

SUBJECT: Presentation of a Proposal for an Honors Thesis
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TITLE: Blessed are the Poor: Examining the Juxtaposition of Rich and Poor in the Gospel of Luke.

I. Purpose

Jesus' sermon on the plain, found in Luke 6:20-31, holds what seems to be a paradigm for a radical reversal of power. Indeed this prophecy, which is attributed to Christ himself, claims that the lowly will be raised up, and the privileged will be cast down. Particularly interesting is the statement in Luke 6:20: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and the accompanying statement in verse 24: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." This concept found in Luke's beatitudes contains a theology that is both remarkable as well as puzzling; this reversal of power, along with the coinciding blessing of the poor and cursing of the rich, is a subject that merits examination.

By looking specifically at Luke 6:20, 24, and broadly at a variety of key Lukan passages, I will examine what it means for the poor to be blessed. I will also explore the nature of this reversal of power, how that plays out in the Gospel of Luke, and how it is a part of Luke's understanding of God. Since poverty remains an ever-present aspect of our culture and world, I seek also to bring insight into how Christ's blessing of the lowly and poverty stricken may or should affect our own spiritual reflection.

II. Problem

The Gospel of Luke contains a wide variety of passages and messages about (or relating to) the poor. In numerous instances, various characters are in situations of poverty; the disciples, for example, willingly step into a place of poverty when they leave everything in order to follow Christ (see Luke 5). In other instances, however, Jesus does not seem to require that his followers forsake all their belongings. For example, in Luke 19:1-10, Jesus finds Zacchaeus' offering of half his possessions to the poor more than acceptable. In fact, he equates Zacchaeus' sacrifice with a salvific event (Luke 19:10). As these two examples indicate, Luke lacks a single, unified mandate for how Christians should interact with the poor, or how they are to deal with possessions. There seem to be a variety of ways in which people relate to the poor, or to their own belongings.

Luke Timothy Johnson, who has done extensive examination of the use of possessions in Luke-Acts, claims that there are various passages that form connected themes. Johnson categorizes Luke's treatment of possessions into four themes: total renunciation of possessions by Jesus' followers (see Luke 5:11, 28), hospitality or almsgiving (see Luke 8:1-3 and 21:1-4), communal living and sharing of goods (see Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-35), and God's blessing of the poor (see Luke 6:20, 24). My research concentrates on one of Johnson's themes: The idea that the poor are somehow "blessed," a concept often accompanied by the contrasting idea that the rich are not looked upon favorably by God. Theologically this is a fascinating and complex idea;

Luke brings into question the so-called “gospel of wealth,” which claims that God’s favor is displayed through success and the possession of material goods. Luke’s depiction of rich and poor may also challenge the understanding that God is purely compassionate by portraying a God who prefers a certain class. In short, these scriptures raise numerous questions about the Lukan depiction of the nature of God, and God’s relationship with humanity.

Beyond these initial queries, there are many important questions raised by the text: First, if these passages portray a God who favors people based on economic status, what is the author of Luke saying about the nature of God? Especially, are we to understand that God generally despises those who are rich? In a sense this seems to make those who are physically poor into the spiritually rich; however, it may also proclaim an unconditional misfortune for people who are economically privileged. A second major issue raised by the text is this: Luke contains many promises that the poor will be favored, or even that the poor will receive justice. The question is whether or not we see actualization of these promises within Luke. If we do not, how are we to interpret this, especially in light of a loving God? Certainly today the poor continue to suffer injustice and neglect, regardless of their spiritual state; how are we to deal with the fact that they have not been raised up as Jesus declared they would be in the gospel of Luke?

III. Methods

In order to examine how the blessing of the poor relates to the Lukan understanding of God’s nature, and in turn, how God relates to humanity, I will be looking closely at the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1, 4, and 6. The main text that I will be examining, in terms of exegesis, is Luke 6:20: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” I will also be looking at the corresponding warning to the rich in verse 24; these two texts will serve as the center of my research. I will also be examining two other sections of Luke that address the reversal of power between rich and poor, or God’s blessing of the lowly. These passages include Mary’s declaration that the Lord will raise up the humble and the poor in Luke 1:46-56, as well as Jesus’ proclamation in Luke 4:18 that God had anointed him “to bring good news to the poor” (see Luke 4:16-21).

I will examine these passages mainly by employing narrative criticism, supplemented by some historical-critical analysis. Narrative criticism is a particularly helpful method because it requires one to follow the contours of the actual story presented in the Gospel of Luke. In order to better comprehend the text and the issues raised, I will be researching a wide variety of scholars—narrative critics as well as historical critics and other experts. I will be using Luke 1:46-56 and 4:16-21 as comparisons to Luke 6:20, 24, or as a continuation of a similar Lukan theme. In the course of this, my purpose is not necessarily to answer the many questions that arise from this text, but to engage the difficult issues raised by Luke’s theological understanding of the juxtaposition of rich and poor.

IV. Key works

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