

**THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN  
AND LAZARUS (LUKE 16.19-31) TO NIGERIA CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

Umeokoli, Paul Okechukwu  
Department of Religion and Human  
Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka, Anambra State

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**Abstract**

*Poverty is among the major challenges confronting Nigeria, despite the fact that Nigeria is endowed with great (human and materials) potentials that is capable of making it a poverty free nation yet huge number of Nigeria live in poverty level. It is sad that the economy of the country is mired with multiple problems, to the extent that the widespread of economic crisis and global economic meltdown deprive the country opportunity to raise the standard of living of its citizens to an appreciable height or the standard of living match with the potentials. The increasing incidence of poverty in Nigeria is fuelled by a lot of factors like inequality, social strata and social structure. It is against this background that the paper seeks to exegete the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) and applies the message of the parable to alleviating the problem of poverty in Nigeria. The paper also reviews that huge number of citizens live in abject poverty while very few are starkly rich. The social interaction shows that the poor are treated with great abandonment from their rich fold. The paper therefore recommends that the rich and highly placed persons in the Nigerian society should abhor any action that will treat the poor with neglect and oppression, intensify caring ministry and biblical reorientation.*

**Introduction**

The increasing incidence of poverty in Nigeria in spite of several efforts used by a range of poverty-related programmes and schemes to avert poverty is really an irony. It is paradox in the sense that Nigeria is endowed with great potentials (human and materials) that is capable of making it a poverty-free nation yet a huge number of Nigerians live in poverty level while very few are flamboyantly rich.

This is a problem that needs to be addressed. Poverty is never idealized. It should be alleviated because marginalization and oppression can turn people away from

the Lord, but wealth tends to do even more as people think they can independently supply all their own needs thereby act in such a manner that can bring about dehumanization, injustice and oppression.

To delve into the above, the social-gap that exists between the poor and the rich in Nigeria will be interrogated. It will also investigate the neglect and exploitation that is meted on the poor and vulnerable citizens of Nigeria. It will encourage the government and non-governmental organizations not to overlook the plight of the poor in Nigeria and seek for spiritual, financial and moral solutions to the problems of poverty and social injustice poverty in Nigeria. With the aforementioned the plight of the poor in Nigeria is believed to change for better and social interaction between the rich and the poor improved.

### **Definition of Terms: the Poor and the Rich**

#### **The Rich**

People define being rich in many ways. And most of the definition gear towards having goods, property, and money in abundance, which implies having more than enough to gratify ones normal needs or desires. Okediadi (2010) defines the being rich as the sufficiently or the availability of resources while Stall (2010) on his part defines the term as one who lives in affluence, plenty and ostentatious. Clarke (2007) sees the term “rich” as not necessarily being buoyant but the availability of the basic necessities of life. Against this backdrop, one can easily say that to be rich is to have an abundance of material possessions, enjoying a large of property, well supplied with land, goods or money; wealthy, opulent, affluent and in general, a well-supplied, copious, bountiful, a rich treasury and a quality or state of being wealthy.

#### **The Poor**

The poor are those who lack sufficient money to live at considered comfortable or normal life in a society. Poverty is about not having enough money to meet basic needs including food, clothing and shelter. However, poverty is more, much more than just not having enough money. Okonkwo (2015) defines the term “poor” as being in lack or insufficiency of either social, spiritual or material resources. Hornby (2008) defines it as not having enough money for basic needs. Harris (2014) defines it as one who deserves pity and sympathy. Clarke (2007) defines it as a quality that is low or lower than expected. Among other things, to be poor encompasses both the social, spiritual, and material insufficiency.

According to Jensen (2001) there are six main types of poverty which include: situational, generational, absolute, relative, urban and rural. These categories of poverty show that a state of being poor is occasioned by a number of factors. It can hit anyone at any time. While some instances of poverty are created by situations, others are trapped in poverty because of the generation before. Poverty of this nature can be just continue the vicious cycle and bring the entire family down into a deep hole. It is based on this fact that this study advocates that the poor should be helped to survive instead of being oppressed.

### **The Socio-Economic World of Luke**

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), cannot be studied in isolation from Greco-Roman world. The survey of the socio-economic background of Luke reviews that Luke portrays a picture of Greco-Roman world as that of unjust dichotomy of very few rich and a large population of poor who live little above hungry line, together with its gross exploitation and injustice. A world of very few wealthy elites who have great wealth and whose wealth gives them great power, but the majority of the population suffer from degrees of abject poverty and marginalization. A world characterized as a period of extreme inequality in terms of its socio-economic conditions. A world where the over-populated low class was subjected to frequent exploitation through high taxation by the few elites. A world whose socio-economic system supports the broad inequality between the rich and the poor so that the rich get deliberately richer while the poor get poorer and have no control of environment. A world where the rich display their wealth always through feasting, eating, drinking and clothing and a world where the elites and the poor live in ghettos with little or no traffic between them.

Such society was marked with exploitation of the poor, and ostentation, the conspicuous or vulgar display of wealth and success, especially designed to impress people. Luke, however, pictures Jesus as social reformer whose mission is to fight against this socio-economic disorder. With this in mind, one can understand why the materials on poor and possession run like thread in the gospel of Luke and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in particular.

### **Nigerian Socio-Economic System**

Poverty remains significant as one of the major challenges in Nigeria. As the one of the world's highest economic growth rate, Nigeria still remains one of the world's poorest nation (Nigeria Economic Report 2014). For a country with massive wealth and a huge population to support commerce, a well-developed

economy, and plenty of natural resources such as oil, the level of poverty remains unacceptable.

Nigeria is known for having one of the more affluent economies in Africa; a large oil drilling industry ensures that the country has a consistent revenue stream. But the lives of people in Nigeria reflect poverty rather than affluence. Nweke (2006) maintains that an estimated 67percent of the population, that is one hundred and twenty four million, six hundred and twenty thousand (124,620,000) people live without sufficient means to support themselves and their families. Again, Nigeria has a current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) worth of 405.10 billion dollars, and represents more than half of a percent of the world economy, yet majority of its citizens are poor (Harris, 2014). Yemi (2016) reports that in addition to the Nigeria economy being on the rise, the figure for citizens living in absolute poverty has also risen from 12.3% from 54.7%in 2004. Despite the fact that the Nigerian economy is growing, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty is increasing every year.

Nigeria's Bureau of public service reform urged attention to a housing shortage in the country that left over one hundred and eight (108) million Nigerians homeless in 2006; yet there are one hundred (100,000) houses built yearly in the country, but with hundreds of million homeless and living in poverty, this is insufficient to support the nation's needs. While facts about poverty in Nigeria illustrate how the country makes most of its money from its oil sector, the nation has unfortunately become overly dependent on this single industry. Due to this reliance, other areas of the economy that host a majority of available jobs in agriculture, palm oil production and coconut processing are in decline.

Nigerians have one of the fastest growing populations in the world and this has overburdened the government in adequately taking care of its terming populace. This is most apparent in the north of the country with an estimated poverty rate near 86% (Kale, 2018).

Though poverty is one of the major challenges facing Nigeria both past and present, as noted above, yet social interaction between the rich and the poor is nothing to write home about. Nigeria is a nation of a widening gulf between very few wealthy and numerous citizens living far below poverty level. The rich people in Nigeria context are prototypes of the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 and they are comprises of the following as enumerated by Ottuh (2014):

1. Those who own big companies but pay workers peanuts as salaries.
2. Those who are in the seat of political and economic powers but do not care about how the resources of the nation can be used in such a way that the poor can benefit.
3. Those who increase school fees indiscriminately thereby depriving the poor from attaining education.
4. Those who monopolize all businesses leaving no room for the poor to gain access to any meaningful business to better their lots.
5. Those who hijacked all enabling environment for business and academic leaving the poor at the periphery.

The poor in Nigeria context are consist of the following:

1. School drop outs due to incessant increment of school fees in government Universities which their parents or sponsors could not afford.
2. The unemployed who roam the street with his degree certificate.
3. The under-paid employee who generates huge amount of money for his employer yet under-paid.
4. The orphans, widows and widowers whose' benefactors left some resources for but such resources have been taken away from them by the highly placed in the family but cannot afford justice.
5. The retrenched and out of job persons who go hungry without any hope of one meal a day.
6. The lowly placed person who does not have any godfather at the top and thereby having no hope of gaining any access to resources that can better his lot.
7. The sick and physically challenged who struggle for survival through begging for alms.
8. The brilliant child of the poor parents whose child cannot gain access to scholarship to fulfill his academic and professional dreams.
9. The child who has become a street and high way vendor of commodities due to lack of free education.

The problem is not that few Nigerians are rich and numerous Nigerians poor, but the rich control the affairs or the destinies of the poor populace with little or no interest in the betterment of the poor and their social systems. These categories of poor people are not really lazy, they are trying to work hard to make ends meet yet they get it very difficult to get out of poverty due to lack of enabling environment. Many of such people suffer in the hand of the rich.

Ezeokafor (2008) in like manner, pictures the socio-economic and social system of this Nigeria thus:

Poverty has made many Nigerians to lose their sense of self-worth and self-confidence. This is troubling. Many of the poor people have been beaten by the harsh economic climate to the point of settling for anything, so long as it keeps life going. Hunger, frustration, and hardship can turn a very promising young man or woman into an angry fellow who has little or no value for himself or herself. The way many of them adore the rich will immediately tell you how poverty has changed their orientation in life (p.3).

The parable should therefore be a challenge every rich Christian must not neglect in Nigeria. They should not be selfish with our wealth but must learn to care for those who are poor in the family, church and the society at large.

### **Comparative Analysis of Nigeria and Lucan Worlds**

Both the Lucan and Nigerian worlds share a lot of things in common as regard to the social inequality between the rich and the poor. The two worlds appear to be seriously under physical, economic, ethical and political stress. The descriptions of Luke's world are as follows:

1. The world having concern for political world and balance of power in Greco-Roman Palestine.
2. World where eschatological anticipation is rampant because of social stress.
3. World of social status and social stratification.
4. World defined around power and privileged and is measured by a complex of phenomena, religious purity, family heritage, landownership, vocation, ethnicity, gender, education and age.

The situation in Nigeria is slightly different from that of the Lucan Greco-Roman Palestinian world. Aside from their differences, their shared ideas hinges on the inequality that exists between the rich and poor citizens. Their belief on social justice and inequality of status and opportunity based on one's understands that the rich are meant to enjoy a secured maximum welfare; freedom and happiness are the detriment of the poor who are denied these basic rights. Consequently, it was this condition of living that Luke stood to fight. As an apologetic writer, he fought against the unjust dichotomy of the very few rich and a large population

of the poor who live little above the hunger line, together with its gross exploitation and social injustices.

A similar condition is observed in the present day Nigeria and this needs to be addressed. Like the poor in the Lucan world that includes the sick, beggars, lepers, the outcast, widows and likes of them who live at the mercy of the rich, the socio- economic background in Nigeria is almost the same. The economic inequality in Nigeria has reached extreme levels, despite being the largest economy in Africa. The country has an expanding economy with abundant human capital and the economic potentials to lift millions out of poverty yet the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer. Until this is addressed, Nigeria can never be a better place to live.

### **Theological Implication of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) to Nigerian Society**

The parable is not talking about the individual lives of rich man and Lazarus but two figures to represent two groups of the people that existed in the time of Jesus. Hock (1987) opines that "The parable, however, does not merely describe Lazarus and the rich man; it also takes a particular stance toward them and their social world, viewing their poverty and wealth in a specific way" (p.455). With such a detailed depiction, Jesus as Luke puts it, is targeting a certain lifestyle for criticism and is emphasizing the striking contrast between the rich and the poor, a social structure that inflicts pains and suffering in the society. The parable, from the beginning, has the wide gap between the rich and the poor as its major concern and theme.

The parable makes no mention of the moral state of the two characters. Nowhere does it say that the rich man was evil and poor Lazarus was good, or that the rich was an impious unbeliever while Lazarus was a devout believer, however there moral state can be presumed from the parable. The rich man's failure lies in the fact that he did not properly use his wealth to alleviate the suffering of the poor. The haves' surplus property is meant to be shared with the have-nots.

However, the use of wealth is the major theme of Luke 16. Wealth can be a blessing or a curse, depending on whether it is used as a means to exercise power, a tool of self-indulgence or a resource to serve others. Wealth's danger is that it can turn our focus toward our own enjoyment, as Jesus emphasises in the

parable of rich fool (12:13-21) and the rich man in our text (16:19-31). Money is a tool. It is an excellent resource when put to the right use. It can help to build many things of use to others.

But to possess money is also to hold a sacred stewardship. Our resources are not to be privately held and consumed but are to be used as a means of generosity, as a way of showing care for our neighbour, as demonstrated in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and also during the restoration of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) goes beyond the events of the present. The rich man faced the judgment of God when he died and Lazarus entered heaven when he died. This does not mean that poverty is a prerequisite to make heaven nor riches hell. The sin of the rich man was selfish use of wealth. He refused to treat Lazarus sore even though he has the resources to do so. Lazarus presumably was a righteous man irrespective of his poverty. He was pious not really because he was poor but as a person. The rich man on the other hand was not punished for being rich but for not using his riches to bless the poor around him. This is a lesson every rich Christian must learn. Rich Christians should not neglect the plight of the poor who need their helps.

Another message of the parable is unnecessary emphasis on status. The parable attacks the social strata that exist among the rich and poor and emphasis the danger of social gaps among the haves and have-nots. The rich men in the society are being referred to as successful people who have reached the top. For many, wealth is the essence of life. The problem is not that one acquires wealth after all, everybody needs money, the problem is their wealth accords power over the poor. The rich intimidate the poor and therefore make them to keep quiet on occasions where they should speak out against the manipulations and injustices especially by the rich in the society.

The rich man was highly placed in the society. Instead of using their wealth for the benefit of the society, in most cases they turn their wealth and position to dehumanize the poor. This is a lesson every rich and those who are highly positioned public office must also learn. They must use their position to help and protect the poor and the sick people around them. In this context, God does not judge the rich based on their personalities but on their relationship with other people, especially the poor.



Dehumanization of poor people in the Society is another ill which the parable stands to attack. The rich man allowed dogs to lick Lazarus' wounds. It would not have taken much from the rich man to take Lazarus to a hospital. History has it that rich people in Jesus' time have physicians as their slaves. Being that the man in this parable was rich, it is possible he even had a household physician yet he left Lazarus' wounds untreated. The rich and highly placed persons especially those who are Christians should give a human face to fellow human beings especially those who are having affinities with them in one way or the other. Jesus even mentioned that whatever we do to fellow humans is being done for God. Jesus admonishes his disciples that refusal to feed the thirsty and hungry who came to beg for food and water is a sin before God and it is capable of taking one to hell (Matt.25:34-46).

The parable brings into light the importance of care for the poor, the needy and less privilege in the society. Rich Christian must care for the less-privileged in the Church and Society. The contrast is set up from the opening of the account in the parable narrative. The rich man is finely clothed and eats well. The dressing of fine linen and clothes of purple dye and his daily feasts inside his mansion with its own gate imply his wealth; the imagery of purple cloth here was used to describe flamboyant, very expensive dresses and splendour. Linen may allude to expensive undergarments; the two terms together suggest a "power dresser" (Fitzmyer, 1985). The rich man lives like a king (Prov. 31:22; 1 Maccabees 8:14; Gen 20:31). While some people eat heartily and can afford expensive underwear, others have nothing so Lazarus. He is very poor and probably crippled, since he lies down at the gate. If he is not crippled, he is very sick. He is looking for food. Even crumbs will do. His hope of sustenance is alms from the offerings of those who have something. His skin is a snack to lick for the wild dogs that roam the streets. Lazarus wears his poverty's pain on his ulcerated skin-a graphic contrast to the rich man's soft clothes.

The story is told in antithetical pattern, their opposing lives are clear: the rich man has a great life, while the poor man does not. The rich man throws away food; the poor man must scrounge for it. Likewise in Nigeria, some people have nothing, while others have expensive underwear. Observing this scene, it appears as if God has blessed the rich man and the poor man an object of God's judgment. This type of poverty following the Old Testament idea raises the notion that Lazarus must be lazy or sinful and as such paying for his depravity with his destitution. Deeper observation of the narrative shows that Lazarus was incapacitated by sickness and poverty. It means Lazarus cannot even work to

earn money to feed for himself. We were not told if he had a family of his own and even if he had, he cannot take care of them. In this story Lazarus did not speak. His situation is so pathetic that no one would likely hear him if he had spoken. Here is dire need that the rich man could easily meet, even with leftovers. The rich man simply saw Lazarus as a no body and as such he did not care for him even though he had much. Jesus' teaching in this parable shows that God wants rich Christians to care for the less-privileged in the church and in the society at large. This is a challenge every rich Christian must not neglect. The rich should not be selfish with their wealth. They must learn to care for those who are poor.

The parable is eschatological, that is to say that a juxtaposition of the present and the afterlife gives the true picture of real life. Christians must look at life side by side with the consciousness of the present and eschatological aspects of life. People who rely on their earthly wealth are living in the shadows of real life. In as much as God wants us to be rich, He also wants us not to see wealth as the basis of life. The story in question exposes our values as it now considers Lazarus from an eternal perspective. Both the rich man and Lazarus answered the call of death without any regard to their status. Death is a leveller, for both the rich and the poor. Each has a ticket for a permanent destination, one that money cannot buy. Money cannot guarantee one's status in the afterlife. Here, a remarkable reversal has taken place. Now Lazarus is in eternal banquet and the rich man is out of it to eternal damnation. This is known as an eschatological reversal. It is a true rag-to-riches story, only eternal destinies are the prize. Lazarus is by Abraham's side, while the rich man is in dire need of relief, living in torment. The mood of the parable is set by the distance and difference between the two figures. Everything is reversed, and the changes are all very permanent.

Nigerians should heed to the warnings the parable of the rich man and Lazarus tends to convey. This social inequality between the poor and the rich is always displayed in most of the ceremonies. For example the selfish, extravagance and lavish spending in the name of befitting burials should be abhorred. Ezeokafor (2017) calls it unnecessary waste that neither helps the dead nor the surviving relatives. It adds no value to the dead and impoverishes the living. From the narrative the rich man died and was buried signifying all manner of wasteful rainbow colour ceremony of different kinds of uniform while Lazarus died unnoticed, the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich should therefore learn to use their resource to care for living and not waste them burying the dead. What matters is one's final abode not necessarily the kind of funeral

accorded to him. Divine riches do not take notice of earthly wealth or social status. It is a time warning to the rich Christians.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional teaching of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is the right attitude to wealth; concern for social justice and care for the poor, the needy and marginalized. The social stratification which forms the framework of the parable shows Luke's deep concern for the socioeconomic systems of his community with its social polarization between the rich and the poor. The parable does not condemn wealth but vividly illustrates teachings about the difficulty of the total commitment of one's wealth which is a necessity for following Christ in his mission. The parable also illustrates how difficult it is for the rich to commit their money in the mission of Christ.

It demonstrates that the parable emphasizes God's mercy to the poor and the marginalized; and warns the rich about proper use of money and the danger in neglecting the poor. It also shows that humans are accountable to God for their wealth and possessions with a reward/punishment motif underlying God's role as eschatological judge.

The Parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) also unveils some theological lessons that the church and the society must learn as to the issue of the poor people living around us. Such lessons showed that un-generosity towards the poor is a sin, status in God's view is immaterial when dealing with others, dehumanization of poor people in the society is inhuman, a rich Christian must care for the less-privileged in the Church and society, a juxtaposition of the present and the afterlife gives the true picture of real life. When the church and the society especially the rich put these lessons into cognizance, their attitude towards the poor will change and as such they will give a more human face to the poor.

### **Recommendations**

The work therefore recommends the following:

1. Rich people occupy many positions and are being recognized in the church today. It is therefore pertinent that they should be given an intensify biblical reorientation through Bible studies to help them know and see the value of wealth as the sum total of smiles put on the faces of the poor and needy in the church and the society.

2. The Church should intensify her caring ministry. A more viable charity ministry should be operated by the church to care for the immediate hunger of the poor before and during their empowerment process. For those who are irredeemably incapacitated, the church should see it as a point of duty to feed them in case they are abandoned by their families. Some churches have opened what they term 'Food Bank', where food is made available for the indigent members. This should be intensified and encouraged.
3. The government should as a matter of all seriousness make policies that will check mate the ostentatious living and expenditure especially during ceremonies like burial and marriage which directly or indirectly push the poor into unnecessary expenditure in the name of meeting up with the social demand which has been established by the rich.
4. The government from the federal government to local should establish an agency or a ministry with the objective of executing poverty alleviation related programs in the country. This would guarantee that successive government does not discard their predecessors program, rather, add their own suggestion (still under the same umbrella) and all programs would run concurrently to ensure that all target audiences are reached. The agency should house all the poverty alleviation programs. Units/sections should be created to monitor each of the programs according to their peculiarity. By so doing, programs will be able to stand on the premise of the housing agency and as such, might not necessarily fizzle out with government of the day.
5. The rich and highly placed persons in the Nigerian society should abhor any action that will treat the poor with neglect and oppression.
6. Like in other developed countries, the Government should as a matter of necessity provide the basic human needs of the people at the affordable price. Electricity, roads, hospital, education and other need of life should be made affordable for both the rich and poor. The invention of mobile phone should be a lesson to Nigerians. You may recall that initially, the mobile phone was meant for the rich. SIM card alone cost at thirty six thousand Naira, until now the price has been so reduced that the mobile phones are in the hands of everybody, both the rich and the poor.

7. The rich and highly placed persons in Nigeria especially those who are Christians should give a human face to fellow human beings especially those who are having affinities with them in one way or the other. It is an irony that one may be stinky rich while the brilliant child of his closest neighbour is a drop out because the parents cannot afford school fees.
8. The rich should not be selfish with their wealth. They ought to care for the less-privileged in the church and in the society at large. They should learn to care for those who are poor in the family, church and the society at large.
9. The church in collaboration with the Government should create more employment opportunities to the citizenries. In doing so those living in poverty level will be reduced.

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