

applied Isaiah 61 to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk. 4:18,19). He seems to have incorporated into his quotation the giving of sight to the blind from elsewhere in Isaiah (42:7; 35:5) to give emphasis to the fact that he would use the Spirit to provide both literal and spiritual sight.

The work of Jesus through the Spirit did not end when he ascended to heaven, however. The Gospel concludes with Jesus telling his disciples, "I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" (24:49). Thus in

the first verse of Acts Luke says that the Gospel was the record of "all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach". He was to continue the work through his apostles, who, after receiving the Spirit at Pentecost, "went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following" (Mk. 16:20).

For more on the theme of the Holy Spirit at work as recorded in the early chapters of Luke, see ["I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh"](#), Don Harrison (Apr. 2003, p. 128); ["The promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2: A reply"](#), Don Harrison (Dec. 2006, p. 442) and ["The spirit of Elijah and Pentecost"](#), Andrew Perry (Feb. 2007, p. 42). These are available on the [Back Issues](#) page of our website: [www.testimony-magazine.org](http://www.testimony-magazine.org).

# Poverty and wealth in Luke's Gospel

Mark Vincent

*The themes of wealth, materialism and stewardship, and the contrast between rich and poor, are widely recognised as being dominant in Luke vis-à-vis the other Gospels. This article looks at what Jesus has to say about the topic by breaking Luke's teaching down into five sections.*

**O**UR CONSIDERATION of the theme of poverty and wealth in the Gospel of Luke is divided into five sections:

- [1 The God Who turns things upside down](#)
- [2 Jesus and the poor](#)
- [3 Woe to the rich](#)
- [4 Give to the poor](#)
- [5 Stewardship.](#)

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## 1. The God Who turns things upside down

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**T**HE famous Song of Mary, recorded uniquely in Luke's Gospel, sets the tone for our theme. Like Hannah before her, she characterises her Lord and God as the God of inversion, the One Who turns things upside down. Consider these phrases:

"He hath regarded the *low estate* of His handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me *blessed* . . .  
He hath scattered the *proud* in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down the *mighty* from their seats,  
and exalted them of *low degree*.

He hath filled the *hungry* with good things"  
(Lk. 1:48,51b-53a).

What, then, would such a God think of riches, and the attitude they are likely to engender? What would be His attitude to materialism and obsession about 'things' when He sees it in the men and women He has created? We could guess it pretty accurately even if we did not know the next line of the Song. Mary makes it quite clear:

"and the *rich* He hath sent *empty away*"  
(v. 53b).

There is good reason for this, as we shall see later on; it is not arbitrary, nor is it that He rejoices in seeing people stumble for the sake of it (as if He would gain satisfaction from watching someone fall off a bicycle just because they had learned how to ride). It is not success *per se* that God decries, whether measured in monetary or in other terms. It is the spirit that success—of many different kinds—so often breeds within

human hearts that is the problem. We shall come back to this.

For now, though, let us note beyond any doubt that riches are likely to be a problem. We see this not just from what Mary says God can do (and even *likes* to do, perhaps) to the rich, but from many other passages within Luke. Consider the words of the Sermon on the Plain:

“Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God . . .

Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you . . . and shall reproach you . . .

Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy”.

And the flip side:

“But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.

Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger.

Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep”

(excerpted from 6:20-25).

The same pattern of inversion is clearly here once more, and this time on the lips of our Lord. We can try to domesticate the passage by saying that it is about an attitude or a ‘spiritual poverty’ rather than our literal state, but those are not the terms in which the Lord frames his message in Luke (even if it is slightly different in Matthew), and we should be naïve if we were to admit no “consolation” in being rich now, or if we should claim that the literal deprivation/excess axis is not likely to have some correlation with a ‘spiritual’ one.

And there is more. Consider some further passages:

“For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased;

and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (14:11).

Are not the physical expressions of riches (luxurious homes, clothes and cars, for instance) ways of ‘exalting ourselves’? Just how easy is it to deny ourselves when we have the financial means to achieve something we really want? And would such a denial not be an example of humbling ourselves?

Let us take another very similar-looking passage:

“every one that exalteth himself shall be abased;

and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (18:14).

So concludes the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. It is not specifically a parable about riches, but the same theme of inversion is very much in evidence, and it is a theme with obvious application to our relations with material things.

And finally in this section:

“he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger;  
and he that is chief, as he that doth serve . . .  
I am among you as he that serveth”

(22:26,27).

What does a servant spend his money on? What money does a servant have to spend? What demeanour and what pride does a servant have? These are highly relevant questions for personal examination.

So what may we conclude from this initial survey of the inversion theme, so dominant in Luke? At least this: that it is easier and better to learn the ways of God in a humble state than in a state of excess. It really is the case that less is more. The model would seem to be: poverty now, riches later. We need to ask personally how literally this teaching ought to be applied.

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## 2. Jesus and the poor

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IT IS no surprise, given the foregoing, that our Lord himself experienced what it meant to be humble, both literally and in spirit. He was born in a manger (2:7,8), and he kept company with the misfits and the despised, with prostitutes and publicans. The verse that stands out most, however, is the following:

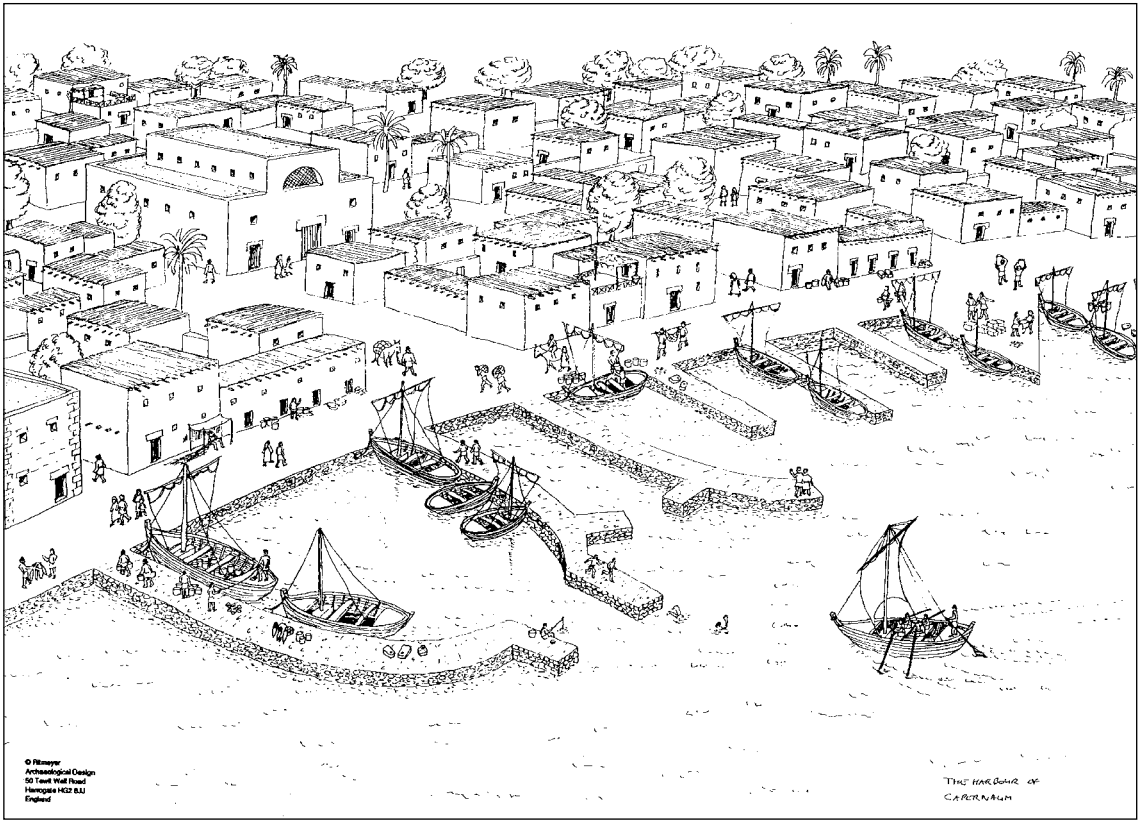
“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;  
but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (9:58).

Jesus not only had an affinity with the poor, he saw the preaching of the gospel to them as a particular priority, and as the fulfilment of Scripture. This link between preaching and the poor comes out in several passages:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (4:18);

“Then Jesus answering said . . . tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk . . . to the poor the gospel is preached” (7:22);

“what went ye out [into the wilderness] for to see [in John the Baptist]? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously



**Reconstruction drawing of the harbour at Capernaum. © Ritmeyer Archaeological Design. Reprinted with permission.**

apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts" (v. 25).

The latter passage has interesting implications. Are we attired (physically and mentally) more for a job in the courts of a worldly king, or are we with John the Baptist, preaching a gospel of repentance? These three passages make quite a challenge regarding the focus of preaching. Jesus experienced poverty and focused on the poor and despised; his example might implicitly ask us to do the same.

From a structural point of view, it is interesting that Jesus interacts closely with two tax collectors within the Gospel. Five chapters in we meet Levi/Matthew. This man, as a despised tax collector, is identified by Jesus as "sick" and a "sinner" (5:27-32), but the remedy comes through the call of the Lord. Six chapters from the end of the Gospel there is Zacchaeus, similarly despised, but who, on receiving the Lord's call, restores all he has falsely taken from men, and gives liberally to the poor (19:8). Right at the heart of the Gospel, in chapter 12, some of Luke's most telling passages

on wealth and materialism are to be found. We shall come back to chapter 12, but it seems that Luke has brought the rich/poor admired/despised oppositions right into the structural shape of his Gospel.

### 3. Woe to the rich

**S**O MUCH for the poor. What about the rich? Jesus does not mince his words. He attacks the Pharisees who love the uppermost seats and outward recognition (11:43). He tells the parable of the conceited and self-centred Pharisee (18:9-14), and implicitly criticises those who dress sumptuously and live the high life (7:25). He scourges those who show greater interest in commerce and profit than in God by selling their wares in the temple (19:46). And, most strikingly of all, he tells the parable—unique to Luke—of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). The rich man, bedecked in finery and faring sumptuously every day, receives his "good things" in this life (v. 25), but misses out in the next. To put it mildly, it is difficult to



### Remains of ancient houses at Caperhaum.

feel comfortable with wealth and its trappings against the backdrop of these passages.

And so it should be! Why? Because the attitudes to which riches tend so easily to lead are very dangerous to our spiritual health. Let us brainstorm for a moment on what the problems with being rich might be.

❖ Riches can lead to pride. Look how much I have! Look what I have achieved and how successful I have been! I admire myself, and you should admire me too! “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built . . . ?” (Dan. 4:30). Pride, it scarcely needs to be said, is one of the great obstacles to a right relationship with God. In a sense, pride is the replacing of God with oneself in one’s heart.

❖ Salary, wealth and possessions provide an easy and obvious yardstick to measure ourselves against other people; salary and status envy are key motivators in the workplace. I admire *her* because she has so much. I despise *them* because I have so much more and can operate so much more effectively. I would hate to live *there* or to dress like *that*. *They* can’t have been very successful. “God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men” (Lk. 18:11). Yet I ought to be esteeming others better than myself.

❖ When goods are increased, so are those who eat them. Riches and the abundance of ‘things’ bring burdens both pleasant (new interests and possessions to learn and take care of) and unpleasant (more bills to pay, people to see, things to repair and maintain, and business to take care of), which demand more resources, time and attention. But do I have the time to be rich or to pursue rich men’s interests when I have a life of discipleship to lead?

❖ Having tends to lead, not to satisfaction, but to wanting more. So, am I to be consumed by a never-ending quest for more and better? Should I not rather learn in whatsoever state I am to be content?

❖ Resources and success can breed an attitude of self-reliance. I feel secure because I have a large pension pot and good life insurance cover. I feel powerful and in control because I can afford to pay someone to come and fix whatever problem I may have. Yet I ought to feel reliant on God and not on myself. I should be confident because of faith in Him, not a portfolio of accounts and contacts.

These points alone ought to be enough to make us realise that Jesus’ teaching about riches is not arbitrary, but is well founded on an intimate un-

derstanding of human nature. There is scarcely a good thing said anywhere in the Gospel about riches as an end in themselves.

With this introduction, then, let's take a look at some of Jesus' teachings as they relate to the dangers of riches:

- ✠ In the parable of the sower some seed is "choked" (an unpleasant term!) by riches and the cares and pleasures of this life (8:14). This is what riches have the power to do: to choke, and to render spiritually barren.
- ✠ The Pharisees loved "the uppermost seats in the synagogues" and elaborate greetings (11:43). Why? So that they could look down on others, and so that people would perceive them as superior, more successful, more important. Many of the outward displays of riches today achieve the same effect, whether intentionally or not.
- ✠ In a very powerful verse (12:15), Jesus warns against covetousness and asserts that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses. The very fact that Jesus said this implies that people mistakenly tend to think that it does.
- ✠ The parable of the barns is unique to Luke (12:16-21). The man planned for himself a relaxing and luxurious future, industriously pulling down his barns to build greater. He was a highly successful entrepreneur, just the sort that society admires. But in doing all this he forgot about being rich toward God. He forgot, too, just how short man's time can be.
- ✠ It is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (18:24). There is a lot of baggage (literal and ideological) that comes with being rich. Wealth tends to encourage self-indulgence, and consequently self-loss. Witness the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32).
- ✠ We cannot serve God and mammon (16:13). Money and things ought to be our servants. Yet they have a nasty tendency to want promotion to the status of master.

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## 4. Give to the poor

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**W**HAT, then, to do with the resources that we have? This question brings us to the treatment of the poor (about which Luke has many things to say) and to the topic of stewardship. Let us look at each in turn.

We have already seen Jesus eating and drinking with sinners (5:29,30; 19:2,7), and his Father's

concern with the poor and disadvantaged is attested many times in the Old Testament. Given the impeding effects of wealth, then, one wise option would be to give it to others more needy than ourselves:

*"Lend, hoping for nothing again . . . give, and it shall be given unto you" (6:35,38);*

*"Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not" (12:33).*

It is reasonable to assume some degree of hyperbole here. Clearly, if we gave everything away at once, then we would not be able to attend to some of Jesus' other commands; we would become burdensome to others, and our resources for helping in the longer run might be hindered. In economic terms, there is an opportunity cost of using money, whether we spend it on ourselves or others (we can only spend it once), so responsibility is required in selection. However, it will be in our nature to err on the side of caution (weakness!) in the application of Jesus' words here, so we should guard against dismissing the verse too lightly.

*"Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (18:22).*

Notice the little word "all" here, which makes this passage so painful! It is spoken to the rich young ruler, a man whom Jesus loved because of his already high standard of dedication towards God. But Jesus was keen to raise him to an even higher level of discipleship. There would be no gain without pain.

We ought, similarly, to have an attitude of mercy to those in our debt (7:41,42), driven by a consciousness of our own debt towards God and a sense of our poverty in relation to Him.

In two further passages, Jesus continues his exhortations:

✠ When we feast we ought to call the poor to share with us, rather than thinking of our rich neighbours who might be the usual guests at our gatherings (14:13).

✠ In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan charges the innkeeper to take good care of the hapless victim, taking full responsibility himself for whatever costs are incurred: "whatsoever thou spendest more . . . I will repay thee" (10:35). This is a fine standard of neighbourliness and concern for others.

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## 5. Stewardship

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THE NOTION of stewardship is one that is core to Luke's Gospel, and is developed in a number of sayings and parables that are unique to him. It is a waste of resources to squander wealth as the Prodigal Son did in his phase of riotous living (ch. 15), and we should not want to be like the Unjust Steward who wasted his master's goods (16:1). But beyond that, what are the parameters that should govern our stewardship, whether it be of material things, or of things like talents, time, intellect, emotions and heart?

We know that a certain tribute is due to Caesar that must be paid (20:22), so there are worldly claims upon us that ought not to be denied when we live as foreigners on someone else's land. We must prove ourselves faithful in matters pertaining to "the mammon of unrighteousness" (16:9-11). But we should remember what comes first. Our Lord compares himself to a harsh or "austere" nobleman who reaps where he does not sow (19:21,22). It is not good enough to bury our resources in the ground; God expects us to capitalise on our opportunities, to take the assets He has put into our care and to make them work in His service. We ought to remember, too, the poor widow, who, though she had so little, knew where her priorities lay (21:2).

Chapters 15 and 16 of Luke focus particularly on stewardship, and contain much material unique to Luke. Chapter 15 contains three parables, all about things lost and found. In the first, a sheep wanders off and is lost *outside* the fold. In the second, a coin is lost *inside* the house. (Is this within the ecclesia? It is possible to be spiritually lost there, too, even while coming along to the meetings.) In the third, one son goes *outside* to sow his wild oats, but when he returns it transpires that his brother has lost his way, at least to some extent, *within* the family home. In every case our Lord is deeply concerned about finding and restoring the one who is lost. Shepherding and stewardship—in the widest sense—are very important to him, and so they ought to be to us.

Finally there is chapter 16. We have already alluded to the unique parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in the second half of the chapter, and we shall want to ensure that our stewardship does not involve too large a portion of self-serving, as it did for that rich man. But it is with the parable of the Unjust Steward that we shall conclude. The Lord commends the steward because he acts

decisively in his hour of need in order to ensure his security when he loses his job (he does this by increasing his master's near-term cash flow, working to the principle that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush). The children of this generation are wiser in their generation than the children of light; they know where they want to be and what they have to do to get there, and they go right ahead and achieve it. We need to have that kind of clear thinking, that drive and determination, with respect to our spiritual goals and access to God's Kingdom.

The crux comes later in the passage when Jesus tells us that we should make to ourselves friends of the unrighteous mammon, "that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations" (v. 9). The only "they" who can authorise access into everlasting habitations are God and Jesus. In order to secure that access, we need to handle "the unrighteous mammon" in a certain way. There are two ways of interpreting this, although the overall brunt of the passage is the same whichever option we choose:

- 1 We should be friendly/intimate/acquainted with the mammon of unrighteousness; that is, not being scared of it or regarding it as something dirty or evil, but using it to good purposes (no place here, then, for burying it in the ground!). That way, when we fail (when this life comes to an end), or when it fails (when money runs out, or, as the Living Bible paraphrases it, "when money is a thing of the past"), God and Jesus may be pleased to welcome us into eternity because we have been good stewards of all our assets (not merely the financial ones), using them to profit and glorify Him.
- 2 We should make friends with God and Jesus *by means of* the mammon of unrighteousness, by the way we use it. Once again, this means by using it wisely, as good stewards, in such a way as to win their favour and to show that it is them (rather than ourselves) that we are trying to please.

In this way, then, this unique and difficult parable (many cite it as the most complex in the entire teaching of Jesus) can be seen to provide an excellent summary of Luke's message on this topic. There is nothing that we have that we did not receive. God has blessed us with the opportunity and privilege of serving as His stewards. We know what truly matters. Now it is up to us to execute it as we face the day of account.