

Jesus and the poor: two texts and a tentative conclusion

Hans Kvalbein

The author, who is an international editor of Themelios, is Professor of New Testament at the Free Faculty of Oslo in Norway. The article is (substantially) the text of a lecture given by Dr Kvalbein in Taiwan during the summer of 1986.

The question of Jesus and the poor had no prominent place in NT research up to the early 1970s. The existentialist trend set by Bultmann and his school did not give priority to the social background of the NT and the socio-ethical dimension of its message. This was changed with the new awareness of the world situation in the seventies. The wave of Neo-Marxism and the widening gulf between poor and rich countries changed the theological agenda. Liberation theology challenged both the ecumenical and the evangelical movements. In recent years many biblical studies have been devoted to the question of the social setting and the ethical implications of the NT, and many authors have published studies relating to the question of Jesus and the poor.¹

In this paper I don't want to describe or comment on this discussion. I'll rather go directly to two of the most important and most discussed texts in the gospels on this topic: the beatitudes of the poor, Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20, and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31. And from my interpretation of these texts I want to suggest some biblical guidelines for the question of evangelism and social responsibility.²

We start with a survey of the use of the word 'poor' in the gospels. We find this word in two different contexts: it is used (1) about those who receive alms, and (2) about those who receive the gospel or the kingdom of God.

(1) The 'poor' as potential receivers of alms

The rich man asking Jesus how to inherit eternal life was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor (Mk. 10:21 and parallels). The poor are not emphasized here. They are simply the receivers of gifts from the rich man. The dominant question is not the situation of the poor, but the rich man's salvation. He was called to follow Jesus, but he went away because he was very rich.

The tax collector Zacchaeus, however, responded positively to Jesus' call (Lk. 19:8). He wanted to sell and give away half of his wealth to the poor. Here again the rich man is the main person. The poor are the receivers of his gifts.

In the story about the anointing of Jesus (Mk. 14:3-9 and parallels), we hear that the disciples protested. The precious ointment could have been sold and given to the poor. But Jesus defended the woman's action. You have the poor always with you. You can always help them.

In the story of the widow's mite (Mk. 12:41-44 and parallel), we hear that she gave to the temple, to God, all she had. The point of this story is that she gave more than the rich

who gave from their surplus. She was poor and needed support from others, but she proved her love for God with a whole heart.

The story about the rich man and Lazarus tells about a beggar lying at the rich man's door (Lk. 16:19-31). In all these texts the 'poor' are the beggars, dependent on other people's mercy and help to survive. Their need is social and material.

(2) The 'poor' as the receivers of the gospel and the kingdom of God

The Baptist once asked Jesus if he was the one to come or if he should wait for another (Mt. 11:1-6 and parallel). Jesus answered by listing the miracles he did: 'The blind receive sight, the lame walk . . . and the good news is preached to the poor.' The last expression is a quotation from Isaiah 61:1f. This text is also the preaching text of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth according to Luke 4:18, and it is the basic text of the beatitudes of the poor in Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20. Isaiah 61:1-2 seems to be a sort of programmatic text for the ministry of Jesus. It is the background to all of these texts speaking about the 'poor' as the receivers of the gospel or the kingdom. These texts are not many, but they all have an emphasized position in presentations of the basic message of Jesus.

In the parable of the great banquet (Lk. 14:15-24) the two different uses of the word 'poor' are combined. The new guests to be invited, after the first had refused to come, are the 'poor and maimed and blind and lame' (v. 21; cf. v. 13). In the story these are literally the beggars of the town. But the topic of the parable is how to receive the kingdom. From this interpretation these 'poor' seem to be a metaphor for those 'tax collectors and sinners' who received the message of Jesus, not a literal description of the receivers of the kingdom.

How can we understand the relationship between these two ways of using the word 'poor'? Is the kingdom and the gospel exclusively for beggars, the receivers of alms spoken of in the first use of the word? Is Jesus' message of the kingdom a special comfort for the poor and oppressed or even part of a class struggle between the poor and their suppressors? We see that the social and ethical question of Jesus and the poor implies a semantic question about the meaning and reference of the word 'poor', especially when the word is used to designate the receivers of the kingdom. Let us first look at this question in the light of the beatitudes. Then we can discuss the position of the poor in a text about a 'potential receiver of alms', the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

I. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' — 'Blessed are you poor'

If you look at the form and context of the two versions of this beatitude, you'll find a striking similarity and some important differences.

Matthew has the expression 'poor in spirit' followed by a beatitude on 'those who mourn'. His addition to the blessing on 'those who hunger', i.e. 'and thirst for righteousness', makes it evident that he is not speaking about people who are materially poor. They are not hungering for bread or rice, but for righteousness. The context and the form of the beatitudes in *Matthew* 5:3 makes it clear that the word 'poor' is used in a metaphorical or transferred sense.

The text of *Luke* is different. The blessing of the 'poor' is here immediately followed by a blessing on 'those who hunger now'. Hunger is a typical suffering of the materially poor. *Luke* speaks about the needs of our body, and he contrasts the poverty of this present time with the glory and abundance of the world to come. And the poor are contrasted in the following woes with the rich and well-to-do in this world. They shall suffer in the coming age. For this and other reasons some scholars speak about *Luke* as the 'social gospel'. He brings the good news to the hungering and oppressed masses of the world.³

But be cautious! *Luke* is different from *Matthew* in another way also. The beatitudes of *Luke* are not in the third person, but in the second person plural. His beatitudes are directed to *you* poor', to a specific group Jesus has in front of him. The context leaves no doubt as to whom Jesus is speaking: 'Looking at his disciples, he said . . .' (v. 20). The message of Jesus according to *Luke* is not that everybody who is poor is blessed, but that the disciples, *in spite of* their bad condition now, are blessed because they are the receivers of the kingdom of God.

In fact neither the text of *Luke* nor the text of *Matthew* pronounces a general blessing on all the poor and oppressed in the world. But many NT scholars say that these two texts must have some common origin. And they try to reconstruct this text by eliminating all specific features in *Matthew* and *Luke* and retaining what they have in common. By this method the 'original form' of the three common beatitudes may be the following text:

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are those who hunger, for they shall be satisfied.⁴

This reconstruction of the supposed original text may, in contrast to the text of *Luke* and *Matthew*, be understood as a broad social message of comfort to all suffering and destitute people. Jesus proclaimed that God is king, and as king he'll care for the poor and oppressed. In this way the message of the reconstructed text is interpreted as different from the message of our gospel texts.

But according to this view, this original message of Jesus has been changed by the gospel writers. *Matthew* has changed this message into a moral catechism or a catalogue of virtues. To be 'poor' is a negative description of man, but to be 'poor in spirit' is positive. *Luke* has in a different way changed the beatitudes into a message of comfort for a church in distress. This reconstruction is to be found in many scholarly books. The most elaborate argument for this reconstruction and interpretation is given by the eminent Belgian scholar Jaques Dupont in his three-volume work, *Les Béatitudes*.

I don't want now to discuss this reconstruction of the text. I want to prove that even if we presume it as a probable reconstruction of the common tradition behind the beatitudes, we

don't need to accept this interpretation of it. In fact it is not very probable that Jesus declared all poor people happy and promised to them the kingdom of God. In this context the word 'poor' does not refer to social position or material needs. I'll argue for this in four points.

1. The meaning of the word 'poor'

The most important word for 'poor' in the OT, the Hebrew *ani*, has a broader meaning than the modern European words for 'poor' (poor, pauvre, arm, fattig, etc.). We could translate it 'miserable, unhappy', like the English expression 'poor me', which can be used both by rich and poor. The Hebrew word is used in many different contexts and with different meanings.

In the laws of the OT we find rules to protect the poor from the oppression of the rich and powerful. The law, the wisdom writings and the prophets again and again encourage the Israelites to take care of the poor and protect them against exploitation. In these contexts the words evidently refer to the material poverty of those in a weak social position.

But in other contexts we see that the word has another meaning. In many psalms of lamentation we find the expression 'Hear me God, because I'm poor and needy [*ani weehjon*]'. But the psalms where this expression is used never describe a material or economic need. The typical need in these psalms is (a) social: they are persecuted by enemies who are never described as rich, but as wicked and powerful. Or their need is (b) medical: they suffer from illness, or (c) religious: they are guilty before God because they have sinned. The word can also be used in another religious meaning: to be 'humble'. In *Zechariah* 9:9 we find a description of the Messiah, the king, coming to Jerusalem. He is *zaddiq* and *ani*, 'righteous' and 'poor', not in a material or social sense, but 'humble'. Similarly the word *ani* is used to describe Israel in *Psalms* 18:27 and 2 *Samuel* 22:28.

On the basis of these texts, A. Rahlfs a century ago maintained that the Psalms had their origin in groups of poor Jews in post-exilic times. These 'pious poor' regarded their poverty as a part of their piety. They made a virtue out of their need and despised the rich and wealthy.⁵ The idea of the 'anawim-piety' was taken up by NT scholars and used to explain the background of Jesus and the first Christians. They suggested that the beatitudes of *Matthew* and *Luke* refer to such groups: *Matthew* to their piety and ideal of humility, *Luke* to their social position.⁶

But in fact there are no references to such groups in the historical sources! OT scholarship has refuted Rahlfs' view of the Psalms and their background. The thesis of 'the pious poor' has no tenable basis⁷ (though it is still alive among NT scholars). It gives a sociological solution to a semantic problem. The use of the word *ani* with a religious meaning cannot prove the existence of a special piety of the poor or a poverty of the pious. The Psalms is the official prayer book of the Israelites and not an apocryphal work for separate conventicles. When the Israelite in his prayers describes himself as 'poor and needy' he does not describe his economic position, but his helplessness and need before God. This language is found also in later Jewish texts like *Ecclesiasticus*, the *Psalms* of Solomon, and the Hymn Scroll from Qumran.

From the OT background we see that the word 'poor' does not always have a material or social sense. We must consider the possibility that Jesus used the word according to this liturgical language of prayer.

2. The narrow context of the beatitude of the 'poor'

The 'poor' are here put together with those who mourn and those who hunger. To the first word we must say that sorrow is not sociologically limited. You find sorrow and mourning people both among rich and poor. The word 'hunger' however describes a typical need of the materially poor. But this word can in the OT also be used metaphorically, e.g. about those who hunger for the Word of God (Am. 8:11). The narrow context gives no clear answer to the question of the meaning of the word 'poor' in the beatitudes.

3. The biblical reference to Isaiah 61:1-2

Isaiah 61:1-2 is a promise to the 'poor', the 'brokenhearted', the 'captives', the 'prisoners'; it is a word of comfort to 'all who mourn' and 'those who grieve in Zion'. Two expressions in the beatitudes are taken from this text: the 'poor' and 'those who mourn'. When we look at the content and the wider context of Isaiah 61 it is evident that the promise refers to Israel as a whole. It does not refer to a limited group of economically poor within the people, nor does it refer to all the poor and destitute in the world. These expressions describe the humiliation and the poor conditions in the Babylonian exile for the people of Israel and cannot be taken literally. At least they are understood as metaphorical descriptions of Israel in later Jewish use of Isaiah 61:1-2 (see *11QMelch*, *Targum*, *Mechilta*). This corresponds to the ministry of Jesus. He never literally liberated prisoners or captives from jail. The OT text behind the beatitudes and the use of this text in Judaism points clearly in the direction of a metaphorical use of the word 'poor' in the first beatitude.

The decisive question we have to discuss to find the meaning of the first beatitude is this: what does Jesus in other texts say about the hearers of the gospel and those who receive the kingdom of God? We have to look at the beatitude in the broader context of Jesus' message about the kingdom.

4. Jesus' message about admission to the kingdom of God

I summarize my argument in four points:

4.1 The children: 'The kingdom of God belongs to such' (Mk. 10:14ff.)

This sentence is in the Greek NT the one which is most similar to the second part of the blessing of the poor: 'for the kingdom of God is theirs'. It is impossible to take this sentence as a literal promise of the kingdom to all children. What then could be the age limit? The word is both literally a warning not to exclude children from the fellowship of Jesus, and a parabolic word about admission to the kingdom for all men.

The Greek word meaning 'such' (*toiouton*) contains an element of comparison. We should be like the children in some way. Some interpreters try to find virtues in children that we should live up to. A popular idea is that children are innocent, but this idea is not rooted in the Bible, but in the Greek connection of sexuality (puberty) with sin. In the biblical view children are sinners too, like grown-ups.

Another interpretation is that children are so trusting. They believe everything you say to them. Many think that this text encourages the grown-up to have faith like a child. I don't think that is a biblical interpretation either. The NT has many exhortations to Christians to grow in their faith, to be mature Christians, to test everything critically.

I think all interpretations that try to find positive values in children fail to capture the meaning of this text. Children receive the kingdom not because of their virtues, but simply because they are small and helpless. And God gives his gift of salvation, without asking for qualifications, to all who receive Jesus. This will be confirmed when we look at what other words say about the recipients of the kingdom.

4.2 'Not the wise and prudent, but the simple' (Mt. 11:25 and parallel)

This word doesn't talk directly about the kingdom, but its topic is closely related. The question is: who have received the revelation from God? The answer is given in the form of an antithesis: 'not the wise and prudent, but the simple'. The opposite of wise and prudent is in fact 'silly' or 'unwise'. Jesus here excludes those who are normally highly esteemed and respected by everybody. The revelation from God and the kingdom of God is not dependent on intelligence.

In this verse there is a polemical note against the scribes and the Pharisees. They believed in their knowledge and in their ability to keep the law. Therefore they did not need Jesus and rejected him. The gospel, the revelation from God, is also for helpless and stupid people. The Greek word for 'simple', *neptos*, and its Hebrew equivalent *peti*, has a meaning close to the word 'child' (see Gal. 4:1-3). The word does not here designate a virtue. Those who receive the kingdom are described *negatively*, in opposition to the positive description of the outsiders. This will be confirmed when we look at the most striking and paradoxical expressions about the recipients of salvation:

4.3 'Not the righteous, but sinners' (Mk. 2:17 and parallels)

'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' This word is of course neither an idealization of sinners nor of the sick. Jesus wants sinners to be forgiven and the sick to be healed. The kingdom is given to them not because of, but in spite of, their situation. It is given through Jesus and by the grace of God alone. This helps us to understand the other words about those who receive. They don't describe virtues, but the basic position of men before God, in need of his wisdom and his healing and his grace.

Jesus as the friend of 'tax collectors and sinners' is a basic part of the picture of Jesus in the gospels, testified both through his words and his actions. At this point he was remarkably different from his contemporaries. He dared to cross borders within Jewish society in a new and radical way. And these borders were not set by economic or material standards. The tax collectors were not poor in our sense of the word. But they are not excluded from his 'good news to the poor'. They shall be among the first to enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 21:28-32).

This may also be the key to another important group of sayings about admission to the kingdom, which is expressed above all in many of Jesus' parables:

4.4 'Not the first invited, but the outsiders' (Lk. 14:15-24; cf. Mk. 12:1-12 and parallels; Mt. 8:11 and parallel)

In the parable about the great banquet (Lk. 14:15-24) the first invited did not want to come. Other activities seemed more important to them. But the host invited new guests: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. These beggars in the streets and marketplaces had never been to a banquet like this before. But now they were included. And there was still room for new guests from outside the town!

This is a parable of the kingdom. In the life of Jesus these beggars correspond to the 'tax collectors and sinners'. They received the invitation to the kingdom, but the 'righteous' leaders of the people rejected it. The new groups from outside the town may correspond to the Gentiles. The parable warns the Jews not to reject Jesus' invitation to the kingdom. And it shows the possibility of a new people for the kingdom, where outsiders are included. Jesus crosses social boundaries. Your position as righteous or sinner, healthy or sick, rich or poor, or even as Jew or Gentile, is irrelevant. When you meet the invitation to the kingdom only one question counts: your relationship to Jesus. That is what Jesus said already in his answer to John the Baptist: 'Blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (Mt. 11:6f.). The blessing of the 'poor' should be read and understood in this broader context.

Conclusion

We have now argued in four steps about the possible meaning of the beatitude of the 'poor'. We may summarize the results first negatively, and then positively.

The meaning of the word 'poor' is here not the economically poor, destitute or needy. Tax collectors are also included. The meaning is not 'humble' as a positive religious and ethical virtue. The word must here be interpreted as a negative description of those who receive salvation. In the broader context of Jesus' ministry it is used in a parallel way to the description of those people as 'like children', 'simple', 'sinners', 'ill'. This is also confirmed by the nearer context speaking about the recipients as 'those who mourn' and 'those who hunger'. These are all negative expressions. The meaning of the word 'poor' must therefore be found in what it has in common with these parallel expressions.

'Poor' here means 'helpless', dependent on others, unable to pay back. The recipients are in this world indeed described as beggars. But the word does not refer to their economic or social status. The tax collectors, the fishermen and the farmers in the fellowship around Jesus were certainly no beggars and could hardly be called 'poor' in a material or social sense of the word. They were able to sustain themselves by their own work. But they were beggars before God. They were dependent on his grace as it was proclaimed and demonstrated in the preaching and person of Jesus. The word is used in a transferred sense and describes the fundamental position of man before God.

One of Martin Luther's last words was this: 'We are beggars, that is true.' As far as I know, Luther had never been a beggar in the literal sense of the word. But he had learnt both from Scripture and life that we are dependent on God, we are beggars before him. The gospel is the message that God gives his gift, his kingdom, to beggars, into empty hands. We have nothing with which to pay him back.

The reference of the beatitudes is therefore *not* to a socially limited group of poor and destitute, neither in Israel nor in the world. I think we can interpret the reference of the beatitudes in three different directions, perhaps corresponding to a historical development within the ministry of Jesus and the history of the early church.

First they refer to Israel as a whole corresponding to the promise of salvation in Isaiah 61. Jesus brings the message of God's fulfilment of his promises to his chosen people. Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises. But we know that most of the people did not receive his message. And therefore he says: 'Blessed are those who take no offence at me.' In this way he creates a new Israel of those who receive him and his message.

There is, secondly, the direct, literal reference of the beatitudes as we find them in Matthew and Luke. They refer to the disciples as the remnant of Israel. But this message is not only for the disciples in the past: there is, thirdly, also a good message for the nations, for the church of both Jews and Gentiles. This is the reason that it is written down in the gospels. These gospels are written for the universal church, for all who receive the kingdom of God.

We started by presenting a theory of an 'original text' as a possible source for the two versions of the beatitudes in Matthew and Luke. We conclude that it is not possible to use this text as argument for the view that Jesus' 'original' message was different from the message of our gospel texts. There is no contradiction, but a clear continuity between them. Matthew and Luke have two different applications of the same gospel from the same Lord and Saviour.

In my opinion *Matthew* (or the tradition before him), with his explaining additions, is closest to the original meaning of the first three beatitudes. He makes it clear that Jesus speaks of the 'poor' and 'those who hunger' in a transferred sense. His first three beatitudes describe the basis for discipleship: the gift of the kingdom given into empty hands. And he adds other beatitudes to show the character of these disciples as children of God (vv. 6-10) and their position in this world (vv. 11f.). The beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 are a basic text for the doctrine of the church.

Luke gives another version of the beatitudes where they are related to the position of the disciples in the world. In spite of their material poverty, their hunger, the persecutions they meet, they should know they are not forgotten by God. They are better off than the rich and well-to-do, because they live under the promise of the kingdom. The beatitudes and woes in Luke are a new and different application of the beatitudes: a word of comfort directed to the disciples and a warning against the attitude of the rich. The Lukan text is closely related to James 2:5-7, which may be an early application of the tradition behind Luke 6:20-26. I don't find it impossible to think that Jesus himself gave the beatitudes a new form like the one we find in Luke. But I find it probable that this form is a new application of a text already taught and memorized in Jesus' instruction of his disciples. (Luke's use of the second person only in the second sentence in each beatitude is difficult to explain unless against the background of a fixed tradition in the third person.)

For an evangelical, biblical theology, the question of the origin and the development of the biblical traditions, is not

crucial unless it is used to undermine the authority of the real text of the Bible or the concept of a basic doctrinal unity of Scripture. A hypothetical reconstruction of a possible 'original' text may be useful as far as it may help us understand the given text. But it can never replace the biblical text as the only source of faith and conduct.

II. The rich man and the poor Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31

This text talks very seriously about the two possibilities for eternity. The rich man was lost and came to hell; the poor man Lazarus reached his life's destination and came to the bosom of Abraham. There are two possibilities, and after death there is no possibility of change.

But why did the rich man come to hell, and why did the poor Lazarus come to Abraham? This is a text where interpretations go in different directions. A popular interpretation in modern theology is that this text expresses the hope of the poor. It presents us with the reversal of fortunes in the coming age. The poor, who have suffered much in this life, will be comforted then, but the rich, who have lived in luxury and affluence, are lost and shall suffer. The main point in the story is seen in verse 24, and this verse is interpreted as giving a sort of balance: suffering in this world will give comfort in the world to come, and the well-to-do in this world will suffer. But verses 27-31 are seen as a secondary addition. These verses talk about conversion as the way to eternal life, and this does not fit into this theory of the reversal of fortunes as the main point of the story. This is an interpretation you'll find in many studies of this story.⁹

Against this interpretation I want to present another understanding of the text. This story does not teach how the poor are saved. It concentrates on the question of why the rich man is lost. It is a warning to the rich and not a promise to the poor. It corresponds to Luke's woes against the rich, but is no explanation of the beatitudes of the poor (Lk. 6:20-26).

I'll argue for this second interpretation, making five points.

1. The structure of the story

When we read a long text in the Bible it may be important to see how it is structured in different sections. This story has two main parts: the narrative and the dialogue. The narrative part tells first about the life on earth of the two persons, then very briefly about their fate after death. So far it's true that there is a reversal of the fortunes of the two. We see that the poor Lazarus has his place at the gate of the house of the rich man, who is described as very rich indeed. He had to pass this beggar many times every day as he went in and out of his house. It should have been a privilege to lie at the gate of such a rich man. But the relationship between these two persons is in this part described with ice-cold silence. The whole situation of Lazarus is a cry for help. But nothing happens.

When their fates after death are changed, then the rich man is in pain and needs help from Lazarus. And the first part of the dialogue is the request from the rich man. He knows how to treat poor people: 'Send him over here to give me some water!' But now the situation is changed. The open gate is replaced by a deep gulf between them. Communication and help is impossible. It is too late. And now we find a sympathetic feature in the picture of the rich man. He begins to think about his brothers and wants to warn them. But also

his prayer for his brothers is refused. They have the Law and the Prophets, they should hear and obey them. It would not help them even if Lazarus were raised from the dead and could warn them.

We can summarize the structure of the story like this:

1. *Narrative part*, verses 19-23:
 - (a) Their life on earth, verses 19-21 (the open gate)
 - (b) Their fate after death, verses 22-23 (the deep gulf, v. 26).
2. *Dialogue*, verses 24-31:
 - (a) The request of the rich man for relief is refused, verses 24-26
 - (b) The prayer of the rich man for his brothers is refused, verses 27-31.

From the structure of the story we see that only the rich man takes part in the dialogue. He is the main person. The last appeal of the story is directed to the five still-living brothers of the rich man, those who live like him. The story is a warning to the rich man and his brothers.

Lazarus is only a figure of contrast. He illustrates the unfulfilled possibility on earth: the rich man did not help him but left him to the dogs, the unclean animals. And he illustrates the lost possibility after death. He did reach the destination for the people of Abraham, the destination which the rich man lost. The salvation of the poor is not discussed at all. I think it is simply presupposed that he is a son of Abraham living under the promises to Abraham. This is perhaps indicated by his Jewish name, Lazarus, which is the Greek form of Elazar or Eliezer, 'God helps'.

This interpretation will be supported by our next step:

2. The context of the story

In Luke 16:14 we see to whom this story is told. It is told to the Pharisees, 'who loved money'. This is the only place in the NT where the Pharisees are accused of greed. It corresponds to the fact that 'love for money' is an important concern in the previous verses. In verse 13 Jesus warns his hearers against Mammon and invites them to choose between God and Mammon. We don't know any other Jewish sources where money is pictured as an idol in this way. Verse 9 concludes the previous story about the unjust steward. But it can also be seen as an introduction to the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The verse gives an exhortation to use worldly wealth to gain friends so that they can welcome their helpers into the eternal dwellings. The rich man is an illustration of what happens if you don't do this. He had a chance to gain a friend by helping the poor Lazarus. If he had done so, he might have been received into the eternal dwellings. But he didn't help, and he was excluded. The context speaks very much about wealth and the right use of wealth and confirms that this is a main concern in the story.

The context also speaks about another topic. Verses 16-18 speak about the Law. The Law retains its validity as long as heaven and earth exist. This corresponds to the last part of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man and his brothers should have listened to and obeyed 'Moses and the Prophets'.

You may object to this argument by saying that this context has been created by Luke or his sources. We have no guarantee that this was the original context of the story in the ministry of Jesus. We have to interpret the story by itself and

from a general picture of Jesus' message, not from the context given us by the final redaction of the gospel. I would answer to this objection that even if the context may be secondary, it is in no way accidental. It is the oldest evidence we have for the understanding of the story in the early church. And in this case the context only confirms what we have already found by a structural analysis of the story itself.

Let us now have a broader look at what Jesus says about these two topics: (1) wealth and the wealthy and (2) the Law.

3. *Jesus' teaching on possessions and the rich*

We find quite a number of texts in the gospels where Jesus gives warnings against the power of money and wealth. These are not popular preaching texts today. Perhaps they tend to be suppressed in our rich churches in the rich part of the world. I can only briefly list the main points of some main texts.

(1) The rich man (Mk. 10:17-31 and parallels). The story of the rich man who came to Jesus to ask for the way to eternal life has a very unhappy end. The man went away sad because he did not want to sell all and follow Jesus. His great wealth was a hindrance to discipleship. Jesus' comment on this event is simple: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' It is quite interesting to read in commentaries how interpreters try to make the needle's eye wide or the camel small in order to make this possible. But in fact Jesus speaks about the smallest opening and the biggest animal because this *is* impossible. At least, for men it's impossible; nothing is impossible for God.

(2) In another text (Mt. 6:24) Jesus speaks about the choice between Mammon and God. It sounds similar to the robber coming to his victim saying, 'Your money or your life.' It is impossible to have both. You have to choose. But Jesus doesn't say this with a gun in his hand. He says it with the love and the respect for the other man that gives him the freedom to make the wrong choice and go away.

Both these stories tell us that money and wealth are idols competing with God. Perhaps Mammon is much more dangerous than the Baals or the Buddhas or other idols that are worshipped right up to our present day.

(3) The story of the rich farmer, Luke 12:16-21, shows us how a man gains and accumulates wealth all his life. But suddenly his life is taken from him. Who then shall have all he has gathered? This is the fate of a man who has become economically rich 'but is not rich towards God'.

(4) In Luke 6:20-26 the beatitudes on the poor disciples are followed by the woes on the rich. Again the two possibilities are contrasted: blessing or curse. It is dangerous to be rich!

(5) But Luke also has a story about the positive possibility for a rich man. The story about the wealthy chief tax collector Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10) shows how a rich man can be liberated from Mammon. When he receives Jesus and his salvation his attitude is completely changed. He gives half of his possessions to the poor, and wants to give fourfold back to those he may have cheated. His relationship to his money and to his fellow men becomes quite different.

These examples may demonstrate how important are the warnings to the rich against dangers from wealth in the message of Jesus. It's dangerous to be rich. We should interpret the story of the rich man and Lazarus in line with these words. But we should be careful to note that the

warnings against wealth do not necessarily imply an idealization of poverty. Poverty is in the Bible always seen as a need to be relieved and an evil to be fought against. It's the result of injustice or lack of care from fellow men, and is no desirable condition for human life.

4. *Jesus' teaching on 'the Law and the Prophets'*

This is a big and difficult question. For our purpose it's enough to state in what respect the Law has retained its value after the coming of Jesus. The answer to this is given when Jesus summarizes the Law and the Prophets in the double commandment of love (Mt. 22:34-40/Lk. 10:25-37). The whole NT unequivocally shows that this was the main impression of the teaching of Jesus on the Law. And in Luke 10:25-37 Jesus gives a story illustrating one practical implication of the love for one's neighbour. Before we give a comparison between the story of the good Samaritan and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we should try briefly to relate the warnings against riches to the double commandment of love.

In fact these warnings can be seen as an application of this summary of the Law. Love of money is dangerous first of all because it hinders the love of God. This is the main message of the texts we have mentioned in section 3.2-4 above: Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:16-21; 6:23-26.

But, secondly, love of money is also dangerous because it hinders love for your neighbour. It makes it more important for you to gather wealth in order to secure yourself than to share with those who are in need. This is the main message of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was the rich man's neighbour, but the rich man overlooked him and did not care for him. He loved himself and his money instead of God and his neighbour.

And thirdly we may add that love for money is dangerous because it hinders discipleship. To follow Jesus is to leave everything behind and to give him and the ministry for him the first and absolute priority. This is what we learn from texts like Mark 10:17-31 and parallels and Luke 6:23-26; 14:25-33.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is first and foremost an illustration of the second part of the double commandment of love. The rich man and his brothers are warned to listen to 'Moses and the Prophets' while there is still time for it. The Law speaks clearly about our duty to love God and our fellow men. In this story the kingdom of God is not the main topic of Jesus' message. The judgment of the rich man and the appeal to conversion are derived from their failing to hear the Law, not from their failing to hear and receive the message of the kingdom.

5. *A structural comparison of the story of the rich man and Lazarus and the story of the good Samaritan*

Finally, we want to illuminate our interpretation by a comparison of our text with the main illustration of the commandment of love in the gospels: the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37. We look at the roles of the different actors in the stories in order to see similarities and differences.

Both stories have a person in need who is a *potential object of love*. In Luke 10 it is the man who was robbed and lay helpless at the road, in Luke 16 it is the poor Lazarus at the

gate of the rich man. Their situation is a cry for help; they need care and love from their fellow men.

Both stories also have *negative examples*. From these persons you should learn: don't be like them. The priest and the Levite saw the helpless man, but did not stop to help him. In the same way the rich man did not care for the poor Lazarus.

Now we come to the difference in the structure of the two stories. Only the story of the good Samaritan has a *positive example*. It is the good Samaritan. The message of the story is: Be like him! Do care for your suffering neighbour! He is the illustration of what love means. It's action! It would be very wrong to regard poor Lazarus as a positive example in Luke 16. The hearers of the story should not identify with him. In the same way it would be wrong to make the man among robbers the positive example in the story of the good Samaritan. In these stories we are not encouraged to be robbed by robbers or to be beggars dependent on mercy from our fellow men. But we are encouraged to care for fellow men who come into such situations, and we are warned not to overlook them because God doesn't overlook them. He cares for them and has given us a duty to help them in his Law.

Lazarus is no ideal for imitation. Poverty is never idealized. Jesus doesn't preach ascetism. The NT allows us to use and enjoy the world God has created. But it should be used according to the Law of God: don't love the world, but love God with your whole heart — and your neighbour as yourself!

Summary of Luke 16:19-31

We now can summarize the message of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in two sentences, a negative and a positive.

1. *A life of affluence and luxury closes your ears to the Word of God and your eyes to the need of your neighbour. Wealth is dangerous for your spiritual life, for your relationship to God, and for your relationship to your fellow man.*
2. *Hear the Word of God and let it lead you to your neighbour in distress — while there is still time for it. The gate is open now. You can help your suffering neighbour now and care for him. Your action now has consequences for eternity.*

III. Some tentative concluding theses

We started with a simple question of Jesus and the poor. We saw that this question cannot simply be discussed as a question of *social ethics*. The texts also raise the *semantic* question of the meaning of the word 'poor'. This semantic question is urgent in those texts that talk about 'the poor' as those who hear the gospel and receive the kingdom. To speak biblically and clearly about 'Jesus and the poor', it is imperative to recognize the two basic meanings of the word poor: in its literal meaning it refers to beggars, to the material need of people not able to sustain themselves; in its transferred meaning it refers to the fundamental position of man before God, as helpless, as a sinner, regardless of material resources or social position.

On this basis I first want to offer three theses on the biblical teaching on poverty.

1. Poverty in the material and social sense of the word is *neither a hindrance nor a condition for salvation*. The Bible

contains no promise that all poor and suffering people will be saved at last. Poverty is a distress to be helped, a human need that should not be made innocent by a false comfort or the promise of 'a pie in the sky'. Poverty is never idealized. It challenges us to relieve it and work for justice. Therefore the church cannot remain passive or neutral when fellow men suffer from poverty.

2. *Salvation is given to those who are poor in themselves.* Notice now that the word 'poor' is used in a transferred sense. The kingdom of God can only be received by empty hands. Jesus warns against (a) worldly self-sufficiency: you trust yourself and your own resources and don't need God. Example: the rich farmer; (b) religious self-sufficiency: you trust your religious attitude and moral life and don't need Jesus. Example: the unbelieving Pharisees.

3. *The people of God are sent to the poor, to suffering and oppressed fellow men.* The empty hands receiving salvation are not made lame! They are strengthened and filled to serve the neighbour, to meet his need for bread, health, social security, justice (1 Jn. 3:16-18).

But our neighbour also has another need. Regardless of social position he has a need for the gospel: to hear the saving Word of God. The good news for 'the poor' is for all mankind! With this gospel we are sent to everybody. It is a human right to hear the gospel!

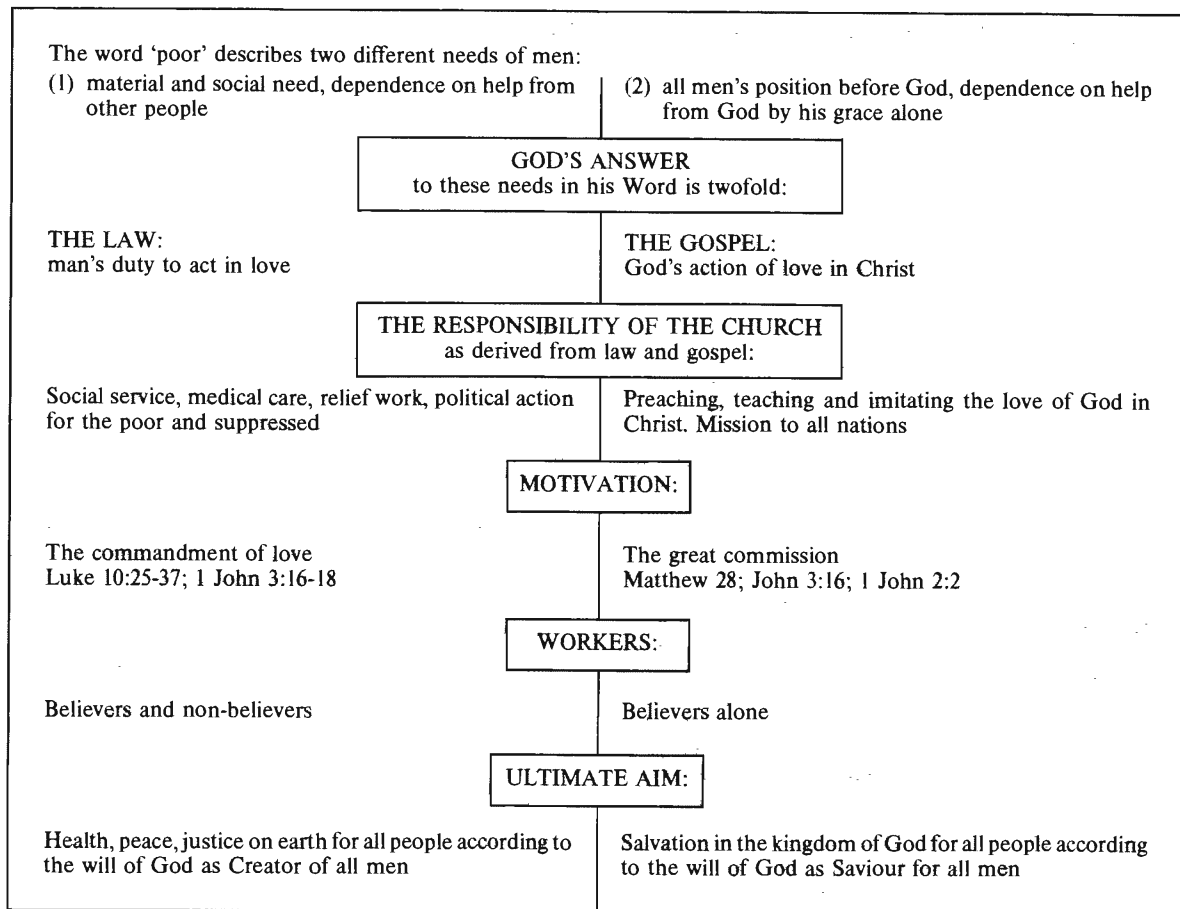
The word 'poor' describes two different needs of man. In its material and social sense it describes people dependent on others for bodily survival. In its transferred sense it describes everyone's position before God: helpless, dependent on his grace. These two meanings correspond to the two different contexts of the word in the gospels. When it is used in the material sense of the potential recipients of alms, we regularly find also an implicit or explicit challenge for action from their fellow men: care for them, help them. When used in a transferred sense the context refers to Isaiah 61:1f. and the promise of God's action of salvation for his people.

In this way the two different meanings and uses of the word seem to correspond to the classical evangelical distinction between law and gospel. The Law is what God demands from men, summarized in the commandment of love; the gospel is the good news of God's fulfilled action of salvation, the message that he loves us. Preaching the gospel is not to tell men what to do, but to tell what God has done for us. But the preaching of the gospel should never be separated from the proclamation and the application of the Law.

The words on Jesus and the poor in the gospels can be related to the distinction between law and gospel in the way described on the next page.

The danger for evangelical Christians has been to stress the gospel in a way that has made them deaf to the demands from the Law. It challenges us to share our wealth with those in need, to care for all who suffer injustice of any kind, to support and cooperate with those who want to build a better world for human beings. The materially poor need bread, not only bread from heaven.

The danger in modern liberation theology is to confuse law and gospel by saying that we can bring salvation and build God's kingdom by our social work or political action. That's not biblical. The Bible teaches us that salvation in the full



theological sense is given by God alone. The kingdom does not come through our poverty programmes or political reforms. The kingdom can only be offered as a free gift through the gospel. And it is open for all men, regardless of social status, sex, race or nation. All men are beggars before God. And as 'poor' in this sense all men also need the 'bread from heaven'.

¹ L. Schottroff/L. Stegemann, *Jesus von Nazareth — Hoffnung der Armen* (Stuttgart, 1978); D. L. Mealand, *Poverty and expectation in the Gospels* (London, 1980); W. E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the poor. Wealth and poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, 1981); D. P. Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (Linz, 1982); F. W. Horn, *Glaube und Handeln in der Theologie des Lukas* (Göttingen, 1983). An impression of the discussion in the ecumenical movement can be found in: J. de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor. The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church* (WCC, Geneva, 1977); *Your Kingdom come. Mission Perspectives* (Report on the World conference on

Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, 1980/Geneva, 1980). From the evangelical movement: R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. A biblical Study* (Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1977).

² A broader discussion on these texts and the other gospel texts on Jesus and the poor is given in my doctoral dissertation: H. Kvalbein, *Jesus og de fattige* (Oslo, 1981).

³ J. Ernst, 'Das Evangelium nach Lukas — kein soziales Evangelium', in *Theologie und Glaube* 67 (1977), pp. 415-421.

⁴ This reconstruction has been made by J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes, Vol I: Le problème littéraire* (EB, Paris, 1969). The interpretation of this reconstructed text is given in *Vol II: La bonne nouvelle* (EB, Paris, 1969), and the interpretation of the texts of Matthew and Luke in *Vol III: Les évangélistes* (EB, Paris, 1973).

⁵ A. Rahlfs, *Ani und anaw in den Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1892).

⁶ E.g. J. Schniewind in his commentary to Mt. 5:3 in *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (NTD, Göttingen, 1936).

⁷ H. Birkeland, *Ani und anaw in den Psalmen* (Oslo, 1933); H.-J. Kraus, *Die Psalmen I-II* (BKAT 15, Neukirchen, 1978).

⁸ The reference to Israel is well argued and applied in the work of Seccombe (see above, n. 1).

⁹ E.g. Schottroff/Stegemann, Mealand and Horn (see above, n. 1).