CHAPTER SEVEN

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

How important are issues of riches and poverty in the New Testament? Does the New Testament have unique ethical views on poverty and riches? Does the New Testament have different views from those found in the Old Testament? Are there links between faith in God and aid to the poor?

In this chapter I want to explore the message of the New Testament about poverty and riches. In the first section I look at the way in which the New Testament stresses the importance of the right priorities, i.e., that religion must come first. Then follows a discussion of several texts in the New Testament that contrast rich and poor. The next section looks at texts dealing with aid to the poor and then the final section follows on the metaphoric uses of the concepts “rich” and “poor” in the New Testament.

The New Testament was written when the Old Testament dominated religious life in Israel as the authoritative Word of God to Israel. For this reason the New Testament cannot be read correctly without “hearing the voice of Israel’s Scriptures within these early Christian documents” (Hays 1996: 306). The inextricable links between the Old and New Testaments come to the fore when often one can detect the Old Testament values of how to deal with poor people as background assumptions in the New Testament’s portrayal of situations where riches and poverty are at issue. These links and similarities in contents lead one to expect a fundamental continuity and significant overlaps in the moral values of both Testaments for dealing with poverty and riches.
1. Religion Comes First

In a series of New Testaments texts, the authors stress the point that to put God first trumps all other issues concerning poverty and riches. To give God first priority has significant implications for how Christians are to deal with poverty and riches.

1.1 Riches as Obstruction to Salvation

The story of the rich man asking Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life is found in Matthew (19: 16–30), Mark (10: 17–31), and Luke (18: 18–30). The differences between the three versions are minor and do not affect the meaning of the story. An example of these minor differences are found in the naming of the person concerned. Matthew (19: 20, 22) refers to the rich young man, Mark (10: 17, 22) only to the rich man, and Luke (18: 18, 23) to the rich man who was a Jewish leader.

The rich man presents himself as someone who fully obeys the second table of the law. Jesus says to the rich man that he must keep the commandments to get eternal life. In response the rich man says that he has done so. This response is significant. Despite keeping the commandments, he still felt the need to ask Jesus what he has to do to get eternal life. He knew that something was missing, despite his obedience to the Law (Grosheide 1954: 294; Gould 1896: 191).

Jesus challenges the rich man to do two things that will ensure him eternal life. He must sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor and then follow Jesus. This radical demand of Jesus to the rich man asks that he breaks all his ties with his wealth, show compassion to the poor, and follow Jesus as his spiritual leader. For the rich man this was a demand he could not fulfil, for he could not part with his riches. All three evangelists describe
him as very rich. He goes away from Jesus very sad, although it is not clear exactly why he was sad.

In response Jesus emphasises to His disciples through repetition how difficult it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God. It is more difficult for rich people to enter God’s kingdom than for a camel, the largest known domestic animal in Palestine, to go through the eye of a needle, a well-known small opening (Grosheide 1954: 297). Jesus emphasises the particular strong deterrent effect riches have on people’s faith in God (Allbright & Mann 1971: 233). His audience would immediately have realised the impossibility of a camel going through the eye of a needle (Hill 1972: 284). They are astounded at the impossibility of rich people to be saved, as they shared the common perception of ancient Israel – reinforced by Old Testament promises – that riches were blessings of God and prosperity signs of God’s favour to hard-working people obedient to the Law (Allbright & Mann 1971: 233; Evans 1990: 653; Hendriksen 1975: 398). Their response is to ask who then can be saved. Jesus answers them that God can save any human being, although for human beings themselves it is impossible.

If one important lesson from this story is that rich people can only enter the Kingdom of God through His power, what then about the requirement to sell all one’s belongings? Is that requirement universally applicable to all rich people? An interpretation that says no to this question could argue that Jesus used this requirement to determine the rich man’s loyalty. The rich man claimed that he obeyed the second table of the Ten Commandments. This obedience does not automatically imply obedience to the first table, that concerns a person’s relationship with God. To require that he sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor, asks of the rich man to make God’s concern for poor people fully his own.
Parting with all his belongings would show that his relationship with God has absolute priority in his life and that he trusts God fully to take care of him. He is not prepared to give up the security that riches give, i.e., that he can provide for himself. He values his earthly riches more than the riches in heaven that Jesus promised he would get if he sold all his belongings. Thus, despite his obedience to the commandments concerning his behaviour towards his fellow beings, he could not shift his trust in wealth to trust in God. He was enslaved by his belongings (Hendriksen 1973: 726). His riches obstructed his entry into God’s Kingdom.

Should all rich people be required to sell all their belongings like this rich man had to do? Only if their riches have a powerful hold on them and obstruct their entry into God’s Kingdom (Grosheide 1954: 296; Hill 1972: 283; Hendriksen 1973: 728). If this is so, selling all their belongings will help them learn the right priorities in life and how to trust God completely. Paul sounds a cautionary note about selling belongings and giving the money to the poor. In 1 Corinthians 13: 3 he says giving away everything you have without love will do you no good. This remark suggests that only a heart filled with love will make any gift or aid to poor people meaningful.

A particularly difficult section in Luke seems uncompromisingly set on commanding believers to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor (Luke 12: 32–34). The section follows the parable of the rich fool with its emphasis on riches in heaven and a section on placing trust in God and not worrying about where food or clothes come from. The point this problematic section makes is that believers should save riches – that cannot decay or be destroyed – in heaven, because their hearts will be where their riches are. This idea echoes an almost identical saying of Jesus in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6: 19–21). Clearly the saying of Jesus that Luke reports presupposes that selling your belongings and giving the money to the poor is an important way of building up and saving riches in heaven.
However, should this unambiguous, radical demand be taken to apply to all Christians? Should Christians sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor? One could easily argue against this text by saying that soon all Christians would end up in poverty as well if they sell all their belongings. Another argument would be to say that such a demand is found nowhere else in the Bible. These arguments might work, but could be too convenient. Perhaps when they are combined with a further argument they might have somewhat more force. Can it be done in the following way?

Some of the sayings of Jesus are deliberately radical so as to grab our attention, to force us out of our comfortable everyday assumptions that have become so natural to us that we can see no alternative to them. Do any Christians really practice the radical demands of the Matthean Sermon of the Mount to take out their right eyes and throw them away or to cut off their right hands and throw them away? If not, why? I doubt very much that all Christians all the time obey the strict interpretation of adultery that Jesus gives. So, if they do fail that strict interpretation of adultery, why not do what Jesus said they had to do? Perhaps for a similar reason Christians are also not obeying the command of Jesus to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor.

My hesitant interpretation that I hope is reasonably acceptable is that for some issues Jesus states his case so forcefully so as to draw our attention to take an issue seriously that we otherwise would have ignored. It seems so natural for heterosexuals to look at some attractive people from the opposite sex with desire, that it seems impossible to recognise the dangers thereof. The same with belongings. It seems so human and natural to use your possessions to your own advantage. By stating his demands so radically, Jesus shocks us into taking the morality of sex and possessions (riches) seriously. If so, then his commands about the right hand and eye is to warn Christians
to deal immediately and decisively with temptations that could lead to breaking His strict interpretation of the command on adultery. The same with the command to sell all your belongings. The danger of riches corrupting your priorities is serious. The desire for riches makes people selfish and focused on their own interests at the expense of compassion with poor people. Desire and love for riches also distract people from their focus on God as their highest priority and first love. For this reason, Jesus wants to convey the message that people must be prepared to deal with their riches in a decisive way so as to avoid inner corruption and to safeguard their ethical and religious values. On the other hand, there are people so desperately in need, that are so easily ignored, that believers must take their plight seriously.

A similar emphasis on riches as obstruction to salvation as discussed above is found in the parable of the sower. The seeds sown among the thorn bushes are choked and they do not bear fruit. The explanation given in Matthew (13: 22), Mark (4: 19), and Luke (8: 14) says that the love of riches chokes the message. Hearts filled with love and longing for riches are preoccupied, without room for thinking and doing God’s word (Hendriksen 1975: 158). Choking is a slow and gradual process that eventually disables the plant to reach its potential (Plummer 1922: 221). Mark and Luke add the worries of this life as part of the chokers. Mark also adds all other kinds of desires and Luke the pleasures of this life as chokers. The important point is that the love of riches is described in this parable as something that can gradually stifle God’s message in people’s lives so that their lives bear no fruit.

1.2 Greed and Rich Fools

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool in response to a question that He refuses to answer (Luke 12: 13–21). A man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide with him the property their father left them. Jesus answers through a
counter-question that He does not have the right to judge or to divide the property between them. He goes on to warn his audience against every kind of greed. The link with the earlier question seems to be that Jesus judged the questioner to be greedy. Nevertheless, Jesus justifies his warning against greed by saying that persons' lives are not made up of their possessions. His warning is against materialism, where people judge the value of their lives according to the possessions they have.

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool to illustrate the worthlessness of riches in determining the important things of a person's life. Initially the rich fool looks wise, as he builds bigger barns to store all his crops. His foolishness enters when he thinks that his riches are all he needs to live a good life of food, drink, enjoyment, and a comfortable tempo in years to come. His emphasis is on his own enjoyment of his riches, without thinking about needy persons or having any concern for God (Marshall 1978: 524). The emptiness of this life before God comes out when Jesus asks him what will happen if he suddenly dies, an ever-present risk for all humans. He will lose all his piled up riches, which will then go to someone else. So ultimately his possessions will have no value to him (Marshall 1978: 521). However, he is not rich in God's sight, as his life never earned him that. He never did the things that God rewards. It seems reasonable to assume that the tacit background of this text is that the rich fool has ignored the Old Testament message about poverty and riches. He directed his energies in pursuit of the wrong things and ignored the truly important aims in life (Marshall 1978: 521). Gathering riches without living a life in obedience to God out of gratitude for His love and mercy is foolishness, meaning nothing.

1.3 Acceptable Rich Men

Not all rich people in the New Testament have negative images. Zaccheus of Jericho had the potential and opportunity to earn a negative reputation. He
was a chief tax collector, a profession hated by the Israelites and one notorious for exploiting people. However, Zaccheus is rich and praised by Jesus (Luke 19: 1–10). What makes him different from the other rich people who are negatively portrayed?

The crucial factor distinguishing Zaccheus from the unacceptable rich people is his excitement about Jesus. His lack of physical length made it difficult for him to see who Jesus was when He was passing through Jericho. Zaccheus thought it so important to see Jesus that he ran ahead to climb in a sycamore-tree, regardless what it did to his personal dignity, to be able to get a good look at Jesus (Plummer 1922: 433). Jesus noted Zaccheus and said to him to come down as Jesus had to stay with him that day. Zaccheus shows his excitement by hurrying down and welcoming Jesus with great joy. The crowd of people who accompanied Jesus were dissatisfied that Jesus went as guest to Zaccheus’s house, whom they described as a sinner.

Zaccheus immediately reacts to their grumbling by addressing Jesus directly. The excited personal relationship that he has established with Jesus has an immediate effect on his ethical values. He must have known the strong duties toward the poor that God expected of his followers in the Old Testament. As if to take away the embarrassment caused by the crowd's reaction to Jesus' presence at his house, Zaccheus gives a public undertaking, a declaration of intent, to Jesus (Marshall 1978: 697). He promises to give half his belongings to the poor. He furthermore promises to pay back four times the amount to anyone he has cheated. Zaccheus wants to make restitution for his former evil habits (Marshall 1978: 694).

The Old Testament prescribed that wealth or possessions acquired through dishonest means had to be repaid in full, plus an additional twenty percent. Zaccheus undertakes to do much more than that. Through these undertakings Zaccheus immediately demonstrates the right priorities. His relationship
with Jesus has priority and belongings can be sacrificed to secure this relationship. To safeguard his relationship with Jesus, Zaccheus will fulfill more than his duties to the poor, as well as to those that he has cheated. Zaccheus was freed from his riches through his response to the relationship Jesus established with him (Groenewald 1973a: 8; Evans 1990: 661).

The reaction of Jesus to Zaccheus’s undertakings tells the full story. Jesus acknowledges that Zaccheus has experienced true salvation, as only God’s salvation can bring about a change of that scope in a person’s life. Significant is that Jesus calls him a true descendant of Abraham. Besides being the one to whom God promised many descendants, Abraham was also an obedient and very rich man. Zaccheus falls in Abraham’s category, i.e., a rich person who immediately believes in God and obeys His commandments.

Another example of an acceptable rich man is found in Acts 10: 1–7. God uses Cornelius, a Gentile, in teaching Peter the lesson that all people, not only Jews, are acceptable to God. Cornelius must have been moderately rich. He was a captain in the Italian regiment of the Roman Army. His pay was considerably higher than that of common soldiers (Barrett 1994: 499). The fact that he took two house servants and one of his personal attendants along on his journey, suggests that he was no poor man (De Villiers 1977: 214). He was a sincerely religious man who worshipped God with his whole family. When an angel called him to get involved with Peter, he told Cornelius that God was pleased with the prayers Cornelius was constantly praying to God and the works of charity he did to help the Jewish poor people. Again we find that a rich person is acceptable to God if the person has God as highest priority and uses accumulated riches to serve the poor.

These requirements for the acceptable rich person come to the fore in one of the scathing attacks Jesus makes on the Pharisees (Matthew 23: 23; Luke
11: 41–42). Their emphasis on religious rituals made them lose sight of the real priorities of their religion. For this reason Jesus advises them to give to the poor what is inside their cups and plates and then everything will be ritually clean. Whereas their tithing is done in the strictest detail, sometimes going beyond what is required of them, they forget the bigger picture with its main priorities, i.e., love for God, justice, mercy, and honesty (Hendriksen 1973: 830; Hill 1972: 313; Marshall 1978: 497). The ideal, Jesus says, is both to give priority to the essentials, the weightier matters and to observe minor commandments as well (Plummer 1922: 311; Evans 1990: 505).

1.4 Don’t Worry; Trust God

Matthew and Luke both wrote about Jesus’ advice to his disciples not to worry about food, drink, or clothes, but to trust God for such things. Matthew prefaces his text on worries with a short section about the impossibility of serving two masters simultaneously. The two masters he refers to are God and money. Anyone trying to serve both these masters will hate and despise the one and love and be loyal to the other. Matthew explicitly links this section with the section on worries by saying that Jesus tells his disciples not to be worried because of the impossibility of serving two masters. What does Matthew mean? Matthew seemingly suggests that to serve God wholeheartedly implies not to be worried about food, drink, and clothes, but to trust God for those things.

Matthew and Luke both emphasise the point that Jesus makes, i.e., that instead of worrying, believers should have the right relationship with God. This relationship requires that they serve only one master, i.e., God. Their main concern must be God’s Kingdom and what He requires of them. They must accept and believe that God knows what they need and that He will provide for them. Their lives are worth more than food and their bodies worth more than clothes. The way God takes care of birds and plants suggests that He
would do even more for humans whom He values far more than birds and plants.

Matthew also presents reasons drawn from common sense against being worried about food, drink, and clothes. Every day has enough troubles of its own and therefore it makes no sense to add more worries to it. No one has ever lived longer or grown taller as a result of being very worried. Thus, to be worried, common sense tells us, is to make life more complicated than it needs to be and a waste of energy that produces nothing.

These Lukan and Matthean texts have a strong message for poor people. All people – poor people included – are challenged to have the right relationship of trust with a caring God. Their first priority must be God, His Kingdom, and His requirements for their lives. They must furthermore trust that God knows their needs and will provide for them. They must accept that His loving care towards them far surpasses the loving care He expresses towards birds and plants. For these reasons, and the other common sense ones, they must quit worrying to eliminate the destructive influence of worrying from their lives. Desperately poor people, as many others, might find this difficult to do, although enormously comforting. To be able to trust that God knows what a person needs and believe that He will provide it as well, must relieve poor people of enormous burdens.

1.5 Be Satisfied with – and Work for – What You Have

The apostle Paul suffered many trials and tribulations during his missionary work in the early church. Part of his problems was a life-style that could at times be characterised as poor. He states that he was often hungry, thirsty, clothed in rags, and worn out from hard work (1 Corinthians 4: 11; 2 Corinthians 6: 4). He did not want to rely too much on the support of the early churches and thus often used his skill as tentmaker to provide for his needs.
and those of his helpers. In Philippians 4: 10–20 he thanks the Philippian believers for sending him gifts as token of their care for him. As part of thanking them, Paul tells them that he has experienced negative conditions, such as being in need, being hungry, and having too little. He has also experienced having more than enough, too much actually, and being full.

Paul’s attitude towards these diverse conditions is important to note. He stresses that he has learnt to be satisfied with what he has, to be content regardless of his situation. This is possible, because Christ gives him the power and strength to face all conditions. Thus Paul says that Christians can be satisfied with their conditions, good or bad, and be content. This is possible if they accept the challenge to learn to deal with their conditions through the strength available in Jesus Christ. A further source of comfort for Paul was that although he and his co-workers seemed to be poor and have nothing, they nevertheless possessed everything in God and made other people rich through sharing their faith (2 Corinthians 6: 10).

A similar message accompanies the warning in Hebrews 13: 5 that believers should keep their lives free from the love of money. They are advised to be satisfied with what they have. Again, they are not expected to do so by themselves. To be satisfied with what you have is possible because God is portrayed as their Helper who will never leave or abandon them (Hebrews 13: 6). God’s presence and care can enable believers to make peace with their conditions.

Paul insisted on not becoming dependent on the churches for financial support so that he could safeguard his ministry against charges that he wants to enrich himself (Grosheide 1959: 183; Groenewald 1973b: 95). In order to do so, he worked very hard and long hours to provide for himself and his co-workers (2 Thessalonians 3: 8). In Acts 20: 33–35 Paul states this case similarly, but he adds that by working hard believers have the responsibility
to provide for the weak. Who the weak is, is not clear. Paul quotes a saying of Jesus, not found in the gospels, to support his case (Kee 1997: 242). The saying conveys the idea that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving. For this reason believers have a responsibility to work hard and not be a drain on other people's resources. Paul seems to suggest that through hard work and earning good income believers are enabled to help those who are weaker.

Paul translates his hard work to achieve self-reliance in support of his ministry into a command that he gives the Thessalonians. He offers himself and his co-workers as examples to the Thessalonians of hard workers who earn their own living. In the light of such praiseworthy examples, the Thessaloni- ans must resist associating with people who are lazy and meddle in other people's affairs. They should rather admonish these people to follow the example set by Paul and his co-workers. Although Paul seems to justify these prescriptions from his own attempt to safeguard his ministry, he twice describes them as commands that he issues in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. For Paul the obligation to work (hard) to earn your own income was an important obligation for believers. Through self-reliance they do not place any burden on other persons to take care of them, but are able to help those weaker than themselves (Du Preez 1981: 65). Through earning their own living they will also gain the respect of people who are not believers (1 Thes- salonians 4: 11–12).

Paul states this thought in a revised form in his letter to Titus (3: 13–15). In this case he emphasises that believers should learn to spend their time doing good by providing for real needs. Believers should live such lives, so that they will not live useless lives. Titus is advised to help the people concerned to have everything they need to be able to help others. Useful lives are lives spend doing good as God defines it. Believers have the responsibility to enable one another to live such lives.
1.6 Faith Made Perfect Through Actions

Is James against Paul? This question often arises when James 2: 14–26 with its emphasis on faith and actions is discussed. Any conflict with Paul’s writings is more apparent than real (Grosheide 1955: 382). James’s fundamental point is that faith must result in action, otherwise it is meaningless. Differently put, if Christian faith does not affect what a person does or does not do, it cannot be alive in any meaningful way. True, living faith must make a difference to a person’s life. Good deeds and right actions are integral parts of faith and thus legitimate tests whether a faith that works is active in a person (Pretorius 1988: 66). To this message the apostle Paul would not object; on the contrary, he would embrace it wholeheartedly!

To substantiate his point that faith without actions is dead, James draws two contrasts that are implicit in his text. He contrasts a living faith where faith and actions work together with a dead faith because it has no actions. James gives an alternative formulation of this idea when he states that faith is made perfect, brought to fulfilment, through the actions that flow forth from it. True, genuine faith needs the accompanying actions that authenticate it (Stulac 1993: 109). James draws another contrast, i.e., between showing your faith by your actions and not having faith if your actions do not prove it. He uses an example from poverty relief to make this point. It is no good saying to people in need of food or clothes that God will bless them and wish them to keep warm and eat well. Instead of saying these things to them, they must be given food and clothes.

This example of need satisfaction is a comparison with dead faith which has no actions to make it legitimate. James uses the example for comparative purposes and not for its own sake. Nevertheless, its use in this context is instructive. James takes it as self-evident that people in need must be helped immediately. Help must be concrete enough to satisfy those urgent needs.
James is not only convinced that he is right about this, he also assumes that his readers think the same. For this reason he can use it as an example to demonstrate his point about a living faith.

John makes the link between poverty relief and a life of faith much closer. This link is found in a section that emphasises that believers must love one another because Christ has shown them what love is through dying for them on the cross. His sacrificial death must be emulated by the believers: their love must make them willing to sacrifice their lives for one another (Grayston 1984: 113). If they are willing to sacrifice their lives, how much more must they not be prepared to use their capacity to give help in service of others (Stott 1964: 142–143; Grayston 1984: 114; Houlden 1994: 100). John makes a direct link between love for God and love for fellow human beings. Rich people cannot claim to love God if they close their hearts to people in need. True love for God will thus show itself in action towards one’s fellow human beings in need. Love cannot only be words and talk, but as in the case of James, must be demonstrated through acts of love towards others. Action, as the proverb says, speak louder than words (Stott 1964: 144).

1.7 Jesus or the Poor?

Many non-poor people justify their lack of involvement with poor people by reference to the saying of Jesus that the poor will always be with us. Could it be that Jesus is saying that poverty is an insoluble problem that His followers can therefore ignore? Is such an interpretation outrageous and an abuse of this saying of Jesus (Allbright & Mann 1971: 315)? If so, why?

The choice between Jesus and the poor is only valid in the one specific case where the woman used expensive perfume to prepare Jesus for His burial (Matthew 26: 7–13; Mark 14: 3–9; John 12: 3–8). The alabaster jar with perfume made of pure nard that the woman poured over Jesus’ head (Mat-
teth and Luke) or his feet (John) was indeed very expensive. The disciples, all males, harshly criticise the woman. In a patriarchal context that kind of critique is much more damaging. Their criticism centres around the financial waste involved (Hill 1972: 334). The money could rather be used for poverty relief. John 12: 6 even suggests that Judas had an eye on that money for personal gain, as he defrauded Jesus and the disciples of their own money for which he took responsibility.

Jesus strongly defends the woman’s deed. Against the criticism of the disciples that she wasted money that could have been used to benefit the poor, Jesus emphasises that His life on earth will not last much longer. The disciples will have many opportunities in future to take care of the poor; however, their opportunities to do something for Jesus, to show their love and respect for the Son of God whilst on earth, are running out (Hendriksen 1973: 900; Groenewald 1980: 272). The woman used such an opportunity to do something for Jesus by preparing His body for burial (inadvertently?) through pouring expensive perfume over Him (Grosheide 1954: 387; Hendriksen 1954: 180). Jesus adds the remark that her deed is so special that it will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. This remark both serves as comfort to the woman and further reinforces the reprimand to the disciples.

1.8 The True Riches of the New Testament

In 1 Timothy 6: 5–11 the apostle Paul summarises some of the main themes of the New Testament on riches. The danger and uncertainties of riches and Christian religion as the true riches and appropriate focus of human life are both there in detail. He introduces these issues through the problem of teachers of false doctrines who thought they could make money by means of religion. In response to their views, Paul sets the record straight by pointing to the metaphoric riches true religion gives.
Paul warns people who want to be rich against the temptations and traps that could ruin them. One must notice that Paul refers to people who want to be rich, as the desire to become rich can be as destructive as having a large surplus of riches (Smelik 1973: 83). The lure of a luxurious lifestyle can erode moral values and religious spirituality. The power of the many desires awakened by riches can be destructive. That the love of money is the source of all kinds of evil has become a common proverb. Paul expands this idea by referring his readers to people who were so eager to have money that they drifted away from their faith with resultant broken hearts and deep sorrows. Love of money and a desire to be rich can have major negative consequences on people, believers included. Paul asks Timothy to admonish rich believers not to place their hope in the uncertainty of riches, but to place their hope in God.

In contrast to the dangers of riches, Paul points to the true riches that faith and trust in God brings. Religion can make a person very rich, on condition, Paul says, that believers are satisfied with what they have. Believers must develop the capacity to be satisfied with any circumstances (De Kruijf 1966: 71). As we brought nothing into the world, nor can take anything out of it, enough food and clothes ought to satisfy us. Although we cannot take anything out of this world at death, we can store treasure in heaven with God which will ensure that we will have true life with God after death. This is the focus that a rich believer's life ought to have. What does it mean for a believer to have the right focus that will ensure riches in heaven?

Paul says that believers must place their hope in God who generously gives to us everything for our enjoyment. From this basis believers must show their faith in God by doing good (works), being generous and sharing with others (Davies 1996: 54). An ethical lifestyle based on God's commandments with an emphasis on generously sharing what you have available (belongings, money, friendship, support, etc.) with others is what generates
riches in heaven. Believers ought to be concerned to get God’s approval by being rich in good deeds (Davies 1996: 54).

2. Contrasting Rich and Poor

Several texts in the New Testament draw sharp parallels between rich and poor people. In these texts rich people are the villains and the poor people are protected. Does this mean that God has made a choice for poor people and He is against rich people? Such a view would be simplistic, therefore I will explore these texts in greater detail to uncover their deeper meanings.

2.1 The Lukan Beatitudes

One of the more difficult sections in the gospel of Luke is the author’s version of the Matthean Beatitudes (Luke 6: 20–26). Whereas Matthew’s focus is on spiritual qualities of the truly happy and blessed people, Luke emphasises real life circumstances in which people are now living. Luke does not only present a series of blessings, but also pronounces woes on people who are called the rich. Does Luke condemn all rich people and offer a poor lifestyle as the ideal for Christians?

We can only make sense of this section if we note the strong contrast that Luke sets up between rich and poor. The contrast is neatly presented in parallels. Once these parallels are noted, the section becomes a devastating judgement on certain kinds of rich people. The rich people are those who live luxurious lives now without concern for the poor and do all they can to gain public approval. Perhaps a visual presentation of the parallel contrasts will illuminate the reasons for this interpretation.
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<th>BLESSINGS</th>
<th>WOES</th>
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<td>Happy are you poor</td>
<td>how terrible for you who are rich now</td>
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<tr>
<td>the Kingdom of God is yours</td>
<td>you have had your easy life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy are you who are hungry now</td>
<td>How terrible for you who are full now</td>
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<tr>
<td>you will be filled</td>
<td>you will go hungry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy are you who weep now</td>
<td>How terrible for you who laugh now</td>
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<td>you will laugh</td>
<td>you will mourn and weep</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you... all because of the Son of Man</td>
<td>How terrible for you when all people speak well of you</td>
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<td>their ancestors did the very same thing to the prophets</td>
<td>their ancestors said the very same things about the false prophets</td>
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The precise parallels with sharp contrasts betray that Luke refers to a situation where the concepts rich and poor get specific meaning. He is not referring to any kind of rich or poor person. Luke clearly assumes a relationship between rich and poor in this section. Simply put, the poor are poor because the rich are rich. Why this interpretation? Luke is addressing a situation where the rich are leading an easy life, with more than enough to eat and laugh about. Not only is that their life-style, but they also determine their lives by the demands of getting good reputations and praise from other people. They are not concerned with the needy, poor people in society, but are indifferent to their plight (Marshall 1978: 256). The rich also do not have a commitment to the “Son of Man.” They are only concerned with their own desires and need for public approval (Marshall 1978: 246). They thus fit the profile of the false prophets of the Old Testament, who do not proclaim, nor live according to, God’s moral requirements as expounded in the Mosaic Law.

The poor people are people who live in physical and psychological need, but get no help from those better off, i.e., the rich. They are pitiable by outward appearance, but are judged to be happy because of what Jesus promises them (Marshall 1978: 245–246). Poverty is thus not depicted as a condition
that brings about happiness; rather, God’s promise of the Kingdom is the source of happiness (Marshall 1978: 249). Luke emphasises that they are poor and hungry now, and weep now. He refers to their present need. In contrast to the rich, the poor have miserable lives, without the benefit of loving care expressed by those, the rich, able to do so.

In the context of future rewards, a future reversal of fortunes, and peace in the New Testament, there is a sense in which the poor are promised the future rewards of the Kingdom. Luke presents us with a picture where the poor experience gross exploitation by the rich. If the section is read as a whole and judged to apply as a whole to the rich and to the poor, then those addressed as the poor are not just any poor person. The poor of this section then becomes those who also suffer, like the prophets of the Old Testament, because of their relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. This relationship with Christ is a vital qualification, which implies that the poor suffer hatred and contempt not as a result of their own wrong actions and unacceptable behaviour, but because of their links with Christ (Plummer 1922: 181).

If this interpretation holds, then Luke sketches a situation where poor believers are severely exploited by the rich unbelievers of their society. Luke’s message now becomes one of comfort to the poor (Marshall 1978: 246). Are they comforted by the fact that poverty, sorrow, and hunger are opportunities for developing certain virtues, while wealth, laughter, and having enough to eat are sources of temptation (Plummer 1922: 179)? No. They are promised that their hunger will be changed in future to being filled. Their weeping will change to laughter.

Is this a “pie in the sky” message where the poor people are promised eschatological justice and rewards in future in exchange for acquiescent and submissive behaviour now? Perhaps, if one notes that Luke promises them a great reward in heaven for suffering ill-treatment from others as a result of their commitment to Jesus. Perhaps not, if one looks at the statement that the Kingdom of God already belongs to them. In this case, they are not
promised the Kingdom, but Luke states as a fact that the Kingdom is theirs (Plummer 1922: 180). The poor thus already share in God’s rule over creation and the lives of people, but will also have part in God’s future establishment of His Kingdom.

Is the comfort of future rewards, a future reversal of fortunes, and possession of God’s Kingdom enough for people suffering from poverty, hunger, and psychological distress now? Perhaps not. However, Luke offers them something more. He presents them with God’s strong judgement on their predicament. This judgement shows the injustice of their poverty that results from their exploitation by the rich and the rich’s neglect of their obligations towards the poor. This insight into their situation, provided by a strong normative evaluation thereof, can be the starting point for collective action to do something about the extreme degree of difference between rich and poor in their society.

2.2 The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke’s story of the rich man and Lazarus has a similar message (Luke 16: 19–31). Again the profile of the rich in this story is one of a person who ignores the plight of the poor and who does not care about God either. As in Luke 6: 20–26, Luke gives a list of contrasting parallels between the life of Lazarus and the rich man (Marshall 1978: 635). Again, his intention is to show the direct link between exploitative rich people and suffering poor people. The contrasts can be presented as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RICH MAN</th>
<th>LAZARUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dressed in most expensive clothes</td>
<td>covered with sores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lived in great luxury everyday</td>
<td>brought to the rich man’s door; hoping to eat bits of food falling from his table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>died, buried, in Hades in great pain</td>
<td>died, carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this section, as in Luke 6: 20–26, Luke shows us rich and poor in an exploitative and non-caring relationship. The paths of the rich man and Lazarus crossed practically everyday. Lazarus was brought to the rich man’s gate with the hope of getting bits of food from the rich man’s table to eat. Lazarus was very poor, as he could not provide his own food, nor did he have relatives or friends who could provide him with food. Luke does not even tell us about the clothes of Lazarus; what stands out is his health problem, a body covered with sores. Luke mentions that Lazarus had a difficult life in which he got all the bad things. The rich man’s life is sketched by Luke in contrasting terms. The rich man dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury. He focused on the enjoyment of his riches and doing so in view of other people (Groenewald 1973a: 192). What is clear, though, is that he ignored the plight of the poor man in front of his gate everyday.

The situations of Lazarus and the rich man are reversed at death. Lazarus dies and is carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. In contrast, the rich man dies, is buried and suffer great pain in Hades. The conversation between Abraham and the rich man is telling. The rich man negotiates with Abraham for pity, but he still assumes an attitude of superiority towards Lazarus. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his lips with water and when that request fails, he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his. He has the attitude that Lazarus is inferior and ought to be commanded to be him of service (Marshall 1978: 638).

In answer to his first request to send Lazarus to cool his lips, Abraham reminds him of the reason why his fate differs so much from that of Lazarus.
Lazarus got all bad things in his earthly life, whilst the rich man were given all good things. By implication, the rich man did nothing to alter the desperate poverty of Lazarus through the use of his considerable resources. Now after death, their conditions are reversed, as Lazarus enjoys himself and the rich man is in pain. The rich man failed to use available opportunities to make wise use of his wealth (Plummer 1922: 390). The rich man is not punished for being rich. In an ironic twist, Lazarus ends up at the heavenly feast next to Abraham, one of the richest men in the Old Testament. Not riches, but uncaring, unloving, and heartless neglect of the urgent needs of the poor lead to his unfortunate fate (Plummer 1922: 394).

Abraham’s answer to the rich man’s request to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a similar fate is significant. Abraham says with great conviction that the only way to avoid such a fate is through taking Moses and the prophets seriously. If people are not willing to accept the authority of Moses and the prophets, then nothing else, not even someone risen from death, will convince them to do so. This implies that the rich man was in Hades because he ignored the message of Moses and the prophets. He thus ignored God’s word and refused to help the poor. He used his riches for his own benefit and kept it all for himself. Furthermore, Abraham’s answer implies that the message of Moses and the prophets is strong enough and sufficient in itself to convince people to accept God as father and to take care of the poor in their midst. This story of Jesus thus legitimises the Old Testament message on poverty and riches.

2.3 Rich Man, Poor Man in James

James gives his version of a strong contrast between a rich man and a poor man in James 2: 1–11. His version is complicated by the way his readers discriminated against a poor man as compared to the prejudicial way they treated a rich man. He wants his readers, whom he describes as believers,
not to judge people on their outward appearance. His example of judging people on outward appearance is their contrasting treatment of rich and poor. James disagrees strongly with their conduct and presents several reasons why he judges it to be wrong.

In the case of James he also presents a series of parallels between the rich man and the poor man that highlights the contrasting ways the believers treated these two people. It can be illustrated as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE RICH MAN</th>
<th>THE POOR MAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a rich man wearing a gold ring</td>
<td>a poor man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fine clothes</td>
<td>ragged clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show more respect</td>
<td>you dishonour the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have this best seat here</td>
<td>Stand over there; sit here on the floor by my feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the ones who oppress you and drag you before the judges; speak evil of that good name...given to you</td>
<td>God chose the poor... to be rich in faith and to possess the kingdom...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contrast is clear. Rich and poor are easily recognisable by their outward characteristics. The rich man’s fine clothes and gold ring immediately betrays his economic status, whereas the poor man’s ragged clothes gives his economic status away. The believers respond correspondingly. They show more respect to the rich man and offer him the best place to sit. They dishonour the poor man by telling him to merely stand over there, or to sit at their feet. James rejects their conduct as an instance of judging people according to their outward appearance.

The most important reason James presents for rejecting preferential treatment for the rich and discriminating behaviour against the poor is that such behaviour is not in accordance with the law of the Kingdom, i.e., to love your
neighbour as you love yourself. The readers, addressed as believers in Jesus Christ, ought not to treat people in such a way (Pretorius 1988: 51). The interpretation James gives to this commandment excludes the possibility of judging people according to their outward appearance; on the contrary, judging that way becomes a sin.

The status God ascribes to poor people is another reason for rejecting any discriminating behaviour against them. God has chosen poor people to be rich in faith and to possess His kingdom that He promised to those who love Him. Who are God’s children, then, to disregard His example and denigrate the people chosen by Him? Again, as in Luke, the support for poor people is not unqualified. The poor people James defends against unfair discrimination are those chosen by God, who love Him. Poor people, as fellow believers who were chosen by God, thus deserve full respect like any other person (Pretorius 1988: 56).

James portrays the rich in a similar way than Luke does. The rich for James are people who oppress the readers, take them to court, and violate God’s name. For this reason the rich are not worth to be given preferential treatment above poor believers by James’s readers (Pretorius 1988: 51). To treat them thus, James judges as creating distinctions amongst believers that are irrelevant in the church. Their judgements in favour of the oppressive rich are based on evil motives and not in accordance with the second part of the Great Commandment.

2.4 God Looks at the Heart, Not the Amount

The story of the poor widow has its impact because of the strong contrast it contains. It is not just a contrast between the two copper coins the widow dropped in the offering box and the lots of money the others gave. The contrast extends further between one poor widow and many rich men. Widows
were one of the most vulnerable groups in patriarchal ancient Israel and here a single widow of limited means is contrasted with many men of considerable means, the most powerful group in ancient Israel. In that context most people would value the high monetary value of the contributions made by the many rich men and treat the widow’s minuscule contribution (and herself) as insignificant and irrelevant. The powerful group with big contributions drawn from their large resources must surely be more important to God’s work than a poor widow with her small contribution that even depletes her resources. Or, that’s how people would think.

Jesus reverses this judgement. In God’s Kingdom people are not valued according to the amount or size of their monetary or other contributions. Jesus makes the surprising remark that the widow put more money in the offering-box than all the others. How can that be? The last contrast in the story explains the way Jesus evaluates this situation. The many rich men dropped in a lot of money, but in proportion to their means, they gave only part of what they could spare of their riches. The poor widow, in contrast, gave all that she had. The repetition of “all that she had” emphasises that what she gave was all the resources she had available to live on. This means she gave everything she had, not just part of what she could spare.

Through judging the proportion of the income and wealth that the people gave, Jesus comes to the conclusion that she gave more than all the others. Thus, in the eyes of Jesus the poor widow deserves more credit and praise than all the rich men combined. The divine standard that Jesus applies seems to be that what people do with their available resources to serve God is what really counts. The poor widow has more value in God’s Kingdom than the rich men. Poor people thus need not feel insignificant in God’s Kingdom because they have fewer resources to contribute.
This message is reinforced by Luke 16: 14–15. Jesus says to the Pharisees that God knows their hearts and can thus look past their attempts to make themselves acceptable to other people. Their attempts to make themselves acceptable and respectable will not necessarily impress God. Jesus explicitly says that what human beings consider to be of great value is worth nothing in God’s sight. This statement reinforces the idea that God judges people differently from the way people in ancient Israel would have judged the value of a poor widow’s contribution against those of many rich men.

James (5: 1–6) writes one of the strongest condemnations of rich people found in the New Testament. It warns of dangers of riches in his letter.

2.5 Treat the Poor (as Special)

Jesus also made a habit of inverting the distinctions that dominated social life in ancient Israel. In Luke 14: 7–14 Jesus makes two points that go against the usual ways of doing things in ancient Israel. Whilst having a meal with a leading Pharisee, Jesus noticed how some of the guests chose the best places for themselves. He told them what He calls a parable to instil humility in them, so that they would rather humble themselves and be made great, than make themselves great and be humbled. His advice to them was to take the lowest place at a social function and be asked to move to a better one, rather than the other way around.

When He was finished speaking to the guests about humility, Jesus turns to the host with a typical strong Lukan contrast. With this contrast Jesus wants to undermine a view so strong that it is almost regarded as natural. Practically all people give a lunch or dinner for their friends, relatives, acquaintances, or colleagues and associates at work. Jesus tells the host not to invite such people, as they can invite him back and that is equal to being paid for his invitation to them. Rather, Jesus encourages the host to give a feast and invite the marginalised people who cannot pay him back, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. He will eventually get repaid by God at the resurrection. The message again is to do something special for the poor
in society by treating them as human beings with dignity who are valuable in the sight of God. Does this mean that believers should not invite their friends and relatives for dinner? Not necessarily, if Marshall’s explanation is plausible. What is stated in Semitic idiom as “do not do this, but that,” really intends to say “do not do so much of this, but more of that” (Marshall 1978: 583).

2.6 Condemning the Rich

James (5: 1–6) writes one of the strongest condemnations of rich people found in the New Testament when he discusses the dangers of riches in his letter for the third time. The clue to the interpretation of this section is found in James 5: 4. The clue is that James draws a sharp contrast between the rich and their workers who are poor as a result of the rich exploiting them. The contrast is between the rich and those who work in their fields and gather in their crops. As in the case of other authors elsewhere in the New Testament, James is not addressing the rich in abstract, but the rich people he knew, who were ruthlessly exploiting their workers.

In this context James’s strong condemnation of the rich makes sense. These rich people have not paid the wages of their workers, who have complaints and cries that have reached God. The workers suffer a life of urgent need and experience a desperate struggle for survival (Pretorius 1988: 108). Even worse, the rich are so powerful that they can condemn and murder innocent people without anybody resisting them. While withholding their workers’ wages and murdering innocent people, the rich are piling up riches and living luxurious lives full of pleasure. They handled their enormous wealth irresponsibly (Stulac 1993: 168). As elsewhere in the New Testament, the condemned rich are those who live alongside the poor but do not care for them at all. The condemned rich also lacks faith in, and obedience to, God. Lack of care for the poor and lack of faith in God usually go together.
For James it is not enough to condemn the rich. He goes further by pronouncing woes on them. The exploitative rich must weep and wail over the miseries that they are going to suffer. They are going to lose their riches through decay. Their bodies, clothes, and riches (gold and silver) will be lost. Their riches will rot away, moths will eat their clothes, rust destroy their silver and gold and eat up their flesh. Whether these are normal processes of decay or something else is not clear. James refers to a day of slaughter for which they have prepared themselves (James 5: 5), but the reference is too vague to draw any conclusions from it. James seems to be saying the following. To gather riches that will eventually decay is a futile exercise (Pretorius 1988: 104). Their hopes and dreams based on their abundant riches will be destroyed through inevitable decay (Stulac 1993: 164).

2.7 Difficult Texts

James 1: 9–11 is difficult to interpret because James briefly states a contrast between rich and poor without giving much detail. He addresses Christians and asks them to be glad when God lifts up the poor and brings down the rich. These sayings are then complemented by a metaphoric description of the mortality of the rich. What could it mean?

The section rests on two assumptions. One is that the poor are down and needs lifting up, as the rich are up and needs to be brought down. The other assumption is that God judges a role reversal between rich and poor to be appropriate. The text assumes that the poor is in a lowly position from which they need to lifted up. We could only speculate what this low position might be. Perhaps the reference is to their meagre means and resources, their low position in society, or their perception of themselves. Similarly, the high position of the rich could refer to their abundant means and resources, their high status in society, or their pride about their achievements and status.
The safest interpretation of James 1: 9–11, though not necessarily the correct one, is to establish a link with James 2: 1–13. In that section James indeed enhances the lowly social status of the poor by showing that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to possess his Kingdom. He furthermore requires that His followers treat the poor, full participants in the community of faith, according to the second part of the Great Commandment (Pretorius 1988: 37). The rich are brought down by James. They must not get preferential treatment because of their socio-economic status, as they are not more important to God than the other believers. On the contrary, the rich James refers to are people who harm Christians through oppression and court action. They also defile God’s name. The poor believers thus deserve far better treatment than James’s readers have given them and the rich do not deserve any preferential treatment. In this way God effects a reversal of fortunes through enhancing the human dignity of the poor and stripping away the special privileges of the rich.

The second part of the section in James 1: 9–11 is a bit easier. James compares the rich to a flower of a wild plant. The point of the comparison is the transience of the lives of the rich. They are mortal like flowers of a wild plant that die and are destroyed when the sun gets hot. The rich too are vulnerable to being destroyed in the midst of their daily activities, without any prior warning. Rich people are exposed to the uncertainties and the risks of destruction of everyday life, despite their wealth of resources. This exposure is an equalising factor that should remind rich people not to put too much trust in their wealth (Pretorius 1988: 38).

A second difficult text to interpret forms part of Mary’s Magnificat, her song of praise to God after she shared her pregnancy with Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39–56). The part at issue here is verses 51–53. They seem to be comments on the nature of God. God is portrayed as being against the proud, mighty
kings, and the rich. He is also portrayed as being for the lowly and the hungry.

Perhaps it is sufficient to say that Mary’s portrayal of God rests on her interpretation of the sacred texts of ancient Israel and her understanding of God’s involvement in Israel’s history. The text is a song of praise that highlights God’s character as an almighty, good, and faithful God. The text does not claim to make any moral prescriptions or give any interpretation of societal issues. What is significant, though, is that God is understood as being on the side of the weak and powerless, whilst being against the mighty, the rich, and the proud. Again, God is the One who will reverse the fortunes of these two groups by humbling the powerful, proud people and elevating the marginalised persons, a common theme in the Old Testament (Groenewald 1973a: 25; Evans 1990: 175–176).

Written against the background of the Old Testament and in the context of Luke’s gospel, the weak and powerless would be those who seek help from God and have a relationship with Him. The powerful, the rich, and the proud would be those who reject God, oppress and exploit their fellow beings, and have no mercy or compassion for the marginalised people in society.

A similar text in Luke (4: 18–19) is a quote from Isaiah 61: 1–2 that Jesus uses to announce His Messianic mission. When he has read it, he declares that this section of Isaiah has come true as they heard it being read. What can this possibly mean? The section reminds of the return of the Israelites from exile and the joy at the release during the year of the jubilee (Plummer 1922: 121; Marshall 1978: 184). The section tells us more about God’s plans for salvation through Christ and His aims for humans. God has a deep concern with the marginalised, the weak, and the vulnerable people of society. In this case the poor, blind, oppressed, and captives are specifically men-
tioned. The Messiah is sent to take away these characteristics so that these people will become humans only. He is also sent to save God’s people.

3. Giving Aid to Poor People

As in the case of the Old Testament, the New Testament places heavy emphasis on the responsibility of God’s followers to aid the poor. This responsibility is attributed a deep meaning and judged to be close to the heart of Christian faith. What are the dimensions of aid found in the texts of the New Testament?

3.1 Judging Sheep and Goats

One of the most intriguing passages in the Bible deals with the responsibility of Christians to give aid to the poor and marginalised people of society. In Matthew 25: 31–46 we find a picture of what to expect at the final judgement. This section forms part of the apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24: 1 – 25: 46), that in turn is part of the fifth discourse section in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 23: 1 – 25: 46). In the apocalyptic discourse Jesus first sketches some of the characteristics of life when his second coming will take place (Matthew 24: 1–35). The second section of the apocalyptic discourse has its focus on the need for believers to be on guard, as they do not know when the second coming will happen (Matthew 24: 36–44; 25: 1–13). An important part of being on guard is to be busy with the right kind of activities. The need to be faithful and wise and to be busy developing the talents, capacities, and opportunities that God gives, is stressed (Matthew 24: 45–51; 25: 14–30).

The story of the final judgement (Matthew 25: 31–46) fits in this context. This section is clearly consistent with its context, where the focus of Jesus is on the demands believers will have to deal with, and the responsibilities they have, while waiting for Jesus’ second coming (Hill 1972: 330). The section demonstrates on what basis all people will be evaluated at the final judge-