

## A Theology of Wealth from the Book of James

Robbie Booth

*Union Theological College, Belfast, Northern Ireland*

**Abstract:** *Many cultures in the twenty-first century display a pervasive love of wealth. The poverty gap has widened, not only between rich and poor nations, but also among the citizens within those nations. As the world continues to reel from the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital that Christians reexamine what the Bible teaches about wealth. Arguably, no New Testament book speaks more directly to wealth and poverty than the book of James. This article will provide a summary interpretation and application of the poverty and wealth passages of James in light of the socio-economic context of the first century. The first section considers relevant background material including the social historical context. The second section concentrates on James's most explicit passages on wealth: (1) 1:9–11; (2) 2:1–7, 8–9, 14–16; (3) 4:13–17; and (4) 5:1–6. The final section synthesizes five prominent theological themes from James's teaching on wealth.*

**Key Words:** *economic divide, James, oppression, poor, poverty, rich, social historical context, wealth*

Many cultures in the twenty-first century display a pervasive love of wealth. The poverty gap has widened, not only between rich and poor nations, but also among the citizens within those nations.<sup>1</sup> Patrick Henry, a senior writer at the World Economic Forum, explains that the global pandemic and the war in Ukraine have only accelerated and exacerbated the disparity between the rich and the poor.<sup>2</sup> Followers of Christ must turn to Scripture to discern how they should live in such a world, but where should they look? The book of James may be the best place to start, because as Ralph Martin has observed, “No [other] NT document . . . has such a socially sensitized conscience and so explicitly champions the cause of the economically disadvantaged, the victims of oppression or unjust

wage agreements, and the poor who are seen in the widows and orphans who have no legal defender to speak up for their rights [as the book of James].”<sup>3</sup> This article will provide a summary interpretation and application of the poverty and wealth passages of James in light of the socio-economic context of the first century. The first section considers relevant background material including the social historical context. The second section concentrates on James's most explicit passages on wealth: (1) 1:9–11; (2) 2:1–7, 8–9, 14–16; (3) 4:13–17; and (4) 5:1–6. The final section synthesizes five prominent theological themes from James's teaching on wealth.

### Social Historical Context<sup>4</sup>

The social stratification that James passionately opposed did not spring up overnight. The social and economic divide that existed in the first century owed much of its heritage to Hellenism.<sup>5</sup> Pedrito Maynard-Reid claims, “[T]he world under the Hellenistic rulers reached a level of capitalistic organization in agriculture, industry, and commercial trading that was not evident prior to the period and that Rome could not surpass.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these Graeco-Macedonian policies and culture, which spread through the Middle Eastern world during the period after Alexander, deliberately exploited subject territories.<sup>7</sup> The Romans, after conquering the Greeks, continued the same economic governing policies with little modification.<sup>8</sup> Helen Rhee explains that “enormous and structural inequalities constituted the very fabric of sociopolitical stratifications

<sup>3</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), lxvii.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise and helpful summary of scholarship on the economy of Roman Palestine, see Philip Harland, “The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi, et al. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2002), 511–27.

<sup>5</sup> Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of a Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 15–16. Erich Gruen argues that Roman influence over the Hellenistic world did not come about in a linear or gradual fashion. Gruen stresses both Rome's receptivity to compatible Hellenic principles and the Greeks' benefit from Roman presence in a familiar system (*The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, vol. 2 [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984], 730). See Mary T. Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 65–98.

<sup>1</sup> Kevin H. O'Rourke, “Globalization and Inequality: Historical Trends,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 8339, June 2001, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w8339>.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Henry, “Economic inequality has deepened during the pandemic. That doesn't mean it can't be fixed,” World Economic Forum, 7 April 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/04/economic-inequality-wealth-gap-pandemic/>.

and the values that governed the economic behaviors of various social groups [in the Roman empire].”<sup>9</sup> Social stratification revolved around three criteria: (1) Power (through position and acquisition of property and wealth), (2) Privilege (in legal, socioeconomic, and political realms), and (3) Prestige (social esteem and influence).<sup>10</sup>

Although the *Pax Romana* increased trade and commerce in Palestine, it also brought with it the negative consequences of increased social stratification.<sup>11</sup> The upper class greatly benefited from the economic growth made possible by the extended period of peace and order, but the economic situation for the common person became increasingly worse.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies have moved beyond Geza Alföldy’s thesis that the elite consisted of 1 percent of the population and possessed the vast majority of the Roman Empire’s wealth, while the other 99 percent lived at or below the poverty line.<sup>13</sup> Steven Friesen, for example, has proposed a seven-tiered poverty scale to describe the wealth distribution of the Roman Empire.<sup>14</sup> Though the details of his original proposal have been rightly critiqued, Friesen’s more nuanced treatment of the data has greatly

<sup>9</sup> Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ekkehard W. Stegemann, *Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 60–65.

<sup>11</sup> Harland notes that the agrarian economy in Palestine largely mirrors the general character of the economy in the greater Roman Empire (“The Economy of First-Century Palestine,” 515).

<sup>12</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 18. For an overview of how the Roman Empire’s policy of imperialism and expansion favored the wealthy elite over the poor, see Peter F. Bang “Predation,” in *Roman Economy*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 197–217. Samuel Dickey comments, “The peace of Imperial Rome, its roads, its protection of trade and intercommunication, its orderly administration by experienced officials, its practical abandonment of the tax-farming system, its elimination of the old uncertainty from life and business, brought two hundred years of general prosperity. But it was not a uniform prosperity; still less was it an equality. For a time at least opportunities were offered to the lower classes to rise in the social scale.... But as a whole the fact remains that Roman magnificence was built on the inadequately requited toil of her laboring masses” (“Some Economic and Social Conditions of Asia Minor Affecting the Expansion of Christianity,” in *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Shirley Jackson Case [New York: The Century Co., 1928], 402).

<sup>13</sup> Geza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1985), 146.

<sup>14</sup> Steven J. Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 323–61.

improved our understanding of the economic context of the Roman Empire in the first century.<sup>15</sup> In these studies, estimates for the number of people in poverty can range from percentages in the eighties or nineties, but what remains clear is that a vast percentage of the population of the Greco-Roman world lived near or in poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the socioeconomic stratification present in the first century can also be described in terms of an urban-rural divide.<sup>17</sup> The rural and agrarian setting of most of the inhabitants of Palestine stood in strong contrast to the perceived superiority of the urban setting. It is not surprising that as cities grew and increased their trade, an agrarian society would give way to an urban one.<sup>18</sup> A growing population in first-century Palestine forced many men who were not firstborn to work as tradesmen, unskilled laborers, or slaves. Peter Davids points out that even the eldest sons who received land as an inheritance often lacked the resources to retain that land. Small plots, poor harvests, high taxation, drought, and wealthy landowners could force a man off his land. His options were then to move to the city in search of work or to become a hired laborer or tenant farmer—sometimes on the land he had previously owned.<sup>19</sup> The

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of Friesen’s influential hypothesis, see John Barclay, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: A Response to Steven Friesen,” *JSNT* 26.3 (2004): 363–66; Peter Oakes, “Constructing Poverty Scales for Graeco-Roman Society: A Response to Steven Friesen’s ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies,’” *JSNT* 26.3 (2004): 367–71; Walter Scheidel and Steven J. Friesen, “The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire,” *JRS* 99 (2009): 61–91; Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 44–59.

<sup>16</sup> David J. Downs, “Economics, Taxes, and Tithes,” in *The World of the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 160.

<sup>17</sup> D. E. Oakman, “Economics of Palestine,” ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 305. For a thorough description of the urban-rural divide, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 28–56.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Dibelius, *James*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1976), 41. See also Oakman, “Economics of Palestine,” 305. For an alternative view of the economy of Roman Palestine, see Downs, “Economics, Taxes, and Tithes,” 160–62. See also W. V. Harris, *Rome’s Imperial Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–56.

<sup>19</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 32. For a more thorough treatment of the socioeconomic context of the wealthy landowners and the plights faced by the poor day workers, see Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 81–98.

accumulation of wealth in the cities further increased the economic divide, resulting in increasing feelings of contempt and acts of oppression by the wealthy urban citizens against the lower class and rural poor.<sup>20</sup>

This is the socioeconomic context of the early church. Undoubtedly, James was sensitive to the needs of the poor since he had seen and experienced many of these issues within his own congregation. He wanted to make sure that Christians were doing their part to take care of the poor and oppressed.<sup>21</sup> It is no small wonder that James dedicated nearly one quarter of his letter to the subject of wealth.<sup>22</sup>

## James on Wealth

### James 1:9–11

In 1:9–11, James introduces the topic of wealth to his audience and this passage is characterized by the contrast between the *ὁ ἀδελφός ὁ ταπεινός* (“the lowly brother”) and the *ὁ πλούσιος* (“the rich one”).<sup>23</sup> Ordinarily, *ὁ ταπεινός* does not refer to an impoverished person, but rather

<sup>20</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2007), 402.

<sup>22</sup> According to Peter Davids, “47 verses out of the 105 in the letter, or close to 45%, have an economic theme” (“The Test of Wealth,” in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 355). In the Nestle Aland 28th edition, James contains 108 verses. Whereas Davids’s paper considers the larger passages in which wealth is discussed in James, this article focuses more narrowly on the verses that explicitly discuss wealth and economic status: 1:9–11, 27; 2:1–7, 8–9, 14–16; 4:13–17; and 5:1–6. These 26 verses constitute just over 24 percent of the epistle. Regardless of whether one argues that James speaks on economic themes in 24 or 45 percent of the letter, the fact remains that wealth is a significant topic for James.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most highly contested issues in the book of James is whether the rich people addressed are Christians or non-Christians. The problem results from James’s ambiguous language concerning representatives of two groups of people in 1:9–11: (1) *ὁ ἀδελφός ὁ ταπεινός* “the lowly brother,” and (2) *ὁ πλούσιος* “the rich one.” Throughout the letter of James *πλούσιος* refers to material wealth, and 1:9–11 makes a clear contrast between the material wealth of the rich person and the lack of wealth of the lowly brother. Rather than linking the lowly brother with humiliation and the rich one with exaltation (which would have been the cultural expectation), James reverses their standing. Paradoxically, the lowly brother should “boast in his exaltation,” while the rich one should boast “in his humiliation.” The *ἀδελφός* clearly belongs to the believing community that James

is addressing. Chris A. Vlachos, *James*, EGGNT (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 32–33. But what about the *ὁ πλούσιος*?

Some recent commentators have argued that James consistently presents the poor as believers, who belong to the community, and the rich as unbelievers in his book. See Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 40–47; Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter and Jude*, 51; Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 24–26. Davids argues that the term *πλούσιος* is only used to present the rich as persecutors. When James refers to wealthy believers, he does not use the term *πλούσιος*, but rather describes the person in a way that reveals his wealth (*A Theology of James, Peter and Jude*, 51 n. 69). Douglas J. Moo summarizes some of the main arguments for interpreting the rich as unbelievers: “James 5:1–6 pronounces judgment upon the rich generally, and that 1:10b–11 identifies the ‘humiliation’ of the rich person with condemnation in the last judgment” (*James*, TNTC [Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2009], 92). Maynard-Reid observes that if James believes the rich are non-Christians, then the humiliation in 1:10–11 must be interpreted as ironic (*Poverty and Wealth in James*, 42). Dibelius provides a translation of such an ironic boast: “The rich man has had his day; all he can expect from the future is humiliation; that is the only thing left for him to ‘boast about.’ This then would be some ‘boast!’” (*James*, 85).

Though there is some credence to this position, several problems exist. First, Vlachos demonstrates that since the adjective *πλούσιος* (“rich”) is in the substantival position with no noun to qualify, “it seems natural to supply *ἀδελφός* from v. 9 even as the syntax demands that *καυχάομαι* in v. 9 be brought over to v. 10” (*James*, 33). The parallelism linking verse 9 and verse 10 make the repetition of *ἀδελφός* unnecessary. Understanding *ὁ πλούσιος* as a rich member (or brother) of the community seems much more likely. See A. K. M. Adam, *James: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 11. Second, there is evidence that wealthy Christians appear throughout the book of James. Dan McCartney points out that at the very least, a few rich people had some form of relationship with the community, “or else passages such as 2:1–4 would be unnecessary” (*James*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 98). James 4:13–17 likely refers to wealthy Christians, or at least to a mixed Christian and Jewish audience. When planning for the future, James exhorts the merchants to acknowledge that God is ultimately in control and has the right to change their plans. See Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 60; and Dale C. Allison Jr., *James*, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 645–47. Third, as Blomberg argues, “[T]hat only the negative consequences of being rich are mentioned is not surprising given the antithetical parallelism with verse 9 in which only the positive benefits for the brother ‘in humble circumstances’ are mentioned” (*Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 150). Fourth, H. H. Drake Williams demonstrates the presence of an intertextual echo of Jer 9:23–24 in verses 9–11, which sheds light on both the identity and the boasting of the

to lowliness and humility. It can, however, also denote someone who has a lowly social status or a humble attitude. Since James clearly contrasts the lowly brother with the rich, it is apparent that he is speaking to those in a humble socio-economic position.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in 1:9–11, James presents a contrast between two opposing worldviews. The first values people from God's perspective, whereas the second values people according to worldly values of wealth and social rank.<sup>25</sup> Chris Vlachos claims that the "chiastic structure [of 1:9–11] highlights the paradoxical nature of the logic."<sup>26</sup> The audience's inclination would naturally connect ὁ ταπεινός with boasting ἐν τῇ ταπεινώσει αὐτοῦ ("in his humiliation") and ὁ πλούσιος with boasting ἐν τῷ ὑψει αὐτοῦ ("in his exaltation"). That "the lowly brother" (ὁ ταπεινός) is a cognate with "humiliation" (ταπεινώσει) further highlights this paradox.<sup>27</sup> Surprisingly, however, James urges the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich to boast in humiliation.<sup>28</sup>

rich. In light of Jer 9:23–24, this boasting should be understood not as ironic, but as a "heroic boast." He asserts, "Despite poverty or wealth, Christians ought to see their situations eschatologically—when wealth and poverty fade away" ("Of Rags and Riches: The Benefits of Hearing Jeremiah 9:23–24 within James 1:9–11," *TynBul* 53.2 [2002]: 282). This boast can only be interpreted as a heroic boast if the rich are included among the believers. If the rich are non-believers, the boasting must be interpreted as ironic. James Hardy Ropes argues that the "excess of fierce irony" makes the ironic interpretation unlikely (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, ICC [New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916], 146). Blomberg and Kamell agree that an ironic boast, in light of the rich person's eternal damnation, is too implausible (*James*, 58). The identity of the rich is certainly a complex issue. In light of the textual and contextual evidence, this article follows the understanding of Moo and tentatively concludes that the rich people in 1:10–11 and 4:13–17 are Christians and the rich landowners in 5:1–6 are not Christians (*James*, 90).

<sup>24</sup> McCartney, *James*, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> The verb James uses for boasting, *καυχάομαι*, is normally used with a negative connotation in the New Testament relating to pride and arrogance (see Rom 2:23; 1 Cor 1:29; 3:21; 4:7; 13:3; 2 Cor 5:12; 10:16; 11:12, 18; Gal 6:13; Jas 4:16; see also Martin, *James*, 25). The LXX, the Old Testament Apocrypha, and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, however, regularly use *καυχάομαι* with a positive sense of rejoicing in or glorying in God (see LXX 1 Sam 2:10; LXX 1 Chron 16:35; LXX Ps 5:12; 31:11; 149:5; Sir 39:8; 50:20; Pss. Sol. 17:1; and Jer 9:24). Interestingly, in Sir 24:1–2 it is personified wisdom herself who "boasts" in the midst of her people and before the power of the Most High. Even Paul uses *καυχάομαι* to speak of boasting in God (Rom 2:17; 5:11), in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor

In the midst of their sufferings and low socioeconomic status, Christians should take pride and joy in their high position before God. James's use of ὑψος ("high position") alludes to the heavenly realm. Thus, James most likely urges Christians to boast both (1) in their confidence that they belong to the heavenly realm in the present through their faith and (2) in the certainty of Christ's return from the heavenly realm.<sup>29</sup> juxtaposed to the lowly boasting in exaltation, James exhorts the rich to boast ἐν τῇ ταπεινώσει αὐτοῦ. Questioning whether it would make sense for a person to glory in physical destitution, Craig Blomberg and Miriam Kamell assert that James must intend a spiritual humbling in 1:10a.<sup>30</sup> By boasting in their humiliation, rich believers acknowledge that what matters is not their standing before men, but their standing before God. Furthermore, such humility may also indicate identification with Jesus Christ, who humbled himself and was rejected as the least by the world.<sup>31</sup>

Verse 11 further describes what James means by "passing away" in verse 10.<sup>32</sup> The image of flowers rapidly withering under the heat of the sun was certainly familiar to his audience.<sup>33</sup> The force of the imagery here is not apocalyptic. Instead, James makes use of routine occurrences in the plant life of Palestine.<sup>34</sup> Though the imagery of fading flowers and grass can be found throughout the Psalms and prophets, the phrase ἄνθος χόρτου ("flower of the grass") which James uses in 1:10 is only found in

2:17), and in Christ Jesus (Gal 6:14, Paul boasts in the cross of Christ; Phil 3:3). Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 87.

<sup>30</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Moo, *James*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 34, observes that the verb *παρελεύσεται* ("will pass away") is never used in the New Testament to refer to judgment. *Παρέρχομαι* is usually used in one of several ways: (1) to pass by in terms of spatial movement (Matt 8:28; Mark 6:48; Luke 18:37; Acts 16:8); (2) to pass away or to come to an end (Matt 5:18 [x2]; 14:15; 24:34–35 [x3]; Mark 13:30–31 [x3]; Luke 16:17; 21:32–33 [x3]; Acts 27:9; 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 4:3; 2 Pet 3:10); (3) to avert something (Matt 26:39, 42; Mark 14:35); (4) to neglect something (Luke 11:42; 15:29); and (5) to arrive or come near (Luke 12:37; 17:7). None of these uses refer to temporal or eschatological judgment. Furthermore, seventeen of the twenty-eight occurrences of *παρέρχομαι* (not including the occurrence in Jas 1:10) are used to indicate something passing away or coming to an end. For further treatment, see BDAG, "*παρέρχομαι*," 775–76.

<sup>33</sup> Moo, *James*, 93–94.

<sup>34</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 43.

the LXX of Isa 40:6.<sup>35</sup> James uses the agricultural simile to draw an analogy between the transient nature of the flower and the momentary life of the rich person.

### James 2:1–7, 8–9, 14–17

James 2:1–7 elaborates on the topic of wealth by addressing how believers and the church should treat both the wealthy and poor. The phrase ἐν προσωπολημψίαις (“in partiality”) is fronted for emphasis in 2:1. The plural form likely suggests that James is referring to actions that surface due to favoritism, rather than a mere disposition toward it.<sup>36</sup> Though it does not appear in either secular Greek or the LXX, προσωπολημψίαις (“partiality” or “favoritism”) does appear with its cognates in Acts and Paul (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Col 3:25; Eph 6:9).<sup>37</sup> Προσωπολημψίαις is a composite word based on the LXX phrase, πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν, likely from Lev 19:15, which James later alludes to in 2:8–9.<sup>38</sup> James here uses προσωπολημψίαις to refer to a judgment based on social/economic appearances.<sup>39</sup> For James it is impossible for a person to “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (2:1) and

<sup>35</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 40–41; Nelson R. Morales, *Poor and Rich in James: A Relevance Theory Approach to James’s Use of the Old Testament* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 76–102. The same phrase ἄνθος χόρτου appears also in 1 Pet 1:24. The author of 1 Peter, like James, is also dependent upon LXX Isa 40:6–8. See Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 125–30; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 389–94.

<sup>36</sup> Adam, *James*, 35–36.

<sup>37</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 105; Dibelius, *James*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> Morales, *Poor and Rich in James*, 140–43. See also Allison, *James*, 379–81. Commenting on πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν—occurring in Gal 2:6—J. B. Lightfoot rightly points out that the Hebrew phrase פָּנִים נָשָׂא, which underlies both πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν and προσωπολημψίαις, can carry a positive sense of “receiving kindly” or “looking favorably upon” someone. When this Hebrew phrase is translated as “an independent Greek phrase however, the bad sense attaches to it, owing to the secondary meaning of πρόσωπον as ‘a mask,’ so that πρόσωπον λαμβάνειν signifies ‘to regard the external circumstances of a man,’ his rank, wealth, etc., as opposed to his real intrinsic character. Thus, in the New Testament it has always a bad sense. Hence a new set of words προσωπολήμπτως, προσωπολημπτέειν, etc. which appear to occur there for the first time” (*The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 108). For a thorough and convincing argument on James’s use of Leviticus 19 (and most importantly for this argument at 2:1, 8, 9), see Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Use of Leviticus 19 in the Letter of James,” *JBL* 101.3 (1982): 391–401; Pierre Keith, “La citation de Lv 19,18b en Jc 2,1–13,” in *The Catholic Epistles and the Tradition*, ed. J. Schlosser (Leuven: Leuven University Press 2004), 227–48.

<sup>39</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 67.

simultaneously show partiality to certain groups of people.<sup>40</sup>

James 2:2–4 contains a single sentence, illustrating a situation that further unpacks the problem presented in 2:1. These verses form a third-class conditional sentence, with verses 2–3 forming the protasis and verse 4 forming the apodosis. Though such a construction often depicts a hypothetical situation, the specifics of the illustration, what follows in verses 6–7, and the prepositional phrase ἐν προσωπολημψίαις in verse 1 might suggest that James is reflecting upon real events.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of the illustration is to present a striking contrast between two extreme groups of people who enter their assembly: the wealthy and the poor.<sup>42</sup> From context it appears that both men are probably visitors since they are both directed to their seats.<sup>43</sup> The gold ring and fine clothing mark the wealthy person as someone who possessed both social rank and money. The man’s ostentatious style would have clashed harshly with the largely poor audience.<sup>44</sup> The term ῥυπαρᾶ (“shabby” or “filthy”)—which James uses to describe the poor person’s clothing further emphasizes the

<sup>40</sup> The phrase τὴν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης is notoriously difficult to interpret. Rejecting the necessity of an interpolation, Dibelius offers three plausible interpretations, preferring the third: (1) “Faith in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ,” (2) “Faith in our Lord of glory, Jesus Christ,” and (3) “Faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (*James*, 126–28). In addition to providing a convincing defense for the inclusion of ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, Davids also opts for Dibelius’s third interpretation (*James*, 106–7). For a more thorough treatment of the issues associated with this phrase and for an argument for omitting ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, see Allison, *James*, 382–84.

<sup>41</sup> McCartney, *James*, 137–38.

<sup>42</sup> James uses συναγωγή rather than ἐκκλησία to describe the assembly of these believers. Dibelius rightly cautions scholars not to overinterpret the term συναγωγή, or infer specifics regarding the time or place of the events of Jas 2:1–9. The term συναγωγή was used in a variety of ways in the early stages of Christianity. It could refer to the Jewish synagogue but could also designate a general meeting or assembly (see Dibelius, *James*, 132–34). McCartney believes James is clearly speaking of a “Christian gathering, to which visitors rich or poor may come. If James is an early letter (prior to the completion of the rift with Judaism), then ‘your synagogue’ is perfectly understandable as a reference to an early Christian church’s local gathering for worship” (*James*, 138). Though McCartney may overreach by arguing for dating this passage before the Christian split from Judaism, the context which James addresses in Jas 2:1–9 suggests that he is addressing a Christian gathering, regardless of the physical location of the actual meeting. See also Rainer Metzner, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 116–17; Allison, *James*, 385–88.

<sup>43</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 107–8.

disparity between the two men.

Not only does James contrast the rich and poor men's appearances but also where they sat. The rich man is invited to sit in a ὧδε καλῶς ("good place"), whereas the poor person is told στῆθι ἢ κάθου ἐκεῖ ὑπὸ τὸ ὑποπόδιόν μου ("stand over there or sit down at my feet"), indicating his lowly status. James ends the conditional sentence with a rhetorical question that functions as a condemnation of the community's skewed faith and actions. The believers have discriminated among themselves and become judges with evil thoughts.

In Jas 2:5–7, James provides the proof as to why favoritism toward the wealthy and discrimination against the poor are incompatible with true faith. Verses 5–7 each contain a rhetorical question negated by οὐχ ("not"), indicating that James expects each question to be answered affirmatively. Yes, God has chosen the poor (2:5). Yes, the rich are the ones who oppress and drag believers to court (2:6). Yes, the rich dishonor the name by which believers are called (2:7). Advocates of liberation theology, however, have often taken verse 5 out of context. They apply their slogan, "God's preferential option for the poor," to Christian and non-Christian poor without discrimination.<sup>45</sup> James, however, explicitly communicates in the context of verse 5 that the poor who inherit the kingdom and are rich in faith are those who love him.<sup>46</sup> James does not identify all poor as being rich in faith. The present participle τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν ("those who love") suggests a continuous action by those James addresses: the lives of these poor are characterized by a constant love for God.<sup>47</sup> James contrasts God's choice of the poor with the audience's preference for the rich, highlighting three elements: (1) the rich oppress believers; (2) the rich drag believers to court; and (3) the rich blaspheme the good name invoked over believers.<sup>48</sup> This favoritism of the wealthy does not make rational sense, argues James. Nor does it make sense in light of God's commands.

In verses 8–9 James reminds his audience of the royal law, which he

<sup>45</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*; Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*; Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977); Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds., *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986). See also Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth: From Leo XIII to Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 152.

<sup>47</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 59. The "good name" could refer to (1) the name of God; (2) the name of Jesus; or (3) Christian morality and worship practices. See Moo, *The Letter of James*, 140.

quotes from Lev 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For James, showing partiality to the wealthy and dishonoring the poor is about much more than displaying bad social manners. Rather, these prejudices reflect a clear violation of the command to love one's neighbor.<sup>49</sup> James continues arguing that if a person breaks one part of the law—by showing favoritism, for example—they have broken the entire law and are "convicted by the law as transgressors" (Jas 2:9).

The focus of Jas 2:14–17 is on ineffective faith. The illustration James uses to make his point involves an interaction between a wealthy and a poor member of the congregation, expressing that the way a person uses their wealth is a direct demonstration of their faith (or lack of faith).<sup>50</sup> The necessity of good works is further emphasized by the rhetorical questions in 2:14. These questions carry implied answers of "no good" and "no." No, faith without works is no good, nor can such faith save a person.

The situation James presents in 2:15–16 is a hypothetical one demonstrated by the governing particle ἐάν. It seems best to understand James as presenting a scenario that his audience would either likely encounter or could possibly experience. The prevalence of poverty in the first-century Roman Empire may suggest that James believed his audience would encounter such impoverished individuals. Regardless, the focus is not upon the likelihood of experiencing such a situation, but on the exhortation to good works.<sup>51</sup> No longer is James addressing someone outside of the community (as in 2:1–7), but rather those within the believing community. The picture James paints of the poor brother or sister is a desperate one. They are scantily clad and lack even the basic necessity of daily food. That the hypothetical believer sees and understands that their brother or sister is in need is evident from his response: ὑπάγετε ἐν εἰρήνῃ, θερμαίνεσθε καὶ χορτάζεσθε ("Go in peace, be warmed and filled").<sup>52</sup> In their pitiless refusal to meet even the most basic needs of

<sup>49</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 59–60.

<sup>50</sup> Aída Besançon Spencer, *A Commentary on James* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 139.

<sup>51</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 121.

<sup>52</sup> There is some debate as to whether the verbs θερμαίνεσθε and χορτάζεσθε should be interpreted as middle or passive. Daniel B. Wallace argues that as passives ("be warm and be filled") the verbs suppress the agent for rhetorical affect and serve as an indictment of the brother who does not truly have faith (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008], 437). On the other hand Witherington contends that they should be understood as middle verbs ("warm yourself and fill yourself") (*Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 474). Blomberg and Kammell state, "If middle,

clothing and food, these self-proclaimed believers display extreme hypocrisy. James exhorts his audience to demonstrate their faith by action. Those who are able must meet the needs of their brothers and sisters who are in desperate need. If they do not, their faith is worthless; it is νεκρά, a corpse.<sup>53</sup>

#### James 4:13–17

James returns to the topic of wealth in 4:13–17 and focuses his attention on traveling merchants and businesspeople. He does not explicitly mention that they are rich. Their extensive travel plans, however, and their intentions to make money imply that they are at the very least moderately wealthy.<sup>54</sup> These merchants addressed here are also probably Christians. James rebukes them for living with a worldly perspective and urges them to acknowledge the Lord's sovereignty over their lives. He also admonishes them because they know what is right and fail to do it.<sup>55</sup> As in 1:9–11, James uses a metaphor in 4:14 to highlight the transience of human life: "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." The wordplay between the similar sounding φαινομένη ("appears") and ἀφανιζομένη ("disappears") further emphasizes the transitory nature of life.<sup>56</sup> The "certainty" of their future planning is in reality nothing more than a mirage.

The problem that James addresses has nothing to do with wealth itself or with making a living as a merchant, but rather with the arrogant and presumptuous attitudes of the merchants. In their desire to become rich, they have traded a God-centered worldview for a worldly one.<sup>57</sup> Christian merchants, according to James, must consult the Lord in their business dealings (and all areas of life) and acknowledge his sovereignty and

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the insult to the poor person merely becomes even more outrageous" (*James*, 131). Perhaps Dibelius is correct when he claims that "it makes no difference in this regard whether the imperatives here are understood as passive or as middle" (*James*, 153 n. 23). What matters for James is that believers demonstrate their faith by meeting the needs of others in love.

<sup>53</sup> McCartney, *James*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> Moo, *James*, 196.

<sup>55</sup> There would be no need to admonish these merchants, exhorting them to acknowledge God's sovereignty, if they were not Christian. For an argument for treating the merchants as believers, see Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 208; Davids, *James*, 171; Moo, *The Letter of James*, 254; McCartney, *James*, 225. For an interpretation that the merchants addressed could refer to a mixed Jewish and Christian audience, or to non-Christian Jews, see Allison, *James*, 647–49. See also McKnight, *James*, 369.

<sup>56</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> Martin, *James*, 165.

lordship over their lives. He urges them to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (4:15). James does not intend the phrase "if the Lord wills" to be used as a formula that should be repeated mindlessly, but rather an expression of a submissive attitude towards God.<sup>58</sup> James closes this section with verses 16–17—a condemnation of those who have correct knowledge and yet refuse to act upon that truth.

#### James 5:1–6

Moving from a hortatory to a denunciatory tone, Jas 5:1–6, presents arguably the most severe condemnations against the non-Christian rich who oppress the poor.<sup>59</sup> James's rhetorical style here closely resembles the Old Testament prophets and apocalyptists in their condemnation of the rich.<sup>60</sup> Witherington observes similarities to woe oracles and notes that the eschatological prospects of the non-Christian rich are very dim: "The rich are invited to view their funeral in advance. They should begin to weep ... and wail ... because of the miseries that are heading right their way."<sup>61</sup>

The "rich" that James attacks in this passage are identified in 5:4 as wealthy land-owners. These wealthy land owners were frequently the object of criticism of the Old Testament prophets, Jewish literature, and even the wider Greco-Roman world for their greed and willingness to exploit their laborers.<sup>62</sup> James uses the literary device known as an "apostrophe" to address the rich who are not physically present in his church.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 65.

<sup>59</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 158. See also Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 523.

<sup>60</sup> In particular, Martin references Isaiah—the condemnations of foreign nations in Isaiah 5, 13, 15, and 34—and 1 Enoch 94.7–11 (*James*, 172). He also mentions prophetic oracles against the rich and powerful in Israel (Isa 3:11–4:1; Amos 4:1–3; 6:1–7; Mic 3:1–4). The OT phrases and idioms Martin references, however, appear in passages that focus on condemning foreign nations rather than Israel (κλαίειν ... ὀλολύζετε μετὰ κλαυθμοῦ, Isa 15:2, 3; ὀλολύζοντες, Isa 10:10 LXX; 13:6; 14:31; 15:2, 3, 5; 16:7; 23:1, 6, 14; Jer 31:20 LXX). Thus, the context of Jas 5:1–6 favors understanding the rich as non-Christian oppressors of the poor.

<sup>61</sup> Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 524.

<sup>62</sup> Moo, *The Letter of James*, 210. For a thorough description of absentee land ownership in the Roman Empire, see MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 4–27.

<sup>63</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 157. See also Vlachos, *James*, 158. For an argument regarding the rich in Jas 5:1–6 as false believers within the Christian community, see Joseph K. Pak, "A Case for James's Condemnation of the Rich in James 5:1–6 as Addressing False Believers within the Believing Community," *JETS* 63.4 (2020): 721–37.

While James speaks directly to οἱ πλούσιοι, his purpose is not to call for a change among the rich. Rather the passage is intended to comfort and console the oppressed. The Lord of Hosts sees and knows their plight. One day their oppressors will face ultimate judgment before the Lord himself for their cruelty and wicked deeds.<sup>64</sup>

Verses 2–3 further expand upon the plight of the rich.<sup>65</sup> The worldly riches they have so carefully stored up have become worthless: “Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded” (5:2–3a). Significantly, James uses the perfect tense to describe what occurs to the hoarded wealth. These three perfect verbs are likely not futuristic, but rather consummative or extensive perfects. The riches have already lost their luster; they have already become rotten.<sup>66</sup> Though James has previously highlighted the transience of life, here he also describes wealth as temporal in nature. James certainly knew that neither gold nor silver could rust or corrode.<sup>67</sup> The image he presents is “deliberately jarring and all the more powerful if it reflects the metaphorical meaning of becoming useless.”<sup>68</sup> The irony is thick as James explains that the silver and gold in which the rich placed their trust have turned against them, testifying on behalf of the righteous whom they have oppressed and exploited.

In verses 4–6 James shifts from a general condemnation of the rich for hoarding up wealth to specific charges against their wicked business methods and wanton living. The charges against the rich are fourfold: (1) they have withheld wages from their workers (5:4); (2) they have lived in luxury and self-indulgence (5:5a); (3) they have fattened their hearts for slaughter (5:5b); and (4) they have condemned and murdered the righteous person (5:6).<sup>69</sup> Witherington helpfully notes that the first and fourth charges the rich commit against other people, while the second and third they commit against themselves.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 81–82.

<sup>65</sup> For helpful background context of the various miseries that come upon the rich, see Spencer, *A Commentary on James*, 250–53.

<sup>66</sup> Vlachos, *James*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Though gold and silver do not corrode, they do become tarnished. Tarnish, however, does not destroy the item in question and can be cleaned off. Todd Scaewater argues based on linguistic evidence that James adapts his language in Jas 5:2–3 as he interacts with Jewish tradition, specifically Sirach 12:10–11; 29:8–12 (“The Dynamic and Righteous Use of Wealth in James 5:1–6,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 20.2 [2017]: 232–33). See also Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 525.

<sup>68</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 221.

<sup>69</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 134.

<sup>70</sup> Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 528.

Unfortunately, oppression of the poor laborers was all too common in the first century. As mentioned above, many farmers were forced off of their lands by wealthy landowners and had to earn meager wages as day laborers. For those who were living at or below the subsistence level, prompt payment would have been critical for daily survival.<sup>71</sup> Withholding wages was a grievous sin not only against the worker, but against God himself.

Surprisingly, not only are the harvesters themselves crying out to God for justice, but so are the wages of the laborers (5:4). Passages such as Gen 4:10, Hab 2:11, and Luke 19:40 demonstrate that in unjust circumstances even inanimate objects can be described as calling out to God.<sup>72</sup> Most significantly, James indicates that these cries for justice “have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” (5:4). The perfect tense of εἰσεληλύθασιν (“they have reached”) suggests that the Lord of Hosts has already heard the cry and begun his judgment upon the rich.<sup>73</sup>

Not only do the rich commit wrongs against the poor, but they unknowingly commit wrongs against themselves. The selfishness with which they have hoarded their wealth and spent it on luxurious living ironically brings about their own demise (5:5).<sup>74</sup> Since there was no effective method of refrigeration in the first century, whenever an animal was slaughtered, people gorged themselves with meat. Whatever was left of the butchered animal had to be dried, salted, or discarded.<sup>75</sup> The rich, who enjoy such feasts by living in luxury and self-indulgence, fatten their hearts for a day of slaughter.

The “day of slaughter” is an image frequently used in the Prophets to allude to God’s ultimate judgment.<sup>76</sup> Davids observes an ironic play on words in 5:5: “‘The rich’ are having their feast on their ‘day of slaughter,’ but they should be mourning, for unbeknown to them God’s ‘day of slaughter’ has arrived.”<sup>77</sup> God’s eschatological judgment will bring about

<sup>71</sup> Moo, *The Letter of James*, 216.

<sup>72</sup> Brosend, *James and Jude*, 134. In Gen 4:10, blood cries out. In Hab 2:11, the stones cry out. Luke 19:40 is an allusion to Hab 2:11.

<sup>73</sup> Martin, *James*, 179; McCartney, *James*, 234. For an overview and helpful bibliography on the phrase “Lord of hosts,” see T. N. D. Mettinger, “Yahweh Zebaoth,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 920–24.

<sup>74</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 224.

<sup>75</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 66.

<sup>76</sup> For examples of prophetic uses of the “day of slaughter” as referring to the day of judgment, Allison refers readers to Isa 34:2–7; 65:12; Ezek 39:17–20; Zech 9:15; 11:4; Sib. Or. 5.375–400; Rev 19:17–21. Allison, *James*, 683 n. 297.

<sup>77</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 66.



a reversal of fortunes. Those who are exalted and have exalted themselves on earth will be brought low. The poor and oppressed will be raised up, for the Lord of hosts has heard their cries. This passage would have brought great hope to the believers who faced tremendous oppression.

### Major Theological Themes and Practical Implications

#### The Transience of Life and Wealth (1:10–11; 4:14; 5:2–3)

James teaches us that both human life and wealth are momentary in light of eternity. Human life will pass away like a scorched flower or a vanishing mist (1:10–11; 4:14). Our wealth will rot away, and our possessions are easily destroyed (5:2–3). True wealth, according to James, cannot be found in temporary earthly treasures, but only in the eternal nature of God and his kingdom (2:5). From an eternal perspective, it makes no sense for Christians to be concerned with hoarding wealth. This world, including its wealth and resources, will pass away. No amount of wealth can replace the eternal security offered by Christ.<sup>78</sup>

Having a heavenly worldview changes the way Christians think about and use the resources the Lord has given them. For Christians, money cannot be an end in itself. Resources are a God-given means that we should use strategically with wisdom.<sup>79</sup> We must use our wealth in a way that promotes the growth of the kingdom, investing in works that intentionally help spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, both locally and worldwide. R. Paul Stevens and Clive Lim challenge us to use our money relationally, contributing to the unity and equality among the people of God.<sup>80</sup> In contrast to the greedy and self-seeking practices of the world, we ought to intentionally create communities that promote generosity and care for our neighbors.<sup>81</sup> Christians need to reject materialism and deliberately use their homes, resources, and money to invest in the lives of believers and non-believers. In this way they participate in the growth and

<sup>78</sup> Dewi Hughes, *Power and Poverty: Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 145. See also Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 360–65.

<sup>79</sup> Scaewater, “The Dynamic and Righteous Use of Wealth in James 5:1–6,” 236–37.

<sup>80</sup> R. Paul Stevens and Clive Lim, *Money Matters: Faith, Life, and Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 131–32.

<sup>81</sup> Hak Joon Lee, *Christian Ethics: A New Covenant Model* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 326–27.

spread of the heavenly kingdom here on earth.<sup>82</sup>

#### Wealth and Works (1:27; 2:8, 14–16; 5:2–6)

One of James’s most well-known teachings is that true faith results in good works. He argues that a faith without works is dead and useless (2:14–26). A Christian’s good works include stewardship of the material blessings of the Lord. Thus, James questions the veracity of the faith of Christians who refuse to meet the dire needs of their fellow brothers or sisters (2:14–17; 5:1–6). For James, true religion is to care for the orphans and widows and resist the stain of the world (1:27). Hoarding wealth as an end in itself is an egregious sin against both God and the poor.

Not only should Christians intentionally invest in eternal things, but also we must work to meet the present needs of the less fortunate. Almsgiving and social justice work should not be done apart from the proclamation of the gospel. They are, however, necessary outgrowths of the gospel and proof of a transformed life.<sup>83</sup> Regardless of political beliefs, Christians across the spectrum are obligated to care for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.<sup>84</sup> We need to become “just peacemakers” who seek both the spiritual and physical wellbeing of others and protect the economic rights of the poor and needy.<sup>85</sup> Space precludes an exhaustive list of ways to care for the poor. However, all Christians ought to prayerfully consider how God intends for them to use their wealth and resources to meet the needs of the poor.<sup>86</sup> If we are not willing to use our wealth to help others, we must seriously consider whether or not our faith is dead.

<sup>82</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Stevens and Lim, *Money Matters*, 69–81; Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010); Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> Craig Blomberg, “Paul and James on Wealth and Poverty: No Disagreement Here,” *Presbyterion* 48.1 (2022): 131.

<sup>84</sup> Chad Brand and Tom Pratt, *Seeking the City: Wealth, Poverty, and Political Economy in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 741–42.

<sup>85</sup> Lee, *Christian Ethics*, 325. See also Charles Reed, ed., *Development Matters: Christian Perspectives on Globalization* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001).

<sup>86</sup> For a helpful list of selected statements on just economy and wealth inequalities by protestant denominations and ecumenical organizations, see Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 227–29.

### Oppression of the Poor (2:1–9; 5:1–6)

James does not mince words when addressing the atrocious treatment of the poor at the hands of the wealthy. He accuses them of committing fraud, withholding daily necessities from the needy, and murdering the righteous (5:1–6). Furthermore, James also condemns showing favoritism to the rich over the poor. By following worldly social conventions, these Christians have humiliated and disgraced the poor and transgressed the law of God (2:1–9).

Few Christians reading this article are likely to engage in affairs that actively oppress the poor. I pray that none of us are engaged in slavery, human trafficking, or any other horrific acts of exploitation that should not exist. James's epistle, however, not only condemns oppression, but, by implication, inaction as well. To engage the poor and oppressed in a meaningful way would make many Christians very uncomfortable. We will need to come face to face with drug addicts, prostitutes, orphans, immigrants, homeless, and many others who do not normally enter the front door of our churches. James commands us not to offer hollow platitudes, but to provide for their physical needs.<sup>87</sup> Meeting a person's most basic needs—food, clothing, clean water, healthcare, education, etc.—is a “fundamental moral demand.”<sup>88</sup> To turn a blind eye to the needs of our communities is oppression.

The ever-increasing complexity of the world's marketplace further complicates our ability to make ethical monetary decisions.<sup>89</sup> With the majority of our purchases, we now engage a worldwide economy rather than a purely local one.<sup>90</sup> Not knowing where items come from, how they are produced, or the work conditions of the companies' laborers creates ethical dilemmas for us as consumers. When faced with such decisions, we tend to ignore ethical issues connected to the decision or make decisions based on incomplete information, rather than doing the necessary research to make educated and moral decisions.<sup>91</sup> With some

<sup>87</sup> For practical suggestions on how Christians can effectively engage poverty both locally and internationally, see Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 183–268. See also William H. Brackney, *Christian Voluntarism: Theology and Praxis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>88</sup> Lee, *Christian Ethics*, 320.

<sup>89</sup> For a positive critique of capitalism as an economic philosophy from a Christian worldview, see Fred Catherwood, *The Creation of Wealth: Recovering a Christian Understanding of Money, Work, and Ethics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2002).

<sup>90</sup> For a discussion on how increased globalization has increased inequality over the past two hundred years, see O'Rourke, “Globalization and Inequality.”

<sup>91</sup> Brand and Pratt, *Seeking the City*, 700.

effort and research it is possible for us to determine which companies make reasonable efforts to provide fair wages and working conditions.<sup>92</sup> As Christians, we need to purchase from and invest in companies making socially conscious decisions and refuse to support those who oppress and exploit the poor.

### Dependence on God (1:9–11; 2:5; 4:13–17; 5:1–6)

Perhaps the greatest danger of possessing wealth is that a rich person places his trust in his wealth and sees no need for God. James condemns this attitude and strongly exhorts Christians to place their faith in God and seek his will (1:9–11; 4:13–17). By living a life of self-indulgence founded upon trust in wealth, the rich condemn themselves to destruction (5:1–6). Those who love God, humble themselves, and place their faith in God rather than in worldly riches will inherit the kingdom of God (2:5).

The security of wealth is nothing more than a mirage, yet people take great comfort from their riches. Attempting to control the future and find certainty in the wealth it might bring is an attitude of extreme arrogance.<sup>93</sup> God alone knows and is sovereign over the future. Christians must therefore reject such self-centered arrogance and acknowledge the sovereignty of God and their utter dependence upon him. Furthermore, all of creation and its blessings are God's to distribute in his good providence. He does not owe us, nor are his blessings exclusively ours once he has given them to us.<sup>94</sup> We are merely stewards of these good gifts. We have the extreme privilege of joining God and participating in his kingdom work here on earth through the strategic use of our wealth and resources.<sup>95</sup> This perspective frees us from the temptation to amass

<sup>92</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 234.

<sup>93</sup> Christopher W. Morgan, *A Theology of James: Wisdom for God's People*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 91.

<sup>94</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Economies of Grace,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 375–77.

<sup>95</sup> In order to cultivate a life that acknowledges its dependence on God, Bruce B. Barton, David R. Veerman, and Neil Wilson suggest avoiding these five attitudes regarding wealth: (1) imagining retirement in selfish terms as our time to enjoy the fruits of our labors; (2) seeing work and careers as ways we can make money in order to buy what we want; (3) defining money as a symbol of independence; (4) believing that we are in control of major areas of life; and (5) making practical decisions about education, job changes, moving, investments, and spending without serious prayer (*James*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, *Life Application Bible Commentary* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992], 112).

wealth and trust in it instead of God's sovereign provision.<sup>96</sup>

### The Great Reversal (1:9–11, 27; 2:5; 5:5–7)

James does not promote poverty as a mere ascetic discipline with no real hope. He exhorts Christians and those who are poor to persevere because there will be a great reversal in the end. Since Christ will return and both redeem and restore all of creation, the lowly brother can boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation (1:9–11). Though wealth greatly affects a person's social standing in earthly kingdoms, it has no bearing on a person's standing in the heavenly kingdom (2:5). Those who trust in wealth will be met with a day of slaughter (5:5–7). Those who love God (2:5) and have kept themselves unstained by the world (1:27) will be rich in faith and heirs to the eschatological kingdom.

A proper eschatological perspective brings great hope to Christians who are suffering in this life and gives them strength to persevere. Wealth may offer temporary protection, but that safety is only illusory. Christians can find great hope because their current social status is not indicative of their eternal standing before God. When Christ returns to redeem all things once and for all, it is not a person's wealth that will bring security, but their standing before God.<sup>97</sup> The wealthy will be humbled, and the poor will be raised up. Their true identity is not defined by earthly wealth, but by their identity as God's children redeemed by Christ. Furthermore, God himself has seen the plight of the poor and heard their cry. He will not refrain from bringing his justice upon the situation. Those who trusted in their wealth on earth will spend eternity separated from God, longing for his presence and entry into the kingdom of heaven. In contrast, those who have placed their trust in Christ will spend eternity in the presence of God, lacking nothing, and receiving infinitely more than this world could provide.

### Conclusion

Though it may be an overstatement to refer to poverty and wealth as James's most important theme, this issue undeniably plays a significant

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<sup>96</sup> Stevens and Lim, *Money Matters*, 103–9. See also Thorsten Moritz, "New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society," in *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2000), 66–72.

<sup>97</sup> Mariam Kamell, "The Economics of Humility: The Rich and the Humble in James," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 174–75.

role in the epistle. James exhibits a deep sympathy for Christians struggling to survive and retain their faith in an unforgiving and hostile environment. The theological significance of James's teaching on wealth lies in both his attack on the arrogant and oppressive rich and his encouragement of the poor and lowly.<sup>98</sup> According to Chester and Martin,

[James] stands in essential continuity with the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the central thrust of Jesus' message of the kingdom. It lays bare the power interests involved in human relationships, actions, and words, and calls the bluff of falsely motivated action. Against this, it calls for genuine faith and concrete, practical action. Both for its own time, and also for the present day, it poses a challenge to society and to the Christian community.<sup>99</sup>

In a world where the deprivations of war and the aftermath of a global pandemic threaten to plunge many, many more into poverty, Christians have ample opportunity to demonstrate their faith by providing for the physical needs of the poor and destitute. James reveals that those who love God, who have humbled themselves, who have drawn near to him, who have kept themselves unstained by the world, and who have used their wealth to take care of the poor and oppressed, will be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom.

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<sup>98</sup> Andrew Chester and Ralph P. Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>99</sup> Chester and Martin, *The Theology of the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude*, 58.