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-
ment. The description of the final judgement is "very dramatic [and] frequently symbolic" (Hendriksen 1973: 885). Jesus is addressing his inner circle of disciples in this section on how they should be living while waiting for His second coming.

Several things make this section so intriguing. One example is why the righteous deny knowing that they ever treated Jesus in the way He tells them they did. The others — never classified, but only referred to as "the goats," "the others," "those on his left," and "these" — similarly do not recall when they failed to give aid to Jesus. Another example is whether the criterion for eternal life here is good works, or not. When discussing this section as a possible guideline for dealing with poverty, the question arises what it means that Jesus identifies so strongly with needy, marginalised people.

The section starts with a description of the setting. Two metaphors flow into one another. Jesus is described in terms of the metaphors of king and shepherd. He is depicted as a king coming in majesty with his angels to judge all the people in the world. His judgement will be a division of all people into two groups, as shepherds divided their sheep and goats at night time in ancient Israel. Those on the right are the sheep who did the right things, who did God's will, and receive eternal life, or alternatively, they are invited to come and possess God's kingdom. This kingdom has been prepared for them from the creation of the world. Does this mean that they have earned the right to eternal life through good works? No. One could argue that since the kingdom has been prepared for them since creation, therefore their care for people in need followed on their experience of God's grace. The case for this interpretation is not very strong, as one could also argue that God prepared his Kingdom for His followers in general and that they now receive that as a result of doing the right things.
One crucial phrase in Matthew 25: 34 makes the interpretation of this section easier. An important trace of the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount provides a key for unlocking the meaning. The sheep, the people who did the right things, are called those who are blessed by God. This phrase reminds of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 3–12. The emphasis in Matthew 25 is not on blessings that are promised and must still come in future. The emphasis is on those already blessed by God, as in Matthew 5: 3–12. The people on the right, the sheep of Matthew 25: 31–46, can be linked and identified with the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5: 3–12.

This interpretation can be strengthened by taking the unity of the Matthean Gospel seriously. Why should the characteristics of the people truly happy and blessed by God depicted in Matthew 5: 3–12 be different in the later sections of Matthew? His addressees, the disciples, ought to have been familiar with the characteristics of His followers spelt out in the Beatitudes. The deeds performed in the lives of the sheep of Matthew 25: 31–46 seem to be fully consistent with the characteristics of the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5: 3–12. Can one not argue that care for people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, strangers, or in prison is merely the practical manifestation of the lives of people who thirst for justice ("..whose greatest desire is to do what God requires" [TEV]), who are merciful to others, who mourn, who are humble, who are pure in heart, and who work for peace? Could one not say that being like this and doing these things are to do the will of God, as the sheep are said to have done?

There are interesting parallels between Jesus' address to those on the right (the "sheep") and those on the left (the "goats"). They can be illustrated as follows.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left: the goats</th>
<th>Right: the sheep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- you that are under God's curse</td>
<td>- you that are blessed by my Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the eternal fire that has been prepared for the Devil and his angels</td>
<td>- the kingdom has been prepared for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- away ..to the fire</td>
<td>- come and possess the kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was hungry</td>
<td>I was hungry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was thirsty</td>
<td>I was thirsty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was a stranger</td>
<td>I was a stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was naked</td>
<td>I was naked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was sick</td>
<td>I was sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was in prison</td>
<td>I was in prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you would not......</td>
<td>you fed..., gave..., took care..., visited..., received..., clothed...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- then they will answer him, “When, Lord, did we...”</td>
<td>- the righteous will then answer him, “When, Lord, did we...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me</td>
<td>- whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- will be sent off to eternal punishment</td>
<td>- will go to eternal life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both cases Jesus speaks in the first person and tells them that He Himself was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison. Both groups are astounded by these words, as most people today. Both ask Jesus when did they see or meet Him in those conditions. His answer reveals His strong identification with these marginalised groups of people who are considered to be the least important people in society (Hill 1972: 330). Satisfying their urgent needs is the same as doing it directly for Jesus, whereas neglecting their needs are the same as neglecting Jesus in similar conditions. What does this strong identification mean?

I doubt whether there are many texts in the Bible with a stronger message about the obligation to engage in emergency poverty relief than this one. Jesus points to the enormous value that He attaches to alleviating people’s urgent needs. He makes this point by showing his identification with people who exhibit misery of all kinds and degrees (Hill 1972: 331). People living in absolute poverty do not have enough to eat or drink, clothes to wear, and
they thus get sick easily. To help them in their crisis has the same value as helping Jesus, were He on earth in a similar situation. Jesus makes it clear that He wants His followers to serve Him through helping those who are in serious (physical) need (Hill 1972: 331).

Not only does this section say something about aid to those in need, it also says something about how to treat people in need. If doing something for them is the same as doing it for Jesus, one would have to treat them with respect similar to the respect one would show to Jesus. No discriminating, denigrating, or dismissive treatment may be allowed; full respect for each human being as image of God is required. This requirement implies that taking care of people’s physical needs must be done in a way that respects their value as human beings. Aid should not harm the self-respect and self-image of people in need through insensitive and disrespectful conduct.

The story ends with those on the left ending up with eternal punishment, because of what they neglected or omitted to do. The sheep, those on the right, receive eternal life because they positively cared for people in need (Hendriksen 1973: 887). Those blessed by God, who are to possess God’s kingdom, are the people who lived lives pleasing to God by taking care of people in need (Grosheide 1954: 382). As in the Beatitudes, no sins or shortcomings are mentioned, except failure to fulfil positive duties to the least important people with whom Jesus fully identifies (Hendriksen 1973: 891). Jesus thus interprets aid to people in need as fundamentally important to being a Christian and it forms a crucial distinguishing criterion between true believers and non-believers.

3.2 Keeping Aid Secret

Jesus draws a contrast between two styles of aiding people in need (Matthew 6: 1–4). The style of the hypocrites is public and Jesus rejects it. The
style that Jesus recommends to his disciples is to keep their aid private. The hypocrites make a big show of giving aid by making it known or doing it in public places (on the streets) and places of religious significance (houses of worship). In contrast the disciples are advised to avoid making such a big show of giving aid like the hypocrites do. The motive of the hypocrites for the public display of their charity is to be noticed and to receive praise from other people for their generosity (Hendriksen 1973: 319; Grosheide 1954: 94).

Jesus advises His disciples to keep their aid a private matter even to the extent that their closest friends will not know what they are doing. The consequence of making your aid public for other people to see is that their admiration and praise are the full reward you are going to get (Hill 1972: 133). Jesus says to His disciples to avoid such a public display of giving aid motivated by selfish interest for receiving recognition and praise (Hendriksen 1973: 319–320). When aid is a private matter, God still knows about it. He will give you a reward in heaven. Aid must thus not be done to impress people, but as service to God. When giving aid to poor people, the focus must be on serving them and serving God, not one’s own interests (Hill 1972: 133).

Is this section in conflict with the apostle Paul’s emphasis that aid to poor people leads to gratitude towards God and praise for His grace that enabled people to generously contribute resources to alleviate others’ needs? The focus of Jesus here is against a public display of people’s generosity in order to draw attention and get praise for the good deeds they have done. Good deeds with the aim of serving one’s own reputation and public image are unacceptable. Paul’s emphasis is on people giving aid through the grace of God. The Macedonian churches give aid because they belong to God and want to serve Him through service to others, despite meagre resources. In
this case, although their attitudes and deeds are public, God gets people's 
gratitude and praise for what has happened.

3.3 Taking Care of Widows

A cameo example of someone aiding the poor is Dorcas (Tabitha) (Acts 9: 36–42). She is introduced as part of one of the miracle stories in Acts. Tabitha dies and is raised to life again by the apostle Peter. She was ac-

tively involved in poverty relief in the Christian church at Joppa through 
making clothes (shirts and coats). She devoted her whole life to her project 
of helping the poor and doing good. From her story it seems as if her relief 
work was a specialised ministry focused on widows, a group very vulnerable 

Whether she had abundant means, or made money through sewing is not 
clear. What is clear, is that she must have had considerable skills to run a 
relief project taking care of all the widows in Joppa. She also had to have 
time and means available (Witherington 1998: 331). Whether there is any 
link between her miraculous resurrection from the dead through Peter and 
her valuable work in poverty relief among widows is unsure. So too whether 
she had any training project in sewing for the widows, or whether she merely 
made clothes herself and used the proceeds from sales to support the wid-
ows. What can be said, is that Tabitha became a role model exemplifying 

3.4 The Church in Jerusalem

The first congregation established in the Christian church after the outpour-

ing of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem had important features and problems 
relevant to issues of poverty. How and why to give aid is one of them. These 
features and problems are highlighted in two summary passages in Acts, 
that give a glimpse of life in the first Christian church and serve as links or
bridging passages in Luke’s narrative presented in Acts (Witherington 1998: 156–157; Barrett 1994: 159). The new, post-Pentecostal believers were one in heart and mind and thus in close fellowship, whilst praising God (Acts 2: 44, 47; 4: 32). They met day after day and had meals together in their homes (Acts 2: 46). The way the congregation in Jerusalem dealt with riches and poverty is often presented as the ideal of Christian sharing or socialism. But is the matter that simple?

The sense of unity in faith and mutual obligation that members of this community experienced were expressed in their sharing of belongings (Kee 1997: 54). The Christian believers viewed their belongings as not their own and shared everything they had with their fellow believers in need. They sold their properties (land and houses) and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution amongst needy believers (Witherington 1998: 162). The proceeds were distributed by the apostles according to need and as a result no one in the congregation was in need (Acts 2: 45; 4: 32, 34–35). The wealthier believers showed loving care by selling their belongings to provide for the needs of the poorer believers (De Villiers 1977: 98).

Selling their belongings to earn money for poverty relief was an entirely voluntary matter that each individual could freely decide on (Witherington 1998: 216; Barrett 1997: 267). There was no transfer of private property to communal ownership, nor any communal control of ownership of property (De Villiers 1977: 64, 65; Witherington 1998: 208). There is no indication that their sharing of belongings in this way is prescribed to believers, as no apostle suggests or teaches that all believers ought to share their belongings in this way (Barrett 1994: 252). There is also no evidence that their practice was followed by the other Christian communities described in the New Testament (Barrett 1994: 169). A serious question for supporters of this practice is whether it is sustainable over time. The answer provided by the rest of the story of the Jerusalem congregation – that one can piece together
from scattered information in the New Testament – suggests that it is not (Jonker 1966: 197).

Luke, the author of Acts, does not only sketch the positive side of the first church and ignore the problems experienced by believers. He briefly discusses the problems and their solutions (Witherington 1998: 247–248). In the context of voluntary sharing of possessions amongst members of a newly found, excited, worshipping Christian community, Luke points out two problems. In contrast to the voluntary sharing of the proceeds of the sale of possessions, as exemplified by Barnabas (Acts 4: 36–37), the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows how some believers threatened the strong ties of solidarity and generosity amongst the new church community through acts of deceit (Acts 5: 1–11) (Barrett 1994: 255; Kee 1997: 75). Ananias and Sapphira also sold property that belonged to them, but deceived the apostles in the process of handing over the proceeds to them for distribution. They tried to deceive the apostles that the part of the proceeds they handed over were the full amount (De Villiers 1977: 103; Barrett 1994: 266–267). They thus colluded to keep the true price of their property a secret, lied to the apostles, and according to Peter, to God as well (Witherington 1998: 215). When Peter confronts Ananias with his deception and lie, he emphasises that the property, as well as the proceeds from the sale, belonged to Ananias and Sapphira. Their sin was to deceive and lie to God, the apostles, and the community. Sapphira is confronted when she arrives three hours later than her husband and gets an opportunity to set the record straight and confess her sin. She fails to do so, thus confirming their collusion (Witherington 1998: 217–218).

A second problem in the first congregation in Jerusalem regarding the sharing of possessions was that the Greek-speaking Jews felt that the widows belonging to their group were neglected by those distributing funds daily (Acts 6: 1–7). The apostles acknowledged the problem as an important defi-
ciency in administration to deal with right away by calling together the whole community (Barrett 1994: 303; De Villiers 1977: 122–123). The issue was important because widows were a particularly vulnerable group of the poor in their society (Barrett 1994: 306). The apostles realised the need for a division of labour between preaching the gospel and ministering to the concrete needs of poor people (Kee 1997: 89). They recognised that their calling was not to handle finances, but to be involved with preaching and prayers. They suggested that the congregation choose seven men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These men were to be put in charge of the distribution of funds for the needy so that the apostles could focus on their calling.

The harmonious sharing of belongings and joyful worshipping of God was rudely interrupted by persecution spearheaded by Saul after the stoning of Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to deal with the congregation’s finances. The persecution had the effect of scattering the believers throughout Judaea and Samaria. The scattering of believers led to an upsurge in missionary work, as the believers proclaimed the Gospel wherever they went (Acts 8: 1–4). There is a faint resemblance between these events and the events at the tower of Babel in the Old Testament (Genesis 11). The believers clustered together in Jerusalem and their persecution kick-started God’s mission to the nations. Their scattering through persecution aided the widespread preaching of the gospel message; paradoxically, that which their persecutors hoped to prevent (Witherington 1998: 199, 282). Luke’s earlier quote of Jesus’ words that his followers would proclaim the gospel not only in Jerusalem, but also in Samaria and Judaea, was now fulfilled (Witherington 1998: 279). Ironic that the great missionary of the New Testament, Paul, was responsible for starting this evangelical outreach to surrounding areas through his persecution of Christians under the name of Saul.

Another calamity hit the Jerusalem congregation. A severe famine struck Judaea (Jerusalem) in the time of emperor Claudius (Acts 11: 28). The
famine and persecution were not the only reasons for the need that arose among believers in the church at Jerusalem. Their previous generous sharing of the proceeds of the sales of their belongings could have impoverished them in the long run. Their funds would soon have run out through selling their capital assets and using the money to distribute among the needy. It is difficult to see anything else happening if they did not have ways in which to generate new income once they had no more belongings or capital assets to sell. This way of addressing poverty through sharing the proceeds gained from selling possessions was never obligatory and was not followed anywhere else in the New Testament. In the end this strategy – plus the famine and persecution – left the church at Jerusalem vulnerable.

The disciples at Antioch decided to collect money for the believers in Judaea (Acts 11:29). The apostle Paul worked with Barnabas at Antioch at that time and he made a strong commitment to seek further help for the believers in Judaea from the other churches in Gentile areas (Acts 11: 25–26; Galatians 2: 10) (Groenewald 1971: 228). Paul emphasises (Romans 15: 27) that the churches decided freely to make contributions for the church in Jerusalem (Judaea), although he believes he could make a case for them having an obligation to help the church in Jerusalem. In his two letters to the Corinthians he extensively discusses the issue of aid to the church in Jerusalem. How does he justify the obligations of other churches to give aid in this case and how should they go about it?

Paul presents several reasons in support of his call to the Corinthians to generously support the poor church in Jerusalem. The most obvious reason is that the church in Jerusalem shared their spiritual blessings with other people through which these others became believers sharing in God’s riches (Romans 15: 27) (Stuhlmacher 1994: 241–242). Besides bringing the message of God’s salvation to the members of these churches, the church in Jerusalem was the leader in spiritual affairs who settled doctrinal conflicts,
gave moral support, and brought joy through their encouragement, as Acts 15 clearly demonstrates. In return the Gentiles have an obligation to aid the church in Jerusalem with their material blessings (Romans 15: 27). Paul elsewhere restates this idea of reciprocal help when he says to the Corinthians that it is only fair that they help others in need while they themselves currently have plenty. Why he describes this as fair is that in times when the Corinthians are in need, other churches in turn will help them (2 Corinthians 8: 13–14). Paul thus emphasises that need most possibly is not a permanent characteristic of a church and that churches should help one another in turn, as equals ought to do. Ironic is that the “mother” church in Jerusalem is the one needing financial help, despite being the spiritual leader that brought the message to the other churches.

The most important reason that Paul advances in support of his call for aid to the church in Jerusalem is to point to the example of Jesus (2 Corinthians 8: 9). Jesus deprived Himself of the riches of God in heaven and made Himself poor by becoming a human being. He did this so that his death and resurrection can enrich human beings immeasurably. His followers ought to emulate his example.

Another example presented as reason for giving aid is the churches in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8: 1–6). Paul uses them as example to show the Corinthians what God’s grace can achieve in a congregation. He uses the example not to blame or put the Corinthians to shame, but rather to inspire them. He wants to show them what God’s grace can achieve in people’s hearts who are poor and experience troubles (Grosheide 1959: 222). What makes these churches an example is that they gave themselves both to God and to Paul and his helpers to be available for service. This is remarkable as these churches went through testing times and were very poor themselves. Nevertheless, they begged Paul to be allowed to make their contribution and when they did, they were very generous as a result of the great joy they
have in their faith. What impresses Paul about these churches is not the amount of money they gave, but that they gave freely with a joyful heart and more than he could reasonably expect (Grosheide 1959: 225).

The example of the Macedonian churches points to the important link between a believer's relationship with God and giving aid (Groenewald 1973b: 114–115). The Macedonians gave themselves fully to God and the service of the apostle Paul out of gratitude for God's grace that brought them endurance and joy in times of trouble. Their giving is voluntary and comes from inner experiences of joy and gratitude. Giving aid to the poor gets deep religious meaning as it expresses an important dimension of the relationship between believers and God.

When Christians give expression to fellowship in such joyous and generous ways despite their own adverse conditions, it becomes a strong reason for glorifying the God who enables people to do so through His grace (2 Corinthians 9: 13) (Pop 1971: 237–238). Giving aid becomes a testimony of faith to other people, for which believers will glorify and thank God. Paul also motivates the Corinthians to give aid by saying to them that he wants to find out how real their love for other people is (2 Corinthians 8: 8). The Corinthians were rich in many things, such as faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness to help, and love for Paul and his helpers (2 Corinthians 8: 7). He wants to see their love for God and their fellows expressed in giving aid to the believers in Jerusalem. When he discussed the issue with them earlier, they showed a willingness and an eagerness to make such contributions (2 Corinthians 9: 1–5). Paul now wants to see them put their good intentions into practice, to make true their promises to him. He wants to see them complete the good works that they have started at an earlier stage to contribute to the alleviation of the plight of the church in Jerusalem.
Paul’s arguments establish the obligation of Christians to help fellow-believers in a distant congregation deal with their poverty. How should this obligation be put into practice? Paul advises the Corinthians not to give with an attitude of regret or out of a sense of duty. Rather, they should give gladly (2 Corinthians 9: 7). As in the case of the church in Jerusalem, giving part of your belongings for God’s service must be voluntary (Pop 1971: 244). Paul reminds the Corinthians that they need not be afraid that their giving would impoverish them. He assures them that God will give them enough resources so that they will always have what they need and be able to generously contribute to good causes (2 Corinthians 9: 8, 11). To organise this giving practically, Paul advises them to put an amount proportionate to their income aside every week. These contributions of the individual members must be saved so as to be easily available when Paul and his helpers arrive (1 Corinthians 16: 2). He suggested that they choose people to take their aid to the church in Jerusalem. He would give them a letter to establish their credentials (1 Corinthians 16: 1–3). One could speculate about his motivations for not offering to take their money to Jerusalem himself. He might want to allay suspicions that he could enrich himself, or he could think it important that the church in Jerusalem meet their benefactors and thank them personally (Groenewald 1971: 229). Paul clearly states that he wants to do what is right before God and people and thus he does not want believers to complain about the way he handles the aid they collected for the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8: 20). Paul is sensitive to criticism that might harm his ministry and thus does not ignore possible suspicions that he might abuse the funds the Corinthians have collected (Grosheide 1959: 245).

This kind of giving is important as expression of the faith of believers. When they give part of their material resources for the needs of other believers, two good things follow for God. Their contributions not only satisfy the needs of believers, but also lead to an outpouring of gratitude to God (2 Corinthians 9: 11–12). People receiving this aid know that the grace of God enables
people to give generously for their cause. From this follows a second good thing for God. People will praise and honour God for his love, grace, generosity, and faithfulness. God will get the glory for the charitable deeds of His children (2 Corinthians 8: 19; 9:13).

4. Metaphoric Riches and Poverty

There are many examples in the New Testament where the concepts “rich” and “poor” are used as metaphors. These metaphoric uses seem to be irrelevant to this study, as they do not directly, or even indirectly, point to ethical values dealing with poverty or riches. However, there is one aspect of the metaphoric uses of the concepts “rich” and “poor” that is relevant to a study of New Testament ethics on poverty and riches. The relevant aspect concerns the nature of the metaphoric uses made of these concepts. More specifically, do the authors of the New Testament use the concepts “poor” and “rich” in positive or negative senses? And what is depicted as being rich or poor in a metaphoric sense? A brief overview will suffice.

God’s heaven is depicted in many metaphors referring to riches and wealth. In Revelation many jewels and precious metals are used as metaphors to describe the physical characteristics of the heavenly city or the clothes of its inhabitants. Heaven is depicted as a place of abundance and wealth, reflecting the splendour of God. In line with this wonderful portrayal of God’s dwelling place, what God offers to believers are similarly sketched in metaphors reflecting richness and wealth. The key metaphors speak about Jesus’ riches before He came to earth and that He thus made Himself poor to become human for our salvation. Fortunately, through His voluntary poverty every human being can become immeasurably rich. The New Testament refers to the wealth of His glory, His infinite riches, rich blessings, and the hidden treasures of God’s wisdom and knowledge.
God offers these riches to human beings as good enough to satisfy their non-physical hunger and thirst in a satisfactory way. God's riches are offered as the satisfaction for our needs. Our non-physical hunger and thirst for true, eternal life will be satisfied by Jesus who is the true bread of life who gives streams of live-giving water to all who needs it. No one who has enjoyed His bread and water will thirst again. His flesh and blood is depicted as fulfilling a similar function.

Images drawn from the economic sphere and from issues somewhat related to poverty and wealth are used in three parables. The parable of the workers in the vineyard where workers are hired all throughout the day, but still paid the same amount at the end of the working day makes a point about God's free choice how he wants to reward his followers (Matthew 20: 1–16). The parable is accompanied by the warning that those who are first will be last and vice versa. The parable of the gold coins is found of the context of eschatology and aims to make the point that believers should be ready for Christ's second coming by busying themselves with responsible use of what God has entrusted them with (Groenewald 1973a: 209). They must fulfil the commands God has given them even in the absence of Jesus between His first and second comings (Grosheide 1954: 379; Marshall 1978: 700–701; Plummer 1922: 444). Each person must take responsibility for determining and using the gifts and opportunities they have (Hill 1972: 329). The parable of the shrewd manager shows what shrewd use the desperate manager, who has been fired, makes of his master's accounts in order to secure friends for himself who could be sympathetic to his plight after he has lost his job.

In an interesting combination of metaphoric and literal uses of the concepts "poor" and "rich," the apostle John tells us in Revelation how Jesus judged two of the seven congregations who are addressed. The congregation in Smyrna was literally poor, but Jesus valued the spiritual wealth of its mem-
bers (Revelation 2: 9). The other congregation, Laodicea, was literally rich and proud of it, without realising the full extent of their spiritual poverty. They are advised to buy pure gold from Jesus, again a metaphoric reference.

An interesting pattern emerges in the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) in the New Testament. When the concepts rich and riches are used in the New Testament, they consistently refer to positive things, like what God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, blessings). The concepts poverty and poor consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient. Even the metaphoric use of poor in the "poor in spirit" of Matthew 5: 3 is negative. Such people know their own insignificance and unworthiness before God. As a result of their insight into their own deficiencies and shortcomings and their willingness to acknowledge it, God will respond positively to them. Thus, the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life that believers ought to strive for. Rather, believers with resources have a strong obligation to help ameliorate and eradicate conditions of poverty.

5. Conclusion

What are the central themes found in New Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate.

1. God must be the first priority and main focus of people's lives, whether they are rich or poor. Human lives without God, however rich or poor, are meaningless. All cases of condemnations of rich people are of rich people characterised by their trust in riches rather than in God. Poor people portrayed as those favoured by God are characterised as people chosen by God, who put their trust and faith in God.
2. The New Testament makes strong normative judgements on riches. People can be rich and believers, but on condition that God enables them to accomplish the impossibility of choosing to serve the right master, i.e., God rather than Mammon (money). The unwillingness to be satisfied and content with what you have goes with a love for riches. This desire for riches is a source of many troubles that can ruin people, even believers.

Acceptable rich people are those who have God as first priority in their lives and share His concern about helping the poor who are in need. Through their good deeds and right actions — as positive responses to God’s commands — they gather riches in heaven, which are the only ones that count. They do not rely on decaying earthly riches and refuse to let such riches obstruct their way to God’s salvation.

Riches can corrupt people’s priorities and stifle their love for God, like the case of the rich man who ignored poor Lazarus day after day. When the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his, Abraham affirms the legitimacy of the Old Testament scriptures (the law and the prophets). Those scriptures are sufficient to teach their readers the right priorities. If people do not listen to them, they will listen to nothing else. Jesus teaches all people, but poor people especially, not to worry about food, drink, and clothes. Again the message is to have the right priority, i.e., to put trust and faith in God who will take care of His children more than He takes care of birds and plants.

The rich people who rely on their riches for a good life are most often also those people who reject God and His concern for the poor. They often go further and exploit and harm poor people, often believers included. Their riches result from their injustice towards more vulnerable members of their society.
3. The New Testament takes over the Old Testament ideas about the important moral obligations of believers to help poor people and strengthens and deepens them. The New Testament attaches major significance to the responsibility of believers to aid poor people. Jesus identifies to such an extent with poor and needy people that he regards helping or neglecting them as being done to Himself. That identification has enormous consequences for how non-poor people ought to treat poor people so as to respect the human worth and dignity of the poor.

Several justifications are offered to motivate believers to fulfil these responsibilities toward poor people. Some of the strongest are the following. Jesus left the riches of heaven to become poor on earth. Through his voluntary poverty He made believers immeasurably rich by giving them access to God’s salvation. As a result believers have the obligation to serve God through obeying His commands, inter alia those directed to safeguard, and care for, the weak and vulnerable members of society. Believers must become like God in their compassion and care for the poor. Their faith in a loving and caring God must be authenticated by the loving deeds that flow from their faith in, and experience of, a compassionate God.

A further argument is that aid to poor believers is justified because doing so will make the aided grateful to God. People noting the aid will glorify God for His grace that motivates people to give aid. As aid to the poor forms a central part of the responsibilities of believers, the need to put faith into action or to make love concrete provides additional strong justifications for helping the poor.

Aid must be used to glorify God, not to enhance personal status through seeking public recognition. Aid must be given gladly and in proportion to a believer’s available resources. Aid can be given personally, as the rich man ought to have given poor Lazarus in front of his gate everyday. Aid can also
be organised collectively through a congregation. If necessary, a division of labour can be made in the church for effectively organising and administering the collection of aid. How to practically organise the collection of aid depends on the circumstances of the congregation involved. The Christian witness of people involved with the collection and distribution of aid must be protected through measures designed to make it abundantly clear that they do not benefit personally from such aid.

Through hard work Christians must ensure that they themselves become self-reliant and not in need of aid. Through self-reliance they become givers of aid rather than being recipients of aid or burdens to others.

4. The New Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor similar to the Old Testament. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief where the focus is on provision for the urgent needs of poor people that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. The New Testament regards this kind of help as enormously important.

A second kind of aid aims to help a poor congregation rid themselves of their poverty. This aid serves the function of enabling the poor believers to become self-reliant again in order to empower them to help other poor people in turn.

5. The Bible never talks about riches and poverty outside a specific context where such people live together. Never are the Biblical authors concerned about rich people in general, or interested in comparing rich people across different societies. What matters is the relation between rich and poor who live together and share their lives in a specific geographical area. The contrast that counts is the one between the rich and the poor living together here and now. The behaviour that is important is between the rich in this context
and their poor neighbours. Whether a rich South African person would be relatively poor when compared to Americans does not matter. What matters is how rich South Africans compare to the poor people they share their country and lives with. Not only how they compare, but how the rich treat the poor. This way of talking about poverty and riches has enormous practical implications.

6. The New Testament judges deep and sharp contrasts between exploitative, rich people and suffering, poor people to be totally unacceptable. In all of these contrasts sketched in the New Testament the rich people do not live according to the Old Testament ethical values for treating the poor. The rich are rich because they are exploiting and ignoring the poor. Through exploitation and deliberately ignoring the poor, the rich are showing no concern for God’s commandments and thus have no compassion or love for the suffering poor. These rich people will only experience their earthly pleasures derived from their riches, but are desperately poor in God’s sight and will not receive eternal life. The suffering poor people who place their trust in God are blessed by God and will get big rewards in heaven.

7. A strong theme in the New Testament is that God judges people differently from the way usually considered to be appropriate in human societies. God – especially through the eyes of Jesus – is not impressed by people’s standards of human worth. God does not think rich and mighty people are the most important or valuable members of society just because they have riches or power. He chose the poor to be rich in faith and as His chosen people they must be treated with respect for their God-given human dignity. A good example of God’s judgement that differ from those usually made by humans is the following. God does not think that the considerable financial contributions of many rich men to the synagogue are worth more than the meagre contribution of the poor widow – she gave all the money that she had left.
Jesus is not impressed by the way people host feasts for their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. He would rather see believers invite those people who cannot reciprocate and who therefore probably never gets any invitation to go anywhere. Through these kinds of judgements the New Testament shows that God easily reverses the judgements current in ancient Israelite society (and elsewhere), giving poor people more status and worth than most people were willing to acknowledge. In this way God restores the human dignity and worth of the vulnerable people of society and puts the others who look down on them to shame. In many cases the exploitative rich now living in luxury will face a role reversal with the suffering poor they are now exploiting.

8. The metaphoric uses of the concepts rich and riches in the New Testament consistently refer to positive things, like what God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, blessings). The concepts poverty and poor consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient. Thus, the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life that believers ought to strive for. Rather, believers with resources have strong obligations to help ameliorate and eradicate conditions of poverty.