

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CHRISTIAN ETHICS, POVERTY, AND RICHES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

What is the message of the Bible about poverty and riches for us today? This is the question that has guided the thesis thus far. The best possible answer to this question will result in a Christian ethics of poverty and riches appropriate to the ethical problems of contemporary societies. How does one formulate this kind of ethics? To whom is this ethics to be addressed?

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches – like any other Christian ethics – has three audiences (cf. David Tracy in Van Huyssteen 1999: 74). One audience is the Christian Church. In this context the Church not only means the clergy or synods, but especially individual Christian believers – both rich and poor. A second audience is any society where Christians live. Christians believe that their views on social issues must be heard by all engaged in politics, those participating in the economy, and citizens active in the organisations and associations of civil society. A Christian ethics that claims to be theological also aims to engage fellow scientists in dialogue, especially those who are interested in issues of poverty and riches.

I have argued throughout the thesis that a Christian ethics that hopes to be credible and worthy of being a partner in dialogue with these audiences must be developed in the following way (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1996). I have first argued that major parts of theology function scientifically and that theological results and theories are argued for rationally. The scientific and rational character of large parts of theology enables theologians to become legitimate partners in dialogue between scientists, as well as equal partners in

political deliberation in the public sphere of society.

The scientific, rational way I have proposed for answering the guiding question of this thesis, i.e., "What is the message of the Bible about poverty and riches for us today?" is as follows. There is no way of making meaningful ethical judgements without fully understanding the ethical issue under consideration. For this reason I have devoted a chapter to fully understand the complex phenomenon of poverty. Understanding poverty does not yield sufficient background information for developing an ethical theory. What more is needed, is to understand why poverty is a serious moral issue. I have tried to point out the detail of why poverty should be a matter of serious concern for all humans. Thereafter I analysed the phenomenon of poverty in terms of the various dimensions of the concept of justice, so as to capture the main moral issues in terms of the dominant categories used in contemporary public philosophy.

Armed with this detailed background, I then went to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to examine what they have to say about the ethical issues involved with poverty and riches. I formulated a set of dominant themes that emerged from the detailed analysis and interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, at this stage the ingredients for putting together a Christian ethics appropriate for today have been gathered, but not yet integrated.

What thus remains to be done in this thesis is to develop a Christian ethics of poverty and riches by integrating our current understanding of the phenomenon of poverty, our contemporary moral insight into the issues raised by poverty, and our results from close readings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. This will be done in the following way. I will first give a brief reformulation of the moral challenge that poverty presents to us today. Next I will integrate the ethics found through close readings in the Old and New



Testaments into a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches. This Biblical ethics will be evaluated comprehensively in terms of the way we today understand the complexities and injustices of poverty. In the light of this evaluation I will formulate a proposal for a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. I will attempt to reformulate a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches to be appropriate to contemporary societies and to translate its contents to suit current circumstances.

### 1. The Challenge of Poverty to Ethics

What, in a nutshell, is the challenge that poverty poses to contemporary ethics? I have already established that poverty is a serious moral issue that demands the attention of all people and that poverty is a matter of justice that comprehensively affects its sufferers. What, by way of summary, are the main issues that contemporary ethical theories must address?

1. *Poverty concerns matters of life and death.* Poverty can lead to people's death. Lack of food, water, shelter, or clothes can cause people's death. Food with inadequate nutritional value, water that spreads disease, shelter offering no protection against the elements, and clothing that exposes people to cold weather can all cause diseases that lead to ill-health and eventually death, or severely diminish people's vulnerability to disease and illness. The greater risks of crime in poor areas have similar consequences.
2. *Poverty causes or exacerbates bad relationships.* Through a diversity of reasons, being poor can cause relationships to deteriorate within families, between friends and neighbours, within communities, and amongst citizens in a state.
3. *Poverty leads to squandered human potential.* Lack of money, energy, and time, inferior opportunities, and social illiteracy can cause poor people's human potential to be wasted through lack of proper development.

4. *Poverty means public humiliation for poor people.* Many poor people suffer public humiliation in a number of ways. Poverty is mostly a condition visible for everyone to see. Non-poor people often treat poor people like dirt and blame them for their poverty or for simply being there. Their mere presence presents a moral challenge many people refuse to face.
5. *Poverty means more burdens and reduced quality of life for many people.* The physical, psychological, and sociological consequences of poverty stacks up more burdens for poor people to carry through their lives than would have been the case without their poverty.
6. *Poverty shows people's inhumanity towards one another.* Poverty illustrates the bad side of human beings, as they often turn a blind eye towards the suffering of their fellow humans. Not only do many people not care about the suffering poor, some exploit them and do all kinds of injustices to them.
7. *Poverty exposes widespread responsibility for a condition of injustice.* Many people are blameworthy for the suffering poor people experience. Some people are responsible for directly causing poverty, many more others are responsible for choosing not to care or refusing to get involved. Poor people themselves are responsible in a few cases for their poverty, but in many more cases they are responsible for exacerbating the circumstances and suffering of themselves or other poor people.

These are the issues that ethical theories must address, in condensed, summary form. How does a Christian ethics of poverty and riches deal with these issues? To answer this question, we must first look at a biblical ethics of poverty and riches.

## 2. A Biblical Ethics of Poverty and Riches

What are the central themes found in the Bible on poverty and riches that ought to form part of a biblical ethics of poverty and riches? The following



themes dominate.

1. The Bible gives no idealised picture of either poverty or riches. Poverty is shown as a condition that is difficult to handle, that is often accompanied by oppression and exploitation, and that puts severe strains on many relationships. The uncertainty and corrupting influence of riches are clearly portrayed. Riches are something acquired in different ways, could easily be lost, and has limited value for improving a person's life. Riches can easily corrupt a person's priorities by taking the place of God as object of deepest trust.

2. The Bible emphasises that God ought to be first priority in the lives of His followers. They must acknowledge Him as the only God. They must worship and obey Him only. Life without God – whether rich or poor – is meaningless. People must trust in God and not in their wealth. Only God can enable rich people to choose against relying on their riches and to rather trust in Him. Once people accept God fully as main focus of their lives, those lives must change. Obedience to His commands is demanded as gratitude for His liberation and salvation of people – whether the Israelites from Egyptian bondage or members of the human race from their sin. When accepting God's liberation and salvation, His followers must become like Him. Part of becoming like God is through being holy and caring deeply for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society.

3. God is portrayed in the Bible as the One who deeply cares for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people in society. He takes up their cause and demands that His followers should do the same. The ethical values prescribed to take care of the poor are particularly strong demands that are placed central to the meaning of being a follower of God. To take care of the poor (the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised members of society) belongs to the practical manifestation of belonging to God, showing that a person's

faith in God is authentic and true. The reason for this emphasis is that God showed this kind of loving care for His followers when He pitied them in Egyptian bondage, in Babylonian exile, and in the bondage of sin everywhere in the world. Jesus emphasises God's care for the vulnerable in dramatic fashion by fully identifying with vulnerable people as if He Himself has been each one of them. In response to God's merciful, loving care His followers must live their gratitude and worship through an ethical lifestyle pursuing justice towards all people.

4. Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people of society must become effective in the ways non-poor people give aid to them. The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God's followers must render to people in need. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief. People in desperate need of aid to satisfy basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional for people in desperate need thereof. Helping people in this way belongs to the core of the message of the Bible. The other kind of aid is aid to help poor people escape from their poverty and to restore them to self-reliant, interdependent people similar to the others in society who are non-poor.

Aid can be abused to serve the interests of the givers of aid. They want honour and praise from fellow-citizens, which would be their sole reward. Rather, God's followers should give aid in secret, knowing that God sees everything and will reward them. If aid becomes a public issue, God must get the glory and praise for empowering His followers to be able to give gladly and generously of their resources to people in need.

5. Poor people are not only in need of aid, but especially in need of humane treatment by non-poor people. Being poor is a public affair and needing help from others for things most people provide for themselves is difficult to accept. Any action towards poor people that contains insults, humiliation, op-



pression, or exploitation makes life much more difficult for poor people. The Bible is clear that poor people's dignity and worth as human beings may not be violated in any way. Poor people are God's creation just like any other person and therefore may not be treated any differently from any non-poor person. How important this matter is in the New Testament becomes clear when Jesus identifies with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people to such an extent that relieving their needs is considered to be as if one was relieving the needs of Jesus Himself. No follower of Jesus would consider treating Jesus in a degrading or humiliating way. People in need ought to be treated thus.

6. In the light of the strong emphasis in the Bible on [1] loving care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people, [2] the great significance attached to helping poor people, and [3] the major importance of treating poor people with respect worthy of their dignity as God's children it is not surprising that people causing poverty are judged severely. Stark contrasts between suffering poor people and exploitative rich people are rejected in no uncertain terms as totally unacceptable. All such judgements on poverty and wealth are made within specific contexts to apply to the concrete circumstances of the world each author lived in. There is no abstract speculations about rich people in general or poor people in general, except perhaps a few proverbs in the Wisdom literature. Judgements on unacceptable contrasts between the rich and the poor always apply to situations the authors knew very well.

The issue for biblical ethics is thus how do people who share their lives relate to one another. What are their differences in income, wealth, and lifestyle? Where does the money of the rich come from? Are they rich because they exploit the poor? Are they oppressing the poor and trampling on them? These questions are relevant for a judgement of the level of wealth in a specific society, not how the rich in this society compares to the rich elsewhere

in the world. The Bible thus looks at riches relative to the society and the poor living in that society. In the background of all such biblical judgements are assumptions about God's ethical values given in the Old Testament for helping and treating the poor. Why were they ignored and the poor allowed to get into such desperate situations? God's followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people. To add to the miseries of poor people through injustice, oppression, exploitation, humiliation, and degradation is almost unforgivable.

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

A related difference between the Old and New Testaments with significant implications is the scope of God's addressees. In the Old Testament God addresses His people, the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, God's message becomes universal in scope, aimed at the world. Now the moral values concerning stark contrasts between rich and poor cannot be limited to intrastate justice anymore. Obviously people share their lives in different ways with members of a small community, such as a family or village, than



they share it with citizens of a large modern state or inhabitants of the world. Nevertheless, the universal scope of the New Testament message that identify all humans as sharing life in God's world has significant implications for international justice. No Christian group in any country can easily justify their non-involvement with poverty outside their own country's borders. Sharp inequalities between countries ought to matter to rich and poor Christians in different countries.

7. Poverty is nowhere presented as an ideal lifestyle that God wants for His followers. Rather, there are enough reasons to argue that God wants non-poor lives for His followers. From various sources in the Bible it is clear that God wants His followers to live lives that are rich in quality relationships with God Himself, other people, and the rest of creation. God wants His people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning. A life of poverty is portrayed as unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people's moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, make them short-sighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceited and rude to other people. An ideal life-style for God's followers is one that keeps their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God.

The strong emphasis on aid to poor people in the Bible has the intention of alleviating, ameliorating, and eradicating poverty. This implies that poverty is not considered a condition God wishes people to stay in. God wants people's poverty to be changed urgently through the help of His followers. This assumption underlying the urgency and importance of aid further reinforces the idea that God does not will poverty for His people. Further support for this idea comes from the metaphoric uses of the concepts rich and poor, especially in the New Testament. The metaphoric uses of rich all denote something positive, while the metaphoric uses of poor denote something

negative. Again, poverty is not exalted as something positive, but as a negative condition that God's followers must strive to get rid of in the lives of all people they share their lives with.

### 3. Biblical Ethics and the Complexities of Poverty

The understandings of the complexities of the phenomenon of poverty found in the biblical texts are not as sophisticated or comprehensive as those yielded by the combined efforts of current human sciences. There are no definitions of poverty, no measurements expressed as numerous indicators of poverty, a few indications of the effects of poverty, and a couple of hastily mentioned factors influencing poverty and riches. No detailed discussions of the complex phenomenon of poverty, no exquisitely analysed empirical support for statements on poverty and riches, and no theoretically adequate scientific explanations of poverty are found.

The authors of the biblical texts do not present us with explicitly articulated or purposefully worked out descriptions and explanations of poverty. They work with implicit understandings of poverty and riches that they assume their readers share with them. It would be unfair to expect that their understandings of poverty and riches match ours, as we have all the many benefits of living about 2000 to 2500 years later. The authors of the biblical texts formulated ethical values for dealing with poor people and for motivating non-poor people to become involved with such human problems on a sustained basis.

The biblical authors correctly assume that poverty is an easily identifiable phenomenon – one can see who are poor through noticing their clothes, bodily condition, limited available resources, and their loss of assets, such as land. Poverty is a condition that can destroy people and makes life a constant struggle for its sufferers. Poor people's human relationships are often



negatively affected by their poverty. They lose friends as a result of their poverty and find it difficult to make new ones. Their neighbours come to dislike them for their poverty and even their families have no use for them. Poor people have to be submissive to the rich who often dominate them and treat them like dirt.

A condition like poverty cause deep emotions in its sufferers. Poor people sometimes have knees weak from hunger and their bodies are no more than skin and bones. The suffering caused by poverty can hurt poor people to the depths of their hearts. The misery resulting from poverty are at times relieved through using alcohol. When poverty is accompanied by oppression it causes sorrow and grief. Besides those feelings, poor people also experience feelings of abandonment, as no one is prepared to help them for fear of the oppressors. Not only oppressors, but ruthless and wicked people can exacerbate the miserable conditions of poor people considerably by ignoring their rights and taking advantage of them. Political leaders can do likewise through injustice and exploitation. Political officials can perpetrate such iniquities and hide from responsibility within the chains of command found in hierarchical bureaucracies.

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

Despite the negative effects of poverty on humans, it remains possible to live a life of moral integrity reinforced by genuine religious spirituality. There are no compelling reasons for poor people to become morally corrupt or religiously apostate. The Bible several times sketches groups of suffering poor

who trust God completely and live according to His commands. God also consistently demands integrity and spirituality from poor people. Many poor people live morally better lives than many rich people and often have better insight into character than many rich people who often judge themselves to be wise.

The Bible points to a few factors that could cause poverty, though there is no comprehensive and depth understanding akin to contemporary social science of the myriad factors impacting on poor people's lives. Three categories of causes can be distinguished. People can cause poverty in the lives of others. Unjust people sometimes will not allow farming on unused land, despite the fact that allowing such farming could provide basic necessities for the poor people working the land. Poverty often results from exploitation, oppression, and injustice by people intent on enriching themselves or reinforcing their positions at the cost of others. Such people may acquire others' possessions through theft or dishonesty. Poverty often continues because people refuse to intervene out of fear for those with power who are exploiting or oppressing the poor. Poverty also continues because some people ignore the plight of the poor and are unwilling to provide any kind of help or support.

Poverty can also occur as a result of circumstances created by social forces. A monarchical system of government easily becomes exploitative and oppressive with the result of impoverishing people. The expansionary drive by political leaders of strong nations to dominate and conquer other nations can create instant, shock poverty through colonial conquest involving military force. Similarly, violent conflict causing death, destruction, and enabling looting also cause poverty overnight besides the traumas of lost loved ones and destruction of livelihoods.

At a more personal level, poverty can be caused by the loss of a father or husband in a patriarchal context, as the experience of Ruth and Naomi



shows. Similarly, negative circumstances and ill-fortune can lead to poverty due to sudden loss of income, wealth or property, despite wise spending of resources. Negative personal characteristics like laziness gets a major share of the blame for poverty. Bad behaviour, such as excessive drinking and expensive taste in food can also cause poverty. A strong desire to become rich can blind people for the dangers of becoming poor, while negative attitudes like an unwillingness to learn and improve can also cause poverty.

The biblical understanding of poverty must be complemented and contrasted with the understanding of wealth and riches. There is a negative view in the Bible about the desire to be rich, as that desire can be destructive. The desire to be rich can never be satisfied, leads to many temptations and traps, and the lure of a luxurious life-style can erode moral values and stifle religious spirituality.

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

Riches have several effects on their owners. Rich people attract people as friends, though they also attract danger from which they need protection. Their riches can protect them to a certain extent, but not completely. Rich people often judge themselves to be wise and can be rude to their subordinates, especially the poor. Not only are rich people capable of humiliating poor people, but also of exploiting and oppressing them for further gain. Rich people sometimes have the power to arbitrarily withhold the wages of their

needy employees. They might even murder poor people who come in their way to thwart their plans. While doing things like these, they deliberately ignore the desperate plight of the poor.

Despite a seemingly untouchable position of power, rich people have to face the uncertainties and burdens of riches. Their own death can prevent them from enjoying the riches they have worked for, as the rich are subject to sudden, unforeseen deaths as much as anybody else. Some rich people might not have close relationships or worthwhile relationships where they can meaningfully share their riches. The more a person's riches increase, the more worries come along too. Riches can become a burden that distracts from its enjoyment. Furthermore, riches can be lost in the blink of an eye, without the opportunity to recover from such loss again. For that reason, riches are not something one ought to place trust in. The ability of riches to do worthwhile things for their owners are limited, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death. Riches cannot be taken along in death, cannot secure God's favour, and neither can it buy anything in God's heaven. For these important events riches mean nothing.

#### **4. Biblical Ethics and the Injustices of Poverty**

The authors of the biblical texts lived before the larger part of the history of philosophy took place. They did not have access to the detailed normative analyses of issues of justice accessible to us today. Nevertheless, these authors are aware of many of the issues of justice we discuss today and have given answers that either apply directly to such issues or could imaginatively be applied to contemporary issues through intelligent interpretations. In what follows, I will indicate the contribution that a biblical ethics of poverty and riches makes in terms of the six categories of justice identified earlier.



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

Many of the specific injunctions concerning the appropriate treatment of poor people flow from this central claim that all humans are equal before God. Poor people must participate as full members in the Old Testament feasts of ancient Israel and the poor who cannot repay their hosts are the ones to be invited to feasts and dinners. People created in the image of God may not be oppressed, exploited, ill-treated, destroyed, or deprived of their rights. Poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Others may not take pleasure in their misery, nor laugh at them. Non-poor people should not ignore them, nor fail to notice or care for them. Lives highly valued by God are at stake.

The second category of justice concerns reciprocity. This category deals with fair terms of co-operation at interpersonal, social, and institutional levels. The terms of co-operation can be presupposed in social conventions, embodied in promises, agreements, and contracts, or specified in responsibilities and obligations. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth is particularly strong in this category as well. The terms of co-operation are specified in a comprehensive set of moral values with the Ten Commandments and the commandments to love God and neighbours as fundamental. These moral values include several provisions for dealing with poverty through emergency poverty relief and efforts to re-establish self-reliance. The responsi-

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

The third category of justice concerns the equitable distribution of goods that can be distributed like and analogously to material possessions. Although a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth does not prescribe any detailed specification of preferred distributive patterns, sharp contrasts in distribution of resources are vehemently rejected. There are several detailed condemnations of strong contrasts between the exploitative rich and the suffering poor. These normative evaluations of the often desperate circumstances of the poor suffering from skewed distributions provide them with an awareness of the moral wrongs they are suffering. This consciousness of a divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty can be political dynamite, empowering the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances they are living in.

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

Not only must the non-poor share their resources through generous giving to



those in need, but also through various other measures. Harvesting their crops only once and leaving the remainder for the poor to collect was one way of sharing resources in agriculturally dominated ancient Israel. Other ways were allowing the poor to fully participate in religious festivals despite their inability to contribute anything, providing interest-free loans that were written off in the Sabbath year, using the tithes of every third year as a store of food where the poor could collect whatever they needed, and hosting dinners and feasts for those unable to pay back the host in any way. The motive for these acts of distribution are similar: all people must be able to share in God's blessings. Viewing property, possessions, utilities, and basic necessities as God's blessings makes distribution easier, as a strict interpretation of private property is overruled in favour of viewing everything as God's gifts to be shared by all His (human) creatures.

The fourth category of justice is justice as enablement. In this category, institutions and behaviour are judged according to the degree to which people's self-development and self-determination are enabled or constrained. The moral values contained in a biblical ethics of poverty and riches are strongly enabling, as discussed earlier. These reciprocal moral values accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. Several commandments has enablement of the poor as aim. The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years takes away burdens that constrict and constrain poor people. The right to buy back land lost through poverty, that could be exercised with help from family or after enough money has been collected, is similarly aimed at enabling poor people to eventually return to their former non-poor status. If not bought back before the next year of restoration (every 49 years), the land automatically returns to the family, with the implicit hope of breaking any long term culture of poverty that might be developing.

The prescribed religious offerings can also place burdens on the poor who

do not have money available for buying the required animals. For this reason several cheaper alternatives are presented without any damage to the religious significance of the offerings. Special provision are made for widows, a particularly vulnerable group amongst the poor. Women are enabled in two other ways. Wives in polygamous marriages are enabled to demand continued care of the same quality after their husbands have found new favourites. Daughters without fathers or brothers in patriarchal ancient Israel are enabled to take care of themselves by being allowed to inherit their father's land.

The fifth category comprises justice as transformation. Here issues of changing existing institutions, practices, and behaviour are explored. Several examples of transformative justice at work are found in biblical narratives. What unites these examples are the role of individuals who take the initiative to rectify a situation on the basis of shared moral values that are slightly extended or modified. Ruth and Naomi as two poor, vulnerable widows in patriarchal ancient Israel engineer their own survival and well-being through using several Old Testament commandments to their advantage. Nehemiah uses Old Testament moral values to angrily condemn exploitation and oppression in the post-exilic community busy restoring Israel. In difficult economic circumstances Nehemiah uses extraordinary measures in the sense of somewhat stricter interpretations of commandments aiming to enable the poor to escape their poverty and rebuild their society after the destruction of the violent conquest and the abandonment of exile. Zaccheus is personally transformed by his meeting with Jesus and undertakes to rectify his illegitimate acquisitions of taxpayers' money through repaying them fourfold, considerably more than the 120% repayment required by Old Testament commandments. As penitence he will donate half his belongings to the poor as well.

The book of Deuteronomy is an excellent example of justice as transforma-



tion. Whether in its original setting before the Israelites entered the promised land, or in the setting of its final revision after the exile, the book gives important pointers to successfully effect a just transformation. Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. The strong commitment demanded from the Israelites to worship and obey God only shifts their loyalty in the right direction for starting and maintaining a new course. The emphasis on teaching the new values to adults and children and being able to justify the rationale of those values to one another and the next generation are important elements of any successful transformation. Being continually aware of the core values to be obeyed through leaving reminders everywhere and strong calls for obedience from leaders further facilitates effective transformation. Incentives for obeying the new set of values were given in the form of promised blessings and sanctions for punishing moral failure came in the form of curses. Commitment to make the transformation work lies in the strong ties that are urged between people and God, the latter being the source of the values and the inspiration of the transformation. Adherence to the new values are to be enforced through judges appointed by Moses, the leader.

#### Active Injustice

Justice as retribution has its focus on appropriate sanctions, penalties, or punishment for those persons who violate society's accepted principles of justice. Retribution presupposes a clear vision of what injustice is and clarity on the concept of responsibility, so as to be able to accurately determine who must be held responsible for specific injustices and to what degree. The degree of responsibility for injustice is strongly affected by the distinction between active and passive injustice. Active injustice occurs when perpetrators of injustice deprive or harm other people's lives and dignity. Passive injustice results when persons are indifferent to injustice happening. Passively unjust persons are people who tolerate injustice and ignore the claims of victims of injustice.

A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth has no trouble apportioning blame for poverty. Active injustice in the sense of deliberately depriving people of wages, possessions, or land are often condemned. Selling poor people into slavery for failing to pay small amounts of debt and taking poor people's belongings they have given as security for loans are similarly roundly rejected. Sometimes the rich are held directly responsible for exploiting and oppressing the poor, sometimes political leaders or government officials must take the blame.

Interesting cases of passive injustice occur in the New Testament. Several rich people are condemned for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. They neglect the explicitly prescribed duties in the Old Testament, ignore the desperate plight of poor people, and continue to live in luxury. Similarly, the "goats" of Matthew 25 failed to help the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised when they were hungry, naked, in prison, and so on. What the "goats" did wrong was their failure to notice people in need and their neglect of those people who really needed their help. They were guilty of passive injustice.

## **5. Evaluation of a Biblical Ethics of Poverty and Riches**

What are the strengths of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches? Does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches have unique aspects not found in any other ethical theories? I want to argue that the uniqueness of a biblical ethics lies in the strengths that I am going to outline below. These strengths are as follows.

A biblical ethics on poverty and riches provides us with a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches. Strong contrasts between rich and poor are rejected outright; poor people's dignity are



protected in the strongest possible way; care for the poor is a high priority, with God as example; aid for emergency relief and self-reliance are judged to be close to the core of a comprehensive, authentic biblical lifestyle; and the values implicitly assume that poverty is bad for humans and must be eradicated. Riches are portrayed as uncertain and not worth trusting in; as capable of upsetting priorities, corrupting integrity, and stifling moral values; as inadequate in death and for securing God's favour; but nevertheless a gift of God to be enjoyed.

This set of values on poverty and riches is made even stronger through their link with a comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God's salvation that will provide them with meaningful lives lived in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly – as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross – means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realise their God-given potentialities.

Adherence to a biblical ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. In the Old Testament God's followers were promised blessings like abundance and happiness for living out these values, while their neglect could bring about negative consequences like natural disasters, illness, or death. In the New Testament the incentives are different. Now incentives are riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.

Perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of the biblical moral values on poverty and riches is the powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting them. Commitment to God is the

deepest motivation for making these values come to life. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to His commands results from the experience of His liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values. A further incentive for Christians to implement God's commands is that the credibility of their faith is at stake in the way that they live their values in their daily lives. Furthermore, Christians are under a strong command to communicate their faith to non-believers. One of the strongest and most convincing ways of doing that is to manifest God's love towards others concretely in their lives. Loving the poor by treating them as God commands ought to be a large part of their practical witness to others about God's love.

What are the weaknesses of a biblical ethics on poverty and wealth? Differently put, what does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches fail to provide us? There is no detailed understanding in the biblical texts of the nature, consequences, or causes of poverty. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth also does not help much in determining how sharp contrasts between riches and poverty arose or what the causes of specific persons' poverty were. To what extent people are responsible for their own poverty, how much responsibility they must take, and how that affects aid are also not specified. Similarly, no detailed analysis of the moral issues involved is given. Practically nothing is said about the practical implementation of the moral values on poverty and riches, while the best possible strategies for giving aid is not discussed, nor is any indication given of when aid does more harm than good. There is no indication whether aid by individuals is better than aid by groups, organisations, or institutions. All the above are details to be worked out that could only be learnt through experience thoroughly reflected upon.



The shortcomings of a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth point to the need for interdisciplinary dialogue between normative prescriptions provided by theological ethics, the detailed descriptions and comprehensive explanations of the human sciences, and the conceptual and argumentative analysis of philosophy. Part of appropriating a biblical ethics of poverty and riches in complex, modern societies means that such interdisciplinary dialogues must take place to determine the ways in which biblical ethics can become relevant in new circumstances. Interdisciplinary dialogues should not only be between academics, but also with practitioners and professionals with practical experience. Through numerous inputs the concrete implications and detailed applications of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches can be determined in ways that make sense to ordinary citizens of contemporary democracies.

## **6.A Christian Ethics of Poverty and Riches for Today**

One major problem in the way of developing a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is whether values that originated in contexts so far removed in time, culture, economy, and socio-political organisation can be brought across those distances into our contemporary world. Before presenting an outline of a Christian ethics on poverty and riches, I want to argue that the differences between the societies where these values originated and our contemporary world are less important than the similarities. Thus, these values can still apply to our world today.

The Old Testament values concerning poverty and riches originate within the context of a group of wandering nomads waiting to cross the border into their promised land after a journey of forty years through desert from Egypt to Canaan. The values are refined and implemented in the context of establishing and maintaining a monarchical governmental system, with an economic system based on agriculture and growing international trade. The Old

Testament values were finalised during experiences of colonial conquest, exile, return, and restoration. Conquest and exile were God's punishment as a result of the unwillingness and inability of Israel to keep God's commandments.

Some of the New Testament values on poverty and riches are formulated in the context of the promised Messiah living temporarily on earth during the Roman occupation of Israel after yet another colonial conquest. The other New Testament values are articulated in the context of non-Israelite individuals accepting the message of the Messiah in neighbouring countries also under Roman occupation.

Today we are living in vastly different conditions. We want to apply values in highly differentiated, complex modern societies that were developed between 2500 and 3000 years ago. Modern societies differ in important respects from those in ancient Israel. Modern societies are characterised by democratic political systems with large, hierarchical bureaucracies which claim power over many more aspects of citizens' lives than ever imaginable in ancient Israel. High levels of urbanisation give modern societies a different demographic complexion from ancient ones. The scientific and technological explosion of the past four centuries have given humans vast amounts of knowledge and insight into the nature and workings of their world, enlarging their abilities to harness nature's forces to enable them to live lifestyles unimaginable a couple of centuries ago. All these changes made human life on earth so much more complex, poverty included. Through the human sciences – that started to come of age since the middle of the nineteenth century – knowledge and insight into the complexities of human life have grown enormously. The phenomenon of poverty is no exception. Collective human understanding of many dimensions of poverty have grown immensely, as studies by diverse human sciences such as sociology, economics, political studies, social work, psychology, theology, and philosophy have proliferated.



Can the values of the Old and New Testaments, developed so long ago before all the massive changes brought about by modernisation, give us any light on how to deal with poverty today? Perhaps one should note that the problem of poverty is bigger today than ever before. Not only is a major part of the world's population living in abject poverty, but the numbers of poverty-stricken people are still steadily growing. The contrast between rich and poor has also never been as big as now. The enormous wealth owned by some individuals – measured in billions of US dollars – are in stark contrast to the desperate poverty of billions of people on earth. Despite the popularity of liberal-democratic political views that endorse ideas on human rights, no significant impact on world poverty has been made. The success of the welfare state since World War 2 in Europe did a lot to reduce and even eradicate poverty in some European countries, but the provision of cradle to grave welfare benefits proved not to be sustainable over the longer term in the rich European democracies.

Despite the enormous differences between complex modern societies and the simpler societies of ancient Israel, it might be worthwhile to explore the ways a biblical ethics on poverty and riches might be applied to our contemporary societies to see where it leads. The exploration is justified by the wisdom developed over ages and the strong ethical values presumably embodied in the biblical texts.

There are also number of perennial similarities in human nature and behaviour that remain throughout history. There are still stark contrasts between rich and poor in many countries of the world. Poor people are still oppressed and exploited by the strong and rich in many societies and communities. Poor people still suffer injustice and are still exposed to public humiliation. Millions of people are still hungry, thirsty, without clothes, sick, and in prison – thus needing urgent help from others. Many people still suffer desperately,

while others still turn away and ignore their plight. The lure of wealth still traps many people to trade their priority focused on God for the priority of becoming rich. Thus, all the major issues that a Biblical ethics of poverty and wealth deal with, are present in contemporary societies, although perhaps in slightly different packaging.

These similarities between the contexts of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible and our world today enable human communication and dialogue across many cultures and allow understanding of the values embodied in ancient cultures of many centuries ago. It is perhaps not possible to apply all aspects of a biblical ethics too directly to modern societies – some of the circumstances are perhaps too different. For example, agriculture does not dominate many countries today as it did in ancient Israel. For that reason most of us cannot harvest our corn fields or olive trees only once and leave the rest for the poor – we don't farm anymore. Nevertheless, to formulate a Christian ethics on poverty and wealth means to raise the issue of how to make a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches work in the new context of modern societies. Such a project might lead to exciting intellectual problems whose solutions could energise a biblical ethics developed so many centuries ago.

How should a proposal for such a Christian ethics look? In what follows I want to present an outline of a Christian ethics appropriate for our contemporary world.

*1. Poverty is a complex phenomenon that makes life very difficult for some people.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has to accept the complexity of poverty as revealed by the human sciences. This complexity manifests in the multiple ways in which characteristics of poverty can combine in different instances of poverty. The complexity also emerges in the diversity of possible causes of poverty in the multitude of known cases. For these reasons a



Christian ethics of poverty and riches must either collaborate with the human sciences or acquire the necessary expertise to be able to [1] describe the characteristics of every case of poverty to be morally evaluated or [2] judge the causes involved in the specific case under discussion (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1994: 240).

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be aware of the multitude forms of hardship that poverty can cause. Furthermore, a Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be prepared to listen to the poor people involved in specific cases that are being considered. Theologians and ordinary Christians must listen to the voices of the poor whom they are directly concerned with, to understand how those people are experiencing their poverty. Just to show concern through being prepared to listen will already be a positive signal to poor people that someone cares.

The nature, degree, and complex interactions of injustices involved in specific cases of poverty must be investigated as well. The role of various people in causing or exacerbating poverty must be inspected. Interviews with poor people, community and political leaders, and experts in other sciences are needed, as well as research on the wider contexts of the cases of poverty under consideration (Cf. Hollenbach 1988: 189).

*Christians must live the right priorities.* The fundamental aspect of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is that God must be first priority in the lives of His followers. They must acknowledge Him as the only God. They must worship and obey Him only. Life without God – whether rich or poor – is meaningless.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is only part of the far more comprehensive set of moral and religious values of Christianity. Values on poverty and riches are immensely strengthened by their link with a comprehensive

network of other moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God's salvation. This they get by worshipping and obeying God as the only God.

Commitment to God is the deepest motivation for making these values come to life. Once people accept God fully as main focus of their lives, those lives must change. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to His commands results from the experience of His liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This powerful commitment to God is perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of biblical moral values. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values.

This kind of life provides Christians with meaningful lives that ought to be lived in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly – as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross – means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realise their God-given potentialities. The love of God for humans that His followers must exhibit is the driving force in Christians that "causes you to have regard for the poor" (Lamprecht 1993: 64).

Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. For Christians the incentives are riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.