

## **RICH AND POOR<sup>1</sup>**

In the first-century Palestinian world the main classes were a relatively small wealthy class and a large poor, peasant and artisan class, in some contexts referred to as “the people of the land.” Judaism dealt with this social disparity by accepting it and encouraging the wealthy to give alms to the poorest of the poor. Jesus, however, saw wealth as a hindrance to entering the kingdom of God (*see* Kingdom of God) and pronounced a blessing on those poor who were seeking God. He taught his followers a radical ethic (*see* Ethics of Jesus) of giving based on trust in God and the coming of the kingdom (i.e., an eschatological perspective) and lived out in the context of the new community of disciples. The texts indicate that Jesus is to be understood from within this eschatological perspective as a Jewish sage, not as a lawgiver or a teacher of an unattainable ideal.

1. Rich and Poor in First-Century Judaism
2. Rich and Poor in the Teaching of Jesus
3. Eschatology and the Ethic of Jesus

### **1. Rich and Poor in First-Century Judaism.**

The material in the Gospels on rich and poor is set against a background of the social world of Jesus’ day and the response that Judaism was making to that world. It was not without reason that Jesus has more to say on this topic than on almost any other he chose to address.

**1.1. The Social World of First-Century Judaism.** In the first-century Palestinian world there were essentially two major groups of people, the rich and the poor. The rich included especially the wealthy high-priestly clans (*see* Priest and Priesthood). Consisting of four extended families, they must be distinguished from the lower clergy (e.g., Zachariah of Luke’s birth narrative) who were in general poor and felt oppressed by the high-priestly group. It was the chief priests who not only profited from the sacrifices offered in the Temple (the lower clergy officiated for only two weeks a year, while the high-priestly clans were always present) but also controlled the considerable commerce associated with that sacrifice and other religious activities (e.g., the activity noted in Mk 11:15–19).

Another wealthy group was the Herodian family and retinue, whose political power was easily translated into wealth. It has been estimated that Herod and later his family may have owned more than half the land in his dominions. Gifts of land to faithful followers were not unusual.

The third group of wealthy people were the remnants of the older Jewish aristocracy (although much of their land was confiscated by Herod and his sons) and individuals who had become rich through trade, tax farming or the like. To be considered truly rich one had to own land, so a person would purchase landholdings as he became wealthy, but such a person would not farm his own land. Instead, he rented it to tenant farmers and

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<sup>1</sup>Joel B. Green et al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 701.

spent much of his time on civic and religious affairs in the city (principally, Jerusalem). This system led to the abuse of tenants and hired laborers, which mistreatment was seen by the wealthy as perfectly legal, but was viewed by the poor as totally unjust (cf. Jas 5:1–6).

A final group of wealthy people were the prosperous merchants who had not yet joined the land-owning aristocracy, although like them they controlled much of the economic life of the country. Both the land-owning and non-land-owning groups were deeply resented by the people of the land. It was no accident that during the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66–70, when the common people got the upper hand in Jerusalem, one of their first acts was the burning of the debt records and the slaughter of many of the aristocrats.

Religiously and socially then, the four groups of wealthy people could be split into two groups: (1) observant Jewish leaders and (2) those wealthy persons associated with the Herodians and Romans, whose power gained them a certain acceptance, but who were considered to be moral outcasts (i.e., “Jews who have made themselves Gentiles”), although obviously one dared not despise them too openly. Both groups at times used their power to oppress the lower classes. The less religious group did it through sheer abuse of power. The observant group justified their oppression through legal interpretation, which in the eyes of Jesus was viewed as more culpable, for it appeared to put God on the side of injustice.

Although there was a small middle class of some of the skilled artisans, land-owning medium-sized farmers and merchants (and socially, although not economically, the lower clergy), the second major social group was the poor, the peasants, the “people of the land” (*am hā-āreṣ*, although the Hebrew term was also used with a broader meaning, as will be seen below). This group included several sub-groups.

The best-off were the small landowners, who tended to lead a precarious life which depended on the harvest. A bad year or two could spell the loss of their land to the wealthy neighbor who lent them seed after the first crop failure. It could also mean the starvation of their family. The tenant farmers were next best-off, although they had to pay their landlord his due before providing for their own families. Worst off were those without land (and without the skills of artisans), the hired laborers and the beggars. They were the truly poor. Their hand-to-mouth existence was considered hardly worth living. Mixed in among these various levels of poorer people were such trades as fishermen and carpenters, whose social level depended on their relative prosperity, even though they were landless. Zebedee, for example, appears to have been relatively prosperous, for he had hired workers on his boats, not simply family. Jesus’ family, on the other hand, offered the sacrifice of the poor when he was born (Lk 2:24), but it is possible that when established back in Galilee they may have had a higher (if still modest) standard of living, which skilled work could at times command.

Cultural differences existed among the “people of the land” in that some (perhaps eight percent of the population) were urban-dwellers and thus closer to the life and values of the urban elite, while the rest (i.e., ninety percent of the people) were villagers, a step removed from the urban centers. A village carpenter, for example, would probably have been viewed by his urban fellow-carpenter as a “rustic,” for his values would have been more those of the small landowner than those of the urban elite.

There were other minor classes in Jewish society. There were some slaves, although in Palestine hired laborers were preferred since slaves had to be cared for in bad years

and Jewish ones then released in the Sabbath year. Furthermore, Gentile slaves might convert to Judaism and receive all the rights of Jewish slaves. Slaves tended to be house-servants in the city. There were also Jews who were forced (or chose) to drop out of respectable society and become outcasts (“Jews who had made themselves Gentiles”): tax collectors, hired shepherds, tanners, prostitutes. All except the tax collectors were among the poor, but the tax collectors, even if financially well-off, were never counted among the higher classes.

The poor in Judaism, then, included first of all those who owned no land (a definition based on the OT categories of poor, principally the Levite, the foreigner, the widow and the orphan). But because some non-landowners were wealthy, there was in the NT period also a secondary definition of poor in financial terms (reflected in *m. Pe'a*. 8:7–8, which was recorded by A.D. 250). However defined, the poor lived on the edge of existence even in the best of times, for to be in an agricultural economy without owning sufficient productive land to provide security is to be economically marginal. Yet the first century was not the best of times. Even if they managed to scrape by in normal years, the first century included years of famine, especially in the 40s (Josephus *Ant.* 20.2.5 records one incidence). This threat could never be far from any of the poorer people. Then there were Roman (or Herodian) taxes to pay and on top of that the Law prescribed a tithe (which could amount to from seventeen to twenty-three percent of one’s gross income). It is no wonder that the “people of the land” in general were looked down on by the religious as lax in their observance of the Law.

This laxness was not universal in that many of the later rabbis and even the great Pharisaic teachers of Jesus’ day appear to have been poor, at least during their time of study and in some cases throughout their life (teachers did not charge for their teaching). Yet most of the Pharisees were urban-dwellers, while most peasants in the village lacked the zeal and discipline of the rabbis or their closeness to the high culture. Their legal observance (and knowledge of the Law) was minimal and based on village tradition. On the one hand, the choice for them often appeared to be between the piety proclaimed by city-dwellers and starvation. On the other hand, even if they had a desire to follow the Law exactly, their hand-to-mouth existence left little time for study and meditation or for being sure all food was kosher and the tithe (in its Pharisaic sense) meticulously paid.

Thus, virtually all poor peasants were considered among “the masses” or the “people of the land” (*am hā-āreṣ*), which was for the Pharisees more a religious than a socioeconomic classification. In the OT it indicates either those who are not aristocrats (the earlier OT material) or non-Jews living within the traditional Jewish land (Ezra-Nehemiah). In rabbinic literature (thus beginning in the NT period) it frequently refers to those who are not observant of the Law as opposed to the Pharisees (and later rabbis). Virtually all rural peasants were included within this category, for, as we have noted, the Pharisees were predominantly town-dwellers. As a result, this pejorative term could include not simply the economically poor, but also somewhat better-off individuals (including the tiny middle class) and even the wealthy, unless they made the effort to follow the Pharisaic concept of purity (*see* Clean and Unclean). In general practice, however, it usually designated the semi-observant masses, the peasant population.

**1.2. The Response of Judaism to Social Inequality.** Judaism in general did not have any problem with wealth. Possessions were not viewed as evil. Indeed, because of the OT

stories of Abraham, Solomon and Job, there was a tendency to connect wealth with the blessing of God (the piety-prosperity equation), but while for the most part this attitude continued in the first century, it was modified in two directions. On the one hand, the empirical observation was made that wealth tended to beget greed and the abuse of power. And in a society in which the supply of wealth was believed to be limited, any gathering of wealth which was not clearly from God was suspected of being done through such abuse (cf. Malina 1981, 75–78). In fact, in the light of the experience of the righteous (see Justice, Righteousness) under the Seleucid rulers and later the Hasmoneans and Herods, it even appeared that most wealth was gained by injustice and that righteousness tended to make one poor. Some inter testamental writers questioned if there were any wealthy people who were righteous (Sir 31:3–10). On the other hand, the same authors made it clear that a wealthy person could be righteous or honorable (especially if the wealth had been inherited) and the way that he or she could demonstrate this righteousness was through charity. Thus in Jewish tradition Abraham and Job were singled out as being wealthy persons who were righteous because they excelled in generosity (see *Jub.* or *T. Job*).

The real problem in first-century Judaism was that of poverty, especially the poverty of the righteous. Some anthropologically oriented scholars argue that the poverty that was a problem was that caused by the loss of one's inherited position, whether that position was economically rich or poor. This resulted in the OT categories of poor as noted above (cf. Malina 1981, 84). However, although this may have been true for the OT period, it does not completely fit that of the NT. A number of rabbinic sayings note the economic misery of the life of the poorer peasant (e.g., *Lev Rab.* 34:6 on Lev 25:25; *b. B. Bat.* 116a; *b. Sanh.* 151b). As it was later expressed, "There is nothing in the world more grievous than poverty—the most terrible of all sufferings. Our Teachers said: all sufferings are on one side and poverty is on the other" (*Ex R.* 31:12 on Ex 22:24). Furthermore, the Jesus tradition (e.g., Lk 6) contrasts the poor, not with the greedy or the wicked (as in the OT), but with the rich, showing that economic issues had become more important. James also exhibits this pattern. Economic lack was a problem, even if inherited social status was not ignored.

The first response of Judaism to the poor was to encourage the voluntary sharing of wealth, for outside of assistance from a person's extended family, charity or almsgiving was the only form of social assistance available. Governments of that day only intervened, if at all, when mass starvation was threatened (and in those cases the motives were to preserve future tax revenues and prevent social unrest). Almsgiving included (1) private charitable actions (e.g., giving to a beggar, forgiving a debt, providing for the proper burial of an impoverished person), which in the case of the wealthy could include significant aid to large areas (Queen Helena of Adiabene, for example, sent major food aid to Jerusalem in the 40s); (2) group charitable actions (i.e., those organized through a village council of elders or a synagogue); (3) religious charity (e.g., the charitable fund collected and distributed through the Temple). Later Judaism would develop a highly organized system of collection and distribution of charity. In the first century, however, individual initiative in almsgiving was the primary force.

The giving of alms was therefore viewed by Judaism in general as a very important righteous work in the eyes of God. In fact, in rabbinic Judaism only meditation on Torah could have outranked charity as a righteous deed. Deeds of charity were seen as greater

than all the commandments (*b. B. Bat.* 9a, b) and defended the giver before God whenever Satan tried to accuse him (*Ex Rab.* 31:1). In other words, almsgiving was so significant that the term “righteousness” became synonymous with the giving of alms. Because of this, “The poor do more for the wealthy than do the wealthy for the poor,” for the poor provide the righteous with a means of gaining merit with God (*b. Šabb.* 151b).

On the negative side, evil comes upon Israel because of the neglect of obedience to the OT laws of giving to the poor (*m. <Abot* 5:9). One does not know exactly how much of this attitude can be attributed to the time of Jesus, but charity was certainly highly ranked: “Upon three things the world stands: the Law, worship [i.e., the service of God, including obedience], and deeds of loving-kindness [i.e., alms giving and other charitable acts]” (*m. <Abot.* 1:2); in fact, charity is equivalent to sacrifice and atones for sins (*Sir* 35:1–2; 3:3–4).

At the same time, at least in rabbinic circles, the giving of alms was not viewed as a means of changing a person’s social status, but as a means of rescuing him or her from the misfortune into which they had fallen and restoring them to their former station in life. Differing social status itself was not viewed as a problem. Thus a peasant who needed alms would not be supported at the same level as an impoverished aristocrat. For example, there is the (possibly apocryphal) story about Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, who upon discovering that an impoverished member of a noble family was travelling, arranged that he be provided with a horse. But there was no servant to run in front of the man, so the rabbi himself took the role so the man could travel in the style appropriate to his rank (*b. Ketub.* 67b). This is certainly charity, but it is a charity which took social rank into account. Thus, while almsgiving was not to raise persons above their normal social rank, it might restore a noble person to his or her rank and fortune (e.g., an appropriately generous dowry might be provided so that a woman might marry at her accustomed status level).

Yet at the same time, there was, as noted above, a social status below which life was miserable. Thus, we find that people who fall below a certain level (defined in *m. Pe‘a* 8, some discussions of which are first century) are always subjects of charity, whether it is their inherited status or not. In other words, once people were separated from inherited land the traditional social distinctions began to break down and economic ones started to take their place.

Charity was covered by a number of areas of Jewish Law, not simply the encouragements to almsgiving. Observant Jews not only gave the poor tithe in the third year and alms throughout the year, but also allowed the poor to glean in their fields and left their fields fallow one year in seven with the poor being allowed to gather what grew of itself. The repeated OT theme of caring for the poor was not lost in later Judaism, even if it was regulated.

At the same time, there was a recognition that even with plenty of charity the rich and powerful would tend to oppress the righteous. In other words, in this world righteousness tended to make one poor. This led to two final responses. First, the community of the righteous was in all likelihood the community of the poor (this identification is made explicitly in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Pharisaic *Psalms of Solomon*). It is this community that must exercise generosity. Second, wealth will come to the righteous, but not in this age. God will redress all wrongs in the age to come, when the righteous poor

of this age will reap the reward of their charitable deeds. This eschatological piety-prosperity equation is also important in considering the teaching of Jesus.

## **2. Rich and Poor in the Teaching of Jesus.**

Jesus fits into the social situation of first-century Palestine as we have come to know it. He himself belonged to the people of the land as the son of a carpenter who owned neither inherited land nor land he had acquired himself (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). He was not an officially recognized teacher, but a charismatic leader with a ragtag group of followers (which explains the negative response to him in Nazareth, where his class origins were well known, Mk 6:3). He accepted the outcasts of society and was frequently found associating with the poor. This provides the immediate context for his teaching.

That teaching is reported in the Synoptic Gospels (the Fourth Gospel having relatively little to say on this topic). While Mark has some significant narratives and sayings on the issue, the vast majority of the teaching is found in Q material, blocks of which occur in Matthew 6 and in Luke 6, 12 and 16. Of the two Gospels Luke has both more material than Matthew and a stronger form of the material which both include. For example, Luke includes woes along with his Beatitudes (Lk 6:20–26; *see* Blessing and Woe), which sharpen the teaching by explicitly stating the obverse. Therefore it can be said fairly that Luke has a special interest in the topic (which is the reason that most of the studies on Jesus' economic teaching focus on Luke), although the same general attitude is shared by Matthew and perhaps also by Mark. The three Evangelists give a consistent picture of Jesus' attitude toward wealth and poverty. Furthermore, the viewpoint they share is consistent with the ancient Mediterranean view that goods are limited and that collection of wealth by some implies the loss of basic subsistence for others. Yet Jesus does not accept inherited wealth to the same degree that his contemporaries did.

**2.1. The Danger of Wealth.** While Jesus never looks on possessions *per se* as evil (he was not a dualist), for him wealth was not something safe, but a dangerous substance. In many of his sayings it is personified as Mammon (which in the Aramaic of Jesus' day meant simply "possessions" and could be viewed as evil or neutral, depending on its modifiers) and functions exactly as the idols did in the eyes of ancient Hebrew prophets in that it seductively draws people away from total allegiance to God. For example, in the parable of the sower (Mk 4:18–19) it is "the deceit of wealth and the desires for other things" that come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful, just as if it had been snatched by Satan (*see* Devil, Demons, Satan) or burned out by persecution. Here wealth is personified and acts with effects similar to that of personal evil (i.e., Satan), although in a slower, less dramatic way. It draws the person away from God.

The issue is not simply a matter of giving both possessions and God their proper place. Both God and possessions (i.e., Mammon) claim a person's service. Mammon's claim is evident: Wealth must be preserved; daily bread must be earned. Yet Jesus categorically rejects that there is a proper service of Mammon: It is impossible to serve both money and God (Mt 6:24).

This impossibility is underlined by his next point, for, far from being a mark of divine favor, wealth makes it impossible to enter the kingdom (*see* Kingdom of God). This constitutes a total denial (at least in the terms of this world) of the piety-prosperity

equation. This idea is presented in a number of ways. The Markan story of the rich young man ends in all three Synoptics with the comment, “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” (Mk 10:25). This clearly means that the salvation of the rich is an impossibility. Can such folk never be saved? “All things are possible with God,” responds Jesus to the shocked question of his disciples. Luke follows his version of this story with the Zacchaeus narrative (Lk 19:1–10), which shows the impossible taking place. But this does not leave Zacchaeus rich (i.e., his possession of riches is not neutral), for in the process Zacchaeus gives up his wealth. It is only when he announces this intention that Jesus responds, “Salvation has come to this house today.”

Jesus also emphasizes the impossibility of serving both God and money in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31). Abraham says to the rich man in Hades, “In your lifetime you received your good things ... but now ... you are in agony.” This fits with the woe of Luke 6:24, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” In the parable the woe receives a literal pictorial presentation, showing that to hold on to one’s comfort today is to risk damnation tomorrow.

Finally, the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16–21) emphasizes once again that one cannot serve both God and Mammon. The rich man in the story, who simply has the good fortune of a bumper crop, prudently takes the excess of the present and stores it for the future, rejoicing that his future will be free from financial worry. That worldly prudence qualifies him in Jesus’ eyes as a fool. The mere possession of this windfall condemns him. He has stored up for himself instead of giving to the poor (and thereby becoming “rich towards God”).

**2.2. *The Only Healthy Use of Wealth Is in the Care of the Poor.*** In both of the parables cited above there are implied alternatives to the behavior of the rich. The first man could have cared for Lazarus, having both the means (the parable notes that he had plenty) and opportunity (Lazarus lay at his gate and was known to the rich man, cf. Lk 16:23–24). As for the rich fool, Luke defines what is meant by being “rich towards God” when a dozen verses later he concludes the section on the topic of wealth with, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Lk 12:33). This interpretation of what one is to do with surplus is a consistent theme in the teaching of Jesus (and of the rest of the NT). If one has more than enough, the best thing to do with it is to give it to those who have less than enough and so invest in heaven.

Another example of this teaching is found in Luke 16:9 in which Jesus states, “Make friends for your selves by means of unrighteous Mammon [“worldly wealth” NIV], so that when it is gone, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings.” In context this probably means that one should care for the poor with one’s wealth (“make friends for yourselves”) so that when one dies (“when it is gone,” left behind at death) those poor welcome their benefactor into heaven (“eternal dwellings”).

This teaching, of course, is in line with the Judaism of the period. Wealthier persons demonstrated their righteousness by caring for the poor, just as Job and Abraham (or, for Christians, perhaps Joseph of Arimathea or Barnabas) had done before them. Within their Mediterranean culture this both demonstrated the virtue of their class and showed that their wealth was not gained by injustice. Jesus differed from the Judaism of his day not in

**Comment [MH1]:** Thoughts on this “conclusion”?

the high value he placed on charity, but in the extent of the charity he required and the basis on which he founded his demand.

**2.3. God Has a Special Interest in the Poor.** Jesus was no ascetic. There is no glorification of poverty for its own sake nor a masochistic enjoyment of want. Indeed, Jesus consistently pictured the consummation of the kingdom as a time of plenty, and he was known as a person who enjoyed a party (e.g., Mt 11:19, not to mention Luke's well-known banquet theme; *see* Table Fellowship), so he was certainly not against good food and drink, even if he might be a guest who could make a host uncomfortable.

At the same time Jesus clearly stated that God has a special interest in the poor, a teaching that builds on God's care of the poor in the OT. For example, in both Luke and Matthew one finds him describing his mission in terms of Isaiah 61:1–2 with specific reference to the poor having good news announced to them (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18–21). These poor are surely the “people of the land” (*am hā ʾāreṣ*) to whom he sends his disciples in Matthew 10:6–7. And it is on these poor that he pronounces, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk 6:20). While Matthew 5:3 has a different version of the saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” the sense is similar once one realizes that in Luke Jesus is addressing the poor who are following him and in Matthew he is speaking of the poor who display the (OT) spirit of the poor, that is, those who are seeking and depending on God (cf. 1QM 14:7, where the Hebrew equivalent of this phrase occurs).

Some scholars, however, question whether these are the materially poor or the metaphorically poor. Is not the phrase “I am poor and oppressed” used in the Psalms by individuals who are materially well-off? Has not the term “poor” become by the time of Jesus simply a synonym for Israel as an oppressed and helpless people? Certainly, as noted above, there is a spiritual qualification of the poor being addressed. It is also clear that in such intertestamental works as the *Psalms of Solomon* and the Dead Sea Scrolls the term “poor” had come to designate the Pharisaic and Dead Sea communities respectively as the pious remnant of Israel. Finally, it is clear that some among Jesus' band of disciples were not poor to the extent of being destitute, even if they were not necessarily well-off (e.g., Peter and Andrew owned a house; James and John came from a reasonably prosperous family; Matthew/Levi, while not necessarily a wealthy tax collector, is reported to have afforded a feast for Jesus).

Yet, taking all of this into account, the term “poor” always carries with it a sense of the experience of oppression and helplessness or, as Malina put it, the inability to maintain inherited status. A person who was comfortable and secure would not be termed “poor.” The disciples had left their relative security to identify with the insecurity of Jesus. The sects who referred to Israel as “the poor” were in fact experiencing oppression by the ruling classes. Even in the Psalms the term is used only if the psalmist feels helpless; he may in fact have money, but it is of no use to him in his need. In his helplessness he calls upon God to look on him with the special concern that God in the Law and Prophets proclaims that he has for the poor. Thus the so-called metaphorical use of “poor” is not entirely metaphorical; it always contains an element of real suffering and insecurity, even if the suffering is not necessarily economic, but is instead a physical threat.

In the case of the two Beatitudes, groups experiencing real impoverishment are blessed. While one could be materially poor without receiving this blessing because of

not following Christ/having the right spirit, there is no intention in either these or any similar passages that one can hold onto wealth or other security and yet claim such blessings because one's spirit is "poor." It is significant that the blessings are never pronounced on the rich, either in this passage or elsewhere. And in Luke this distinction is underlined by a curse on the rich three verses later (because "you have already received your comfort;" i.e., because they have maintained their wealth, not because of any other injustice). Again, it is "the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame" whom God is inviting to his messianic banquet, while the wealthier people (who can afford to purchase fields and oxen) are excluded (Lk 14:21).

If people have their own security, they have no need for the "good news" Jesus preaches to the poor. Jesus not only quotes from Isaiah 61:1–2, with its theme of good news to the poor, release for prisoners, sight for the blind and release for the oppressed, he enacts it in his ministry. He gives sight to the blind and releases those who are bound and oppressed (which in Luke refers to his casting out demons [*see* Devil, Demon, Satan], although the freedom of his new community of disciples was surely experienced as another form of release). And while there are wealthy people who receive the kingdom, the only ones mentioned in the Gospels are those like Zacchaeus, who are engaged in acts of generosity (and thus identify with the suffering). Those who refuse to so humble themselves are turned away.

Is Jesus then proclaiming a time of Jubilee (Lev 25:8–55) when he proclaims "the year of the Lord's acceptance"? Does this mean a time of economic redistribution of wealth? While this possibility is attractive and while Luke certainly sees the ideals of Sabbath and Jubilee years realized in the early church (Acts 4:34; cf. Deut 15:4), this is unlikely. Such an interpretation hangs on too narrow a linguistic base and focuses Jesus' concerns too exclusively on economic and class issues. There is a realization of the Jubilee ideal, but in terms much broader than those envisioned in the OT literature and without its specific regulations.

The language of Jesus is not class language, which would include all materially poor Israelites within it and exclude all materially rich Israelites. If that were the case, he would surely have had to define how poor one had to be to qualify. But at the same time it is not spiritual language which speaks only of an inner condition without reference to outer circumstances. Rather, it refers to those actually experiencing oppression and helplessness in one form or another, or those identifying with this group by giving up their own security and generously sharing what they have.

**2.4. Caring for the Poor Earns Eternal Reward.** If God has a special concern for the poor (which is clear even in the OT where God proclaims himself the special protector of the classic Israelite poor—the widow, the orphan and the alien), one would expect that his followers would also display this concern. Jesus argues for such a conclusion by noting that it is treasure in heaven that is lasting (Mt 6:20; Lk 12:32–34; Luke makes it clear that people put treasure in heaven by "sell[ing] your possession and giv[ing] to the poor," while Matthew is content to simply use the phrase which was well known to his Jewish audience). The reason given for such radical action is that the heart naturally follows the treasure, so treasure in heaven means a heart fixed on heaven, while treasure on earth equally means a heart fixed on earth. Jesus' own practice must have followed his advice, for John 13:29 indicates that almsgiving ordered by Jesus was what the disciples

**Comment [MH2]:** A theologically unfortunate term!

suspected Judas was about when he left them. It was apparently a customary action, for it is presented as a natural assumption on the part of the disciples.

Charity, however, is not simply a matter of making sure that one's heart is in the right place or getting rid of a dangerous substance. It earns a reward. Just as the rich man is condemned for not practicing charity toward Lazarus and the rich fool for not putting treasure in heaven, so in the context of a banquet the promise is held out to those who invite the poor to their feasts: "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Lk 14:14). It is likely that Jesus is here applying Proverbs 19:17, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done."

**2.5. Radical Trust in God Is the Basis for the Ability to Give Up Wealth.** The call of Jesus is radical with its point-counterpoint of "do not invest on earth—do invest in heaven," but it is based in an equally radical promise, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these [material] things shall be yours as well" (Mt 6:33). Likewise, the promise "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" precedes "Sell your possessions" in Luke 12:32–33. Those who are convinced that their heavenly Father will indeed care for them are also those who are able to give freely. Conversely, the lack of trust in the Father (including doubting the goodness of his will) leads to the need to provide for one's own security, to serve Mammon.

Jesus suggests that even on the level of natural theology people ought to realize that they can trust God, for if God cares for the birds without their providing for their own security and if he clothes the lilies with beauty, surely he is more concerned about his human children (Lk 12:22–31). Furthermore, human anxiety and attempts at providing for security are useless anyway (Mt 6:27). Instead, what counts is the assurance that "your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (Mt 6:32; Lk 12:30). Renunciation flows out of security, not out of demand. But security is rooted in the knowledge of the Father, not in what is physically present.

It is at this level that the Fourth Gospel supports the teaching on rich and poor found in the Synoptics. While the language of wealth and poverty is almost entirely absent (occurring only in two passages in Jn 12–13), the language of radical trust in God is not. For example, John's Jesus argues that after the resurrection "my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." This asking and receiving is so that "your joy will be complete" (Jn 16:23–24). Such joyful dependence on the Father, underlined multiple times in the surrounding chapters along with the insistence that the Father loves them, is the foundation on which the carefree generosity of the Synoptics is based.

**2.6. The Primary Context of Renunciation Is in the New Community.** Jesus' whole life and teaching took place within the context of the social world of first-century Judaism in which a person was embedded in a social matrix, a community. Within the modern Western individualism, much of what he taught on wealth and poverty appears to be nonsense. But given that his followers assumed that Jesus was correct in his teaching that the kingdom of God had come, it made good sense. As the Pharisees, the Dead Sea community and even the Zealots invited people to join a supportive community which pointed to the new order that was coming, so Jesus invited those who accepted his message into a new social world. They were to become his followers, part of the renewed community. The disciples left what they had, but they did so to follow Jesus, to be part of

his band. The rich young ruler is not called simply to sell what he has and give to the poor, but to do that and then “follow me.” In other words, the call of Jesus to radical generosity is at one level an individual decision, but its context is that of a call to community in line with the function of voluntary communities within his society.

Much of the teaching of Jesus can only be understood within this context. For example, the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31–46) is entirely related to community. People are certainly judged according to their charitable acts (all of the acts mentioned would have been viewed in Judaism as varieties of almsgiving), but the focus is on their acts of charity toward “one of the least of these brothers of mine” and not toward the poor in general. While it is clear that the charitable actions of Jesus and his followers (especially their healings and other miracles) extended beyond their own group, most of the concrete actions named have to do with actions toward his followers. This is true even for the offering of the proverbial “cup of cold water.”

Likewise, the promises of Jesus are primarily addressed to his followers. The “you poor” of Luke 6 is put into the context of his “looking at his disciples.” The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount are spoken when “his disciples came to him.” There is no blessing spoken to poor who are not disciples, although there is some type of blessing for anyone, rich or poor, who, though they are not his disciple, comes to the aid of a disciple (Mk 9:41; Mt 10:40–42).

Finally, the blessings pronounced by Jesus are primarily received within the context of the eschatological community (i.e., the band of disciples). When Peter notes that, unlike the rich man, “we have left everything to follow you,” Jesus responds that he and the other disciples will receive “a hundred times as much in this present age” and “in the age to come, eternal life” (Mk 10:28–30). The reception of “one hundred times as much” (with persecutions added) refers not to an individual’s personal reward, but to their sharing in the wealth of the community. In anthropological terms, they receive a new network of dyadic relationships. It is as the disciples form a new extended family that each receives a larger family than they left behind. It is as the disciplined community shares among itself that each member has access to much more than they gave up. Conceivably, this could also be said about heavenly reward. Certainly, at least on the level of temporal reward, without this community emphasis the teaching of Jesus easily degenerates into an ethic of personal fulfillment.

### **3. Eschatology and the Ethic of Jesus.**

It is well known that Jesus’ teaching was set within a context of expectation of the kingdom. Jesus came announcing that the time of fulfillment had come and that the kingdom of God was at hand. Each of the promises about the provision of the Father as well as the blessings of the Beatitudes, contains the command to seek the kingdom or the promise of the kingdom. God had broken into history in a decisive way; now was the time for radical change.

Given this context it is possible to read the ethic of Jesus in four different ways. First, following A. Schweitzer and others, we might view it as an interim ethic established in the face of the soon-to-appear kingdom. This perspective views Jesus’ teaching about rich and poor as totally conditioned by his end-time expectation, an expectation that was not fulfilled. Thus the ethic was irrelevant to later generations in the church. Yet it does not appear that this was the position taken by the first interpreters of Jesus, for the

Gospels were certainly written a generation into the Christian movement and such works as the Epistle of James demonstrate a relatively literal application of the teaching of Jesus.

Second, we can view it as an ideal ethic designed either to force Jesus' contemporaries to confront their own inability and their need for grace (so in part, R. Guelich) or to take effect when the kingdom would be consummated. The test of this position is to observe whether or not Jesus' disciples practiced his teaching literally or whether Jesus himself accepted it as an unattainable ideal for them. Furthermore, one can ask whether the early church so understood Jesus (recognizing that the Gospels were their books and that they were responsible for shaping the tradition).

Third, is to see Jesus as giving a literal guideline to a particular group of followers. For communal Anabaptists this was a literal rule binding on all Christians who wish to walk in the way of full discipleship. For monastic orders this "gospel perfection" was only incumbent on the religious who wished to forsake the world and live the fullness of Christian life. In either case there is the implication that those who do not divest themselves of wealth and give to the poor are at best second-class followers of Jesus.

Fourth, we might understand his teaching as an ethic to be lived in the light of eschatology. The premises for this reading are: (1) the kingdom is in fact the wave of the future in the sense that, although it is unseen (except in the various signs of its coming) it is actual and the present observable features of this age are going to pass; (2) the Father in fact does love and care for his own; and (3) the Holy Spirit (promised in the Gospels) frees the follower of Jesus to respond to his demand. In light of these factors the application of Jesus' teaching on rich and poor to life in Christian community makes sense.

Related to the consideration of any of these positions is the fact that it is unlikely that Jesus is giving a new Law. In fact, only the third of these positions would suggest something like that. In the Gospels one discovers that Peter still owned a house (Mk 1:29) and that women of means continued supporting Jesus, apparently not ridding themselves of wealth in one act (Lk 8:3). They evidently understood Jesus to be speaking in the black-white hyperbole of a Jewish sage (as in Proverbs) or storyteller, rather than in the stark literalism of a lawgiver.

In fact, these and other examples show two things. First, while the disciples "left all" and followed Jesus, they did not necessarily renounce their possessions totally, although their decision did involve considerable economic loss and risk as well as trust in Jesus. Second, their joyful and generous giving was precisely that. It was not a rule enforced on them. For example, the narrative of the anointing at Bethany (Mk 14:1-9; it is found in all Gospels except Luke, who at best has it in quite a different form) shows quite a different type of generosity. The anointing of Jesus "for burial" was certainly a radical act of giving (even an act of charity, if the burial idea was in any way conscious in the woman's mind, which is unlikely), but it was enacted toward Jesus, not toward the poor (which offended the disciples, and in John's Gospel especially offended Judas). There is certainly no suggestion that it would have been good for the woman to have kept the ointment for her own security. The issue for the Evangelists is the proper direction of the extravagant act. Jesus suggests that he took precedence over the poor; the eschatological moment took priority over all other demands. This is hardly the word of a lawgiver in any conventional sense.

The test of these positions, then, is threefold. First, we must look within the Gospels and ask how Jesus' contemporaries could have interpreted his message, a task which has been attempted in part above. Second, we must look at the Gospels (and perhaps along with them Acts as being of one perspective with Luke) and, realizing that they were foundation documents for Christian communities, ask if there is anything in them or in the NT epistolary literature that might direct us toward understanding this teaching as anything other than a command of the Founder to be practiced. Third, we must look at the early interpretations of the Christian tradition (e.g., Paul in 2 Cor 8–9; 1 Tim 6; James) and see if they agree with the perspective of Jesus or in some way mitigate the sharp edges of his teaching.

None of these considerations will remove the aspect of eschatology from Jesus' teaching on rich and poor. But they will show how eschatology (and, in Paul and others, the gift of the Spirit as the down payment on the eschatological future) was related to ethics in the early Christian tradition. We will then be better able to interpret that tradition for today.

*See also* ETHICS OF JESUS; JUSTICE; RIGHTEOUSNESS; TAXES.

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