

Rich and Poor in the Gospel of Luke

One of the striking features of the Gospel of Luke is the collection of stories which revolve around wealth and poverty. In his 'New Testament History' Filson argues that the author of the Gospel of Luke emphasises the universality of the 'good news' of Jesus Christ by including those who needed help, for example outcasts, tax-collectors and sinners¹. Although there are stories in the Gospel of Luke of Jesus socialising with and helping people of social and economic standing, there are also stories indicating Jesus' concern for the poor, his criticism of those who deprived the poor of justice, and his understanding of the damage caused to relationships by wealth. Longenecker identifies² a number of stories in the Gospel of Luke which he claims demonstrates that the author of the Gospel of Luke 'has his eye on the materially impoverished':

1. Jesus' parable of the Samaritan (and the inn-keeper), who cared for a stranger from his own resources despite significant inconvenience and danger to himself (Luke 10.25-37);
2. the Lukan version of the Lord's prayer, with its petition that the Father 'keep giving' the necessity of bread on a daily basis (Luke 11.3);
3. Jesus' parable of the rich fool, who hoards his possessions, rather than sharing them with those in need (so the implication seems to be; Luke 12.13-21);
4. Jesus' command to the rich man, 'Sell your possessions and give to the poor' (Luke 12.33);
5. Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet, in which the invited guests include 'the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame' (Luke 14.15-24);
6. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in which the rich man finds himself in Hades as a consequence (it seems) of his failure to recognize the needs around him (Luke 16.19-31). In this parable, Jesus even intimates that 'Moses and the prophets' are properly interpreted in contexts where the needs of the poor are not overlooked (Luke 16.29);
7. Jesus' words to the elite ruler of Luke 18, who is commanded to 'sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor' (Luke 18.22); and
8. Zacchaeus' act of obedience to Jesus in giving half of his goods to the poor and ensuring that the rest of his resources could be claimed by those whom he had defrauded, to which Jesus responds, 'Today salvation has come to this house' (Luke 18.8-9).

¹ Floyd V. Filson, *A New Testament History* (London: Clowes, 1965), pp. 369-370.

² Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, poverty and the Greco-Roman world* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 123-124.

Longenecker concludes: 'it seems fair to say that the materially poor and vulnerable were of special significance and concern to Jesus.'

This collection of stories which revolve around wealth and poverty appears to be part of theme which runs through the Gospel of Luke: the kingdom of God disrupts the ways in which human societies are ordered to privilege the powerful and the rich at the expense of the weak and the poor. That theme is evident from the very first pages of the Gospel even before Jesus has appeared on the scene.

Read Luke 1.46-55.

In what ways does the 'Song of Mary' describe the kingdom of God disrupting the ordering of human societies?

The Gospel of Luke tells us that John proclaimed 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3.3). The exchange between John and the crowds suggests that the repentance required by John involved changes of attitudes and behaviours: 'Bear fruits worthy of repentance' he tells the crowds (Luke 3.8). But these fruits are not simply 'spiritual'. When asked by the crowds what they should do, John makes explicit his expectations of practical actions which impact on human relationships: 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise' (Luke 3.11).

What verses in the Hebrew Bible make explicit the connection between religious observance and ethical actions?

The Gospel of Luke records an incident at the start of Jesus' public ministry, an incident which many commentators interpret as a programmatic statement or manifesto of Jesus' ministry³.

³ See, for example, David Wenham and Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament: the Gospels and Acts* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 2011, p. 242, or Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: unlicking the Bible's grand narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), p. 309.

Read Luke 4.16-21.

What are we to make of Jesus' statement, drawn from Isaiah (Isaiah 61.1f; 58.6), that he will 'bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free'? In his commentary on these verses, Marshall writes, 'The various acts described are to be taken spiritually rather than literally'⁴. Commenting on the same verses Conzelmann states that "'today' does not extend into the present in which the author lives, but is thought of as a time in the past"⁵. And Gutiérrez asserts that 'Christ does not 'spiritualize' the eschatological promises; he gives them meaning and fulfilment today; ... The hidden sense is not the 'Spiritual' one which devalues and even eliminates temporal and earthly realities as obstacles; rather it is a sense of fullness which takes on and transforms historical reality.'⁶. Finally, Chester agrees with John Howard Yoder that when Jesus proclaimed 'the year of the Lord's favour' he announced an eschatological jubilee, a new era of economic and social relations for those who had been forgiven and set free by the death and resurrection of Jesus; 'the followers of Jesus are to live as both recipients of, and participants in, a permanent jubilee'⁷.

What are the different positions taken by these four commentators? What might be some of the implications of these different positions for our interpretation of the Gospel of Luke?

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke record Jesus' teaching which has become known as 'The Beatitudes' (Matthew 5.3-12; Luke 6.20-23). Despite some obvious differences between the two versions, what is perhaps most striking is that only the author of the Gospel of Luke records 'The Woes' (Luke 6.24-26).

Read Luke 6.20-26.

What parallels are there between the 'Song of Mary' (Luke 1.46-55) and 'The Beatitudes' and 'The Woes' recorded in the Gospel of Luke?

⁴ I. H. Marshall 'Luke' in *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (3rd ed.; eds D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer; Leicester: IVP, 1970), p. 896.

⁵ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke* (translated from the German by Geoffrey Baswell; London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 195.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (translated from the Spanish by Sr Caridad Inda and John Egleton; London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 96.

⁷ Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: sharing the gospel through social involvement* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), p. 96.

Johnson suggests that the 'blessings and woes' of Luke 6.20-26 are the fulfilment of the 'programmatically prophecy' of Luke 4.18: 'the Messiah brings 'good news' to the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are persecuted. In contrast, he pronounces woes for those who are rich, well fed, joyful, and approved by others.'⁸ Johnson contrasts those who already 'have their consolation now' (Luke 6.24) and are therefore not in need of the 'consolation of Israel' brought by Jesus (Luke 2.25). He notes how the 'blessings and woes' of Luke 6.20-26 fit within a 'pattern of messianic reversal established earlier in the Magnificat': '[Jesus] does not prescribe a spiritual attitude for his followers but announces that God is upsetting the measure of the world: those considered outcast and excluded from the 'consolation' of full membership of God's people are accepted by God. The 'good news' to them is that the standard of humans are not those of God: 'Yours is the kingdom of God'.'

Bailey reminds us that, unlike in classical Greek thought, in Hebrew thought there was no distinction between 'body' and 'spirit'⁹. He goes on to argue that 'there is no 'spiritual gospel' that can be endorsed in isolation from the reality of the physical world that God created, called 'good' and into which he placed human beings'. Bailey sees the integration of the physical and the spiritual at the heart of Jesus' teaching. When talking about material goods – money, possessions – Bailey claims that Jesus assumed that all material goods belong to God: we are stewards rather than owners of material goods, and we are responsible to God for how we use them. The so-called 'Parable of the Rich Fool' (Luke 12.13-21) provides an example of Jesus' teaching about our relationship with God and our relationship with material goods.

Read Luke 12.13-21.

How does Jesus respond to the demand that he should intervene in a dispute about material goods?

What themes about our relationship with God and our relationship with material goods can you identify?

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (3rd ed.; London: SCM, 2010), p. 202.

⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 298.

In his 'summary', Bailey identifies the following points from the 'Parable of the Rich Fool':¹⁰

1. A naked cry for justice, unqualified by any self-criticism, is not heeded by Jesus.
2. In case of a broken personal relationship Jesus refuses to answer a cry for justice when the answer contributes to finalizing the brokenness of that relationship. He did not come as a divider.
3. Jesus is concerned for needs, not simply earnings. Here a self-centred cry for justice is understood by Jesus to be a symptom of a sickness. He refuses to answer the cry but rather strives to heal the condition that produced the cry.
4. Material possession belong to God who gives them as gifts to humans. Sometimes those gifts are in the form of unearned surpluses of material things. The rich man in the parable assumed exclusive ownership of all his material possessions and with it the right to keep them for his private use. Sharing his wealth with those in need never occurred to him.
5. The rich fool failed to account for his mortality. He failed in securing both his life and his possessions.
6. Human life is on loan from God. It is a gift, not a right. The rich man assumed he owned his soul / self. He discovered his mistake when God suddenly asked for the loan of his life to be returned.
7. The person who believes that security and the good life are to be found in the acquisition and storing of more and more possessions is sadly mistaken.
8. The voice of God de-absolutizes material possessions by reminding the rich man that he does not know and cannot control who will acquire power over his wealth. He may have a will, but when the dust settles, who, in the end, will own his wealth?
9. The abundant life is to be found in 'treasuring up for God' rather than for self.
10. James talks of the rich man who will 'fade away in the midst of his pursuits' (James 1.11). Jesus paints a parabolic picture of this precise phenomenon. The fool's wealth destroyed his capacity to maintain any abiding human relationships. He had no one with whom to share his soul / life / self. Worst of all, he did not know he had a problem.
11. In contrast to the psalmist [who wrote 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God' (Psalm 42.1)], the rich fool

¹⁰ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Easter Eyes*, pp. 307-308.

misunderstood the nature of his own self / soul / life. He saw it as a type of body that could be fully nourished and sustained by food and drink.

In his encyclical 'The Joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis writes of the idolatry of money in contemporary culture:

While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. Debt and the accumulation of interest also make it difficult for countries to realize the potential of their own economies and keep citizens from enjoying their real purchasing power. To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion, which have taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.¹¹

What parallels can you draw between Pope Francis' criticism of the idolatry of money and Jesus' teaching in Luke 12.13-21 about our relationship with God and our relationship with material goods?

In 'Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts' Esler argues that the author of the Gospel of Luke uses stories about Jesus to develop a 'theology of the poor' that speaks into the contextual reality of the Christian community for which the Gospel of Luke was first written¹². Within this theology of the poor, the author of the Gospel of Luke views salvation from two distinct but related perspectives: worldly and other-worldly. The other-worldly perspective focuses on the Messianic Banquet, the time when 'the sufferings of the poor in this life will be replaced by eternal contentment'¹³. In contrast, Esler claims that 'the elimination of injustice, the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor and the

¹¹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (London: The Catholic Truth Society, 2013), pp. 33-34.

¹² Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts the social and political motivations of Lucan theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), pp. 187-197.

¹³ Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 193.

destitute, is not merely an eschatological reality, but is a vital constituent of Christianity in this world, here and now'¹⁴.

Who does the author of the Gospel of Luke see as the 'poor' to whom Jesus brings 'good news' (Luke 4.18)? Is it those who are economically poor or those who are religiously poor (cf. Pss 34.6; 40.17; 70.5; 74.19)?

Trace the use of 'poor' through the Gospel of Luke: 4.18; 6.20; 7.22; 14.13; 14.21; 16.20; 16.22; 18.22; 19.8; 21.3.

Who are the poor in the Gospel of Luke?

What is the Jesus' 'good news' to them?

¹⁴ Esler, *Community and Gospel*, p. 193.