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“The Poor will always be with you”: Ethical Implications for the Church and Development in Africa

By

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We live in the world and Africa in particular where the Church that promotes the love of God and neighbor but also harbours the poor as well. However, in the gospels Jesus in Matthew 26:11 echoed the words of Deuteronomy 15: 11 that the “*poor will always be with you*” when a woman poured expensive oil on him preparing him for his death. To most people, it is believed that he meant that poverty is unstoppable, unbreakable, unavoidable and predetermined by God yet it is created by human beings when they disobey God and neglect their neighbor. Christians ought to help each other and witness justice through sharing, clothing and providing shelter for the poor. This paper seeks to delve into the meaning of Jesus’ words and propose ethical implications for Christians. What’s the role of Christians in fighting poverty amongst themselves? Is poverty unavoidable? Is it predetermined by God? Through biblical search and other thinkers, the meaning and implications will be drawn.

Key Words: The poor, ethical implications, Africa, Church

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Introduction

Throughout the world, poverty is a common theme in the ‘academic world’; it is at the centre of world conventions and international organizations and a worldwide concern in religious institutions. About 9.2% of the world or about 689 million people live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day, according to the World Bank. In the United States, 10.5% of the population, 34 million people live in poverty as of 2019. In 2021, there are 490 million people in Africa living in extreme poverty or 36% of the total population. This number is up from 481 million in 2019 (Development Aid, 2021). Regarding the central part of this work, Biblical stories furnish us with the death and burial arrangement of Jesus where we see Jesus being anointed with an expensive perfume by a woman (Matt. 26, Mk. 14 & John 12). Judas’ had a negative response that the expensive perfume should have been sold and the proceeds go to the poor (Matt.26:9) but Jesus responded that “*the poor are always with you.*” Instead, he praised the woman for she did. Keen (2000) argues that Jesus’ reply probably contains an allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11, which promotes generosity to the poor, who will always be in the land (Adeyemo, 2006). Keen emphasizes that Jesus does not play down giving to the poor but plays up what follows: devotion to Jesus himself must precede and inform all other important and godly agendas. If they obeyed the Lord there would be very few poor and needy people requiring help (Deut 15:4-6). However, the law is also realistic in recognizing that disobedience is likely and that there will be some who require help (15:11). Thus, the Israelites were exhorted to be generous and to meet the needs of others (15:7-8, 10-11). In fact, failure to do so is labeled as a sin (15:9) and extreme poverty would lead some to sell themselves into service as slaves (15:12)

Grudem & Asmus (2013) emphasize that the significance of helping the poor is twofold: Jesus says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt.22:39). If we love someone who is poor, we will want to help that poor person. Jesus also said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). If we want to let that light of our conduct shine before others, we certainly should give help to those in need. They quote St. Paul where he says that God has called us to live lives that are characterized by ‘good works’: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). And, certainly one of the good works that God wants us to do is helping those in need. The second reason why we need to help the poor is that the scripture commands us to do so as evidenced in various passages including the following:

- a. If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be (Deut. 15:7-8)
- b. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore, I command you, “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land” (Deut.15; 11).
- c. Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble, the Lord delivers him (Prov. 41:1).

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- d. Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honours him (Prov. 14:31)

Thus, despite of the scriptural messages on poverty, what is on the ground like in the developing countries like in Africa, it is realized that governmental laws and entrenched special interests in a nation can be structural forces that make it impossible for individual people to rise out of poverty. The laws and the powerful elites in the country may keep all the power and retain all the wealth for themselves (Grudem & Asmus, 2013). It is also important to note that whereas poverty is known to mean lack of material things, the poor evaluate their situation by describing their condition in far more psychological and social terms. Also, poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation and voicelessness (Corbett and Fikkert, 2009)

Statement of the Research Problem

Though the church has always taken a keen interest in the alleviation of poverty, there is still a lot that needs to be done with the guidance of the Holy Scriptures. One of such scriptural passage is in Deuteronomy 15: & Matthew 26:11(...*the poor will always be with you...*) but most of the faithful always misunderstand and misinterpret it. Consequently, there is always the evidence of apathy and insensitiveness on the contribution towards the alleviation of poverty. Therefore, this chapter explains the meaning of the verse in relation to poverty in Africa and points out ethical implications for the Church in Africa.

Objectives of the Study

1. To expose the meaning and nature of poverty in Africa in this 21st century
2. To discuss the biblical meaning of the Deuteronomy and Matthew passage on poverty
3. To propose the ethical implications for the church in Africa based on the quoted biblical text.

Review of Related Literature

Andria (2006) stresses that poverty has always existed and is found wherever a poor majority lives next to a rich minority- as is the case in most countries of the world. Throughout the world, poverty is the state of being in which a person lacks the income or other means of support to reliably meet their basic personal needs, such as food, shelter and clothing (World Population Review, 2021). Mwaura (2002), notes that a casual glance at the African continent reveals a situation of pain and suffering for the majority of her people. One sees poverty, oppression, violation of human rights, destitution and desperation where the crisis has manifested itself, among other things, in chronic food shortages, debilitating diseases, pervasive illiteracy, environmental degradation, mismanagement of resources, deteriorating living conditions, shortened life span, corruption, external dependence and crushing foreign debts. And, the World Bank defines poverty as living on less than \$1.90 a day or about \$700 per year, which puts 10 percent of the world’s population below the global poverty line. Poverty is not strictly about measuring household income, income inequality or the need for economic growth. Poverty changes everything about a person’s life experience. It impacts all of a person’s basic needs and touches every aspect of his or her existence. Poverty exists in every country in the world, though it is more pressing issue in some countries than in others. Also it is noted that a fast-growing population is one of the factors that counter poverty eradication efforts across Africa. However, a burgeoning middle class in many countries has seen the overall poverty rate decline. Statistically, in 2021, there are 490

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million people in Africa living in extreme poverty, or 36 % of the total population. This number is up from 481 million in 2019. Although this is an increase of just over 9 million, it represents an overall decrease as the population increased by roughly 30M (Development Aid, 2021).

To some, poverty is likened to disease and some people are in a very sorry state in Africa compared with the western world’s poverty (<https://www.encyclopedia.com>). Others believe it is a curse from God to be born in Africa to suffer and face difficulties with a high rate of poverty with all its effects. However, from a biblical perspective, Andria (2006) argues that poverty does not come from God as supported by Adeyemo (2006), because all that he does is good (Gen 1:25, 31). He created the world that was intended to ensure that all human beings would have everything they needed (Gen 1:29-30). He contends that the reason some people lack what they need is a consequence of the fall, which brought sin into this world (Gen 3). Thus, recognizing this fact is not the same as saying it is sin to be poor. Rather, it is saying that sin lies behind all the economic, social, political, environmental and psychological factors that result into poverty (Grudem & Asmus, 2013).

Mwaura (2002) argues that poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon but is easy to recognize. It can be perceived as deprivation in terms of lacking access to resources or in terms of living in deteriorating or demolished environment, or as the inability to meet basic needs. She further notes that poverty can be seen from a mental or cultural perspective as isolation, loss of direction, hopelessness, apathy and passive suffering. It can also mean the denial of opportunity and choices most basic to human development for example denial to lead a long healthy creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-respect and the respect of others.

Chepkwony (2002) also notes that Africans have been weeping and have been made to weep for a very long time but he also discusses that Africa is endowed with a lot of riches of different kinds that would have made Africa richer and richer. Chepkwony (2002) further raises wealth and poverty issues to have been at the centre of human concern since time immemorial. It is noted that the reality of the plight of the poor and the privilege of the rich cannot be denied in our society today (James 5:1-6; & Amos 6:1-7). Kanyandago (2002) notes that the cries of the poor pierce the night as mothers lose their beloved ones in the hospitals or at home because of the failure to deal with preventable diseases. He laments the wailing of the ritual mourners that rise high during the day as bodies of beloved one are brought home, some of them victims of senseless traffic accidents that can be prevented. Elsewhere it can as well be noted that regrets related to poverty among some people are always observed as they missed opportunities for going to good schools. Others did not go to school at all. Their economic situations are indescribable. For example, Uganda’s poverty estimate data is based on US\$.88-US\$1.04 per person per day as the national poverty line. This measure is much lower than the World Bank’s international figure of US\$1.90 (Devinit, 2021). We shall now go to the bible for the biblical perspective on poverty based on Deut 15:11 & Matt 26:11.

Poverty in the bible based on Deut 15:11 & Matt 26:11

The meaning of “*the poor will always remain with you*” based on (Deut 15:11 & Matt 26:11) ⁷ *If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them.* ⁸ *Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.* ⁹ *Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then*

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*appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.*¹⁰ *Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*¹¹ *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land* (Deuteronomy 15:7-11 NIV)

Before Chapter 15, there evidence that the Bible supports an organized system of caring for the poor ...*at the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands*" (Deut 14:28-29). God told his people to use their tithes every third year for those who were helpless, hungry or poor. These regulations were designed to prevent the country from sinking under crushing poverty and oppression. It was every one's responsibility to care for the less fortunate. Families were to help other family members, and towns were to help members of their community. National laws protected the rights of the poor, but helping the poor was also an active part of religious life. God counts on believers to provide for the needy, and we should use what God has given us to aid those less fortunate. *Thus, Christians are called upon to look beyond their regular giving and think of ways to help the needy.* This helps one to show his or her regard for God as creator of all the people, sharing God's goodness and drawing them to him. It is a practical and essential way to make faith work in everyday life.

God told the Israelites to help the poor among them when they arrived in the Promised Land. This was an important part of possessing the land. Many people conclude that people are poor through some fault of their own. This kind of reasoning makes it easy to close their hearts and hands to the needy. But we are not to invent reasons for ignoring the poor. We are to respond to their needs no matter who or what was responsible for their condition. This raises some questions: *who are the poor in your community? How could your church help them? If your church does not have a program to identify the poor and assist in fulfilling their needs, why not help start one?* In Deuteronomy 15, poverty is not remotely necessary in God's economy but the Lord knows that everyone will not obey his word on the matter: *There will always be poor people in the land.*

Raymond (1993) has stated that human sin will always make people greedy and selfish. Adequate provision must therefore be made for those who are destitute: *if there is a poor man among your brothers.* The Lord knows that kind-hearted and generous people will not always be in the majority so the passage tends to address the innate miser rather than the potential benefactor. Stingy people in the Hebrew community are told to avoid four dangers-a hard heart, a closed hand, an evil thought and a grudging spirit. He argues that Israelites who have been blessed by God are told that, if they become aware of the poverty of one of their brothers, they must not be hard-hearted. It is a serious offence against God if the needs of any poor brother are deliberately ignored. It is also underlined that if God constantly cares for the poor, the rich must studiously avoid them. Nor must the rich time hold back any help he can give to his brother. He is told not to be tight-fisted but open minded (7-8, 11), gladly making help available, albeit by a loan, to a needy member of the same spiritual family.

Furthermore, Raymond (1993) advances the point that anyone who is really mean will be hesitant to loan anything if the 'year of release' is approaching because he might not get the money back. He is therefore warned against such a wicked thought and urged to be generous hearted, whether the money will be returned quickly or not. Not to do so is to sin against the Lord. Even if he decides to give, however, the spirit in which he gives is also

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important. He advises that if the person with plenty decides to help the poor it is not sufficient merely to give them the money they need. The manner in which assistance is offered is as important as the help itself. God is concerned about what is in our hearts as well as what is in our hands. The benefactor must not adopt grudging spirit towards the poor brother he intends to help. God is concerned about motivation as well as obedience. He does not want people to help others in a totally unwilling spirit as God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). Raymond (1993) reminds us that teaching of this kind is not simply restricted to the conduct of pre-conquest Israelites. The eight-century prophets took up these themes with passionate social concern, as they are equally relevant in our own time.

In the gospels, the story of a woman anointing Jesus with perfume is found in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-11). All record Jesus’ response that “*the poor will always be with you*”. In Matthew 26: 11 Jesus back to mind Deuteronomy 15:11 about the quoted verse. This statement does not justify ignoring the needs of the needy. The passage in Deuteronomy continues: “*that’s why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need*”. Here Jesus was not opposed to the poor being helped. However, the opportunity to help them would always be there. But there was only one limited time in which to offer Jesus service. If Mary did not offer service to Jesus now, she might never be able to help the poor at any time. Jesus used the second person plural in the verbs ‘you have’ and ‘you have not’ as he was now addressing the crowd not Judas (Ngewa, 2003). Jesus was not saying that we should neglect the poor nor was he justifying indifference to them. The act and Jesus’ response do not teach us to ignore the poor so we can spend money significantly for Christ

Boaheng (2020) argues that poverty reduction is a worldwide concern yet if the church is to play an effective role in its alleviation, an approach that is both biblical and contextual is required. He adds that there is need to create a paradigm for understanding and alleviating poverty in Africa. Boaheng highlights that, whatever our cultural context, God frowns upon materialism, extravagance, and love for riches. Though Africa is poor, Boahenga (2020) argues that Africa has a rich cultural heritage across African societies which can be a stronger foundation to build upon; rather than importing solutions which are culturally and contextually inappropriate for the global south. He tackles poverty in the context of Old and New Testament, prosperity theology, poverty in the context of Africa and also on the poverty reduction in Africa. Thus, a rich heritage that Africa has needs to be built on so as to alleviate a host of poverty related issues in Africa.

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Implications of “the poor will always be with you” for the church today

Adei (2006) notes that poverty is a recurring theme in the Bible and also the experience of many Africans, for half of those in sub-Saharan Africa live on less than us \$1.00 a day. He argues that many are poor because we live in a world where injustice and skewed economic order may mean they lack access to education, land and other means of improving their material conditions (Jas 5:1-6). Nowhere do the scriptures equate material poverty and piety, and Christians must work to remove the barriers that prevent people from escaping poverty (Lev. 25:38-55, Luke 3:10-14, 18:22; Col: 1). Thus, Christians are called upon to work against anything that is a hindrance to their progress. They are to expose without any fear or favour any form of injustices that hinder people’s social, political and economic development. Matthew 5:13-16 exhorts Christians to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ of the world implying that like salt they need to purify and preserve the society from rotting. Also they need to speak out or condemn evils that cripple development. They are called upon to illumine and give guidance to the contemporary society in matters that hinder the growth and development.

Part of the contribution that the Church can render is the promotion of generosity to alleviate poverty in this 21st century Africa. Andria (2006) argues that if we say poverty is rooted in human nature, and that people are naturally sinful, must we give up the attempt to do anything about poverty? Must we give in to Afro-pessimism, accepting poverty as something we cannot change? God created every human being and he is concerned about their well-being. It is written that Israelites were to be generous by taking care for widows, orphans and foreigners (Deut 24:17-22). As such, all those named would have died in dire poverty. ¹⁷Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.

¹⁹ When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this (Deut 24: 17-22)

The above is about gleaning in the Old Testament but which is still applicable for us today regarding helping the poor and needy. Those harvesting were not to completely harvesting everything but to leave some for the poor. They were not to go to harvest second round. Raymond (1993) says that the sheaf still speaks. He says that even for those of us who will never see it, its message is unforgettable. Innumerable families in our global village long for the “gleanings”. He argues that there is enough to for all if only we would not hoard every grain. He adds that a compassionate God must be grieved about that especially when he has said so much about our responsibility to the needy. Generosity is not foreign to Africa for it is part of our culture. And one does not need to be rich to be generous.

However, a Christian is called to work hard in order to fight poverty. Adei (2006) reminds us of the Bible that speaks harshly to those who are poor because they have not used their God-given mind, strength and resources. Laziness or slothfulness are condemned (Prov.

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6:6-11; 10:4-5; 14:23; 20:4, 1; 2Thess 3:10. He argues that those who work hard, learn a trade, improve their knowledge and skills, are entrepreneurial, learn to save and invest small amounts, and who are faithful to God are often able to improve their material conditions (Prov. 21:5). In addition, the way we spend our money is important. We are not to be like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and spend our wealth on wild living and drunkenness. On alcohol, one survey done tells us that Ugandans drink 11.93 shots of liquor per year on average, which is the second most in the Africa. And of 10 other countries analyzed by US based Moguldom Media Group arm AFKinsider, none comes anywhere close. The Kenyans, the third biggest in AFKinsider’s sample, down 9.72 shots per year; Rwandans drink roughly 9.10 liters per year; and Tanzanians consume only 7.7 (Eagle, 2016). Such lavish spending on alcohol contributes a lot towards poverty and other related evils. We are to use such resources to meet the needs of our family. Those that are rich are also commanded to be “generous and willing to share” (1 Tim 6:17-19). However, this teaching of being generous needs more teaching and even devoted rich Christians need to be examples so that others could emulate them since it is not practically easy to apply. Furthermore, God loves a cheerful giver and throughout the Bible there is emphasis on giving to God, to the poor, and to each other (2 Cor. 9:7). Sometimes this is followed by material wealth and /or spiritual blessing (Prov. 3:9) but this may not always happen. It goes beyond biblical teaching to assume that ‘when we give, we also get’. Believers should give joyfully in gratitude to God but without expecting or demanding immediate monetary returns.

Yet another implication is of the promotion of solidarity: With the commandment of loving a neighbor, we are called to show practical concern for the destitute in church. There is an implication for the church to be inspired by the solidarity of the first century church in Acts of the Apostles. Today the church can help its poorer members by encouraging them to be creative in thinking of solutions and helping them to obtain the training and equipment they need both technically and spiritually. But unfortunately, generosity and solidarity can easily be corrupted by selfish motives. And when this happens these cultural virtues can lead to tribalism, nepotism or the clinging dependence of parasitism. These evils have resulted in there being more poor people than rich people in Africa. The gospel guides our generosity and solidarity, and the same virtues become strong tools with which to build a better world.

The implication of honoring productive work in order to do way with poverty is vital in Africa. A productive society will naturally give higher honor to work of higher quality. One of the reasons for the astounding economic development of Japan was that the Japanese became world leaders in making the highest quality automobiles, photographic equipment, robotics and other electronic products. According to Landes (1999) the factories in Japan instituted the world’s most effective quality controls thus giving high value to the highest quality of work. In this, Christians are called upon to promote work habits that need to be inculcated and reinforced by the society. Workers will take pride in being diligent, thrifty, honest, punctual, courteous, faithful in their performance of work, respectful toward authority, cheerful and proud of their high quality of work. However, it is a known fact that that some countries in Africa indirectly promote corruption leading to poverty of the masses because the same countries trapped in poverty give honour to people who can “game the system” and can as well pay those who are lazy, wasteful, dishonest, unfaithful to commitments, those who frequently late, disrespectful, arrogant, discontented and careless in their work (Grudem & Asmus, 2013). However, the church must continue to exercise her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless without fear or favour in the face of injustices such as corruption (Ruwa, 2001). Fighting against the oppressive structures will contribute greatly towards the attainment of poverty alleviation and development (Pilgrim, 1981).

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Conclusion and Recommendations

The Bible is a rich resource for guidance on poverty related issues. There is a lot it contributes to the understanding of poverty and how it can be elevated. The commandment of *the love of a neighbor* and its implications in poverty ridden continent needs to be practically promoted. If this was to happen, few would remain poor. “*There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.*” —*Deuteronomy 15:11*. Thus there is a need to internalize the entire book of Deuteronomy and the Gospels in relation to poverty (*the poor will always be with you*). We are called to be openhanded instead of being hardhearted or tightfisted towards them—the poor. Generosity and solidarity are part of the ethical virtues to be promoted in Africa than ever before if poverty is to be alleviated. The church needs to work toward the ideal of ending poverty by being *salt and light* (Matt.5 13-16) of the society by stamping out our own selfishness, working for more just systems, and by being generous with our neighbors. The church must continue to exercise her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless and press for reforms. However, this needs to be done in partnership with governments.

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