



# JESUS, LUKE, and the POOR



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by Bobby Kelly

**W**E SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED that Luke's Gospel would focus attention on Jesus' condemnation of a rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and His call for faithfulness concerning possessions (vv. 22-48). In fact, one might call the Third Gospel the Gospel to the poor.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the angel's announcement to Mary, we find Mary's song in which she praised God as the One who has "put down the powerful from their thrones, and exalted the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good

things, and the rich He has sent away empty" (1:52-53, writer's translation). Jesus identified the poor as the focus of His work in the opening scene of His Galilean ministry in the synagogue sermon in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" (4:18a).<sup>2</sup> Luke's version of the

## LESSON REFERENCE

FBS: Luke 12:13-48

The poor who could not work because of some physical problem often sat by the city gates and begged alms of the wealthy.

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Opposite left: A hoard of bronze coins found under the floor of the synagogue at Qasrin.



Opposite center: Document about an inheritance arrangement that mentions the ancient Sumerian city of Sippar. From 18th cent. B.C. Poverty might result from a person not inheriting land, which would have been a social stigma in the Old Testament era.

Opposite right: Imperial tax decrees etched on marble plaques for the Roman emperor Justinian, found at Beersheba in Israel. Zacchaeus, the tax collector, promised to give half of his money to the poor.

Sermon on the Mount opens with Jesus' proclamation "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20). Jesus told the messengers of John the Baptist to go and tell John the things they had seen and heard with the climax being "the good news is preached to the poor" (7:22).

In the Parable of the Great Supper (14:16-24), the host invited many, who all made excuses and declined the invitation. The host responded by instructing the servants to invite the "poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (14:21). Luke alone recorded the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31) in which the rich man, by neglecting the poor, disregarded God and thus suffered torment. In Luke 18:22, Jesus proclaimed to the rich ruler, "sell everything you have and give to the poor." Only Luke recounted the story of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, who provided evidence of true repentance by giving half of his wealth to the poor (19:1-10). Jesus' concern for the poor is woven into the fabric of Luke's Gospel.

Jesus obviously had concern for the poor. We would be wise, though, to consider who the poor were in Jesus' day. Did Jesus have in mind only the material poor, that is, those who did not have the basic necessities of life. Did Jesus use the designation metaphorically to refer to those who show an attitude of dependence on God, that is, the poor in spirit. Perhaps Jesus used the term to designate a whole class of people who were disadvantaged whether because of a material need or some other unfavorable condition such as gender, occupation, or religious impurity.<sup>3</sup> A summary of Deuteronomy reveals some element of each.

During the rule of King Saul, a social division emerged between wealthy landholders and the peasant class. The poor depended on the rich for survival. Too often, however, the hired worker, alien, beggar, widow, and orphan were neglected and even oppressed by the powerful. These were the very people that the law, particularly Deuteronomy, mentioned centuries earlier.

The word for the poor in Deuteronomy, *'ebhyon* (Hebrew: עֲבִיּוֹן), referred to a person who lacked the basic necessities.<sup>4</sup> The term also carried social implications since such a person had no inheritance of land. Such a person existed in a state of lowliness and social alienation. As this person drew near to God, the term took on the metaphorical sense of humility, even piety.<sup>5</sup>

The responsibility of the rich toward the poor is evident in Deuteronomy, which laid out the goal that "there should be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4a). This meant that Israelites were to give generously until the goal was reached. Deuteronomy promised judgment on those who



acted out of self-interest and disobeyed God in this matter. To insure a poor class did not exist in Israelite society, Deuteronomy required the cancellation of all debts at the end of every seventh year (vv. 1-5). Further, Deuteronomy declared that anyone who refused to be generous to a poor man would "be found guilty of sin" (v. 9). Deuteronomy also showed concern for persons to maintain the dignity and self-respect of the poor by forbidding creditors from entering the debtors' homes to collect (24:10). If a poor person's coat was taken as collateral for an outstanding loan, then it was to be returned before night (vv. 12-13). If a poor man sought a loan, it was to be granted without interest charged (23:19-20). To hold back the wages of a needy person was considered a sin (24:14-15).

In Luke the term *ptochos* (Greek: πτωχός) reveals the influence of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish history. The word appears ten times in Luke's Gospel, usually with reference to the impoverished. Since they were oppressed and alienated, God was their only hope. Thus, Jesus' use of the "poor" could refer to spiritual poverty as well as material poverty. The dual meaning of the term is evident by comparing Matt 5:3, "blessed are you who are poor in spirit" versus Luke 6:20, "blessed are you who are poor." When Jesus spoke of the poor in Luke, we should allow for some sense of spiritual poverty, as well as a broader reference to all those who are hungry, who weep, the sick, the least, the last, those on the fringes of society, and/or the oppressed. But whatever else we say about the exact identity of the poor, we can hardly imagine Jesus or Luke ever using the term "poor" without their indicating something of the economic poverty that pervaded their world.

Jesus' concern for the poor begs the question of the Christian responsibility in the face of poverty. What should be our response in light of parables such as the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-21? To begin,

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**Above: An overview of modern Nazareth.**

**Left: From Tunis, bracelet set with sapphires, emeralds, and pearls. In the first century, jewelry was often seen as an indication of a person's wealth.**

**Right: Sea of Galilee from the Church of the Beatitudes. Tradition holds that Jesus preached His "Sermon on the Mount" in this location.**

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poverty was and is a disgraceful reality that should not exist. While the origin of poverty is complex and unclear, it exists because of human decisions. A recent tendency is to lay the blame at the feet of unfortunate decisions by the poor. In the biblical tradition, however, the bad decisions are placed at the feet of those with wealth and power who, because of selfishness and greed, unjustly deprive others of what they need. The rich man in Luke 12 was a fool because his greed revealed an attitude contrary to the heart of God. His actions created an environment of economic oppression. Rather than standing with the poor, the rich fool intensified their suffering by doing nothing.

So what are we to do? Should we renounce all wealth or should we defend the acquisition of wealth as long as our hearts are right with God? Perhaps Christian responsibility rests somewhere between. Jesus called and still calls His followers to be generous in sharing with those in need. While Jesus likely did not intend all of His followers to sell all and give to the poor, He likewise never spoke of poverty as something that should be ignored or accepted as inevitable either.<sup>6</sup> Wherever we find people who are powerless and marginalized and anywhere neighborhoods

are devastated by poverty and hopelessness, Jesus' call is to give generously. Those of us who have economic security must share our wealth and assist those in need, thus storing up treasures that last. The manner in which we utilize our means has eternal consequences. **B**

1. For further research comparing the Synoptics' treatment of Jesus and the poor, see P. H. Davids, "Rich and Poor" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 705.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

3. Joel Green suggests Jesus defined the poor "in the holistic sense of those who are for any of a number of socio-religious reasons relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God's people," *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 211.

4. G. H. Botterweck, "רִיכֻס" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 888.

5. Ernst Bammel, "πτωχός," "πτοχεία," "πτοχεύω" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel, ed., G. W. Bromiley, trans., vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 888.

6. Robert Stein rightly cautions against using Luke or Acts to insist on voluntary poverty as a mandate for all Christians: "selling all one's possessions is not seen as a requirement but as an option (note Acts 5:4), and it did not bring about a higher status," Robert H. Stein, *Luke in The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 53, fn. 85.

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