The Poor and the Rich

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God's instructions in the Old Testament do not abolish the difference between rich and poor. In the same way, the gospel of grace does not call for the social differences in this world to be abolished. To this day, we have to live with the fact that there are rich and poor. **But in the assembly (church) of God, social differences must not play a role.** Nevertheless, rich and poor still cause conflict among believers today. Let's take a look at what James has to say on this subject.

God's teachings on rich and poor are divided into four sections in the letter of James:

- Chapter 1:9-11: Comparing rich and poor – God's view
- Chapter 2:1-7: Comparing the rich and the poor – man's view
- Chapter 2:15-17: Supporting the poor
- Chapter 5:1-6: God's judgment of the rich

Profile of the rich

When reading the letter of James, you can't help but notice that the rich come off badly. *“They will perish,”* it says in the very first chapter (James 1:11). The behavior of the rich was extremely culpable: they oppressed and blasphemed others (James 2:6-7). They had cheated the poor and even killed the righteous (James 5:4, 6). James must sharply rebuke the rich and prophesy to them that they had nothing but tribulations (= judgment) to expect (James 5:1).

Who are the rich?

How can it be that the rich come off so badly in James? Who are these rich people? Doesn't the apostle Paul also speak to the rich – but not in a condemning way, but rather in an admonishing and encouraging way?

It is exactly the same: James writes quite differently from Paul. This applies not only to the topic of “rich and poor,” but also to the topic of “faith and works.” It is important to understand James' perspective and style of writing. This is the only way to correctly classify his letter.

It is noticeable that James constantly addresses his letter recipients. He says “*(my) brothers*” 15 times. He obviously has in mind primarily those who have been “*begotten by God through the word of truth*,” i.e. who have experienced a new birth (James 1:16, 18). However, here an Israelite is writing to Israelites – James is writing to the twelve tribes in the dispersion (*James 1:1*). And it was not unusual for the people of Israel to call each other “brothers.” This is also how Peter addressed his listeners in his sermon at Pentecost, even though they were not among the children of God, as they were called to repentance (Acts 2:29).

It is similar with James. Among the recipients of his letter were also those who had no life from God and therefore had to expect judgment (cf. James 2:13; 5:9, 12). This also included the rich. While Paul exhorts the rich to manage their earthly possessions spiritually (1 Timothy 6:17-19), James must urge the rich to weep and howl over the coming misery (James 5:1). There was nothing good about them; they were on the

road to death.

What James has to say to the rich

Rich people are often proud of their possessions. They enjoy being recognized by society. They rarely complain about a lack of contacts and friends. For *“many are those who love the rich”* (Proverbs 14:20). But James does not give the rich any honor – on the contrary, he says that the rich should boast about their humiliation (James 1:10). Why is that? Because he sees how poor and lowly they ultimately are in view of eternal things. Anyone who is not “*rich in relation to God*” (Luke 12:21) is one of those people who are to be pitied – regardless of whether they are richly endowed or not.

In James 5:1-6, James addresses the rich directly. They only had their own welfare in mind. Their whole life was geared towards enjoying earthly things. They had so much abundance that their treasures were beginning to rot. But they had not become rich through hard work; they had satisfied their greed at the expense of the wage laborers by simply not paying them.

If the rich now thought that as “masters” they could do whatever they wanted, they were mistaken. They were responsible to a person who possesses incomparably greater power than any human being: the Lord of hosts, who is obeyed and served by hosts of angelic beings. He stands ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:5).

What do we learn from this? We never want to envy the rich of this world. We do not want to accumulate money and possessions. We want to store up treasures for ourselves in heaven (Matthew 6:20).

Profile of the poor

The poor or lowly were oppressed by the rich (James 2:6). There were some among them who did not even have the bare necessities (James 2:15). The poor were the despised. In the synagogues, they were assigned the standing room or the seats “under” the footstools.

What James has to say about the poor

Anyone who is treated in the way James writes about the poor feels worthless. Often not even relatives and acquaintances contribute to a poor person being noticed. This confirms the words from Proverbs: *“Even his neighbor hates the poor”* (Proverbs 14:20). But this is precisely what James opposes. He sheds heavenly light on the social structure and encourages the lowly to boast of their superiority (*James 1:9*). *“Has not God chosen the worldly poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?”* (James 2:5 NKJV). Those who have received Christ in their hearts are made infinitely rich. They already receive “*a hundredfold*” today and “*eternal life in the age to come*” (*Mark 10:30*).

God's children, who are among the “lowly” here and now, still have to persevere a little (cf. James 5:7). But there is no reason to give up. Even if you have to do without the comforts of life – the coming “*eternal weight of glory*” will outweigh everything (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Making distinctions between rich and poor?

The rich are usually highly regarded in society and are often envied. **But Christians do not need to join in.** James teaches us that it is not only foolish but even wrong for God's people to treat the rich and the poor differently. Because we humans look at outward appearances, we tend to favor the rich and put the poor at a disadvantage. But this is nothing other than looking at the person. Anyone who does this sins and has become a “*judge with evil thoughts*” (James 2:9, 4).

“Be like-minded towards one another” (Romans 12:16) – **that is the appropriate exhortation in this context.** This is exactly what James means: we should treat all believers with the same basic attitude of love and appreciation, i.e. not honor one and despise the other, not shower one with courtesy and cordiality and “give short shrift” to the other. The law already demanded that we love our neighbor as ourselves (James 2:8) – regardless of who our neighbor might be. Furthermore, as children of God, we are obliged to love one another as God has loved us (1 John 4:11). **Social differences must not play a role in our dealings with and love for one another.**

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (*Galatians 3:28*)

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