

POOR MAN – RICH MAN  
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The apostle James in his brief letter had a lot to say about the poor and the rich. The early church composition of slaves and masters offered many opportunities to observe their interaction. James told the story ( chapter two) of two men coming to an early church worship service. One was rich and one was poor. The rich man was warmly welcomed and given a place of honor. The poor man was virtually ignored and told to sit in a place where he would not be a distraction.

This scene, in various forms, is still played out in many churches today. We cater to the rich and often overlook the poor. But James said that this was fundamentally wrong. He said that it is wrong to place a value on people on the basis of possessions or lack of them. The amount of money in the bank is the wrong measuring stick of the value of a human being. He said to do so, is to set ourselves up as judges, where we determine a person's worth. The only true judge is the Lord and we should not usurp His place.

In fact James went on to say that this was sin. It was the breaking of the royal law that stipulated that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. That neighbor may be a poor man. James also reminded us that there is a day of personal judgment coming when we will be judged for our attitudes and conduct toward the poor. Pretty sobering stuff!

In another place James paints the picture of one of the church members who is destitute. He comes to the church meeting hoping that someone would care and help him. That was a practice in the early church where those that had shared with those who had need. They had all things common and no one lacked anything. But now, in this particular church, they have drifted from their early beginnings and had lost their spirit of generosity. So rather than help him in a practical way they utter some pious words and say " God bless you". But the needy man needed help, not words. Words, by themselves can be cheap. Sometimes we need to answer the prayer ourselves, by sharing what we have with those who are in need. James indicated that true faith is demonstrated in deeds, not just in words.

God has given us clear instructions concerning those who are destitute. Deuteronomy 15:7-8-" if there is among you a poor man of your brethren.....you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need." The apostle John wrote, " but whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" ( 1 John 3:17)

But the clearest words that James wrote on the subject were these - "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this : to visit(care) orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world".( James 1:27). He places holiness and the care of the poor on the same plane.

One of the major tests of the genuineness of our faith is demonstrated in our care for the poor, especially the widows and the orphans. In James' day, as in many parts of the world today, there was no social safety net for widows and orphans. They became the most vulnerable and destitute in their society. All through the scriptures God demonstrates His care for them and urges us to be like Him in this regard. God is described as" a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows".( Psalm 68:5). He instructed His people,"Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless,

plead for the widow".( Isaiah 1:17)

Jesus spoke about our attitude toward the poor and the final judgment. They are sobering words.

Mathew 25:35 –40 - " for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. Then the righteous will answer Him , saying, Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you drink? When did we see You a stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you? And the King will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me".

So next time a poor man comes to church, or a destitute brother approaches you, or you are made aware of the plight of the orphan and widow, see it as an opportunity to minister to Jesus.