

Exploring Issues of Wealth and Poverty in the Gospels: A Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatic Reading of Luke 16

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of Jesus' actions and teachings on money, wealth, poverty, and economic justice in the gospels, some scholars portray him as a leader of a social movement, with a revolutionary economic program. In Luke, money is sometimes considered a normal part of everyday life. On the contrary, there is a negative view of riches in seven of the nine passages where the word "rich" is used in the third Gospel (Luke 16:1-13; Lk 19:1-9). This chapter examines Jesus' teachings on issues of wealth and poverty in Luke 16 from a Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatic perspective. It concludes that unlike the prosperity gospel, from a Lukan perspective, wealth assumes a negative trait when its primary essence is to make more wealth at the expense of the poor, or when it occupies a central place in a person's life without regard for their neighbor's wellbeing. A positive dimension is established when money is utilized for the communal good, such as bridging the gap between the rich and the poor in society. Thus, wealth is either a tool for social justice, or it is an idol (mammon) that leads to slavery when accumulated.

Keywords: Wealth, Poverty, Social Justice, Prosperity Gospel, African Pentecostalism

Introduction

The theme of wealth and poverty is a topical issue in African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity because of the prevalence of the so-called prosperity gospel. This concept espouses the view that God's will is to bless the Christian spiritually, physically, and materially.¹ Nevertheless, the words "wealth" and "poverty" assume divergent meanings depending on the normative values of the cultural context in which they are used. Thus, any application of New Testament texts regarding these terms that do not consider the cultural differences of the reader can amount to a misrepresentation of the texts.² For many Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians in Africa, the Bible remains the primary source of their inspiration for daily living regarding issues of finances. The words and examples in the Bible serve as reference points for those who want to please God and live for him. Although they live in a different world from the New Testament world of the eastern Mediterranean, they often take verbatim the injunctions in the Bible. Despite living in a twenty-first century world that is often assessed in terms of quantitative orientations such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and success in life is routinely judged by numbers in terms of a healthy bank balance, quality education, home ownership, and even clothing that complements a person's status, uncompromising faith in the Bible and its word is widespread in this strand of Christianity. To be faithful Christians in their context, they come to the Bible for moral reminders, for daily living, including the theme of wealth and poverty.

The contemporary African Christian is confronted with issues of wealth and poverty, just like any other Christian community. The subject is contentious because the New Testament's treatment

¹ Justice Arthur, "The Gospel of Prosperity and its Concept of Development: A Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic Experience," *Religion* 51:1 (2020), 90-104.

² Bruce J. Malina, "Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World," *Interpretation* 41:4 (1987), 354.

of it falls short of establishing a clear set of core Christian teachings on the subject.³ While the words of Jesus on wealth and poverty provide us with some behaviors, such as what is out of bounds for Christians, they also offer some difficulty in interpretation and application. Some of Jesus' words have been described as rather "radical" and as sometimes difficult to understand for a twenty-first century audience. Jesus' actions and teachings on money, wealth, poverty, and economic justice have, therefore, led some scholars to portray him as a leader of a social movement with a revolutionary economic program.⁴ Indeed, Jesus' messages are considered radical not only for the first-century contexts but also for the twenty-first century. The reason is that his views on wealth and poverty were extremely different from the prevailing materialistic-individualistic culture. Also, his views sought to reform the prevailing institutionalized norms and practices regarding wealth and poverty.⁵

The radical nature of Jesus' messages on the theme of wealth and poverty is predominantly expressed in the Gospel according to Luke. The third Gospel's presentation of the fundamental aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus on the theme shows a problematic relationship, as well as the diverse ways Jesus approached the subject. On the one hand, issues of money and wealth are considered as a normal part of life when their use does not engender disparities within the Christian community. This shows that money is not an issue when used appropriately (Luke 16:1-13; Luke 19:1-10). On the other hand, there are instances where wealth and riches are portrayed negatively (Luke 6:20; Luke 16:1-13; Luke 16:19-31). The wealthy are often encouraged to redistribute their wealth in order to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor in society. It is against this backdrop that this chapter examines the issues of wealth and poverty in Luke 16:1-31. This assessment is done in the light of the Pentecostal/Charismatic practice of the prosperity gospel in Ghana. Thus, the call to action by Luke is analyzed relative to the core teachings of some Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatic prosperity preachers, namely, Mensa Otabil⁶ and Sam Korankye-Ankrah.⁷

This chapter adopts the communicative approach proposed by the Ghanaian biblical scholar, George Ossom-Batsa, as a lens for analysis. This is a three-step approach that places the biblical text at the center of the interpretation process. It includes an analysis of the biblical text, attention to the call to action suggested in the text, and an engagement between the reality and the text.⁸ Therefore, the chapter is divided into four main sections: an explanation of the choice of the third Gospel, a discussion of the prosperity gospel in Ghanaian Pentecostalism, an assessment of Luke 16, and an engagement of the biblical text and the prosperity gospel.

³ Thomas Massaro, "The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor," *Journal of Religion & Society* 10 (2014), 172.

⁴ Thomas E. Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 7; Obery M. Hendricks Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Three Leaves International, 2007), 1; Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), 2.

⁵ Bruno Dyck, *Management and the Gospel: Luke's Radical Message for the First and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 193-194.

⁶ Mensa Otabil is the founder of the International Central Gospel Church and the pastor of the church's first congregation and headquarters church, Christ Temple in Accra.

⁷ Samuel Korankye Ankrah is the founder of the Royalhouse Chapel International (RCI), a Pentecostal/Charismatic church headquartered in Accra.

⁸ George Ossom-Batsa, "Interpretation of the Bible in a Communicative Perspective," *The Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (July, 2007), 100-101.

Wealth and Poverty in the Gospel According to Luke

The theme of wealth and poverty is a critical subject in the Old Testament,⁹ but to explore that in this chapter would be much too far afield. Instead, I will concentrate on the New Testament, specifically on the Gospel according to Luke. The subject of wealth and poverty is indeed an integral part of Luke. The evangelist sometimes uses unique material and parables that are absent in the other gospels (Cf. Luke 6:20-24; 12:13-31; 16:1-13; 16:19-31; 18:18-23). There are several reasons why Luke seems to be the most relevant when dealing with wealth, poverty, and social justice. First, Luke is one of the most prolific writers in the entire Bible, contributing to almost 27.5 per cent of the New Testament when the words of his two-volume work, the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are taken together.¹⁰ Second, unlike the other evangelists who wrote primarily to Jews or Christians, Luke is the most likely to have the entire Greco-Roman world as his audience. Third and foremost, in contrast to the other three gospels, Luke's gospel addresses the significance of material possessions, the dangers of excessive attachments to riches, and the proper regard for the needs of the poor and marginalized. It covers the greatest abundance of material that emphasizes the proper attitudes and practices regarding the appropriate use of money and the disposition of material possession.¹¹

Luke's treatment of the theme of wealth and poverty begins in chapter one of his gospel, before he even announces the birth of Jesus. Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke 1 re-echoes the theme of reversal of fortunes for the poor, a common motif in the Old Testament, as a way of championing the cause of the poor and showing the culpability of the wealthy, as well as indicating that the wealthy are under the threat of severe punishment. Then, the evangelist continues to show the corrupting influence of wealth and the proper use of affluence. In Luke 4, Jesus begins his public ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah. He read from the scroll in the Temple. Significantly, the passage deals with the preaching of the gospel to the poor. Perhaps, Luke's view is that the poor would readily receive the gospel while the wealth of the rich would be an impediment. In Luke 6, a chapter dealing with blessings and woes, there is clear evidence that the blessings favored the poor and the deprived while the woes were synonymous with the rich.

Furthermore, when Jesus sends out the twelve and the seventy in Luke 9:1-6 and Luke 10:1-12 respectively, the disciples were to travel light and avoid luxuries. This is an indication of the skepticism towards wealth and its influence on the mission of the disciples. In Luke 10:25-37, the Good Samaritan also shows the proper use of wealth and material resources. That is, it should be used to serve others, even marginalized groups. This is followed by the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21, which cautions about the dangers of the accumulation of wealth. The parable ends with Jesus denouncing those who lay up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God. In line with the theme of reversal of fortunes and communal wealth redistribution, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 also condemns the propensity of the rich to ignore the needs of the poor, especially when they are close.¹² Equally significant and even more direct is the story of the rich ruler in Luke 18:18-25, who came to Jesus to enquire about how to earn eternal life. The encounter ended with Jesus stating, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25).

⁹ R. N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁰ Dyck, *Management and the Gospel*, 13.

¹¹ Thomas Massaro, *The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor*, 168.

¹² Esa Autero, *Reading the Bible Across Context: Luke's Gospel, Socio-Economic Marginality, and Latin American Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016), 251-283.

Apart from the corrupting influence of wealth, Luke also offers some comments on the proper use of riches. First, Luke 16:1-13 deals with the parable of the unjust steward. While this parable clearly contains some ambiguities, it ultimately emphasizes that one cannot serve God and wealth (*mammon*) simultaneously. Second, in Luke 19:11-27, although the parable of the talents also contains a message about the use of wealth, the lesson remains unclear. It is clear from these Lukan texts that Jesus either heaps praises or blame on people depending on how they relate to wealth or how generous they are to others. The last pericope dealing with wealth and possession is Luke 19:1-10, which tells the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. While Zacchaeus does not renounce the entirety of his wealth, Jesus commends him for promising to make four-fold restitution to those he had defrauded and for sharing his wealth with the poor. Therefore, in Luke's estimation, wealth is useful when it is shared or returned to the rightful owners; in this case, the defrauded.¹³

Nevertheless, some scholars assert that while Luke seems to comment on the theme of wealth and poverty frequently, the evangelist does not address the topic in a thoroughly systematic way.¹⁴ Of course, Luke's gospel is not in any way intended to give a specific formula or an orderly package of injunctions on this one aspect of discipleship. There definitely exist some internal tensions in the third gospel regarding wealth and discipleship. For example, while in some instances Jesus allows some people to retain a significant proportion of their wealth, in other places, he is unequivocal about the demands of true discipleship, which is the renunciation of all their possession.¹⁵

The Prosperity Gospel and the Issues of Wealth and Poverty

The so-called prosperity gospel, sometimes referred to as the "health and wealth" gospel, has become an immensely popular teaching within the global Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement. Indeed, it has, in many ways, become synonymous with African Pentecostal/Charismatics, including the charismatic elements within the mainline historical churches.¹⁶ Katharine Attanasi has described the prosperity gospel as a concept that says, "God wants to bless Christians spiritually, physically and materially."¹⁷ It teaches that God's ongoing work in the world includes granting believers prosperity and health. This emerges from a material view of salvation within Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, especially in Africa, where the religious worldview that connect deities with abundant life and prosperity as part of salvation is prevalent.¹⁸ Thus salvation in this sense is seen as having implications on the material aspect of this life and not just the world to come. Much as this doctrine has been attributed with being a means by which people have been raised from poverty in Africa and elsewhere,¹⁹ it has also been critically interrogated for breaking the basic Christian obligation of

¹³ Autero, *Reading the Bible Across Context*, 301.

¹⁴ J. David Armitage, *Theories of Poverty in the World of the New Testament*, (Gomaringen: Mohr Siebeck Tubingen, 2016), 1; Thomas Massaro, *The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor*, 168.

¹⁵ Compare Luke 19:1-10 and Luke 14:25-33 or Luke 18:18-25.

¹⁶ Justice A. Arthur, "Prosperity Theology(ies): Mensa Otabil and the ICGC," *Interkulturelle Theologie: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 4 (2017), 401-419.

¹⁷ Katherine Attanasi, "The Plurality of Prosperity Theologies and Pentecostalism," In *Pentecostalism and Prosperity: The Socio-Economics of the Global Charismatic Movement*, edited by Katherine Attanasi and Amos Yong, (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 3.

¹⁸ Andreas Heuser, *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015), 1.

¹⁹ Cf. Paul Alexander, *Signs and Wonders: Why Pentecostalism is the World's Fastest-Growing Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

redistribution of wealth to the wider community.²⁰ Because of its individualistic tendencies, some of its adherents, especially the preachers, have been described as self-seeking and exploiting the poor.²¹

In Ghana, there are two main types of prosperity gospel preaching within the Pentecostal/Charismatic setting. One is represented by preachers like Samuel Korankye Ankrah and Nicholas Duncan-Williams, and focuses on the principles of sowing and reaping, and the exercise of faith and prayer as the main prerequisite to success in life.²² The second group, represented by preachers like Mensah Otabil, focuses on teaching success and emphasizing hard work, personal development, and education. The two groups are remarkably similar in the fundamental beliefs of the prosperity theology but differ in their approaches and emphasis to achieving success in life. While both groups teach on wealth accumulation and have the similar perceptions on poverty, the latter group focuses on social development as well - albeit their shared views far outweigh their differences.

First, the prosperity gospel preached by both groups is generally targeted at the poor because it is believed that God wants to bless Christians with prosperity and not poverty.²³ This blessing is to be felt in every area of human life, especially financial prosperity, and health. In fact, poverty is seen as a disease and a curse that must be “hated.” Adherents of the prosperity gospel generally employ several biblical texts (Ps. 1:3; Ps. 84:11; Dt. 28-30; Mt. 6:33; Jn. 10:10; 2 Co. 8:9; Jm. 4:2) in support of the doctrine, but the most popular one in the Ghanaian context is 3 Jn. 2. According to their interpretation of this verse, it is God’s will that Christians prosper in every aspect of their lives. Accordingly, three main ideas are propagated by prosperity preachers, namely, “God is ready to meet all human needs in the here-and-now; poverty is not the will of God for Christians,” and “God is willing to deliver Christians from material poverty.”²⁴ Ultimately, God is seen as one who is not delighted in poverty, since, in their view, the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross does not only save from sin but also from poverty and sickness. Additionally, poverty is seen as a product of a poor mindset because human beings are created in the image of God to have dominion; therefore, they cannot be poor.²⁵

Second, the prosperity gospel espoused by both groups is also wealth centered.²⁶ They believe that wealth is part of Jesus’ atoning work and that wealth signifies the blessings of God. Adherents of the doctrine believe that Jesus died to pay not only their spiritual debt, but also for their financial and general wellbeing. Therefore, material wealth is considered part of the salvation offered by Christ, and wealth can be accumulated to glorify God.²⁷ The prosperity gospel teaches that God is a God of abundance, wealth, and riches, who gives liberally to his children who act in faith by “sowing seeds.” Sowing and reaping, as presented in this doctrine, portrays God as a multiplier who is willing to give abundance to his children.²⁸ Therefore, seed sowing comes with the expectation of future financial, material, and health blessings. This teaching has motivated many Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians

²⁰ Andreas Heuser, “Trajectories into the World: Concepts of ‘Development’ in Contemporary African Christianity,” In Kenneth Mtata ed., *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development?* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), 51-68.

²¹ See Allan H. Anderson’s forward to J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2013): xv.

²² Arthur, *Prosperity Theology(ies)*, 401.

²³ Samuel Korankye Ankrah, *The Rising of the Sun: Shining from Obscurity* (Accra: Combert Impressions, 2010).

²⁴ Mensah Otabil, *Enjoying the Blessings of Abraham* (Accra: Alta International, 1992), 19-20; Ankrah, *The Rising of the Sun*, 157.

²⁵ Mensah Otabil, *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia: A Biblical Revelation on God’s Purpose for the Black Race* (Accra: Alta International, 1992), 18.

²⁶ Arthur, *Prosperity Theology(ies)*, 402

²⁷ Samuel Korankye Ankrah, interview by Justice Arthur in Accra, Ghana, May 25, 2020.

²⁸ Joseph Quayesi-Amakye, “Prosperity and Prophecy in African Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011), 291 - 305.

to donate generously to churches. As a result, some churches accumulate wealth and are involved in social development projects such as hospitals, schools, feeding the poor, etc. while others have been accused of using the doctrine to enrich themselves and their families at the expense of the poor. Yet others channel these resources into building other businesses to make even more money, with the profits believed to be ploughed back into running the church and its ministries.²⁹

Reading Luke 16

I opted to examine Lk. 16 because, comparatively, it has a higher concentration of terminologies related to the theme of wealth and poverty. Scholars are not in agreement as regards the exact limits of some of the pericopes within the chapter, such as where the parable of the unjust steward ends.³⁰ In this chapter, I have adopted the following structure proposed by Clay Myers³¹ for Lk. 16:

- (a) The parable of the unjust steward (Lk. 16:1-8)
- (b) Teaching on God and mammon (Lk. 16:9-13)
- (c) Attack on Pharisees as lovers of money (Lk. 16:19-14)
- (d) The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31)

Nevertheless, because the delimitation of the text is not the primary concern, I have opted to link the first two, (a) and (b), in the structure. Consequently, I discuss Lk. 16:1-13 jointly because they are usually discussed together as (b) basically forms the moral comments, or an application of (a).³²

The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk. 16:1-13)

This pericope has been variously referred to as one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to interpret. The reason is that in the parable, a steward seems to be praised for his dishonest behavior and held up as an example for Jesus' followers.³³ Traditionally, it has been interpreted as showing a steward who defrauds his master but who is commended for his wisdom and prudence; qualities that the followers of Jesus should imitate in their use of material possessions. Nevertheless, difficulties with certain aspects of the parable mean there is no consensus on this view. In response to the question of how the master could praise dishonest and fraudulent behavior, some scholars have advanced socio-economic reasons that the steward's actions were not really unjust, such as the steward was only writing off the commission of the remuneration due him.³⁴

The parable can be divided into a series of five (5) acts. In act one, the steward's problem is that he has been relieved of his role by a "rich man" for whom he has been working (Lk. 16:1-2). The reason for losing his job, according to the narrative, is that he has been wasting the rich man's possessions.

²⁹ Justice A. Arthur, "The Gospel of Prosperity and its Concept of Development: A Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic Experience," *Religion* (2020), 1-15; Arthur, *Prosperity Theology(ies)*, 402-418.

³⁰ Denis J. Ireland, "A History of Recent Interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward-Luke 16:1-13," *Westminster Theology Journal* 51 (1989), 293.

³¹ Ched Myers, *From Capital to Community: Discipleship in Jesus' Parable about a Manager of Injustice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 51-68.

³² Ireland, "A History of Recent Interpretation," 293; John Arierhi Ottuh, "The Story of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31): Retold in a Nigeria Context," *Global Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2:3 (2014), 59 - 76.

³³ Dave L. Mathewson, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward Luke (Luke 16:1-13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:1 (1995), 29-39.

³⁴ Joseph, Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985); Mathewson, *The Parable of the Unjust Steward Luke (Luke 16:1-13)*, 29; Ireland, "A History of Recent Interpretation," 296.

Clearly, he does not protest his innocence from the accusations. Nevertheless, in act two, the steward comes up with a solution to the problem he faces. In a monologue, he recognizes the problem and reflects on two possible action plans, which he rejects outrightly: “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg” (Lk. 16:3). He then seems to have had a eureka moment: “I have decided what to do. . .” (Lk. 16:4). At this point, he does not state what the plan is, but the aim of the solution was to be received in the homes of his benefactors after he has lost his job. The next act describes how the steward plans to execute his plan (Lk. 16:5-7). He invites his master’s debtors and reduces their debt. He reduces two examples of debt: a hundred measures of oil were reduced to fifty, and one hundred measures of wheat were cut down to eighty. In act four, the master assesses the steward’s actions: the master commends the unjust steward for his shrewdness (Lk. 16:8). While the master praises the action of the steward, there is no evidence that he reinstates him. Therefore, the plan’s success will be for the steward to get a new position with the master’s debtors. The fifth act is an application of the parable, a counsel given by Jesus to his disciples (Lk. 16:9-13).

The pericope is part of a larger section that covers Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, (Lk. 9:51-19:27). The audience is primarily the money-loving Pharisees (16:14) and, by implication, the disciples of Jesus (16:1). The evangelist, Luke, basically advances themes in discipleship, such as God’s mercy and forgiveness, by emphasizing that the kingdom of God is for the poor. Indeed, the phrase, “He also said to the disciples” (Lk. 16:1) indicates a transition from the three parables in Lk. 15 and thus offers continuity in Jesus’ teaching. Moreover, the phrase, “there was a rich man” also connects the pericope to other Lukan passages where Jesus critiques the use of riches and material wealth (Lk. 9:57-62; 10:25-37; 12:13-21; 15:11-32; 16:1-13; 16:19-31; 18:18-30; 19:1-10; 19:11-27). The parable is sandwiched between two parables that deal precisely with the term “rich man” (Lk. 12:13-21 and Lk. 16:19-31). The first of these two warns about the dangers of accumulating material wealth, while the second reveals the eschatological punishment for not showing generosity to the poor. While the steward is praised for his prudence in the face of a crisis, the parable also offers a severe critique of the rich and unjust people, using the characters of the rich man and his unjust steward.

Overall, the parable’s primary message could be summarized as follows: First, it scandalizes to attract the readers’ attention to what true riches are. The parable indicates that the affluent landlords or their agents should decrease the amount the occupants owed. The reason is that by using their “unrighteous mammon” or wealth, they would make friends of the poor people to whom the kingdom belonged. Thus, the rich are considered outsiders to the kingdom of God. Ultimately, when Jesus returned and established the kingdom of God, there would be a reversal of fortunes in which the rich and, by implication, the powerful, would be humbled, and the poor people would be exalted and given eternal dwellings. At that time, because their former creditors had treated them well, the poor would receive them into their heavenly abodes. The eschatological kingdom of God is here considered the true riches, and to enter the kingdom, a person needs to acquire friends, mainly the poor, the outcasts, etc., by sharing their false riches (wealth). Therefore, wealth is beneficial when it is used to serve the poor and vulnerable in society. Accordingly, the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus are warned not only to use money to gain friends (16:1-9) but also to avoid being lovers of money (16:14). The unjust steward provides an example by befriending his master’s debtors through the reduction of their debts.³⁵

³⁵ Delbert Burkette, “The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16:1-9): A Prudent Use of Mammon,” *New Testament Studies* 64:3 (2018), 332.

Second, as a manager, the steward was used to conducting big financial transactions and can be considered an example of those who control wealth. Therefore, the parable is encouraging the rich to use wealth in a similar way as the steward. Perhaps, this parable was directed toward the wealthy or those who manage their wealth. Third, the parable emphasizes repentance and the significance of the practical actions that come after repentance.³⁶ Fourth, the parable affirms that the love of money leads to idolizing wealth and possession, which competes with God's place in a person's heart (Lk. 16:13). This leads us to the second pericope in Lk. 16.

The Money Loving Pharisees (Lk. 16:14-18)

Sandwiched between the parable of the unjust steward and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the pericope, Lk. 16:14-18, dealing with the Pharisees and their love of money. This suggests that after the parables in 15 and 16:1-13, which were partly directed at the Pharisees, they were still listening to Jesus' teaching to the disciples. It is their uneasiness towards the message of the unjust steward that led to the ridicule indicated in Luke 16:14. The message that to be a lover of money amounts to idolizing wealth and possessions (16:13) and making wise use of the wealth under their control (16:8) led the Pharisees to scorn Jesus.³⁷ Accordingly, Luke introduces them as "lovers of money." Perhaps it is this response from the Pharisees that finally leads to the next pericope, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

A Brief Analysis of the Parable Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31)

This is certainly one of the most popular parables in the Bible. Some scholars divide it into two parts owing to a tendency to use an Egyptian folktale as a parallel. Within this tradition, the first part is Lk. 16:19-26, dealing with the theme of reversal of fortunes, and the second part, Lk. 16:27-31, is considered a later inclusion.³⁸ Other scholars within this first tradition believe that the two parts are entirely independent of each other and are even conflicting in nature.³⁹ On the other hand, semiotic and literary analysis of the pericope argues for its unity. They argue that the parable is best considered as a three-part story made up of a description of the earthly life (16:19-21), a dialogue (16:22-23), and the afterlife (16:24-31).⁴⁰ Furthermore, the themes of reversal of fortunes and conversion are not viewed as contradictory. Instead, the pericope first shows the reversal of fortune, followed by instructions on how to avoid judgment.⁴¹

In this parable, the characters represent two opposite extremes on the socio-economic scale. On the one hand, the rich man is not only depicted by his wealth but his life of opulence, which is reflected in his daily banquet-like feasting and through his expensive clothing. Fitzmyer indicates that even among the rich, this man's clothing were not ordinary garments; they resembled royalty.⁴² On the other hand, Lazarus was poor and covered by sores and was placed next to the rich man's gate, possibly a disabled man who could not move around by himself. In addition to his inability to freely

³⁶ Cf. Guy D. Nave, *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 184-191.

³⁷ Adeniyi Olubiyi Adewale, "An Afro-Sociological Application of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19 - 31)," *Black Theology* 4:1 (2006), 28.

³⁸ Dyck, *Management and the Gospel*, 13; Adewale, "An Afro-Sociological Application," 27.

³⁹ Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus and the Hope*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 25-26.

⁴⁰ Walter Vogels, "Having or Longing: A Semiotic Analysis of Luke," *Eglise et Theologie* 20 (1989), 27-46.

⁴¹ Vogels, "Having or Longing," 27-46

⁴² Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, X-XXI*, 27.

move around, Lazarus is characterized by a dependence on crumbs from the rich man's table and is subjected to harassment from the dogs around the rich man's premises. Furthermore, the two characters' socio-economic difference becomes even more glaring when the rich man is said to have been buried, but Lazarus was not (16:22). Nevertheless, there is a reversal of fortunes after they both die (16:25-26). The rich man is tormented in the afterlife while Lazarus is being comforted because the former received good things and the latter experienced bad things in life. The second part of the parable has eschatological implications where the rich man is interceding for his brothers (16:27-31). This shows the importance of repentance to the living.

First, the parable reveals that the reversal of fortunes is clearly linked with glaring social injustice and the lifestyle of the rich and powerful. The rich man's opulent lifestyle is depicted as a negative example of the use of resources and of the kind his brothers should avoid. Second, there is a misuse of wealth on the rich man's part, especially considering his neglect of the poor, which is in stark contrast to God's care of the poor. Multiple Old Testament sources show that God always comes to the aid of the poor, vulnerable, and the helpless, irrespective of their piety (Ex. 22:22-23; Dt. 10:18; 14:28-29). It is clearly a call to show compassion to the poor because, like the parable of the unjust steward, it affirms that wealth is useful when it is used to take care of the poor and vulnerable, not when it is exclusively spent on oneself and immediate family. Third, the parable carries a social message; it speaks against social injustices. This is depicted by the two socio-economic extremes and the reversal of fortunes closely connected to it. Among other things, the parable challenges the simplistic view that wealth and possessions are blessings from God, and poverty is a misfortune or a curse. It renders weak the idea of hastily connecting wealth to God's favor.⁴³ Fourth, the parable also moralizes and issues a call for repentance to the rich and their agents, in this case, the brothers of the rich man.

The Engagement of Luke 16 and the Reality of the Prosperity Gospel

Ossom-Batsa's communicative approach suggests that context is the framework within which the discussion between God and humanity occurs. The realization of the call to action suggested by the biblical text is linked to the context of the reader.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the reader's experience may lead him/her to understand certain aspects of the text clearly than other parts. A typical example may be the significance given to texts dealing with wealth in contexts where people have experienced dire poverty. Within the context of the Ghanaian Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, the prosperity gospel occupies a central place, often defining the nature of lived Christianity. A dialogue between the Lukan teaching of wealth and poverty and the main characteristics of the prosperity preaching is therefore critical.

First of all, the prosperity preachers' perspective of the poor is markedly different from how they are represented in the Lukan teaching. The poor in Lk. 16 are considered in a positive light to the extent that their condition is attributed to inequalities and injustices in society, and the rich are admonished to use their wealth to help them. In Lk. 6:20, the poor are described as blessed and rightful members of the kingdom of God. In contrast to Luke's position, adherents of the prosperity gospel in Ghana perceive the poor as cursed and lacking faith in God, while poverty itself is an evil and a disease that must be detested by the Christian. But among other things, the parables in Lk. 16

⁴³ Autero, *Reading the Bible Across Context*, 301.

⁴⁴ Ossom-Batsa, "African Interpretation of the Bible in Communicative Perspective," 101.

challenge this simplistic perception that wealth and possessions are blessings from God and poverty is a curse. For Luke, poverty is the consequence of social injustice and proof that the human community is still not God's community. Thus, poverty alleviation is a form of evangelization for Luke.

Furthermore, whereas the focus of the prosperity gospel is wealth, material possession, and health, Luke clearly cautions his audience against making wealth (mammon) their focus because of the danger of it leading into idolatry (Lk. 16:13). The messages in Lk. 16, in their Lukan context, are addressed primarily to the rich instead of the poor. For example, in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, the emphasis is basically directed at the rich and their use of their resources.⁴⁵ The prosperity gospels' focus on wealth as evidence of a Christian's faith in God has the tendency to lead people into corruption, and to some wealthy people feeling a sense of superiority over the poor, which can result in discrimination, even in churches.

Additionally, for Luke, the proper use of money and possessions is to make friends and help the poor and the needy (16:1-13; 19-31). Wealth is to be redistributed to the community until there is no poor person. Therefore, bridging the gap between the wealthy and the poor in the community is central to the use of riches and possessions. On the other hand, the prosperity gospel is primarily individualistic, targeting wealth creation for individuals and their immediate families. Although it must be pointed out that within the Ghanaian context, there is now a conscious teaching within the movement towards wealth redistribution, championed by adherents like Mensa Otabil.⁴⁶

Also, central to both the parables of the unjust steward and Lazarus and the rich man is the theme of the reversal of fortunes. This is also a prominent part of the prosperity gospel in the Ghanaian context. But, unlike the Lukan parables, which have eschatological orientations, the prosperity theologies deal with the here-and-now. There is widespread teaching on the transfer of sinners' wealth to believers here on earth, based on Pr. 13:22.⁴⁷ Eschatological issues seem to be completely absent from the teachings of the prosperity gospel in Ghana.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Generally, we see that Luke is not in any way glorifying poverty but drawing attention to the plight of the poor and the proper use of wealth so that money does not become an idol to take God's place in a Christian's life. The evangelist is concerned with proper stewardship of what is entrusted to the believer, as well as having a collective perspective towards wealth and poverty. From the Lukan perspective, wealth assumes a negative trait when its primary use is to make more wealth at the expense of the poor, and when it assumes a central place in a person's life without regard to their neighbor. It is a positive tool when used for the communal good, such as bridging the gap between the rich and the poor in society. Thus, for Luke, money is either a tool for social justice, or it is an idol (mammon) that leads into slavery when accumulated. Also, it is clear from the reading of the text that because of its emphasis on individualism and wealth accumulation, the prosperity gospel perhaps contradicts Luke's view on the proper use of wealth: the redistribution to the community. Nevertheless, it affirms Luke's perspective that God does not want poverty - albeit, unlike the

⁴⁵ Autero, *Reading the Bible Across Context*, 279.

⁴⁶ Cf. Arthur, "The Gospel of Prosperity and its Concept of Development," 1-15.

⁴⁷ Samuel Korankye Ankrah, interview by Justice Arthur in Accra, Ghana, May 25, 2020.

⁴⁸ Quayesi-Amakye, Joseph. *Prosperity and Prophecy in African Pentecostalism*. 291.

prosperity gospel, poverty is considered the consequence of social injustice in the Lukan perspective. Lastly and on a different note, the prosperity gospel-inspired projects such as the 20-year development plan,⁴⁹ have the potential to lift people from poverty by helping them to develop a savings culture, which is critical to the third world contexts.

⁴⁹ See, “My 20-Year Personal Development Plan” International Central Church, https://www.centralgospel.com/directory/gallery/downloads/20_Year_Plan.pdf, accessed December 17, 2020.