


**Matthew 25:31-46 in the context of the needy and poor in Nigeria****Author:**

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**Dates:**

Received: 30 May, 2023  
 Accepted: 28 Aug., 2023  
 Published: 27 Oct., 2023

**Disclaimer:**

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**Competing interests:**

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**Abstract**

During his earthly ministry, Jesus used many parables or stories to relate spiritual principles to the people especially his disciples. He often emphasized the need to love people, care for the needy, forgive, lay up our treasures in heaven, and so on. Poverty is a universal phenomenon that is visible in almost every region of the world especially in the so-called “third world” countries. From all indications, it remained an endemic problem in the Nigerian society, and there is the need to tackle it. This paper, using literary-critical method of Biblical studies, argues that since Christian responsibility cuts across every sphere of human endeavor, there is the need for the church in Nigeria to do more in enhancing the socio-economic well-being of the citizenry. Findings reveal that some Pentateuchal laws and Jesus’ teachings (cf. Matthew 25:31-41), prove that Christian responsibility to the poor has Biblical foundation. The paper recommends that Preachers should practically model altruism and generosity to their audience and that churches should regularly organize seminars on economic empowerment for their members.

**Key Words:** Christian Responsibility, Poverty, The Poor, Nigerian Church

**Introduction**

The Matthean Gospel records some of the most important teachings of Jesus about the kingdom of Heaven. During his time, Jesus adopted many graphic or lifelike teaching forms, including parables, imaginary stories and/or illustrations in order to communicate his messages to his audience. He said many parables or stories to relate spiritual principles to the people especially his disciples. Jesus often emphasized the need to love people, care for the needy, forgive, lay up our treasures in heaven, and to be righteous and honest at all times. For Christ, Believers are to practically show love to others including their enemies. In the text under study, Matthew 25:31-41, he emphatically discusses the importance of showing love and care to others especially the poor, marginalized, and helpless ones.

Poverty is an age-long problem in human societies. It is a universal phenomenon that is visible in almost every region of the world especially in the so-called “third world” countries including Nigeria. From all indications, poverty has been an endemic problem in the Nigerian society. Poverty describes the state of lack of money and/or material possessions. Aderounmu (2007) opines that poverty covers a range from extreme want of necessities to the absence of material comforts. In Nigeria, poverty is one of the major factors that have continued to influence and perpetuate so many unacceptable situations like violence/agitations, kidnapping, prostitution/sexual slavery, armed robbery, child trafficking, and so on in the country. According to the World Population Review and the World Bank 2022 indices on human poverty, Africa topped other continents in poverty rate: South Sudan -82.30%, Equatorial Guinea - 76.80%, Madagascar - 70.70%, Guinea-Bissau - 69.30%, Eritrea - 69.00%, Sao Tome and Principe - 66.70%, Burundi - 64.90%, Democratic Republic of the Congo - 63.90%. Interestingly, many of these countries are “Christian nations”.

According to the Nigeria Federal office of Statistics, in 1960, about 15% of the entire population was poor. However, by 1980, this percentage rose to 28% and by 1996, over 66% of the population (about 76.6 million people), lived in poverty. The UN human poverty index in 1999 placed Nigeria among the 25 poorest nations in the world. Then, it was estimated that two thirds of the 140 million Nigerians were poor (Muthengi 1992). Recent highlights of the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index survey by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reveal that 63% of persons living within Nigeria (133 million people) are multidimensionally poor.

It is against this backdrop that Christian responsibility to the poor has become a very serious issue. According to biblical standard, Christians are challenged with the task of caring for the poor. From the pages of the Bible, it is obvious that God acts in history to set the poor and captive free. He often identifies with the poor, helpless, and marginalized people in the society. Hence, Johnson (1998) remarks that the idea of Christian responsibility to the poor, which is holistic in nature, has deep biblical roots. He notes that both in the Old and New Testaments, God's people are admonished to minister to the needs of the others: spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially and otherwise. It is however unfortunate that many Christians do not often see the need to help the poor and needy due to certain reasons.

### **The Concept of Poverty**

Though poverty can be defined in several ways; but generally speaking, it is a situation whereby a person cannot take care of him or herself adequately and/or provide the needs of his or her family members. Meyers (2003) sees poverty as a term referring primarily to the condition of persons of low social and economic status. Below are some of the ways people have defined poverty:

First, poverty as deficit. According to this view, poverty is the absence of material things. Ofemi (2002) notes that in the early days of Development thinking, people defined poverty as a deficit- that is, as a lack. Consequently, poverty was seen as not having enough food to eat, shelter, lack of clean water, lack of basic amenities, and experiencing economic hardship. Meyer (2003) observes that the above view of poverty encourages people, governments and policymakers to plan to provide these missing things: food, low-cost housing, social amenities and so on. The unspoken assumption here is that when these missing items are provided, poverty will have been eradicated and the poor will no longer be poor.

Second, poverty has been defined as entanglement. Using the household as his point of departure, Chambers (1997) describes the poor as living in a "cluster of disadvantages". For him, poverty entails physical weakness, being isolated, vulnerable and powerless. Examining the above system approach of Chambers shows that the elements listed are interconnected. Osumudiamé (2009) notes that the above approach to poverty is powerful and in order. Each of the above items mentioned are linked to and reinforces the others. A problem in one area means a problem in another.

Third, poverty as lack of access to social power. Friedman (1992) describes poverty by focusing on powerlessness as lack of access to social power. Like Chambers, Friedman begins with the household as the social unit of the poor and sees it embedded within four overlapping domains of social practice: State, political community, civil society and cooperate economy (Friedman 1992). Each domain has a distinctive type of power: state power, political power, social power, and economic power. These interacting domains are systems within which the poor households in the society struggle to find space, location and influence.

Fourth, poverty as a state of disempowerment. Like Chambers and Friedman, Christian (1998) sees poverty as disempowerment. He sees the poor household embedded in a complex of framework of interacting systems which includes personal system, social system, and religious system. According to Christian, the poor find themselves trapped inside a system of disempowerment made up of these interacting systems.

Besides, poverty can be said to exist in different forms: absolute poverty, relative poverty, physical poverty, spiritual poverty, economic poverty, and so forth. According to Haralambus and Holborn (2013), the concept of absolute poverty usually involves a judgment of basic human needs measured in terms of the material resources required to maintain one's health and physical efficiency. One is thus said to be absolutely poor when he or she cannot afford quality food, shelter, clothing and other necessary items needed for a healthy life. Poverty has also been seen as relative deprivation in relation to the standard of a particular society at a particular time (Townsend 1979). It is the society that often determines and conditions people's needs.

Physical poverty is one that is characterized by malnutrition, illness/diseases, lack of good hygiene, and so on; while spiritual poverty is different from all the other types of poverty because it is more abstract than concrete. It is the form of poverty that has a spiritual dimension; moreover, it affects both the rich and the poor in terms of material things. Economic poverty is often the most obvious of all forms of poverty. It is the form of poverty whereby one is unable to meet his or her needs because of lack of financial resources. It can lead to material poverty, physical poverty, frustration and so many other problems.

### **Causes and Effects of Poverty**

Because of the nature of this study, it is important to say something about the causes of poverty before discussing how to respond to the problem as Christians. Having a good understanding of some of the major causes of poverty definitely will help to shape our understanding of transformational development. Some of the major causes of poverty include but not limited to the following: physical weakness/sickness, unemployment/underemployment, economic and social exploitation, climate, weak rule of law and corruption, poor management of available resources, lack of good education, bad governance, political instability, witchcraft manipulations and so forth.

Many are poor today because of lack of empowerment. Clabaunt (1980) acknowledges that many are poor because many jobs require higher education and technical skills. According to him, this kind of situation often excludes the poor who may not have the privilege to gain such qualifications. Most times, when poor people succeed to get jobs, they are often paid merely a minimum wage which cannot be enough to pay for accommodation and solve other family needs. Corruption, bad leadership and economic and social exploitation are common especially in the "third world" countries. Due to the prevalence of these, poverty is very

common in these countries. Take Nigeria for example, recently, due to the high rate of inflation caused by bad governance and economic policies, many people are suffering because of exploitative consumer practices. People are now spending a greater proportion of their income to meet their basic needs. Moreover, as Muthengi (1992) had noted years back, exploitation of the poor is not confined or limited to consumer practices, but also in the money market transactions.

The above observation is still common and prevailing today. The service charges required for bank transactions and currency exchange can be said to be exploitative to the poor. From all indications, it is obvious that in the Nigerian context, weak rules and poor management of resources is part of the reasons why Nigeria has recently been referred to as the world's "headquarter of poverty". Poor management of resources has led to failure by the government to provide essential social amenities which has worsened poverty in the land (Nnamani 2003; Ugoani 2020). The age-long crisis in the northern part and the middle-belt regions of Nigeria and recent unrest in the southern part of the country is seriously causing economic poverty in the country.

Many people have lost their lives and properties because of these challenges. In the northern part of the country and the Middle-Belt, many farmers can no longer freely go to their farms again because of the activities of terrorists (Okoro 2018; Abdullahi 2019; Babajideet' al 2020). Aside the above-mentioned factors, some of the causes of poverty have to do with the mental condition of the poor. Some people are poor because of lack of knowledge, technical information and exposures. Sometimes, it is not that the poor put themselves in such condition; some of the factors mentioned above may cause one to become mentally poor (Maggay 1994; Christian 1998; Myers 2003).

Based on the above evidence, it is obvious that the problem of poverty is very real in Africa/Nigeria. According to Mmaduagwu (2000), the culture of poverty has caught most African nations in a firm grip and consequently is leading many Africans to migrate to other countries to search for greener pastures. Every year in Africa, thousands including women and children, die due to poverty related diseases. According to the Global Hunger Index, every year, more than half a million women die in pregnancy and childbirth and majority of these cases happen in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (the Commonwealth Yearbook, 2002). As highlighted by Julie (2009), violence, slavery, prostitution, and child-trafficking among other issues are rampant due to the problem of poverty.

### **Poverty in the Old Testament and the Various Approaches to its Alleviation**

Poverty is a complex age-long problem. For one to understand the various Old Testament traditions about poverty, it is important to understand some of the Hebrew key words translated "poor": first is the word, '*ani* which is from the root '*anah* and *anaw*. According to Pedrito (2004), this word refers to one who is economically dependent, humiliated, or dispossessed. It thus depicts the poor, needy, oppressed or

afflicted (cf. Lev. 19:10; Deut. 15:11; Job 29:12). Other Hebrew words often used to designate a poor person include *dal* and '*ebyon*. *Dal* indicates one who is socially weak and/or low, helpless and frail; while '*ebyon* denotes one who begs alms and seeks help from another (Vine 1985, p. 203; cf. Exod. 23:3; Job 5: 16; Ps. 113:7; Prov. 19:17; Deut. 15:4-11; Ps. 132:15 etc.). The Wisdom Literature prefers using the word *rush* instead of the ones above. *Rush* refers to one who is poor, needy and famished (cf. Prov. 13:8; 14:20; 18:23; Eccl. 4:19; 9:5f).

Pedrito (2004) observes that in ancient Israel, the distinction between the rich and the poor was unknown as the people practiced "clan egalitarianism". According to him, "The close tribal and family units ensured that no one starved- each one in the clan and family had equal rights and status" (p. 25). Yahweh intended that there should be no poor among His people (cf. Deut. 15:4, 5). But because Israel did not fully follow the laws Moses gave them especially when they entered Canaan, due to social and economic challenges, the above intentions of Yahweh became almost unrealistic. As time went on, as trade and commerce increased and the land became more developed, the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen. Thus, during the period of the monarchy, there were many poor people in Israel with few plutocratic and aristocratic landowners (Pedrito 2004).

Generally speaking, poverty is challenged in the Bible. According to Olojede (2012), "In fact, all the major corpuses of the Old Testament reflect concerns for the poor and the needy and studies show that the sages also offer a variety of approaches to deal with poverty" (cf. Whybray 1990; Spangenberg 1991). In the Old Testament, poverty was considered as an unintentional social evil that can be eradicated; not allowed or accepted. It depicts the poor (including widows, orphans, and aliens) as people to be helped and not held responsible. Such people are not to be looked upon as sinners but as "the sinned against" (Fung 1980). Though many Old Testament texts view being poor as being exploited and oppressed; many Wisdom texts especially Proverbs "attribute poverty to individual choices and attitudes such as laziness, negligence or foolishness" (Olojede 2012, p. 475).

The Pentateuchal laws required the Israelites not to close their hands against their poor neighbors nor harden their hearts towards the marginalized. They were to be cared for and be open-handed in upholding those who could not sustain themselves by taking them into their homes and feeding them without charge. Their tithes were also to be used in supporting the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows (cf. Deut. 14:29-15:7; Lev. 25:35ff). Furthermore, an Israelite was not to charge interest on money lent to someone in need. If he took a pledge to secure his loan, he was not to go into the home to fetch it, but to stand respectfully outside and wait for it to be brought out to him. If he took as pledge his neighbor's garment, he was to return it before sunset because the poor person would need it as a blanket to sleep with (cf. Exod. 22:25-26; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 24:10-12).

Many laws in the Pentateuch show God's concern for the poor and needy. Bloomberg (1999) acknowledges that the practice of gleaning was based on God's laws that farmers should not continue to harvest their fields to gather all the leftovers, but should allow the poor to come and collect what the harvesters missed on their first trip (cf. Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-22). In fact, Meeks (1989) observes that gleaning rights are not voluntary acts of charity of the rich towards the poor; they are the poor's right to livelihood. Furthermore, according to the Levitical codes, tithes and offerings were not only to be given to the Levites but also, every third year, the tithes would go to the local storehouses so that they could be distributed not just to the Levites, but also to the poor and disadvantaged in the society, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows (cf. Deut. 14:28-29).

In the Wisdom literature and the prophets, one of the characters of a righteous person is that he "is generous and lends freely" and "has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor"; whereas if a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Ps. 111:1-9; Prov. 21:13; 14:20ff; Job 31:16ff; Ezek. 16:49). In Psalms 82, judges are instructed to "defend the cause of the weak and fatherless" and to "maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. King Lemuel was exhorted by the mother to "speak up and judge fairly and defend the right of the poor and needy" (Prov. 31:8, 9; cf. 22:22ff; 29:7, 14). The prophets did not only demand the people and their leaders to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow; and on the other hand, prevent them oppressing the alien or the poor". Elijah rebuked Ahab for killing Naboth and taking his vineyard. Amos condemned the rulers of Israel because in return for bribes, they trampled the heads of the poor, crushed the needy, and denied justice to the oppressed. Jeremiah denounced king Jehoiakim for using forced labor to build his luxurious palace (Cf. 1kgs. 21; Amos 2:6f; 5:1ff; Jer. 22:13ff).

### **Christian Responsibility to the Poor in the New Testament**

The New Testament is not also silent on the issues patterning to helping the poor and needy. Jesus' lifestyle, teachings and ministry exemplify Christian responsibility to the poor and needy. Studying the life and teachings of Jesus Christ shows that He loved and cared for the poor, the needy and helpless in the society. He did not only preach the gospel but also gave compassionately to the needy. The following NT passages show that Christian responsibility to the poor is well defined and depicted in the NT:

**Matthew 6:33:** According to this passage, God's people are to seek for His kingdom and justice which by definition entails helping the needy and marginalized in their midst. The unique juxtaposition of Luke 12:33 with the Lukan parallel (12:31) supports this conclusion: "sell your possessions and give to the poor..." Kisau (2000) thus concludes that the body of Jesus' sermon ends with the famous "golden rule" in Matthew 7:12. According to him, its application in the economic realm would

surely include one being as generous in helping meeting other's needs as one would want others to be when he or she is in need. In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus teaches that His followers should give alms; but He insists on their doing it in secret rather than from the desire for human praise. Furthermore, that the "giving of a cup of cold water to a 'little one' will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42) teaches Jesus' disciples that the least significant Christian has great spiritual value in God's eyes and deserves at least the basic material provisions of life (Krodel 1986).

In connection to the passage of the "laborers in the vineyard" (Matt. 20:1-16), Duling and Norman (1994) point out that the parable offers a cameo (character part) of what much of the Gospel of Matthew represents: concern for the marginalized, open to all, upsetting and overturning human wisdom, welcoming "nobodies" treating everyone equal etc.

During the time of Christ, He spoke against human systems and traditions that were contrary to teachings of the Torah. Commenting on Mark 7:9-13, Martin (1972) opines that against the dominant group boundaries, Mark offers a counter vision in which a new morally defined community upholds the radical demands of scriptural tradition, which condemns profiteering and defends the weakest members of the society. In the teachings of Jesus concerning The Rich Young Ruler and Zacchaeus (Mk. 10:17-31 and Lk. 1:1-10), He commanded the young man who had great wealth to "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Commenting on these passages, Larkin (1995) avers that no one should consider his or her possession his own. According to him, the plight of the poor takes priority over the desires for wealth.

Concerning the anointing of Jesus by Mary in Bethany (Mk. 14:3-9), Luz (1989) explains that Mark 14:3-9 further supports Deuteronomy 15:11, when He declares, "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me" (cf. Mk. 14:7). The clause, "you can help them any time you want" surely means that the disciples should have an ongoing ministry to the poor. In the Lukan Gospel, Jesus is depicted as having special concerns for the poor, women in poor health and the Gentiles.

Though Luke seems to have interest in the poor and outcast; he in no way idealizes poverty. In fact, he encourages the Christian community of his day to help others to overcome it. Luke does not blame the rich for the problems of the poor, but he calls on them to use their possessions to benefit the poor so that the poor and rich may help each other to participate fully in the life of the Christian community (Cassidy 1978). The parables of the rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21) and the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) obviously warn against the greedy and indulgent lifestyles that wealth can often spawn. The story of Zacchaeus' conversion (Lk. 19:1-10) demonstrates how alms giving play a central role in that renunciation. And the uniquely Lukan creation of a harmony of models of giving- a demand to surrender all (18:22-25), a voluntary giving up of

half (19:1-10) and an investment of everything (19:11-27), demonstrate the diversity of application.

### **Exegesis of Matthew 25:31-41**

A clearer understanding of Christian responsibility to the poor is seen in the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 24: 25-46. But before proceeding further, it is important to briefly consider the socio-economic and literary contexts of the *pericope*.

Talking about the socio-economic and historical context of the text, it is important to note that during the time of Christ, there were many poor people; neglected, marginalized, mistreated and trampled upon by the rich folks. According to McKnight and Osborne (2004), Palestine was a pyramidal society in which most of the power, prestige, and privilege resided at the top among the narrow band of ruling elites and native aristocrats. Beneath were the retainer classes, who helped to maintain the status quo on behalf of the elites; thereby gaining for themselves some measure of relative prestige.

Down the ladder were the peasants, the free landowners who could not aspire to a higher place on the social ladder. Instead, they were in constant danger of being demoted to the landless poor and destitute via increased taxation, or aggrandizement of property by the ruling elites (p. 27). According to Tenney (1972), from 70-135 was a very difficult period for the Jews. It was a period of economic melt-down, scarcity, starvation, austerity, suffering, which was partly caused by “internal strife, agitations, and uprisings against the Roman rule” (p. 45). These problems continued until 70AD, when the Roman General, Titus invaded Jerusalem and took control of the city.

### **Literary Context of Matthew 25:31-46**

Matthew 5:31-46 has three eschatological parables. These parables talk of the need for constant preparedness of the *parousia*: The parable of the thief (Matt. 24:43, 44), that of the Disorderly servant (24:45-51), the Ten Virgins (25:13) and that of the Talent (25:14-30). According to Johnson and Buttrick (1951), Matthew in constructing these discourses has a twofold purpose: first, to awaken in his audience a vivid expectation that Jesus is coming again in glory even though His advent has been delayed.

The Jewish Christian community had expected the *Parousia* at the time of the Jewish war based on Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 24. Second, the author wanted to make it plain that the Christian must do more than reckon the times and seasons. No one can specifically tell when the Lord will come (24:42). Hence, Jesus expects His followers to be ready at all times (24:43-44); prepared in every way (25:4), making good use of every talent given to them (25:14-30) and actively engaged in the works of mercy (25:31-46).

### **Close Reading of the Text (Matthew 25:31-46)**

#### **Two kinds of people to be separated on the judgment Day (vv.31-34)**

v. 31 starts with the Greek word, *οταν/otan* (when), which suggests a term of condition rather than date. Hence, Jesus did not date this event but spoke of it in terms of condition. It is only when the Father decides that this event would happen.

*καθημαι/kathēmai*, deponent of *καθισει* (he will sit), is a future indicative active of *καθιζω*, meaning “to sit, to take one’s seat. The imagery used by Jesus concerning His return is similar to that of Matthew 16:27; 19:28; and 24:30. From all indications, and based on the parables, Jesus is the final judge. The parable under study also recognizes Jesus’ deity and supposes a Christology that is in agreement with Matthean Christology in general. Jesus coming with “all angels” as Keener (1991) and Kwan (2002) note, refers to the various versions of Zechariah (14:5), where Yahweh is in view. In this text, Jesus uses his favorite designation, *ο υιος του ανθρωπου/ho huios tou anthropou*: the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13-14).

At the judgment seat, all nations (*ethnē*) or (Gentiles) in Jewish literature, will be gathered and separated the way a shepherd would separate sheep from goats (cf. Ezek. 31:17), to keep the goats warm at night while keeping the sheep in open air as they preferred (Jeremias 1972). The parable’s portrayal of the righteous as sheep and the wicked as goats suggests from their relative value of the owner. Goats were sometimes disobedient to the goatherd more the sheep to the shepherd. Moreover, sheep cost more than goats did in those days.

The account here describes the judgment of all humanity. Placing the “sheep” on the right hand indicates the kind of honor the righteous will receive. Meanwhile, *εωνυμος* (left, on the ‘left’ hand) indicates a bad omen and disgrace. This placing or separation is by no means an indiscriminate and/or arbitrary one. Each person is placed where he or she belongs to according to his or her character. This shows that the Lord’s return will reveal what character and destiny each person on earth has chosen for him or herself.

#### **Invitation of the righteous and the reasons for the separation explained, (vv. 34-36)**

Having made the separation, the king will invite the blessed (the righteous) to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. *ητοιμασμενην υμιν* and *καταβολης κοσμου* denote the eternal redemptive purpose of God. *κληρονομησατε/klēronomēsate* as used here, is very significant. It is an aorist imperative active of *κληρομεω/klēromeō*, meaning “to inherit, to receive an inheritance.” To “inherit the kingdom” means to be recognized as a true child of God. The phrase, “*ητοιμασμενην υμιν βασιλειαν απο καταβολης κοσμου*” prepared from the foundations of the world”, suggests that Matthew may have believed that the “righteous” were predestined for this kingdom (cf. 20:23); however, this is not certain.

The “sheep” are recognized and blessed because of their good deeds: providing for their neighbors the basic human needs, apart from salvation (food, shelter, empathy and friendship). The Greek word, *επεινασα* is an aorist indicative active of *πειναω* meaning “to be hungry”. To be hungry was a sign of being needy and poor (Thayer 1966). According to Ogers (1998), all the words listed in this text were considered in Judaism as acts of kindness. The point that Jesus makes is that to care for and serve others in Jesus’ name is to serve Jesus Himself. And of course, Jesus’ figure calls for those needs.

Notice that in each case, the service was appropriate to the needy: "...was hungry...gave me food; thirsty...gave me drink; stranger...took me in; naked...clothed me; and so on. This means caring for others is a serious business that counts in eternity. The word "visit" means more than a brief visit. It involves the ideas of caring for and/or tending to those who are in poor health. Thus, the NRSV reads: "You took care of me". The NIV renders it: "You looked after me"; while the REB (Revised English Bible) reads, "You came to my help". The implication of the above saying of Christ is that any of the services one provides that does not measure up to the needs of those around him, may not be acceptable before God.

#### **The righteous respond to the king (vv. 37-39)**

The response of the "sheep" shows that at the judgment, there will be surprises (v. 44). Here, the saved (righteous: *hoi diakaioi*) express their surprise, saying, "*kurie, poteidomen se*: Lord, when did we see you..." The word, *pote* (when) renders a word meaning "at what time"- that is, "at what time did we see you in these situations? The point here is not that these "righteous" were surprised to be saved; but they simply were surprised as to when and how they had ministered to Jesus directly. This surprise emotional response is surely the most enthusiastic and arousing sympathetic part of the parable. These researchers believe that it is not the works that matter as such, but the love which induced the righteous into the action of service and kindness.

#### **The response of the king to the righteous (v. 40)**

*Amen* (verily: 'I tell you the truth' NIV) often introduces statements of great importance especially in the Gospels. Many have argued as to whom Jesus referred to when He used the *adelphōnmon* (my brothers). For some, He was referring to the Jews. Thus, the basis of eternal judgment is going to be based on how nations treated the Jews (Manson 1979; Muchena 1991; Wiersbe 1992). However, since in Matthew 12:46-59 and 28:10, Jesus declares that His family and brothers are not determined on a biological or an ethnic basis but on spiritual basis, this interpretation/position is therefore a weak one. Second, some people believe that "my brothers" here refers to believers or fellow Christians- those related by spiritual kinship.

For the fact that this view is supported by Jesus' earlier statements in Matthew 10:40-42 and *adelphos* often refers to spiritual kinship in Matthew's Gospel when it does not refer to biological relations, this second view is plausible. Moreover, the term, *elachiston* (least), the superlative form of the adjective, *mikroi* (little one), is often used in the Gospel to refer to disciples (Bloomberg 1992). Third, some believe that "my brothers" could refer without distinction to all who are hungry, distressed, or needy, since Jesus so completely identified with them during His earthly ministry.

In such people's need, Jesus was their brother (Hare 1967; Fewillet 1980; Jones 1995). The important thing to notice is the sincerity with which the righteous did these acts of service. In their service, they were not discomfited ministering to the

king. Rather, they were seeking to help meet the needs of others as they encountered them daily.

The clause, *emoiepoiēsate* ('you did for me') is a Dative of personal interest. Thus, the Messiah identifies Himself entirely with the interests and needs of the "least of these my brethren. The researchers believe that the "brothers" of the Son of Man in this passage suggest the insignificant, marginalized and those likely to be overlooked, despised and neglected (Matt. 10:42; 18:5).

#### **The king addresses the wicked and proclaims harsh judgment on them (vv. 41-43)**

The king's words to the people on his left in vv. 41-43 contrast that of the righteous (vv. 34-36). To these people on the left-hand side, the king says, "*popeuestheapemou (oi) katēramenoi*: Go (depart) from me (you who are) cursed". The Greek word translated "wicked" is *diabolōa* dative of *diabolos*, meaning slanderers, devil, evil etc. These wicked people are thus condemned because they saw real human (desperate) needs as related in vv. 42-43 but did not do anything to serve or help out. The above incidence shows that one's reactions to the Lord and the needy around have eternal consequences. This is why Christians are not to see the needy/disadvantaged as insignificant.

#### **The wicked respond in dismay (vv. 44-45)**

Here, the people on the left-hand side of the king reply like those on the right hand side, "Lord, at what time did we see you in these situations?" One of the most important words in the text is the word, *dikonēsamena* aorist indicative active of *dikoneō* meaning "to serve, to minister, to take care of by rendering humble service". The unrighteous were like, "Lord, when did we not give you whatever you needed" (Robinson 1977).

#### **The king responds to the unrighteous, the unsaved (v.45-46)**

Again, the king's response here contrasts the response he gave the righteous earlier. Thus, while the righteous or "justified ones" go into life eternal (*eiszōēnaōinion*) the wicked referred to as the goats shall go away (*apeleusontai*) from God into everlasting punishment (*eiskolasinaōinion*). Some understand the eternal punishment mentioned here as something less than a permanent state because of the usage of the Greek verb, *kolasin* which is derived from *kolazō* meaning "to mutilate, or to prune".

It is however important to note the Greek word, *aōinion* which is used for both the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 41 and v.46). As the righteous receive eternal life, the unrighteous receive eternal punishment. Jesus is specific about this in this parable. Hence, the perfect tenses of "blessed" (v.34) and cursed (v.41) are used. The point is that while eternal life awaits the righteous (the caring, and hospitable), eternal punishment awaits the wicked (the uncaring and inhospitable). And as Peter (2002) notes, the sufferings to be experienced by the condemned sinner is going to be a severe one.

## Implications of the Study

Based on the findings of this study, there are many points or lessons that one can infer. First, the gospel has a social dimension or implication. The text studied makes it very clear that one cannot accept Christ or say he/she is a true Christian and reject humanity (1Jon. 4:20). Professing love for Christ while at the same time hating fellow humans is a mockery. Christ expects the Christian not to avoid contact with those in needs- they should not be seen as undeserving of help.

Second, showing empathy and love by way of caring for the poor and needy proves that one possesses the Spirit of Christ. It is noteworthy that the public ground for which the “unrighteous” were condemned is the neglect of duty not because of personal moral failures. They were condemned because they did not practically show kindness to the poor and needy. According to Mahali (2007), the true meaning of religion in Matthew 25:31-46 is this kind of outgoing love and nothing else. Second, the most striking note of the parable is that on the Judgment Day, some people will discover that although they are not aware, they have not been on the side of God all this while.

On the Judgment Day, in the criterion of the judgment, each person is singled out in turn and is not asked about his or her creed, denomination or social status but what one had done for his poor neighbors. From the study, it is obvious that those who were judged were judged as individuals and replied as individuals. What the Christian had done for the poor and needy or failed to do is thus judgment in his or her favor or misery and woe.

Third, Christians are to give uncalculating helps in simple things. According to Barclay (1977), helping the poor and needy should be a spontaneous affair that is done with love. The things that Jesus picks out: giving to the hungry, welcoming strangers, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner etc. are things that an average person can do. It is not a question of giving away millions or thousands; it is a case of offering simple help to people we meet every day. The acts of love in this passage are not such that require merely an outlay of money but such as involve the sacrifice of time, strength, and comfort etc.

Fourth, any community wherever there is genuine love, impartiality, distribution of wealth will always experience the mercy of God. The Early Church experienced growth because they did not neglect the poor in their midst (cf. Acts 4:34). Fifth, mutual sharing of wealth is part of God’s will for humans. As earlier noted, right from the OT, God commanded the Israelites to help the poor and needy and various laws were enacted in this regard. In the NT also, Jesus, the apostles and the Early Church all made sure they took practical steps in providing help for the poor, sick and marginalized in their societies. This shows that greed and selfishness are un-Christian attitudes that must not be associated with Christians.

## Recommendations

1. Preachers should practically model altruism and generosity to their audience.
2. Seminars and programs should be regularly organized to teach members financial management and then, such members who are jobless should be empowered to start up small business outfits.
3. Those who benefited from church organizations and poverty alleviation schemes should be encouraged to give back to the church by helping others.
4. Church funds should be entrusted in the hands of God-fearing members so that they can be utilized appropriately.
5. Poor people in churches should be helped and taught on how to cooperatively initiate and implement self-helps projects, by first identifying their needs, prioritizing those needs, and designing and implanting strategies regarding same.

## Conclusion

This study focused on Christian responsibility to the poor and needy. Based on the findings made, it is obvious that the gospel is always intended to be a holistic affair- involving the material and spiritual dimensions. Christians, as Murchie (1978) notes, are to serve as conduits by which God’s gracious material provision is equitably distributed to the world. Henry and Scott (1973) affirm that whenever an individual, as a habit, shows self-denying beneficence to others out of love for Christ and gratitude for the blessings of redemption, such a person gives clear proof that he or she is a true believer.

Christians today should seek to meet people’s physical needs; while at the same time, helping them to understand that ultimately, only God can release them from their oppression. Any system, institution, nation or organization can and should be judged by what happens to the marginalized and powerless. Caring for the poor and needy is very important and will definitely determine the Christian’s eternal fate. Hence, every Christian as well as those wishing to enter God’s kingdom will need to pay special attention to the principles taught by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46.

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