Jesus’ Option for the Poor—and Ours
“A Preferential Option for the Poor.”

1. The Rich Ruler Luke 18:18-30 is composed of two main items:
   a. the story of a rich ruler’s encounter with Jesus,
   b. and Jesus’ follow-up conversation with his disciples.
2. A rich man approaches Jesus.
   a. (not called “young” here or in Mark 10:17-22, as in Matt 19:22)
   b. He is a “ruler,” (He is a religious ruler, not a Roman ruler or one of their Herodian allies in Palestine.)
3. He asks a universal question: “What must I do to live forever?”
   a. Jesus reminds him of the second half of the Ten Commandments
      i. (note that the command against covetousness is conspicuously absent).
   b. The man replies that he has kept all them “from my youth,”
      i. a biblical expression denoting life-long service to God, the best kind.
   c. Then Jesus, accepting his answer at face value but sensing the emptiness in him, replies,
      d. “You still lack one thing [to live forever]. Sell everything you own and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”
4. This invitation to sacrifice and discipleship makes the man sad,
   a. “for he was very rich” and unwilling to meet Jesus’ demand.
5. Mark 10 has the man leaving and Jesus speaking when he is gone,
   a. but Luke keeps him there to hear Jesus’ concluding comment, spoken to everyone while he is looking at this rich man:
   b. “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”
6. A two-stage conversation then ensues,
   a. “Those who heard it,” said with some astonishment, “Then who can be saved?”
   b. Working past attachment to the things of this earth towards salvation is difficult for everyone, not just for the rich.
7. Jesus responds with a saying that covers salvation for rich and poor alike:
   a. “What is impossible for humans is possible for God.”
      i. only with divine empowerment can the sacrifice of leaving possessions and family take place.
8. Peter, speaking for the other disciples, is eager to show that he and the others have made this sacrifice:
   a. “We have left our homes to follow you.”
   b. This is true as far as it goes, but after Jesus’ death, they seem to have family businesses such as fishing boats to go back to!
   c. Jesus commends their level of sacrifice: those who have left house and family “wife, brothers, parents or children”—for the sake of the kingdom of God
   d. “will get back very much more in this age,”
      i. probably in the new families they find in their new life, “and in the age to come eternal life.”
   e. They will find what the rich ruler could not.

Literary context
9. The end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem has two concurrent themes,
   a. the marginalized recipients of the Reign of God
   b. and the messiahship of Jesus.
10. Those who inherit the kingdom are like
   a. the tax collector who was humbly repentant (18:9-14);
   b. they are like trusting children (18:15-17);
   c. they are committed people who, leave everything for the sake of the kingdom (18:18-30);
   d. they are like the blind man, calling on the Lord in faith when others tell him to keep quiet (18:35-43);
   e. they are like Zacchaeus, the tax collector who repents and repairs his fraud (19:1-9).
11. In the middle of these passages lies its Christological heart:
   a. Jesus, the archetypal marginalized person, who goes faithfully forward to his suffering and death
   b. knowing that God will vindicate him in his resurrection.
   c. His disciples cannot grasp the idea of a marginalized Messiah,
   d. probably wondering how this could be a fulfillment of the scriptures (18:31-34).

12. By omitting Mark’s introduction to this passion and resurrection prediction (Mark 10:32a),
   a. Luke may be making this prediction the conclusion to the story of the rich ruler;
      i. at the least we can say that they are closely tied together.

13. The story of the blind beggar in the next main narrative, in 18:35-43, contrasts with the story of the rich ruler.
   a. A blind man approaches Jesus by means of his voice;
      i. no one will get out of the way for him, as they did for the rich ruler!
   b. He calls Jesus “Son of David,” and asks for mercy,
      i. keeping up his shouting even as others tell him to keep quiet.
   c. Jesus did not accept the descriptor “good” from the rich ruler,
      i. but evidently this messianic phrase meets with his approval.

14. After the blind beggar is healed, he follows Jesus.
   a. What the rich ruler could not see in Jesus, the blind man could;
      i. although the blind man followed Jesus without being asked the rich man could not even with a special invitation.

15. Luke’s point is clear:
   a. riches work against understanding Jesus and his message and responding to it,
   b. but the poor and the blind are more likely to receive Good News from Jesus and follow him.

Social-Scientific Setting (background and its meaning for the reader.)
   c. In Mediterranean antiquity, social status was determined by where one fell on the social hierarchy.
      i. The ruler such as this man was on top,
      ii. followed by his assistants in the elite class (scribes, soldiers, priests and prosperous merchants).
         1. Together, they represented only about 2–5 percent of the population, and they controlled most of society’s wealth, either directly or indirectly.
      iii. They alone could use their wealth to assure their future in the world;
   b. The rest of society was composed of people who lived almost from day to day, and could not assure their future:
      a. peasants, artisans, shop-keepers and even more marginalized people (slaves, prostitutes, beggars, cripples).
   c. Mediterraneans believed in “limited goods”—in contrast to the modern American myth,
      a. it was not assumed in antiquity that one should rise “from rags to riches.”
      b. If one did manage to improve one’s status significantly, it was typically at the expense of someone else.
         i. Money, commodities and honor itself were seen as limited in antiquity;
         ii. and the goods are finite, someone is bound to lose when someone else gains.
      c. As a result, people normally sought to maintain their status rather than to gain or lose.

18. Wealth also has a connection to kinship.
   a. One’s wealth or social position came from one’s ancestors,
   b. one used it in one’s lifetime for the honor of family,
   c. and at death all possessions were passed along to one’s main male heir.
   d. These factors made it even more difficult in Jesus’ time to give up all one’s wealth than it is for us today.

Jesus’ Preferential Option for the Poor
   19. The “preferential option for the poor” is a term first used in the 1970s by Roman Catholic liberation theologians to describe God’s special concern for those subjected to poverty and oppression, or otherwise marginalized.
      a. Now it is used widely in theological and church circles beyond Roman Catholicism,
20. (Even the present Pope Benedict XVI, for many years as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger an opponent of some forms of Liberation Theology, has written positively about the preferential option for the poor as being firmly grounded in the Bible and especially in the ministry and teaching of Jesus.)

21. Like any slogan, it needs nuance so that it is not misunderstood and then dismissed.
   a. it **does not mean** that God loves the marginalized more than God loves others;
   b. Christians believe that God loves all people equally.
   c. Neither should it lead to a “works-righteousness” system where the poor merit salvation by virtue of the spiritual value of their poverty.
   d. It does mean that God intends that their marginalization, in its physical, social and spiritual aspects, be ended.
   e. It also means that the poor have significant spiritual resources to share with others.

22. “The poor” should be broadly understood in its biblical sense,
   a. as all marginalized persons regardless of financial status, for example, children and youth who have no voice and are powerless to protect themselves.
   b. Roman Catholic teaching has included those wrongfully deprived of life—the unborn, criminals sentenced to death, and those subject to “euthanasia”—in the preferential option.
   c. However, understanding it in a full sense should not lead to watering down its commitment to those who are literally poor.

23. The preferential option sends us in direction of radical generosity that promotes a fuller degree of social justice.
   a. We cannot “opt for the poor” with our leftover income and castoff clothing.
   b. This does not follow Jesus’ example of giving his life for others.
   c. Think of the difference that would be made in the world if all Christians gave ten percent of their income to the church (and the church spent more of its income to build a more just society rather than on itself)!

24. The preferential option should lead to systemic changes in our economic life.
   a. Most of the world has concluded that the free market/ capitalist system is the best system, despite its significant faults. Perhaps we can say of capitalism what Winston Churchill once said about democracy, that it is the worst system in the world, except for all the others.
   b. Nevertheless, we who participate in the capitalist/ free market system and benefit from it are called by God to strengthen its best features and ameliorate its negatives,
      i. among them its promotion of luxuries as necessities,
      ii. its relentless consumerism that implies that a person’s life “consists in the abundance of possessions” (see Luke 12:15), and the constant temptation of those in control of it not to play by the rules of the market, but resort to crime and corruption to improve profits.

25. Although the preferential option for the poor is not an option for followers of Jesus, it is subject to Christian freedom. Jesus did not lay down a detailed program to build a new society,
   a. but called all his followers, as individuals and as a group, to work creatively and responsibly for the poor.

26. Practicing a preferential option overcomes topical and temporary concern for the poor.
   a. Giving should not be governed by the latest storm or famine crisis in the television news!
   b. Rather, it leads to a continual and firm relationship with the poor that endures all sorts of weather.

27. Reinhold Niebuhr would remind us here that good and evil are always mixed together in our world.
   a. solving one problem usually leads to another.
   b. For example, rising prosperity in India and China in the last twenty years has moved hundreds of millions of people from poverty into a “middle” class,
   c. but this growth has contributed to world-wide energy shortages and more rapid environmental damage (the poor go easier on the earth and its atmosphere than the middle class).
28. Marxist ideology and practice that comes with some forms of liberation theology should be avoided.
   a. With its atheism, anti-Semitism and totalitarianism,

29. Marxism is a poor partner with Christianity.
   a. Class conflict and armed violence are not a part of the teaching of Jesus,
   b. who was—and still is—a friend of sinners rich and poor, bringing the Good News of God’s Reign to all.
   c. The symbol of the Christian faith is the cross, not a clenched fist.

30. Finally, preferential option is for all the poor, not just the poor of our area or even our nation.
   a. The world is our neighborhood, and all its people are the neighbors we are called to love