



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Background: “Blessed Are the Poor” (1)

Applying the Teachings of Jesus

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In the introduction to his commentary on James, Dan McCartney devotes three pages to discussing how “James closely resembles the recorded teaching of Jesus” (McCartney 2009, 49). He includes this helpful summary of that characteristic of the letter as noted by many James scholars:

James does not cite the words of Jesus in the form we have them in the Gospels (although 5:12 comes fairly close to Matthew 5:34–37), nor does he refer to Jesus’s teaching, except in a general sense in 2:1. Nevertheless, as many scholars have noted, a great deal of James’s instruction has a marked similarity to what we find in Jesus’s ethical instruction in the Synoptic tradition. The most thorough study of the matter was undertaken by [D. B.] Deppe (1989 [*The Sayings of Jesus in the Epistle of James*, Bookcrafters]), who examines some sixty writers on James from 1833 to 1985 on the question of James’s parallels to Synoptic tradition. Deppe finds a wide variety in the specific texts that scholars have seen as parallels, possibly because many of the apparent parallels also occur elsewhere in Second Temple Jewish literature, but he concludes that regardless of whether any one particular alleged discrepancy is real, the sheer number of correspondences makes it difficult to argue that there is no relationship whatever. This is especially true of the marked correspondences to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and Luke’s corresponding Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) (McCartney 2009, 49-50).

To show this relationship to the Matthew and Luke texts, McCartney includes a list of twenty-one correspondences (reproduced in the chart at right). Our concern in this study is with the echo of Jesus' teaching heard in James's concern for the poor, evident in four of the topics delineated by McCartney: (1) riches are like grass (1.10; Matt 6.30 = Luke 12.28); (2) God chooses the poor (2.5; Matt 5.3, 5 = Luke 6.20); (3) serving two masters (4.4; Matt 6.25 = Luke 16.13); (4) moth-eaten treasures (5.2–3; Matt 6.19–21).

That the early church was concerned to help the poor is well known. Disciples sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to any who had need (Acts 2.46; 4.35). When there was a widespread famine, the Syrian Antioch church sent relief to their Judean brothers (Acts 11.29–30). Paul made it a point to collect funds from churches across the empire to aid the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15.26; 2 Cor 8–9). Significantly, James is connected to that effort, named, with Cephas and John, as the pillars in Jerusalem who extended the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and Paul in their mission to the Gentiles with the provision that the missionaries would “remember the poor” (Gal 2.9–10).

In remembering the poor, the church was following Jesus' example, a priority in his ministry that Luke emphasizes more (though it is also evident in Matthew and Mark). Focusing just on Luke's use of the word *poor* (πτωχός; *ptōchos*), we see several examples of this emphasis. In his programmatic mission statement, drawn from Isaiah 61.1–2, Jesus said he had been anointed “to proclaim good news to the poor” (Luke 4.18). Luke's account of the first beatitude omits Matthew's “in spirit,” reading simply, “blessed are you who are poor” (6.20). To reassure John the Baptist that he was in fact the coming one, Jesus told the prophet's disciples to tell him what

James and the Sermon on the Mount/Plain		
Correspondences with Jesus' Ethical Teaching in Matthew 5–7		
Dan G. McCartney		
James		Matthew 5–7
1.2	Joy in suffering	5.11–12 (Luke 6.22)
1.4	Be perfect	5.48 (Luke 6.36)
1.5–6	Ask in faith	7.7 (Luke 11.9)
1.10	Riches are like grass	6.30 (Luke 12.28)
1.17	The Father gives good things	7.11 (Luke 11.13)
1.19–20	Do not be angry	5.22
1.22–23	Hearing and doing	7.24–26 (Luke 6.47–49)
2.5	God chooses the poor	5.3, 5 (Luke 6.20)
2.10	Doing the whole law	5.18–19
2.11	Murder and adultery	5.21–30
2.13	Mercy triumphs	5.7 (Luke 6.36)
3.12	Fruit indicates the tree	7.16–18 (Luke 6.43–44)
3.18	Peacemakers	5.9
4.4	Serving two masters	6.24 (Luke 16.13)
4.8	Pure in heart	5.8
4.10	God exalts the humble	5.5
4.11 (5.9)	Do not judge	7.1–2
4.13–15	Not worrying about future	6.34
5.2–3	Moth-eaten treasures	6.19–21
5.10	Prophets as examples	5.11–12
5.12	Do not swear	5.34–37

The clearest example is the last one (Jas 5.12 = Matt 5.34–35, 37) where the wording is close to verbatim.

Dan G. McCartney. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 50.

they saw and heard Jesus doing, not least that “the poor have the good news preached to them” (7.22). When invited to dine with a man, he told his host that when he gave a feast, he should invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind (14.12–14). In the subsequent parable of the great banquet, the servant tasked with recruiting outcasts to replace those who made excuses for not attending was told to bring in people from the same groups (14.21). In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, Luke specifies that Lazarus was “a poor man” (16.20, 22). Jesus told the rich young ruler to give his possessions to the poor (18.22) and as part of his penitence, Zacchaeus said he would give half his goods to the poor (19.8). The widow who was praised for giving more than all the rich contributors combined did so despite being poor (21.3–4). These examples demonstrate an emphasis so pronounced that some see *the poor* in Luke as a category to stand for and include all the outcasts Jesus welcomed (see Green 1995, 79-84).

Of particular interest is how Luke contextualizes Jesus’ teaching on anxiety about life’s provisions in terms of helping the poor (Matt 6.25–33 = Luke 16.22–31). In Luke, this teaching is preceded by the parable of the rich fool (12.13–21), a story that does not appear in Matthew. In 12.32–33, immediately after the paragraph on anxiety, Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid but to “sell what you have and *give alms*” (v. 33 NRSV; the word is ἐλεημοσύνη; *eleēmosunē*; cf. Matt 6.2–4). On either side of the anxiety teaching, in 12.21, 34, Luke includes parts of what Matthew records as a unit in Matthew 6.19–21:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt 6.19–21).

“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. ... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12.21, 34).

Notice also that in Luke the prohibition of hoarding treasure on earth is the conclusion to the parable of the rich fool. The entirety of the unit in Luke 12.13–31 is crafted to not only emphasize the folly of trusting in wealth and being anxious over the things God provides—the points of emphasis in Matthew—but also to stress that God wants the wealthy to be cognizant of the poor.

In the context of what was occurring in the early church (see above), it is noteworthy that concern for the needy is one of the prominent and recurring themes of James. In 1.9–11, he

refers in absolute terms to the reversal of fortunes to be experienced by those who trust in riches versus those who humbly trust in God. In 1.26–27, he defines true religion in terms of caring for orphans and widows, groups typically included in the broader category of the poor (cf. Ps 10). In 2.5–7, he counters discrimination in the assembly with the reminder that God has chosen the world’s poor to be rich in faith; to discriminate is to side with those who oppress the poor and blaspheme God’s honorable name. In 2.14–16, true faith is illustrated in terms of whether one merely wishes the needy well or actively helps them. In 5.1–6, he denounces oppressors who hoard their wealth (cf. Matt 6.19–21) and withhold wages from laborers. As a Jesus-follower, James understood that active care for the poor and oppressed is basic to the practice of steadfast faith that demonstrates friendship with God over the world (Jas 4.4).

The reference to *God* is key for, in stressing concern for the poor, both James and Jesus before him were continuing the tradition long established in the law and reiterated in Second Temple Judaism. We can summarize that tradition with four statements:

- God has a special interest in the poor, downtrodden, and outcasts.
- God’s people should show similar concern for helpless people.
- The poor are often identified with the pious.
- Wealthy and powerful people are often identified with the wicked.

In part two, I’ll undertake a survey of this important aspect of biblical faith in Jewish thought.

Works Cited

Joel B. Green. 1995. *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. New Testament Theology. ed. James D. G. Dunn. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dan G. McCartney. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV

(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

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