

## JESUS' BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY AND RICHES IN THE GOSPELS

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Jesus' evangelism clearly targets the poor, but the generally lackluster attitude of the modern evangelical churches towards the poor is well reflected in the Lausanne Covenant<sup>1</sup> in 1974 on the need to proclaim a balanced and holistic gospel, where social issues such as caring for the needy is highlighted.<sup>2</sup> With the shift of the numerical

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<sup>1</sup> Point 5 of its 15 points declares: "...Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive... The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead." <[http:// www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html](http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html)>(accessed 23 December 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Although in 2010 there were 494.6 million believers, or 22 percent of all Christians, resided in Africa, their voices are rarely heard of. The Western world (America and Europe) "continue to dominate Christian scholarship, broadcasting, the Internet, and publishing, even though these activities are expanding in Africa." Gordon R. Doss, "A Malawian Christian Theology of Wealth and Poverty," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35: 3 (2011): 148.

center of the modern Christianity into the Global South,<sup>3</sup> which encompasses the generally poorer regions of Latin America, Africa and Asia, still one can hardly hear Christian voices from this part of the majority world. Although naturally one can sympathize with the poor, many Christians perceive poverty as an absolute misfortune or even a curse. Sad to say that many well-to-do Christians today struggle within themselves about the giving of tithes and to missions, to say the least about supporting social needs and the poor. Also, most churches' annual budget is targeted for programs or activities related directly to missions or evangelism, very seldom a budget is set aside to support their impoverished non-Christian neighbours or even poor Christian congregations within the church. No wonder many modern urban churches consist of believers from the middle and upper classes and rarely able to attract their poor neighbourhood into their respective Christian community.

All these issues validate a renewed research to present a more comprehensive biblical and theological understanding of poverty and riches in the bible. And for the purpose of this research, we would limit the scope of this study to the biblical and theological understanding of poverty and riches primarily in the Gospels in an attempt to focus on Jesus' views about these issues and their related implications. It is hoped that a more-balanced biblical and theological understanding of Jesus about poverty and riches, as well as issues regarding a more equitable distribution of wealth and accountability that relates to a proper use of financial resources, can be presented for further reflections and actions.

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<sup>3</sup> This theory is propounded by some recent missiologists such as Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

## I. Jesus' Biblical and Theological Understanding of Poverty

### 1. The Interpretations and Implications of "Poverty" in the New Testament Era

In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent of the term "poor" is *penes* and *ptochos*. In contrast with a *plousios* who is a well-to-do landed class, a *penes* (2Co 9:9) refers to a working poor who owns very little property or possession.<sup>4</sup> However, a *penes* who possesses a little wealth yet has "sufficiency," is not called "poor" in the same sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament uses *ptochos* almost exclusively to refer to a beggar who seeks almsgiving and is bereft of all social support as well as all means of support (especially farm and family).<sup>6</sup> One historian says of the *ptochos*: "The *ptochos* was someone who had lost many or all of his family and social ties. He often was a wanderer, therefore a foreigner for others, unable to tax for any length of time the resources of a group to which he could contribute very little or nothing at all."<sup>7</sup> In the first century social setting, many beggars were known to live extremely degrading social life and were "forced out of cities and towns and consigned to roads and gates to beg for alms".<sup>8</sup>

Also, Bruce J. Malina asserts that the linguistic collocation of the word "poor" is often linked with other words to describe the condition of the person who is labeled "poor."<sup>9</sup> Luke 4:18, for instance, quotes

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<sup>4</sup> D. E. Holwerda, "Poor," in *ISBE*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 906.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" *Scripture from Scratch* (Oct. 2012): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Holwerda, "Poor," 906.

<sup>7</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 1.

<sup>8</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce J. Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," *Interpretation* 41: 4 (October 1987): 355.

from Isaiah 42:7 in which the poor are described as "imprisoned, blind, and bruised". Matthew 5:3-5, which has a parallel passage in Luke 6:20-21, delineates the poor as those who "hunger, thirst, and mourn." Matthew 11:4-5 puts the "blind, lame, lepers, deaf, and the dead" and Luke 14:13-21 recounts the "maimed, lame, and the blind" in the same list as the poor. Furthermore, both Mark 12:42-43 and Luke 21:2-3 recount the story of a poor widow (*penichros*; Lk 21:2),<sup>10</sup> and Luke 16:20-22 narrates the story of the poor Lazarus who was leprous, hungry and full of sores.<sup>11</sup> These adjacent descriptions of the poor indicate the "poor" persons as someone who has encountered one or more misfortunes or incidences. Within these collocations, the "poor" are ranked among those who cannot maintain their inherited status due to unforeseen circumstances that befall them and their family such as debt, being in a foreign land, sickness (eg. woman with a flow of blood), death (eg. widow's son), or some personal physical accidents.<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament era, the poor are placed in a low social standing in their social stratification within the ancient society which consists of monarch and/or aristocratic families in the highest group, then tax gatherers, police, scribes, priests, and later merchants, artisans; farmers and fishermen (with some as landowners), and finally are the poor untouchable (comprising beggars, cripples, prostitutes, criminals, and those who lived in the fringes of the cities).<sup>13</sup> The great number of domestic and working slaves recruited by some rich upper

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<sup>10</sup> Holwerda, "Poor," 906.

<sup>11</sup> Finally, Jas 2:3-6 relates to a shabbily dressed poor man as someone powerless, while Rev 3:17 considers the poor to be "wretched, pitiable, blind, naked," a category similar to the list in Mt 25:34-36, where one discovers the "hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, and imprisoned."

<sup>12</sup> Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," 356.

<sup>13</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 2.

class residents, who comprised about two (or even three) million by the end of the first century B.C. in the Roman empire (about 35% of its total population),<sup>14</sup> bear witness to the reality that there were quite a large number of poor people living in the first century.

## **2. How Does Jesus View Poverty?**

In the Old Testament, poverty can be a means of God's judgment on His people. What lies in Deuteronomy 28:15-68 is the Mosaic pronouncement which connects directly a list of curses of casualties/poverty with those who disobey the commandments of God. Ideally, it is the divine will that there will be no poor people among the Israelites in the promised land as God will bless them abundantly so that there will be no want (Dt 15:4). And one can even find some vivid legal texts which regulate treatment of the poor, seeking to protect the poor, widows, orphans, or strangers (Lev 19:9-10; 25:25, 35).<sup>15</sup> In reality, however, the poor, including the widows and orphans, often do not have access to resources and are often classified in the helpless social group who needs protection (Ex 23:3; Dt 24:14; Ps 12:5; 14:6; 35:10; 82:3), justice (Dt 24:15), assistance (Lev 25:25; Ps 40:17), depending on the public's almsgiving (Dt 15:11) and mercy (Ex 23:11; Lev 14:21; 23:22). Hence, poverty is commonly viewed as a curse or a misfortune, except in the eye of the divine trial or testing (eg. Job).

With the coming of Christ and his teaching in the New Testament, however, the proclamation of the coming of the heavenly kingdom

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<sup>14</sup> Everett Ferguson (*Background of Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 46) estimates that one in every five residents in Rome was a slave. See Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Jason Lim, *The Trials of the Christians as Elect Resident Aliens and Visiting Strangers in 1 Peter* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Patrick J. Martin, "Poor," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1070.

has shown God's concern for the poor with even greater vigor than the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> It is true that Jesus acknowledges "the poor" as a low social group within the first century social stratification (Mt 26:11; Mk 14:7; Jn 12:8). In the biblical account which narrates about the disciples' criticism of a woman who poured perfume on Jesus, many responded that the perfume could have been sold to help the poor (Mt 26:9; Mk 14:5; Jn 12:5). However, Jesus' reply that "you will always have the poor among you..." (Mt 26:11; Mk 14:7; Jn 12:8; quoting from Dt 15:11) does not seem to institutionalize poverty, but simply recognition that the settings of the world are conducive to poverty.<sup>17</sup>

The poor is hardly viewed as a people cursed and despised by God. Instead, they are seen as a people for the target of love and of receiving compassion from God. The "materially" poor will be blessed (Lk 6:20) and liberated from their oppression (Lk 4:16-21). He once proclaims that "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58) Jesus was also himself made a sacrifice for the sake of world. Although he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that they through his poverty might become rich (2Co 8:9). Philipians 2:6-10 best illustrates this view: "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!"

Jesus' evangelistic mission is simply declared as such: "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed

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<sup>16</sup> Holwerda, "Poor," 906.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Reese, "Rich and Poor in the New Testament," in *World Missions Associates'* (2009), <<http://www.wmausa.org/Page.aspx?id=101189>>(accessed 23 December 2012).

to the poor." (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22) Embedded within this proclamation are the various reasons why someone may end up in poverty: disable, sickness, misfortune etc. They are, more often than not, segregated by the majority of the more blessed and free social classes such as the elites or the ordinary free people on the street. Even the slaves may have had better lives than this poor group of people, who are considered outcasts of the society.

Although Jesus' message targets the lowly and the poor, his message also targets those who are poor spiritually ("poor in spirit"; Mt 5:3) or ethically ("sinners"; Mk 2:17; cf. Mt 9:12; Lk 5:31).<sup>18</sup> The Lukan context is based on Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 61:1f.) and this heavenly message is thus perceived to have been fulfilled in Jesus' inauguration of the eschatological Year of Jubilee.<sup>19</sup> Since it is proclaimed on the Day of Atonement, Luke's announcement of the eschatological Jubilee is also connected inextricably with the forgiveness of sins (cf. Lk 24:47).<sup>20</sup>

There are numerous biblical accounts which entail the interventions of Jesus in the lives of poor people during the journey of his earthly ministry. Jesus is very sympathetic toward the poor and disabled. For instance, Jesus heals the woman with a flow of blood (Mt 9:20-22) as well as the blind Bartimaeus who was begging on the road (Mk 10:46-52); he comes in the nick of time to heal the only son of a widow (Lk 7:12); he turns the table around for the Lazarus who begs

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<sup>18</sup> In one sense, we need not wholly materialized or politicized the word "poor" and perceives Jesus as caring only exclusively for those who are materially poor, as propounded by certain Liberation theologies. Holwerda, "Poor," 907.

<sup>19</sup> "While originally a description of Israel's condition awaiting release from exile, this prophecy became an eschatological symbol of God's oppressed people awaiting release in the final Year of Jubilee in the end time (cf. 11QMelch in the Qumran Scrolls)". Cited in Holwerda, "Poor," 907.

<sup>20</sup> Holwerda, "Poor," 907.

at the gate of the house of the rich man (Lk 16:19-31); he praises the widow who donated only two pieces of coins; in the parables, when the elites refused to accept invitation to attend the king's supper, the servants are told to go outside the city to the highways and hedges" to bring in "the unclean outcasts, the begging poor... the poor and maimed and blind and lame (Lk 14:21-23).<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that Jesus and his disciples habitually and generously donate to the poor. Matthew clearly affirms Jesus' commitment to the poor: those who have surplus goods must share with those in need of clothing (5:40) and give to the one who begs (5:42).<sup>22</sup> Judas, as the disciples' treasurer, was thought to donate money to the poor on the night he exited to betray Jesus (Jn 13:29). The disciples are strongly urged to continue in helping the poor (Mt 19:21; 26:9, 11; Mk 10:21; 14:7; Lk 19:8; Jn 12:5; 13:29), a tradition which the early church has faithfully upheld (Ac 2:44f.; 4:34f.; Ro 15:26; 1Co 13:3; 2Co 9:8-9; Gal. 2:10; cf. Dt 15:4). It is also perceivable that the early church's belief in almsgiving echoes Jesus' view that God is abundantly generous to the poor: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor." (2Co 9:9; quoting from Ps 112:9)<sup>23</sup>

In one of the most celebrated of Jesus' parables recorded in Matthew 25, "alms" means more than just "money."<sup>24</sup> When the king separates the sheep from the goats, he praises one group and condemns the other according to the criteria of their almsgiving to the

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<sup>21</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 2.

<sup>22</sup> Craig L. Blomberg ("Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 2[July 1999]: 212) notes that Augustine did advise the Christian community not to give to beggars exactly what they ask for (*De Sermonem Domine en Monte* 67); rather, almsgiving should be given widely to the poor.

<sup>23</sup> Reese, "Rich and Poor in the New Testament."

<sup>24</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 3.



begging poor: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt 25:35-36). Jesus' message is clear: he endorses the radical care of the "begging poor." Jesus radically turns around the worldly thought that not giving alms to the begging poor was considered wise, prudent and clever. For God can turn the foolishness of this world into wisdom and worldly wisdom into foolishness.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Made Poor as a Disciple of Christ

It is true that the term "poor" normally denotes an economic condition, but it may be perceived as a synonym for "disciple of Christ."<sup>26</sup> From the environment and the lifestyle of Jesus' followers in the first century, W. Stegmann suggests that the movement within Judaism in the Palestine associated with the Christ's name was fundamentally a movement *of the poor for the poor*.<sup>27</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey also argues that the main reason Jesus' disciples are "poor, hungry/thirst, and mourning" as mentioned in the Beatitude is due to the fact that they are followers of Christ ("...for my sake"). He concludes that "the last and climactic Beatitude call honorable those disciples of Jesus whom their families disown and excommunicate for their loyalty to Rabbi Jesus;" and when a family disowns its siblings for apostasy, the children immediately drop from "working poor" to "begging poor."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 3.

<sup>26</sup> Holwerda, "Poor," 907.

<sup>27</sup> W. Stegmann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, trans. D. Elliott (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 3.

Similarly, we hear the teaching about Christ's words of comfort to the disciples who are admonished to "look at the birds of the air..." (Mt 6:25-33) and not to worry about their livelihood. There may be some disciples who do not possess land but need to work in the fields to grow grain, which they harvested and gathered into storage areas; but they are encouraged to look at the birds which God feeds. Others may be encouraged to look at the lilies in the field on how God clothes them. It is perceivable that once many of his disciples were in the "working class," but then for the sake of the gospel they became "begging poor" (no economic or social resources).<sup>29</sup>

It is perceivable that the early church tradition follows the footsteps of Jesus in self-sacrificing spirit and self-imposed poverty for the sake of the gospel. Rather than seeing poverty as a curse or misfortune, Paul, for instance, teaches that he has overcome it by having a heart of contentment when encountering poverty and wants. There are some vivid instances in Paul's writings where he relate his real-life experiences to his own pain, agony, thirst, hunger, and danger (2Co 11:22). Also, we are all too familiar with the grave consequences of those who follow Christ who suffered in perverse persecution or ended in cruel martyrdom in the early church. It is well handed down in the Christian tradition that the majority of Christ's apostles died without much physical possession in hand, but empty handed in martyrdom. So were countless believers in the first three centuries who suffered in severe persecutions, trials and death. They were made "poor" and were even ended up in "bankruptcy" ending in giving up even their lives due to their religious belief and convictions. Hence, "in issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny

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<sup>29</sup> Neyrey, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament?" 3.

themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community...."<sup>30</sup>

## II. Jesus' Biblical and Theological Understanding of Riches

### 1. The Interpretations and Implications of "Riches" in the New Testament Era

From the usage of biblical literature in the first century of Palestinian land, riches and wealth are terms usually referring to "abundance of possessions, or of valuable products,"<sup>31</sup> but also "designating spiritual, psychological, and social qualities."<sup>32</sup> For the Jews, however, riches or wealth is often understood literally as a divine blessing materially and is rarely referred to spiritual abundance. Their religious background can be perceived from the terms commonly used in the Old Testament which include *asir* ("rich"), *hayil* ("wealth," "power," "capacity"), *hon* ("wealth"), *samen* ("rich"), *gadal* ("become great").<sup>33</sup> The most common word-group for riches and wealth in the New Testament is *ploutos* ("riches") and its related terms (Mt 13:22; 27:57; cf. Ro 11:12; Eph 2:7; 3:16; Col 3:16; 1Co 4:8; 2Co 6:10; 1Ti 6:17; Tit 3:6; Jas 1:10; 5:1; 2Pe 1:11; Rev 18:15). Other related terms to riches are *mammonas* ("mommon"), *chrema* ("riches"), and *ktema* ("possession") which are exclusively used to denote "material riches or resources."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Point 4 of the Lausanne Covenant, <<http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>>(accessed 23 December 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, "Wealth," BibleStudyTools, <<http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/wealth.html>>(accessed 23 December 2012).

<sup>32</sup> C. J. Vos, "Riches," in *ISBE*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 185.

<sup>33</sup> Vos, "Riches," 185-86.

<sup>34</sup> Vos, "Riches," 188.

In the first century of the Roman Empire, the rich comprised a small fraction in the pre-dominantly average or poor social stratification. Of all the population, most free citizen, visiting residents and freedmen were of average or below average in their household income. Even traveling merchants may not be rich by ancient standards, but merely "middle class," they reflect a measure of wealth beyond the roughly 80% of the first-century Roman empire who would have comprised the poor.<sup>35</sup>

It is likely that Jews living in the first century era regarded ancient tradition handed down (especially from the Old Testament) supports the idea that the outpouring of riches is considered a great divine "blessing". In fact, many biblical accounts relate to God's creational blessing in material abundance and they are understood literally and are not interpreted figuratively. Since Israel was an agrarian country, the physical endowments of rain, sunshine, and protection from pestilences and enemies are important images of divine providences.<sup>36</sup>

Typically, many godly people are identified and then blessed with numerous material possessions (Dt 28:11; Ps 25:13). Abraham, for instance, had many cattle (Ge 13:2), and sheep (Ge 24:35), and was regarded highly among his peers in the society of his era. Apparently Abraham knows that God is his source of material blessing (Ge 14:23; Dt 8:17-20; Ps 24:1).<sup>37</sup> God's covenant promise of a land, which is described as rich (Ex 3:8f.), is regarded as a great blessing to him (Ge 17:8). The story of Joseph is par excellence a biblical narrative

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<sup>35</sup> For the distribution of wealth in the first century Roman Empire, see William R. Herzog, II, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 53-73. Cited in Blomberg, "Neither Poverty nor Riches," 216.

<sup>36</sup> Lland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Trempler Longman III eds., "Prosperity," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 675.

<sup>37</sup> Vos, "Riches," 185-86.

of success where "the Lord causes all that [Joseph] did to prosper in his hands" (Ge 39:3); while the other domestic counterpart to Joseph's success story is found in the narrative of Ruth and Boaz where they ended up in good well-being (Ru 4:11).<sup>38</sup> Job is stated to be a righteous man, and yet he possessed thousands of cattle, sheep, and camels; and although he did experience some traumatic trials he was ultimately blessed with manifold material possessions as well as adorable siblings.<sup>39</sup> King David and King Solomon were also rich kings during their reign as the ruler in Palestine (1Ki 3:13). In Ecclesiastes 4:9 it is noted that prosperity is the state of those who "have a good reward for their toil."<sup>40</sup> Financially, the promises of divine blessings in manifold returns are also recorded in the book of Malachi for those Israelites who are willing to offer their tithes faithfully (3:10).

Nevertheless, there are vivid teachings that demand the people to live in righteousness and are to be responsible for a proper distribution of the prosperity given to them (Lev 25).<sup>41</sup> In reality, their negligence has brought about prophetic protests or passages in the Old Testament which warn or criticize those who possess great material resources but do not live up to the good standard measured by God. Stern warnings are targeted to those who intend to gain wealth through improper manners (2Sa 12:1-14).<sup>42</sup> Apart from several passages in Psalms which perceives the term "rich" as identical with "wicked" (Ps 10, 12, 37, 41, 52, 72) and "poor" is synonymous with "righteous,"<sup>43</sup> the Proverbs is

<sup>38</sup> Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III eds., "Prosperity," 675.

<sup>39</sup> See also Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Context of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III eds., "Prosperity," 675.

<sup>41</sup> Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III eds., "Prosperity," 675.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick J. Martin, "Wealth," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1371.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, "Wealth," 1371. See also Carleen Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament* (JSOTSup 357; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

arguably to have drawn "on wealth and poverty language more than any other book in the Hebrew Bible."<sup>44</sup> The Proverbs critically warn its hearers to avoid the foolish wisdom of the wealthy<sup>45</sup> and by using the rhetoric of wealth to convince the addressees of the desirability of wisdom's path.<sup>46</sup> The author of Ecclesiastes can also be seen as criticizing the evils of his/her own contemporary society: "modern man is like Qoheleth—wealthy, isolated, pessimistic, uninvolved."<sup>47</sup> The book of Isaiah mentions that for those who are faithful, the Lord promises wealth of the nations (Isa 45:14; 60:5, 11); but for those who are rich yet evil (especially for oppressing the poor [Isa 10:1-2; Eze 22:25-29]), the Lord issues stern discipline (Isa 10:3; cf. Jer 5:27; 17:3; Eze 7:11; Hos 12:8; Mic 6:12).<sup>48</sup> Isaiah also clearly warns against the oppression of the poor at the hands of the greedy landowners who amass vast properties (Isa 5:8).<sup>49</sup> Of all, the book of Amos exemplifies one of the best critics on the rich. The prophet Amos points out vividly that the accumulation of riches by the upper social classes and their conspicuous consumption as a clear manifestation of injustice done on the proletariat.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Harold C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs*, SBLDS 142 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy J. Sandoval (*The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, Biblical Interpretation Series 77 [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006], 75) notices that "wealth" in the Proverbs "ought not to be viewed only as literal riches, but as a symbol for all that is alluring and desirable in this social script."

<sup>46</sup> Sandoval, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, 112.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Kohelet," in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 57-77.

<sup>48</sup> Martin, "Wealth," 1371.

<sup>49</sup> Martin, "Poor," 1070.

<sup>50</sup> See Willy Schottroff, "The Prophet Amos: A Socio-Historical Assessment of His Ministry," in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 27-46. Willy Schottroff also perceives the peasantry in the book of Amos not as a group of "free and equal villagers with full civil rights," but an exploited proletariat deprived of many privileges and social justices.

## **2. How Does Jesus View Riches?**

In view of the above biblical accounts, we would presuppose that teaching of Jesus (or even of New Testament) should echo both these "blessing" and "warning" lines of thought. Very surprisingly, however, Jesus' perceptions and critiques of "riches" set out a different tone altogether. His interpretation of "blessing" is always understood in the spiritual realm; and thus plays down the common "physical" or "material" perception. Jesus hardly mentions that "riches" or "material abundance" is a blessing from God; rather, he frequently demands accountability on those who possess "material riches" and always puts human desire for "riches" in the negative tone. It is recorded vividly in the gospels that the rich will be sent away empty (Lk 1:53). Those who accumulate wealth with no thought for God or the destitute around them will be eternally condemned (Lk 12:16-21; 16:19-31).<sup>51</sup> He instructs his disciples to keep their treasure in heaven and they are admonished not to store material gains on earth. For "where your riches are, there will your heart also be." (Mt 6:21) He succinctly warns his disciples: "What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Mk 8:36) As a result, we can hardly interpret the passage "they through his poverty might become rich" (2Co 8:9) in the literal sense; rather, it should rather be interpreted in the spiritual sense where the blessing of abundant life is meant (Jn 10:10).

Jesus also never teaches his disciples that they will inherit lots of material resources while living on earth. Much the opposite, they need to be prepared to bear their own cross (Mt 10:38; Lk 14:27) and deny themselves (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). Rather than possessing a high social standing, they are admonished to sacrifice their earthly gains, comfort, friendship, security, safety and even to

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<sup>51</sup> Blomberg, "Wealth."

the point of sacrificing their lives! It is recorded vividly that for the poor, they have the good news preached to them (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22), and not the blessing of monetary or material resources. It is true that when the apostle Peter admitted that he has given up everything to follow Jesus (Mk 10:29), there is a promise of blessing to those who follow Christ in the present and future life. However, one should note that the emphasis on the hundred times of blessing of "houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and land" cannot be taken literally, especially for the interpretation of a hundred times of "brothers, sisters, mothers and children." The emphasis of reward should be understood spiritually to relate to their experiences living in a spiritual Christian community of "brothers, sisters and mothers" in the present age (cf. Mt 12:49-50) where common sharing is well promoted,<sup>52</sup> and it also includes "eternal life" in the age to come (Mk 10:30). Mark 10:30 also includes "persecution," together with eternal life, in the verse concerning blessing. Here, no promise of a life of material abundance is perceived during persecution.

Admittedly, the overriding thrust of Jesus' teaching on riches is to highlight "mammon" (material resources) as a major competitor with God for human allegiance (Mt 6:19-24; Lk 16:1-13).<sup>53</sup> The desire to acquire more "wealth" can act as a "deceitful" tool (Mk 4:19; Rev 3:17) to distract human from putting a priority on spiritual matters, and to cause them to lose the blessing of eternal life (Mk 8:36). It can even act as a blockage for some who prioritize wealth over the eternal blessing of the kingdom of God (Mt 19:24; Mk 10:25; Lk 18:25). Just like in the Old Testament, biblical accounts in the Gospels

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<sup>52</sup> It is perceivable that this teaching is passed on and practiced literally in the early church (cf. Ac 2:24). Blomberg, "Neither Poverty nor Riches," 213.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, "Wealth," 1371. See also Blomberg, "Wealth."



recount many criticisms which are heaped upon the rich who use their high social standing and material resources to do evils.<sup>54</sup> Wealth is frequently perceived as the springboard for idolatry, a fruit or symptom of various injustice, a stumbling block to one's good spirituality. It is always portrayed as a competing object of devotion to God from the disciples. Riches have the very power to entice even the believers to go astray where their own covetous desire makes them to be greedy and commit sinful deeds. For one "cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). This view is also propounded by the first century Jewish philosopher, Philo. His thought about wealth is more of the problems of desire, rather than the amount of wealth itself.<sup>55</sup> Wealth, supposedly a neutral material by itself, is always abused by the people who use it. Material resources can be a source of blessing for *some* but at the same time a stumbling block to *many others*.

The message of the gospel of Jesus relates inextricably with the coming of the kingdom of God. It emphasizes the need for the people on earth to repent of their transgressions and to desire true spiritual virtues in their relationship with God. It deals nothing with the amount of material resources one can gain while on earth but rather with one's investment in the spiritual or heavenly kingdom. It is stated clearly in the Gospel of John that Jesus went to the cross to redeem us spiritually from our sins and give us eternal life (Jn 20:31). This is well followed up by many New Testament writers who understand exactly this spiritual principle and echoes Jesus' implications that the disciples are to be "rich in spirit and in the Spirit, in salvation, and in knowledge of Him, in faith (Jas 2:5), in good works (1Ti 6:18), and in eternal

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<sup>54</sup> Joe Pettit, "The Spoil of the Poor Is in Your Houses: Profits and Prophets in a Disrupted Society," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27:1 (2007): 42.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas E. Phillips, "Revisiting Philo: Discussions of Wealth and Poverty in Philo's Ethical Discourse," *JSNT* 83 (2001): 111-21.

rewards." (2Co 8:9) True riches in Christ (Eph 3:8) are those spiritual riches which we ought to esteem. Even though the Smyrna church in Revelation suffers in severe poverty, Jesus does not despise it but instead affirms the church as rich spiritually (Rev 2:9). Ironically, the rich Laodicean church in Revelation 3:14-22 is reproached, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." (Rev 3:17) As a whole, it is clear that there is a paradigm shift in Jesus' teaching from Old Testament's material blessing to spiritual abundance in the Gospels.

So, does Jesus forbid any of his followers to be "rich" and does he see the attainment of "riches" a sinful thing? No, Jesus never rejects the rich outright because they are rich and never suggests the gaining of wealth itself is sinful. First of all, his critiques of and warnings to the rich do imply that he does care for the destiny and salvation of the rich. For sure, Jesus' invitation is rendered to both the rich ruler and the wealthy Zacchaeus, the only difference is that the former rejected but the latter responded positively to the call of Jesus to follow him. There are also some vivid narratives in the Gospels which show his appreciations for the rich followers who live uprightly or have shown good works. In his ministry, Jesus allows a group of women believers to prepare and provide food for him and his disciples. He is willing to heal the servant of a rich centurion (Mt 8:5-6; Lk 7:2-3) and heal the son of a presumably well-to-do synagogue leader (Mt 9:18; Mk 5:22; Lk 8:41). Although he praises the generosity of the poor widow (Mk 12:42-43), the Markan passage recounts that Jesus never condemns the well-to-do but acknowledges that the rich only cast in their surplus into the treasury (Mk 12:41). In his conversation with a presumably rich Pharisee (and a Sanhedrin member) named Nicodemus, Jesus shows him the right way of salvation through true spiritual birth (Jn 3:1-8). Subsequent to his death, his body was wrapped with fine linen (Mk 15:46) donated by a rich secret (Jn 19:38) disciple called Joseph of Arimathea (Mt 27:57; Mk 15:43). The body was also embalmed

with a massive 100-pound myrrh and aloes donated by Nicodemus (Jn 19:39) and then buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 19:41).<sup>56</sup>

### 3. Economic Redistribution and Accountability?

According to Bruce J. Malina,<sup>57</sup> one should investigate carefully the issue about wealth and poverty from the first century context to render a better picture for a more accurate interpretation of the bible. He concludes that "Jesus' injunction to give one's goods to the poor is not about self-impoverishment but about redistribution of wealth; and motives for giving to the poor are not rooted in self-satisfying charity but in God-ordained, socially required restitution." Recent theologians, such as Dom Hélder Câmara<sup>58</sup> and Ched Myers,<sup>59</sup> believe that the well-to-do is responsible to spare their riches with the poor, beyond the norm of almsgiving for the sake of promoting charity, but of restoring economic equality.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> There are some biblical accounts of quite a few well-to-do and influential followers of Christ such as a certain in the early church as such a "large number of priests" in the faith (Ac 6:7), the centurion Cornelius (Ac 10), the family of John Mark (Ac 12:12); the Cypriot proconsul Sergius Paulus (Ac 13:6-12); the businesswoman Lydia (Ac 16:14-15), Jason and various prominent Greek women in Thessalonica (Ac 17:5-9, 12); certain representatives of the Areopagus (Ac 17:34), Priscilla and Aquila (Ac 18:2-3), Titius Justus (Ac 18:7) and Mnason (Ac 21:16). Cf. David A. Fiensy, "The Composition of the Jerusalem Church," in *Book of Acts in the First Century Setting, vol. 4: Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 213-36; David W.J. Gill, "Acts and the Urban Elites," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 105-18. Cited in Blomberg, "Neither Poverty nor Riches," 215.

<sup>57</sup> Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," 354-67.

<sup>58</sup> Dom Câmara raises the call for the analysis of forces that create and exploit poverty. And his famous quote is: "He is famous for stating, 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.'" See *Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd., 1971).

<sup>59</sup> Ched Myers, "'It Is an Issue of Equality...': Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty," in *Priests and People* ([U.K.] May, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Steven J. Friesen, "Injustice or God's Will: Early Christian Explanations of Poverty," in *Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2008), 17-18.

Jesus' theological view of redistribution can be postulated as an extension from the Old Testament teaching: (1) Every family is told to gather just enough bread for their needs (Ex 16:16-18); and (2) "If there be any poor among you in the land I give you, do not harden your hearts, nor refuse to stretch out your hand to them" (Dt 15:7).<sup>61</sup> The painful state of inequalities within a "fallen" society is a realism shared under the ancient (or even modern capitalism's) worldview. However, the Mosaic commandments introduce a rectification of these "fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power through communal mechanisms of economic redistribution."<sup>62</sup> When discussing about economic justice, Ched Myers reiterates that the "Sabbath economics" based on the Old Testament should be perceived as a better economic model than the classical economics:

Classical economics is based upon two suppositions: (1) the natural condition of scarcity; and (2) the human propensity for unlimited appetite. The first justifies inequality, the second fuels ideologies of unlimited economic growth. Sabbath economics, however, teaches exactly the inverse: God's gift is natural abundance, and our response should be self restraint.<sup>63</sup>

He believes that Jesus expects the "haves" to participate in wealth redistribution to the "poor" as a condition for discipleship.<sup>64</sup>

The appropriate use of riches is a vital issue in Jesus' teaching on discipleship. As for the Lukan perspective, it is quite clear that when Jesus is asked about the way to eternal life through obeying the two greatest commandments (Lk 10:25-28), it seems likely that he

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<sup>61</sup> Myers, "It Is an Issue of Equality...' Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty," 2.

<sup>62</sup> Myers, "It Is an Issue of Equality...' Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty," 3.

<sup>63</sup> Myers, "It Is an Issue of Equality...' Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty," 3.

<sup>64</sup> Myers, "It Is an Issue of Equality...' Biblical Reflections on Wealth and Poverty," 7.

is establishing a practical hierarchy of legitimate values for fulfilling these two greatest commandments: the highest one being mercy and love for "the poor neighbour" (Lk 10:29-37).<sup>65</sup> Other passages related to this similar admonition include the disciples who are asked to have compassion on the poor (Lk 14:7-24), and to give generously to God in spite of limited resources (Mk 12:43-44). There is one particular event when spending lavishly on the worship of Christ in ways some people find wasteful is justifiable (Mk 14:3-9), but it should be seen as a rare exception and not as the norm (cf. Dt 15:11b).

Jesus' teaching on the use of money is also seen clearly in his call to a rich young ruler to sell all he had, give it to the poor, and follow him (Mk 10:21) because Jesus knew that was his main obstacle to his faith and discipleship (Mt 18:22).<sup>66</sup> Although Luke's redaction (Lk 18:18-30) makes it clear this command applies more specifically to this rich young ruler alone and does not apply to all, when this teaching is combined with its second and third teaching in a series of three episodes on wealth (Lk 19:1-10 [repentant Zacchaeus gives up *only half* of his possessions]; servants' *investment* [Lk 19: 11-27]), which indicates that all disciples are taught to invest wisely their master's money for kingdom priorities.<sup>67</sup>

Ideally, then, the scales get balanced all around: everybody gives and gets. Some churches like to preach that when we give to God, we should expect good revenues in return (eg. when the followers of God give tithes, they should expect God to bless them many folds

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<sup>65</sup> Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, "The Sabbath Was Made for Man: The Interpretation of Mark 2:23-28," in *God of the Lowly*, ed. Schottroff and Stegemann, 118-28.

<sup>66</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>67</sup> Blomberg, "Wealth."

in return). But this is not the gospel view of patronage. For instance, Zacchaeus serves as an excellent example of a patron: as a chief tax collector he grew wealthy by taking from others as much as he could; now as a disciple, he gave half of his possessions to the (begging) poor (Lk 19:8). All he gets in return is the praise of Jesus. In another story which relates to donation of the rich (Mk 12:41) and the poor widow to the temple (Mk 12:42), the former's donation is considered a mere minimal of their wealth, but the latter is praised because she has given all she has to God (Mt 12:43). Jesus is stated in Luke's account that the believers should invite to their table those who cannot repay them (14:12-14); they are to act as patrons, but without accepting the debts that naturally accrued to those who played the patron.

Matthew 6:33 ("seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing, and drink] will be given to you as well") seems to promise manifold earthly things to the disciples of Christ. If it is understood literally, the numerous real-life sufferings of God's saints, however, may seem to dampen the comforting promise embedded in this passage. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the second person plural commands and pronouns throughout the Sermon points out clearly that he is "addressing how Christian disciples are to live *in community*." (Mt 5:1-2)<sup>68</sup> In light of Mark 10:30 and Luke 12:33 it must rather mean that to the extent that God's people collectively obey his commands, which include caring for the poor, then individual needs will be met. God provides enough for all his people to live a decent life; the question is if they will distribute his resources equitably to bring about this state of affairs. Solomon's sayings in Proverb 30:8-9 are good reminders of our fallen human nature: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may

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<sup>68</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 212.

have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God."<sup>69</sup>

The parable described in Matthew 25:31-46 clearly entails a kind of eternal judgment where God will judge his people in accordance to how they have cared for the needy in their midst. The parable of sheep and goats most likely refers only to needy disciples ("brothers"), but the parable of the good Samaritan generalizes the principle to embrace even one's enemies, including those of entirely different religions and races (Lk 10:25-37).<sup>70</sup>

In investigating Jesus' parable stated in Luke 16:1-13, the unjust steward is surprisingly praised, not for his injustice but for his shrewdness (16:8); and it is used as a platform to teach his disciples to use worldly wealth to gain friends for themselves, so that when it comes to an end they "might be welcomed into eternal dwellings." (16:9) Here, Jesus seems to be realistic about the temporary nature of earthly wealth, and the disciples are urged to be wise in using their wealth, rather than referring it to either a specific type of ill-gotten gain or to "all 'mammon' or material possessions as somewhere tainted by the fallen world order."<sup>71</sup>

The owning of riches, therefore, can be seen as a blessing when it is complimented with a great responsibility, giving and accountability. The strikingly similar parables of the Pounds (Lk 19:11-27) and Talents (Mt 25:14-30) remind us that investment for the sake of earning more money is a legitimate Christian enterprise.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bob Luginbill, "Are Health and Wealth a Part of the Gospel?" Ichthys, <<http://ichthys.com/mail-Prosperity%20Gospel%20again.htm>> (accessed 23 December 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Blomberg, "Wealth."

<sup>71</sup> Contra Craig L. Blomberg's view (*Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 211).

<sup>72</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*.

John Schneider's<sup>73</sup> argument attempts to liberate relatively well-to-do middle-class Christians from obsessive and oppressive guilt about their wealth and sets them free for responsible royal servant stewardship and delight. But the bottom-line concern is to defend the argument that delight in creation and its economic blessings is compatible with and embraces compassion and justice: for "there is no true prosperity or delight without compassion and justice."<sup>74</sup> In modern missions many resort to "creative abundance"<sup>75</sup> or "wealth creation"<sup>76</sup> in helping the poor, which can be justified when it is practiced appropriately.<sup>77</sup> For a manifestation of justice and morality<sup>78</sup> in economic growth can bring forth glorified testimony for the kingdom of God to the world.<sup>79</sup> In short, God demands accountability from those who own it!

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<sup>73</sup> John Schneider, *Godly Materialism: Rethinking Money and Possessions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> Schneider, *Godly Materialism*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> Joe Pettit, "A Defense of Unbounded (but Not Unlimited) Economic Growth: The Ethics of Creating Wealth and Reducing Poverty," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30:1 (2010): 183-204.

<sup>76</sup> Robert G. Kennedy, "Wealth Creation in the Catholic Social Tradition," in *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income, and Their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition*, ed. Helen Alford, Charles M. A. Clark, S. A. Cortright, and Michael J. Naughton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> However, there are eight essays in Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler, *Wealth, Poverty, & Human Destiny* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003) which are written in opposition to liberal ideas of a capitalist economy. Also, when discussing about cooperate globalization, Sharon Delgado contends, "In the long run, the whole system is unsustainable, for the accumulation of wealth at the top depends upon the exploitation and repression of people at the bottom and upon the unlimited extraction of limited natural wealth." Sharon Delgado, *Shaking the Gates of Hell: Faith-Led Resistance to Corporate Globalization* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>78</sup> See also Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2005).

<sup>79</sup> See Franklin I. Gamwell, *Democracy on Purpose: Justice and the Reality of God* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2000).



### **III. Summary**

From the research on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, it is well documented that Christ cares for the poor. He did not promise those who follow him that they will no longer living in poverty and will get many material resources/blessings. Much the opposite, the disciples are urged to forsake the world and to carry their own cross to follow him. Also, spiritual abundance is the overarching message embedded in the Gospels, and it is a paradigm shift used by Jesus to portray a higher heavenly calling of spirituality when compared with the Old Testament's realm of physical abundance. Material abundance for self-indulgence is not the central teaching of the Gospels, a new life in Christ accompanied by self-sacrificing good deeds, rather, is the main admonishment. Jesus never suggests that his disciples would receive much material blessings and be released from poverty. On the contrary, they are asked to remember and give to the poor and be willing to be made poor for the sake of the gospel. Although it is not sinful to be rich, those who are wealthy need to be accountable on how they use their material resources, lest greed for money fill their hearts and they fall into temptations. As a faithful disciple of Christ, one needs to learn to donate to the poor and put God first in their lives as the greed of money is the root of all evils (1Ti 6:9).

## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to make a thorough study on Christ Jesus' biblical and theological views on poverty and riches and their implications. Although Jesus' message of the kingdom of God primarily targets the materially poor, he also cares for those who are poor spiritually or ethically. Moreover, the blessing of spiritual abundance is the overarching message embedded in the Gospels, and it is a paradigm shift used by Jesus to portray a higher heavenly calling of discipleship when compared with the Old Testament's promises of material abundance. In a way, Jesus never suggests that his disciples would receive much material blessing and be released from poverty. On the contrary, they are asked to remember and give to the poor and even be willing to be made poor for the sake of the gospel. Although it is not sinful to be rich, those who are wealthy need to be accountable on how they use their material resources, lest greed for money fill their hearts and make them fall into temptations. It is thus hoped that a more-balanced biblical and theological understanding of Jesus on poverty and riches, as well as the related issues regarding a more equitable distribution of wealth and accountability that relates to a proper use of financial resources, can be presented for further reflections and actions.

## 撮 要

這篇專文嘗試對耶穌基督的貧窮和富足之聖經－神學觀做一個全面的研究。雖然耶穌的神國度之基本資訊是針對物質貧窮的人，但祂也關心那些在靈性和道德上貧窮的人。此外，靈命豐盛的祝福是福音書裏深藏着的首要資訊，這是耶穌形容作祂門徒一個更高層次的屬天呼召，比起舊約所指的物質豐盛，是一個迥然不同的轉變。在某種意義上，耶穌從未說過祂的門徒會領受很多物質的祝福及不會處於貧窮。相反的，祂要求門徒記念窮人，並且要施贈給他們。為了福音的緣故，他們甚至願意自己成為貧窮。雖然有錢不是罪，富足的人卻要在他們的物質資源上負責任，不然，貪愛錢財會把他們的心擠住，使他們墮入試探裏。因此，在財富和資源上，此專文盼望能提供一個關於耶穌對貧窮和富足較平衡的聖經－神學觀，以及對財富分配有較公平和負責任的措施，以供進一步的反思和回應。