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**“WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS”  
A CONSIDERATION OF JESUS’  
TEACHING ON POSSESSIONS**

**GWAMNA DOGARA JE’ADAYIBE**

*The Christian Church needs to develop a theology of riches, just as much as a theology of poverty. The contemporary world is marked by commercialism, the open market system and a consumer driven economy. Some elements of the Christian community have bought into this and have fallen into a distorted understanding of the biblical view of riches as they loudly proclaim a prosperity gospel. In this article Dr. Gwamna Je’Adayibe provides us an important anecdote to materialism by examining our Lord’s teaching on material possessions. This is a needed corrective to the prosperity gospel promulgated in various circles.*

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper attempts a discourse on the teaching of Jesus in respect of possessions, or what we might alternatively refer to here, as wealth acquisition. This theme is quite pertinent for a serious reflection today, given the often misunderstood teaching of Jesus on

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it. It is even more acute because as Geza Vermes observes, "it is a central element in Jesus' teaching."<sup>1</sup>

And if every aspect of our lives today should come under the scrutiny of the ethics of the kingdom as David Cook has also corroborated,<sup>2</sup> then we need to go back to the kingdom values, in order to apply them to our daily living. In a country where capital and property acquisition has assumed some unprecedented heights, there cannot be a better time to address this theme as now. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, we shall limit our discussion to Jesus' teaching in Matthew and Luke and how it does relate to our Nigerian experience today. We shall draw challenges which these pose to the Church in Nigeria. For the purpose of illustration, we shall pause here to provide a scenario of the acquisition appetite(s) in Nigeria in order to provide background for our discourse.

### **NIGERIA AND THE ACQUISITION OF WEALTH**

Since the death of the late Nigeria's Head of State, General Sani Abacha, the insatiable quest for acquisition of wealth and property in Nigeria once again came into public focus in its unprecedented and unimaginable proportions. In a country where the better part of its population has been most impoverished and economically deprived in Africa, a few of its leaders and their collaborators have acquired more wealth and property than the assets of some smaller countries in Africa put together. This has made the legendary acquisition and treasures of late President Mobutu Sese Seko<sup>3</sup> a mere child's play in comparison to Nigeria's looting of public property to private pockets by its leaders. From President Ibrahim Babangida to General Abdulsalami Abubakar, looting of state

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 1997, 147.

<sup>2</sup> David Cook, *Living in the Kingdom - the Ethics of Jesus*. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992, 210.

<sup>3</sup> It was President Mobutu Sese Seko who was alleged to have accumulated so much wealth, which surpassed the total assets of Zaire put together.

treasury has assumed almost the status of state policy where even military administrators and their cohorts, literally milked state treasuries dry, leaving empty treasuries for civilian governors to inherit, plus some hanging debts.<sup>4</sup> The resultant effects of all these have been continuous pauperization of the Nigerian people. *Tell* magazine puts it this way: "As recent as 1993, the UNDP noted that four out of every ten Nigerians lived below poverty line. Today, at least seven out of ten Nigerians cannot afford basic needs, according to the UN agency".<sup>5</sup>

Examples of State looting of resources show this: At the death of General Sani Abacha, his loot was put at \$10 billion,<sup>6</sup> apart from shares and other investments. At the exit of the military on May 29, 1999, government announced the forfeiture of Abacha's loot along with his collaborators to include,

Mohammed Abacha- \$250 million; Ismaila Gwarzo - Former National Security Adviser to General Sani Abacha - 16 duplex houses in Asokoro, Abuja, 8 story buildings in Abuja, a two story building in Kano, cash amount of \$2 million, cars and shares in companies. The same was reported of the former Finance Minister, Chief Anthony Ani and Bashir Dalhatu former Minister of Power and Steel. Similar revelations are being uncovered daily.

The Abdulsalami Abubakar's regime left billions of Naira scandal at its exit, most of which, it is believed, went into private hands. These are a few of the revelations which have been made of what seems to be the tip of the iceberg of the nation's wealth into private pockets, which constitute a significant percentage of the nation's annual budget. It is no wonder therefore that the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TI-CPI)

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<sup>4</sup> Since the exit of the military on 29 May 1999, there have been revelations of massive looting of state funds across the country, which has generated the need for a massive probe of past regimes. See *Newswatch*, July 5, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Tell*, Magazine, No. 22, May 31, 1999, 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian*, June 10, 1999, 4.

ranked Nigeria as the most corrupt country in the world in 1996.<sup>8</sup> By Tuesday, 26th October, 1999, Transparency International in its current perception Index (CPI) report, out of 99 countries covered by the survey, puts Nigeria ahead of only Cameroon, which remained at the bottom of the list for the second year running. As Transparency International (TI) rightly observed in the report, the country's public officials were generally ever ready to take bribes.<sup>9</sup> The recently launched crusade of anti-corruption in public and private life by President Olusegun Obasanjo is meant to check this trend.

The questions we pose here become relevant. Why the insatiable taste for wealth acquisition? Why do people accumulate wealth more than they really need, while others starve to death? How do they acquire wealth and property? What place does Jesus' teaching have to play in redirecting our values in respect of wealth accumulation? These are a few questions we shall address.

### JESUS' TEACHING ON POSSESSIONS

The vocabulary of the New Testament on "possessions" is loaded with closely related concepts. These include: treasure, wealth, money, mammon, property, get possession of, acquisition, gaining, riches, means and goods. For example, the Greek has the following renderings:

- 1) *Thesaurus*: Place where something is kept, treasure box, storehouse, storeroom. This is used literally and figuratively (see Matt. 6:19, 21; 3:44; 2:11; 13:52; Lk. 12:34; Mk. 10:21; Heb. 11:26; Col. 2:3).
- 2) *Thesaurizo*: To store up, gather, save up, reserve. (see Matt. 6:19, Lk. 12:21; I Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 12:14; Js. 5:3; Matt. 6:20; Rom. 2:5; II Pet. 3:7).

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<sup>8</sup> Cited by Morgan Y. Gbefwi, in "Biblical references to corruption and the Nigerian response," a paper presented at the Nigerian Association of Biblical Studies (NABIS) National Conference, at Ibadan, July 5-8, 1999, 2.

<sup>9</sup> See *Thisday*, October 31, 1999, 40.

- 3) **Mamonas**: Mammon (personified), wealth, property. (see Lk. 16:9, 11; Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13).
- 4) **Peripoieomai**: To save or preserve for oneself, acquire, to obtain, get something for oneself, get possession of (see Acts 20:28; I Tim. 3:13).
- 5) **Peripoiēsis**: That which is one's own, gaining, obtaining, acquisition, a possession, property. This is the only sense used in non-material context (see Heb. 10:39; I Thess. 5:9; II Thess. 2:14; Eph. 1:14; I Pet. 2:9).
- 6) **Ploutos**: Accumulated wealth, possession of many goods, super abundance of something. (see Matt. 13:22; Mk. 4:19; Lk. 8:14; Rom. 9:23; 11:26; II Cor. 8:2; Eph. 1:7, 18; 3:8; Phil. 4:19; Heb. 11:26; Rev. 5:12).
- 7) **Plouustos**: Rich, riches (Matt. 9:23f, 57; Mk. 12:41; Lk. 12:16; 16:1; 19; 18:23; 19:2).
- 8) **Chrema**: Possessions, property, means, money.
- 9) **Hyparxis**: Property, possessions.
- 10) **Ktēma**: Property, possessions, especially landed property.

*Chrema*, *hyparxis* and *Ktēma* are used as synonymous concepts to mean money, goods, and chattels which can be turned to money (see Matt. 19:16-22; Mk. 10:17-22; Lk. 18:18-23).<sup>10</sup> The Greek derivatives of these words project the same sense of material acquisition, and immense wealth, aimed at promoting a good life.

At the time of Jesus, there was no agreement as to wealth acquisition. Craig Keener has noted that, "ancient teachers like Hillel, a famous Jewish teacher, generally acknowledged the corruptibility of earthly treasure."<sup>11</sup> He further observes that some philosophers taught that people should seek only basic needs, while some felt that people could acquire possessions as long as they did not go out of their way to seek them. The Cynics, for example, owned nothing, and they despised material possessions because

<sup>10</sup> F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 96,130,170.

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary - New Testament*, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 1963, 63.

they brought commitments and anxiety with them. And among Palestinian Jews, the Essenes shared all their possessions communally.<sup>12</sup> The Pharisees, on the other hand, thought of wealth as a reward for keeping the law, a sign of God's favour, while poverty was a curse.<sup>13</sup> A.E. Harvey has also noted that in the second century, there was a community of Jewish Christians who made it a rule to renounce their possessions and become literally poor.<sup>14</sup> Harvey provides an example of a certain Monobazus, the elder brother of Izates, King of Adiabene, who was converted to Judaism in 36 AD and according to tradition, "distributed all his treasures to the poor." When his brothers criticized him for this profligacy, he used exactly the same traditional arguments as Jesus: He was "gathering treasure for the world to come."<sup>15</sup> The Acts of the Apostles also provides examples of communal sharing and ownership of property (Acts 2:45).

Jesus brought out a clear teaching on possessions in Matthew 6:19-24 and Luke 12:32ff 16:13ff. Jesus says,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

Keener has provided a hint for us that because thieves could dig through the walls and steal a strong box in one's home in Jewish communities at Jesus' time, well-to-do people usually tried one of several other methods, to safeguard their wealth, by investing money with money changers, depositing it in a temple for safe keeping, or burying it in the ground or in caves at the risk of rust or

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Guthrie (ed), *The New Bible Commentary*, Revised, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1970, 825.

<sup>14</sup> A.E. Harvey, *Strenuous commands - The ethic of Jesus*, London, SCM Press Ltd., 1990, 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

devaluation in the case of expensive apparel or coin.<sup>16</sup> Colin Brown and others have corroborated Keener that "at a very early period, temples were built with treasure chambers, where gifts and taxes in kind and money could be stored."<sup>17</sup> *Thesaurizo* is used similarly in the sense of storing up treasure, or putting it in safe keeping.

It is against such a background that Jesus advised that treasures be laid in heaven, which also referred to treasure in the world to come.<sup>18</sup> Here, Jesus seems to be laying emphasis on the permanence of "treasures laid in heaven," against the temporal and un-enduring nature of earthly treasures. This is the crux of Jesus' teaching. The idea of "treasures in heaven" (i.e. what wins divine approval and reward in the coming kingdom) is of Jewish import. In later Judaism good works, for example, almsgiving, are a treasure which is stored up as a reward in the world to come, while the interest is enjoyed in this world as well. The rabbis sometimes spoke of treasure from which the scribe draws and of the treasure house of eternal life; i.e. the place where the souls of the dead are stored up.<sup>19</sup> Jesus ends the teaching here in Matthew 6:24, by contrasting God and money in which money is personified as "master", the same with God, as options that one must choose to serve. In some Bible translations "mammon" is used instead of "money." Keener has noted that "mammon", an Aramaic derivative, was used for possessions or money and Jesus seems to be personifying it as an idol.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the only kind of idolatry Jesus warned against was the worship of money.<sup>21</sup> Ralph Earle corroborates this further, when he observes that the word "mammon" was used to refer to "that in which one trusts" or

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<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, Michigan, Zondervan Pub. House, 1986, 830.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Colin Brown (ed.), *op. cit.*, 830.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Teachings of Jesus*. New York, Harpersan Francisco, 1991, 135.



“property”, but always with a derogatory sense of the materialistic, anti-godly and sinful.<sup>22</sup> F.F. Bruce, adds that “mammon” connotes “accumulation”, and “piling up”.<sup>23</sup> Colin Brown, et al, have noted that “in itself the word may be neutral, but it acquired in negative contexts the connotation of possessions dishonestly gained and wealth dishonestly used, as in bribery”.<sup>24</sup> Bruce believes that the derivative is not important as it is the use of the word that determines its meaning. And since the service of mammon is presented in this saying as an alternative to the service of God, mammon seems to be a rival to God.<sup>25</sup> The ancient Israel insisted on following three false gods:

- i) Baalism, more commonly called idolatry,
- ii) Money, and
- iii) Philosophy.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the danger of the “love of money” was a popular theme in the ethical literature of paganism.<sup>27</sup> In the days of Jesus, money was still the same false god of the Jews that it had been in the days of the early prophets.<sup>28</sup> It is against such a backdrop that Jesus used “money” as false god, which some would prefer and invest in, than the exclusive dependence on God.

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<sup>22</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament- One Volume*, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1982, 7.

<sup>23</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 1983, 184.

<sup>24</sup> Colin Brown (ed.), *op.cit.*, 837.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> James S. Kelso, *An Archaeologist Looks at the Gospels*, Texas, Word Book Publishers, 1969, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3; Michigan, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986, 410.

<sup>28</sup> James Kelso, *op.cit.*, 85.

Luke has also provided us with extensive information on Jesus' stance towards riches and the rich.<sup>29</sup> In Luke 12, Jesus teaches about the place of possessions in human living. A certain man had asked Jesus,

'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a Judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'. And He told them a parable thus:

The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'what shall I do?' I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'this is what I will do.' 'I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry'. But God said to him, 'you fool! This night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with any one who stores things up for himself but is not rich toward God (Lk 12:13-21).

It is important to recognize that the parable focuses upon the accumulation of additional goods by those who already have enough for their needs. Today, we measure the worth of an individual largely in terms of his possessions,<sup>30</sup> and "our standards of success are almost fatally entangled with the lust for acquisition."<sup>31</sup> This critique against the "rich fool" here is that he did not think of sharing with his poor neighbors. He thought only in the first person, "what shall I do", "I will do this and that", and his life got lost in his livelihood. "He was absorbed into his own

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<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel*, New York, Orbis Books, 1978, 25.

<sup>30</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1983, 104.

<sup>31</sup> George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1973, 133.

ownings".<sup>32</sup> Wealth tends to trap us into self-absorption, materialism, and insensitivity to others.<sup>33</sup>

The "rich fool" also thought that he could live long while he re-organized his warehouses for more accumulation, before he sits to enjoy them. He did not acknowledge God as the source of his wealth. He had a false sense of security, which had built in him a wrong sense of values on how to use his wealth. He did not invest in the future, in God's own bank. He thought more in the typical Epicurean fashion according to the mood of the day. "Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry". He was thus consumed in the deception of his wealth. Jesus calls his reasoning, "fool-hardy", since he does not own his own life, but was granted life by God, who decided to take it at will. The "rich fool" was rich outwardly, but empty in the sight of God. Boice has also noted that "if that rich materialist is called a fool, it puts him right up there in the company of the God-deniers" (as in Ps. 14:1 and 53:1).<sup>34</sup> People who invest in themselves outside God are empty and poor before God. They will inherit empty treasures in the world to come. The parable is "a potent reminder of the folly of living for this world's possessions"<sup>35</sup> and a critique of "all kinds of greed," as Paul says in Ephesians 5:5, which is also called *idolatry*. Perhaps the Spanish proverb captures it all, that "there are no pockets in the shroud."<sup>36</sup>

Jesus lived by what he taught. He had no time to acquire wealth and property. He once said; "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has no where to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58). As Lightfoot expresses it, Jesus was born in an inn and in a borrowed stable, commenced a life of poverty lasting until he died naked on the cross.<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Cassid has noted that reference to those who are "choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>33</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *op.cit.*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 1989, 139.

<sup>36</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *op.cit.*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Herbert Lockyer, *op.cit.*, 128.

life", as in the parable of the sower, is a reminder that in Jesus' view, "the patterns and practices common to the rich are not happy ones."<sup>38</sup> Riches and accumulation of wealth do not bring happiness apart from anxieties, fears and insecurity. Lockyer has corroborated this when he notes that, "money cannot buy the greatest blessings in life".<sup>39</sup> And quoting Izaak Walton's *Complete Angler*, says: "Look to your health; and, if you have it, praise God, and value it next to a good conscience, for health is the second blessing that we mortals are capable of, a blessing that money cannot buy."<sup>40</sup> God's riches are without money, and without a price. No matter how much or little we have of money, it cannot secure deliverance from sin, peace with God, and life eternal.<sup>41</sup> These plain truths are ever pertinent for even the Nigerian church to appreciate.

In Luke 16, Jesus also condemns the Pharisees who were "lovers of money", to the utter contempt of the plight of the poor amidst them, as is illustrated in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man did not go to hell because he was rich but because he allowed his riches to enslave him, making him callous to the needs of others.<sup>42</sup> The point of the parable and the sayings is to teach wise stewardship of worldly goods so that, when their use is past, there will nevertheless be an enduring benefit both for those who have benefited from such wise stewardship and for those who have exercised it.<sup>43</sup>

The unconscious hold that wealth can lay on a good moral man and how it can blind him to the realities of responsible living is illustrated in the episode of the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-25. The rich ruler thought he had kept all that was necessary to make him good to inherit eternal life; but he could not. Jesus told him, "You still lack one thing, sell everything you have and give to the

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Cassidy, *op.cit.*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *op.cit.*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Colin Brown (ed.), *op.cit.*, 832.

poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then, come, follow me." Luke records that the rich ruler was enraged, "because he was a man of great wealth" (Lk. 18:23). Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:24). This sums up Jesus' teaching on wealth and possessions.

Keener has noted that Jesus' saying here reflects a Jewish figure of speech for something impossible.<sup>44</sup> But it was not totally ruled out for the rich to inherit eternal life, hence the phrase, "how hard". Kelso has posed this question, and an answer, "what then was Christ's attitude toward wealth? It is identical with that taught in the Old Testament condensed into a single word. Christ's attitude toward money was stewardship."<sup>45</sup> It must be used responsibly.

Further gleanings from Jesus' teaching on possessions reveal some more insights. Jesus taught that "to be a member of the intimate group that traveled with him was to accept poverty as a condition of life and most certainly to be a son of the kingdom was to sit loose to all possessions."<sup>46</sup> And while Jesus noted that family relationships and possession were God's closest competitors for the first place, he taught that it was not necessary to have great possessions, not even to care about them. For those who loved family relationships so much, they were not worthy of following Jesus. Great reward is, however, promised by Jesus when he said, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life" (Lk. 18:29-30).<sup>47</sup> Norman Anderson is quick, however, to caution that

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<sup>44</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary, op.cit.*, 240.

<sup>45</sup> James L. Kelso, *op.cit.*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> James Smart, *The Quiet Revolution: The Radical Impact of Jesus on Men of His Time*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, MCMLXIX, 93.

<sup>47</sup> The disciples, some who were fishermen, were engaged in a lucrative business which fetched them money for daily bread. They abandoned their fishing nets and boats and followed Jesus (Mk. 1:28; Matt. 4:20). They possibly owned, "The world's most famous fishing club" (see Leslie B.

"it is clear that Jesus did not teach that all Christians should dispose of everything they possess,"<sup>48</sup> as is falsely claimed by some today. In fact, Luke records that there were certain women who provided for Jesus and his disciples, "out of their resources" (Lk. 8:3). George A Buttrick has also observed that, "the Bethany home, in whose hospitable friendliness He found sheltering joy, appears to have been a home of "substance",<sup>49</sup> and concludes that even "the robe of Jesus for which the soldiers cast lots may not have been of 'fine linen', but it was worth owning",<sup>50</sup> Early Christianity too is dotted with assistance arising from wealthy individuals.

### JESUS' CHALLENGE TODAY

What is the relevance of Jesus' teaching to us, particularly, the Church? The socio-ethical imperatives make this question very pertinent in our own case. Answers to this question would help to address the role the church has played in this "Nigerian malaise", or will help to pass a guilty verdict on the failures of the Church to take seriously the teaching of Jesus in respect of earthly possessions, a disease, which has infected the church itself, of recent. Gary Maxery, an American missionary in Nigeria captures the situation this way,

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Flynn, *The Twelve*, Illinois, Victors Books, 1982, 71). Fishing business is still a lucrative trade by all standards in most parts of the world, including Nigeria. Matthew, another disciple of Jesus, belonged to the *Mikhsa*, the custom-house officials. He also renounced his immense wealth with all its fame and power to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus, the chief publican of Jericho, possibly belonged to this group. He also renounced his wealth on meeting Jesus. He said, "here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Lk. 19:8). In Nigeria today, customs officers command immense wealth, some acquired dubiously, from extortion and outright corruption.

<sup>48</sup> Norman Anderson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1983, 139.

<sup>49</sup> George A. Buttrick, *op.cit.*, 128.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Confusion reigns! Not just hundreds but multiplied thousands vie for the attention of an increasingly skeptic and disappointed populace. The same selfishness that characterised the political scene has ignominiously invaded the church world. Economic greed, the love for money, is not only unchecked but un-rebuked, but also in a startling number of cases, provides the fundamental rationale for the formation of many churches.<sup>51</sup>

It is not an overstatement that the quest for wealth acquisition underlies most prosperity gospel preachers and the continuous mushrooming of Churches everyday. The Church today has become a haven where thieves of public funds, 419 fraudsters, drug barons and ritual murderers donate "blood money"<sup>52</sup> to Churches in order to seek 'restitution' for their ill gotten wealth. These ungodly possessions have easily found their ways into some gullible purses of some Nigerian Churches. Such "money bags" are accorded much respect in some Churches. But this should not be so. Keener has reminded us that "Jesus exhorts us not to value possessions enough to seek them (Matt. 6:19-24), quite in contrast to today's prosperity."<sup>53</sup> Keener goes further to extol the virtues of John Wesley who said, "we give to God not by giving to the Church, but by giving to the poor,"<sup>54</sup> and throws a challenge that the world will be a different place if it's poor could share in the abundant resources of the wealthier Christians. This captures Francis Bacon's mood well when he rightly asserts that, "money is like muck, not good except it be spread."<sup>55</sup> This, to say the least, is set

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<sup>51</sup> A keynote address delivered by Gary S. Maxey at the NABIS Annual Conference on "Biblical principals as moral foundations for contemporary Nigeria," held at Wesley International Theological Seminary, Owerri, July, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> The term, "blood money," is a popular reference in Nigeria to money got through dubious means, particularly, through ritual murders in which human parts are used for ritual purposes with the sole intention of making money.

<sup>53</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew, op.cit.*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *op.cit.*, 135.

in contrast to what Phil Parshall has noted of some prosperity preachers such as Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts and Jerry Falwell. Parshall has observed that these preachers live in expensive mansions, drive expensive cars and live expensive lifestyles amidst a multitude of people who live in hunger, deprivations and want. In fact, Robert Schuller charges as much as \$15,000 per speech in a crusade.<sup>56</sup> This practice is already gaining ground in Nigeria, contrary to what Jesus enjoined in Matthew 10:8, "freely you have received, freely give." Jesus' self-sacrificial life precludes a life of luxury, affluence and glamour.

It is a fact that the quest for worldly possessions is fraught with risks and desolation. The unending search for wealth accumulation isolates people from the realities of daily existence as it dehumanises people. Such people lose the sense of care, love, sympathy and mercy for their fellow human beings, attributes that make up true Christian character. The church today must be reminded that it was the evil of materialism which provided fertile grounds for Marxism to thrive and gain roots, with all its attendant consequences, even for the Church, for over seventy years. Proponents of prosperity gospel must shun the temptations of falling into the trappings of exalting man into a semi-god just as was the Marxist-humanist emphasis upon which Marxist fallacies were based. The obvious consequences of these false "theologies" are now part of history's garbage. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Marxist false utopia collapsed to the utter amazement and embarrassment of its proponents around the world, including its Nigerian advocates. Communism as a global phenomenon breathed its last with all its unfulfilled promises of a "heaven on earth". The materialistic church in Nigeria today could well be incubating a Bolshevik-type of revolution within its ranks in the future. The leadership quarrels and other crises within churches could well be the little indications for this impending scourge.

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<sup>56</sup> Phil Parshall, *The Cross and the Crescent*, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers, 1989, 128-129.



## CONCLUSION

From our discussion so far, some very germane concerns have been raised. Jesus did not condemn wealth itself, but he condemned its use in very unwise ways. When wealth is acquired rightly but sets priorities towards achieving only man's pleasures, even at the expense of the poor, it is used unwisely, the kind many people practice today. It becomes foolish. Jesus said that is the height of folly. Wealth acquisition, which does not take care of the everyday human concerns of others, is brutal and inhumane. Leslie B. Flynn has captured the mood today quite well, when he notes,

Today, many interests vie for our devotion. Young and old alike are challenged by the call of money, education and fame, pleasure, and a host of other voices.<sup>57</sup>

But Boice has warned that,

If you think about your home, car, vacation, bank account, make up or investments more than God, then you are serving Mammon and building treasures here on earth. According to Jesus, "Where your treasure is your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).<sup>58</sup>

*The Nigeria Covenant* affirms that legitimate ownership of property is recognised and commended in the Holy Scriptures, but must be properly acquired and managed equitably for the good of all and for His glory.<sup>59</sup> As we re-evaluate our values and priorities toward attaining kingdom standards, the church in Nigeria needs to be reminded of Jesus' teaching in respect of wealth acquisition and not be consumed into the crazy chase for possessions which has led to all kinds of evil in the Nigerian nation. Perhaps this wise

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<sup>57</sup> Leslie B. Flynn, *op.cit.*, 99.

<sup>58</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *op.cit.*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> *The Nigeria Covenant* is a product of the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria (COCEN), whose sole objective is to re-direct Christian values in our national life. The "Covenant" was adopted at its meeting in Abuja on November 3-6, 1997, see pages 6,7 of the Document on the "Covenant."

counsel will suffice that, "those concerned with wealth become as sterile in their Christianity as those who forget their faith or fall away under persecution."<sup>60</sup> This, of course, is antithetical to Jesus' teaching in this regard. And as Lockyer has reminded us, "righteousness, not money, exalted a nation."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, 152.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *op.cit.*, 136.