

5-6 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

Having used the rich and poor persons in the previous verses as an illustration of favoritism, James now emphasizes how wrong it is for children within the family of God to act in this way. For as children of God, lovingly adopted into His family, it follows that we should seek to emulate Him in our own perspectives and actions. Moreover, the impetus to favor the rich person over someone who is impoverished derives from selfishness, for the motive in such favoritism is that one might gain something from the wealthy which could not be gained from the poor. And ultimately, selfishness portrays ungratefulness, for the believer should recognize that being in the family of God is entirely a matter of His grace and not something anyone deserves on his or her own merits. As we come truly to recognize the unmeasured gift of God's grace in our eternal salvation, we are enabled to truly love one another.

Listen, my beloved brethren... – James uses the command or imperative, “listen” (Ἀκούσατε, *acousate*), to emphasize the fundamental importance of this teaching. The fact that he once again addresses his readers as “beloved brethren” (cf. 1:16; 1:19) goes to the heart of his message, namely, that God poured out His love upon us when we were entirely impoverished in our own sin, for in our spiritual poverty, we had no ability to gain favor with God. As Paul writes to the Ephesians:

...remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:12)

Obviously, the Greek ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi*, translated as “brethren,” is used in the Apostolic Scriptures to denote “followers of Yeshua,” those who received Him as the promised Messiah and therefore, when the context warrants it, can denote both male & female. Note, for example, Matt 25:40:

The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ (Matt 25:40)

...*did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith* – The opening “did not God” casts the sentence into a rhetorical question to which the answer is “Yes, surely!” James thus appeals to God’s sovereign election of sinners. James’ point is that God’s choice is in no way effected by the status of the one chosen. God’s choosing of those He would save is entirely a matter of His own sovereign will, for all those He sovereignly draws to Himself are sinners who, left to themselves, are fully impoverished in their sin and have no power in themselves to change their condemned status.

We must therefore inquire as to what James means here when he speaks of “the poor of this world.” The Greek reads τῶ κόσμῳ πλουσίου, “the poor in the world.” Taking the dative to be a “dative of reference,” the meaning would be “those who are poor in the world’s eyes.” However, James makes it clear that the “world’s” assessments of values are in direct opposition to God’s assessments.

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (James 3:6)

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

Thus, taken in this sense, “the poor in the world” could well mean “those who are viewed by the world as poor,” that is, they do not participate in those things that the world considers important, that is, self-fulfillment in the sinful pleasures of the world.

Some manuscripts have “the poor of [this] world”¹ which would emphasize those who are impoverished in terms of possessions, etc. It seems very likely that this reading came about in an attempt to overcome the ambiguity of the text so that it would be read as relating to those who were economically poor. But the majority of the manuscripts have “the poor in the world,” and it seems this is surely the proper

1 τῶ κόσμῳ (+ τουτου 61 al) A2 C2 P Ψ ̄̄ ff co?; Prisc †

reading.

But is this status of “poor” one of material wealth or spiritual wealth? The earlier context makes it clear that the two categories are marked by one’s clothing and jewelry, which surely indicates material wealth. But it seems quite clear that James uses material wealth or poverty to illustrate spiritual wealth or poverty. For those who are mature believers and are also rich financially have come to affirm that apart from God’s grace and mercy they have nothing. And this is likewise the affirmation of believers who are not wealthy financially, for they too have come to affirm that apart from God’s grace they have no hope. In both cases, true wealth or riches is seen to be in the abundant grace God has given to those He has chosen and drawn into an eternal relationship with Him, having adopted them as sons and daughters into His family. To have the eternal, all powerful and loving God as one’s Father is to be rich indeed!

Paul makes the same assessment:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (1Cor 1:26–29)

...and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? – True wealth is that of eternal salvation. Having become the adopted children of God through faith in Yeshua, all who are born again by the Spirit of God have become “heirs of the kingdom.” Yeshua alone is the natural heir, and we as adopted children become “fellow heirs” with Him.

The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Messiah, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom 8:16–17)

The “kingdom” speaks of eternity in which sin and sorrow will be no more, and the love of God in Yeshua will be eternally experienced by all who are His.

Note carefully that James identifies believers as “those who love Him.” In other words, all who are true children of God through faith in Yeshua, and who have therefore been adopted into His family, will verify their standing in grace by lives that conform more and more to that which pleases God. This is what it means to “love God,” as the *Shema* reminds us.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. (Deut 6:4–6)

This is what Paul means in Rom 8:16 when he identifies true believers as those who are willing to “suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” True faith perseveres even if this means enduring times of suffering.

By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. (1Jn 4:17)

But you have dishonored the poor man. – In the believing community, to treat differently those who are financially wealthy and those who are not is to undermine the truth that all who are in Messiah are equally rich in His grace. In other words, to make a difference based upon material wealth or prestige is, at the same time, to diminish the true value of our eternal salvation and the riches all believers have in their growing relationship with God. Indeed, the very promises of God to all who are His in Messiah are incalculable riches that will never diminish.

Clearly in this text James has instructed us about the very foundation upon which unity is built and that for which we must strive in our local communities. For as we love one another and care for each other, we demonstrate our true appreciation for the riches of God’s grace given to each one who is truly “in Messiah.”

Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? – Here James reminds us that there are many people in every society who abound in earthly riches but have no relationship with God through faith in Yeshua. Moreover, in the ancient times since the wealthy usually also had political power, it was often the rich who sought to persecute the believers.

The Greek word translated “oppress” (καταδυναστεύω, *katadunasteuō*) is found only here and in Acts 10:38, where it is used of Satanic activity.

You know of Yeshua of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. (Acts 10:38)

That James uses the same word here may well have in mind governing authorities who persecuted the believing community and were also wealthy from imposed taxes. That they “drag you into courts”¹ would indicate that those who are oppressing members of the believing community had some kind of legal authority and power. Some have suggested that these were Jewish authorities connected to the synagogue.² Paul himself gives us testimony of his persecuting the believers before God drew him to Himself and to faith in Yeshua.

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. (Acts 22:4–5)

Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? – When governing authorities considered the believers to be their enemies and persecuted them in order to stop their message and testimony, such authorities and those who aided them were actually blaspheming God. For in persecuting His people they obviously considered the God they worshiped as impotent and unable to come to their aid. To “blaspheme” is to denigrate the character of God, either by claiming He does not exist, by considering Him to be a source of evil, or by claiming Him to be powerless and therefore of no consequence whatsoever.

By referring to “the fair name” we are reminded that in the Semitic world, one’s “name” represented one’s essential characteristics. Thus, the “name of the Lord” speaks of His infinite character and specifically

-
- 1 The Greek ἔλκουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς κριτήρια has the word κριτήρια, “courts” as a plural, but most English translations have the singular “court” as a collective singular.
 - 2 A. K. M. Adam, *James: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Baylor Univ. Press, 2013), p. 41.

of all of His divine attributes. For example, we read in Prov 18:10,

The name of the LORD (יהוה) is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe. (Prov 18:10)

The “fair name” (τὸ καλὸν ὄνομα) could be translated as “the good name,” or “the beautiful name” and portrays the infinite goodness of God and thus the infinite power and love by which He redeems those who are His, forgiving their transgressions and giving them eternal life with Him.

Clearly the “fair name” of which James speaks is that of Yeshua, for His name identifies Him as the Savior of sinners.

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Yeshua, for He will save (יִשְׁעוּ, *yoshi'a*) His people from their sins.” (Matt 1:21).

Therefore to blaspheme the “fair Name” is to deny that He is the Messiah and the One Who is the only Savior of sinners.

Indeed, all who are in Messiah, that is, all who are truly born again by faith in Him, are those who are known as having placed their faith in Yeshua, and thus are “called by His Name.” The power of Yeshua was proclaimed by Peter when a sick man was healed and Luke records Peter’s testimony regarding His Name.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Yeshua Messiah the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead — by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8–12)

What a privilege it is to be living testimonies of the “fair Name” of Yeshua. And one of the most significant ways that we accomplish this is by loving one another within our respective communities of faith.

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13:35)