

## **CARING FOR THE NEEDY: HOW MINISTRY TO THE POOR REFLECTS THE GOSPEL**

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*How does the expression of compassion and mercy towards the poor relate to the gospel? After reflecting on this question initially, it would not seem to require much consideration that Christians, those who have been recipients of God's extensive compassion and mercy, should demonstrate these same characteristics towards their fellow man. In doing so, we provide an example of the greater spiritual reality of God's heart and His willingness to extend mercy and compassion in redemption. Unfortunately, for the contemporary evangelical church, great debate has arisen as to the legitimacy of mercy ministries as a part of the church's witness.*

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### **The Purpose of God in Salvation**

But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation (1 Pet 2:9–12).<sup>1</sup>

First Peter 2:9–12 reminds us that God's purpose for the church in the world is to advance the gospel. His purpose for Israel was to represent Him before the Gentile nations of the earth. The Old Testament clearly puts on

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all English citations of Scripture are from the NASB.

display the redemptive plan of God. The church is appointed by God to realize His plan of gospel advancement. Notice how Peter describes the purpose of the church to glorify God in advancing the gospel. He applies the same mission given to Israel after being freed from slavery, to the church as, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” The church has been called out for the same purpose to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Peter on this occasion repeats the statement made to the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, described in Exod 19:5–6. The children of Israel waited for Moses to ascend the hill to meet with God. Having been freed from slavery and now anticipating their future entrance into the promised land, their expectation was for God to provide a statement of purpose and promise. God provides Moses with such a statement. The mission God declared for the nation is that they would fulfill their new calling by functioning as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

God had a purpose in calling the nation Israel out of slavery. He explains His purpose by saying to them that they were to function collectively in a priestly capacity. The job description of a priest is to function as a mediator between sinful man and a holy God. A priest “facilitates reconciliation with God.” God provided the Israelites with an illustration of their national role when He selected the tribe of Levi from among the other eleven Israelite tribes (Num 3:5–12), assigning this tribe the responsibility to function as priests. As the Levites were called out to serve these tribes as priests, so too were the Jewish people called out to serve other nations in a priestly role. By nationality as Israelites, they collectively bore the responsibility to function in a priestly role.

The tabernacle and its priestly system was a grand illustration of what God intended for the nation of Israel. What is important to note is that priests could not fulfill their assigned role if they were unsanctified or unholy. So too, the nation of Israel would be ineffective if they were not characterized by holiness.

Isaiah clearly describes the nation of Israel as being appointed by God to extend salvation to the Gentile nations, stating that they would be “a light to the Gentiles, that you should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6; 42:6; 51:4). This is consistent not only with the mission statement given in Exodus 19, but also with the covenant God made with Abraham, that “through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed” (Gen 12:1–3). Paul explains in Gal 3:14 that this *blessing* was salvation. Salvation extended first to the Jews and through them extended to the Gentiles as well (Acts 13:47).

This mission is affirmed in the gospels following the advent of Christ. Described within the immediate context of the nativity, Simeon affirms this at the dedication of Christ in the temple in Luke 2:30–32:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have

prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

Christ, on several occasions, illustrated that the scope of redemption extended to Gentiles, none more clearly than in His final commission to His disciples. His Jewish disciples were sent to teach and baptize those from every nation. How could they draw Gentiles to worship and glorify Jehovah, if they lived in a manner that violated God's standard and presented a compromised picture of His character?

In light of this understanding of the necessity of holiness for the fulfillment of priestly responsibility, the wrath and judgment of God upon the Israelites for embracing idolatry can be recognized as a failure to fulfill their calling. Sanctification and witness are directly linked in the mission given to Israel. Peter is making this application to the church in 1 Pet 2:9–12. On this occasion, under the new covenant, he is saying the church has the responsibility as a called-out people to function in a priestly role. This is not a designation afforded to just a select group of Christians. It is a corporate responsibility.

### **The Purpose of God in Sanctification**

The election of Israel, far from meaning the rejection of the other nations of the world, was the very means of salvation of the nations. Election was not a call to privilege, but a choosing for service. As such, the priestly character of the nation of Israel came into view almost from the beginning of her existence as a nation. The people were to be God's ministers, his preachers, his prophets to their own nation as well as to the other nations.<sup>2</sup>

Exodus 19:5–6 clearly states that a necessary relationship exists between the role of priest and the responsibility to holiness. A priest could not effectively function as one who reconciles sinners to a holy God, without himself living in a manner that reflected the holy character of God. Immediately following the giving of this mission statement to the nation of Israel, the law is given (Exodus 20). The law was provided to serve as a standard for holiness in order for the nation to achieve their God-given purpose. Paul tells us that the law is a tutor (Gal 3:24; Rom 3:19; 7:12; 1 Tim 1:8), and reveals to us our sinful nature. Yet, it is more than that. The law serves the practical purpose of equipping the nation with a standard of God's nature and character. It serves as their guide as to how they should conduct themselves before the pagan nations of the world and points to the holiness of God himself. Therefore, sanctification is directly linked to witness.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 22.

R. Kent Hughes in his book *Set Apart*, says it well. He states,

God's plan for Israel was a global plan. They understood that the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant was to set apart Israel to live according to the standards of God, to put on display the very nature and character of the one true God before pagan and lost nations, so that they could also be blessed.<sup>3</sup>

The advancement of God's redemptive plan and His purposes in salvation are intrinsically related to God's purposes in sanctification. Holiness serves a greater purpose than just personal benefit. Holiness is the opportunity to put on display the character and nature of God in this fallen world.

Believers need to understand that their sanctification is directly related to the effectiveness of our witness in this world. Sanctification is living as a reconciled image bearer. Man was made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Man was created with the capacity to reflect the communicable attributes of God; His mercy, His compassion, His justice, His love, His commitment to truth, the way that He grants forgiveness, the way that He makes peace with sinful man. Man was made to bear witness to the Creator, but because of the Fall his ability to live in a holy manner was compromised. It is these very attributes that God Himself refers in response to Moses' appeal for God to relent from His wrath following the Israelites immediate return to idolatry in Exod 34:6–7.

And Jehovah passed by before him, and proclaimed, Jehovah, Jehovah, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth, keeping lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation.

Man no longer lived to glorify God and to love Him but exchanged the truth for a lie and worshiped the creation instead of the creator (Rom 1:24–26). Man chose to worship himself. Created to express God's love, man now seeks to love and seek his best interest above God and others, and in so doing makes enemies of his neighbor. This is why the law became necessary to illustrate the nature of godliness. This is why Christ chose to cite the Old Testament summation of the law (Deut 6:5), "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–40)<sup>4</sup>. Because of the Fall, man could no

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<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 19.

<sup>4</sup> See also Rom 13:8–10; Gal 3:10; and Jas 2:10.

longer fulfill his responsibility to bring God glory by putting on display His character. The gospel provides a means for us to be reconciled to God, and provides the regenerating work of the Spirit in perfecting us. As reconciled image bearers we can once again put on display the character of God in this world. This is the work and purpose of sanctification in our lives.

### **The Compassion of God**

It is important to consider these preliminary principles in order to reach a proper understanding of why the church is called to serve the needy. The church finds its proper motivation in functioning as God's witness when it realizes that its fulfillment is found in manifesting godliness, holiness, mercy and compassion to those who are in need.

This church was a congregation of Jewish converts to Christianity formed on the day of Pentecost. Within this church were Jewish men of the *diaspora*, representing every existing nation within the Roman Empire. They heard the gospel in their own tongue and came to faith, many of them continued in Jerusalem (Acts 2). These displaced converts, as well as the multitudes that made up the congregation, composed of a great number of unemployed and impoverished. In Acts 6:2, the appointment of deacons occurred following the complaints of these Hellenist Jewish converts that their widows were not being cared for by the church leaders. This is also the church that Paul carried a financial gift to from the church of Antioch (1 Cor 16:1–2; 2 Cor 8:2–4; Gal 2:9–10), intended to help meet the material needs of the many poor in their midst.

With that in mind, James exhorts his congregation (Jas 2:1–7):

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

James goes on to shepherd them by saying,

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love our neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment (2:8–13).

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture. It holds a clear exhortation to put on display the character and nature of God as most evidenced in the work of redemption. James writes (2:5), “Did not God choose the poor of this world?” This is a reference to His redeeming work in their lives. The aorist tense here of *exelaxato* is the same used by Paul in 1 Cor 1:27. The word “chose” reminds us that this is an act of God determined in eternity past. The reference here is consistent with the meaning of election as expressed in Eph 1:4–5.

James is making a very intentional reference to this same electing work of God as he focuses on a particular demographic in order to illustrate in physical terms what God is accomplishing among the spiritually impoverished. It is parabolic, just as Christ illustrated the kingdom by using familiar and understandable pictures. In James’ consideration, the church’s care for the poor illustrates for others how those who are considered undeserving receive the mercy of God in salvation. Paul conveys this same understanding in 1 Cor 1:6–29:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

God demonstrates His love towards those things that are considered unworthy, ignoble, inferior. Though referring to the poor’s physical circumstances, the allusion to an unbelievers’ spiritual condition is clear. This is why James is greatly concerned for the behavior of Christians showing favoritism and partiality to the rich person and despising, ignoring, and neglecting those who are poor. The materially poor are illustrative of every

man's spiritual condition. What the church does in its particular work for the materially poor puts on display what God does in His particular work for the spiritually poor. Failure to care for the needy compromises a picture of this spiritual truth and exposes the church to fair accusations of hypocrisy. Christ illustrated this principle in Matthew 18. The slave, who had been forgiven an unpayable debt, unjustly exacts payment from his fellow slave. Roberts affirms this paradox, "If we worship God, who is father and who loves His creature, while we ourselves are heartless and merciless, we should be able ourselves to see that there is something incongruous in our worship."<sup>5</sup>

The principle is clearly summarized in verse 33, "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" The "just as" principle is consistent within Old Testament and New Testament and teaches that those who are followers and children of the true God should act in a manner that is consistent with their Father.

For I am the Lord *your* God; *consecrate yourselves* therefore, and *be holy, for I am holy* . . . For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be *your* God; *you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy* (Lev 11:44–45).

Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us" (Eph 5:1).

God's choice of the poor does not mean that all the poor will be saved. That is not the teaching of this text, but it does assure that their poverty does not place them at a spiritual disadvantage in comparison to the rich. His choice does not imply any merit in their poverty; in fact, the opposite is true. It is a picture of a lack of any merit to deserve His grace and His mercy. His choice indicates that the poor are in a better position than the rich to understand God's saving purpose and to be drawn to Him. They are uniquely positioned to be first responders to the wonderful message of hope preached in the gospel.

Christ on several occasions made a comparison between the rich and their neglect of His message in response to His teaching, acknowledging that the poor man is illustrative of the redeemed. Consider the account in Luke 12 of the rich man who tore down his barns to build greater ones. The rich man is judged because he is consumed with his wealth and does not recognize his dependence and his need upon God himself. It is a picture of his spiritual condition. This is seen as well in the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. One man, Lazarus—a poor man who went through this life begging from the table of the rich man, is the one who now sits at the table of the King. Christ consistently

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<sup>5</sup> J.W. Roberts, *A Commentary on the General Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, n.d.), 82.

uses these references to the rich and poor to illustrate our spiritual condition and what awaits those who possess genuine faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Who Are the Needy?**

James qualifies the poor as “of this world” (v. 5). This is a direct reference to those who walk on this planet as human beings and are, in the economy of this world, impoverished. The poor are those who are very conscious of their material needs and are often reduced to begging for mercy or for help. The poor are those lacking earthly possessions in the world’s estimation. D. Edmond Hiebert in his commentary on this text makes this observation:

In Jewish thinking the term “the poor” became closely associated with the pious. It was in this class that godliness had maintained itself. Perhaps James thought of the economic status of the majority of the church members. This close association of poor with pious may have been in his mind. He well knew that God never tired in selecting the materially poor in being rich in spiritual forms. Church history demonstrates that comparatively more poor people than rich have responded to the Gospel. Why is this true? What differs between a rich and poor person’s world view? Primarily it comes down to the issue of self-sufficiency. The poor individual has no pretense to imagine that they can be sufficient in caring and meeting all of their needs. The rich person can suffer under this illusion, and therefore convince themselves that they need no assistance from a fellow human being and no assistance from God himself. The poor person has been stripped of any possible façade or means to deceive himself in this regard.<sup>6</sup>

Because the dependency and hopelessness of the poor cannot be masked by possessions, power, or prestige, they long for a better life in a better world. It is the poor who are more prone to recognize the picture of their condition in the message of the gospel. Not just physically but also spiritually.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew *ani* or *dalai* have their correspondents in the Greek. The word here in James is *ptokos*, and is the word used most often in the New Testament to refer to the poor. Its usage intends to convey one who is utterly helpless, defenseless, in need of provision and protection. The second word used throughout the New Testament with regard to the poor is *penichros*. This word emphasizes a complete dependence and reliance upon another’s good will for life-sustaining resources.

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<sup>6</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 157.

The spiritually impoverished condition of the unredeemed is clearly described by these same terms. The unredeemed are utterly dependent upon God's grace and His mercy. It is the message of Eph 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." The unredeemed can do nothing through personal accomplishment, to earn the merit and favor of God. So it is that the individual who is materially poor in this world's economy is someone who understands the principle of being dependent upon another for life-sustaining resources. If someone does not intervene on their behalf they will die. They are that broken; they are that dependent; they have nothing to offer; they cannot care for themselves. Someone must demonstrate compassion towards them or they will die.

What makes the poor more prone to consider the message of the gospel? Church and missions history illustrate that a greater number of conversions and responses to the gospel are evidenced among the materially poor. Why is this the case? It is the individual who is in crisis that is most prone to ask eternal questions such as, "Is there a God?" "What is the purpose of life?" "What will happen when I die?" The poor have no resources to minimize the effects of the Fall, and therefore are faced daily with the realities of life and death. Christians who understand this recognize that the poor of this world are most open to a message of hope, forgiveness, peace, and promise of eternity spent with God. They are under no pretense that they possess the capacity to merit redemption.

### **God's Promise to the Needy**

God chose the poor of this world to be "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him." Given here are two expressions of spiritual wealth. The first "rich in faith" regards their condition in this present life. The world may view them as poor, but God views His chosen as rich *in faith*. Their material poverty and their spiritual riches coincide. Their present wealth consists of their salvation and all of the blessings that accompany it. The irony is the poorer they are the greater the faith they can possess to rely on God fully for provision of their physical needs. The person who has absolutely nothing has the capacity to express the greatest measure of faith. The more needy and impoverished a person is, the more they look to their heavenly Father to meet their needs. The capacity for faith is directly proportionate to their poverty.

James refers to this as "a blessed condition" stating that they will be "heirs of the kingdom." This second expression of their spiritual wealth is a reference to their future, eschatological life. The poor look expectantly to their future inheritance as heirs of the kingdom.

Paul uses the same language of inherited riches,

For the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:12–13).

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us (Eph 1:7).

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ (Eph 3:8).

And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:19).

Hiebert again on this text says, “The poor’s heirship, being heirs in the kingdom, was not a sudden thought, but a long premeditated gift. A fact that, in and of itself, should have made the Jerusalem church see the high worth of every believer.”<sup>7</sup>

James qualifies these individuals as those “who love him.” We see this same phrase used for genuine believers in 1:12:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Those who are being redeemed are those who love Christ. The promise of receiving the *crown of life* and the promise to be *heirs of the kingdom* are synonymous expressions in the book of James. Both relate to the believer’s eschatological future and the benefit of salvation. A love of God is evidence and fruit of authentic salvation, but it should be noted that it is not the cause of salvation. First John 4:19 expresses clearly the causal effect of God’s active, merciful work towards us. His love inaugurates regeneration, resulting in a diminished love and worship of the creation, rightly restoring the creation order of love first for God. Recognition of the underserved nature of His atoning work fosters within us a richer and deeper affection for himself (Eph 3:17).

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<sup>7</sup> Hiebert, 158–159.

### **The Hypocrisy for the Church When It Neglects the Needy**

James again exhorts his congregation in 2:6–7: “but you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?”

James uses a very strongly worded statement, warning believers that they have chosen to act in a way that lacks integrity. If a believer has received the mercy and compassion of God himself, which was displayed in the gospel, and yet he does not have the capacity to reflect that mercy and compassion to his brother or neighbor in need, that is utter hypocrisy. How can we be quick to beg the mercy of God and then behave the opposite of those values?

Romans 5:8 tells us that “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” When the sinner’s good deeds are no more valuable than filthy rags, Christ lavished His love on us by going to the cross and dying on our behalf. A sinner is incapable of reciprocity, meaning that grace alone was the standard modeled to those who are spiritually impoverished. James’ exhortation exposes the members of His church as disregarding the poor man and behaving in a fashion diametrically opposed to how God acts. You ignore the poor man and make him sit in the back because you can’t gain anything from him. You bring the rich man to the front; you give him the best seats, and you honor him because you know he is rich. And there is an expectation in your heart that you will receive something from him.

If God applied this same standard to men, then no one would be saved. James is saying that we have the opportunity to put on display the wonderful love of Christ as best displayed in His work on the cross on our behalf when we reach out a hand of help to the person who cannot reciprocate. It is the purest expression of godly mercy.

These good deeds are the self-denying fruits of the Spirit expressed in the believer’s life. There are actions that convey genuine self denial and love for God and others and work to validate our claim to be the children of God. A life of self-denial and service has significant implications for the unbelieving world. John urged that by our love the world would see the authenticity of the church’s claim to be redeemed and transformed (1 John). Is it no wonder that unbelievers, when observing the church, see us as self-interested, seeking the same ideologies of personal success, materialism, and self-serving accumulation of possessions as they do instead of seeing the practice of sharing, giving, and seeking the benefit of their neighbor? We are rightly guilty of their conclusion that we and our faith are no different than the claims of other religions. In Jas 2:14–17 the correlation of salvation based on genuine faith is illustrated by describing ministry to the poor as the hallmark of authentic faith.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in

peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Why does James do so? Because it is when ministering to the poor the radical transformation of faith in a believer's life is most accurately represented.

Those in the Jerusalem church should have realized that of the two visitors, they were most like the poor man. This, in turn, should have created empathy for the poor man's condition. In addition, the poor man was the most likely prospect as a convert. Their actions betrayed their pride and failure to remember the reality of their own spiritual poverty. Living in light of the gospel should remind us daily that there is nothing we can do to earn or merit God's grace and that the gospel requires us to recognize our spiritual poverty.

### **The Example of Christ**

A commitment to model mercy and compassion is demonstrated by Christ himself in His incarnation. He was the perfect image bearer, evidencing the nature of God in human form (John 14:9). Christ did not only proclaim the kingdom, He illustrated kingdom truths. His choice of miracles reveals His intentionality in showing His disciples how the practical ministry of healing and helping those in need complemented the message of the gospel. Of the many miracles He could have chosen to validate His deity, it is astounding that the majority of His miracles were acts that addressed the needs of the poor. He thus modeled the compassion, mercy, grace, and justice of God. He cared for the lame, the sick, the blind, and reached out to Gentile foreigners such as Samaritans, cared for the prostitute, the thief, and the tax collector. He invited them to receive God's undeserved mercy and forgiveness of their sins. Matthew 9:35–38 punctuates this truth by showing that while Christ's public ministry involved healing and serving the poor, He affirmed their physical poverty which reflected their greater spiritual poverty.

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Christ saw the physical brokenness and need of the people as symptomatic of their greater spiritual poverty. This profoundly moved Him to plead with the Father to send gospel workers to address this spiritual famine.

### **The Law of Liberty: Freedom to Love Like God Loves**

The prior context of this passage affords a greater understanding of God's perspective of the poor. Jas 1:25 states:

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

What is the "law of liberty"? Paul explains in Galatians 5 that believers are no longer slaves to sin. Formerly, they did not possess the ability to make a choice to love others, sin being their master. Paul explains in Galatians 5 that believers are not to use their liberty for seeking their own benefit. As a person who has been set free from being a slave to their own self interest, they can now live just like our Lord and Savior, to be imitators of Him, to reflect His character and nature. And in so doing, receive the capacity to love like He loves. Believers have volitional freedom to love God and love our neighbor which we did not possess prior to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

The theme of the poor reoccurs multiple times in the book of James, the earliest reference being Jas 1:26–27. It is here we see an allusion to a well understood motif which occurs throughout the Old Testament and which was imbedded within the Law. James' audience, being primarily Jewish converts to Christianity, had a deeper appreciation for what James was saying when he summarized genuine Christianity with two familiar but rarely understood phrases. It is a curious thing for James to be able to summarily describe those who are authentic disciples and ambassadors for the kingdom as he does in verse 27:

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

One is tempted to ask, "How can you reduce the entirety of the Christian experience down to those two things—visiting orphans and keeping oneself unstained by the world?" It is clear that keeping oneself unstained from the world focuses on the believer's willingness to be holy, as God is holy. Consecration requires that we are set apart for the purposes of God and that living according to the values of the kingdom versus the values of this sin affected society is the calling of all believers. As children are to reflect the character of their father, so the children of God are to reflect the character of God. This is inherent in the admonitions of Paul to be imitators of God (Eph 5:1).

### **The Expanded Motif of the Poor in the Old Testament**

Careful study reveals that this Jewish audience would have understood James' reference to widows and orphans as a kind of shorthand for the well known teaching of the Old Testament on the poor. The Jewish audience only needed to hear the words "widows and orphans" to be reminded of God's voice throughout their own history. God has always instructed the nation of Israel to demonstrate His character of mercy to those at risk. In the Old Testament, God's compassionate identity as the merciful defender and provider of those who are vulnerable emerges. The reference to widows and orphans would have included, in the Jewish mind, the foreigner or alien, the sick (lame and blind), as well as the prisoner.

So Jas 1:27, for the believer, is a twofold statement describing both the love and holiness of God. Both working in perfect combination and expected to become characteristic of those who have made it their ambition to be called the children of God. With this understanding, a study of the biblical motif of the poor leads to an awareness of how exhaustively and comprehensively the theme of the poor is used in Scripture as a means to illustrate and understand the very character of God. By way of Old Testament examples, God is known as a defender and provider for the poor.

He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Deut 10:18–19).

For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, "You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land" (Deut 15:11).

You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing. When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow (Deut 24:17–20).

Embedded in the Law were instructions for the Israelites to display God's merciful nature to each of these demographics. In doing so, they illustrated how God shows mercy to those who were spiritually orphans, widows, foreigners, sick, blind, and imprisoned. As they lived in the counter-cultural manner they provided a stark contrast to the nature of pagan deities, and

the cultures informed by idolatrous worldviews. All secular worldviews create a culture that marginalizes the poor, and this was true of the pagan cultures that surrounded Israel.

In addition to the clear admonitions prescribed in the Law, this same expectation is evidenced in the Psalms and prophets.

The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, but He thwarts the way of the wicked (Ps 146:9).

While the prophetic text of Isa 61:1, looking forward to Christ, says this:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.

#### *The Widow*

The widow, who is by covenant united with her husband at marriage, finds herself left alone. Christ, promising to never leave or forsake His Bride, provides the church with an opportunity to model His promise when they embrace and care for the widow. This is a picture of assurance in the perseverance of the saints who are beneficiaries of the gospel. As the church cares for the widow it illustrates the greater truth that God will never forsake His people, even though the effects of sin have separated a wife from her husband.

#### *The Orphan or Fatherless*

The orphan most clearly reflects our vulnerable pre-salvation position, defenseless and without the loving care of a protective father. In redemption we are adopted into the family of God. In Eph 1:5, Paul uses the language of adoption to refer to our spiritual condition. Those who are adopted are those who are fellow heirs of Christ based on the doctrine of adoption. The identity of the church is formed by this doctrine; brothers and sisters with Christ being the firstborn, the begotten of God. We are the adopted children of God. We are joint heirs, and on and on the list goes. This is the language of the church and it refers to our spiritual condition as orphans and adopted by God into His family.

#### *The Alien or Foreigner*

The alien or foreigner best illustrates our separation from God, and represents that the gospel is both welcoming in nature and multicultural in scope. In Eph 2:19, Paul says,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household.

We are not simply now pilgrims, Phil 3:20 tells us, but we are citizens of heaven.

*The Sick and Blind*

The sick, whether lame or blind, are clear analogies of our need for healing and restoration. The language of the New Testament utilizes both conditions as references to our being called to walk worthy (Eph 4:1). Ephesians 1:18 reminds us that in the coming of the gospel our eyes have been opened to the truth.

*The Prisoner*

It is the prisoner who most accurately portrays our bondage to sin and the wonderful freedom from the law of sin which imprisons us.

And having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life (Rom 6:18–22).

Within every category of the poor we see the tragic spiritual condition mankind is in without the intervening love of God. These serve as specific illustration of the transforming work of the gospel.

<i>Categories of the Poor</i>	<i>The Poor as Redemptive Analogy</i>	<i>Text</i>
Widow	The bride of Christ	Eph 5:22–33
Orphan	The adoption of believers to be fellow heirs with Christ, Abba Father	Eph 1:5
Alien/Immigrant	No longer strangers and aliens to God's kingdom, but fellow citizens with the saints	Eph 2:19
	Pilgrims on earth, citizens of Heaven	Phil 3:20
Prisoner	Prisoner of the law of sin	Rom 7:23
Sick/Blind	"That their eyes might be opened"	Eph 1:18

### Conclusion

James is saying to the church, “How dare you neglect the poor? How dare you rob the world of this wonderful and beautiful illustrative picture of what is afforded to us in salvation? It is the greatest of hypocrisies.”

The Hebrew and Greek words translated “compassion” (*raham, oikteiro*) in both the Old and New Testaments bear the following nuances: “to be merciful, have pity, to suffer with another, to be moved in your most inward parts, show loving-kindness, to bear another’s burden, suffering with.”

It is the same exact set of words used to describe God’s great work of salvation. The images portrayed in Scripture of the poor are the same images which describe our spiritual condition without Christ. The same set of words used in Scripture to describing our involvement with the poor are the same sets of words used in Scripture to describe how God loves and saves us. When you hear God’s work of atonement on our behalf motivated out of mercy and loving-kindness, you are hearing the same exact motivation for believers to reach out to the poor. We demonstrate God’s compassionate heart in salvation when we move into the lives of the needy. We become living parables of a greater spiritual reality.