

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

As you drive down the road and you see someone at an intersection in London walking up and down the center median, what's your initial reaction? If we are honest, there are many thoughts that can come to our minds. But the reality is that we all know that the reason someone is panhandling can be very complicated.

Some people view poverty as a simple problem: people are lazy. Yet the reasons people struggle are varied and wide. Mental health can play into people's well being. Previous poor choices they have made might affect their well being or health. A wrong sense of self can distort someone's view of who they are and what they are able to do. Growing up in a bad neighbourhood can shape a person profoundly. Sickness can limit a person's well-being overall.

The reasons people struggle are as wide and as varied as the day is long. As Christians, we need to think wisely about who is poor and then move forward in ways that we respond with the mercy of the good news.

Who are the poor?

When we think about the poor, we typically reduce poverty down to financial poverty. But our view of poverty is based off of a culture that has placed a disproportionate emphasis on wealth. But poverty in the biblical sense was applied in a far wider way.

For James, the poor included those who were financially poor. We see that in 2:14ff where he tells the church that those who are financially poor need more than words but also actions. But we also see how the poor included the widow and the orphan (1:27), people who would be powerless, and the powerless were often those who were oppressed. The reasons for oppression are often because they have been mistreated by the rich, having their wages withheld or being taken advantage of because they lack the resources to push back against those who are rich and powerful (5:1-6). And finally the poor are those who have been displaced or exiled (1:1) and have lost social standing in the culture.

When we consider who are the poor according to James, we can see that James stands in the OT tradition. The poor were usually associated with God's people displaced and exiled (Isa. 26:6; 49:13), scattered and oppressed. Our modern notions of poverty and powerlessness have become confused and many of those groups associated with poverty have now become the oppressors.

When James writes, there seems to be four groups he addresses in his letter: 1) the poor, who were the vast majority of people addressed in this letter because they had been displaced; 2) the extremely poor who did not have enough food or clothing (2:14-17); 3) the merchants who are believers who have some financial means and have confidence that they can avoid the problem of poverty (4:13-16); and 4) unbelieving rich landowners who exploit others. James knows that the church he writes to is made up of the first three groups.

The Poor – Selections from James

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So then it is not a surprise that James says that the poor are cared for by God and will be exalted (1:9-11) because he writes with the heart of the OT in mind (Deut. 10:18-19; Ps. 68:5).

Care for the poor (1:26-27; 2:1-17)

In light of the fact that God defends the poor, James makes it clear that our responsibility is to also care for those who cannot care for themselves. Participation in religious activities is very important, but James wants to make it clear that the practice of religion not only includes worship, prayer, giving, reading Scripture, and fellowship, but also living our lives consistently as those who show love to the most vulnerable. True religion is not only living a holy life, but it is also showing kindness to the vulnerable, because this is God-like.

While Martin Luther would struggle with the book of James, his emphasis on this point was spot on. He would argue that Christians should not live in monasteries to serve God because that is only serving yourself. Rather, Christians should love and serve God and neighbour through their vocations. Luther would famously say, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbour does.” (quoted in Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 2).

God tends to care for the people around us through our vocations, so instead of seeing God works as something we do for God, we are now to see good works as God’s work performed through us for our neighbour. This is the gracious gift of God – that if he gives you a healthy body and opportunity to work, your worship to God is expressed in your work by serving your neighbour.

For this reason, James has no place for favouritism. Our view of power is often very fleshly, failing to realize how we use power for personal gain and end up exploiting those in need. We are to show honour and mercy to those who are in need, and we do that through giving and working. We have opportunity to serve others, help others, and benefit others by being mindful that honest work, fair work, and generous work can support those who are the greatest in need.

Not only that, but we must encourage patience. This is James’s point in 5:7ff – that there is a need for us to encourage patience. And the reason we encourage patience and not try to put band-aids on the problems is because we have...

Hope in God’s Future Reversal (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 5:1-6)

The promise we have is that God will make wrongs right. The great reversal is that those who have been humbled will be exalted and those who have exalted themselves will be humbled. This is why the lowly believer should boast in his exaltation because one day, those who are

powerless, forgotten, oppressed, and displaced will receive power, be remembered, be exalted, and forever have a home.

The reason for this is that the poor believer must learn to depend upon the Lord. The poor believer is going to inherit the kingdom (2:1-13) because the evidence that you belong to the kingdom is faith. And the faith of every believer is that they will receive what they do not deserve because they have been remembered by God. As James can say in 5:1-6, God hears their cries. Just as God heard the cries of his people in Egypt when they were oppressed and mistreated, God hears the cry of every believer who is powerless, oppressed, weak, and mistreated.

So either we will humble ourselves or humiliation will come to us, whether we are rich or poor. The question that remains is this: will you humble yourself or will you be humbled? How do we treat the lowest people of society is an indication of how we will stand before the Lord. The truly humble will practice the economics of humility by caring for the helpless rather than flaunting their wealth because we know that the day is coming when God will right every wrong, make everything beautiful.

For this reason, we who have much want to remember that faith is seen in sacrifice. Just because we do things for the poor doesn't mean that we have faith. Any unbeliever can do things for the poor. James is not advocating for some social gospel – that we do good to the poor because that will save us. Rather, we care for the poor because we identify with them in their humiliation and we give sacrificially until we feel some measure of pain in giving.

This practice of humbling ourselves is the way that we identify with God's great reversal that will come at the end of the age. God will vindicate those who depend upon him. He will care for their needs. He will justify the godly and it will be seen in their love of neighbour.

Because God is merciful, we also ought to be merciful. Because mercy triumphs over judgment, we also ought to be those who defend the cause of the orphan and the widow. The powerless in our society are often the forgotten. They are treated like they are not persons. The death of the unborn cries out against those who treat them as non-humans. And one day, God will show himself to be the one who has identified with the poor.

And we know this is the case because the glorious Lord Jesus Christ was not born in riches and power, but in poverty and scandal. In destitution and need, with no place to lay his head, growing up in a home where his earthly father had to eek out a living, Jesus could say that foxes have dens and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head (Matt. 8:20).

But the Son of Man who humbled himself to the point of death on a cross, executed as a criminal, was raised from the dead as the greatest reversal of all, showing that true honour and glory is not seen in this world by riches and money, but by trusting in his heavenly Father. And in going to the cross, he not only rescues you from your pride, but he identifies with you in your weakness and calls you to the way of humbling yourself so that you might follow him on the

narrow road that leads to life. And if this is the way of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, can't we follow him?