


# Narratological reading of poverty-related parables (Lk 12:13–21; 14:15–24; 16:19–31)

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Nigeria is an example of developing countries characterised by mass poverty in the midst of plenty. Coincidentally, the Nigerian church is stupendously rich. Pastor Emmanuel, a former National Coordinator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Germany, notes that the annual revenue of the Nigeria church in 2014 is over ₦3 trillion while surprisingly, the national budget is ₦4.69tn for the year. Gigantic buildings, exotic cars and private jets are the hallmarks of the church's wealth. Some pastors acquire jets ranging from ₦2.3 to ₦6.4 billion with additional ₦8.4bn for maintenance and salaries annually. Surrounded by this 'affluence' are thousands of poor, unemployed and barely surviving church members. This calls for the need to examine what Lukan Jesus would have wanted the church to do with her wealth. This article examines Lukan parables on the rich and the poor using narratological method. Thus, the parables' context, the characterisation and the plot is analysed, including lexical-syntactical relationships. Finally, the lessons derived is used via socio-scientific reading of the Nigerian situation to arrive at a theology of social action for the poor. Most parables are open-ended, a literary device that ensures the readers take a decision, therefore the message focuses on the church rather than individual Christians.

**Contribution:** The article recommends that church-owned institutions should make education accessible to the poor, rise against socio-economic policies that will impoverish people while seeking economic independence of the poor. Finally, the church should also integrate the differently-abled into the church.

**Keywords:** narratology; Lukan parables; poverty; social-action; social-scientific reading; post-colonial hermeneutics; African hermeneutics.

## Introduction: Poverty in the Nigerian context

Poverty is a topical issue in Nigeria that has attracted the attention of both the people and the government of the country. It is on record that whilst government has implemented over 20 poverty alleviation programmes at various periods, poverty alleviation has remained a mirage (Oshewolo 2010). The failure of the government to tackle poverty has been attributed to its entrenchment in the society. On this, Adejuwon and Tijani (2012) found that despite several government efforts at reducing poverty, no appreciable impact has been achieved and that poverty thus still pervades the Nigerian population. It even appears as if 'poverty has risen in Nigeria with about 112 million Nigerians (about 67.1% of the country's total population of 167 million) living below poverty level' (Aidelunuoghene 2014:116). The issue of poverty is thus prevalent and has posed serious challenges to the Nigerian government over the years with the attendant effects of deprivation of the basic necessities of life (Kanayo 2014:116). It is also important to note that poverty in Nigeria defies long-standing theory that economic growth naturally results in poverty reduction because poverty is on the increase in Nigeria despite the growth in national growth domestic product (GDP) being recorded (Dauda 2017). Poverty in Nigeria has been described as a paradox poverty because Nigeria is endowed with human and natural resources with an increasing national income, but a large section of the population languishes in poverty because of uneven distribution and allocation of income and wealth (Danaan 2018:20). Although poverty and inequality are global phenomena, the rates in Nigeria are higher than most countries. For example (Akinkuotu 2019):

The number of extremely poor Nigerians has risen to 91.6 million according to the World Poverty Clock. This implies that virtually half of Nigeria's population now lives in extreme poverty. (n.p)

Juxtaposed against this glaring level of dehumanising poverty is the affluence in the church. The church in Nigeria is stupendously rich. With an annual income that comes close to the national budget, the question is, if the government has failed to lift these people out of poverty, should the church also remain unmoved about their predicament?

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## Lukan parables in the Nigerian context

Ukpong who has been described as the father of inculturation hermeneutics has laid the ground for African biblical interpretation. He has maintained that doing African interpretation involves 'one process of a reader who is critically aware of their context interacting with the text analysed in its context' (Ukpong 2002:25).

This has been the path of scholars who have treated the Lukan parables within the Nigerian context. Ottuh (2014) worked on the parable of the faithful steward (Lk 16:1–15) also from the Nigerian context. He used the evaluative method, which he described as a means of understanding the biblical message against the background of African life, thought and practice and to also highlight situations that require changes in the society (Ottuh 2014:134 quoting Ukpong 2006). After the analysis of the socio-economic context of the parable, he concludes that the situation is similar to the Nigerian context and as such, applications can be made to the Nigerian situation from the parable.

Ngele, Uwaegbute and Odo (2017) worked on the parable of the Rich Barn Builder using the diachronic method of exegesis. Diachronic method tilts towards the historical-critical method and thus it is not surprising that the article devotes much space to textual, sources and criticisms. Conclusively, they draw the following lessons:

1. Materialism is covetousness
2. Materialism reduces interest in God
3. True life does not depend on material possessions
4. Eschatological dimensions.

Although not invalid as lessons of the parable, the authors failed to see the parable also as a warning to the church that is actually driving the craze of materialism and they did not also comment on the proper use of wealth in assisting the poor in the church and the society. This article goes beyond the individual-based teachings of the parable to look at the implications of the parable for the church as the institution supposed to disciple the individual. It points out that the church should lead in the right use of wealth by looking away from materialism to using its resources to assist the poor and outcasts in the society.

## The Lukan concept of the poor

Establishing the Lukan understanding of poverty is important before proceeding with the body of this article. Luke, in the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, made use of three Greek words to designate the poor: *πενιχρός*, *ἐνδεής* and *πτωχός*:

1. *πενιχρός* is used only in Luke 21:2 to mean a 'poor, wretched widow' emphasising the neediness of the poor. *πενιχρός* has to do with the lack of the essential means of livelihood and it is usually translated as 'poor' or 'needy' (eds. Louw & Nida 1989) or someone without possessions or money (Friberg, Friberg & Miller 2005).

2. *ἐνδεής* is used only in Acts 4:34 and it means 'poor' or 'impoverished' (Ardnt & Gingrich 1957). *ἐνδεής* is similar in meaning to *πτωχός* but it focuses more on severe lack of needed resources rather than the state of poverty and destitution (eds. Louw & Nida 1989). *ἐνδεής* is also translated as lacking basic needs, poor, needy, impoverished and poverty-stricken person when used substantively (Friberg et al. 2005).
3. *πτωχός* is the most used word for poor in Luke with 10 occurrences. Six of the 10 occurrences are found in Lukan materials (Lk 4:18; 14:13; 14:21; 16:20; 16:22 and 19:8). Two of the remaining four come up within the Q materials: Luke 6:20, which is paralleled in Matthew 5:3 and Luke 7:22. The last two are found in the Synoptic tradition (Lk 18:22 and 21:3).

Although some scholars conclude that the use of *πτωχός* is not important to the evangelist (Shoemaker 1992), one feels that if Luke uses *πτωχός* 10 times, six of which are in the Lukan materials and most scholars<sup>1</sup> have already established the Lukan concern for the poor and the outcast, most of which also occur within the Lukan materials, then the use of *πτωχός* is important to Luke.

The range of meaning of *πτωχός* can be seen in the way it is used in the LXX. *πτωχός* translates six Hebrew words. The first and most common is *אָנָּן* which means afflicted, oppressed, poor and humble as in Psalms 14:6 and 12:6. It can be said to refer to (Ottuh 2014):

[A] person suffering from some kind of disability or distress. Financially, the *aniyyim* lives from day to day and have to satisfy the necessities of life through begging from others; socially they are dependent and subject to oppression. Generally, they are wrongfully disposed of their rights. (p. 65)

*אָנָּן* is also similar to *אָנָּן*, which is used in Psalm 69:33. This usage carries the religious concept of piety. The poor put all hope and trust in God because he knows that God is his only defence.

The second word is *לָךְ* used in 1 Samuel 2:8. It means lowly, poor, needy, haggard and scrawny. It refers to physical weakness showing that the poor cannot challenge their opponents (Ottuh 2014; Strong 2001).

The third is *אֲנָסִי*, which means one who seeks alms, that is, a beggar. The fourth is *שָׂרָף* as used in Proverbs 29:13 and it means poor, famished and oppressed. The fifth is *מְהֻרָּם* as used in Proverbs 21:17 and it means one who is socially poor, penury, scarcity, want and lack. The sixth is *מְהֻרָּם* and it is usually translated poor and afflicted (Ottuh 2014).

This wide range of the use of *πτωχός* for poor in the LXX made Ukpong (1995) conclude that *πτωχός* covers economic, social and religious dimensions as the term embraces the materially poor, the socially alienated, the physically weak and the psychologically afflicted who then become pious and humble placing all their hope in God.

1.Sources on this includes Nevone (1970); Ukpong (1995); Scheffler (2011).

The Lukan usage of *πτωχός* is best seen when the Q passage used in Luke is examined along its Matthean parallel (Table 1).

It is apparent to indicate that the usage of *πτωχός* is completely and overtly religious and spiritual, Matthew used the phrase *τῷ πνεύματι* [in the spirit] whilst Luke does not, indicating his preference for secular usage. It is on this basis that Ottuh (2014) concludes that Luke's text expressed poverty thematically.<sup>2</sup> This implies that (Lalfakmawia 2011) the:

Lukan poor are not only the destitute but at the same time they are those who live in an outcast condition. These people represent the extremes of social and economic status. (p. 22)

The high rate of poverty in the first-century Mediterranean world is the result of the kind of economy it ran. It was an agrarian society in which the farmers are usually not the direct owners of the land but a small number of wealthy landowners. Their situation is worsened because the state did not show concern for the poor (Häkkinen 2016). This cannot be said to be different from the contemporary Nigerian society. The capitalistic economy drives poverty in the country and the state is not bothered about the plight of the poor.

## Analysis of Lukan parables on the poor and the rich

Having given an explanation of the Lukan concept of the poor, this article would now focus on three chosen parables: the Parable of the Rich Fool (Lk 12:13–21) where the word poor was not used but the teachings have implications on relationship of the rich to the poor<sup>3</sup>; the Parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15–24), which was chosen because the banquet invitation extended to the poor and other social outcasts in their league. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31), this thus become a call for the inclusion of the poor and other social outcasts in the kingdom, because the rejection of the rich man for not extending a helping hand to the poor is very apparent. The parables will be analysed using narratological analysis wherein 'the readings of the text would be followed closely so that no major clue, especially linguistic and literary, would escape notice' (Adewale 2005).

### The parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:13–21)

#### Dialogue between the rich young man and Jesus (Lk 12:13–15)

This parable is set in a context that implies that it is addressed to both private and public audiences. The dialogue leading to the parable is recorded in Luke 12:13–15. Someone from the crowd requested that Jesus should settle the inheritance dispute between him and his elder brother. In verse 14,

2. Ottuh (2014) indicated that unlike Matthew who treated the issue of poverty spiritually, Luke treated it thematically. I assume thematically would mean secularly, the obvious opposite of spiritually.

3. This parable is included because its message has bearing on the poor. For example, the Lausanne Movement (2017) report says that the Rich Fool was condemned for ignoring the need to serve God, including the implication of serving the poor ... it is an encouragement for taking care of the needy, including the poor.

TABLE 1: The Lukan usage of *πτωχός* examined along its Matthean parallel.

Passage	Greek (SBLGNT)	English (RSV)
Matthew 5:3	Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Luke 6:20	Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί, ὅτι ὑμετέρα ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ	Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God

SBLGNT, Society for Biblical Literature Greek New Testament; RSV, Revised Standard Version.

Jesus spoke to the man (private) that he was not appointed an arbiter and in verse 15, he began to tell the parable to the crowd as signified by the use of 'αὐτοῦς' [public].

The immediate context out of which this parable grew is the issue of inheritance. The Torah, specifically, Deuteronomy 21:15f. has regulations regarding the sharing of inheritance. It says that the first son should receive a double portion. On the other hand, Psalm 133:1 enjoins communal living and the keeping of the family's inheritance intact. These two views on inheritance indicate that (Adewale 2005):

One cannot say whether it is the younger brother who has guilt of greed by seeking to disrupt the desired family unity via the division of inheritance or whether it was the elder brother who claimed all the inheritance. (p. 12)

The context resembles that of the Nigerian society. In Nigeria, capital inheritances such as houses and farmlands are kept together to maintain family unity and to ensure that people are living together whilst consumables and money were shared. Although this varies amongst various groups of people, the communal living motif was never lost. Amongst the Yoruba people, houses were left intact so that siblings would continue to live together whilst other properties were divided according to the number of wives, then the children of the same mother shares what is allotted to their line amongst themselves (Oni 2014). Amongst the Bini people, the eldest son inherits the father's house (although he is not expected to send his siblings away) whilst other properties were shared out (Itua 2011). All these practices notwithstanding, because of the innate greed in humanity, inheritance issues easily cause family squabbles.

One major literary device used in this parable is characterisation. The parable is presented using characterisation as the narrator oscillates from indirect characterisation to direct characterisation.

#### Indirect characterisation (Lk 12:16–19)

Indirect characterisation is when the narrator tells what a character does or says and leaves the audience to draw conclusions about the character. Jesus began the parable by using the phrase 'a certain rich man', which would present the character as symbolic. Who then does he represent? One can conclude that he stands for the people who are materially rich but takes no thought of God (Blomberg 1990). Moreover, scholars such as Fitzmyer (1985) affirmed that although he is described as a farmer, he stands for all human beings seduced by greed no matter their vocation and also argued that the use of the word *ψυχῆ*, which means

'life' is the key to understanding the symbolic use of the character that represents every human being (Capon 1998). I conclude that he represents the rich and the use of the rich man here is to enrich the symbolism as exploitative tendency is higher amongst the rich because they have the means to exploit.

The man, as presented, was already rich and the surplus harvest only presents additional opportunity to increase his wealth. The surplus caused a crisis, namely coping with the surplus and this led to a thought process. In describing the thought process, the man's heart was opened up to the listeners and/or readers. This process opens with the phrase *καὶ διελογίζετο ἐν ἑαυτῷ* (reasoning with himself) (Lk 12:17). Luke's use of *διελογίζετο* is significant for two reasons:

1. Casting the word in the past continuous tense, which would then translate it as 'he was considering or pondering (TDNT, Vol. 2:96) with himself', implies that the matter was on his mind for a considerable length of time.
2. The use of *διελογίζομαι* is important. Although the word is used to mean 'to ponder' or 'to consider', it also has the possibility of meaning 'to discuss' or 'dialogue' (Schrenk 1964). This is the basis of Scott's (1989:133) position that 'the rich man carries on his dialogue with himself. He excludes others from his story'. His decision not to consult with others in the thought process is unusual in a world that is not individualistic.

From the Nigerian perspective, someone who has come to the point of neglecting the socio-economic webs around him/her in the process of decision-making has become an avoidable fiend. It would be easy for Nigerians to conclude that the man's egocentric nature led to him being ostracised (Megbowon & Uwah 2017). Thus, the rich man is presented as a victim of the prison that wealth provides for the wealthy (Adewale 2005).

In summary, indirect characterisation indicates the following:

1. The man is symbolic of the greedy nature of many rich people, which is usually seen in the attitude of the rich towards wealth. Stein (1992) sees attitude to wealth as an important theme of the parable.
2. The man is self-centred.
3. The man has become a victim of wealth's folly because he thinks life consists in abundance or in securing one's own economic future (Snodgrass 2008).
4. He has become inhuman. His only concern was making more money from his bumper harvest despite the fact that he is already rich. The laws of benevolence would not be strange to him, but he did not allow it to change his intention.

### Direct characterisation (Lk 12:20–21)

In direct characterisation, the narrator tells the listeners or readers explicitly what the character is like. Jesus according to Luke moves to the use of direct characterisation from v. 20 when God broke into the rich man's world and

monologue. God calls him ἄφρων [fool]. The LXX's use ἄφρων to translate five Hebrew words: לָבָד, כְּסִיל, אֶזְרִי, בַּעַר (all in Proverbs) and לָבָד (only in Ecclesiastics) signifies the rich tradition of wisdom literature that forms the background of ἄφρων.

The Hebrew בַּעַר is derived from the word בָּעִיר, which is usually translated as 'beast' or 'cattle'. This implies that the ἄφρων can be likened to a beast and as Qoheleth says, the only difference between human beings and beasts lies in the ability of human beings to respond to God (Ec 3:18–21). Wisdom Literature derives its use of the word ἄφρων as one who lives without regard to God from its linguistic interplay. For example, the phrase אִישׁ-בַּעַר is used in Psalm 92:6, as one of the wisdom psalms. Although English versions translate the word as a dull (Revised Standard Version [RSV]) or senseless man (New American Standard Bible [NABS]), Wisdom Literature would use 'a man without knowledge' because knowledge is related to God, the man without knowledge is a man without God.

When verses 16 and 19 are compared, a pun is discerned. Luke uses the word εὐφραίνου [enjoy], which coincides with εὐφρόρησεν [bring forth many things]. This pun gives an insight into the rich man's worldview: enjoyment of life lies in the abundance of possession.

The two methods of characterisation become necessary because human beings may not be able to see anything wrong in the rich man's actions. For example, the rich man's decision to build new barns to store the excess harvest and lay it up for many years reveals his intention to hoard and sell when shortage drives up price (MacMullen 1974). This might pass for a wise and good business tactics. However, with the use of direct characterisation, God passes a divine evaluation: the wise business tactics is actually foolishness as it fails to reckon with divine wisdom.

The last verse οὕτως ὁ θησαυρίζων ἑαυτῷ καὶ μὴ εἰς θεὸν πλουτῶν is enigmatic in construction and has been translated 'so is the man who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God'. Taken like this, translators have turned active participles (θησαυρίζων and πλουτῶν) into passive participles. However, it is possible to retain the active participles and take the preposition εἰς as dative of advantage and translate it as 'for' as in Luke 9:13 and 14:35 thus turning the two participles to parallels. If this is done, the statement would then be translated 'so is the man who is storing up treasure for himself and is not gathering riches for God'. It is important to note that Snodgrass (2008) agreed that the use of material resources to assist the needy is included in the phrase gathering riches for God.

Finally, the parable is open-ended as the response of the key character cannot be determined precisely. The silence of the rich man in the parable matches the silence of the petitioner.



Thus, the audience are left to resolve the tension, in this case, the contemporary church.

The following messages can be gleaned from this parable:

1. Material possessions should be seen and related to as gifts from God. Rather than being concerned about his future, the rich fool should have had assistance of the needy in his plan and thus gather riches for God.
2. Abundance of life cannot be found in the abundance of material wealth but in the wise and godly use of wealth.
3. Material wealth is transient and man will give account of it to God.
4. A purely selfish accumulation of possessions is incompatible with true discipleship.

This parable serves as a subtle warning to the contemporary Church as she is becoming worldlier by the day and thus runs the risk of becoming like the fool. A true self-examination would show that many churches do not care about the material wellbeing of their members. This is expressed by Woolnough (2014) when he opined that the local church lacks biblical vision to care for their poor and needy. The social injustice that goes on in the church makes the church lack the moral right to oppose the injustice in the society. How can we explain the accumulation of money in the church's bank accounts, state-of-the-art cars and private jets whilst there are many unemployed youths in the church? To continue in this attitude is to become the fool who closes his eyes to the mass of the sick, hungry and unemployed people dropped at her gates daily!

## The parable of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:15–24)

This is one Lukan parable wherein the word 'poor' is mentioned *en passant* but has implications for Jesus' teachings on the relationship to the poor people. The characters in this parable can be classified into four groups: the host, the host's servants, the originally invited guests and the *ad hoc* guests (the guests who were invited after the originally invited guests declined the invitation). However, out of these four, the emphasis of the parable is on only two: the host's servants and the *ad hoc* guests. This is buttressed by the fact that the host played no important role in the parable other than asking the servants to go and bring in the guests for the banquet and the originally invited guests phased out of the parable after they declined invitation to the banquet.

The host's servants were the ones going back and forth to ensure that the banquet was well attended whilst the main emphasis falls on the *ad hoc* guests. As a result, apart from the context of the parable, the presentation of the *ad hoc* guests will be the focus of the article. It has to be noticed, however, that these *ad hoc* guests are presented as passive and indirect characterisation is used in the presentation.

## The context of the parable

The parable is spoken against the background of the Kingdom of God as shown in the parable's immediate context (Lk 14:12–15). This began with Jesus' criticism of the Jewish feast guests' list wherein he informs them that they would be rewarded at the resurrection if they invite the underprivileged (Lk 14:12–14). Jesus' use of the word 'resurrection' led to a co-guest's response in Luke 14:15: Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God.

Two issues are to be noted here:

1. It is possible that the co-guest was trying to correct Jesus' assertion that those who have been kind to the less privileged would be rewarded by reminding Jesus that everyone who makes it to the final banquet would be rewarded (Marshall 1978).
2. The phrase 'will eat bread' refers to eating a full meal, but the use of the future tense and the reference to the Kingdom indicates that 'the metaphor speaks of the Messianic banquet and refers to participating in the resurrection of the righteous' (Stein 1992:392).

This prologue makes the concept of the Messianic banquet fundamental to understanding this parable. This concept, which is deeply entrenched in the Old Testament (Ps 23:5; Is 25:6) and also carried over to the New Testament (Mt 8:11 and Lk 22:30) is often associated with eschatological doctrines. It is important to note that by the inter-testamental period, participation in the Messianic banquet, has not only been narrowed down to the Jews, but has excluded all differently abled people, most of whom are poor. An example of such can be found in 1QSa 2:5b–9a quoted from Sutcliffe (1960), which reads:

No one physically afflicted, either struck with deformed feet or hands, lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or physically afflicted with any defect that can be seen, or an old man who is tottering and unable to keep still in the midst of the congregation, none of these shall enter to stand in the midst of the congregation... (p. 542)

## The originally invited guests

As indicated in the text, the host sent out two invitations as customarily expected. This means that by the time of the second invitation, the meal was ready, and the banquet was expected to begin and this may be read in the servants' message in verse 17: ἡδη ἔτοιμά ἐστιν. As ἡδη and ἔτοιμά both means ready, the double use of 'ready' 'emphasises that refusal to respond to the invitation at this point is an act of great discourtesy' (Marshall 1978:588). Thus, the host is one who is true to his words and societal expectation and cannot be held responsible for the failure of those who did not participate in the banquet.

At this point, they were not expected to decline; however, despite having accepted the invitation at first, all the guests began to give excuses. Luke's use of ἀπὸ μιᾶς, an Aramaism meaning 'all at once' (Ardnt & Gingrich 1957) indicates in contemporary English that they unanimously refused to

attend the banquet. This would constitute an insult and embarrassment to the host. This is emphasised by Jesus' use of three excuses. For the Jews,<sup>4</sup> and Nigerian numerology, three is a symbolic figure signifying 'enough' or 'full measure'. Coincidentally, when examined in detail, all the excuses are untenable. It was this situation that made the host to invite other guests, herein called the *ad hoc* guests.

### The *ad hoc* guests

The first set of *ad hoc* guests were from the τὰς πλατείας καὶ ῥύμας τῆς πόλεως. The πλατείας refers to the broad, main streets or public squares (Marshall 1978) whilst the ῥύμας is 'an urban passageway shut in by buildings on both sides, thus meaning narrow streets' (Friberg et al. 2005:350). It is however important to note that these two types of roads are qualified by the adjective τῆς πόλεως [of the city]. This adjective distinguishes the location where the other set of *ad hoc* guests were to be brought from.

The second set of *ad hoc* guests were from the τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ φραγμοῦς. Whilst ὁδοὺς displays 'an extremely varied range of meaning, its basic sense refers to a path, road, or street or walking' (Volkel 1990:491), the preponderance falls on 'any place along which one travels' (Friberg et al. 2005:350), especially a highway. The metaphorical meaning cannot fit into the context of this passage. φραγμοῦς has also been translated as hedge side paths or country lanes usually frequented by vagabonds and beggars (Ardnt & Gingrich 1957).

For a good understanding of verse 23, the ambiguity in the sentence has to be cleared (Lk 14):

καὶ εἶπεν ὁ κύριος πρὸς τὸν δοῦλον· Ἐξέλθε εἰς τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ φραγμοῦς καὶ ἀνάγκασον εἰσελθεῖν, ἵνα γεμισθῇ μου ὁ οἶκος. (v. 23)

The ambiguity lies in the word, ἀνάγκασον, which is translated 'and compel them'. The pronoun 'them' has no antecedent in this verse. If the antecedent is taken to be, 'the poor, the lame, the blind and the crippled', from the preceding verse, then it would mean that the slaves are asked to go and look for the same category in another location. It is also possible for 'them' to be taken as a substantive, and then, it means that the servants were sent to the same location to look for another group of destitutes. Green (1997:562) takes 'them' as a substantive and concludes that it refers to the 'utterly destitute and impure typically disallowed from living within the walls of the city'. I reject this position as only lepers were sent to live outside the city walls (Lv 13:46) and considering the contagious nature of leprosy and the Old Testament's stand on it, it is unimaginable that the host would have asked his servants to bring lepers to the feast.

The only option left is to consider the absence of the adjective 'of the city' from the highways to mean that the host is calling for guests from beyond his community because the absence of 'of the city' implies that they are outside the city (Bailey

1998). Thus, the servant is asked to bring in the same set of people but from outside the city. Now, since Jesus and the crowd in the parable context are Jews, they would have taken the host, as a Jew and this means that the second set of *ad hoc* guests are the destitute of the Gentiles (Bailey 1976:101). It is important to draw attention to the fact that scholars such as Snodgrass (2008) do not see the second set of *ad hoc* guest as indicating Gentiles, others such as Stein did.

Another important issue to examine is Jesus' use of the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Ordinarily, the differently abled people mentioned would be listed amongst the poor. This usage intentionally put two classes of people together and these are those who are poor but physically okay and those who are poor and physically challenged. This position is buttressed by Jesus' use of the poor, crippled, lame and blind in its physical and literal sense in his admonition of verses 13–14. As the banquet is a symbol of the Messianic banquet that ushers in the new age, the emphasis on the differently abled people becomes an indication that those who are hitherto excluded from the worship of the Lord because of their physical deformity are now free to join. This understanding is important against the Jewish background of the exclusion of these sets of people from the assembly. Snodgrass (2008) made reference to several Jewish writings that make this clear such as 1QSa 2.3–9 and 1QM 7.4–5 amongst others.

It has to be noted that because those who are invited from the Gentile community are the destitute (the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame), it becomes very difficult to assume that the parable only intends to teach that the salvation of God was offered to the Gentiles after the Jews had rejected it as it had been traditionally taught. Rather, it is better, easier and more contextual to read that the salvation of God does not exclude those regarded as sub-humans as a result of their adverse physical and economical conditions.

The open-endedness of this parable cannot be overlooked. The parable did not tell whether the last set of guests went into the banquet, but we are left with the note that the banquet hall is not yet filled. The availability of room for more people is where the lesson for the contemporary church lies.

This parable is a great challenge to the church because it points out what the church should do that is 'disgusting and embarrassing'. The message is clear: the church needs to take the ministry to the physically challenged seriously. Rather than keep them outside the gates where they become mere objects of alms, they should be brought in to take their place within the church by their integration into the Church. It is also important to point out that as the host's servants went about obeying the command to bring in the *ad hoc* guests, so also the church must act decisively.

## The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31)

The major characters in this parable are presented by the artistic means of indirect characterisation; therefore, their

4. Adewale (2007:10) explained this in Amos' use of figures three and four in Amos chapters 1 and 2. By its usage, it means that the people's sin 'are more than enough to warrant God's punishment'.

personalities are to be seen in their words, actions and inactions.

### The rich man

The rich man in this parable is described through his dressing, food and his house. The rich man is said to be using a purple robe and 'fine linen' (Adewale 2006). Describing the implications of this manner of dressing, Green (1997:605) says it 'was the sign of highest opulence'. Also, the use of *ἐνεδιδύσκετο*, a third person imperfect tense, implies that he was dressed *daily*, in this royal, majestic and opulent manner, which would imply having a good number of such dress (Adewale 2006).

The next phrase describes the meal going on in his house: *εὐφραινόμενος καθ' ἡμέραν λαμπρῶς. εὐφραινόμενος* designates social and festive enjoyment (Friberg et al. 2005). This means 'the daily meals prepared were of banquet proportions' (Adewale 2006).

Although the house is not described explicitly in the text, the use of the word 'gate' in verse 20 implies that the man either has an estate or at least a fenced compound that would have befitted his status (Adewale 2006). In summary, all these pictures are used to convey the image of an opulently rich man.

### Lazarus

Lazarus, the poor man, is described in verses 20–21. The words and phrases that indicate the state of the man are examined as follows:

1. He is a poor man. The use of *πτωχός* implies that Lazarus is physically weak, afflicted, oppressed and reduced to a dependent beggar (see earlier discussion on *πτωχός*).
2. He is a frail person. *ἐβέβλητο* conveys this picture. Although rendered as 'was laid' in most English translations, it can also be translated as 'was thrown down'. The construction is often used to describe an afflicted person who had been bedridden or crippled (cf. Mt 8:6, 14; 9:2; Rv 2:22 and Josephus' Antiquities IX.10). This would imply that Lazarus is either ill or crippled and would have been placed at the rich man's gate by his friends. The use of *εἰλωμένος* shows he was covered with sores:  
In the Oriental society as well as the Nigerian society, the rich man is expected to help anyone, especially with a shared kinship (belonging to the same race in this instance). It is a great sin in Nigeria to refuse help to a kinsman when one has the means (Megbowon & Uwah 2017:155). It is a sin against the man, the community, the ancestors and even the gods of the land. Lazarus may not even be the one to call the gods to witness his neglect at the hands of the rich man; others who would be equally hurt and offended by such actions would do so.
3. He is a man with unfulfilled desires. The phrase 'longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table' is worthy of examination. Two constructions are to be considered.

The first, *ἐπιθυμῶν χορτασθῆναι*, is the use of *ἐπιθυμία* with an infinitive, in this case, *χορτασθῆναι*. This is a typical Lukan construction to indicate an unfulfilled desire. It also occurs in Luke 15:16, 17:22 and 22:15 (Adewale 2006). The audience are made to understand that Lazarus was unable to lay his hands on the leftovers from the table.

The second, *τῶν πιπτόντων* could be translated as 'what is thrown' referring to the 'pieces of bread which the guests dipped in the dish, wiped their hands with and then threw under the table' (Jeremias 1954:184). These would have actually been enough to feed Lazarus, but unfortunately were not given to him (Adewale 2006). The only reason one can fathom for not giving these to Lazarus was because they were reserved for the dogs. If this is the case, then it indicates that the rich man implies that the dogs were far more important to him than Lazarus (Adewale 2006). So, whilst Lazarus goes hungry, the dogs were well fed. To the Nigerian mind, the rich man would be seen as callous and anti-society because in his riches, he has treated a fellow human being as sub-human (Megbowon & Uwah 2017:155–156).

The phrase, *ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ κύνες ἐρχόμενοι ἐπέλειχον τὰ ἔλκη αὐτοῦ*, to most Western scholars, depicts the summit of Lazarus' misery. For example, Stein (1992:424) says 'even the dogs tormented the poor man by licking his ulcerated sores'. In the Oriental and Nigerian minds, a different picture may emerge altogether. This is because there is a belief amongst the Orientals and Africans that the dogs' saliva may be therapeutic. Thus, rather than see the dogs' licking of Lazarus' wounds as a further abuse, they would see it as the 'height of irony to depict the absolute irresponsibility of the rich man' (Adewale 2006:35). The picture that emerges here is that whilst the dogs are doing their bit to assist Lazarus, a human being like him, withdrew help. This position can be corroborated by the archaeological discovery in Israel of a semi-religious centre where those who have wounds visit to have dogs lick their wounds (Bailey n.d.).

At the death of the rich man and Lazarus in the parable, the reversal of fortunes began. Whilst angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom, it was however a mere mortal that buried the rich man. In Hades, the reversal becomes complete and total (Adewale 2006).

The introduction of Abraham as a character is significant because he occupies a position of authority amongst the Jews and Christians. Being regarded as the father of Israel who brought Israel into a covenant relationship with YHWH, his words can be taken as YHWH's. Abraham is also used as a contrast to the rich man, thus re-orientating one's mind about the parable (Adewale 2006). Abraham was a rich man, but he had a proper relationship with God and was given hospitality.

The last thing to examine is Abraham's response to the rich man's request from Hades that Lazarus should be allowed to cool his tongue with water. Abraham's reason for denying the request is in verse 26 and it opens with the phrase *καὶ ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις*, which would read 'and in all these' if translated



literally (cf. King James' Version, New International Version and New American Standard Bible, translation as 'besides all these'). However, a variant reading of this phrase, which is *καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τοῦτοις*, it would mean 'upon all these things' or 'because of all these things' exists. The phrase 'these things' would be taken to refer to the state of relationship between the rich man and Lazarus (Adewale 2006). This would be taken as contextually correct because verse 25 has already indicated it. This implies that Lazarus' inability to cross the chasm was because the rich man did not build the bridge when he had the means to do so (Adewale 2006).

One message that rings out loud and clear is that the right and proper way to relate to the poor is to be compassionate and to use one's wealth to aid them as demanded in the Scriptures not only from Moses to the Prophets but also from the Gospels to Revelation (Adewale 2006).

This parable is challenging to the church because of her hitherto passive stand on the issue of the oppressed and the marginalised. By keeping mute, the church can be accused of participating or giving tacit approval to the status quo.<sup>5</sup> If the church does not want to die, she has to wake up and do the following:

1. Show compassion for the poor by helping to lift up the downtrodden.
2. Reject the dangerous formula of prosperity theology and teach a balanced theology to the people.

If God condemns the rich man for not participating in the emancipation of Lazarus from poverty and sickness, then the time has come for the church to devote her time to the crusade against injustice, poverty, sociopolitical oppression and discrimination of all sorts (Adewale 2006).

## Towards a social agenda for the poor

Having analysed the selected three parables and highlighted the messages in them, the next thing to do is to formulate an all-encompassing theological statement. It is, however, necessary to have a recap of the teachings of the parables treated here:

1. Material possessions should be seen and related to as gifts from God. Rather than being concerned about his future, the rich fool should have had assistance of the needy in his plan and thus gather riches for God.
2. Abundance of life cannot be found in the abundance of material wealth, but in the wise and godly use of wealth.
3. Material wealth is transient, and man will give account of it to God.
4. A purely selfish accumulation of possessions is incompatible with true discipleship.
5. One needs to be compassionate to the poor and use one's wealth to assist them.
6. The church needs to take the ministry to the differently abled seriously and also integrate them into the church.
7. There is the need to participate in the liberation of people from oppression and marginalisation.

5.Nwadiador and Nweke 2014, share the same opinion.

Based on these facts, the following are my recommendations.

## Recommendations

Whilst not attempting to enforce any social action step on the churches that may be willing to draw an action plan, one wishes to make some suggestions because of the shift in time between biblical revelation and the contemporary period.

The first thing to take note of is that most of the teachings derived here relate to the use of wealth to assist the poor rather than its accumulation and ostentatious lifestyle. Therefore, both the individual members of the church and the church as an institution need to devise means of assisting the poor. To do this effectively, there is also the need to use modern means of supporting the poor because poverty can no longer respond to the traditional almsgiving alone as that would leave the poor perpetually poor. Social actions that would draw the poor out of poverty are more desirable.

The church must (Rhee 2012):

[R]ecognise and deal with both material and non-material dimensions and multiple levels of poverty: non-access or lack of access to material necessities – economic, educational, social, political, medical and spiritual resources and care. (p. 290)

Consequently, the duty of the church should go beyond almsgiving, sharing, hospitality, caretaking of the poor, the afflicted and the helpless to taking specific steps that would reverse their fortunes. Such steps include the followings.

### Provision of educational opportunities for the poor

The church, knowing that education is a key to get out of poverty, must be involved in providing educational opportunities for the poor. Mission schools should not be seen as profit-oriented enterprise but more as a self-sustaining business for the benefit of the society. The secondary schools' fees ranging from ₦270 000 to ₦800 000 per annum and university fees of ₦550 000 to ₦1 000 000 per session (excluding feeding), should be reduced drastically.<sup>6</sup>

### Championing the cause of the poor

Like the prophets of the ancient times, the church must rise above partisan or ethno-religious politics by becoming the watchdog of the nation. The church needs to speak against poverty promoting governmental policies.

### Aiming at economic independence for the poor

The ancient practice of making the poor objects of almsgiving should stop. Whilst almsgiving may be fulfilling the law, it keeps the poor at the level of poverty most of the time. Firstly, the church should aim at actions that would make the poor

6.The issue of fees in church-based secondary schools can be checked in Asabor (2016); and cost of private universities can be seen in Obasi (2015).



become economically independent. For example, there would be the need to give vocational and skill training for the uneducated poor and also the giving of grants to set them up to excel in the skills acquired.

Secondly, the church has to take the ministry from the differently abled to the next level. Apart from meeting their physical needs, the church has to take steps to win those who are not yet Christians and then integrate them into the life of the church. It is my opinion that the blind, the lame, the deaf and the dumb can still be integrated into the main church rather than creating separate churches for them.

## Conclusion

By way of summary, the parable of the Rich Fool serves as a lesson to the church on the proper way to handle her wealth. Rather than use her wealth selfishly and as a means of self-aggrandisement, her wealth should be diverted in ministering to the masses of poor people whose mites also form part of wealth. This also becomes an example to the wealthy members of the church on the proper use of their wealth. The parable of the Great Banquet is a call to the church to integrate the physically challenged to the mainstream church rather than keep them outside the gates as objects of alms. This integration is important as most of these people are poor not only because of their state but also as a result of discrimination and abandonment. The parable of the Rich and Lazarus buttresses these points by pointing out that as kinsman to the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed, the church needs to take her stand and fight against poverty, injustice and any form of social, economical and political oppressions keeping any human being at sub-human level.

Finally, I would draw on the kinsman redeemer's concept. Leviticus 25:25 states that 'If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold'. By highlighting the role of the kinsman in the redemption of the poor, God is placing the responsibility of liberating the poor on the relatives who are of means. Thus, the church must become the kinsman redeemer for the poor because the church becomes the closest relative either by faith or by creation. Failure to do this is disobedience to YHWH and a loss of the vision of global liberation that God wants.

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