. This aid can be given in various ways, one being the practice of harvesting certain crops once only and leaving the remainder for the poor to collect.

A second kind of aid aims to *liberate poor people from their poverty*. This type of aid serves the function of enabling poor people to become independent instead of dependent on others and to be self-reliant

instead of relying on others for the basic means of life. Blomberg says the Old Testament “clearly presupposes both the right and the responsibility of those who are able to work to provide for their own well-being”.<sup>2</sup>

**(5) *According to the prophets, sharp disparities between rich and poor are deeply unacceptable.***

Such disparities were usually based on selfishness, exploitation, and deliberate ignorance of God’s commands. The ethical values of the Old Testament presuppose that special care is given to the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people in society. Excessive wealth cannot be justified in the face of humiliating poverty.

**(6) *Old Testament judgements on poverty and riches are always made to apply within specific contexts and are not universally applicable to all possible worlds.***

The prophets are concerned about rich people they know who exploit and oppress the poor people with whom they share their lives. Prophetic criticism and judgement deals with people in the world in which the prophets live, not all people everywhere of all times.

**(7) *The Old Testament does not present an idealized picture of poverty.***

The difficulties of poverty are clearly acknowledged. Being poor is hard and involves a constant struggle. Poor people are often exploited, oppressed, unjustly treated, and treated with contempt. Their personal relationships are often strained and even lost. Ruthless, wicked people exacerbate their situation. People are poor for various reasons, including unjust people not willing to make land available for the poor to farm on, conquest by colonial powers, violent conflict that results in extensive looting, and people’s own personal flaws.



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**(8) *The uncertainties of riches are clearly indicated in the Old Testament.***

Riches cannot protect the rich against all dangers and mean nothing in the face of death. It is better to trust in God than in riches. Wealth may lead to increased anxiety and is thus often not enjoyed by those who worked for it. Nevertheless, it is a gift from God to be enjoyed within realistic limits.

**(9) *God's promised blessings to Israel show that God intended human life on earth to be:***

- ▶ ***Rich in relationships with God, fellow humans, and creation, and***
- ▶ ***Abundant with prosperity, well-being, and meaning.***

This is seen in the lifestyles of the ancient heroes of faith, like Abraham and Jacob. Nowhere is poverty portrayed as an ideal lifestyle that God wishes for his people. If poverty were a state God willed for his followers, then why the strong emphasis on aid to help them escape from poverty? The strong emphasis on condemning the exploitative rich for their injustice towards the poor, and the enormous significance attached to helping the poor presupposes that poverty is an unacceptable condition that has negative consequences for human beings.

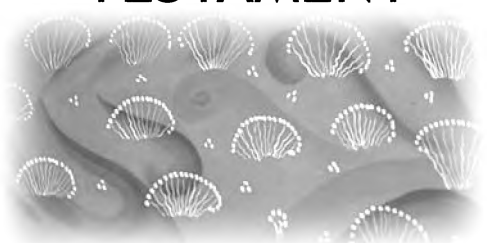
## **Endnotes**

- 1 Ferdinand Deist, "Biblical Studies, Wealth and Poverty in South Africa," in H.L. Bosman, I.G.P. Gous, and I.J.J. Spangenberg (eds.), *Plutocrats and Paupers: Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament*, (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik), p. 255.
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III

**POVERTY AND  
RICHES IN THE  
NEW  
TESTAMENT**







## FAITH COMES FIRST

*H*ow important are issues of riches and poverty in the New Testament? Does the New Testament have unique ethical views on poverty and riches? Do New Testament perspectives differ from those found in the Old Testament? Are there links between faith in God and support for the poor in the New Testament?

In this chapter I explore what the New Testament has to say about poverty and riches. In the first section I look at the way in which the New Testament stresses the importance of having the right priorities, i.e., that faith always comes first. I follow this up with a discussion of several texts in the New Testament that contrast rich and poor. The next section looks at texts dealing with aid to the poor, and the final section deals with the metaphoric uses of the concepts *rich* and *poor* in the New Testament.

The New Testament emerged at a time when the Old Testament dominated the religious life of Judaism as the authoritative Word of God to Israel. For this reason the New Testament cannot be read correctly without “hearing the voice of Israel’s Scriptures within these early Christian documents.”<sup>1</sup> The inextricable links between the Old and New Testaments are evident from the way in which Old Testament values of how to deal with poor people form the background assumptions to the New Testament’s portrayal of situations where riches and poverty are at issue.<sup>2</sup> These links and similarities in content lead one to expect a fundamental continuity and significant overlaps in the moral values of both Testaments for dealing with poverty and riches.

In a series of New Testaments texts, the authors stress the point that putting God first trumps all other issues concerning poverty and riches. Giving God first priority has significant implications for how Christians are to deal with poverty and riches.

## 1. Riches as an obstruction to salvation

The story of the *rich man* who asks Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (Mt 19:16-30, Mk 10:17-31, and Lk 18:18-30) The differences between the three versions are minor and do not affect the meaning of the story. For example, there is a slight difference in the description of the person concerned. Matthew refers to a “young man” who has “great wealth”, Mark merely to a “man” who has “great wealth” and Luke to a “certain ruler” (i.e., Jewish leader) of “great wealth”.

The rich man presents himself as someone who fully obeys the second table of the Law. Jesus says to the rich man that he must keep the commandments to obtain eternal life. In response the rich man says that he has done so. This response is significant. Despite keeping the commandments, he still felt the need to ask Jesus what he has to do to get eternal life. He knew that something was missing, despite his obedience to the Law.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus challenges the rich man to do two things that will ensure him eternal life. He must sell all his belongings, give the money to the poor, and then follow Jesus. This radical demand requires the rich man to break all his ties with his wealth, show compassion to the poor, and follow Jesus as his spiritual leader. For the rich man this was a demand he could not fulfil, for he could not part with his riches. All three evangelists agree that he was very rich. He goes away from Jesus very sad, although it is not clear exactly why he was sad.

In response Jesus emphasizes to his disciples how difficult it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God. It is more difficult for rich people to enter God's Kingdom than for a camel, the largest known domestic animal in Palestine, to go through the eye of a needle, a well-known small opening.<sup>4</sup> Jesus emphasizes the strong deterrent effect

riches have on people's faith in God.<sup>5</sup> His audience would immediately have realised the impossibility of a camel going through the eye of a needle.<sup>6</sup> They are astounded at the impossibility of rich people being saved, as they held the common perception of ancient Israel - reinforced by Old Testament promises - that riches were blessings from God and prosperity signs of God's favour to hard-working people obedient to the Law.<sup>7</sup> Their response is to ask who then can be saved. Jesus answers them that God can save any human being, although it is impossible for human beings to save themselves.

If one important lesson from this story is that rich people can only enter the Kingdom of God through God's power (and grace), what then about the requirement to sell all one's belongings? Is that requirement universally applicable to all rich people? An interpretation that says "no" to this question could argue that Jesus used this requirement to determine the rich man's loyalty. The rich man claimed that he obeyed the second table of the Ten Commandments. This obedience does not automatically imply obedience to the first table, which concerns a person's relationship with God. To require that he sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor, asks of the rich man that he makes God's concern for poor people his own

Parting with all his belongings would show that his relationship with God has absolute priority in his life and that he trusts God fully to take care of him. He is not prepared to give up the security that riches give, i.e., that he can provide for himself. He values his earthly riches more than the riches in heaven that Jesus promised would be his if he sold all his belongings. Thus, despite his obedience to the commandments concerning his behaviour towards his fellow beings, he could not shift the focus of his trust (and faith) from wealth to God. His belongings enslaved him.<sup>8</sup> His riches obstructed his entry into God's Kingdom.

Should all rich people be required to sell all their belongings like this rich man had to do? Only if their riches have a powerful hold on them and obstruct their entry into God's Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> If they are enslaved to their wealth, selling all their belongings will help them learn the right priorities in life and how to trust God completely. Paul

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sounds a cautionary note about simply selling one's belongings and giving the money to the poor. In 1 Corinthians 13:3 he says giving away everything you have without love will do you no good. This remark suggests that only a heart filled with love will make any gift or aid to poor people meaningful.

A particularly difficult section in Luke seems uncompromisingly set on *commanding believers to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor*. (Lk 12:32-34) The section follows the parable of the rich fool with its emphasis on riches in heaven and a section on placing trust in God and not worrying about where food or clothing will come from. The point this problematic section makes is that believers should develop riches that cannot decay or be destroyed - riches in heaven - because their hearts will be where their riches are. This idea echoes an almost identical saying of Jesus in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount. (Mt 6:19-21) Clearly the saying of Jesus that Luke reports presupposes that selling your belongings and giving the money to the poor is an important way of building up and saving riches in heaven.

However, should this unambiguous, radical demand be taken to apply to all Christians at all times? Should all Christians sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor? One could easily argue against this interpretation by saying that if all Christians did sell all their property and give it away, they would soon end up poverty stricken themselves. Another argument would be to say that no similar demand is found anywhere else in the Bible. Despite their logicity, these arguments might come across as just too convenient. When supported with a further argument they do, however, have somewhat more force. Could we not suggest that some of the sayings of Jesus are deliberately radical so as to grab our attention in order to force us out of our comfortable everyday assumptions that have become so natural to us that we see no alternative to them? Furthermore, do any Christians really practice all the other radical demands of Jesus? Consider, for example the Matthean Sermon on the Mount with its command to pluck out the right eye and throw it away or to cut off the right hand and throw it away if they cause one to sin? If these com-

mands are not followed, why is that? I doubt very much that all Christians manage to avoid breaking the strict interpretation Jesus gives to adultery all the time. So, if they fail, why not pluck out their eyes as Jesus advised them to? Perhaps for the same kind of reason that Christians also do not obey Jesus' command to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor.

My hesitant interpretation, which I hope is reasonably acceptable, is that on some issues Jesus states his case in this forceful manner to draw our attention to them. Jesus wants us to take some issues we would prefer to avoid very seriously. It seems so natural for heterosexuals to look at attractive people of the opposite sex with desire, that it is easy to disregard the dangers of doing so. The same applies to possessions. It seems so human and natural to use your possessions to your own advantage. By stating his demands so radically, Jesus shocks us into taking the morality of sex and possessions (riches) seriously. If this is the case, then his commands about the right hand and eye are intended to warn Christians to deal immediately and decisively with temptations that could lead them to break his strict interpretation of the command on adultery. His intention is the same with the command to sell all one's belongings.

The danger of riches corrupting one's priorities is serious. The desire for riches makes people selfish and focused on their own interests at the expense of compassion for poor people. Desire and love for riches also distract people from focusing on God as their highest priority and first love. For this reason, Jesus wants to convey the message that people must be prepared to deal with their riches in a decisive way so as to avoid inner corruption, and to safeguard their ethical and religious values. So many desperately needy people are so easily ignored. Believers must take their plight seriously and act accordingly.

A similar emphasis on wealth as a potential obstruction to salvation is found in the *parable of the sower*. The seeds sown among the thorn bushes are choked and do not bear fruit. The explanation given in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is that the love of riches chokes the mes-



sage. (Mt 13:22; Mk 4:18-19; Lk 8:14) Hearts filled with love and longing for riches are preoccupied, and do not have space for reflecting on and doing God's will.<sup>10</sup> Choking is a slow and gradual process that eventually prevents the plant from reaching its potential.<sup>11</sup> Mark and Luke add the worries of this life as part of what can choke one. Mark also adds all other kinds of desires and Luke adds the pleasures of this life. The important point in this parable is that the love of riches is something that gradually stifles God's message in people's lives, until their lives bear no fruit.

## 2. Greed and rich fools

Jesus tells the *parable of the rich fool* in response to a question that he refuses to answer. (Lk 12:13-21) A man asks Jesus to tell his brother to share with him the property their father left them. Jesus answers through a counter question to say that he does not have the right to judge or to divide the property between them. He goes on to warn his audience against every kind of greed. The link with the earlier question seems to be that Jesus judges the questioner to be greedy. Nevertheless, Jesus justifies his warning against greed by saying that people's lives are not made up of their possessions. His warning is against materialism, where people judge the value of their lives according to the possessions they have.

The purpose of the parable that follows this exchange is to illustrate the worthlessness of riches in determining the important things in one's life. Initially the rich fool looks wise, as he builds bigger barns to store all his crops. His foolishness lies in the fact that he thinks that his riches are all he needs to live a good life of food, drink, and enjoyment with many years stretching out ahead of him. His emphasis is on his own enjoyment of his riches, without thinking about the needy or having any concern for God.<sup>12</sup> The emptiness of this kind of lifestyle is revealed when Jesus asks what will happen if he suddenly dies. He will obviously lose all his piled up riches, which will then go to someone else. So ultimately his possessions will have no value to him.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, despite his material wealth, he is not rich in God's sight,

as his life has not earned him that. He has not done the things that God rewards. It seems reasonable to assume that the tacit background of this text is that the rich fool has ignored the Old Testament message about poverty and riches. He has directed his energies in pursuit of the wrong things and has ignored the truly important purpose of life.<sup>14</sup> Gathering riches without living a life in obedience to God, out of gratitude for his love and mercy, is foolishness and means nothing.

### 3. Acceptable rich people

Not all rich people in the New Testament have negative images. *Zaccheus of Jericho* had the opportunity to earn a negative reputation. He was a chief tax collector, a profession hated by the Israelites and one notorious for exploiting people. However, Zaccheus was rich and still Jesus praises him. (Lk 19:1-10) What makes him different from the other rich people who are negatively portrayed?

The crucial factor distinguishing Zaccheus from the unacceptable rich people is his excitement about Jesus. His short stature makes it difficult for him to see Jesus when he passes through Jericho. Zaccheus is so determined to see Jesus that he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree, regardless of the consequences to his personal dignity.<sup>15</sup> Jesus notices Zaccheus in the tree and tells him to come down as he wishes to visit Zaccheus' home that day. Zaccheus hurries down and welcomes Jesus with great joy. But the crowd of people who have accompanied Jesus are dissatisfied that Jesus has asked to be a guest in the home of someone they feel is a sinner.

Zaccheus immediately reacts to their grumbling by addressing Jesus directly. The excited personal relationship that he has established with Jesus has an immediate effect on his ethical values. He must have known the strong duties toward the poor that God expected of his followers in the Old Testament. As if to take away the embarrassment caused by the crowd's reaction to Jesus' presence at his house, Zaccheus gives a public undertaking, a declaration of intent, to Jesus.<sup>16</sup> He promises to give half his belongings to the poor. He furthermore promises to pay back four times the amount to anyone he has

cheated. Zaccheus wants to make restitution for his former evil ways.<sup>17</sup>

The Old Testament prescribed that wealth or possessions acquired through dishonest means had to be repaid in full, plus an additional twenty percent. Zaccheus undertakes to do much more than that. Through these undertakings Zaccheus immediately demonstrates the right priorities. His relationship with Jesus has priority and belongings can be sacrificed to secure this relationship. To safeguard his relationship with Jesus, Zaccheus will fulfil more than his duties to the poor, as well as to those that he has cheated. Zaccheus was freed from his riches through his response to the relationship Jesus established with him.<sup>18</sup>

The reaction of Jesus to Zaccheus's undertakings tells the full story. Jesus acknowledges that Zaccheus has experienced true salvation, as only God's salvation can bring about a change of that scope in a person's life. It is significant that Jesus calls Zaccheus a true descendant of Abraham. Besides being the one to whom God promised many descendants, Abraham was also an obedient and very rich man. Zaccheus falls into the same category of Biblical characters as Abraham, i.e., a rich person who immediately believes in God and obeys his commandments.

Another example of an admirable rich man is found in Acts (Acts 10:1-7) where God uses *Cornelius*, a Gentile, to teach Peter that all people, not only Jews, are acceptable to God. Cornelius must have been moderately rich. He was a captain in the Italian regiment of the Roman Army. This meant that his pay was considerably higher than that of common soldiers.<sup>19</sup> The fact that he took two house servants and one of his personal attendants along on his journey, suggests that he was no poor man.<sup>20</sup> He was a sincerely religious man who worshipped God with his whole family. When an angel called him to get involved with Peter, he told Cornelius that God was pleased with the prayers Cornelius constantly prayed to God and the works of charity he did to help poor Jewish people. Again we find that a rich person is acceptable to God if the person has God as highest priority and uses accumulated riches to serve the poor.

These requirements as to what makes a rich person acceptable in

the eyes of God come to the fore in one of the scathing attacks Jesus makes on the Pharisees. (Mt 23:23) Their emphasis on religious rituals made them lose sight of the real priorities of their religion. For this reason Jesus advises them to give to the poor what is inside their cups and on their plates and then everything will be ritually clean. While their tithing is done in the strictest detail, sometimes going beyond what is required of them, they forget the bigger picture with its main priorities, i.e., love for God, justice, mercy, and honesty.<sup>21</sup> The ideal, Jesus says, is both to give priority to the essentials, the weightier matters, and to observe minor commandments as well.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Do not be anxious: trust in God

Matthew and Luke both wrote about Jesus' advice to his disciples *not to worry about food, drink, or clothes, but to trust God* for such things. Matthew prefaces his text on worries with a short section about the impossibility of serving two masters simultaneously. (Mt 6:24) The two masters he refers to are God and money. Anyone trying to serve both these masters will hate and despise the one, and love and be loyal to the other. Matthew explicitly links this section to the section on worries, by saying that Jesus tells his disciples not to be worried because of the impossibility of serving two masters. (Mt 6:25-26) What does Matthew mean? Matthew seems to suggest that serving God wholeheartedly implies not being worried about food, drink, and clothes, but trusting that God will provide these things.

Matthew and Luke both emphasize the point that Jesus makes, i.e. that instead of worrying, believers should have a right relationship with God. This relationship requires that they serve only one master, God. Their main concern must be God's Kingdom and what he requires of them. They must accept and believe that God knows what they need and that he will provide for them. Their lives are worth more than food and their bodies worth more than clothes. The way God takes care of birds and plants suggests that he will do even more for humans, whom he values far more than birds and plants. (Lk 12:24-27) Matthew also presents common-sense reasons why the believer

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should not be worried about food, drink, and clothes. His Gospel says that every day has enough troubles of its own and therefore it makes no sense to add more worries to it. No one has ever lived longer as a result of being very worried. Thus, to be worried, common sense tells us, is to make life more complicated than it needs to be and is a waste of energy. (Mt 6:25)

These Lukan and Matthean texts have a strong message for poor people. All people - poor people included - are challenged to have the right relationship of trust in a caring God. Their first priority must be God, his Kingdom, and his requirements for their lives. They must furthermore trust that God knows their needs and will provide for them. They must accept that his loving care towards them far surpasses the loving care he expresses towards the birds and plants, for which he so obviously provides. For these reasons, and the other common-sense ones, they must stop worrying and so eliminate the destructive influence of anxiety from their lives. Desperately poor people, like many others, might find this difficult to do, although enormously comforting. To be able to trust that God knows what one needs and believe that he will provide it, must offer an enormous sense of relief to believers, rich and poor alike.

## 5. Be satisfied with what you have

The apostle Paul suffered many trials and tribulations during his missionary work in the early church. Part of his problem was a lifestyle that could at times be characterised as poor. He states that he was often hungry, thirsty, clothed in rags, and worn out from hard work. (1 Cor 4:11-12a) He did not want to rely too much on the support of his congregations and thus often used his skill as tentmaker to provide for his needs and those of his helpers. In Philippians he thanks the believers of Philippi for sending him gifts as token of their care for him. (Phil 4:10-12) As part of thanking them, Paul tells them that he has experienced negative conditions, such as being in need, being hungry, and having too little. On the other hand, he has also experienced times of having more than enough.

Paul's attitude towards these diverse conditions is important to note. He stresses that he has learnt to be satisfied with what he has, to be content regardless of his situation. This is possible, because Christ gives him the power and strength to face all conditions. Thus Paul says that Christians can be satisfied with their conditions, good or bad, and be content. This is possible if they accept the challenge to learn to deal with their conditions through the strength available in Jesus Christ. A further source of comfort for Paul was that although he and his co-workers seemed to be poor and have nothing, they nevertheless possessed everything in God and made other people rich through sharing their faith. (2 Cor 6:10)

A similar message accompanies the warning in Hebrews that believers should keep their lives free from the love of money. They are advised to be satisfied with what they have. Again, they are not expected to do so by themselves. To be satisfied with what you have is possible because God is portrayed as their Helper who will never leave or abandon them. God's presence and care can enable believers to make peace with their conditions. (Heb 13:5-6)

Paul insisted on not becoming dependent on the churches for financial support so that he could safeguard his ministry against charges that he wanted to enrich himself.<sup>23</sup> In order to do so, he worked very hard to provide for himself and his co-workers. (2 Thess 3:7b-8) In Acts, Paul states this case similarly, but adds that believers have the responsibility to provide for the weak by working hard. (Acts 20:33-35) Who the weak are, is not clear. Paul quotes a saying of Jesus, not found in the Gospels, to support his case.<sup>24</sup> The saying conveys the idea that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving. For this reason believers have a responsibility to work hard and not to be a drain on other people's resources. Paul seems to suggest that through hard work and earning a good income, believers are enabled to help those who are weaker.

Paul translates his hard work to achieve self-reliance in support of his ministry into a command that he gives the Thessalonians. He offers himself and his co-workers to the Thessalonians as examples of hard workers who earn their own living. In the light of such praisewor-

thy examples, the Thessalonians must resist associating with people who are lazy and meddle in other people's affairs. They should rather admonish these people to follow the example set by Paul and his co-workers. Although Paul seems to justify these prescriptions from his own attempt to safeguard his ministry, he twice describes them as commands that he issues in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. For Paul the obligation to work hard to earn your own income was thus an important obligation for believers. Through self-reliance, believers would avoid placing burdens on other persons to take care of them, and at the same time build up the resources to help those weaker than themselves.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, through earning their own living they would also gain the respect of people who were not believers. (1 Thess 4:11-12)

Paul revises this thought in his letter to Titus. Here he emphasizes that believers should learn to spend their time doing good by providing for real needs. This would mean that they are not living useless lives. Titus is advised to support others in such a way that they are able to help others. Useful lives are lives spent doing good as God defines it. Believers have the responsibility to enable one another to live such lives. (Titus 3:14)

## 6. Faith made perfect through actions

Does James contradict Paul? This question often arises when people discuss the book of James with its emphasis on the value of both *faith and action*. (Jas 2:14-26)

Any conflict with Paul's writings is more apparent than real.<sup>26</sup> James's fundamental point is that faith must result in action, otherwise it is meaningless. Differently put, if Christian faith does not affect what a person does or does not do, it cannot be a living faith in any meaningful way. True, living faith must make a difference to a person's life. Good deeds and right actions are an integral part of faith and thus legitimate tests as to whether a person's faith is a living and active faith.<sup>27</sup> The apostle Paul would not object to such a message; on the contrary, he would embrace it wholeheartedly!

To substantiate his point that faith without actions is dead, James draws two contrasts that are implicit in his text. He contrasts a living faith where faith and actions work together with a dead faith because it has no actions. James gives an alternative formulation of this idea when he states that faith is made perfect - or brought to fulfilment - through the actions that flow from it. Genuine faith needs the accompanying actions that authenticate it.<sup>28</sup>

James also uses an example from poverty relief to make the point about a living faith. He argues that it is no good saying to people in need of food or clothes that God will bless them, and simply give them good wishes to keep warm and eat well. Instead of saying these things to them, faithful believers must provide the poor with food and clothes.

This example of need satisfaction compares a living faith with a dead faith that is not legitimized by actions. James uses the example for comparative purposes and not for its own sake. Nevertheless, its use in this context is instructive. For James it is self-evident that people in need must be helped immediately. Help must be concrete enough to satisfy those urgent needs. James is not only convinced that he is right about this, he also assumes that his readers think the same. For this reason he uses it as an example to demonstrate his point about a living faith.

John makes a very close link between poverty relief and a life of faith. This link is found in a section that emphasizes that believers must love one another because, through his death on the cross, Christ has shown them what love is. (1 Jn 3:16-18) His sacrificial death must be emulated by believers: their love must make them willing to sacrifice their lives for one another.<sup>29</sup> If they are willing to sacrifice their lives, how much more ready must they be to help and serve others.<sup>30</sup> John makes a direct link between loving God and loving one's fellow human beings. Rich people cannot claim to love God if they close their hearts to people in need. True love for God will thus show itself in action towards one's fellow human beings in need. Love is not only words and talk, but as James also teaches, must be demonstrated through acts of love towards others. Actions, as the proverb says, speak louder than words.<sup>31</sup>



## 7. Jesus or the poor?

Many non-poor people justify their lack of involvement with poor people by repeating the saying of Jesus, that *the poor will always be with us*. Could this saying mean that Jesus believed that poverty was an insoluble problem, which his followers could thus ignore? Or is such an interpretation an outrageous abuse of this saying of Jesus?<sup>32</sup> If so, why?

If we read this saying of Jesus in its proper context, it is clear that having to choose between Jesus and the poor refers to a single, specific instance where a woman used expensive perfume to prepare Jesus for his burial. (Mt 26:6-13) The alabaster jar with perfume made of pure nard that the woman poured over Jesus' head (Matthew and Luke) or his feet (John) was indeed very expensive. The disciples, all males, harshly criticise the woman. In the patriarchal context of the ancient world this criticism is even more damaging than in a modern society. The men's criticism centres around the financial waste involved.<sup>33</sup> They say the money could rather have been used for poverty relief. John even suggests that Judas had an eye on that money for personal gain. He was, according to John, in charge of the disciples' finances, but was regularly defrauding them. (Jn 12:6)

Jesus strongly defends the woman's action. In answer to the criticism of the disciples that she wasted money that could have been used to benefit the poor, Jesus emphasizes that his life on earth will not last much longer. The disciples will have many opportunities in the future to take care of the poor; however, their chance to do something for Jesus, to show their love and respect for the Son of God while he is on earth, is running out.<sup>34</sup> The woman used such an opportunity in an entirely appropriate way to do something for Jesus by (inadvertently?) preparing his body for burial by pouring expensive perfume over him.<sup>35</sup> Jesus adds that her deed is so special that it will be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached. This remark both serves as comfort to the woman and further reinforces the reprimand to the disciples.

## 8. The true riches of the New Testament

In 1 Timothy 6:3-11 the apostle Paul summarizes some of the main themes of the New Testament on the subject of riches.

The danger and uncertainties of earthly riches on the one hand, and Christian faith as the true riches and appropriate focus of human life on the other, are dealt with in detail. He introduces these issues through the problem of teachers of false doctrines who thought they could make money by means of religion. In response to their views, Paul sets the record straight by pointing to the metaphoric riches true religion provides.

Paul warns people who want to be rich about the temptations and traps that may ruin them. One must notice that Paul refers to people who want to be rich, as the desire to become rich can be as destructive as actually having a large surplus of riches.<sup>36</sup> The lure of a luxurious lifestyle can erode moral values and spirituality. The power of the many desires awakened by riches can be destructive. That the love of money is the source of all kinds of evil has become a common proverb. Paul expands this idea by referring his readers to people who were so eager to have money that they drifted away from their faith with resultant broken hearts and deep sorrows. Love of money and a desire to be rich can have major negative consequences on people, believers included. Paul asks Timothy to admonish rich believers not to place their hope in the uncertainty of riches, but rather to trust in God.

In contrast to the dangers of riches, Paul points to the true riches that faith and trust in God bring. Religion can make a person very rich, on condition, Paul says, that believers are satisfied with what they have. Believers must develop the capacity to be satisfied with any circumstances.<sup>37</sup> We brought nothing into the world, and can take anything out of it, thus we ought to be satisfied with enough food and clothes to meet our needs. Although we cannot take anything out of this world at death, we can store treasure in heaven with God, which will ensure that we will have true life with God after death. This is the focus that a rich believer's life ought to have. What then does it mean for a believer to have the sort of focus that will ensure riches in heaven?

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Paul says that believers must place their hope in God, who generously gives us everything for our enjoyment. From this basis believers must show their faith in God by doing good works, being generous and sharing with others.<sup>38</sup> An ethical lifestyle based on God's commandments with an emphasis on generously sharing what you have available (belongings, money, friendship, support, etc.) with others is what generates riches in heaven. Believers ought to be concerned about getting God's approval, by being rich in good deeds.<sup>39</sup>

## Endnotes

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## CONTRASTING THE RICH AND THE POOR

Several texts in the New Testament draw sharp contrasts between rich and poor people. In these texts rich people are presented as the villains and poor people as “blessed”. Does this mean that God only loves poor people, and that he hates all rich people? Such a conclusion would be simplistic. In this chapter I will explore these texts in greater detail to uncover their layers of meaning.

### 1. The Lukan beatitudes

One of the more difficult sections in the Gospel of Luke is the author’s version of the Matthean Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26. Whereas Matthew’s focus is on the spiritual qualities of truly happy and blessed people, Luke emphasizes real life circumstances in which people are living. Luke not only presents a series of blessings, but also pronounces woes on people who are called “the rich”. Does this imply that Luke condemns all rich people simply because they are rich and presents a poor lifestyle as the ideal for Christians to follow?

We can only make sense of Luke’s Beatitudes if we note the strong contrast he sets up between rich and poor. This contrast is neatly presented in parallels. Once these parallels are noted, the Beatitudes become a devastating judgement on *certain kinds of rich people*. These are the rich who live luxurious lives now without concern for the poor

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and who do all they can to increase their status in the public eye. Perhaps a visual presentation of the parallel contrasts will illuminate the reasons for this interpretation:

BLESSINGS	WOES
Happy are you <i>poor</i>	How terrible for you who are <i>rich</i> now
the Kingdom of God is yours	you have had your easy life
Happy are you who are <i>hungry</i> now	How terrible for you who are <i>full</i> now
you will be <i>filled</i>	you will go <i>hungry</i>
Happy are you who <i>weep</i> now	How terrible for you who <i>laugh</i> now
you will <i>laugh</i>	you will <i>mourn and weep</i>
Happy are you when people <i>hate you, reject you, insult you...</i> all because of the Son of Man	How terrible for you when all people <i>speak well</i> of you
Their ancestors did the very same thing to the <i>prophets</i>	Their ancestors said the very same things about the <i>false prophets</i>

The precise parallels with sharp contrasts reveal that Luke is referring to situations where the concepts *rich* and *poor* have very specific fields of meaning. He is not referring to all rich or poor people in all situations. Luke clearly assumes a relationship between rich and poor in this section. At the heart of this relationship is the fact that these poor people are poor because these specific rich people are rich.

Why this interpretation? Luke is addressing a situation where the rich are leading an easy life, with more than enough to eat and drink and laugh about. They also live their lives according to the demands of

acquiring good reputations and praise from other people. They are not concerned with the needy, poor people in society, but are indifferent to their plight.<sup>1</sup> The rich do not have a commitment to the “Son of Man”. They are only concerned with their own desires and need for public approval.<sup>2</sup> They thus fit the profile of the false prophets of the Old Testament, who neither proclaimed nor lived according to God’s moral requirements, as expounded in the Mosaic Law.

The poor people are people who live in physical and psychological need, but get no help from those better off, i.e., the rich. They are pitiable by outward appearance, but are judged to be happy because of what Jesus promises them.<sup>3</sup> Poverty is thus not depicted as a condition that brings about happiness; rather, God’s promise of the Kingdom is the source of happiness.<sup>4</sup> Luke emphasizes that it is *now* that they are poor and hungry and weep. In contrast to the rich, the poor have miserable lives, without the benefit of loving care and generosity from the rich.

Luke presents us with a picture where the poor experience gross exploitation by the rich. If the section is read as a whole and judged to apply as a whole to the rich and to the poor, then those addressed as the poor are not just any poor people. They are specifically those who suffer, like the prophets of the Old Testament, because of their relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. This relationship with Christ is a vital qualification, which implies that the poor suffer hatred and contempt not as a result of their own wrong actions and unacceptable behaviour, but because of their links with Christ.<sup>5</sup>

If this interpretation holds, then Luke sketches a situation where poor believers are severely exploited by the rich unbelievers of their society. Luke’s message now becomes one of comfort for the poor.<sup>6</sup> Are they comforted by the fact that poverty, sorrow, and hunger are opportunities for developing certain virtues, while wealth, laughter, and having enough to eat are sources of temptation?<sup>7</sup> No. They are promised that their hunger will be changed in future to being filled. Their weeping will change to laughter.

Is this a “pie in the sky” message where the poor people are promised eschatological justice and rewards in the future, in exchange for



acqui-escence and submissive behaviour now? Perhaps, if one notes that Luke promises them a great reward in heaven for suffering ill-treatment from others as a result of their commitment to Jesus. But if one looks at the statement that the Kingdom of God already belongs to them, it is not so simple. In this statement they are not promised the Kingdom, but assured that the Kingdom *is already theirs*.<sup>8</sup> The poor thus already share in God's rule over creation and the lives of people, and will also have part in God's future establishment of his Kingdom.

Is the comfort of future rewards, a future reversal of fortunes, and possession of God's Kingdom enough for people suffering from poverty, hunger, and psychological distress now? Perhaps not. But Luke *does* offer them something more. He presents them with God's strong judgement on their predicament. This judgement highlights the injustice of their poverty, a direct result of their exploitation by the rich, and the rich's neglect of their obligations towards the poor. In this sense God *is* on their side. This insight into their situation, provided by a strong normative evaluation of it, can be the starting point for collective action to do something about the extreme split between rich and poor in their society.

## 2. The rich man and Lazarus

Luke's story of the rich man and Lazarus has a similar message. (Lk 16:19-31) Again, the profile of the rich person in this story is of someone who ignores the plight of the poor and who does not care about God either. As in his Beatitudes, Luke gives a list of contrasting parallels between the life of Lazarus and the rich man.<sup>9</sup> Again, his intention is to show the direct link between exploitative rich people and suffering poor people. The contrasts can be presented as follows:

RICH MAN	LAZARUS
<i>Dressed</i> in most expensive clothes	<i>Covered</i> with sores
Lived in <i>great luxury</i> every day	Brought to the rich man's door, <i>hoping to eat scraps of food falling from</i> his table
<i>Died</i> , buried, in Hades in great pain	<i>Died</i> , carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven
You were given all the <i>good things</i>	Lazarus got all the <i>bad things</i>
You are in <i>pain</i>	He is <i>enjoying</i> himself

In this section, as in Luke 6:20-26, Luke shows us rich and poor in an exploitative and non-caring relationship. The paths of the rich man and Lazarus crossed practically every day. Lazarus was brought to the rich man's gate with the hope of getting scraps of food to eat from the rich man's table. Lazarus was very poor, as he could not provide his own food, nor did he have relatives or friends who could provide for him. Luke does not even mention Lazarus' clothes; what stands out is his ill health - his body is covered with sores. Luke mentions that Lazarus had a difficult life in which he received only bad things. The rich man's life is sketched as a complete contrast. The rich man dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury. He focused on the enjoyment of his riches and flaunted his wealth before other people, some of them poor.<sup>10</sup> It is very clear that he consistently ignored the plight of the poor man at his gate.

The situations of Lazarus and the rich man are reversed at death. Lazarus dies and is carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. In contrast, the rich man dies, is buried and suffers great pain in Hades. The conversation between Abraham and the rich man is telling. The rich man negotiates with Abraham for pity, but he still assumes an attitude of superiority towards Lazarus. He asks Abraham

to send Lazarus to cool his lips with water and when that request fails, he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his. His attitude has not changed; he still believes that Lazarus is inferior to him and must be ordered around like a servant.<sup>11</sup>

In answer to his first request to send Lazarus to cool his lips, Abraham reminds the rich man of the reason why his fate is so different to Lazarus's. Lazarus got all the bad things in his earthly life, whilst the rich man was given all the good things. By implication, the rich man did nothing to change Lazarus's state of poverty, through the use of his considerable resources. Now after death, their conditions are reversed: Lazarus enjoys himself while the rich man suffers. The rich man failed to use available opportunities to make wise use of his wealth.<sup>12</sup> The rich man is not punished for being rich; he is punished for not using his wealth properly in service of God and neighbour. In an ironic twist, Lazarus ends up at the heavenly feast next to Abraham, one of the richest men in the Old Testament. It was not riches that led to the unpleasant fate of the rich man, but his uncaring, unloving, and heartless neglect of the urgent needs of the poor.<sup>13</sup>

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, so they can avoid a similar fate. Abraham's answer is significant. Abraham says with great conviction that the only way to avoid such a fate is to take Moses and the prophets seriously. If people are not willing to accept the authority of Moses and the prophets, then nothing else, not even someone risen from death, will persuade them to do so. This implies that the rich man was in Hades because he ignored the message of Moses and the prophets. He thus ignored God's Word and refused to help the poor. He used his wealth for his own benefit and kept it all for himself. Furthermore, Abraham's answer implies that the message of Moses and the prophets is strong enough and sufficient in itself to convince people to accept God as father and to take care of the poor in their midst.

This parable thus legitimizes the Old Testament message on poverty and riches.

### 3. Rich and poor in James

James gives his version of the contrast between a rich man and a poor man in James 2:1-11. James is concerned at the way his readers have discriminated against a poor man yet treated a rich man with favour. He wants his readers, whom he describes as believers, not to judge people by their outward appearance. He uses their different treatment of rich and poor people as an example of how they do this. James disagrees strongly with their conduct and presents several reasons why he believes it is wrong.

James also presents a series of parallels between the rich man and the poor man that highlights the contrasting ways believers treated these two classes of people. It can be illustrated as follows:

THE RICH MAN	THE POOR MAN
<i>A rich man wearing a gold ring</i>	<i>A poor man</i>
Fine clothes	Ragged clothes
Shown more respect and attention	You dishonour the poor
"Here's a good seat for you"	"You stand there." or "Sit on the floor by my feet"
The rich are the ones who exploit you and drag you before the judges; slander the noble name of him to whom you belong.	God chose the poor ... to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom ...

The contrast is clear. Rich and poor are easily recognizable by their outward characteristics. The rich man's fine clothes and gold ring, and the poor man's ragged clothes immediately betray their personal economic status. The believers respond accordingly. They show more respect to the rich man and offer him the best place to sit. They dis-

honour the poor man by telling him to remain standing where he is, or to sit at their feet. James rejects their conduct as an instance of judging people according to their outward appearance.

The most important reason James presents for rejecting preferential treatment for the rich and discriminating behaviour against the poor is that such behaviour is not in accordance with the law of the Kingdom, i.e., the commandment to love your neighbour as you love yourself. The readers, addressed as believers in Jesus Christ, ought not to treat people in this way.<sup>14</sup> The interpretation James gives to this commandment to love one's neighbour excludes the possibility of judging people according to their outward appearance; on the contrary, judging that way becomes a sin.

The status God ascribes to poor people is another reason for rejecting any discriminating behaviour against them. God has chosen poor people to be rich in faith and to possess his Kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him. Who are God's children then, to disregard his example and denigrate the people chosen by him? Again, as in Luke, the support for poor people is not unqualified. The poor people James defends against unfair discrimination are those chosen by God, those who love God. Poor people, as fellow believers who were chosen by God, thus deserve as much respect as any other person.<sup>15</sup>

James portrays the rich in a similar way to Luke. For James the rich are people who oppress the poor, take them to court, and violate God's name. For this reason the rich do not deserve to receive preferential treatment.<sup>16</sup> In James' view, treating them preferentially creates distinctions between believers that are irrelevant in the church. Their judgments in favour of the oppressive rich are based on evil motives and are not in accordance with the second section of the Great Commandment.

#### 4. God looks at the heart, not the amount

The story of the poor widow in Luke 21:1-4 is striking because of the strong contrast it contains. This contrast lies not only between the two copper coins the widow dropped in the offering box and the large

amount of money the others gave. It extends further to the difference between one poor widow and many rich men.

Widows were one of the most vulnerable groups in patriarchal ancient Israel, and here a single widow of limited means is contrasted with many men of considerable means - the most powerful group in ancient Israel. In this context most people would only have seen the value of the considerable contributions made by the many rich men and treated the widow's minuscule contribution (and herself) as insignificant and irrelevant. Many people would have thought that the powerful group with big contributions drawn from their large resources must surely be more important to God's work than a poor widow with her small contribution that depletes her limited resources.

Jesus reverses this judgement. In God's Kingdom people are not valued according to the amount or size of their monetary or other contributions. Jesus makes the surprising remark that the widow put more money in the offering box than all the others. How could that be?

The last contrast in the story explains the way Jesus evaluates this situation. The many rich men dropped in a lot of money, but in proportion to their means, they gave only part of what they could spare of their riches. The poor widow, in contrast, gave all that she had. The repetition of "all that she had" emphasizes that what she gave was all the resources she had available to live on. This means she gave everything she had, not just part of what she could spare.

Judging by the proportion of their wealth given, Jesus concludes that the widow gave more than all the others. Thus, in the eyes of Jesus the poor widow deserves more credit and praise than all the rich men combined. The divine standard that Jesus applies seems to be that what really counts is what people do to serve God with their available resources. The poor widow has more value in God's Kingdom than the rich men. Poor people thus need not feel insignificant in God's Kingdom because they have fewer resources to contribute.

Luke 16:14-15 reinforces this message. Here Jesus says to the Pharisees that God knows their hearts and can thus see through their attempts to make themselves acceptable to other people. These attempts do not impress God. Jesus explicitly says that what human

beings consider to be of great value is worth nothing in God's sight. This statement reinforces the idea that God judges people differently from the way people may have judged the value of a poor widow's contribution in relation to the contributions of many rich men.

## 5. Treat the poor as special

Jesus also made a habit of inverting the distinctions that dominated social life in his times. In Luke 14, for example, he makes two points that go against the usual ways of doing things in Israel.

Whilst having a meal with a leading Pharisee, Jesus noticed how some of the guests chose the best places for themselves. He told them a parable to instil humility in them, so that they would rather humble themselves and be made great, than make themselves great only to be humbled afterwards. His advice to them was to take the lowest place at social functions and then be asked to move to a better one, rather than the other way around. (Lk 14:7-11)

When he had finished speaking to the guests about humility, Jesus turned to the host with a typically strong Lukan contrast. Jesus makes it to undermine a view so strongly held by society that it is almost regarded as natural.

Almost everyone entertains his or her friends, relatives, acquaintances, or colleagues and work associates. Jesus tells the host not to invite such people to meals at his home, as they will invite him back and that is the same as being paid for his invitation. Rather, Jesus encourages the host to invite marginalized people who cannot repay him, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind when he wants to entertain others. God will repay him at the resurrection of the righteous. (Lk 14:12-13)

Once again, the message is to do something special for the poor in society by treating them as human beings with dignity who are valuable in the sight of God. Does this mean that believers should not invite their friends and relatives for dinner? Not necessarily, if Marshall's explanation is plausible. What is stated in Semitic idiom as "do not do this, but that," really intends to say "do not do so much of this, but more of that." <sup>17</sup>

## 6. Condemning the rich

James writes one of the strongest condemnations of rich people found in the New Testament when he discusses the dangers of riches for the third time in his letter. (Jas 5:1-6)

The clue to the interpretation of this section is found in the sharp contrast that James draws between the rich and their workers who are poor as a result of the rich exploiting them. The contrast is between the rich and those who work in their fields and gather their crops. As in the case of other authors elsewhere in the New Testament, James is not addressing the rich in abstract, but rich people he knew who were ruthlessly exploiting their workers.

In this context James's strong condemnation of the rich makes sense. These rich people have not paid the wages of their workers, whose complaints and cries have reached God. The workers are experiencing a desperate struggle for survival.<sup>18</sup> Even worse, the rich are so powerful that they can condemn and murder innocent people without anybody resisting them. While withholding their workers' wages and murdering innocent people, the rich are piling up wealth and living luxurious lives full of pleasure. They have handled their enormous wealth irresponsibly.<sup>19</sup>

As elsewhere in the New Testament, the condemned rich are those who live alongside the poor but do not care for them at all. The condemned rich also lack faith in, and obedience to, God. Lack of care for the poor and lack of faith in God often go together.

For James it is not enough to condemn the rich. He goes further by pronouncing woes on them. The exploitative rich must weep and wail over the miseries that they are going to suffer. They are going to lose their riches through decay. Their bodies, clothes, and wealth (gold and silver) will be lost. Their riches will rot away, moths will eat their clothes, rust will destroy their silver and gold and eat up their flesh. Whether these are normal processes of decay or something else is not clear. James refers to a day of slaughter for which they have prepared themselves, but the reference is too vague to draw any conclusions from it. What he seems to be saying is that it is futile to gather riches that will eventually decay.<sup>20</sup>



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The rich need to realize that their hopes and dreams based on their abundant riches will be destroyed through inevitable decay.<sup>21</sup>

## 7. Difficult texts

James 1: 9-11 is difficult to interpret because James briefly states a contrast between rich and poor without giving much detail. Here he addresses Christians and asks them to be glad when God lifts up the poor and brings down the rich:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

These sayings are then complemented by a metaphoric description of the mortality of the rich. What does it mean?

The section rests on two assumptions. One is that the poor are downtrodden and need lifting up, while the rich are exalted and need to be brought down. The other assumption is that God judges a role reversal between rich and poor to be appropriate.

We can only speculate as to what this low position of the poor might be. Perhaps the reference is to their meagre means and resources, their low position in society, or their perception of themselves. Similarly, the high position of the rich could refer to their abundant means and resources, their high status in society, or their pride about their achievements and status.

The safest interpretation of James 1:9-11, though not necessarily the only one, is to establish a link with James 2:1-13 where James enhances the lowly social status of the poor by showing that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to possess his Kingdom. He furthermore requires that his followers treat the poor, who are full participants in the community of faith, according to the second part of the Great Commandment.<sup>22</sup>

James, on the other hand brings down the rich. They must not get preferential treatment because of their socio-economic status, as they are not more important to God than the other believers. On the contrary, the rich James refers to are people who harm Christians through oppression and court action. They also defile God's name. Poor believers deserve far better treatment than James's readers are giving them and the rich do not deserve any preferential treatment. In this way God effects a reversal of fortunes through enhancing the human dignity of the poor and stripping away the special privileges of the rich. The second part of James 1:9-11 is a bit easier. James compares the rich to the flower of a wild plant. The point of the comparison is the transience of the lives of the rich. They are mortal like flowers that are destroyed when the sun gets hot. The rich too are vulnerable to being destroyed in the midst of their daily activities, without any prior warning. Rich people are exposed to the uncertainties and risks of destruction of everyday life, despite their wealth of resources. This exposure is an equalising factor that should remind rich people not to put too much trust in their wealth.<sup>23</sup>

A second difficult text to interpret forms part of Mary's *Magnificat*, her song of praise to God after she shared her pregnancy with Elizabeth in Luke 1. The relevant section is found in verses 51 - 53:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

These verses seem to be comments about the nature of God. God is portrayed as being against the proud, mighty kings, and the rich. He is also portrayed as being on the side of the lowly and the hungry.

Perhaps it is sufficient to say that Mary's portrayal of God rests on her interpretation of the sacred texts of ancient Israel and her understanding of God's involvement in Israel's history. The text is a song of praise that highlights God's character as an almighty, good, and faith-

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ful God. The text does not claim to make any moral prescriptions or give any interpretation of societal issues. What is significant, though, is that God is understood as being on the side of the weak and powerless, whilst being against the mighty, the rich, and the proud. Again, God is the One who will reverse the fortunes of these two groups by humbling the powerful, proud people and elevating the marginalized persons, a common theme in the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup>

Against the background of the Old Testament and in the context of Luke's gospel, the weak and powerless are those who seek help from God and have a relationship with him. The powerful, the rich, and the proud are those who reject God, oppress and exploit their fellow beings, and have no mercy or compassion for the marginalized people in society.

A similar text in Luke is a quote from Isaiah 61 that Jesus uses to announce his Messianic mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Lk 4:18-19)

After reading this, Jesus declares that these words have become true in the hearing of the congregation. What can this possibly mean?

This reading calls to mind the return of the Israelites from exile and Israel's joy at the release from debt and bondage experienced during the Year of Jubilee.<sup>25</sup> It tells us more about God's plans for salvation through Christ and his intentions for human society. God has a deep concern for the marginalized, the weak, and the vulnerable people of society. In this case the poor, blind, oppressed, and captives are specifically mentioned. The Messiah is sent to remove all these forms of bondage, so that anyone oppressed by them may become fully human. He is thus sent to "save" God's people.

## Endnotes

- 1 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), p. 256.
- 2 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 246.
- 3 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 245-246.
- 4 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 249.
- 5 Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, (Second Edition), (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922), p. 181.
- 6 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 246.
- 7 Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 179.
- 8 Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 180.
- 9 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 635.
- 10 E.P. Groenewald, *Die Evangelie van Lukas*, (Cape Town: N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, 1973a), p. 192.
- 11 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 638.
- 12 Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 390.
- 13 Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 394.
- 14 E.A. Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, (Cape Town: NG Kerk-Uitgewers, 1988), p. 51.
- 15 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 56.
- 16 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 51.
- 17 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 583. See also a similar interpretation by Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1997), p. 58.
- 18 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 108.
- 19 George M. Stulac, *James*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), p. 168.
- 20 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 104.
- 21 Stulac, *James*, p. 164.

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22 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 37.

23 Pretorius, *Die Brief van Jakobus*, p. 38.

24 Groenewald, *Die Evangelie van Lukas*, p. 25 and C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 175-176.

25 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 184 and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, p. 121.



## GIVING AID TO POOR PEOPLE

*L*ike the Old Testament, the New Testament places heavy emphasis on the responsibility of God's followers to help the poor. This responsibility is given great significance and is judged to be a core aspect of Christian faith.

What, then, are the dimensions of aid found in the texts of the New Testament?

### 1. Judging sheep and goats

One of the most intriguing passages in the Bible deals with the responsibility of Christians to give aid to the poor and marginalized people of society. In Matthew 25:31-46 we find a picture of what to expect at the final judgement. This section forms part of the Apocalyptic Discourse (Mt 24-25), which in turn is part of the fifth discourse section in Matthew's Gospel. (Mt 23-25)

Jesus begins the Apocalyptic Discourse by describing some of the things that will happen at his second coming. (Mt 24:1-35) The second section of the Apocalyptic Discourse focuses on the need for believers to be on guard, as they do not know when the second coming will happen. (Mt 24:36-44; 25:1-13) An important part of being on guard is keeping busy with the right kind of activities. The need to be faithful and wise and to continually develop the talents,

capacities, and opportunities that God gives, is stressed. (Mt 24:45-51; 25:14-30)

Matthew's parable of the final judgement fits into this context. This section is clearly consistent with its context, where Jesus focuses on the demands believers will have to deal with, and the responsibilities they have, while waiting for the second coming.<sup>1</sup> The parable shows the basis on which all people ("the nations") will be evaluated at the final judgement. The description of the final judgement is "very dramatic [and] frequently symbolic."<sup>2</sup> Jesus is addressing his inner circle of disciples, instructing them on how they should be living while waiting for his second coming.

There are many intriguing elements in this parable. One is why the righteous deny knowing that they ever treated Jesus in the way he says they did. The others - never classified, but only referred to as "the goats", "the others", "those on his left", and "these" - are similarly unable to recall occasions when they failed to give aid to Jesus.

Another intriguing question is whether or not good works are the criterion for attaining eternal life.

When examining the parable for guidelines for dealing with poverty, one of the questions we need to answer is this: What are the implications of Jesus' strong identification with needy, marginalized people?

The parable starts with a description of the setting. Two metaphors flow into one another. Jesus is described in terms of the metaphors of king and shepherd. He is depicted as a king coming in majesty with his angels to judge all the people in the world. His judgement will be a division of all people into two groups, in the way that shepherds divided their sheep and goats at night in ancient Israel. Those on the right are the sheep who did what was right and obeyed God's will. They receive eternal life. They are invited to come and possess God's Kingdom. This Kingdom has been prepared for them since the creation of the world.

Does this mean that they have earned the right to eternal life through good works? No. One could argue that because the Kingdom has been prepared for them since creation, their care for people in

need followed on their experience of God's grace. The case for this interpretation is not very strong, as one could also argue that God prepared his Kingdom for all his followers in general and that they now receive it as a result of doing the right things.

One crucial phrase in Matthew 25: 34 makes the interpretation of this section easier. An important echo from the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount provides a key for unlocking its meaning. The sheep, the people who did the right things, are called those who are "blessed by God." This phrase recalls the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. The emphasis in Matthew 25 is not on blessings that are promised and must still come in future. The emphasis is on those already blessed by God, as in Matthew 5. The people on the right, the sheep of Matthew 25, can thus be linked and identified with the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5.

This interpretation is strengthened when one takes the unity of Matthew's Gospel seriously. Why should the characteristics of the people truly blessed by God depicted in Matthew 5 be different in the later sections of Matthew? His addressees, the disciples, ought to have been familiar with the characteristics of his followers spelt out in the Beatitudes. The deeds performed in the lives of the sheep of Matthew 25 seem to be fully consistent with the characteristics of the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5. Can one not argue that care for people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, strangers, or in prison is merely the practical manifestation of the lives of people who thirst for justice ("... whose greatest desire is to do what God requires" [TEV]), who are merciful to others, who mourn, who are humble, who are pure in heart, and who work for peace? Could one not say that being like this and doing these things means doing the will of God, as the sheep are said to have done?

There are interesting parallels between Jesus' address to those on the right (the "sheep") and those on the left (the "goats"). They can be illustrated as follows:



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<b>LEFT: THE GOATS</b>	<b>RIGHT: THE SHEEP</b>
You that are under God's curse	You that are blessed by my Father
- the eternal fire that has been prepared for the Devil and his angels	- the kingdom has been prepared for you
- away ... to the fire	- come and possess the kingdom
I was hungry	I was hungry
I was thirsty	I was thirsty
I was a stranger	I was a stranger
I was naked	I was naked
I was sick	I was sick
I was in prison	I was in prison
<i>You did not ...</i>	<i>You fed ... gave ... took care ... visited ... received ... clothed ...</i>
- then they will answer him, "When, Lord, did we ..."	- the righteous will then answer him, "When, Lord, did we ..."
Whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me	Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me.
Will be sent off to eternal punishment	Will go to eternal life

In both cases Jesus speaks in the first person and tells them that he himself was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison.

Both groups are astounded by these words, as are most people today. Both ask Jesus when did they see or meet him in those conditions. His answer reveals his strong identification with those marginalized groups who are considered to be the least important people in society.<sup>3</sup> Satisfying their urgent needs is the same as helping Jesus in person, whereas neglecting their needs amounts to neglecting Jesus himself in similar conditions. What does this strong identification mean?

I doubt whether there are many texts in the Bible with a stronger message about the obligation to engage in emergency poverty relief than this one. Jesus points to the enormous value that he attaches to alleviating people's urgent needs. He makes this point by showing his identification with people who exhibit misery of all kinds and degrees.<sup>4</sup> People living in absolute poverty do not have enough to eat or drink or clothes to wear, and they thus get sick easily. To help them in their crisis is as profound an act as helping Jesus himself, were he living on earth in similar circumstances. Jesus makes it clear that he wants his followers to serve him through helping those who are in serious (physical) need.<sup>5</sup>

Not only does this section say something about aid to those in need, it also says something about how to treat people in need. If doing something for them is the same as doing it for Jesus, one would have to treat them with respect similar to the respect one would show to Jesus. No discriminating, denigrating, or dismissive treatment is allowed; full respect for each human being as image of God is required.

This requirement implies that taking care of people's physical needs must be done in a way that respects their value as human beings. Aid should not harm the self-respect and self-image of people in need, through insensitive and disrespectful conduct.

The parable ends with those on the left facing eternal punishment, because of what they neglected or omitted to do. The sheep, those on the right, receive eternal life because they actively cared for people in need.<sup>6</sup> Those blessed by God, who are to possess God's Kingdom, are

the people who lived lives pleasing to God by taking care of people in need.<sup>7</sup> As in the Beatitudes, no sins or shortcomings are mentioned, except failure to fulfil positive duties to the least important people with whom Jesus fully identifies.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus thus interprets aid to people in need as fundamentally important to being a Christian and it forms a crucial distinguishing criterion between true believers and non-believers.

## 2. Keeping aid secret

In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus draws a contrast between two styles of helping people in need. The style of the hypocrites is public and Jesus rejects it. The style that Jesus recommends to his disciples is to keep their aid-giving confidential. The hypocrites make a big show of giving help by making it known or doing it in public places (on the streets) and places of religious significance (houses of worship). In contrast the disciples are advised to avoid making such a big show of giving aid. The hypocrites' motive for their public display of charity is to be noticed and to receive praise from other people for their generosity.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus advises his disciples to keep their aid a private matter even to the extent that their closest friends do not know what they are doing. The consequence of making your aid public for other people to see is that their admiration and praise are the full reward you are going to get.<sup>10</sup> Jesus tells his disciples to avoid such a public display of giving aid motivated by selfish interest for receiving recognition and praise.<sup>11</sup> When aid is a private matter, God still knows about it. He will give you a reward in heaven. Aid must thus not be done to impress people, but as a service to God. When giving aid to poor people, the focus must be on serving them and serving God, not one's own interests.<sup>12</sup>

Is this section in conflict with the apostle Paul's emphasis that aid to poor people leads to gratitude towards God and praise for his grace that enabled wealthier people to generously contribute resources to alleviate others' needs? The focus of Jesus here is on condemning public displays of generosity in order to draw attention to oneself and to receive praise for good deeds. Good deeds with the aim of serving

one's own reputation and public image are unacceptable. Paul's emphasis is on people giving aid through the grace of God. The Macedonian churches give aid because they belong to God and want to serve him through service to others, despite their own meagre resources. In this case, although their attitudes and deeds are public, God is the one who is the focus of people's gratitude and praise for what has happened.

### 3. Taking care of widows

A cameo example of someone aiding the poor is Tabitha (Dorcas) in Acts 9:36-42. She is introduced in the context of one of the miracle stories in Acts where she dies and is raised to life again by the apostle Peter. She was actively involved in poverty relief in the Christian church at Joppa through making clothes. She devoted her whole life to her project of helping the poor and doing good. From her story it seems that her relief work was a specialized ministry focused on widows, a group very vulnerable to poverty in patriarchal ancient Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Whether she had abundant means, or made money through sewing is not clear. What is clear, however, is that she must have had considerable skills to run a relief project taking care of all the widows in Joppa. She must also have had time and means available to undertake the task.<sup>14</sup> Whether there is any link between her miraculous resurrection from the dead through Peter and her valuable work in poverty relief amongst widows is unclear. It is also unclear whether she ran a sewing training project for the widows, or whether she made clothes herself and used the proceeds from sales to support the widows. What can be said, however, is that Tabitha became a role model exemplifying Christian caring for poor people.<sup>15</sup>

### 4. The Church in Jerusalem

The first congregation established after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem faced important problems relating to poverty. Why and how to give aid was one of them. This issue is highlighted in two

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summary passages in Acts which give a glimpse of life in the first Christian church and serve as links or bridging passages in Luke's narrative presented in Acts.<sup>16</sup>

Luke tells us that the new, post-Pentecostal believers were one in heart and mind and thus in close fellowship, whilst praising God. They met day after day and had meals together in their homes. They sold their possessions and shared everything they had. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32) The way the congregation in Jerusalem dealt with riches and poverty is often presented as the ideal of Christian sharing or socialism. But is the matter quite as simple as that?

The sense of unity in faith and mutual obligation that members of this community experienced were expressed in their sharing of belongings.<sup>17</sup> The Christian believers did not view their belongings as their own and they shared everything they had with their fellow believers in need. They sold their properties (land and houses) and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution amongst needy believers.<sup>18</sup> The apostles distributed the proceeds according to degree of need, and as a result no one in the congregation went short. The wealthier believers showed loving care by selling their belongings to provide for the needs of the poorer believers.<sup>19</sup>

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4: 34 - 35)

Selling their belongings to earn money for poverty relief was an entirely voluntary matter that each individual could freely decide on.<sup>20</sup> There was no transfer of private property to communal ownership, nor any communal control of ownership of property.<sup>21</sup> There is no indication that this type of sharing of belongings is prescribed for all believers, as no apostle suggests or teaches that all believers ought to share their belongings in this way.<sup>22</sup> There is also no evidence that the other Christian communities described in the New Testament followed their practice.<sup>23</sup>

A serious question for supporters of this practice is whether it is sustainable over time. The answer provided by the rest of the story of the Jerusalem congregation - that one can piece together from scattered information in the New Testament - suggests that it is not.<sup>24</sup>

Luke not only sketches the positive side of the first church, but also briefly discusses the problems the church faced and their solutions.<sup>25</sup> In the context of voluntary sharing of possessions amongst members of a newly found, excited, worshipping Christian community, Luke points out two problems.

In contrast to the voluntary sharing of the proceeds of the sale of possessions, as exemplified by Barnabas, the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows how some believers threatened the strong ties of solidarity and generosity amongst the new church community through acts of deceit.<sup>26</sup> (Acts 4:36-37; cf. 5:1-11) Like others in the community, Ananias and Sapphira sold property that belonged to them, but deceived the apostles in the process of handing over the proceeds to them for distribution by not giving the full amount.<sup>27</sup> They thus colluded in keeping the sale price of their property a secret, lied to the apostles, and according to Peter, lied to God as well.<sup>28</sup> When Peter confronts Ananias with his deception he emphasizes that the property, as well as the proceeds from the sale, belonged to Ananias and Sapphira. Their sin was to deceive and lie to God, the apostles, and the community. Sapphira is confronted when she arrives three hours later than her husband and gets an opportunity to set the record straight and confess her sin. She fails to do so, thus confirming their collusion.<sup>29</sup>

A second problem faced by this congregation regarding the sharing of possessions was that the Greek-speaking Jews felt that the widows belonging to their group were being neglected by those who distributed the daily funds. (Acts 6:1-6) The apostles acknowledged the problem as an important deficiency in administration, and called together the whole community to deal with it.<sup>30</sup> The issue was important because widows were a particularly vulnerable group of the poor in their society.<sup>31</sup> The apostles realized the need for a division of labour between preaching the Gospel and ministering to the concrete needs of poor people.<sup>32</sup> They recognized that their calling was not to

handle finances, but to be involved with preaching and prayers. They suggested that the congregation choose seven men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These men were to be put in charge of the distribution of funds for the needy so that the apostles could focus on their calling.

The harmonious sharing of belongings and joyful worshipping of God was rudely interrupted by persecution spearheaded by Saul after the stoning of Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to deal with the congregation's finances. The persecution had the effect of scattering the believers throughout Judaea and Samaria. The scattering of believers led to an upsurge in missionary work, as the believers proclaimed the Gospel wherever they went. (Acts 8:1b-4) There is a faint resemblance between these events and the events at the tower of Babel in the Old Testament in Genesis 11. The believers clustered together in Jerusalem and their persecution kick-started God's mission to the nations. Their scattering because of the persecution aided the widespread preaching of the Gospel message - paradoxically this was exactly what their persecutors had hoped to prevent.<sup>33</sup> Luke's earlier quote of Jesus' words that his followers would proclaim the Gospel not only in Jerusalem, but also in Samaria and Judaea, was now fulfilled.<sup>34</sup> It is ironic that the great missionary of the New Testament, Paul, was responsible for starting this evangelical outreach to surrounding areas through his persecution of Christians when he was still known by the name Saul.

Later another calamity hit the Jerusalem congregation. A severe famine struck Judaea (Jerusalem) in the time of Emperor Claudius. (Acts 11:28) This famine and the persecution were not the only reasons for the need that arose among believers in the church at Jerusalem. Their previous generous sharing of the proceeds of the sales of their belongings may also have impoverished them in the long run. Their funds would soon have run out through selling their capital assets and using the money to distribute among the needy. It is difficult to imagine an alternative if they did not have ways in which to generate new income once they had no more belongings or capital assets to sell. This way of addressing poverty through sharing the proceeds gained

from selling possessions was never obligatory and was not followed anywhere else in the New Testament. In the end this strategy - plus the famine and persecution - left the Jerusalem church vulnerable.

The disciples at Antioch decided to collect money for the believers in Judaea. (Acts 11:29) The apostle Paul worked with Barnabas at Antioch at that time, and he made a strong commitment to seek further help for the believers in Judaea from the other churches in Gentile areas. (Gal 2:9-10)<sup>35</sup> Paul emphasizes that the churches decided freely to make contributions to the church in Jerusalem (Judaea), although he believes he could make a case for them having an obligation to help. (Rom 15:25-27) In his two letters to the Corinthians he extensively discusses the issue of aid to the church in Jerusalem. How does he justify the obligations of other churches to give aid in this case and how should they go about it?

Paul presents several reasons in support of his call to the Corinthians to generously support the poor church in Jerusalem. The most obvious reason is that the church in Jerusalem shared their spiritual blessings with other people, and through this sharing, those people became believers sharing in God's riches.<sup>36</sup> Besides bringing the message of God's salvation to the members of these churches, the church in Jerusalem was the leader in spiritual affairs, settled doctrinal conflicts, gave moral support, and brought joy through their encouragement, as Acts 15 clearly demonstrates. In return the Gentiles have an obligation to aid the church in Jerusalem with their material blessings.

Elsewhere Paul restates this idea of reciprocal help when he tells the Corinthians that it is only fair that they help others in need at times when they themselves have plenty. He argues that this is fair because in the future if the Corinthians are in need, other churches will help them. (2 Cor 8:13-14) Paul thus emphasizes that financial and material neediness is not a permanent or necessary characteristic of any church and that churches should help one another in turn, as equals, as the situation arises. It is ironic that the "mother" church in Jerusalem is the one needing financial help, despite being the spiritual leader that brought the message to the other churches.



The most important reason that Paul advances in support of his call for aid to the church in Jerusalem is to point to the example of Jesus. (2 Cor 8:8-9) Jesus deprived himself of the riches of God in heaven and by doing so immeasurably enriched human beings. His followers ought to emulate his example.

Another example presented as a reason for giving aid is that of the churches in Macedonia. (2 Cor 8:1-6) Paul refers to them to show the Corinthians what God's grace can achieve in a congregation. He uses the example not to blame the Corinthians or put them to shame, but rather to inspire them. He wants to show them what God's grace can achieve in the hearts of people who are poor and who experience difficulties.<sup>37</sup> What makes these churches an example is that they gave themselves both to God and to Paul and his helpers to be available for service. This is remarkable as these churches went through testing times and were very poor themselves. Nevertheless, they begged Paul to be allowed to make their contribution and when they did, they were very generous because of the great joy they had in their faith. What impresses Paul about these churches is not the amount of money they gave, but that they gave freely with a joyful heart and more than he could reasonably expect.<sup>38</sup>

The example of the Macedonian churches points to the important link between a believer's relationship with God and giving aid.<sup>39</sup> The Macedonians gave themselves fully to God and the service of the apostle Paul, out of gratitude for God's grace that brought them endurance and joy in times of trouble. Their giving is voluntary and comes from inner experiences of joy and gratitude. Giving aid to the poor takes on a profound religious meaning as it expresses an important dimension of the relationship between believers and God.

When Christians give expression to fellowship in such joyous and generous ways, despite their own adverse conditions, it becomes a strong reason for glorifying God. This is something God, through his grace, enables people to do. (2 Cor 9:13)<sup>40</sup> Giving aid becomes a testimony of faith to other people, for which believers will glorify and thank God. Paul also motivates the Corinthians to give aid by saying to them that he wants to find out how real their love for other people is.

(2 Cor 8:8) The Corinthians were rich in many things, such as faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness to help, and love for Paul and his helpers. (2 Cor 8:7) He now wants to see their love for God and their fellows expressed in giving aid to the believers in Jerusalem. When he discussed the issue with them earlier, they showed a willingness and an eagerness to make such contributions. (2 Cor 9:1-5) Paul now wants to see them put their good intentions into practice and to make true their promises to him. He wants to see them complete the good works they have started by contributing to the alleviation of the plight of the church in Jerusalem.

Paul's arguments establish the obligation of Christians to help fellow believers in a distant congregation deal with their poverty. How, then, should this obligation be put into practice? Paul advises the Corinthians not to give with an attitude of reproachfulness or out of a sense of duty. Rather, they should give gladly. (2 Cor 9:7) As in the case of the church in Jerusalem, giving part of your belongings for God's service must be voluntary.<sup>41</sup> Paul reminds the Corinthians that they need not be afraid that their giving will impoverish them. He assures them that God will give them enough resources so that they will always have what they need and be able to generously contribute to good causes. (2 Cor 9:8,11) To organise this giving practically, Paul advises them to put an amount proportionate to their income aside every week. These contributions of the individual members must be saved so as to be easily available when Paul and his helpers arrive. (1 Cor 16:1-2) He suggests that they choose people to take their aid to the church in Jerusalem. He will give them a letter to establish their credentials. (1 Cor 16:1-3)

One could speculate about his motivations for not offering to take their money to Jerusalem himself. He might want to allay suspicions that he wants to enrich himself, or perhaps he thinks it is important that the church in Jerusalem meet their benefactors and thank them personally.<sup>42</sup> Paul clearly states that he wants to do what is right before God and people and he does not want believers to complain about the way he handles the aid they collected for the church in Jerusalem. (2 Cor 8:20) Paul is sensitive to criticism that might harm his ministry

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and thus does not ignore possible suspicions that he might abuse the funds the Corinthians have collected.<sup>43</sup>

This kind of giving is important as an expression of the faith of believers. When they give part of their material resources for the needs of other believers, two beneficial consequences follow for God himself as well. Their contributions not only satisfy the needs of believers, but also lead to an outpouring of gratitude towards God. (2 Cor 9:11-12) People receiving this aid know that the grace of God enables people to give generously for their cause.

From this follows a second benefit for God. People will praise and honour God for his love, grace, generosity, and faithfulness. God will be glorified because of the charitable deeds of his children. (2 Cor 8:19; 9:13)

## Endnotes

- 1 David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New Century Bible), (London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 330.
- 2 William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 885.
- 3 Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 330.
- 4 Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 331.
- 5 Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 331.
- 6 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 887.
- 7 F.W. Grosheide, *Het Heilig Evangelie volgens Mattheus* (Second Edition), (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1954), p. 382.
- 8 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 891.
- 9 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 319; Grosheide, *Het Heilig Evangelie volgens Mattheus*, p. 94.
- 10 Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 133.
- 11 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 319 - 320.
- 12 Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 133.
- 13 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 333.

- 14 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 331.
- 15 Howard Clark Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 126.
- 16 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 156-157 and C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Volume 1), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 159.
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- 24 W.D. Jonker, *Die Brief aan die Romeine*, (Cape Town: N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, 1966), p. 197.
- 25 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 247 - 248.
- 26 Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Volume 1), p. 255 and Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven*, p. 75.
- 27 De Villiers, *Die Handelinge van die Apostels*. Deel 1, p. 103; Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Volume 1), pp. 266-267.
- 28 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 215.
- 29 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 217-218.
- 30 Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Volume 1), p. 303 and De Villiers, *Die Handelinge van die Apostels*. Deel 1, pp. 122 - 123.
- 31 Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles* (Volume 1), p. 306.
- 32 Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven*, p. 89.
- 33 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 199, 282.

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- 34 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 279.
- 35 E.P. Groenewald, *Die Eerste Brief aan die Korinthiërs*, (Cape Town: N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, 1971), p. 228.
- 36 Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 241 -242.
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- 41 Pop, *De Tweede Brief van Paulus aan de Corintheërs*, p. 244.
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## METAPHORIC RICHES AND POVERTY

*T*here are many examples in the New Testament where the concepts *rich* and *poor* are used as metaphors. These metaphoric uses may seem to be irrelevant to this study, as they do not directly, or indirectly point to ethical values dealing with poverty or riches. However, there is one aspect of the metaphoric use of the concepts *rich* and *poor* that is relevant to a study of New Testament ethics on poverty and riches. This concerns the nature of the metaphoric uses made of these concepts. More specifically, do the authors of the New Testament use the concepts *poor* and *rich* in a positive or negative sense? And what is depicted as being rich or poor in a metaphoric sense? A brief overview will suffice.

God's heaven is depicted in many metaphors referring to riches and wealth. In Revelation, jewels and precious metals are used to describe the physical characteristics of the heavenly city and the clothing of its inhabitants. See, for example, Revelation 21:1-2, 9-15, 18-21. Heaven is depicted as a place of abundance and wealth, reflecting the splendour of God. In line with this wonderful portrayal of God's dwelling place, what God offers to believers is similarly sketched in metaphors reflecting richness and wealth. The key metaphors speak about Jesus' riches before he came to earth and how he made himself poor to become human, for our salvation. Fortunately, through his voluntary poverty every human being can now become immeasurably

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rich. Note how Philippians 2: 5-11 uses these ideas. The New Testament refers to the wealth of his glory, his infinite riches, rich blessings, and the hidden treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge. God offers these riches to human beings as sufficient to fulfil their non-physical hunger and thirst. Our non-physical hunger and thirst for true, eternal life will be satisfied by Jesus who is the true bread of life, and gives streams of live-giving water to all who need it. (Jn 6:32-35) No one who has enjoyed this bread and water will ever thirst again. His flesh and blood is depicted as fulfilling a similar function. Note how John presents the ideas Jesus had about his body and blood in the long first-person narrative in John 6:53-57

Images drawn from the economic sphere or which relate in some way to poverty and wealth are used in three parables. The parable about the *workers in the vineyard* where some workers are hired for the whole day and others for part of the day, but all are paid the same amount, makes a point about God's free choice in how he decides to reward his followers. (Mt 20:1-16) The parable is accompanied by a warning that those who are first will be last and vice versa.

The parable of the *talents* is found in the context of eschatology, and makes the point that believers should prepare themselves for Christ's second coming by busying themselves with responsible use of that with which God has entrusted them. (Lk 19:12-13)<sup>1</sup> They must fulfil the commands God has given them even while they await the return of Jesus to the earth.<sup>2</sup> Each person must take responsibility for determining and using the gifts and opportunities they have.<sup>3</sup>

The parable of the *shrewd manager* shows what clever use the desperate manager, who has been fired, makes of his master's accounts in order to secure friends for himself friends who would be sympathetic to his plight after he has left his job.

In an interesting combination of metaphoric and literal uses of the concepts *poor* and *rich*, the apostle John tells us in Revelation how Jesus has judged two of the seven congregations in Asia Minor. The congregation in Smyrna is literally poor, but Jesus values the spiritual


wealth of its members. (Rev 2:9a) The other congregation, Laodicea, is literally rich and proud of it, without realising the full extent of their spiritual poverty. They are advised to buy pure gold from Jesus, again a metaphoric reference. (Rev 3:17-18)

An interesting pattern emerges in the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) in the New Testament. When the concepts *rich* and *riches* are used in the New Testament, they consistently refer to positive things, for example, the blessings that God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, eternal life). The concepts *poverty* and *poor* consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient. Even the metaphoric use of poor in the “poor in spirit” by Matthew is negative. (Mt 5:3) Such people know their own insignificance and unworthiness before God. Because of their insight into their own deficiencies and shortcomings and their willingness to acknowledge them, God will respond positively to them. Thus, the metaphoric use of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life for which believers ought to strive. Rather, believers with resources have a strong obligation to help ameliorate and eradicate poverty.

## Endnotes

- 1 E.P. Groenewald, *Die Evangelie van Lukas*, (Cape Town: N.G. Kerk-Uitgewers, 1973a), p. 209.
- 2 F.W. Grosheide, *Het Heilig Evangelie volgens Mattheus*, (Second Edition) (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1954), p. 379; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, (Second Edition) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1922), p. 444 and I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), pp. 700 - 701.
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## CONCLUSION: CENTRAL NEW TESTAMENT THEMES ON POVERTY AND RICHES

**W**hat are the central themes found in New Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate:

(1) *God must be the first priority and main focus of people's lives, whether they are rich or poor.*

No matter what a person's financial status is, a life without God is meaningless. All cases of condemnation of rich people refer to rich people who put their trust in riches rather than in God. Poor people portrayed as favoured by God are always described as people chosen by God, and who put their trust and faith in God.

(2) *The New Testament makes strong normative judgements on riches.*

People can be rich and believers, but only on condition that God

enables them to accomplish the difficult task of choosing to serve the right master, i.e., God rather than Mammon (money). A love for riches is accompanied by discontent with what you have. This desire for riches is a source of much trouble and can ruin people, even believers.

Acceptable rich people are those who make God the first priority in their lives and who share his concern about helping the poor. Through their good deeds and right actions - as positive responses to God's commands - they gather riches in heaven, which is the only wealth of any real and lasting value. They do not rely on decaying earthly riches and refuse to let such riches obstruct their way to God's salvation.

Riches can corrupt people's priorities and stifle their love for God, like the case of the rich man who ignored poor Lazarus day after day. When the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his, Abraham affirms the legitimacy of the Old Testament scriptures (the law and the prophets). Those scriptures are sufficient to teach their readers the right priorities. If people do not listen to them, they will not listen to anything else.

Jesus teaches all people, but poor people especially, not to worry about food, drink, and clothes. Again the message is to have the right priorities, i.e., to put trust and faith in God who will take care of his children as surely (indeed more surely) than he takes care of the birds and plants.

Rich people who rely on their riches for a good life are most often also those people who reject God and his concern for the poor. They often go further and exploit and harm poor people, believers included. In fact, their riches actually result from their injustice towards more vulnerable members of their society.

***(3) The New Testament takes over the Old Testament ideas about the moral obligations of believers to help poor people and reinforces and develops these ideas.***

The New Testament attaches major significance to the responsibility of believers to aid poor people. Jesus identifies with the poor and needy to such an extent that he regards helping or neglecting them as either helping or neglecting himself personally. This identification has enormous

consequences for how non-poor people ought to treat poor people: it must always be with respect for their human worth and dignity.

Several justifications are offered to motivate believers to fulfil their responsibilities toward the poor.

Jesus left the riches of heaven to become poor on earth. Through his voluntary poverty he made believers immeasurably rich by giving them access to God's salvation. As a result, believers have the obligation to serve God through obeying his commands, including those directed at safeguarding and caring for the weak and vulnerable members of society. Believers must become like God in their compassion and care for the poor. Their faith in a loving and caring God must be authenticated by the loving deeds that flow from their faith in, and experience of, a compassionate God.

A further argument is that aid to poor believers is justified because doing so will make the recipients grateful to God. Other people, seeing the help given, will glorify God for his grace that has motivated these people to give aid.

As aid to the poor forms a central part of the responsibilities of believers, the need to put faith into action or to make love concrete provides additional strong justifications for helping the poor.

Aid must be used to glorify God, not to enhance personal status through seeking public recognition. Aid must be given gladly and in proportion to a believer's available resources. Aid can be given personally, as the rich man ought to have done when he saw poor Lazarus in front of his gate day after day. Aid can also be organized collectively through a congregation. If necessary, a division of labour can be made in the church for effective organization and administering of the aid collected. How to practically organize the collection of aid depends on the circumstances of the congregation involved. The Christian witness of people involved with the collection and distribution of aid must be protected through measures designed to make it abundantly clear that they do not personally benefit from such aid.

Through hard work Christians must ensure that they themselves become self-reliant and not in need of aid. Through self-reliance they become givers of aid rather than being recipients or burdens to others.

**(4) *The New Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor similar to the kinds portrayed in the Old Testament.***

One kind of aid is *emergency poverty relief* where the focus is on provision for the needs of poor people so urgent that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. The New Testament regards this kind of help as enormously important.

A second kind of aid aims to help a poor congregation *rid themselves of their poverty*. This aid serves the function of enabling the poor believers to become self-reliant again in order to empower them to help other poor people in turn.

**(5) *The New Testament never talks about riches and poverty outside a specific context where rich and poor live together in the same society.***

New Testament authors are never concerned about rich people in general, or interested in comparing rich people across different societies. What matters is the relation between rich and poor who live together and share their lives in a specific geographical area. What is relevant to New Testament authors is the contrast between rich and poor neighbours living together here and now. In other words: whether a rich South African is relatively poor when compared to an American does not matter. What matters is how rich South Africans compare to the poor people they share their country and lives with - not only how they compare, but also how the rich treat the poor. This approach to poverty and riches has enormous practical implications.

**(6) *The New Testament judges deep contrasts between exploitative, rich people and suffering, poor people to be totally unacceptable.***

All the contrasts between rich and poor sketched in the New Testament show that the rich do not live according to Old Testament

ethical values for treating the poor. The rich are rich because they exploit and ignore the poor. By exploiting and deliberately ignoring the poor, the rich show no concern for God's commandments and thus have no compassion or love for the suffering poor. They may experience earthly pleasures derived from their riches, but are in fact desperately poor in God's sight and will not receive eternal life. Suffering poor people who place their trust in God are blessed by God and will receive immense rewards in heaven.

***(7) A strong theme in the New Testament is that God does not judge people the way usually considered appropriate in human societies.***

God - especially through the eyes of Jesus - is not impressed by people's standards of human worth. God does not think that the rich and powerful are the most important or valuable members of society just because they have wealth and influence. He chooses the poor to be rich in faith, and because they are his chosen people, society must treat them with respect for their God-given human dignity.

A good example of God's judgement that differs from the way humans usually see things, is the Gospel story of the poor widow's contribution to the temple fund. It shows that God does not think that the considerable financial contributions of many rich men were worth more than the meagre contribution of the poor widow - she gave all she had, even though it was less in financial terms, than the amount given by the wealthy men.

Jesus was also not impressed by the way people hosted feasts for their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. He would rather see believers invite those people who cannot reciprocate and who therefore probably never received any invitations themselves.

Through these kinds of judgements the New Testament shows that God easily reverses the judgements current in ancient Israelite society (and elsewhere), giving poor people more status and worth than most people were willing to acknowledge. In this way God restores the human dignity and worth of the vulnerable people of society and

puts the rich and powerful, who look down on them, to shame. The New Testament also argues that the exploitative rich now living in luxury will ultimately face a role reversal with the suffering poor whom they are currently exploiting.

(8) *The metaphoric uses of the concepts rich and riches in the New Testament consistently refer to positive things, such as what God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, blessings). The concepts poverty and poor consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient.*

The metaphoric use of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) in the New Testament never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life that believers ought to strive after. Rather, the point is repeatedly made that believers with resources have strong obligations to help ameliorate and eradicate conditions of poverty.





IV

**THE BIBLE,  
CHRISTIANS AND  
POVERTY  
TODAY**









## A BIBLICAL ETHICS OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

What message does the Bible have for us today, on the subject of poverty and riches? The best possible answer to this question will provide us with a Christian ethics of poverty and riches appropriate to the ethical problems of contemporary societies. How, then, does one formulate this kind of ethics - and to whom would such an ethics be addressed?

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches - like any other Christian ethics - has three audiences.<sup>1</sup> The first is the Christian Church. In this context the Church not only refers to clergy and official decision making bodies, but to individual Christian believers - both rich and poor.

The second audience is the broader society in which Christians live. Christians believe that their views on social issues must be heard by all engaged in politics, those participating in the economy, and citizens active in the organizations and associations of civil society.

Thirdly, a Christian ethics that claims to be theological must also engage fellow scientists in dialogue, especially those who are interested in issues of poverty and riches.

I have been following a rational method of argument, in an attempt to

answer the guiding question of this book, i.e. *What is the message of the Bible about poverty and riches for us today?* Because there is no way of making meaningful ethical judgements without fully understanding the ethical issue under consideration, I have devoted two chapters to fully understanding the complex phenomenon of poverty. However, understanding poverty does not yield sufficient background information in itself for developing an ethical theory. It is also necessary to understand *why poverty is a serious moral issue*. I have thus tried to explain in detail why poverty should be a matter of serious concern for all humans.

Armed with this background, I then went to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to examine what they have to say about the ethical issues relating to poverty and riches. I formulated a set of dominant themes that emerged from my analysis and interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments.

What remains to be done in this final section of the book is to develop a Christian ethics of poverty and riches suitable for today, by integrating our current understanding of the phenomenon of poverty, our contemporary moral insight into the issues raised by poverty, and our results from close readings of the sacred texts of the Bible.

This will be done in the following way:

- ▶ I will first give a brief reformulation of the moral challenge that poverty presents to us today.
- ▶ Next I will integrate the ethics found through close readings of the Old and New Testaments into a biblical ethics of poverty and riches.
- ▶ This biblical ethics will then be evaluated comprehensively in terms of the way we understand the complexities and injustices of poverty today.
- ▶ In the light of this evaluation I will formulate a proposal for a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. In doing so, I will attempt to reformulate a biblical ethics of poverty and riches to be appropriate to contemporary societies and to translate its contents to suit current circumstances.

## 1. The challenge of poverty to ethics

What, in a nutshell, is the challenge that poverty poses to contemporary ethics? I have already presented this series of challenges in an earlier chapter and therefore merely summarize them here:

- ▶ Poverty concerns matters of life and death.
- ▶ Poverty undermines the human dignity of people.
- ▶ Poverty causes or exacerbates bad human relationships.
- ▶ Poverty leads to squandered human potential.
- ▶ Poverty means public humiliation for poor people.
- ▶ Poverty means more burdens and reduced quality of life for many people.
- ▶ Poverty shows people's inhumanity towards one another.
- ▶ Poverty exposes widespread responsibility for a condition of injustice.
- ▶ Poverty often leads to degraded and wasted human and natural environments. Poor people mostly reside in such areas.

These, in condensed, summary form, are the issues that ethical theories must address. How does a Christian ethics of poverty and riches deal with these issues? To answer this question, I will summarise and systematise the results of my investigation into what the Old and New Testaments say about poverty.

## 2. Ethics based on an analysis of the Old and New Testaments

(1) *The Bible does not give an idealized picture of either poverty or riches.*

Poverty is shown as a condition that is difficult to handle, that is often accompanied by oppression and exploitation, and that puts severe strains on many relationships.

The uncertainty and corrupting influence of riches are also clearly portrayed. Riches are acquired in different ways, can easily be lost,

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and have limited value for improving one's life. Riches can easily corrupt a person's priorities by taking the place of God as the object of deepest trust.

***(2) The Bible emphasizes that God ought to be first priority in the lives of his followers.***

God's people must acknowledge God as the only God. They must place their faith in him and worship and obey him only. Life without God - whether one is rich or poor - is meaningless. People must trust in God and not in their wealth. Only God can enable rich people to choose not to rely on their riches but to trust in him instead.

Once people accept God as the main focus of their lives, their lives must change. God demands obedience to his commands in gratitude for his liberation and salvation of people - whether the Israelites from Egyptian bondage or members of the human race from sin. When accepting God's liberation and salvation, his followers must become like him. Part of becoming like God is to become holy and to care deeply for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people in society.

***(3) God is portrayed in the Bible as caring deeply for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalized people of society.***

God takes up their cause, and demands that his followers should do the same. The ethical values prescribed for taking care of the poor are particularly strong, and are central to the meaning of being a follower of God. To take care of the poor (the vulnerable, weak, and marginalized members of society) belongs to the practical manifestation of belonging to God, showing that a person's faith in God is authentic and true.

The reason for this emphasis is that God showed this kind of loving care to his followers when he rescued them from bondage in Egypt, exile in Babylon, and from their bondage to sin everywhere in the world.

In the New Testament, Jesus emphasizes God's care for the vulnerable in dramatic fashion by fully identifying with vulnerable people as if he himself were one of them. In response to God's merciful, loving

care, his followers must live their gratitude and worship through an ethical lifestyle, pursuing justice towards all people.

**(4) *Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalized people of society must become effective in the ways non-poor people give aid to the poor.***

The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God's followers must offer people in need.

One kind of aid is *emergency poverty relief*. People in desperate need of aid to meet basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional. Helping people in this way belongs at the core of the message of the Bible.

The other kind of aid is aid to *help poor people escape from their poverty* and become self-reliant and interdependent like the non-poor in their society.

Aid can be abused to serve the interests of the givers of aid. Sometimes they may seek honour and praise from fellow citizens, but this will become their sole reward. God's followers should give aid in secret, knowing that God sees everything and will reward them. If aid becomes a public issue, God must get the glory and praise for empowering his followers to be able to give gladly and generously of their resources to people in need.

**(5) *Poor people are not only in need of aid; they also need humane treatment by non-poor people.***

Being poor is a public affair, and needing help from others for things most people provide for themselves is difficult to accept. Any action towards poor people that contains insults, humiliation, oppression, or exploitation makes life much more difficult for poor people.

The Bible is clear that poor people's dignity and worth as human beings may not be violated in any way. Poor people are created in God's image, just like any other person. They may therefore not be treated any differently from any other non-poor person.

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The importance of this matter in the New Testament is made clear when Jesus identifies with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people to such an extent that he says relieving their needs is the same as relieving the needs of Jesus himself. No follower of Jesus would consider treating him in a degrading or humiliating way. People in need ought to be treated likewise.

**(6) *In the light of the strong emphasis in the Bible on:***

- ***Loving care for vulnerable, weak, and marginalized people;***
- ***The great significance attached to helping poor people, and***
- ***The major importance of treating poor people with respect worthy of their dignity as God's children, it is not surprising that people causing poverty are judged severely.***

Stark inequalities between suffering poor people and exploitative rich people are rejected in no uncertain terms as totally unacceptable. All such judgements on poverty and wealth are made within specific contexts to apply to the concrete circumstances of the world within which each author lived. There is no abstract speculation about rich people in general or poor people in general, except perhaps in a few proverbs in the Wisdom literature. Judgements on unacceptable differences between the rich and the poor always apply to situations the authors knew very well.

The issue for biblical ethics is thus how do people who share their lives relate to one another:

- What are their differences in income, wealth, and lifestyle?
- Where does the money of the rich come from? Are they rich
- because they exploit the poor?
- Are they oppressing the poor and trampling on them?

These are the essential questions relevant to making a judgement about the level of wealth in a specific society, rather than the question of how the rich in a particular society compare to the rich elsewhere

in the world. In other words, the Bible thus looks at riches relative to the society and the poor living in that society.

In the background to all such biblical judgements are assumptions about God's ethical values for helping and treating the poor given in the Old Testament. The point made is that God's followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people. To add to the miseries of poor people through injustice, oppression, exploitation, humiliation, and degradation is almost unforgivable.

Two significant differences between the Old and New Testaments affect the meaning and scope of the biblical condemnation of stark contrasts between rich and poor.

The first difference affects the *meaning of the stark contrasts*. The sharp inequalities in the Old Testament function against the background of God's election of Israel to be his holy nation. The contrasts originate within a closely-knit religious community committed to the same religious values. A shared commitment to foundational moral and religious values cannot easily be assumed in the New Testament context of Israel as a province of the Roman Empire. This difference is important in terms of redressing sharp inequalities, as the comfortable Old Testament appeal to the powerful rich to implement divinely inspired, shared moral values is not available in the New Testament context. Other forms of political action might be needed for redress of inequalities in the context of significant moral diversity.

The second, related difference between the Old and New Testaments, with significant implications, is *the scope of God's addressees*. In the Old Testament God addresses his people, the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, God's message becomes universal in scope, aimed at the world. The moral values concerning stark contrasts between rich and poor cannot be limited to intrastate justice anymore.

Obviously the way people share their lives with members of a small community, such as a family or village, is different to the way they share them with citizens of a large modern state or inhabitants of the world. Nevertheless, the universal scope of the New Testament mes-



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sage that identifies all humans as sharing life in God's world has significant implications for international justice. No Christian group in any country can easily justify their non-involvement with poverty outside their own country's borders. Sharp inequalities between countries ought to matter to rich and poor Christians in different countries.

***(7) Poverty is nowhere presented as an ideal lifestyle that God desires for his followers.***

There are, in fact, enough pointers to argue that God wants non-poor lives for his followers. From various sources in the Bible it is clear that God wants his followers to live lives that are rich in quality relationships with God himself, other people, and the rest of creation. God wants his people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning.

A life of poverty is portrayed as unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people's moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, make them too short-sighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceited and rude to other people. An ideal lifestyle for God's followers is one that keeps their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God.

The strong emphasis on aid to poor people in the Bible has the intention of alleviating, ameliorating, and eradicating poverty. This implies that poverty is not considered a condition God wishes people to remain in. God wants people's poverty to be changed urgently through the help of his followers. The assumption underlying the urgency and importance of aid further reinforces the idea that God does not will poverty for his people.

Further support for this argument comes from the metaphoric uses of the concepts *rich* and *poor*, especially in the New Testament. The metaphoric uses of the *rich* concept all denote something positive, while the metaphoric uses of the *poor* concept denote something negative. Again, poverty is not exalted as something positive, but as a neg-

ative condition that God's followers must strive to eradicate from the lives of all with whom they share their lives.

### 3. How do biblical authors understand the complexities of poverty?

The biblical texts' understanding of the complexities of the phenomenon of poverty is not as sophisticated or comprehensive as the insights of modern human sciences. There are no definitions of poverty, no measurements expressed as indicators of poverty, only a few indications of the effects of poverty, and a couple of hastily mentioned factors influencing poverty and riches. Nor are there any detailed discussions of the complex phenomenon of poverty, appropriately analysed empirical support for statements on poverty and riches, or theoretically adequate scientific explanations of poverty.

The authors of the biblical texts do not present us with explicitly articulated or purposefully worked out descriptions and explanations of poverty. They work with implicit understandings of poverty and riches, which they assume their readers share with them. It would be unfair to expect their understandings of poverty and riches to match ours, as we have all the benefits of living in a highly developed, modern world.

The authors of the biblical texts did, however, formulate ethical values for dealing with poor people and for motivating non-poor people to become involved with such human problems on a sustained basis.

They correctly assume that poverty is an easily identifiable phenomenon - one can see who the poor are by noticing their clothes, bodily condition, limited available resources, and their loss of assets, such as land. They realize that poverty is a condition that can destroy people and make life a constant struggle for its sufferers. The following represent some of the insights of biblical writers into the nature and effects of poverty.

Poor people's human relationships are often negatively affected by their poverty. Poor people lose friends as a result of their poverty and

find it difficult to make new ones. Their neighbours come to dislike them because of their poverty and even their families have no use for them. Poor people have to be submissive to the rich who often dominate them and treat them like dirt.

A condition like poverty causes deep emotions in those who suffer from it. Poor people sometimes have knees weak from hunger and their bodies are no more than skin and bones. The suffering caused by poverty can hurt poor people to the depths of their hearts. The misery resulting from poverty is at times relieved through using alcohol.

When poverty is accompanied by oppression it causes sorrow and grief.

Besides these feelings, poor people also experience feelings of abandonment, as no one is prepared to help them for fear of the oppressors. In addition to the oppressors, other ruthless and wicked people can exacerbate the miserable conditions of poor people by ignoring their rights and taking advantage of them. Political leaders can do likewise through injustice and exploitation. Political officials can also perpetrate iniquities against the poor and hide from responsibility within the chains of command found in hierarchical bureaucracies.

Poor people are often badly treated through public humiliation and degradation. They suffer contempt from others, rich people mock them, and oppressors scorn them. The powerful - whether their power derives from politics, crime, or riches - are often unkind to the poor, ready to trample them underfoot if necessary, persecute them at will, and even kill them if they believe it to be in their interests.

Despite the negative effects of poverty on humans, biblical writers believed it remains possible to live a life of moral integrity reinforced by genuine religious spirituality. There are no compelling reasons for poor people to become morally corrupt or religiously apostate. Several times the Bible sketches groups of suffering poor who trust God completely and live according to his commands. God also consistently demands integrity and spirituality from poor people. Many poor people live morally better lives than some rich people and often have better insight into character than many rich people who often imagine themselves to be wise.

The Bible points to various factors that might cause poverty, though there is no comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the myriad factors impacting on poor people's lives akin to the insights of contemporary social science. Three categories of causes may be distinguished:

▶ People can cause poverty in the lives of others.

Unjust people sometimes will not allow farming on unused land, despite the fact that allowing such farming could provide basic necessities for the poor people working the land. Poverty often results from exploitation, oppression, and injustice inflicted by people intent on enriching themselves or reinforcing their positions at the cost of others. Such people may acquire others' possessions through theft or dishonesty. Poverty often continues because people refuse to intervene out of fear of those with power who are exploiting or oppressing the poor. Poverty also continues because some people ignore the plight of the poor and are unwilling to provide any kind of help or support.

▶ Poverty can also occur as a result of circumstances created by social forces.

A monarchical system of government easily becomes exploitative and oppressive with the result that people are impoverished. The expansionary drive by political leaders of strong nations to dominate and conquer other nations with military force may create instant, shocking poverty. Violent conflict causing death, destruction, looting and the loss of livelihood leads to poverty overnight - besides the trauma of losing loved ones.

▶ On a more personal level, poverty may be caused by the loss of a father or husband in a patriarchal context, as the experience of Ruth and Naomi shows. Similarly, negative circumstances and ill-fortune can lead to poverty due to sudden loss of income, wealth, or property, despite wise spending of resources.

Negative personal characteristics like laziness get a major share of the blame for poverty in the Bible. Bad behaviour, such as excessive drinking and expensive taste in food can also cause poverty. A strong desire to become rich can blind people to the dangers of becoming poor,

while negative attitudes like an unwillingness to learn and improve skills can also cause poverty.

The biblical understanding of poverty must be complemented by its understanding of wealth and riches. The desire to be rich is viewed negatively in the Bible, as this desire can be destructive. A hunger for riches can never be satisfied; it leads to many temptations and traps, and the lure of a luxurious lifestyle can erode moral values and stifle religious spirituality.

Riches may be acquired in various ways, some harmful and others not. They may be acquired through dishonesty, but in such cases will do their owners no good. Governments (kings) can acquire riches through forced labour or heavy taxes, although both cause resentment and resistance. Riches easily acquired will also be easily lost, while riches acquired through hardship will last longer. A capable wife can aid her husband in acquiring riches, while having wisdom can also lead to riches. Becoming rich will not happen through luxurious living.

Riches have several effects on their owners. Rich people attract people as friends, though they also attract dangers from which they need protection. Their riches can protect them to a certain extent, but not completely.

Rich people often judge themselves to be wise and can be rude to their subordinates, especially the poor. Not only are rich people capable of humiliating poor people, but also of exploiting and oppressing them for further gain. Rich people sometimes have the power to arbitrarily withhold the wages of their needy employees. They might even murder poor people who get in their way or thwart their plans. When they do these things, they deliberately ignore the desperate plight of the poor, and contravene the commands of God.

Despite their seemingly unassailable position of power, rich people face the uncertainties and burdens of riches. Their own death can prevent them from enjoying the riches they have worked for - like anyone else, they are subject to sudden, unforeseen death. Some rich people might not have close or worthwhile relationships in which they can meaningfully share their riches. The more a person's riches increase,

the more worries he or she faces. Riches can become a burden that distracts from their enjoyment. Furthermore, riches can be lost in the twinkling of an eye, without the opportunity to recover from the loss. For this reason, riches are not something in which one ought to place any trust. The ability of riches to do worthwhile things for their owners are limited, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death. Riches cannot be taken along in death, cannot secure God's favour, and cannot buy anything in God's heaven. Riches mean absolutely nothing in the face of these events.

#### 4. Biblical ethics and the injustices of poverty

The authors of the biblical texts are aware of many of the same issues of justice we face today. They gave answers to them that may either be applied directly to contemporary issues, or be applied imaginatively through intelligent interpretations. In the following pages, I will indicate the contribution that a biblical ethics of poverty and riches can make in terms of six categories of justice, as we understand it today.

##### (1) *The first category of justice deals with recognition.*

The main issue involved is finding ways of appropriately recognizing the humanity of fellow beings. A biblical ethics of poverty and riches is particularly strong on this point. All people share the same value before God as his creatures, created in his image. The poor are explicitly mentioned as sharing the equal human dignity that God gives to all humans. The strong identification of Jesus with the weak, the vulnerable, and the marginalized reinforces this point. These people must be treated as if they are Jesus, thus with appropriate respect for their human worth and dignity.

Many of the specific injunctions concerning the appropriate treatment of poor people flow from this central claim that all humans are equal before God. Poor people must participate as full members in the Old Testament feasts of ancient Israel and in the New Testament, the poor who cannot repay their hosts are the ones to be invited to

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feasts and dinners. People created in the image of God may not be oppressed, exploited, ill-treated, destroyed, or deprived of their rights. Poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Others may not take pleasure in their misery, nor laugh at them. Non-poor people should not ignore them, nor fail to notice or care for them. Lives highly valued by God are at stake.

***(2) The second category of justice concerns reciprocity.***

This category deals with fair terms of co-operation at interpersonal, social, and institutional levels. The terms of co-operation can be presupposed in social conventions, embodied in promises, agreements and contracts, or specified in responsibilities and obligations. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth is also particularly strong in this category. In the Bible, the terms of co-operation are specified in a comprehensive set of moral values, with the Ten Commandments and the commandments to love God and neighbours as fundamental.

These moral values include several provisions for dealing with poverty through emergency poverty relief and efforts to re-establish self-reliance. The responsibilities that these moral values lay on non-poor people simultaneously become legitimate claims that poor people can make on the non-poor people they share their lives with. Similarly, the commandments about treating poor people with respect so as to protect their dignity are part and parcel of the shared values that God's followers agree to. Poor people can thus insist that they be treated properly, as the shared values of both the poor and non-poor specify. The agreement on a comprehensive set of moral and religious values enables poor people to legitimately claim alleviation of their poverty and proper treatment as rights conferred on them by God.

***3) The third category of justice concerns the equitable distribution of goods that can be distributed like and analogously to material possessions.***

Although a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth does not prescribe any

detailed specification of preferred distributive patterns, sharp inequalities in distribution of resources are vehemently rejected. There are several detailed condemnations of strong contrasts between the exploitative rich and the suffering poor. These normative evaluations of the often desperate circumstances of the poor suffering from skewed distribution provide them with an awareness of the moral wrongs they are suffering. This consciousness of a divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty can be political dynamite, empowering the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances in which they live.

A biblical ethics of poverty has more to offer on distributive issues of justice. The non-poor must help the poor generously and give them part of their resources freely and unselfishly. Such aid must be provided, if possible, when it is needed, and procrastination must be avoided. God does not expect his followers to do more than they can; what is required is to do what is possible within the means and time available.

Not only must the non-poor share their resources through generous giving to those in need, but also through various other measures. Harvesting their crops only once and leaving the remainder for the poor to collect was one way of sharing resources in agriculturally dominated ancient Israel. Other ways were allowing the poor to fully participate in religious festivals despite their inability to contribute anything, providing interest-free loans that were written off in the Sabbath year, using the tithes of every third year as a store of food where the poor could collect whatever they needed, and hosting dinners and feasts for those unable to pay back the host in any way. The motive for these acts of distribution is similar: all people must be able to share in God's blessings. Viewing property, possessions, utilities, and basic necessities as God's blessings makes distribution easier, as a strict interpretation of private property is overruled in favour of viewing everything as God's gifts to be shared by all his (human) creatures.

#### **(4) *The fourth category of justice is justice as enablement.***

In this category, institutions and behaviour are judged according to the degree to which people's self-development and self-determination are



enabled or constrained. The moral values contained in a biblical ethics of poverty and riches are strongly enabling, as discussed earlier. These reciprocal moral values accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. Several commandments have enablement of the poor as their aim. The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years takes away burdens that constrict and constrain poor people. The right to buy back land lost through poverty, that could be exercised with help from family or after enough money has been collected, is similarly aimed at enabling poor people to eventually return to their former non-poor status. If not bought back before the next year of restoration (every 49 years), the land automatically returns to the family, with the implicit hope of breaking any long-term culture of poverty that might be developing.

The prescribed religious offerings can also place burdens on the poor who do not have money available for buying the required animals. For this reason several cheaper alternatives are presented without any damage to the religious significance of the offerings.

Special provision is made for widows, a particularly vulnerable group amongst the poor. Women are enabled in two other ways. Wives in polygamous marriages are enabled to demand continued care of the same quality after their husbands have found new favourites. Daughters without fathers or brothers in patriarchal ancient Israel are enabled to take care of themselves by being allowed to inherit their father's land.

Note how the apostle Paul emphasizes self-reliance as enablement. He often used his skill as tentmaker to provide for himself and his helpers so as not to depend on the churches for support. His self-reliance is backed up by his attitude of being satisfied with what he has and content regardless of his situation. Paul believed that Christians can be satisfied with their conditions, good or bad, and be content. They can do this if they deal with their conditions through God's power. Paul also believed that despite being poor in material possessions, he possessed God's spiritual riches. He could therefore enrich other people by sharing his faith with them.

(5) *The fifth category comprises justice as transformation.*

Here issues of changing existing institutions, practices, and behaviour are explored. Several examples of transformative justice at work are found in biblical narratives. What unites these examples is the role of individuals who take the initiative to rectify a situation on the basis of shared moral values that are slightly extended or modified.

Ruth and Naomi as two poor, vulnerable widows in patriarchal ancient Israel engineer their own survival and well-being through using several Old Testament commandments to their advantage.

Nehemiah uses Old Testament moral values to angrily condemn exploitation and oppression in the post-exilic community busy restoring Israel. In difficult economic circumstances Nehemiah uses extraordinary measures in the sense of somewhat stricter interpretations of commandments aiming to enable the poor to escape their poverty and rebuild their society after the destruction of the violent conquest and the abandonment of exile.

In the New Testament, Zaccheus is personally transformed by his meeting with Jesus and undertakes to rectify his illegitimate acquisitions of taxpayers' money through repaying them fourfold, considerably more than the 20% repayment required by Old Testament commandments. As penitence he also promises to donate half his belongings to the poor.

The book of Deuteronomy is an excellent example of justice as transformation. Whether read in its original setting before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, or in the setting of its final revision after the exile, the book gives important pointers to successfully effect a just transformation.

Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. The strong commitment demanded from the Israelites to worship and obey God is aimed at shifting their loyalty in the right direction for starting and maintaining a new course. The emphasis on teaching the new values to adults and children and being able to justify the rationale of those values to one another and the next generation are important elements of any successful transformation. Being continually aware of the core values to

be obeyed through leaving reminders everywhere and strong calls for obedience from leaders further facilitates effective transformation. Incentives for obeying the new set of values were given in the form of promised blessings, and sanctions for punishing moral failure came in the form of curses. Commitment to make the transformation work lies in the strong ties that are urged between people and God, the latter being the source of the values and the inspiration of the transformation. Adherence to the new values is to be enforced through judges appointed by Moses, the leader.

**(6) *The sixth category comprises justice as retribution.***

Justice as retribution has its focus on appropriate sanctions, penalties, or punishment for those persons who violate society's accepted principles of justice. Retribution presupposes a clear vision of what injustice is and clarity on the concept of responsibility, so as to be able to accurately determine who must be held responsible for specific injustices and to what degree. The degree of responsibility for injustice is strongly affected by the distinction between active and passive injustice. Active injustice occurs when perpetrators of injustice deprive or harm other people's lives and dignity. Passive injustice results when persons are indifferent to injustice happening. Passively unjust persons are people who tolerate injustice and ignore the claims of victims of injustice.

A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth has no trouble apportioning blame for poverty. Active injustice in the sense of deliberately depriving people of wages, possessions, or land is often condemned. Selling poor people into slavery for failing to pay small amounts of debt and taking poor people's belongings they have given as security for loans are similarly roundly rejected. Sometimes the rich are held directly responsible for exploiting and oppressing the poor; sometimes political leaders or government officials must take the blame.

Interesting cases of passive injustice occur in the New Testament. Several rich people are condemned for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. They neglect the explicitly pre-

scribed duties in the Old Testament, ignore the desperate plight of poor people, and continue to live in luxury.

Similarly, in the New Testament, the “goats” of Matthew 25 failed to help the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized when they were hungry, naked, in prison, and so on. What the “goats” did wrong was their failure to notice people in need and their neglect of those people who really needed their help. They were guilty of passive injustice.

## 5. Evaluation of a biblical ethics of poverty and riches

What are the strengths of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches? Does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches have unique aspects not found in any other ethical theories? I believe that the uniqueness of a biblical ethics lies in the strengths outlined below:

### ► *A strong and wide-ranging set of moral values*

A biblical ethics on poverty and riches provides us with a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches.

- Strong inequalities between rich and poor are rejected outright;
- Poor people's dignity is protected in the strongest possible way;
- Care for the poor is a high priority, with God as example;
- Aid for emergency relief and self-reliance are judged to be close to the core of a comprehensive, authentic biblical lifestyle;
- Biblical values implicitly assume that poverty is bad for humans and must be eradicated, and
- Riches are portrayed as uncertain and not worth trusting in; as capable of upsetting priorities, corrupting integrity, and stifling moral values; as inadequate in death and for securing God's favour; but nevertheless a gift of God to be enjoyed.

### ► *Moral values linked to religious values*

This set of values on poverty and riches is reinforced by their link with a

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comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God's salvation that will provide them with meaningful lives lived in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly - as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross - means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realise their God-given potential.

### ► *Incentives and sanctions*

Adherence to a biblical ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. In the Old Testament God's followers were promised blessings like abundance and happiness for living out these values, while their neglect could bring about negative consequences like natural disasters, illness, or death.

In the New Testament the incentives are different. Now incentives are the possibility of riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like eternal judgement.

### ► *Commitment to God*

Perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of the biblical moral values on poverty and riches is the powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting them. Commitment to God is the deepest motivation for making these values come to life. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to his commands results from the experience of his liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of his followers to passionately embrace his values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values.

A further incentive for Christians to implement God's commands

is that the credibility of their faith is at stake in the way that they express their values in their daily lives. Furthermore, Christians are under a strong command to communicate their faith to non-believers. One of the strongest and most convincing ways of doing that is to manifest God's love towards others concretely in their lives. Loving the poor by treating them the way God commands ought to be an essential part of practical Christian witness to others about God's love.

What are the weaknesses of a biblical ethics on poverty and wealth? Differently put, what does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches fail to provide us?

There is no detailed understanding in the biblical texts of the nature, consequences, or causes of poverty. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth also does not help much in determining how sharp contrasts between riches and poverty arose or what the causes of specific persons' poverty were. To what extent people are responsible for their own poverty, how much responsibility they must take, and how that affects aid is also not specified. Similarly, no detailed analysis of the moral issues involved is given. Practically nothing is said about the implementation of the moral values on poverty and riches, while the best possible strategies for giving aid are not discussed, nor is any indication given of when aid does more harm than good. There is no indication whether aid by individuals is better than aid by groups, organizations, or institutions.

The shortcomings of a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth point to the need for interdisciplinary dialogue between normative prescriptions provided by theological ethics, the detailed descriptions and comprehensive explanations of the human sciences, and the conceptual and argumentative analyses of philosophy. Part of appropriating a biblical ethics of poverty and riches in complex, modern societies means that such interdisciplinary dialogues must take place to determine the ways in which biblical ethics can become relevant in new circumstances.

Interdisciplinary dialogues should not only be between academics, but also with practitioners and professionals with practical experi-

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ence. Through numerous inputs the concrete implications and detailed applications of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches can be determined in ways that make sense to ordinary citizens of contemporary democracies.

## Endnotes

- 1 See David Tracy quoted in J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Post-foundationalist Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 74.



## A CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF POVERTY AND WEALTH FOR TODAY

**O**ne major question that must be answered when developing a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is whether values that originated in contexts as far removed in time, culture, economy, and socio-political organization as the biblical eras can ever apply in our contemporary world. Before presenting an outline of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches, I want to argue that the differences between the societies where these values originated and our contemporary world are less important than the similarities. This means that these values can indeed still apply to our world today.

The Old Testament values concerning poverty and riches originated in the context of a group of wandering nomads waiting to cross the border into their promised land after a journey of forty years through the desert from Egypt to Canaan. These values were refined and implemented in the context of establishing and maintaining a monarchical governmental system, with an economic system based on agriculture and growing international trade. The Old Testament values were finalized during experiences of colonial conquest, exile, return, and restoration. Conquest and exile were God's punishment as a result of the unwillingness and inability of Israel to keep God's commandments.



Some of the New Testament values with regard to poverty and riches were formulated in the context of the promised Messiah living temporarily on earth during the Roman occupation of Israel after yet another colonial conquest. Other New Testament values were articulated in the context of non-Israelite individuals and communities accepting the message of the Messiah in neighbouring countries also under Roman occupation.

Today we live in vastly different conditions. Modern societies differ in important respects from those of ancient Israel. They are characterized by democratic political systems with large, hierarchical bureaucracies that claim power over many more aspects of citizens' lives than was ever imaginable in ancient Israel. High levels of urbanization give modern societies a different demographic complexion to ancient ones. The scientific and technological explosions of the past four centuries have given humans vast amounts of knowledge and insight into the nature and workings of their world, enhancing their abilities to harness nature's forces to give them lifestyles unimaginable a couple of centuries ago.

All these changes have made human life on earth so much more complex than it used to be. Through the human sciences - which began to come of age from the middle of the nineteenth century - knowledge and insight into the complexities of human life have grown enormously. The phenomenon of poverty is no exception. Collective human understanding of many dimensions of poverty has grown immensely, as studies by diverse human sciences such as sociology, economics, political studies, social work, psychology, theology, and philosophy have proliferated. How, then, can the values of the Old and New Testaments, developed before the massive changes brought about by modernization, shed any light on how to deal with poverty today?

At this point, we should remind ourselves that the problem of poverty is bigger today than ever before. Not only is a major part of the world's population living in abject poverty, but the number of poverty-stricken people is still growing steadily. The contrast between rich and poor has also never been as great as now. The enormous wealth owned by some individuals - measured in billions of US dollars - is in

stark contrast to the desperate poverty of billions of people on earth. Despite the popularity of liberal-democratic political views that endorse ideas on human rights, no significant impact on world poverty has been made. The success of the welfare state since World War II in Europe has done much to reduce and even eradicate poverty in some European countries, but the provision of cradle-to-grave welfare benefits has not proved to be sustainable over the longer term even in the rich European democracies.

Despite the enormous differences between complex modern societies and the simpler societies of ancient Israel, it remains worthwhile to explore the ways a biblical ethics on poverty and riches might be applied to our contemporary societies, and to see where it leads. Such an exploration is justified by the wisdom developed over ages and the strong ethical values embodied in the biblical texts.

There are also a number of similarities in human nature and behaviour that remain constant throughout history, and which may be summarized as follows:

- ▶ There are still stark contrasts between rich and poor in many countries of the world;
- ▶ Poor people are still oppressed and exploited by the strong and rich in many societies and communities;
- ▶ Poor people still suffer injustice and are still exposed to public humiliation;
- ▶ Millions of people are still hungry, thirsty, without clothes, sick, and in prison - thus needing urgent help from others;
- ▶ Many people still suffer desperately, while others still turn away and ignore their plight, and
- ▶ The lure of wealth still traps many people into trading their priority of focusing on God for the priority of becoming rich.

It is thus clear that all the major issues that a Biblical ethics of poverty and wealth deals with, are still present in contemporary societies, although perhaps in slightly different packaging.

These similarities between the contexts of the ancient sacred texts of

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the Bible and our world today enable human communication and dialogue across many centuries, and allow understanding of the values embodied in the ancient cultures of many centuries ago. It is perhaps not possible to apply all aspects of a biblical ethics too directly to modern societies - some of our circumstances are perhaps too different. For example, agriculture does not dominate many countries today as it did in ancient Israel. For that reason most of us cannot harvest our corn fields or olive trees only once and leave the rest for the poor - we don't rely on our own harvest to feed ourselves any more. Nevertheless, to formulate a Christian ethics on poverty and wealth means to raise the issue of how to make a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches work in the context of modern societies. Such a project might lead to exciting intellectual problems whose solutions could energize a biblical ethics developed so many centuries ago.

## 1. An outline of a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth

What would a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth look like? In what follows I present an outline of such a Christian ethics appropriate for our contemporary world.

### *(1) Poverty is a complex phenomenon that makes life very difficult for some people*

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has to accept the complexity of poverty as revealed by the human sciences. This complexity manifests in the multiple ways in which characteristics of poverty can combine in different instances of poverty. The complexity also emerges in the diversity of possible causes of poverty in the multitude of known cases. For these reasons a Christian ethics of poverty and riches must either collaborate with the human sciences or acquire the necessary expertise to be able to:

- (1) Describe the characteristics of every case of poverty to be morally evaluated, or

- (2) Judge the causes involved in the specific case under discussion.<sup>1</sup>

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be aware of the multitude forms of hardship that poverty can cause. Furthermore, a Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be prepared to listen to the poor people involved in the specific cases that are being considered. Theologians and ordinary Christians must listen to the voices of the poor with whom they are directly concerned, in order to understand how those people are experiencing their poverty. Just to show concern through being prepared to listen will already be a positive signal to poor people that someone cares.

The nature, degree, and complex interactions of the injustices involved in specific cases of poverty must be investigated as well. The role of various people in causing or exacerbating poverty must be inspected. Interviews with poor people, community and political leaders, and experts in other sciences are needed, as well as research on the wider contexts of the cases of poverty under consideration.<sup>2</sup>

## *(2) Christians must live the right priorities*

The fundamental aspect of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is that God must be first priority in the lives of his followers. They must place their faith in God as the only God. They must worship and obey him only. Life without God - whether one is rich or poor - is meaningless.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is only part of the far more comprehensive set of moral and religious values of Christianity. Values on poverty and riches are immensely strengthened by their link with a comprehensive network of other moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God's salvation. This they get by worshipping and obeying God as the only God.

Commitment to God is the deepest motivation for making these values come to life. Once people accept God fully as the main focus of

their lives, their lives must change. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to his commands results from the experience of his liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This powerful commitment to God is perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of biblical moral values. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become Christ-like, drives many of his followers to passionately embrace his values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values.

The life of faith provides Christians with meaning in and for their lives, and shapes the way they ought to live in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly - as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross - means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realize their God-given potentialities. The love of God for human beings is the driving force in Christians that "causes you to have regard for the poor."<sup>3</sup>

Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. For Christians the incentives are riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failure to adopt and live out these values results in sanctions, such as no access to heavenly riches and eternal judgement.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is thus embedded in a wider framework of moral and religious values that give meaning to people's lives and offer many reasons for obedience to such ethics. The chances of the ethics being implemented are thus higher than any ethics standing on its own or not linked to a broader framework claiming to give meaning to life through a personal relationship with a Higher Being.

### **(3) *Equal human dignity***

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will have to affirm strongly the equal human dignity of all people, regardless of their socio-economic status. All people share the same value before God as his crea-

tures. The poor are explicitly mentioned as sharing the equal human dignity that God gives to all humans. The strong identification of Jesus with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized reinforces this point. These people must be treated as if they are Jesus, with appropriate respect for their human worth and dignity.

In this respect, a Christian ethics can support the liberal-democratic right to equal respect that expresses the equal dignity and worth of all people. Christians can therefore insist that the rights of poor people must be respected at all times and under all circumstances.

The implications of the equal human dignity of poor people must be pointed out in detail - for example, poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Another implication is that others may not take pleasure in their misery, or laugh at them. Equal human dignity also means that non-poor people should not ignore the plight of the poor, or fail to notice them or show concern. The importance of equal human dignity is affirmed in the following quote from the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic Bishops entitled *Economic Justice for All*:

The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be actively treated or passively abandoned as if they were non-members of the human race.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does equal dignity mean that non-poor people must refrain from doing things that violate poor people's worth as human beings. It requires non-poor people to positively do certain things to affirm the worth of poor people as human beings. Poor people must be enabled to participate in communal festivities as full members, as they did in the Old Testament at the feasts of ancient Israel. Furthermore, non-poor people must treat them as special by inviting them to festivities, in the same way that Jesus commanded hosts to invite the poor, who cannot repay their hosts, to feasts and dinners.

Poor people must be treated humanely by non-poor people. Poverty is visible to the public eye and is often experienced as a matter of shame. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must demand that poor people be treated as if they were Jesus himself. Jesus identi-

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fied with weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people to such a degree that relieving their needs may be considered the same as relieving the needs of Jesus himself.

Commandments about treating poor people with respect so as to protect their dignity are part and parcel of the shared values that God's followers agree to. Commandments that lay duties and obligations on non-poor people thus create correlative expectations in the poor that they will be properly treated. Poor people can thus insist that they be treated properly, as the shared values of both the poor and non-poor specify. In this way strong arguments for a right to human dignity arise.

#### (4) *Values for helping poor people*

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has a number of values specifying how to help poor people. These values have their basis in the character of God. God is portrayed in the Bible as the One who deeply cares for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalized people in society. He takes up their cause and demands that his followers should do the same. Part of becoming like God is being holy and caring deeply for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalized people in society. In their pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, the American Roman Catholic Bishops say that

no one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world.<sup>5</sup>

Ethical values for helping the poor are of fundamental importance in the broader framework of ethical and religious values of Christianity. Helping the poor is one of the core values of Christianity that in effect demonstrates believers' commitment to God. Helping the poor functions as a yardstick for assessing whether a person's faith in God is authentic and true. God's followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people.

Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalized people of society must be effective in the ways non-poor people give aid.

The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God's followers must render to people in need. One kind of aid is *emergency poverty relief*. People with desperate basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional and helping people in this way belongs at the core of the message of the Bible.

The other kind of aid is *enabling poor people to escape from their poverty* and restoring them to become self-reliant, interdependent people similar to the others in society who are non-poor. Ronald J. Sider emphasises this point:

God wants every person, or family, to have equality of economic opportunity at least to the point of having access to the necessary resources (land, money, education) to be able to earn a decent living and participate as dignified members of their community.<sup>6</sup>

Several commandments contained in a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches have *enablement* of the poor as their aim. Some examples are the following:

- ▶ The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years
- ▶ The right to buy back land lost through poverty, and
- ▶ Cheaper alternatives for prescribed religious offerings without any loss of religious significance.

These are all measures aimed at enabling poor people to escape from their poverty.<sup>7</sup> They do not make sense in our world today, but the underlying principle that poor people must be enabled to use their limited resources to escape the traps of poverty can be implemented in a variety of ways. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must consult specialists on aid to the poor to find out what forms of aid are effective in specific cases in order to achieve the goal of enablement.

More important though, is to listen to the poor themselves and to let them take the initiative and control in processes of change. *The Christian Church must avoid treating the poor as recipients of aid, rather*



*than equal partners.* Non-poor Christians must allow poor people to minister to their needs reciprocally as much as they minister to the needs of poor people. In that way poor people's equal worth and dignity are recognized in a concrete way.<sup>8</sup>

Moral values that prescribe aid to poor people place moral obligations on non-poor people to provide such aid. These moral values furthermore accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. These legitimate claims of poor people and the correlative duties of the non-poor combine to guarantee aid to the poor, i.e., to give poor people rights against Christians to the basic necessities of life. Nicholas Wolterstorff illustrates this point as follows:

If a rich man knows of someone who is starving and has the power to help that person but chooses not to do so, then he violates the starving person's rights as surely and as reprehensibly as if he had physically assaulted the sufferer.<sup>9</sup>

Christians ought thus to support political programmes in favour of rights that secure the fulfilment of people's basic needs.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches ought to have detailed views on ways that people abuse aid to serve their own interests. A Christian ethics will insist that honour and praise for aid belongs to God for empowering his followers to share their resources gladly and generously to people in need. Aid to promote a person's own image and theft of aid resources by corrupt officials are examples of problems that need detailed analysis and preventative measures set in place. Similarly, procedures to safeguard the integrity of even trusted Christians (as the apostle Paul sought to put in place) ought to be worked out. No doubts about honesty or self-enrichment must be allowed to tarnish the integrity of Christians involved in aid work. Co-operation and consultation with specialist aid workers and experts in accounting and development aid are useful in this regard.

(5) *Stark inequalities*

Stark contrasts between rich and poor who share a small rural community - or the whole earth, for that matter - ought to be rejected outright by Christian ethics. No situation can be condoned where suffering poor people live next to exploitative rich people. These kinds of judgements are not to be made in abstract terms that are divorced from any social context. Such judgements on stark inequalities must be made of the concrete circumstances where rich and poor live together, from the micro contexts of very small communities to the macro context of the global community of states where all 6 billion people created by God eke out a livelihood. For these kinds of judgement a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth needs to co-operate with scientists in the fields of politics, economics, and statistics.

A Christian ethics on poverty and riches thus has the responsibility of promoting economic policies that would aim at greater equality between rich and poor, thus drastically reducing the scandalously wide gap currently existing between rich and poor.<sup>10</sup>

Poor people can be empowered by normative evaluations of their desperate circumstances resulting from skewed distributions. They become aware of the moral wrongs they are suffering. A divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty empowers the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances they are living in. They can thus become agents of their own liberation from poverty, capable of making a stand for their own interests against powerful and exploitative rich people.

(6) *Responsibility*

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must apportion blame for poverty. People who are responsible for causing poverty must be identified. A Christian ethics will be thoroughly aware of the myriad ways in which many kinds of people can cause poverty or exacerbate already existing poverty. As before, this awareness implies co-operation with scientists in other disciplines, as well as with the poor and

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rich people involved in the situation under investigation, so as to better know what is going on.

Holding people responsible implies more than just identifying the people who cause poverty. Their precise role in causing poverty must be determined to show the degree to which they are responsible. Furthermore, their deeds and behaviour must be morally assessed to find out to what extent they are to blame.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has strong values condemning non-poor people for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. Deliberate ignorance and refusal to provide aid amount to neglect of the explicitly prescribed duties of both the Old and New Testaments.

### *(7) Ideal lifestyle for Christians*

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be able to prescribe an authentic Christian lifestyle to guide Christians through the dangers of riches and the sufferings of poverty. What, then, is an ideal lifestyle for Christians?

An ideal lifestyle for God's followers - both rich and poor - is one that helps them to keep their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God. Neither poverty nor riches must drive people away from God. He must remain first priority in their lives.

What God wants for his followers is that they must be "rich" by having quality relationships with God himself, other people, and the rest of creation. God wants his people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning.

Being poor and being rich are both judged negatively by a Christian ethics. To be poor is unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people's moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, make them too shortsighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceit-

ed and rude to other people. Riches have many uncertainties and place extra burdens on people. Riches can be lost in the blink of an eye and have limited ability to do worthwhile things for their owners, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death.

However, rich Christians obeying God's commands to give gladly and generously to the poor can contribute valuably to poverty relief. For Christians to have resources to contribute to the poor, they must live a relatively simple life so as to have extra resources to give as aid. The example of Jesus is powerful in this context. As Son of God, he sacrificed the riches of heaven to come to the poverty of the earth to save human beings. During his earthly life he chose to live a simple life of very moderate means. His life contains a message that God values a life lived in simplicity through which the poor can benefit.

Some Christian churches have a tradition where some members choose voluntary poverty as an expression of solidarity with the poor and a public protest against their poverty. This practice makes a lot of sense, although is not necessarily something required of all Christians. Being able to make money can be useful for the Christian church's aid to needy people, if combined with a heart filled with compassion like God's heart.

#### **(8) *Universal application***

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will claim that it applies universally to all communities, societies, countries, continents, and the world as a whole. God's claim to be Creator of everything, humans included, results in the further claim to his rule over all human beings. Not only poverty within micro communities, such as an isolated rural farm, but poverty on our planet as a whole, falls within the scope of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches.

No rich person can ultimately deny responsibility for poor people anywhere in the world, as no poor person can interpret their situation without acknowledging the role of rich people from all countries.

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### (9) *A society can change*

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must take seriously the argument that the world as a whole will never change to live according to Christian values and that poverty will persist or even grow worse. Against such criticism a Christian ethics will insist that God *can* change people's moral and religious values. Through such changes a society can be transformed and its normative values be given new contents so that the society grows closer to the ideals embodied in Christian values.<sup>11</sup>

However, exactly how such change may occur and how it can be facilitated must be demonstrated. Here, a Christian ethics can point to the role of individuals taking the initiative to change situations by appealing to shared moral values, by slightly extending or modifying their scope, and insisting on and campaigning for their implementation.

More comprehensive moral transformation resulting in a changed society also occurs. A Christian ethics could try to develop a theory of moral change in dialogue with various sciences. A secularized version of the moral change depicted in Deuteronomy might run as follows:

*Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. New values must be taught to adults and children. Everyone must understand the rationale of those values and be able to justify the values to themselves and successive generations. Every person must be made continually aware of the new values. Strong calls for obedience to the values from leaders further reinforces new values. People must have incentives for obeying the new set of values through rewards or punishments. Strong commitments to make a moral transformation work, grow from strong ties urged between believers and God. Enforcement strengthens adherence to the new values.*

## 2. Christian ethics in the public life of modern democracies

Many Christians today live in multi-cultural societies rich in all kinds of human diversity. Differences of language, culture, morality, and reli-

gion abound. Religious differences can amount to societies having various Christian groups, believers in other religions, and many people embracing different forms and degrees of secularism and atheism. Practically nowhere can Christians alone determine public policies.

The strong emphasis on liberty, fairness, and equality in liberal-democratic societies has sensitized governments and citizens to accommodate all voices in their societies and not to allow dominant groups to exclude or marginalize minority groups. If Christians want to contribute to public policy in this context, they must make arguments defending their positions to their fellow citizens in the public sphere. Only through convincing fellow citizens of the merit of their views can Christians hope to have any impact on public philosophy and policy.

There are strong voices calling for religious views to be seen as private matters that ought to be excluded from public debates about political matters. Richard Rorty, for example, believes that a happy compromise between the Enlightenment and religions has been achieved with religion now being privatized with the result that in today's world it seems in bad taste to use religion in public discussions of political matters.<sup>12</sup> Robert Audi argues that virtuous (religious) citizens ought to advocate new laws and policies not by using religious reasons to motivate their position, but only when they can provide reasons that any rational adult citizen can endorse as sufficient for the purpose.<sup>13</sup>

There are also strong voices arguing that the Christian Church must be allowed to attempt to influence public opinion as part of its social mission. This must be done while respecting the rights of non-believers and without imposing views on people who think differently.<sup>14</sup>

What, then, is a wise option for Christians in contemporary circumstances?

A helpful option would, in the first place, distinguish between two different kinds of political issues.

One issue is what John Rawls calls *constitutional essentials* and issues of *basic justice*.<sup>15</sup> These involve fundamental matters that provide the constitutional framework within which ordinary politics, such as elections, the making of laws, the development of policy, and the exercise of power occur. The crucial, determining role of the

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framework calls for debates that justify or modify aspects thereof on the basis of reasons that all citizens can accept as "reasonable and rational".<sup>16</sup>

All *other political issues* can be debated by using any kind of reason, though such reasons will not necessarily be accepted as convincing by their target audience.

This more inclusive view shows an openness to pluralism, allowing citizens to use whatever reasons they find appropriate to support their political positions.<sup>17</sup> No input control is necessary for public debates on these kinds of political issues, as the process of dialogue and deliberation will sort out which of these reasons are judged acceptable. If citizens have the civility to listen to one another with attitudes of mutual respect, willingness to learn and consequently to modify their positions, then critical scrutiny and public assessment of justificatory reasons will show which reasons succeed in rationally persuading opponents through non-coercive means.<sup>18</sup>

Christians in contemporary constitutional democracies can thus participate in most public debates on political issues. What are the prerequisites for them to make a positive impact on public opinion?

The apostle Paul's example of becoming like the Jews (or Greeks depending on the context) to explain the Gospel to different groups of people is a useful starting point. Christians would have to be fully conversant with all relevant knowledge and information, as well as competent in the reasoning style employed in the domain of politics. To present views informed by the human sciences, supported by rational argumentation, and presented with rhetorical force and communicative skill, seems basic. Christians must be willing to translate their important ethical values from their biblical context into principles applicable to modern constitutional democracies loosely coherent with, or in meaningful debate with, current conceptions of justice.<sup>19</sup> If non-believers are to be convinced, such new packaging for Christian values must be complemented by additional reasons for political views other than those reasons internal to Christian ethics.<sup>20</sup> Engaging in public reasoning in this style implies acceptance of a *fallibilist* attitude. This attitude acknowledges that Christians make errors

of judgement in identifying and interpreting moral obligations contained in their fundamental texts.<sup>21</sup> Fallibilism leads to a willingness to re-examine religious views in various ways in the light of critique or conflict with other values.

The pluralistic values of modern constitutional democracies provide further opportunities for growth in Christians. Those Christians who embrace pluralism see deep and strong commitment to their religion as compatible with respect for other religions and a willingness to learn from them.<sup>22</sup> They expect their moral insight to deepen through dialogue with people who have different moral values and other ways of life. Jeremy Waldron neatly articulates how this openness to moral pluralism works:

I mean to draw attention to an experience we all have had at one time or another, of having argued with someone whose world view was quite at odds with our own, and of having come away thinking, "I'm sure he's wrong, and I can't follow much of it, but, still, it makes you think ..."

The prospect of losing that sort of effect in public discourse is, frankly, frightening - terrifying, even, if we are to imagine it being replaced by a form of "deliberation" that, in the name of "fairness" or "reasonableness" (or worse still, "balance") consists of bland appeals to harmless nostrums that are accepted without question on all sides.<sup>23</sup>

If fallibilism and openness to pluralism occur reciprocally within an atmosphere of mutual respect for persons holding serious moral views other than your own, processes of dialogue can create mutual understanding, establish deep social bonds and result in communal solidarity based on shared political values. Within this context and with such attitudes, non-Christians will at least listen attentively to Christians and take their political views seriously.

There is, however, a factor that inhibits the acceptance of Christian views in the public sphere. The strength and appeal of liberal-democratic values, accompanied by their embodiment in human rights, are clear from their embodiment in many countries during waves of democratisation in the twentieth century. Liberal-democratic values



form the core of the public philosophy guiding modern states in many countries of the world. Although many interpretations of these values are possible, their general thrust tends toward support for substantial aid programs for the poor. Whether liberal-democratic values are a result of the pervasive influence of Christianity in the Western world until the nineteenth century or not does not really matter here. But this does raise the fact that it may seem that a Christian ethics on poverty and riches hardly presents anything radically new to the world at the start of the twenty-first century.

Yet many Christians do believe that a Christian ethics on poverty and wealth still has something worthwhile and meaningful to say to people in contemporary multicultural, modern, constitutional democracies. What, then is the unique content of such a Christian ethics? As indicated earlier, the uniqueness of a Christian ethics lies in its various strengths. These strengths were indicated as the following:

- (1) A Christian ethics on poverty and riches provides a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches. This set of values on poverty and riches is made even stronger through their link with a comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life.
- (2) Christians must treat other people lovingly as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross. This implies that poor people must be loved as fellow humans created in God's image and helped to realise their God-given potentialities.
- (3) Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is strengthened by incentives and sanctions. The incentives are to gather metaphoric riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like eternal judgement.
- (4) The powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting Christian values is the most important reason for their strength and endurance. A deep commitment to obeying God out of love and

gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of his followers to passionately embrace his values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values.

- (5) Christians are under obligation to implement God's commands to safeguard the credibility of their faith. Furthermore, Christians are commanded to communicate their faith to non-believers. A strong and convincing way of doing that is to concretely manifest God's love towards others. Loving the poor by treating them as God commands ought to be a strong incentive that demonstrates God's love to others through practical witness.

How should Christians communicate their unique message concerning poverty and riches to their fellow citizens? I want to look at this issue from two perspectives:

- ▶ One perspective is to view Christians in their public role as citizens of their country; and
- ▶ The other perspective is to view citizens in their public role in civil society and their private roles in interpersonal relationships.

*The first perspective views Christians in their public role as citizens of their country - a role that they share with all other members of their society, regardless of religious beliefs or moral convictions. This role is defined by the moral values of liberal-democratic political philosophy, expressed in human rights, and embodied in a constitution. These values define the rules of politics for a society. Within the spaces for political activity created by a liberal-democratic political system, Christians can engage in dialogue, use rhetoric, lobby, mobilize followers for collective action, utilize the media, and publish pamphlets and books to publicize their views and try to convince their diverse audiences of worthwhile proposals for public policy.*

Should Christian groups go it alone or work together in alliances? Isolationist political strategies might not always be most attractive or prove to be most persuasive. Temporary alliances on specific issues of public policy with other Christian groups, members of different religions, and political organizations of roughly similar conviction might

prove more productive.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, whatever political strategy followed, Christians can at most hope to achieve what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus. This means that their political views on an issue like poverty and riches might converge with those of other political groups, although not necessarily be the same. Their reasons for supporting a particular policy might differ from those offered by other groups. Nevertheless, this might be the only way for Christians to make a public impact in a society characterized by moral and religious diversity.

Sometimes Christians have the option of supporting secular views on justice that were not formulated with the aim to be in agreement with a Christian ethics, but that nevertheless have many overlaps in letter and spirit with an imaginative application of a Christian ethics to contemporary situations.

Two theories of justice are good examples to illustrate the point.

The famous theory of justice by *John Rawls* published first in 1971 has as its contents liberal-democratic political rights, fair equality of opportunity, and a principle of distributive justice close in spirit to a Christian ethics on poverty and riches.<sup>25</sup> This Rawlsian principle runs as follows:

Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are ...reasonably expected to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

The emphasis that Rawls places on distributive inequalities that should be to the benefit of the poor people in society seems to be one way in which a Christian ethics of poverty and riches might be specified for use in modern liberal-democratic societies. Christians ought to be able to strongly support such a view, although Rawls does not present or justify it in a Christian way. Obviously many other elements of a Christian view of poverty and ethics can be added to a Rawlsian view on distributive justice, as a Christian ethics on poverty and riches goes far beyond distributive issues of justice.

The differentiated and context-sensitive view on justice presented

by *Michael Walzer* in 1983 is a similar example of a theory of justice that could easily be supported by Christians.<sup>26</sup> The strength of Walzer's theory of justice lies in his sensitivity to the societal context in which questions of justice are asked. Walzer distinguishes different spheres in society where the issues of justice differ and different principles of justice are thus called for. What is just in the sphere of politics is not necessarily just in the sphere of education.

The contents of Walzer's theory is a sophisticated articulation of liberal-democratic values that need not concern us here. What is of concern is to note how close Walzer comes to a Christian ethics of riches and poverty. He distinguishes between emergency poverty relief and aid to help poor people get rid of poverty. In the case of emergency poverty relief the only criterion is to relieve hunger, for example, no other criteria are to be met by those in desperate need of food. Aid must be given in proportion to the need of poor people. However, Walzer also emphasises that poor people must eventually be led to independence: they must be set up on their own again and be enabled to care for themselves. He rejects aid that breeds dependence or passivity, as he also rejects aid that violates the human dignity of poor people. The aim of both kinds of poverty relief is to restore poor people to become fully participating, equal members of society again.

Walzer's theory of justice comes very close to the moral values of a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth, although the strong motivational aspects associated with religious spirituality are absent.

This kind of secular theory of justice provides interesting opportunities for Christians. The considerable overlaps between Walzer's theory of justice and a Christian ethics of poverty and riches enable Christians to adopt Walzer's theory of justice as appropriate for contemporary liberal-democratic constitutional states.

There is no reason to adopt Walzer's theory uncritically. The theory can be adapted to fit more comfortably with a Christian ethics of poverty and riches, or other aspects of Christian ethics. Through intellectual fermentation, sophisticated secular theories of justice can be intermingled and fused with Christian ethics, so that a coherent theory of justice appropriate to current contexts and circumstances can be

woven together. Such a theory would be provisional and subject to revision. Hopefully such theories will proliferate, showing active intellectual involvement of Christians to change their society for the better through working constructively with fellow citizens.

Christians in modern constitutional democracies have other identities besides their public identity as citizens. *The second perspective looks at Christians as believers or God's followers.* This perspective notes two roles. One is their public role as members of groups and institutions, such as churches and organizations. In this public role they form part of civil society. The other role is their interpersonal role in many family, friendship, work, and casual relationships. Both these roles ought to be meaningfully co-defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. A Christian lifestyle consists of the interdependence of worship and ethics, determined by love towards God and one's fellow humans, and guided by God's commandments. Such a lifestyle must include a element defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. What does this requirement imply for Christians in their roles in civil society and interpersonal relationships?

As God's followers they have an identity as believers or Christians who play public roles as members of non-governmental organizations (churches, Christian groups and organizations) in civil society. Citizens organized into non-governmental associations form the organs of civil society, such as interest groups, sport clubs, and service organizations. Membership is voluntary and organizations are largely self-supporting and independent from the state. They are nevertheless public, constrained by all the societal rules, rights, and regulations that apply elsewhere. In the organs of civil society, people get opportunities to articulate their interests, formulate mutual goals and strategies for implementing them, and opportunities for commenting on, and sometimes demanding, governmental action.

In their public roles as members of civil society Christians in churches, smaller groups, and organizations must show a strong concern for poor people. Through collective action to address poverty, Christians must authenticate their faith in the eyes of anyone con-

cerned. Projects to assist poor people and eradicate poverty must be launched at local, regional, and national levels. Such projects can be undertaken by members of a specific religious group, but the role of ecumenical alliances of Christian religious groups can strengthen the witness of Christians as a strong force for positive social change. The possibility of Christians co-operating in interfaith alliances of religious groups or even with inter-organizational alliances of aid organizations can also be explored. In the context of civil society Christians need to demonstrate how a living faith transforms people to become caring in the same way that God cares for the weak, vulnerable and marginalized. This transformation of people ought to enable Christians to become like God for their society, making a sharp impact through the improvement of needy people's lives. Converting faith into deeds is a particularly effective witness to the truth of the Christian faith and an important complement to other forms of mission and evangelism.

At the interpersonal level Christians have perhaps more limited opportunities to aid poor people, because the complexities of poverty often necessitate forms of aid that are better done collectively or by specialists. Nevertheless, there are numerous ways individual Christians can become involved in at least the life of one poor person they know, perhaps even in the lives of more. Emergency poverty relief through giving food, clothes, or shelter to poor people are obvious examples. Helping poor people to help themselves is another possibility through skills training projects. Sometimes aid can simply be to direct poor people to already existing agencies that can give appropriate help for the poor person's needs. Generously donating money to aid organizations or getting involved in the organization through expert, lay, or administrative work are other ways in which Christians can involve themselves as individuals to make God's care for the poor manifest in their lives. Through such involvement Christians demonstrate the truth and vitality of their faith.

There are three advantages for Christians by being continuously involved in programmes to alleviate and eradicate poverty.

- ▶ Through service to others in need, Christians maintain the focus of their faith: Christianity demands that God's love for people in need

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must become visible in the way his followers focus on the urgent needs of other people.

- ▶ A second advantage is that service to those in need makes God's love practical. Love of God has strong spiritual dimensions, but service to others in need demonstrates the practical aspect of loving God. God's love is experienced as changing the everyday life of people in need.
- ▶ A third advantage for Christians brought about by caring for the poor is the experience of changed, improved relationships that lead to a more humane society.

### 3. Conclusion: sharing in the compassion of Christ

What is the deepest motivation Christians can have for making a difference to the lives of poor people? Surely it must lie in the calling of each and every Christian to have a heart like God - a heart that deeply cares for the well-being of all people.

In the New Testament the extent of God's care for human beings is explained in terms of poverty and riches. We are told that Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, left the wealth of his heavenly abode to share life on earth with humans in relative poverty:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8: 9)

In response to this self-emptying of Jesus for our sakes, Paul commands all Christians to cultivate the following attitude:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil 2: 5-8)

In saying this, Paul was clearly echoing Jesus himself. In John 13, where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, he makes it clear that he wants his followers to serve others in a similar way:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them ... A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (Jn 13: 12 - 17, 34)

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and role model served human beings by living in this world and dying a sacrificial death for all people. Does this not mean that every Christian should care deeply about the suffering and misery of the poor - and to do something about it?

## Endnotes

- 1 D.E. de Villiers and D.J. Smit, "Hoe Christene in Suid-Afrika by Mekaar Verby Praat. Oor Vier Morele Spreekwyses in die Suid-Afrikaanse Kerklike Konteks", *Skrif en Kerk*, 15 (1994), p. 240.
- 2 David Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic World*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), p. 189.
- 3 John A. Lamprecht "Theology of the Poor: The Contribution of the Twentieth Century", *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2 (1993), p. 64.
- 4 Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, p. 82.
- 5 Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, p. 83.
- 6 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, (Dallas Texas: Word Publishing, 1997), p. xiv.
- 7 Kevin Roy, "Wealth and Poverty in the New South Africa: The Question of



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- the Redistribution of Wealth”, *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2 (1993) p. 99.
- 8 Graham Philpott, “God’s Power to Change in Action: Reflections on Ministry Amongst the Poor”, *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2 (1993) p. 84.
  - 9 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 82.
  - 10 Roy, “Wealth and Poverty in the New South Africa”, p. 100.
  - 11 Philpott, “God’s Power to Change in Action”, p. 52 - 70.
  - 12 Quoted in Phillip L. Quinn, “Political Liberalisms and Their Exclusion of the Religious”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 69 1995: p. 35.
  - 13 See Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Sphere: The Place of Religious Convictions in Public Debate*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), p. 17.
  - 14 Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, 1988 pp. 3, 9.
  - 15 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 214.
  - 16 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 217.
  - 17 See Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, p. 112.
  - 18 Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), p. 121.
  - 19 Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, p. 158.
  - 20 See Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, p. 112.
  - 21 See Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Sphere*, p. 14.
  - 22 Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, p. 161.
  - 23 Quoted in Phillip L. Quinn, “Political Liberalisms and Their Exclusion of the Religious”, p. 49.
  - 24 D.E. de Villiers and D.J. Smit, “‘Met Watter Gesag sê U Hierdie Dinge?’ Opmerkings oor Kerklike Dokumente oor die Openbare Lewe”, *Skrif en Kerk*, 16 (1995) p. 50.
  - 25 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
  - 26 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

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