

Rich and Poor in the Letter of James

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The Epistle or Letter of James has startlingly harsh warnings for the rich who have treated others badly: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire...Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (James 5: 1-3a, 4).

These words read more like a sermon than a letter, and the Letter of James probably is a sermon, or several sermons, the words having been copied down by those who were hearing them. James is the man known as the "brother of the Lord." Orthodox Tradition holds, as the whole early Church held, that he was the son of Mary's husband Joseph by a previous marriage. (Both Martin Luther and John Calvin believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary. So, unlike some modern Christians, they would never have said that James was the biological brother of Jesus.)

James was a leader in the early Church, so when Peter was miraculously freed from prison, he instructed his amazed friends to "tell this to James and to the brethren" (Acts 12: 17). James was trusted and respected enough to preside over the Council of Jerusalem, also described in the Book of Acts.

The first part of James' letter, like the strong words in Chapter 5, teaches about being rich, but in a different way. In these verses, he describes the effect of being a follower of Christ on a poor or "lowly" person, and then on a rich person. He says, "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation" (1: 9).

For the poor person, being faithful to God means being exalted, raised to heights unlike anything the world offers. Trials will come to every person, rich or poor, but the poor person who endures them "will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him" just as the rich person will. In the Kingdom, the rich have no advantage.

That is why James says that the rich person should boast "in his humiliation." Having found the true riches of Christ, the rich person will be satisfied. It will no longer be necessary or appealing to pursue the fleeting wealth and position of this world: "For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits" (1: 11).

Troparion - Tone 4

As the Lord's disciple you received the Gospel,
O righteous James;
as a martyr you have unfailing courage;
as God's brother, you have boldness;
as a hierarch, you have the power to intercede.
Pray to Christ God that our souls may be saved.

To both rich and poor, James gives the same advice: "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (5: 8).