

The Blindness of Wealth: An Exegetical Study of Luke 18:18-27

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Preamble

Let me begin by thanking the executive of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria for choosing to focus on “Wealth and Divine Blessing in the Bible” at this conference. The timeliness of such an intervention, if I dare to call it that, cannot be overestimated. The influence of wealth and power on ministry amongst religious groups, including the Holy Roman Catholic Church, whether positive or negative, calls for such a discussion. While it is true that we cannot run the church on Hail Marys alone, it is noteworthy that caution has been thrown to the winds in the proclamation of the good news. The end-results are neither encouraging nor palatable. An exploration of this theme will certainly throw light on the foundations and claims made as rationale for current practice and will hopefully advice a more constructive way forward.¹

My particular contribution to this discussion is a study of the encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler in its Lukan context. The concerns of the paper will be more contextual and practical, drawing on the fruits of the exegetical efforts of other biblical scholars who have done excellent work on the text. That is because the conference is aimed at seeking practical solutions to the viral influence of wealth on liturgical worship and church life.

Luke18:18-30 in Its Lukan Literary and Thematic Context.

This part of my paper seeks to do two things. First, it would locate the place of my focus text within its larger literary context, with frequent reference to repeated themes and concepts, especially those related to the main focus of this conference. Second, it would locate our focus text within the wider discussion on Wealth and Divine Blessing and the use of wealth in the Lukan Corpus. Even though each of these two contextual considerations could form full discussions on their own, our exposition in this regard would rely on the result of the many hard works of others to draw summaries on the said relationships.²

Luke 18:18-30 in Its Lukan Literary Context

Our focus pericopé comes up toward the end of the section in the gospel of Luke referred to as the journey narratives, from 9:51-19:28, marking Jesus’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Along that journey, Jesus did many things and uttered many important proclamations as well. In relation to wealth, some of the most remarkable encounters and utterances are also located within

¹ Thomas E. Philips, “Reading Recent Readings of Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke and Acts,” in *Currents in Biblical Research* (2003:1.2): 231-69, here 233.

² See commentaries on Luke’s gospel for a more detailed exposition of that relationship. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1997); Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations With a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010); Arthur Jost, A. Jr. Ed.: *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture 3 (Downers Grove, KY: Intervarsity Press, 2003); Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994); Matthew E. Carlton, *The Translator’s Reference Translation of the Gospel of Luke* (Dallas, TX: International Academic Book Store, 2008); Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, eds. Amy Plantings Panas and William C. Plancher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Michael Mullins, *The Gospel Of Luke* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: The Columbia Press, 2010); W. Mark Tew, *Luke: Gospel to the Nameless and Faceless* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2012). A majority of the articles cited in this paper is also expository in nature.

this journey narrative section.

Already in the initial gathering of disciples in 5:1-11 and in their sending off on mission in 9:1-6, part of the demand made on the followers of Jesus was the cultivation of a spirit of detachment and complete dependence on God. The same call will be extended to the disciples (9:23-26) once more in the expressions of the condition for following Jesus and to the seventy-two in 10:1-16. The material in Luke 9:23-26 is actually represented in one form or the other in our focus text (18:18-30).

The episode of the two brothers and Jesus' response in 12:13-21, which is a special Lucan pericopé, falls within the template of Luke's teaching on wealth. The blindness, emptiness, foolishness and futility of wealth, and especially its wrong use, are in view in that text. In 12:22-32, Jesus proposes an alternative that encourages complete trust in God and detachment from wealth and property. The pericopé on accountability in 12:35-48 is also within the purview of the right and proper use of wealth, or any other endowments God has bestowed. With these texts are the pericopés dealing with the invitation for the few who would be saved to enter through the narrow door in 13:22-30, on choosing the places of honor at table (14:7-11), the selection of guests to be invited (14:12-14), the obstacles to the response to the invitation to the meal of the kingdom, thus robbing those invited of the proper response (14:15-24), the reiteration of the conditions for discipleship (14:25-27) and the more direct instruction on renouncing possessions (14:28-33). That the parable of the lost son is associated with the allure of wealth, possession and life's goodies is not surprising, considering all the warnings given by Jesus on the dangers of wealth (15:11-32). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) reinforces those warnings.

An exception to this list would be pericopés that deal with the right use of money (16:9-13), which follow the saying on the crafty steward in 16:1-8.

The warning on the coming of the day of the Lord uses illustrations that are characterized by opulence, the kind that can only be provided by the unguarded acquisition of wealth, to describe the dangers that materialism poses for salvation. Not too farfetched is the description of the judge as unjust in 18:1-8. Even though the pericopé is not about wealth *per se*, it is well known that matters of injustice were firmly tied to wealth and corruption both in the prophetic tradition and in the New Testament times.³ The self-righteousness of the Pharisee in 18:9-14 may also be attributed to the confidence that comes from wealth and self-dependence. This last episode is in the immediate context of our focus pericopé.

The stories of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the resulting parable of the pounds (19:11-27), which conclude the journey-narratives section of Luke's gospel, subtly deal with the dangers of wealth but highlight the importance of the right and proper use of wealth and material goods.

The other important episodes that concern wealth and salvation in the Gospel, albeit remotely, include the parable of the wicked tenants, the debate on taxes to Caesar and the controversy on the resurrection of the dead (all in Luke 20). 21:34-36, which warns on the dangers of a life of debauchery and drunkenness, and of course, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, which was driven by greed and avarice, two essential ingredients of wealth acquisition (22:1-6), must be mentioned here as well. The literary-contextual proximity of 18:18-30 to the Zacchaeus episode is, in itself,

³ Read the prophetic books, especially, Amos, Isaiah and others. See Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings and Scrolls* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007). He identifies the theme of injustice as firmly bound to Israel's relationship with her God in every one of the prophetic books.

an invitation to the reader to balance his/her views regarding Jesus' attitude towards the Rich.⁴

Other examples of the proper use of wealth and possessions are found in 8:1-3, where the women of means are said to have supported Jesus' ministry out of their own means, the hosting of Jesus and his disciples by Martha and Mary in 10:38-42 (such banquets may have been a frequent part of their friendship with Jesus [see the Johannine portrait of that relationship in John 11 & 12]), and 23:50-54, where Joseph of Arimathea does the good and merciful service of burying Jesus' body. Matt 27:60 notes that Joseph of Arimathea actually laid Jesus' body in his own tomb. Even though this bit of information is not Lucan, it is important to note that he was a man of influence and power and used his influence to obtain Jesus' body for burial by getting approval from Pilate (23:52).⁵

Suffice it to say that the foregoing is in dissonance with the popular conception of the relationship between wealth and blessings, inspired by a do-well, fare-well theological world view.

Although the list given above contains material that may be found in the other synoptic gospels, their collection and arrangement, especially within the journey narrative section puts a special Lucan emphasis on them. Also, the more pointed of the narratives, episodes, and parables, cited above, are special Lucan material, reflecting the possible *Sitz im Leben* of his community. At least one exegete has suggested a contextual relationship between the literary context of Luke 18:18-30 and the actual pilgrimage of individual Christian disciples through life.⁶

Luke 18:18-30 in Its Thematic Context

At this point, I would like to present a summary of Lucan teaching on wealth, detachment and the proper use of wealth. The summary would simply outline only a few of the main interpretations of such teachings as can be found in the struggles of biblical scholars of all ages on these very complicated topics. Thomas E. Philips correctly remarks that: "the swell of scholarship on issues of wealth and poverty in Luke-Acts has resulted from two factors: (1) the sheer number of Lukan texts that relate to these issues, and (2) the immense diversity of perspectives these texts contain related to those issues." He adds that: "For those interested in issues of wealth and poverty, the problem has not been finding material to interpret but rather providing a single reading that encompasses all of the diversity of the Lukan materials."⁷ That is because one cannot simply force a single reading on Luke-Acts in this regard. Yet, it must be

⁴ Alan P. Stanley, "The Rich Young Ruler and Salvation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 2006:163): 46-62 (59-60).

⁵ For more on the proper use of wealth and the danger of greed and attachment to wealth and material things in the rest of the Lucan corpus, see the following passages: Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35, 36-37; 5:1-11; 9:36.

⁶ Charles M. Swezey, "Luke 18:18-30," in *Interpretation*, (1983:37) 68-73. In his conclusion, he notes: "Luke 18:18-30 is about fidelity to a vision of God and the skill of dispossession. It calls Christians to the arduous task of discernment by bringing to bear their perception of God's governance on what they experience as they travel... Walking the way requires a careful analysis of particular dangers, pitfalls, and temptations and must be informed by more specific values and principles which further illumine the path to follow" (73).

⁷ Thomas Philips gives us a very comprehensive survey of the many different views on Wealth and Riches in Luke-Acts in his article, "Reading Recent Readings." His observation that "although Luke consistently talks about possessions, he does not talk about possessions consistently" is very accurate. With reference to the literally poor though, Luke's presentation was consistently favorable (233). See also, Luke T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS, 39 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 129-30; Christopher Hays, "Beyond Mint and Rue: the Implications of Luke's Interpretive Controversies For Modern Consumerism," in *Political Theology* (2010:11.3): 383-398.

noted that, although the Lucan community contained both the rich and poor, “Luke’s presentation of issues of wealth and poverty was primarily addressed to the rich.”⁸ Amongst the identified points of reference for these teachings are the following: a. there are texts that encourage outright detachment from wealth as condition for discipleship; b. other texts warn of the danger of wealth and possessions; c. still others concern themselves with the proper disposal of wealth and material goods; d. some of the texts are focused on accountability as it relates to wealth and possessions. The above are the main areas into which the Lukan texts on wealth, divine blessing and possessions can be fitted.⁹

Thus, our focus text falls within this general thematic context of the teachings on wealth, detachment and the right use of wealth and is literarily connected to the general flow of material discussing these themes, especially within the journey narrative section. Having carried out this more general task, we must now pay particular attention to our focus text for the purposes of the interpretation of the salient points therein.

LUKE 18:18-30 AND ITS SYNOPTIC PARALLELS

It must be restated here that the pericopé in focus belongs to the three-source tradition, with parallels in Mark 10:17-30 and Matt 19:16-30.¹⁰ My choice of the Lucan text was primarily determined by the fact that Luke 18:18-30 falls squarely within the thematic ambience of the Lucan discussion on wealth and materialism. Also, the few but salient redactional touches by the evangelist betray this relationship. That the evangelist decided to stay faithful to his Markan source is itself an important redaction-critical move, when one takes the fact that Luke also addresses the rich members of his community extensively on the proper use of material wealth, much more than one finds in the other gospels.¹¹ As C. M. Hays correctly points out, “the Third Gospel’s wealth ethics are some of the most demanding in the Bible.”¹² And 18:18-30 is one of the longest single treatments of an ethical issue in the gospels.¹³ In those ethical injunctions, the evangelist made the effort to reflect the sentiments of the disciples of Jesus and his own community, difficult as this task may have been. For, as Daniel J. Harrington rightly points out in one of his homilies, “one of Luke’s goals in writing his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles was to encourage the rich Christians in his community to attend to the needs of the poor members and to share their material goods with them.”¹⁴

⁸ Philips, “Reading Recent Readings,” 239; citing Robert Karris, “Missionary Community: A New Paradigm for the Study of Luke-Acts,” *CBQ* (1979b: 41): 80-97.

⁹ Philips, “Reading Recent Readings,” reviews these and many more exhaustively in his article.

¹⁰ Without burdening the discussion with arguments on synoptic relations, suffice to note that: “All synoptic Gospels have this episode and it is well accepted that this story is from the Markan tradition. The Lukan version essentially follows Mark 10:17-30, except for some slight differences” (Yan Yang, “The Rich Ruler (Luke 18:18-30) and Chreia Rhetorical Practice in Roman Empire-Luke’s Strategy to Exhort the Rich *Ordo* in Roman Society,” in *Asia Journal of Theology* (2012:26.1): 3-28, here 4.

¹¹ The few redaction-critical variations observable in the Luke’s version are very significant and have shaped the interpretation of the text in the past, as far back as the time of Origen. See the detailed discussions of such influences in Petri Luomanen’s “Where Did Another Rich Man Come From? The Jewish-Christian Profile of the Story About a Rich Man in the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’ (Origen, Comm. In Matth 15:14,” in *Vigiliae Christianae* [Aug., 2003: 57]: 243-75, esp. 251-55).

¹² Christopher M. Mays, “Hating Wealth and Wives? An Examination of Discipleship Ethics in the Third Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* (2009:60.1): 47-68, here 67.

¹³ Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of Luke* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland: The Columbia Press, 2010), 407.

¹⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, “Rich and Poor,” in *America* (2007: September 24): 31.

Luke's decision to include this story in his work is also both in tandem with his reversal of fortunes motif, and challenging to his openness to the entry of the rich into the kingdom (cf. 19:1-10).

Also important of note is that the popular title for the pericopé, the "Rich Young Ruler," is not found in any one of the traditions by itself. All three gospels agree that he was a rich man. It is Matthew who calls him a young man and Luke who identifies him as a ruler; both adjustments of Mark's presentation of a "certain man."

Literary Structure of Luke 18:18-30

- (a) Jesus and the Ruler (18-23)
- (b) Jesus' instruction to his disciples (24-27)
- (c) Jesus promises disciples a hundredfold reward (28-30)

Analysis and Interpretation of Luke 18:18-30¹⁵

- (a) Jesus and the Ruler (18-23)

18:18 introduces the discussion, followed with the insertion of a new character into the story, a ruler, who approaches Jesus with a question; one that was similar to the question in 10:25 from the lawyer. Same answer is found here as was given by Jesus in response to the identical question in 10:25; yet different context, since 10:25ff. was used as setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus' teaching on the love of neighbor.

The conjunction *kai* at the beginning of 18:18 closely links what follows to the previous episode, where Jesus prescribed childlike humility and innocence as qualities for entry into the kingdom of heaven.¹⁶ However, here there will be additional prescriptions or demands regarding entry into the kingdom of God.

The ruler addresses Jesus respectfully and directly here. The participle use of *poiēō* in the ruler's question may be translated: "By doing what will I inherit eternal life?"¹⁷ The young man wanted to know if the good things that he did fulfilled God's requirements.¹⁸ That is the sense of the deliberative future *klēronomēsō*. Luke identifies the addresser as one of the rulers or leaders of the Jews; an identity that is slightly different from his synoptic parallels. Luke's presentation of the man as a rich ruler (different from the other synoptic gospels) establishes "a marked contrast with the children of the previous story. The children are the epitome of powerlessness and vulnerability; this man is rich and powerful."¹⁹ While it is difficult for the rich and powerful to

¹⁵ The burden of detailed grammatical, syntactical and exegetical analysis would be left to the many who have mined this text so successfully. We shall concentrate on areas of the text that are more salient for the purposes of this conference. Y. Yang offers us one of such resources in his redaction-critical, literary and rhetorical treatment of the passage ("The Rich Ruler," 4-15). See also, David E. Garland, *Luke, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 3 (ed. Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 710-36.

¹⁶ Note the clitic *tiv* from double accenting of *epērōtēsen*. See Culy, *Luke*, 574.

¹⁷ Culy, *Luke*, 574. Cyril of Alexandria remarks that the Rich man's question was flattery with fraud and deceit (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke, Homily 122*, ACCS 283).

¹⁸ Matthew E. Carlton, *The Translator's Reference Translation of the Gospel of Luke* (Dallas, TX: International Academic Book Store, 2008), 348.

¹⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds., Amy Plantings Panas and William C. Plancher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 216.

enter the kingdom of God, that same kingdom was just presented as the inheritance of the little ones.

18:19. Jesus' response begins by addressing the form of address used by the ruler before taking on the question put before him. Jesus' response should not be turned into a moral evaluation of Jesus, even though the ruler may have used "Good" in his address in a moral sense.²⁰ There is also no necessity to theologize the word "good" the way that Carlton did when he noted: "Since only God is good (v. 19), by addressing Jesus as good he is unknowingly implying that Jesus is God."²¹ Such a theological reading may not even be necessary here. Was Jesus' response an act of humility like a tax collector in 18:9-14? L. T. Johnson notes that Jesus refutes the title "good teacher" in order to not to be carried away by human praise; praise that is meant for God alone as the source of all life and goodness.²² Is Jesus not good? Is Jesus denying any attributes that belong only to God? Jesus' response prepares him for the presentation of the commandments as he "first draws the attention away from himself to 'the one who is good,'" the one addressed in the *Shema*, the daily prayer of the Jews: "listen, O Israel, the Lord our God is One" (Deut 6:4).²³ The notion of God as good is copiously attested in the Psalms (53:6; 72:1; 134:3; 135:1 117:1-4, 29). "Jesus' counter-statement concerning God's goodness thus not only echoes an important scriptural motif but also serves notice that the terms of this interaction will be set out by the standard values to which the ruler has already paid homage."²⁴

18:20. Verse 20 lists the commandments using prohibitive injunctions. Only one, *tima*, is rendered in the imperative with *ton patera* and *tēn mētera* as direct objects. If God only is good, it becomes proper to start the review from the commandments given by God (See Exod 20:1-17 and Deut 5:6-22).²⁵

It must be noted here as in the story with the parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus' intention when he opened the discussion up by evoking the Old Testament commandments was not to invalidate or nullify them. Jesus always affirmed the permanent value of the law but invited the disciple to the righteousness of excess that focused more so on God's grace as the source of the blessing that attends to a generous response to the invitation to discipleship.²⁶ Apart from the slight variation at the beginning of the list, all three evangelists have an identical order of presentation. While Matthew and Mark have *phoneuō* at the head of the list, Luke has *moicheuō*;

²⁰ Carlton, *Luke*, 348.

²¹ Carlton, *Luke*, 348. *oudeis* is nominative subject of verbless equative clause. *agathos* is the predicate adjective of a verbless equative clause. *Ei mē* following *oudeis* - except. Note that *ho Theon* is a nominative in apposition to *eis*, with the implied object *estin agathos*.

²² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina, 3; Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 276. In a certain sense, Jesus points out here that all goodness and also the goodness of Jesus himself comes from God (W. R. Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century* (India: Theological Publications, 1998), 1492.

²³ Mullins, *Luke*, 407.

²⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans, 1997), 655. Already in the Early Church, Augustine gave a Trinitarian interpretation of the goodness of God in order to accommodate Jesus' own goodness (Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity* 8, in ACCS 283).

²⁵ Carlton, *Luke*, 349. So politically biased is the interpretation of the commandment not to kill by Carlton that he actually notes: "God forbids unlawful killing, not killing in war or capital punishment." Is he reflecting the sense of the Old Testament reading of the law or merely betraying his Southern American Christian bias, i.e., a Texas bias?

²⁶ See Gouzalez, *Luke*, 117-18. See also Green, *Luke*, 655.

and while Matthew uses the negative particle *ou*, Luke preserves Mark's use of the more forceful negative particle *mē*.

18:21. The ruler's response, affirming compliance, noted that all the commandments listed had been carefully observed, with emphasis on *tauta panta*.²⁷ Hence, the one who has kept (*ephulaxa*) all the commands is himself kept from, held back from or imprisoned (*phulakē*) by God. The use of the verb *phulassō* here instead of the usual *tēreō* carries the "nuance of careful obedience," much more than just keeping.²⁸

18:22. The threefold response of Jesus---go, sell and come---to the ruler was quite clear as constitutive of the one more thing required of him. The outcomes are also clearly stated. All benefit. The poor will be blessed.²⁹ The ruler will inherit heaven. A note must be made here of Luke's avoidance of Mark 10:21, which suggested that Jesus gazed at the man with love. Instead, Luke smoothens the conversation by presenting Jesus as having listened to the man (maybe intently) or having heard him out (the force of the participle), he went on to address him. The fronting of the subject in *Eti hen soi leipei* ... "lends force to the statements" – "One thing is still lacking for you."³⁰ Again, the fronting of the object in *panta hosa echeis* also makes "the statement more forceful."³¹

The locative use of *en tois ouranois* in this verse unites the concept of entry into the kingdom with the inheritance of eternal life in 18:18. An ancient notion of having treasures in heaven (Prov 19:17) comes alive here. Treasure is also equated to eternal life. The visible presence of that inheritance is the person of Jesus, hence the invitation that follows: "come follow me" (Matt 13:44-46; Luke 12:22-34).

Deuro, a directional adverb meaning "here" but often used like an imperative verb – "come here," together with *akoloutheō*, configure the invitation to the true character of the gospel call to discipleship found in 5:28.³² "This command is not for everyone who is rich, but for everyone who has the same problem that the rich man had (See Luke 12:33); the obsessive love of possessions. Jesus knew that the man loved his possessions more than he loved God. By telling the man to sell all his possession and give the money away, Jesus is trying to make him think about his priorities and realize that his relationship with God will not be right/good until God is his number one priority (See Matt 6:33)."³³ The injunctions regarding the right relationship with God are contained in the first part of the Decalogue, which is not included in the list presented. Yet what is left out is actually where Jesus' invitation would lead; where the rich ruler would rather not go.³⁴ In context, what is lacking for him is to become like one of the powerless little

²⁷ *tauta panta* here is the accusative direct object of *ephulaxa*.

²⁸ See Culy, *Luke*, 392. The explicit statement "I have kept all these commandments" is a required translation here, instead of 'I have done all these things' because the commandments were mainly stated as negative prohibitions. *ek neotētos* is used in a temporary sense here.

²⁹ Even though the scope of "poor" remains undefined, scholars have argued that some of such benefits were actually directed toward people who became impoverished because of their confession of the Christian faith (see Philips, "Reading Recent Readings," 239; citing W. Schmithals, "Lucas-Evangelist der Armen," in *Theologia Viatorum* (1973-1974:14) 153-167, esp. 164-65.

³⁰ See Culy, *Luke*, 576. *soi* dative of disadvantage.

³¹ Culy, *Luke*, 576.

³² Culy, *Luke*, 576.

³³ Carlton, *Luke*, 350.

³⁴ Stanley, "The Rich Young Ruler," 52.

children of the preceding story. It is a call to discipleship like the one issued to the first four disciples and Levi at the beginning of the gospel. They left everything and followed Jesus.³⁵

The one who has kept all these things still has one thing left. Personalized, the text should read: “Only one thing still remains in your case.”³⁶ And then follows the instruction from Jesus. It is important to note the difference from the encounter in the Zacchaeus episode. Notable also is the contrast between the *One thing* that is left undone and all these things that he has observed.³⁷ To fail to meet Jesus’ demand signals lack of the love of neighbor on the side of the rich ruler, and consequently lack of the love of God (cf. 1 John 4:20). He was after all not as obedient as he thought, and that was saddening enough.³⁸ Referring to the Markan encounter where we are told that Jesus loved the rich ruler, Stanley also notes that the one thing that “the rich ruler lacked was taken up by Jesus Himself, worded elsewhere as ‘love of your neighbor as yourself’ (cf. Luke 10:27).”³⁹ Although love of neighbor is only part of the demand made by Jesus in our focus pericopé (marked by the beneficiaries of the ruler’s sale), the main connection here is the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor.

18:23. The Sadness of the rich ruler is the expression of disappointment; a transformation into sadness that is signaled in the combined use of *perilupos* and *egenēthē*.⁴⁰ The great sadness of the ruler may also be linked to 12:34, where Jesus noted that: “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Thus the “ruler’s extreme wealth keeps his heart earth-bound.” He’ll not have heavenly treasure.⁴¹ In a certain sense, “his possessions possessed him.” Instead of experiencing the joy of the kingdom, love became exceedingly distressed because he was exceedingly rich.⁴² Luke does not remark that the man left as the reader finds in both Mark and Matthew, a possible reflection of the economic situation of some in Luke’s community, just like Paul and the Corinthians. “Having the ruler listening to Jesus’ words would prefigure what would be the reality of Luke’s church, where the poor and the not so poor would listen to the gospel together.”⁴³

³⁵ Mullins, *Luke*, 408.

³⁶ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 313.

³⁷ Worthy of note here is “the radical nature of the call that Jesus addressed to the ruler.” Philips remarks that that the radical nature has been so “frequently overlooked that the particularly disconcerting element, ‘sell all that you have and distribute to the poor,’ is not a stray note that finds its way into Luke’s description of Jesus only in this one stance. Rather, it is thoroughly consistent with Luke’s general description of Jesus” (Philips, “Reading Recent Readings,” 235; citing R. J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 27.

³⁸ Stanley, “The Rich Young Ruler,” 52-53.

³⁹ Stanley, “The Rich Young Ruler,” 55.

⁴⁰ There are two different levels of responses to Jesus’ demand: the Ruler’s and Bystanders’. *Akousas panta* compliments *akousas*... *ho Iēsous* in verse 22. *perilupos* is predicate adjective. *egenēthē* - Aor. mid. ind. 3rd sing *ginomai*.

⁴¹ Gundry, *Commentary*, 313. Barr (“The Eye of the Needle,” 36) likens the situation of the man possessed by his wealth to demon-possession.

⁴² Mullins, *Luke*, 408. Despite the efforts made by exegetes to get past the difficulty of the text, we must accept the obvious that, as David Hart (“The Needle’s Eye,” in *First Things* [February 2012]: 70-73, here 71), correctly stated, “the episode of the young ruler is wholly lacking in the sort of exegetical ambiguities that might allow for reassuring evasions of that sort. Simply said, Jesus was not terribly encouraging about the spiritual condition---or prospects---of the rich”.

⁴³ Gonzalez, *Luke*, 216-17.

(b) Jesus' instruction to his disciples (24-27)

18:24. Now, Jesus looks at the man, the one transformed into sadness (see the inclusion of *perilupon genomenon* in some manuscript traditions) and begins to speak. Rather than addressing the rich sad man directly, Jesus would turn away from him and address a general audience, inclusive of his disciples and everyone listening, and even the rich sad man, since Luke does not mention that he departed.

18:25. *gar*--- the conjunction strengthens the preceding statement made by Jesus in what follows. Note the double use of *eiselthein*. A literal reading of the text translates “impossible” even while accepting that Jesus employed hyperbolic language here. Such a literal interpretation is supported by Carlton and others.⁴⁴

Regarding the interpretation of the eye of the needle, some have seen it as referring to a gate in the city wall that was a passage for animals and through which a camel would usually have great difficulty getting through. Nice as that sounds, we must take seriously the objection of the exegetes who see such interpretations as attempts to soften Jesus' statement. Jesus meant impossible and not difficulty, according to Gonzales⁴⁵ (an opening for the protestant theology of Grace). Thus, “Riches can be a diriment impediment to entry into the kingdom.”⁴⁶ David B. Hart simply notes that “there was no such gate, and camels are not that nimble...” The lesson imparted by Jesus is both “uncompromisingly severe” and unseemly radical, and even a mild adjustment as the Calvinist submission that it is a *metaphorical* expression of the “impossibility of anyone fulfilling the requirements of the law and of the need, therefore, for reliance upon faith”⁴⁷ is unsatisfactory. For, “the tension of this radical text resists resolution in any way that removes its pressure on all disciples relative to wealth.”⁴⁸

The traditional biblical remedy for wealth was to use it for good purposes, such as the relief of poverty. In biblical thought, the good person prospers and becomes a benefactor, “making friends with the mammon of iniquity, ensuring a welcome in the kingdom from the recipients of one's generosity (16:9; Job 1:1-5; 29:1-25; Deut 28:1-14; Job 1:10; 42:10 & Prov. 10:22).”⁴⁹

18:26. The rhetorical question in response to what they have just heard betrays bewilderment. Also the question moves the meaning of Jesus' statement from the realm of difficulty to the

⁴⁴ Carlton, *Luke*, 350.

⁴⁵ Gonzales, *Luke*, 219.

⁴⁶ Mullins, *Luke*, 409. Suggestions that the eye of the needle was a gate in the walls of Jerusalem through which large animals like Carmel passed with great difficulty, or seeing the word *kamēlon* (camel) as a mistake and correcting it to read *kamilon* (Rope), as in some manuscripts, serves only to rob the hyperbole of its powerful effects. As Gundry notes, “Contrary to some modern interpretations, there was no narrow gate in Jerusalem called ‘the eye of the needle;’ nor do the rest manuscripts have ‘a rope’ instead of a ‘Carmel’.” Entry into the kingdom by the rich is not described as “not almost impossible or even entirely impossible, but more than impossible” (Gundry, *Commentary*, 314). The tradition of the thick cable goes back to Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 123 in *Ancient Christian commentary on Scripture: Luke*, 284. Ambrose notes that Camel represents the Gentiles and the Publicans (Ambrose, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 8:70-72*, in ACCS, 284). For a survey of some of the other interpretations that struggled with this difficulty, see Joseph H. Hellerman, “Wealth and Sacrifice in Early Christianity: Revisiting Mark's Presentation of Jesus' Encounter with the Rich Young Ruler,” *Trinity Journal* (Fall 2000:21.2) 143-64.

⁴⁷ Hart, “The Needle's Eye,” 72.

⁴⁸ Barr, “The Eye of a Needle,” 42.

⁴⁹ Mullins, *Luke*, 409; Gundry, *Commentary*, 313.

realm of impossibility – why? Everyone probably has some treasure that is disruptive to the total response demanded by Jesus. So the question follows: who then can be saved?⁵⁰ The force of the hyperbole fully comes alive with this question. For as Stanley notes, the evangelical purpose of the choice of language by Jesus already yields some of the desired outcomes because of the realization that Jesus’ point of reference was a redirection of the readers’ or listeners’ attention to the fact that salvation is a gift of God and not totally dependent on human actions.⁵¹ But even such a notion is at best one more exegetical escape route.

The ancient Jewish belief and assumption that wealth was a sign of blessing and God’s approval (See Psalm 128, Prov 10:22) actually clarifies the *raison d’être* of the question. Such a view would put the people’s question in better light. For if the rich, whom they were taught, were blessed and approved by God have difficulty entering God’s kingdom, then what happens to others, especially the poor. It was conventional and taken for granted that rich people more were “likely to go to heaven than the poor people.”⁵² This belief and assumption may also explain the surprise and “incredulity” of the disciples.⁵³

Both responses to Jesus – that of the rich leader and that of the by-standers emanate from this common “theology that posits a relationship between divine blessing and the possession of power, privilege and material possessions.”⁵⁴ This is attested both in the literatures of Israel and in Judaism (Deut 8:8; 28:1-14 Psalm 112:3 Prov 13:18).⁵⁵

18:27. One more point of view will be presented here. From the point of view of humans, it is impossible but not for God.⁵⁶ The movement from difficulty to impossibility in the last verse has Jesus introducing the realm of the divine for whom impossibilities do not exist. More like, I am not saying you are damned because you are rich – God can save you. That impossibilities do not exist with God, brings the issue of the possibility of salvation for the rich back to the realm of difficulty because “God can get the camel through the eye of the needle, so to speak. He can do what people cannot do. He can get a rich person—and in fact any person—into the kingdom (cf. Luke 19:1-10).”⁵⁷

It is important to note here that protestant scholars have been very receptive to Jesus’ affirmation here as it focuses on what God is able to do rather than on what human beings or human effort can accomplish. They often link it to their theology of grace and faith, citing Rom 3:10-12, 23, 27-28; Eph 2:8-9 and Gal 3:24.⁵⁸

(c) Jesus promises disciples a hundredfold reward (28-30)

⁵⁰ *Hoi akousantes* is used substantively. Here the complementary infinitive *sōthēnai* is synonym for inheriting or entering the kingdom.

⁵¹ Stanley, “The Rich Young Ruler,” 51.

⁵² Carton, *Luke*, 351.

⁵³ Steve Barr, “The Eye of the Needle---Power and Money in the New Community: A Look at Mark 10:17-31,” *Andover Newton Review* (Winter, 1990:1.2):31-44 (36).

⁵⁴ Green, *Luke*, 657.

⁵⁵ See Stanley’s brief treatment of this belief in his “The Rich Young Ruler,” 56-57.

⁵⁶ *Para anthrōpois* and *para tō Theō* contrasts and emphasizes viewpoints. The phrases may be read as “Whose view point is relevant to an event or, in the sight of, or in the opinion of, in the judgment of” (Culy, *Luke*, 578). Note also that the word formation here closely: *adunata* versus *dunata*, and *para anthrōpois* versus *para tō Theō*.

⁵⁷ Stanley, “The Rich Young Ruler,” 49.

⁵⁸ See Carlton, *Luke*, 348.

18:28. Some need reassurances here and now. Peter speaks up on behalf of those who have supposedly obeyed the instruction that the rich man could not comply with, albeit, under different calculations.⁵⁹ Commenting on Peter's question, A. P. Stanley notes that Peter's question was a natural one as he recalled the instruction to the rich ruler. "Perhaps," he notes, "they wondered if Jesus would tell them that they yet lacked one thing. Peter's statement, rather than reflecting arrogance, actually reflects the disciples' sense of insecurity at this point of their own salvation."⁶⁰

This discussion with Peter is no less challenging than the previous discussion with the rich young ruler. In a certain sense, the disciples made the same mistake that the rich man had made, in putting forward their credentials to merit the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' response to Peter moves the discussion from the realm of merit to the realm of grace in a certain sense – Note the hyperbolic nature of the demand on Peter here, and even the demand that was made earlier on the Rich Ruler. Both point beyond themselves to the core lesson of the demand: God is not only first but over and above all, and nothing must stand in the way of human response to the invitation to the kingdom; not even personal matters. The encounter falls squarely within the constant warning on the danger of riches and such a warning must be re-echoed in our churches daily in times when the gospel of prosperity (or crown/victory gospel) is the order of the day.

18:29. Without confirming Peter's claim, Jesus gives a list of what the possible obstacles are in human and material resources⁶¹ with the characteristic *amēn legō humin*, which signals a "strong affirmation of what is stated" (introducing a statement of very high importance, and here it is equal to Jesus' response to the rich ruler in 18:22).⁶² Note Jesus' use of *aphiēmi* to match Peter's question in the last verse. The use here is figurative and therefore not an encouragement to leave family or abdicate family responsibilities. See Jesus' recommendation of renunciation of the self, in another instance, to underscore this figurative import (Matt 10:37-39; 16:24-28; Luke 9:23-27; 14:25-27).

18:30. What is given up is given back a hundred fold and over now, and eternal life in the life to come: New family, new inheritance. The double negative in 18:30 underscores the certainty of this reassurance.⁶³ Yet this must not be translated into a gospel of prosperity – give so that you may become wealthier.⁶⁴ There is need for caution here though, as the "note of the grace sounded by Jesus in 18:30 should be taken seriously. This is not salvation by 'works'; it is salvation by trusting completely in Jesus alone. The young ruler was to give up his confidence in riches and to place his confidence in Jesus."⁶⁵

The entire section concludes on a joyful note, contrary to the rich young ruler's sadness and the people's amazement. Jesus' last words return to the ruler's question: "the ruler, still present

⁵⁹ *idou* - highlights the importance of *aphentes*, another participle, which points to the understanding that following Jesus involves a daily leaving behind all that hinder the proper response. *ta idia* "our own things." Note manuscript variations please. Some have – "everything we own." They left everything we are told in Luke 5:11. Peter acts as spokesman for all.

⁶⁰ Stanley, "The Rich Young Ruler," 50.

⁶¹ See Greens discussion in *Luke*, 656-59.

⁶² BDAG 53:1; Culy, *Luke*, 579

⁶³ Carlton, *Luke*, 352.

⁶⁴ See Gonzalez, *Luke*, 219.

⁶⁵ Stanley, "The Rich Young Ruler," 57.

despite his negative response to the call to discipleship has now heard the answer to his question thrice. Those who would inherit life in the future must enter the Kingdom of God in the present, following Jesus as he adopts the unconventional construction of human relationship, peculiar to God's salvific project, valuing the poor as though they were one's own family."⁶⁶

Implications and Pastoral Application

One of the main reasons that I think this conference chose this topic is that the influence of wealth and prosperity gospel on our church is changing the faces of our parishes, pastoral work and ministers. Such changes include the stratification of parishioners according to socio-economic endowments, the maintenance of life styles that are counter-productive to the very purpose of the good news and the neglect of the core values of the gospel message and ecclesial mandate. Such phenomena manifest themselves as necessary corollaries of wealth and prosperity by association. For as Christopher Hays correctly points out, "consumptive patterns delimit boundaries between socio-economic classes" and "postmodern social fragmentation and diversification had led individuals to establish identity through belonging to much smaller social sub groups."⁶⁷ Riches and wealth attract. Such attractions create new and sometimes special identities, which re-stratify and draw new lines in society (in the church); these new definitions of boundaries usually leave the poor in the margins.⁶⁸ The rich then rule under the pastoral watch of the newly aligned minister. The poor just stand by and watch. Jesus challenges us to redistrict the community in such a way that the common dignity of all children of God is preserved and enabled. Part of this initiative must include the adjustment of church budgets to accommodate "social initiatives or even missions work that is attuned to justice issues."⁶⁹ It is a huge challenge but one that we must take head on if we are to reverse the tide.

The one important lesson that we must learn from this episode as well as other episodes where Jesus engages the rich and powerful, especially in 19:1-10, is Jesus' objectives. The goals of such engagements were obvious. The first objective was the concern for the salvation of the individual on the other side of the encounter. The second was his concern for the poor, who were the beneficiaries of the voluntary dispossession of the rich. Such objectives are lacking in present day gospels of prosperity, whose only goal is to milk those engaged for the interest of the church, more importantly, for the selfish interest of individual pastors and ministers.

While it is true that "renunciation of wealth" is a viable form of discipleship, the kind to which the rich young ruler was called, it must always be stated clearly that the "generous use" of wealth, at least in Luke's view, is an equally "viable" form of discipleship. In either case, the beneficiaries are those who have been cheated through the sharp practices of the rich.⁷⁰ In both cases, the demands are equally compelling.

⁶⁶ Green, *Luke*, 659

⁶⁷ Hays, "Beyond Mint and Rue," 393. Note his explication of this assertion: "An individual manifests group belonging by adopting the lifestyle of the group through consuming a conglomeration of goods, such as shoes, music hairstyles, or cars."

⁶⁸ Hays, "Beyond Mint and Rue," 395-96.

⁶⁹ See Hays, "Beyond Mint and Rue," 396.

⁷⁰ Christopher M. Hays, "Hating Wealth and Wives? An Examination of Discipleship Ethics in the Third Gospel," in *Tyndale Bulletin* (2009:60.1), 47-68 (47).

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