Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.1 March, 2024; p.g. 199 – 209; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE TREATMENT OF THE POOR IN THE PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN NIGERIA IN THE LIGHT LUKE OF 16:19-31

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ABSTRACT

Nigerians, both Christians and non-Christians alike, are entangled in the web of poverty, which is both palpable and agonizing. Thus, the country is an example of a nation characterized by mass poverty in the midst of plenty. In the midst of this intransigent poverty is the affluence and stupendous wealth of the Pentecostal congregations. Extravagant lifestyles of rich pastors, gigantic buildings, exotic cars and private jets are the hallmarks of the Pentecostal church's wealth. Some pastors acquire jets, own houses in choicest cities and travel to any country of their choice for medical care and relaxations. Surrounded by this "affluence" are thousands of poor, unemployed and barely surviving church members who are forced to endure a variety of excruciating situations and deplorable circumstances in order to provide for their families. This calls for the need to examine what the Lukan Jesus would have wanted the church to do with her wealth. Employing a comparative and exegetical methods, this paper examines the treatment of the poor in the Pentecostal churches vis-à-vis the Lukan parables of the rich man and Lazarus. The paper points out that, unlike the rich man in the passage, if the rich Christians in Pentecostal churches should provide the necessary accoutrements that make life easy and enjoyable to their poor brethren, it will help bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in the church, consequently, giving the poor a sense of belonging in the church.

Keywords: Pentecostal church, Treatment, Poor, Rich man, Parable.

Introduction

Despite the fact that there is much emphasis on prosperity gospel, financial breakthrough and breaking of the bondage of poverty within the Pentecostal fold in Nigeria, there is still high level of poverty and impoverishment among the worshippers in these churches. This is because the basic indicators of poverty such as low income level, poor living standard, among others largely characterize members of these churches. Again, regardless of the fact that the poor make up the majority of Pentecostal church membership, they are sometimes disregarded and disadvantaged in terms of recognition and pastoral promotion since they do not have the financial wherewithal to support the church in the same way that the wealthy do.Many Pentecostal congregations build schools that the poor cannot attend and hospitals

they cannot afford. Also, the gap between some rich pastors and poor members continue to widen as some pastors use resources contributed by members for themselves, instead of investing in the communities, where the poor members will derive benefit.

Hence, the practice by some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria do not challenge the status quo but somewhat sustain it as members are not taught to challenge the systemic root causes of poverty in the socio-economic structures. Many members who have given wholeheartedly to the church and have participated in faith healing are yet to enjoy the miracle of prosperity and healing, as they continue to live in the midst of intransigent and abject poverty and deprivation. Thus, it becomes necessary to ask the following questions: what is the effect of the pervasive presence of the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria on health status, education and income of the people? How do we possibly explain the massive acceptance of prosperity gospel that is 'trending' in many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, in the midst of abject poverty and lack engulfing its members? Premised upon the foregoing questions, and many more, the present work aims to unequivocally point out that there are salient lessons that can be gleaned from an exegetical appraisal of Luke 16:19-31 in combating this awful treatment of the poor in the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. This pericope is considered appropriate for this work because it contains various lessons aimed at ensuring that the poor should not be neglected in the society. Hence, the lessons deduced from the passage will be instrumental in ameliorating and enhancing an improved treatment of the poor in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and other Pentecostal churches all over the world.

Examination of the Concepts "Poverty and Poor"

Poverty is difficult to conceptualize in clear terms since it affects many aspects of human life, including physical, moral, and psychological well-being. It manifests itself in various ways depending on the type and severity of human deprivation. Thus, a study of relevant literatures on the concept of poverty reveals that there is no general consensus on any useful definition of poverty because poverty impacts various facets of the human experience. Despite this conceptual or definitional difficulty, many scholars believe that poverty denotes a state of scarcity. Olatomide (2012:87),notes, for example, that "most analyses follow the conventional view of poverty as a result of insufficient income for securing basic goods and services". In the middle of this consensus, it is needful to thoroughly evaluate how scholars have variously conceptualized poverty. This evaluation is essential as it will help find further areas of convergence and divergence among scholars.

Poverty is typically characterized as a man's inability to obtain his basic survival needs due to scarcity of resources. This state is frequently associated with need, a lack of resources, and hardship in a variety of situations. Hence, according to Anyanwu (1997), a person is considered poor if his or her income falls below the bare minimum required to meet basic needs. This is referred to as the 'poverty line'. It bears mentioning that what is required to address fundamental needs varies with time and civilization. As a result, poverty levels vary across time and place, and each country uses lines that are suited to its level of development, societal norms, and values.In the view of Arada (1986), the poor are people who are oppressed, marginalized, and hungry; those whose fundamental right to existence is jeopardized. Arada's remark plainly refers to some of the causes and consequences of poverty. He sees poverty as a problem inflicted by the 'haves' (ruling powers and the bourgeoisie class) on the 'have nots' (deficient and impoverished) portions of society. Although his point of view

is valid, it is distorted in the sense that poverty can also be caused by oneself. For example, one may be poor as a result of sloth or indolence.

Indeed, in the Old Testament's third division (The Writings), particularly in the book of Proverbs, poverty is commonly associated with and attributed to sloth or laziness. For example, Prov 24:33-34 records "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior" and Prov 20: 13 writes "Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread". In her work, Ityoban (1999),asserts that under normal circumstances, every human ought to acquire some basic necessities in order to live an enjoyable life. In the opposite direction, when basic needs are not supplied, life becomes unpleasant. As a result, she believes that anyone who lacks the basic essentials of life is destitute and unable to live properly. Furthermore, she maintains that having human basic needs is vital and should not be regarded a luxury. From Ityoban's assertion, it can be gleaned that the basic human needs are just necessary for existence. It should be noted that a need is something which is required because it is essential, not just because one would like to have it.

According to Encarta Encyclopaedia Britannica, "poverty is described as a lack of conventional or socially acceptable amounts of money or other items necessary to make life enjoyable and comfortable. Poverty is seen as the root of more societal problems like crimes, diseases, high mortality rate and other major issues (Oko,2020). Poor people are sometimes forced to make difficult and unpleasant decisions." Poverty, according to the above description, tends to be distasteful and disapproved by any person or society as everyone desires to live a life of comfort and enjoyment. Poor people are frequently looked down on and relegated to the background of any society or organization. The definition's second component addresses the repercussions of poverty. A poor man would naturally do things he would not have done if he were rich. Often, a poor man has no choice when it comes to things like job opportunity, the quality of education to give to the children, dressing, feeding etc. In short, the poor do not have access to what the rich have access to. The poor cannot afford all the basic needs of life at the same time. They have to forgo one in order to have the other. Therefore, in Pentecostal churches, the poor or impoverished are church members who are unable to obtain the basic necessities of life or meet their fundamental needs.

A Brief Historical Evolution of Global and Nigerian Pentecostalism

The origin of the global Pentecostal movement is a complex issue, with some scholars arguing that the experience of Pentecost in the Bible marks the beginning of the movement, while others see it as an offshoot of the powerful revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Anglo-Saxon world. Others, like Martin(2002), see Pentecostalism as an extension of Methodism, spearheaded by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. Some scholars also emphasize the American origins of the movement, with Charles Parham and William Seymour leading significant revivals in the early twentieth century. Parham is credited with pioneering Pentecostalism among North American whites, while Seymour is seen as championing the movement among American blacks through the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles. Recent Pentecostal historiography also recognizes Seymour as playing a more crucial role in the early days of Pentecostalism (O' Connor, 1968). However, examining the movement's rise within specific localities like Nigeria is more productive, given its diverse origins.

Christianity in Nigeria began in the nineteenth century with various missionary groups, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Wesleyans, Roman Catholic Mission, America Baptists, and Presbyterian Mission. The Pentecostal movement began in the twentieth century and developed through three phases. The first phase, originating in the 1930s, involved interactions between indigenous Pentecostal forms called the Aladura and foreign denominational churches from the USA and Britain. The Aladura movement, which began in the early 1920s, sought deeper spirituality and reawakening for certain Christians. The movement was characterized by practices such as "tarrying" for the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, effective prayer, visionary guidance, and a more spontaneous African style of music and worship.

The contact of the leaders of the Aladura movement and the doctrines and practices of the Apostolic Church, which they found agreeable, as pointed out by Ukpong (2014),led to a warm relationship between the two. The result of this was the emergence of a group of churches distinguished by the practices of "tarrying" for the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, as well as by a concern for effective prayer, visionary guidance, and of a more spontaneous African style of music and worship. All these were not new to the Aladura movement; they were indeed the original Aladura trademarks. What the Apostolic Church connection did was to reinforce the tenets and inclinations of the Aladura and to give it a more Pentecostal twist. Indigenous Pentecostal churches such as the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and the Redeemed Christian Church of God clearly epitomized this dialogue with their emphasis on miracles, healings, glossolalia and fervent prayers (Onyinah, 2010).

The second phase of Pentecostal development in Nigeria occurred after 1931 when indigenous churches emerged in the Pentecostal mold. Such churches included the Assemblies of God (1940), which rose to prominence in the eastern part of Nigeria, the Full Gospel Apostolic Church (1949), the Apostolic Faith, and the Foursquare Gospel Church (1955).These and other Pentecostal churches of the time grew increasingly angry of not just the apparently 'cool' mainline churches, but also of the Aladura churches for accepting aspects of traditional African religion (Kalu, 1978). This second phase, lasting about two decades, saw the rise of interdenominational campus fellowships, amplification of the holiness message, and a strong emphasis on biblical inerrancy. This development was not unique to Nigeria but characterized Pentecostal transformation in other parts of Africa. The Deeper Life Christian Ministry, founded by W. F. Kumuyi, was a product of this phase, which was also characterized by an evangelistic fervor (Larbi, 2002).

The contemporary period, dating back to the early 1990s, saw a shift in the neo-Pentecostal movement in Ethiopia. During this period, Ethiopian neo-Pentecostal movement underwent a transition. The classical "holiness doctrine" was eased during this period, and a greater emphasis was placed on the prosperity gospel and faith. Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Sword of the Spirit Ministries, Christ Embassy, Fountain of Life Church, House on the Rock, and Daystar Christian Center were among the new churches founded by young, educated professionals that used modern marketing methods. These churches also took over unconventional public spaces for worship, resulting in a visible explosion in the Pentecostal movement. Meanwhile, the socio-political context within which this explosion took place was characterized by tremendous tension occasioned by the oppressive military regimes of

General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985–1993) and General Sani Abacha (1993–1998) (Falola, 1999).

The masses' immense miseries, impoverishment, and sufferings as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme drove many to Pentecostal churches that promised wealth, breakthroughs, and healing of physical and other sorts of psychosomatic maladies. The failure of the state as a modernizing agent thus expanded "the political space for religious actors, who minister not only to individual needs, but also diagnose and prescribe spiritual solutions to the nation's political and economic problems" (Kalu, 1978). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the socio-political situations in Nigeria gave abundant opportunity for the expansion of the plethora of Pentecostal churches, resulting in the widespread acceptance of the Pentecostal faith by Nigerians. Thus, the poor in the Pentecostal churches are made to believe that when they raise their donations above their heads, heaven will quickly recognize the giver and there will be financial breakthrough (Oko and Umana, 2022:265). This explains why many impoverished people seek financial freedom by attending Pentecostal churches so as to break free from the bonds and chains of poverty.

The Poor in Nigerian Pentecostal Churches

The Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, as in other places are composed largely by the marginalized and the disenfranchised members of the society. Since many Pentecostal churches place immense emphasis on the need to be prosperous, both physically and spiritually, many who throng to Pentecostal churches are people looking for prosperity, and being conscious of this fact, many of the Pentecostal ministers have turned to prosperity preachers. Thus, the desire of many Nigerians to be liberated from the shackles of poverty explains the massive embrace of people to the Pentecostal churches. It must be noted that the messages of prosperity and the get-rich-quick syndrome in Nigeria today are products of bad economy. Many Pentecostal pastors therefore capitalize on this situation to exploit the masses and to hold them spell-bound in their fold. This is why there are many poor people in the Pentecostal churches, who throng there to gain financial breakthrough, by breaking away from the chains and bondage of poverty.

Unfortunately, these people who warmly embrace the Pentecostal strand of Christianity are not treated the same and accorded equal status like the rich folks. Also, many members of these Pentecostal churches, beside the promise of spiritual blessings, which is only realizable through seed sowing, continue to live in abject poverty in the midst of the affluence of the church. It is important to state categorically that some Pentecostal churches, especially in time past, have tried to fight the cause of the poor and the oppressed by acting as vital agents of social transformation. In order to better the lives of their members, these churches have undertaken and continue to undertake many social, economic and community development projects to salvage the situation of the poor. For instance, many churches have used their finances in assisting the poor both within and outside the church by giving freely to the poor, caring for widows, taking in destitute and orphans, visiting the sick, and caring for the dying. Other than almsgiving and hospitality, some Pentecostal churches play salient role by providing educational opportunities for the poor members.

Recently, many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have not done very well in helping the poor. Many pastor, especially of the Pentecostal denominations are wallowing in affluence while

majority of their members keep living in penury. There is gross social abuse in many Pentecostal congregations which has given room for rich to cheat and exploit the poor and the needy (Essien[a], 2020). It is indeed regrettable that the Church that was engaged in social action and social concern in the time past has of recent lost this sense of care for the poor in the church and the society and it is on a daily basis becoming worldlier. Although the Pentecostal churches have championed programmes and projects aimed at ameliorating the deplorable situations of the poor, it goes without saying that many of these projects have produced minimal or have not achieved the anticipated results. For instance, many Pentecostal churches provided educational opportunities for their members by establishing schools, unfortunately, these schools are profit-oriented enterprise and not for the benefits of the poor in the church and others in the society. This is diametrically opposed and strikingly antithetical to the original aim of the missionary schools.

Ukpong (2014),explicates that the Nigerian Church was originally designed to be problem-solving which resulted in the establishment of mission primary/post-primary schools and hospitals aimed at alleviating poverty. This means that the Church was interested in the spiritual needs of the people as it was in their educational, health, and economic needs, thereby, giving holistic attention to the needs of the community. Today, Churches run schools and hospitals that are out of the reach of their poor members. Many schools and hospital owned by churches are far expensive for their poor members to afford. By devoting its resources to building and maintaining such institutions meant only for the rich in the society, the church is widening the already wide-gap existing between the rich and the poor.

Also, the wealthy pastors of Pentecostal congregations are so far-removed and completely disconnected from the plights and difficulties that plague the poor members. The poor can barely feed themselves once a day, and many are forced to endure a variety of excruciating situations and agonizing circumstances in order to provide for their families. Many people die every day from treatable ailments due to a lack of funds to pay their medical expenditures. Others live in slums and dilapidated apartments because they cannot afford their rents. In contrast, the pastors of these churches live in penthouses, eat luxuriously and sumptuously every day, and are occasionally flown abroad for medical check-ups. Their children attend foreign schools and are oblivious of the economic condition that their disadvantaged or less fortunate members face. Some of the pastors of these congregations seem to stand shoulder to shoulder with the politicians in terms of glamour and power. Like the politicians, they have security guards, whose body language is more secular than religious. They are also accompanied by Personal Assistants and they move on a motorcade for functions (Ekanem, Essien&Okon, 2022). Hence, in Pentecostal congregations, there is a wide disparity between poor members and affluent ministers. While the church is tremendously affluent and enormously rich, its followers are pitifully poor. The poor's only hope is in the *eschaton*, where their misery and filth will be replaced with eternal happiness and pleasure on Abraham's bosom. This is particularly unfortunate given that the church should advocate for the needy and pastors should serve as role models for the congregation.

Luke 16: 19-31 and the Treatment of the Poor

The Text in Greek

19 Ἄνθρωπος δέτιςἦν πλούσιος, καὶ ἐνεδιδύσκετο πορφύραν καὶ βύσσονεὐφραινόμενος καθ᾽ ἡμέραν λαμπρῶς. 20 πτωχὸςδέτιςὀνόματι Λάζαρος ἐβέβλητο πρὸςτὸν πυλῶνα

αὐτοῦεἱλκωμένος 21 καὶ ἐπιθυμῶνχορτασθῆναι ἀπὸ τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆςτραπέζης τοῦ πλουσίου· ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱκύνεςἐρχόμενοι ἐπέλειχοντὰἕλκη αὐτοῦ. 22 ἐγένετοδὲ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχὸν καὶ ἀπενεχθῆναι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶνἀγγέλωνεἰςτὸνκόλπον Ἀβραάμ· ἀπέθανεν δὲ καὶ ὁ πλούσιος καὶ ἐτάφη. 23 καὶ ἐντῷᾅδη ἐπάρας τοὺςὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ, ὑπάρχωνἐν βασάνοις, ὁρᾷ Ἀβραὰμ ἀπὸ μακρόθεν καὶ Λάζαρον ἐντοῖςκόλποις αὐτοῦ. 24 καὶ αὐτὸςφωνήσας εἶπεν· πάτερ Ἀβραάμ, ἐλέησόνμε καὶ πέμψονΛάζαρον ἵνα βάψῃτὸἄκροντοῦ δακτύλου αὐτοῦὕδατος καὶ καταψύξῃτὴνγλῶσσάνμου, ὅτιὀδυνῶμαι ἐντῇφλογὶ ταύτῃ. 25 εἶπεν δὲ Ἀβραάμ· τέκνον, μνήσθητιὅτι ἀπέλαβες τὰἀγαθά σουἐντῇζωῇσου, καὶ Λάζαρος ὁμοίωςτὰ κακά· νῦνδὲὧδε παρακαλεῖται, σὺδὲὀδυνᾶσαι. 26 καὶ ἐν πᾶσιτούτοιςμεταξὺ ἡμῶν καὶ ὑμῶνχάσμα μέγα ἐστήρικται, ὅπωςοἱθέλοντεςδιαβῆναι ἔνθεν πρὸςὑμᾶςμὴδύνωνται, μηδὲἐκεῖθεν πρὸςἡμᾶςδιαπερῶσιν. 27 εἶπεν δέ· ἐρωτῶσεοὖν, πάτερ, ἵνα πέμψῃς αὐτὸνεἰςτὸνοἶκοντοῦ πατρόςμου, 28 ἔχωγὰρ πέντεἀδελφούς, ὅπωςδιαμαρτύρηται αὐτοῖς, ἵνα μὴ καὶ αὐτοὶἐλθωσινεἰςτὸντόπον τοῦτοντῆς βασάνου. 29 λέγειδὲ Ἀβραάμ· ἔχουσιΜωϋσέα καὶ τοὺς προφήτας· ἀκουσάτωσαν αὐτῶν. 30 ὁ δὲεἶπεν· οὐχί, πάτερ Ἀβραάμ, ἀλλ᾽ ἐάντις ἀπὸ νεκρῶν πορευθῇ πρὸς αὐτοὺςμετανοήσουσιν. 31 εἶπεν δὲαὐτῷ· εἰΜωϋσέως καὶ τῶν προφητῶνοὐκἀκούουσιν, οὐδ᾽ ἐάντιςἐκνεκρῶνἀναστῇ πεισθήσονται. (BNT Biblework NT).

Translation of the Text in New International Version (RSV)

19 "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' 27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

In Lukan community, there was a vast difference between the rich and the poor. This understanding is further reinforced by the visuals used to depict the wealth of the rich man and impoverished situations surrounding Lazarus. These imageries include: πορφύραν (porphuran- a purple robe), βύσσον (busson- fine linen) and εὐφραινόμενος (euphrainomenos- merriment and splendor), describing the condition of the rich man; and πυλῶνα (pulona-gate, barricade, barrier, etc), εἱλκωμένος (eilkomenos- housed with sores or covered with sores), ἐπιθυμῶνχορτασθῆναι (epithumonchortasthenan- hungry and desiring to be satisfied) and πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆςτραπέζης (piptontonapotestrapezen- crump that fall from the table). The man wore purple and good linen, indicating his riches and social standing (Vine, 1996). According to Scott (1989), purple and fine linen place the man among the nobility

and at the top of the social scale. Lazarus' sores contrast sharply with the rich man's attire; although there is no mention of Lazarus' clothing, it is claimed that the skin serves as a wardrobe in this context to contribute to the character differences.

The purposeful usage of the word "gate" demonstrated rather than described the rich architectural splendor of a wealthy man's estate. While the wealthy man was having a good time inside, the poor man was starving outside. Lazarus, the poor man, was hungry and wanted to eat crumps that had fallen from the rich man's table. The gate represented a barrier that barred Lazarus from eating at the rich man's table (Wenham, 1991). The crumbs here, according to Keener (1993:36), are regular crumbs or pieces of bread used to sop up the table, and the crumbs that fell from the wealthy man's table would have been enough to maintain Lazarus if he had been allowed to eat them. Keener equally explains that the crumbs contribute to the tone of the story; the reader's sympathy is piqued because Lazarus did not expect much from the rich man, only crumbs for survival. The wealthy man's table, where Lazarus had no communion, could be contrasted with God's table in the kingdom of God, as mentioned in Luke 22:30. This image of a table with bread crumbs contrasts with God's banquet, as depicted by the term "Abraham's bosom" subsequently in the text.

Death (thanatos) and the afterlife are extensively discussed in Luke 22-31. It is something that has to do with the hope of the resurrection. Verse 22-31 are concerned with theological eschatology. It is eschatological in the sense that it deals with what happened immediately after Lazarus and the wealthy man died. Seeing the Jewish patriarch Abraham, as depicted in the account of Lazarus and the rich man's afterlife event, provides the rich man's interaction with Abraham a Judaistic cultural backdrop. The story of Abraham and the rich man is told from a Jewish point of view. According to the discourse, they share a particular relationship because they address each other as father and son. According to Lehtipuu (2004), Abraham's role in the afterlife in this story acts as an appropriate spokesman for God as well as a companion and consoler to Lazarus.

Furthermore, being an Abrahamic descendent means being a member of God's family, and Abraham may be understood in the story as an authoritative voice who mediates God's judgment. Abraham's main role serves as an argumentative tool to explain God's and Jesus' points of view, which the implied reader should understand and so serves as a key to the narrative's interpretation. The wealthy man is a descendant of Abraham, a venerated figure who embodies the Jewish people's ancestral foundation, and being referred to as Abraham's son is an honor. To the dismay of the Jewish audience, designating Abraham a parent does not appear to help the rich man. In this sense, Lehtipuu believes it was intended to highlight the rich man's fatherly address to Abraham as a reminder of John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:8: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" Do not brag to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor," because I tell you, God is capable of raising up kids for Abraham from these stones". Finally, Lazarus was a wonderful person in heaven, whereas the rich was a suffering person in hell, not because he was wealthy, but because riches was his god on earth.

Luke 16:19-31 in the Nigerian Pentecostal Context

The socio-economic situation in which Jesus told this story benefited the small ruling elites. It was a system that concentrated wealth in a few hands, a society where the poor became poorer, and the rich became richer. Even though poor Jews hated exploiters, since financial

profit was attached to being a rich man's steward, many accepted to serve rich people, and some even aligned with these exploiters. In this case, the poor in Luke's community includes the sick, beggars (Luke 16:20), lepers-the outcast (Luke 17:12ff), widows (Acts 6:1) and the likes of them. These categories of people rely on the mercies of the rich. Luke 16 is situated in the above socio-economic background and such situation is not farfetched in Nigerian Pentecostal context especially when we look at it from the view point of the dehumanized members of the church, who are suffering in the midst of plenty and in the hands of some rich oppressors. For instance, just as there was a biting economic situation in the Lukan period that warranted the willingness of the poor to work for the rich in order to improve their financial situation, the biting and deplorable economic situation in Nigeria has caused people to embrace Pentecostal churches in an attempt to be liberated from the shackles of poverty. The pursuit of wealth and health, which are frequently emphasized by these Pentecostal churches have attracted many people to the fold.

Astonishingly, to succeed materially and spiritually, members of the Pentecostal churches are enjoined to give sacrificially to the church as the magnitude of their giving is proportional to their level of blessing. Many members who practiced faith giving and attend faith healing are yet to enjoy the miracle of prosperity and healing, as they continue to live in the midst of intransigent abject poverty and deprivation. The expression that the rich man feasted sumptuously every day is a typical image of the rich members and pastors of many Pentecostal churches who do not make provision for the poor members. Just like the rich man, the pastors are feasting sumptuously and lavishly from the offerings of the poor members, and the members themselves are incapacitated to provide their basic and daily necessities.

The boundary created by the gate in the architectural setting is elaborated by the boundary in the social setting of table fellowship. The social annihilation of the poor in both the church and human society in the Bible and the Nigerian contemporary milieu is a form of dehumanization of the poor. Some rich members and pastors in many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria create a picture of superiority over the poor hence they treat the poor with utter disdain and only giving them menial jobs in domestic and cooperate environment. When the rich man allowed the dog to lick Lazarus's sore and did not open his gate for him to come in and eat, it shows dehumanization and uncaring attitude for the poor.

What is wrong inviting the poor man to his house to feed him every day and treat his wounds? This question should be answered by every rich member and pastor in many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Hence, the shutting of the gate against Lazarus typifies the absolute disconnectedness and separation of the rich pastors and members from the deplorable existential realities plaguing poor members in the church. Surprisingly, both the rich man and Larazus have common ancestor, Abraham, whom they both addressed as father. In the church, Christians claim to be the followers of the same Lord and God, yet the disparity between the members is staggering. The claim to Abraham as a father by the rich man was not enough to exonerate him from his ostensibly wicked and unconcerned attitude towards Lazarus while on earth. Like the rich man, there is eternal irreversible suffering for those whose idolatrous materialism manifests itself in the neglect of the needy.

Both Lazarus and the rich man were eclipsed by death as the unavoidable or inevitable end of all human beings (Essien[b], 2020), and their eschatological fates were drastically changed.

While Lazarus was languishing in poverty and agony on earth, the rich man is now anguishing in eternal torment. Thus, the rich man sought help from Lazarus despite his refusal to assist Lazarus while on earth. Like the rich man, many wealthy members and pastors of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria who prefer to degrade, debase and dehumanize the poor rather than help them will be held accountable for their financial stewardship in the *eschaton*. In this context, God does not judge the rich based on their personalities but on their relationship with other people, especially the poor. 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 was a righteous man irrespective of his poverty. The rich man was not punished for being rich but he was punished for not using his riches to bless the poor around him. This is how many rich members and pastors in some Pentecostal churches treat the poor in their midst. Irrespective of one's financial status, no one will evade God's judgment.

This story can be seen as an apologetics against the dehumanization of the poor in the society. It also appeals against greed and the desire for self-indulgence. Jesus wants Christians to see the great spiritual danger in that path. God's judgment against the rich man showed that worldly status does not matter in our dealing with one another rather humans should see fellow human as co-image of God (*Imago Dei*). This story is speaking to the rich not to dehumanize the poor but to use their wealth to bless them. There is a strong lesson every rich Pentecostal church members in particular and Christian in general in Nigeria must learn. The salient lesson that should be gleaned from this passage is that rich Christians should not neglect the plight of the poor who need their help. They should constantly help the less privileged in salvaging their pitiable situation when opportunity presents itself. Unlike the rich man in the passage, the rich Christians should always provide the necessary accoutrements that make life easy and enjoyable to their poor brethren. This will help bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in the church and the wider society. It will also give the poor a sense of belonging in the church.

Conclusion

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus highlights the wide gap that exists between the rich and the poor; a chasm created by man's greed, injustice, and insatiability. Increasingly, our contemporary Pentecostal churches are divided into the haves and the have-nots. In the churches today, there are different classes or categories of the poor: widows, orphans, the homeless poor, the sick, the abandoned, the unemployed, beggars, the hungry, the oppressed, street children, the most vulnerable people, and generally the people who have no access to social needs. Based on the findings of this work, the gap or the dichotomy between the rich and the poor in the Pentecostal churches can be reduced or narrowed through the provision of alms and resources to the poor and the less privilege, the establishment of skill acquisition and entrepreneurial centres for the poor, provision of medical and educational opportunities, financial empowerment, among others. From the exegetical examination of Luke 16:19-31, it was unveiled to us some theological lesson that the church and the society must learn as to the issue of the poor people living around us. Such lessons showed that ungenerosity towards the poor is a sin, status in God's view is immaterial when dealing with others, dehumanization of poor people in the church and 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 among us put

these lessons into cognizance, their attitude towards the poor around them will change and as such they will give a more human face to the poor.

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