

WEIGHTIER MATTERS

An Essay Concerning the Tendency of Conservative Presbyterians, And the American Church At-Large, to Neglect Ministries of Justice and Mercy

Part 2 of 4
by Ben Aalbers M.Div., M.A.

Excursus and Introduction to Part 2: Ridderbos on the lost, and publicans and sinners

In *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Herman Ridderbos reflects on three other categories of people (the “lost” and “publicans and sinners”) who Jesus sought out and who were affiliated with the poor by the fact that they all existed on the edge of society. The Pharisees commonly looked upon this group with contempt and abandoned them to their seemingly hopeless fate¹. Concerning the lost and publicans and sinners, Ridderbos writes:

“They were not only the people who lived in open conflict with God’s law and were, consequently, kept at a distance both by the common people and the Pharisees. Generally this category of ‘publicans and sinners’ also comprised those who did not submit to the special Pharisaical institutions...They are the people who have been left to themselves, the sheep that have no shepherd who were no longer looked upon as belonging to the true people of God. These data show the great importance in the whole of Jesus’ action in seeking and saving that which, humanly speaking, would have become a prey of the judgment².”

The irony is that the Pharisees thought of Israel as being comprised of two nations – a nation within a nation. They believed that the true Israel, who would find favor from God on the Last Day, consisted of those, who like themselves, observed strict laws and purity obligations. All other people comprised the apostate Israel that would be judged. Of course the Pharisees were the ones who were revealed to be apostate. Sadly, their pride blinded them so that they could not see the true condition of their hearts. A couple of important facts must be discussed here. First, Ridderbos states that the poor who Jesus mentions in Luke 4 and in Matthew 5 were first and foremost those within Israel who were oppressed/poor yet faithful. Other scholars such as Blomberg and Marshal endorse this definition³. Second, Ridderbos argues at length that Jesus’ message of salvation and ministry to the poor should not be understood as a “universalized” gospel. He states that:

¹ *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Herman Ridderbos. The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1962, p. 151.

² Ridderbos. p. 152.

³ Blomberg, p. 222.

“The word [poor] in the Old Testament refers to those who were literally poor. It took on the nuance of ‘oppressed,’ since the poor were helpless against exploitations practiced by the rich. This meant that the poor were forced to depend upon Yahweh as their helper since they had no human help. The word thus combines the ideas of weakness and dependence upon Yahweh; those who are poor depend upon God’s favor.” Marshal, Howard I. *Luke: Historian and Theologian*. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove. 1988, p. 122.

“The message of salvation is not placed on a common level of humanity in general. On the contrary, this message is purposely adapted to the special relationship which God has established from olden times between himself and his people. It is the reality of God’s covenant and of his theocratic relationship to Israel as his people which is the basis of the description of the gospel as the gospel of the poor. It is this true people of God which is addressed in the beatitudes and to whom the salvation of the kingdom is granted as their lawful right⁴.”

Ridderbos acknowledges that although texts such as Luke 2:14,32

“ascribe a universal significance to salvation...this does not detract from the fact that the whole of the initial part of the gospel speaks for the coming of the salvation promised to *Israel* and therefore views the gospel of the kingdom from the standpoint of the Old Testament theocracy and from that of the covenant between God and Israel⁵.”

Lastly, concerning the lost, Ridderbos writes:

“The ‘lost state’ of the publicans and sinners that Jesus sought to save consisted just in their complete estrangement from the totality of the flock, i.e., of God’s people. And this is why they run the risk of losing the salvation promised to this people of God. The special interest manifested in Jesus’ whole messianic activity in behalf of what is lost, his pity, are clearly founded on the fact of their belonging to God’s people. It is the lost sheep of the house of Israel that he seeks, and he seeks and saved the despised and lost publican ‘as he, too, is a son of Abraham’ (Luke 19:9). The entire people, even in its least elegant members, is God’s flock and as such the object of Jesus’ mercy and love⁶.”

My response to these three points are as follows: Praise be to God that his kingdom has been inaugurated thus fulfilling his covenant promise with his people Israel because it is bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. The poor may be pious but they are in no less need of MJM as compared to anyone else. Although Jesus clearly states that he came to seek the lost of Israel⁷, and he initially directed his disciples to do likewise⁸, he did not withhold mercy from gentiles⁹ who sought it and he freely approached the Samaritan woman at the well. These examples, along with Jesus’ mentioning of Elijah and Elisha’s ministry to gentiles in Luke 4, demonstrate that God has always been pleased to bring salvation to any and all people regardless of their relation to theocratic Israel. So, contra Ridderbos, the poor also included some who lived beyond the borders of Israel. Also, although Jesus’ birth and message of

⁴ Ridderbos, p. 192.

⁵ Ridderbos. p. 194.

⁶ Ridderbos. p. 197.

⁷ Matthew 15:24

⁸ Matthew 10:6

⁹ Matthew 15:24

salvation was beautiful to the ears of the faithful poor in Israel¹⁰, he primarily went to the unfaithful¹¹. Although the faithful poor in Israel may have waited with anticipation for their freedom, the lost were delightfully surprised by Jesus' invitation to them to enter his kingdom.

Having said that, "Who are orphans?" The term "orphan" can be used to describe a child or children without either parent but more often it referred to children who had lost their father but still had their mother. Losing a father meant the loss of an instructor and model concerning vocation, cultural understanding, and worship¹². It also meant the loss of the leader of the home both within the family unit and as the representative who would serve as the legal arbitrator in any social disputes. The lack of male representation in social transactions placed widows in situations where they could easily be oppressed or taken advantage of. Another type of person who is identified in the OT is the alien. Aliens were strangers to the community in which they lived. A defining characteristic of aliens was their lack of land ownership and thus they had no economic independence and continually lived in a state of extreme vulnerability. Again, the OT has many passages that served to aid orphans, widows and aliens¹³. All of the categories of people mentioned are bonded by the status of existing as the disenfranchised and vulnerable of the community.

The motive for Israel's care of the disenfranchised was based upon God's grace towards them while they existed as the disenfranchised in a foreign land¹⁴. The importance/weight God placed upon these commandments of justice and mercy is evident by the warnings he gave to his young nation¹⁵ as well as the numerous times the prophets bore witness to Israel's failure in this area. Passages such as Isaiah 58, Jeremiah 7:1-15, Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:6-8 are all truly humbling, *if not mortifying*, but yet hopeful. These passages describe Israel as a people who seek God and ask his blessing but they are befuddled by God's silence in light of their prayers, fasting, sacrifices and "obedience" to his Sabbath. Through his prophets God reveals to his people that their religious activity may be orthodox but it is empty because they do not obey its true meaning, namely practicing justice and mercy. God promises to hear their prayers and accept their sacrifices only when and if they change their oppressive and greedy ways, though the Jeremiah passage offers almost no hope of repentance. The application to the American church is obvious. Our worship is meaningless unless we too delight in caring for the poor and seek to remove any instruments of oppression¹⁶. We dare not shout, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD,

¹⁰ I'm thinking here of Simeon and Anna, assuming that they were ostracized by the powerful temple leaders.

¹¹ Luke 19:10

¹² Introduction to the New Testament.

¹³ Ex. 22:21-22; Dt 14:28-29; 24: 17,19-21; 26:12-15.

¹⁴ Dt. 10:18-19; 16:11-12

¹⁵ Ex. 22:23; Dt. 27:19.

¹⁶ "When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. 14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; 16 wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop

the temple of the LORD” while we are performing injustices or not giving generously to those in need. This passage, along with James 5:16, clearly teaches that the effectiveness of our prayers is contingent upon our mirroring God’s pleasure in personal holiness and ministry to the disenfranchised. The fact that we are members of the new covenant and have Christ, who as our high priest prays for us, does not mean that God is obligated to “hear” our prayers. Prayer must be understood as existing on a continuum when considering its power to avail undesirable circumstances. **Perhaps as we align ourselves more with the will of God we will begin to experience more answers to prayer and bear more fruit.** Richard Hays sights the above Jeremiah passage and its relationship to Jesus’ temple purging in Mark 11:15-19 in his article *Can the Gospels Teach us How to Read the Old Testament?*¹⁷. Hays writes:

“The OT teaches us to take seriously God’s word of judgment. Jesus’ condemnation of the Temple corresponds typologically to Jeremiah’s: those who oppress the alien, the widow and the orphan...will come under God’s judgment...*And we should pause long and seriously to consider whether the indictment applies to us, amusing ourselves to death here in the world’s seat of luxury* (emphasis mine). Jesus does not defuse such judgement: he repeats and reenacts it¹⁸.”

There will be severe consequences if we do not repent. I fear that the fruit in our basket is nearly ripe (Amos 8:1-6). The letters in Revelation to the seven churches clearly demonstrate that covenant curses apply in the new covenant just as they did in the old covenant! I know of at least one well-respected church leader who feels that Christ is dangerously close to removing our lamp stand (Rev. 2:5). *Lord, please be patient. We have no hope if your Spirit is completely withdrawn from us.*

Although all of Scripture is a witness to God’s desire for us to care for the disenfranchised, the books of Amos and Luke may be particularly helpful for us considering the social and religious circumstances of their original audiences. Amos prophesied when Uzziah reigned over Judah and Jeroboam II reigned over Israel. Both nations, especially Israel, were enjoying abundant prosperity and security due to the decline of traditional enemies and peace between the two nations of the divided kingdom. Unfortunately, this prosperity led to an increase in corruption that in-turn created the need for Amos’ ministry¹⁹. Amos’ audience was living the high life. They were enjoying the best wine, oil and housing – though often at the expense of the poor (2:8). Their purposeful misunderstanding of God’s election and promises of prosperity and protection “gave the people the false impression that they were

doing wrong, 17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:12-17.

¹⁷ *Can the Gospels Teach us How to Read the Old Testament?* Richard B. Hays. Pro Ecclesia. Vol. XI, No. 4, p. 402-418.

¹⁸ Hays p. 411.

¹⁹ The unfortunate correlation between prosperity and corruption seems to be an event that will not be completely conquered until the hour of the kingdom’s consummation. Perhaps the most memorable sermon that I heard during weekly chapel services while I was a seminary student was preached by an Episcopal minister who spoke about the roles of the geography within Israel and its surrounding area. Specifically, he eloquently described the somber cycle of Israel’s movement between the fertile soil of the promise land and the rocky expanses of desert outside the promise land as a means of God blessing and correcting his people.

doing all the right things and believing all the right doctrines. Religion had truly become the opiate of the people in Israel²⁰.” Amos’ warnings of death and exile sounded absurd, if not heretical, to them²¹. The editor(s) of Amos’ prophecies used great skill in communicating the nature, extent and consequences of Israel’s sin. He/she/they placed Amos’ description of the sins of Israel’s seven neighboring nations, and consequently God’s punishment towards them, at the beginning of the book. It is important to note the types of sins that are described. They “are not cultic, dietary, nor ritualistic but issues of justice and regard for human dignity²².” No doubt Amos’ audience reacted with joy at hearing that God was going to judge its enemies - but they were in for a surprise. The editor(s) does not stop with Israel’s enemies but goes on to name God’s own people, both Israel and Judah, as those who are guilty of gross injustice and disregard for human dignity and, who like their neighbors, will be severely judged unless they repent which may persuade God to stay his judgment. Though injustice is never excusable, the injustice practiced by Israel and Judah was even less so because they were the blessed inheritors of God’s law that emphasized human dignity, the need to protect the poor, and the consequences of disobedience. It wasn’t that Amos’ audience didn’t “go to church enough” but rather their “church” attendance, worship songs and sacrifices meant nothing to God because they did not hate evil and love good²³. God didn’t want more “church services” if they would not be accompanied by justice and mercy! Amos 5:14 teaches that the people were sure that God’s presence was with them — but it wasn’t! They were living in denial. God would come to them only when and if they sought good and not evil. “For Amos, proper worship at the temple is intrinsically identical with seeking Yahweh (5:4-6), and this unified with loving good (5:14-15) and establishing justice. Loving good and hating evil are part and parcel of loving God with all your heart (Deut. 6:5)²⁴.” The new covenant church, like our spiritual ancestors of the Old Testament, always faces stricter judgment because of our covenantal relationship with God. As has been previously stated, the New Testament firmly demonstrates that covenantal blessings and curses exist today just as they did during Amos’ time. Although we must never tie the church in America with America the nation/state, God is entirely free to punish America the nation/state as a means of punishing both the church in America for its neglect of MJM and America the nation/state for its opulent living. The whole goal of Amos’ ministry “was to transform [Israel’s and Judah’s] worldview, persuade them to accept God’s evaluation of their situation (emphasis mine), and change their thinking and

²⁰ Smith, Gary. *Amos: A Mentor Commentary*. Geanies House, 1998, p. 15.

“Many people looked at these promises of life, God’s presence, and his protection (cf. 9:10) as unconditional eternal grants of divine favor which were not connected to morality. Amos offers only conditional promises based on a radical change in behavior, but even then he hedges God’s response with ‘perhaps’ in 5:15. The prophets purpose is not to totally deny the validity of all hope in God; his purpose is to explain the basis for expecting the fulfillment of their dreams. The military success of Jeroboam II and the economic prosperity of the upper class enhanced the perception that God was now giving the good life to his people. Amos explodes the deceptive idea reminding them that the privilege of God’s presence must be preceded by an acceptable relationship with God and one’s fellow citizens. The elect status of Israel was not insurance against punishment (3:1-2). Although Amos does not focus on punishment, it is assumed from the context. He emphasis is on the possibility of God’s presence, if the right changes are made... A person’s devotion and free choice are keys to understanding the potential of the future. Yet the future is never known or predictable by humans, since God is free to deal with people according to his eternal plan and divine wisdom. Nevertheless, within the boundaries of freedom, **justice** (emphasis mine) is a compass which points to the future and is a guide to a daily walk that avoids that disastrous Day of Judgment.” Smith p. 231-232.

²¹ Just like with Amos, the idea of God judging the American church sounds absurd and heretical to us but it is surely a very real possibility. Prosperity should not be equated with blessing given in response to piety.

²² Dr. Pratt’s study notes.

²³ Amos 5:15.

²⁴ Smith p. 232.

behavior²⁵.” God no longer speaks to us through prophets like Amos. Instead, he speaks to us through his word and the working of the Holy Spirit. We must begin to accept God’s evaluation, as made known by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, of our situation. **God cannot be pleased about our unwillingness to sacrifice in any significant manner in order to help those in need, and considering our lack of fruit perhaps we should seriously consider the extent to which God’s presence is really with us!** As evidenced by the indistinguishable financial and charitable habits of our lives compared to those outside the church as well as God’s past action toward his people, it isn’t far-fetched to assume that we are currently under some degree of judgment, which I believe manifests itself through a diminishing presence of the Holy Spirit, that may increase and manifest itself by reeking havoc on our material prosperity.

The Gospel of Luke is also helpful in our task of correction. Most scholars surmise that Luke, being a doctor, was a middle-class citizen writing to other middle-class, Hellenistic Christians and citizens²⁶. The similarity between Luke’s audience and a majority of the American church is obvious. A key passage for understanding the structure and purpose of Luke’s gospel is 4:14-30. In this passage Luke describes how Jesus, who had just demonstrated his faithfulness to God as well as his complete alignment with the impulse of God’s Spirit²⁷, announced the beginning of his public, messianic mission. Jesus declared that he was the anointed of God who came to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. This is the mission for which the Spirit anointed him at his baptism in the river Jordan. This was good news indeed! It was “the announcement of the eschatological epoch of salvation, the time of God’s gracious visitation, with Jesus himself presented as its anointed herald²⁸.” The audience’s first response to Jesus announcement is favorable because they assumed that this son of Joseph was going to bring the blessings that they had heard he had done in Capernaum to their hometown of Nazareth. This misunderstanding is quickly corrected as Jesus continues to speak to them. Jesus mentions the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and their healing of two people who seemingly lived at the extreme socio-religious distance from God’s people²⁹. “With these examples, Jesus underscores that ‘good news to the poor’ embraces the widow, the unclean, the Gentile, those of the lowest status³⁰.” It is this fundamental nature of Jesus and his mission that the people will not accept and thus their unwillingness to embrace Jesus and his mission erects an obstacle that prevents them from receiving God’s favor through him. “Hence, Jesus will be unable to carry on his mission in his own hometown because his own people, far from embracing his identity and mission, resist him. Ironically, he who has been anointed to proclaim the year of the Lord’s ‘favor’ (4:19) himself does not receive the ‘favor’ of his own townspeople³¹.” We must embrace the nature of Jesus’ ministry rather than fight against it.

²⁵ Smith p. 17.

²⁶ Blomberg p. 227.

²⁷ Green p.205.

²⁸ Green, p. 212.

²⁹ Green, p. 218.

³⁰ Green, p. 218.

³¹ Green, p. 217.

Dr. Green and I briefly discussed by means of e-mail the audience’s hostile reaction. My question to Dr. Green: “Your explanation of the audience’s hostile reaction is that Jesus makes it clear that he will not act as ‘one of us’ by showing them special

A closer look at 4:18-19 will give us even greater understanding of the nature of Jesus' kingdom and our responsibilities as members of his kingdom. Jesus' reference to the release of prisoners and the oppressed is developed further by Luke in three ways³². First, it implies forgiveness of sins, the removal of guilt before God (7:47-49). "Remembering that forgiveness implies restoration to or entry into the community, this mission of 'release' would have important spiritual and social ramifications (cf. 5: 27-32; 7:36-50)³³." Second, the theme of release implies that the binding power of Satan is broken through Jesus' word and ministry (4:31-44; 13: 10-17). Third, it implies the release from debts (6: 27-36; 7:14-47; 11:4). During NT times, when a person gave to another in need it placed the receiver in a place of debt which opened the possibility of exploitation. For example, the lender, for whatever reason, may place the receiver in debtors' prison thus making it impossible for the debt to be repaid. Jesus said that we should freely give without expecting anything in return. We should forgive the debts towards us so that we don't hold over anyone any obligation/coercion for praise or esteem. Green also emphasizes the importance of the forgiveness of financial debt in his exposition of 11:4 (Lord's prayer)³⁴. Recovery of sight for the blind is realized in both literal and symbolic ways. Jesus literally heals the blind (18:35-43) "but it is also presented as a metaphor for receiving revelation and experiencing salvation and inclusion in God's family (1:78-79; 2:9, 29-32; 3:6)³⁵." Both the themes of release and recovery of sight are the consequence of v19 — the year of the Lord's favor. This language is an obvious allusion to Leviticus 25 and the year of Jubilee. Debt relief and forgiveness were to be the major elements of God's new age (Joel 2:24, 18-27; Is 55:1). Jesus' action of eating and drinking and

favor. Why would that make them angry? I wonder why Jesus' words make them mad instead of making them worry that they were going to miss out on God's favor? You'd think they would respond by saying, 'Jesus, we too need healing. It's ok if you don't show us special favor but please show us at least some mercy!' You say that it was the audience's lack of acceptance of Jesus' identity and mission which kept them from being blessed, but do you think it is possible that it was the nature of Jesus' mission rather than the audience's reaction which kept them from being blessed?"

Dr. Green answers: "It seems to me that the key issue is not so much pride as the implications of the ethics of election. (My having been chosen carries with it the necessary implication that you have not. In the difficult world of the first-century Mediterranean, this would have been all the more important.) This would be exacerbated by a more generally held concept of limited good (there is only so much of a good "thing," like money or grace, so if ol' so-and-so gets it, will there be enough for me?)." In my opinion this explanation is too important not to be included as part of Dr. Green's commentary!

I now believe that the audience's anger was directly connected to their worry and surprise about the future recipients of God's favor. Just as anger is most often a secondary emotion that covers hurt, so anger also covers intense worry (the feeling of being out of control). Worry forces us to deal with the sovereignty of God and to rely on his promises of covenant fidelity. We hate the feeling of being out of control and we often lash out in anger toward God and others in attempts to regain control.

³² Green p. 210.

³³ Green p. 212.

³⁴ "Because of the centrality of 'release' in Jesus' missionary program; and because the Lukan narrative has elaborated the meaning of 'release' to include liberation from demonic subjugation, deliverance from diseases of all kinds, freedom from liabilities defined by the ethics of patronage, forgiveness of sins, and so on, we should not be surprised to discover the central role of forgiveness of sins and debts in Jesus' model prayer. Forgiveness of sins, in fact, is a pervasive motif in the Lukan narrative, and its correlation to the reciprocity of creditors and debtors was noted already in 7:40-47.

Critical to our understanding of forgiveness in this co-test is, first, that we not capsize too quickly the distinction between 'sins' and 'debts' in its two members, and, second, that we not treat the forgiveness entailed in the second member as a necessary condition for the forgiveness of the first... The 'for' of v 4b does not introduce a relationship of *quid pro quo* between divine and human forgiveness, as though God's forgiveness were dependent on human activity (cf. 6:35; 23:34!). Instead, Jesus grounds the disciples' request for divine forgiveness in their own practices of extending forgiveness. As in previous tests (esp. 6:36), Jesus spins human behavior from the cloth of divine behavior; the embodiment of forgiveness in the practices of Jesus' followers in a manifestation and imitation of God's own character." Green. P. 443-444.

There is no mention of forgiving financial debts in the WLC (194) exposition of the Lord's Prayer.

³⁵ Green p. 211.

providing food for the needy (Luke 7:31-35, 9:10-17) would be seen as evidence of the new age. “The idea of Jubilee is both socio-economic and cultic; the two may not be divorced from each other. Christians today must seek to meet people’s physical needs, while at the same time helping them understand that ultimately only God can release them from their oppression, and then fully only in the coming eschaton³⁶.”

By briefly looking at four other passages in Luke (The Good Samaritan 10:25-37; The Rich Fool 12:16-21; The Rich Man and Lazarus 16:19-31; and Zacchaeus 19:1-10) we will learn even more about prosperity, the kingdom and MJM. The parable of the Good Samaritan begins with “an expert of the law” testing Jesus by asking him what he must do to inherit eternal life and who qualifies as a neighbor. Jesus answers both questions. The answer to the first question is to love God and love neighbor. The parable serves as an exposition of Jesus’ command. The lawyer asks about the identity of his neighbor because he wants to know the size of his circle of responsibility. There were Jewish teachings during that time which forbid compassion to Gentiles because doing so would be to condone the Gentile’s sin (cf. Sirach 12:1-7)³⁷. The unknown traveler is beaten and left for dead. Both the priest and Levite saw the victim and passed on the other side of the road. Their behavior probably didn’t surprise Jesus’ audience because technically both of them had good reason not to stop. The Torah forbid either of them from touching a dead body because doing so would keep them from completing their religious duties in the temple. Also, considering that there was normally intense animosity between members of Jesus’ audience made up of peasants and religious leaders, the peasants felt vindicated by the lack of compassion shown by the Levite and priest and were most likely expecting the hero of the story to be one of them – a Jewish peasant³⁸. But Jesus shocks them all with the identity of the third traveler. Samaritans were considered to be religiously and socially equivalent to Philistines and Edomites; they were Israel’s long lost heretical cousins. With this said it is important to note that even Samaritans had their own version of Torah that also provided an “escape clause” to excuse any lack of compassionate action³⁹. The Samaritan, an apostate, shows that anyone who acts in mercy is the true child of God who will surely inherit eternal life. He “saw” and instead of passing he had compassion and acted⁴⁰.

³⁶ Blomberg, p. 220.

³⁷ *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*. Edited by Richard Longenecker. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000. *Strange and Risky Care* by Sylvia Keesmaat. P. 263-285. p. 277.

³⁸ Longenecker/Keesmaat p. 279.

³⁹ Longenecker/Keesmaat p. 281.

⁴⁰ Hultgren, Arland. *The Parables of Jesus*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2000. p. 98.

Reformed theologian and ethicist John Frame uses this passage to demonstrate the fact that “we will often find that the existential perspective supplements the normative.” Seminary Ethics class notes: *More on Imprecations*, p. 4. I believe Frame’s meaning is that the existential, i.e., the Samaritan’s feelings of compassion was the means by which he correctly interpret the normative/Law. In contrast to the Samaritan who felt compassion, the Levite and priest apparently felt no compassion and as a result they did not correctly interpret the normative by protecting and defending innocent life (Lev. 19:34). For further information on Frame’s teachings on Christian ethics see, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Wipf and Stock Publishers: Eugene, 1999. Also, Keller points out that the irony of the priest and Levite’s action is that they were members of Israel’s cultus who were entrusted by God to help the needy. They had neglected the principle of 1Sam. 15:22, i.e., it is better to obey than sacrifice. We can also note that the Westminster Confession further demonstrates its need for reform by not using this passage as a proof text for WLC 58: “How do we come to be partakers of the benefits which Christ hath procured?” Isn’t the WLC question another way of asking How may I inherit eternal life? “Jesus’ closing words [‘Do likewise’]... do not summarize the parable of the compassionate Samaritan (as though the purpose of the parable were to present a moral obligation to act in such-and-such a way). Rather, they return to the original question of the lawyer: ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’

The next two parables about individuals who are identified as being “rich.” In these parables the term “rich” refers to “those with significant resources at their disposal, yet who fail to consider the plight of others⁴¹” as well as not being heavenly minded. At first glance the parable of the Rich Fool describes a man who shows discipline and wisdom in his hard work and planning for the future. Yet God identifies him as a fool because his actions demonstrate no thought towards the vapor like existence of man⁴² and the futility and foolishness of trying to maintain earthly riches at the expense of becoming “rich toward God” by giving to the needy and holding onto earthly possessions with a very light grip.

When considering the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we must be careful not to equate wealth with evil. The rich man isn’t condemned for his wealth, in fact “he is not said to have committed any grave sin, but he lived only for himself. *In that lay his condemnation* (emphasis mine)⁴³.” The rich man appears to be oblivious to Lazarus’ need even though they exist within close proximity. Alrand Hultgren comments,

“The parable presupposes an ancient agrarian economy in which a person like Lazarus is more than just poor. He belongs among the outcasts of society. He is the type of person about whom it would have been socially acceptable for the rich man to be indifferent. The gate and wall around the rich man’s mansion are outward barriers representing psychic and social barriers as well. The parable warns the well-to-do about any arrogance they may have that looks upon the unfortunates of the world as less than human⁴⁴...Interpreters have concluded that the main point of the parable is to be found in the second part (16:27-31). That is to say, the parable is primarily a warning to persons who, like the five brothers of the rich man, still have time to repent and do the will of God. The will of God has been clearly revealed in the law and prophets. *One should pay heed to these. The one who neglects them runs the risk of indifference to the needs of the unfortunates. Such indifference will be met with punishment at the final judgment* (emphasis mine)⁴⁵.”

The account of Zacchaeus is best understood when it is contrasted with the Rich Young Ruler (18:18-30). The decision faced by the young ruler was not only economic but social as well. To give all of your riches away meant that you would have to associate and be identified among the outcasts. This is a severe loss of social status. Ironically, Zacchaeus is an outcast despite his wealth. The actions of the young ruler prompt the question, “Who then can be saved.” The actions of Zacchaeus prompt the response: “Today salvation has come to this

The parable thus serves a hermeneutical function. It interprets the summation of the law provided by the legal expert.” Green p. 425.

⁴¹ Green p. 267.

⁴² James 4:14

⁴³ Morris, Leon.

“There is no mention of any special and outstanding sins of the rich man. Yet in hell he lifts up his eyes being in torment. This is stated, without any further elucidation, as something inevitable and, as it were, as a matter of course. It is not due to his wealth as such, but to the fact that the whole course of his life could be described in the words, ‘There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously everyday.’” Ridderbos p. 327.

⁴⁴ Hultgren p. 115-116.

⁴⁵ Hultgren p. 115.

house⁴⁶.” Ultimately this parable demonstrates who is suitable for the Kingdom. Zacchaeus’ response to Jesus’ need to stay at his house is devoid of traditional spiritual behaviors such as fasting, praying, tithing or even faith! The text says nothing about Zacchaeus’ need for repentance or change of vocation. It seems that these realities are not mentioned by Luke so as to emphasize other themes and actions. Zacchaeus proves through his financial practices that he, the most unlikely of people, is a son of Abraham. Unlike the young ruler, Zacchaeus does not use his wealth as a means of securing his social status⁴⁷.

How can we summarize Luke’s many teachings about mercy, justice and money? First, we must again take into account Luke’s original audience. Blomberg notes:

“As more and more people of some means became Christians, there was greater need for [Luke] to stress the importance of divesting themselves of enough of their resources to help the needy in their midst. At the same time, Luke recognized the spiritual dimension in which the church was reconstituting the remnant of Israel. Only in this way could the purity of Jesus’ radical vision be kept alive and not be domesticated. Thus Luke teaches not so much God’s preferential option for the poor as God’s having compassion for the outcast to the extent that they are willing to respond to his overtures with faith⁴⁸.”

Second, we must remember that Luke does not idealize poverty. It’s never described as a desired condition and those who have the means should help others overcome it⁴⁹. Contrary to the assertions of Liberation theology, Scripture does not support the notion of preferential treatment of the poor by God⁵⁰. Both rich and poor are equally called to repent and believe the good news. Third, Jesus’ intent is not to condemn the rich because they are the possessors of wealth, but to warn them against the self-centered lifestyles that they so frequently displayed⁵¹. **As members of the wealthiest church in the world, we must always be mindful that wealth is considered as a significant barrier to entering the kingdom.** Last, we must embrace “Luke’s theme of the great reversal⁵²” and honestly acknowledge how threatening it is to us. Sylvia Keesmaat says is well:

⁴⁶ Green p. 667.

⁴⁷ Green. P. 672

⁴⁸ Blomberg p. 227.

⁴⁹ Blomberg p. 227.

⁵⁰ “While the materially impoverished of our world should provoke Christian compassion, irrespective of their world-view or religious allegiance, James 2:5 is not teaching anything about automatic religious superiority based on low socio-economic standing, even if it is often the case that the materially poor more quickly recognize their dependence on God than the materially rich.” Blomberg p. 152.

⁵¹ Blomberg. p. 224.

⁵² Blomberg p. 225.

“Like ‘poor,’ then, ‘rich’ is not simply a declaration of economic class; it is related fundamentally to issues of power and privilege, social location as an insider, and arrogant self-security apart from God. ‘Poor’ and ‘rich,’ then, are socially defined constructs – and Jesus is overturning the way these terms have been constructed in ordinary discourse. In effect, he insists, you who are poor are accustomed to living on the margins of society and you who are rich routinely find yourselves surrounded by friends as you use your resources to solidify your position in society, but the reality under which you have been operating has been overturned. By asserting that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor, then, Jesus is redefining the working assumptions, the values that determine daily existence.” Green p. 267.

“Jesus was preaching such a radical redefinition of the kingdom of God in these parables that it is no wonder that certain people began to seek ways to kill him. His message presented a threat to everyone. To wealthy landowners, who had no desire to forgive the debts of their slaves; to the Pharisees, who were concerned about the holiness of Israel and the purity of the nation; to priests and Levites, who could not risk losing their temple positions through possible uncleanness; to the average Jewish peasant, who could not imagine that righteousness would be exemplified by immoral heretics, whom they must now not only love but also emulate. This is the world that Jesus’ [parables] created: one of profound joy and liberation for slaves, debtors, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and the hated – but also one that was a profound threat for the wealthy, the landowners, the prestigious, the healthy, and the acceptable⁵³...Who are the ones whom we do not want to invite into our churches because they will threaten the purity of the community? Who are the ones whom we do not want to share our wealth with because they do not deserve it? Who are the ones whom Jesus is calling us to invite to the communion table, the ones we would not want to sit with or expose our children to? Who are the ones whom we are sure do not deserve to share our abundance because they cannot pay anything – those too schizophrenic, or too homeless, or too deeply entrenched in welfare?⁵⁴.”

⁵³ Longenecker/Keesmaat p. 282-283.

⁵⁴ Longenecker/Keesmaat p. 264-265.