



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

“Blessed Are the Poor”

Background Study

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Introduction

1. In Luke 12:22-31, we read a text that may strike us as both familiar and different. It is familiar because we’re accustomed to hearing it in studies of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (6:25-34).
2. But a few details, and especially how the paragraph is located in Luke, are different.
 - a. Just prior to verses 22-31 is the parable of the rich fool (vv. 13-21).
 - b. Just after it, Jesus tells us his followers not to be fearful (a natural result of anxiety) but to “sell your possessions, and give it to the needy” (vv. 32-33).
 - c. Especially interesting is that the saying Matthew records as a unit in 6:19-21 is split between the verses just before and just after the paragraph about worry (21, 34).
3. When we read Luke 12:13-34 as a unit, we see Jesus warning his followers not to worry about wealth, but rather to use it as a heavenly investment, especially to help the poor.
4. Luke’s arrangement illustrates his tendency to highlight Jesus’ emphasis on the poor.¹ It is important to see just how important the subject was to Jesus because of the way James applied his teaching to the life of faith. His emphasis was not an adjunct to Jesus’ emphasis but an important application of it.
 - a. In 1:9-11, he stresses in absolute terms the reversal of fortunes of rich and poor.
 - b. In 2:5-7, he declares that “God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith,” and then says that to show favor to the rich is to participate in persecuting the poor man and amounts to blasphemy of God’s honorable name.
 - c. In 5:1-6, he uses language reminiscent of the boldest of the Old Testament prophets to denounce the rich and their riches.
 - d. The theme is so woven into James that the ideas of being doers of the word who are properly humble before God is closely tied to taking proper care for the poor (see 1:26-27; 2:14-16, and the use of “lowly/humble” in 1:9 and 4:6, 10).
5. We will understand James’s focus better if we take the time to study his background.

¹ “The poor” is used in Luke as a category to cover all of the outcasts and enslaved to whom Jesus’ ministry was especially directed (note the following references and their surrounding contexts: Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; see Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 79-84).

Body

I. James's Jewish Roots.

- A. The law of Moses taught that there was to be no permanent or hopeless poverty in Israel (Ex. 23:10-11) and that any person who did fall on hard times was to be treated properly in line with God's holiness (Lev. 25:39-43).²
- B. In general, their status as a rescued people made it incumbent on them to exhibit God's concern for the less fortunate who were often abused and oppressed.
 - 1. The principle is stated in Deuteronomy 10:16-19.
 - 2. The ideal king was to demonstrate the right concern (Psa. 72:1-2).
 - 3. The poor were to not hesitate in calling on the LORD, for he listened to the poor (Psa. 69:32-33; 86:1-2).
- C. By the time of the prophets, denunciations of mistreatment of the poor had become normative (as Amos 2:6-7³ illustrates), a practice that carried over into intertestamental literature.⁴ There were three points of emphasis.
 - 1. "The action of the wealthy in taking advantage of the poor or *simply in failing to help* them is a crime, a sin. The wealthy are not condemned for their wealth *per se* but for how they use it.
 - 2. "The word pair . . . 'poor and wretched' had come into use as a technical designation of the poor by the exilic period.
 - 3. "The concept of poor was readily paired with that of innocent (or righteous)."⁵

II. Jesus (and His Body) Regarding the Poor.

- A. In general, we can note the following things about Jesus' actions and teachings.
 - 1. From the outset, Jesus' identity as Messiah was tied to God's concern for the poor (Luke 4:18; 7:22 = Matt. 11:5).
 - 2. In prophetic tones, Jesus blessed the poor and cursed the rich (Luke 6:20, 24).
 - 3. He taught the reversal of fortune idea (Luke 16:19-31; 21:1-4 = Mark 12:41-44).
 - 4. One's view of wealth was a good indicator of the spiritual condition of his heart.
 - a) We see this in the episode of the rich ruler and what Jesus said afterward about the rich entering heaven (Matt. 19:21-24; par. Mark 10; Luke 18).
 - b) We see it in what he said about lasting treasure and the focus needed to obtain it (Matt. 6:19-24).

² Specifics include the following: [1] Loans to fellow Israelites were to be interest-free (Lev. 25:36f; Ex. 22:25; Deut. 23:19). [2] Control was exerted over collateral for loans and how long it could be kept (Ex. 22:26f.; Deut. 24:6, 10). [3] Every third year, the required tithe was to be used for the poor (Deut. 14:28f.; 26:12f.). [4] Farmers were to leave parts of their crops standing so the poor could help themselves as needed (Lev. 19:9f.; Deut. 24:19-22).

³ The NEB translates: "For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve, because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of their way."

⁴ See Sirach 4:8-10; 13:3-7, 17-20; 31:5.

⁵ Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 42.

- c) We see it in the contrast between the unaccepting Pharisees who were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14; see the parallel to Matt. 6:24 in v. 13) and Zacchaeus who, pledged “half of [his] goods... to the poor” (Luke 19:8).
5. Jesus’ intent is expressed in his parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:13, 21.
- B. The early church’s behavior showed the influence of Jesus’ teaching.
 1. Being in community led them share with those in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37).
 2. Gentile churches were expected to give to help the poor in Jerusalem, the one thing the Jewish leaders specifically asked Paul to do (Gal. 2:10; 2 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 15:26).⁶

III. Reflections on Teaching About the Poor.⁷

- A. We should think about what the above shows about God’s heart and ponder what questions these principles should lead us to ask.
- B. At the very least, we are safe in affirming the following.
 1. To imitate Jesus includes an effort to reflect his concern and follow his example with regard to the poor.
 2. Our attitude about wealth says much about the spiritual condition of our hearts.
 3. As both the Pharisees and the rich young man show, being very religious can mask an attitude about wealth (and the poor) that is eternally costly.
 4. If, as we so often (correctly) hear in prayers, we are among the world’s richest people, it is incumbent on us to reflect on what those riches imply relative to our responsibility to the poor (cf. James 2:5; Luke 12:48).⁸

Conclusion

1. We conclude with James who, in light of the Bible background we’ve studied, calls us to the attitude of heart that leads to obedient faith: “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation. . . . [for] God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him” (Jas. 1:9; 2:5).
2. In what are we boasting? Whom do we esteem most, the poor in the world or the most affluent?

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⁶ Allusions such as those made to ministerial support (1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6) show that there are authorized purposes for church contributions besides sharing with the poor. That said, it is noteworthy that the New Testament’s primary emphasis when the collection is mentioned is on assistance for the poor. Perhaps in light of this truth, we should evaluate what receives most emphasis in our modern budgets and what that says about our understanding of biblical teaching and priorities.

⁷ This brief summary has barely begun to unpack the biblical teaching on this issue, but should be enough to at least begin serious self-reflection by those of us who live in the world’s most affluent society.

⁸ We should undertake this self-examination by comparing ourselves with those who are poorer, not with those like Bill Gates.