

Rich Man/Woman - Poor Man/Woman In the Early Christian World

A growing concern...

Income inequality in the United States has grown markedly since the 1970s. While it varies considerably from one area of the country to another, today the top 1% in America have:

Annual income of \$500,000 or higher
Net worth of \$10,500,000 or higher
Hold 32.4% of all net worth in the United States

There are 1,286,744 such households in America

Meanwhile...

The lower 50% hold 1.9% of all net worth in the United States

Think about a city in which...

- The **super-rich** own beautiful mansions, some scattered about the city, some in exclusive neighborhoods and gated communities
- There is a significant **immigrant/foreigner population** that is **deeply resented by lower class locals** who compete with them for jobs
- There is a large ethnic population of people who are **descendants of former slaves**
- The **political system** is dominated by the rich who control and shape it for their own benefit
- The **courts and law enforcement** discriminate in ways that seriously disadvantage the poor, immigrants, foreigners and ethnic minorities

- There is a large and growing **homeless population** living along the roadways, under bridges and in any available open space

You could be describing **Portland, Oregon**... and any other large city in the United States in the twenty-first century

Or...

You could be describing the city of **Rome** at the end of the first century when the Christians there first began to form **house churches** and small congregations

A Tale of two Cities: Portland and Rome

That is the story we want to tell/think about today and the next two weeks

Week one: The Populus Urbanus

- Elite
- Upper-class Freeborn Roman Citizens
- Imperial Freedmen (former slaves)
- Lower-class Freeborn Roman Citizens
- Slaves
- Ordinary freedmen
- Foreigners/immigrants
- Homeless and destitute

Our Big Questions: **How did each group live?**
What were the homes of the rich and poor like?
What did they eat? Drink?
What was daily life like?
Who was Christian?
Who was not?

Week Two: Early House Churches in the City of Rome

- Known house churches in Rome in the 1st century
- How they formed
- Membership/Leadership
- Where they met
- What they did

Our Big Questions: Who was Christian and who was not?
Who joined house churches in 1st century
Rome?

Why did they join?
What house churches existed?
Where did they meet?
What did they do?

Week Three: Social Relations in Early Christian Congregations

- Conflict between the rich and poor
- Clement ... A former imperial slave and his house church
- Hermas ... A former lower-class slave and his house church
- James ... An unknown early Christian and his attitude toward the rich in his own congregation

Our Big Questions: How did these leaders differ?
What was the social/economic makeup of
their congregations?
What were the issues?
How did they get along?

A Tale of two Cities: Portland and Rome

Rome

- The city of **Rome** in the first century probably had a population of about **one million**. Its wealth was on an almost unimaginable scale in the ancient world. Augustus bragged that he had “found it a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.”
- It covered about **16 square miles**, half of which was covered by marble-faced public buildings, monuments, public squares and the mansions of the rich and famous.
- The mansions of the wealthy dotted the hillsides of the famous seven hills, but most were concentrated in a few areas near the city center.
- **99% of the population crowded into the other half of the city** area or spilled outside its walls into an area called *Transtiberinum* - across the Tiber river.

The Populus Urbanus

The Roman Emperor Augustus **regulated the social classes** (“*ordo*”) in Rome and set standards for membership in each level.

The Elite

Senators

- At the top were those of the “**senatorial**” order - **limited to 300 families** in the first century. They were not allowed to be involved in commerce, trade or any business other than agriculture.
- The minimum **requirement for membership** was financial assets worth **250,000 times the average**

daily wage – about 25 million in today’s economy – though most had far more.

- **One senator owned** assets equivalent to nearly **40 billion** in today’s dollars, more than the income of the entire Roman empire in one year.

Equestrians

- Below them were the “**equestrians**,” who made up about 1% of the population. Their minimum **financial requirement** was about **125,000 times the average daily wage** – roughly 12 million in today’s dollars.
- Equestrians **occupied the vast majority of government posts**. About 650 types of government jobs were open to them in the first century.
- They gained **enormous wealth from trade, land speculation and control of commodity markets** throughout the empire.
- **Military officers, provincial governors and high-ranking city officials** were all equestrians. One such was **Pontius Pilate**.
- (A lower order, the “**decurions**,” held many of the lower ranking provincial and urban offices but were not a significant presence in the city of Rome.)

Well-off, Freeborn Roman Citizens

- A small group. Freeborn Roman citizens were **allowed four names** (Nero had 23). They were not permitted to engage in trade or manual labor and paid no taxes.

- **Many were quite wealthy** and tried to live by the same standards as the elite. But they were often mocked for their attempts to do so.

Lives of the Elite

- The elite were roughly another **1% of the population**
- They **lived in walled and gated mansions** that featured a series of rooms surrounding an atrium and colorful garden.
- They had **beautifully frescoed walls, mosaic tile floors, gorgeous rugs and tapestries, elegant furniture** and professional decoration.
- Most had **running water**; some had heated water and baths. **Slaves** – many houses had more than 100 - **provided the food, clothing and services needed** to keep the household running and kept the house and grounds clean and well supplied.
- The typical entry hall displayed **busts of illustrious ancestors** and led to a room off the atrium called the **“tablinium.”** There the family tree would be on display for all to see and admire.
- The **dining room** typically featured **three couches** on which diners reclined, each designated for specific **guests** so they could be **seated according to rank and prestige.**
- **Sleeping rooms** off the atrium were the only “private” part of the house.
- **Children were schooled**, often by private tutors, though the higher levels of education were restricted to boys.

- These folks **rarely ventured out alone**, were usually accompanied by an entourage, and were commonly **carried by litter** in order to avoid having to step in the filth that littered the streets.
- **When epidemics** (which were common) **hit** they **retreated to their country estates** and waited out the danger.

The Lower Classes

Imperial Freedmen (former slaves)

- Most emperors freed their slaves at age 30. Since they were **usually well educated and competent**, they ran much of the imperial trade, business and government affairs.
- Many became wealthy and, like all freedmen, they were **allowed three names**.

Lower-class Freeborn Roman Citizens

- Like their freeborn betters, they were **allowed four names**, and paid no taxes. Many **were desperately poor and depended on the grain dole**, given to all citizens above 11 years of age, that provided about 40% of a family's food needs.

Slaves

- During the reign of Augustus there were **280,000 slaves in Rome** - about **40% of the total city population**. **Imperial slaves were allowed two names, all other slaves just one**.
- They came in large numbers **from every corner of the empire**. Slave speculators followed the Roman legions

and added thousands to the slave markets after every battle.

Slave Markets

The largest slave market was on the Greek island of Delos. About 10,000 slaves were sold there every day. After one battle Julius Caesar sold 53,000. After a victory at Carthage 50,000 were sold. After one in Corinth, 150,000 were sold. After a victory in Gaul, Julius Caesar enslaved entire tribes. **When Jerusalem fell in 70 c.e., 40,000 Jewish slaves were brought to the city of Rome.** In the 1000 years the city of Rome was dominant, it is estimated about 100 million people were enslaved throughout the empire.

- The huge supply made slave prices low, so **virtually all Romans of any means had them.** Large households would have a hundred or more.
- Given the sheer number of new slaves available at any given time, the **odds for manumission were high.** Augustus decreed a slowdown for fear of swelling the ranks of freedmen.
- A slave was **not legally a person but a Res, a thing,** outside the control of the state. Owners had total control over slaves, including the power of life and death.

Foreigners: freedmen/freeborn immigrants/resident aliens

- In the first century these folks were the **majority of the population** in the city (over half of the tombs lining roads into Rome are those of freedmen) and came from every corner of the empire. **They were allowed three names.**
- They were tradesmen, craftsmen, service providers, merchants, etc. A majority were from the eastern

provinces and **spoke no Latin. Their native language was Greek.**

- While the **majority were freed slaves or the descendants of freed slaves**, a small number had migrated to Rome on their own... but few people moved to Rome voluntarily.
- Foreigners tended to **live with their own kind in ethnically segregated parts of the city.**
- One of the largest groups, **about 40,000 to 50,000, were freed Jews or their descendants.** They lived in *Transtiberinum* and were **among the poorest residents of the city.**
- In fact, **most foreigners were poor and all were despised by native Romans.**
- **Poor, freeborn Romans resented them** especially because they had to compete with them for jobs and resources.

Homeless and destitute

- This was a very large portion of the population, numbering in the tens of thousands. **They lived along the roadsides, under the bridges and aqueducts, and even in the sewers** in some areas of the city.
- **Slaves in elite homes were far better off than most of the urban poor** because they at least had a roof over their heads and adequate food to eat.

Lives of the Urban Poor

- The urban poor lived in **tenement complexes known as “insulae.”** These were wooden apartment buildings, as many as 6 stories high, with no fire escapes. Cooking was

done on a coal or charcoal brazier and apartment fires were common.

- **A typical family of 8-10 persons had two rooms.** The poorest had only one. Privacy was unknown. There was no heat, window glass was too expensive, and so windows had wooden shutters to close when it got cold.
- There were **no toilets, refrigeration or running water.** Water had to be hauled from public fountains.
- Everyone used **honey buckets**, which were often stored under the stairs to be available to all. They were **emptied onto the streets below each morning** – along with the garbage – so the streets of poor neighborhoods were really running, stinking sewers.
- **The streets were lined with all kinds of shops**, *popinae* (stand-up food counters), restaurants, various products or services. Merchants selling a **given product were all in the same area** for mutual support and advertising.
- **Fountains provided water** and urine receptacles collected **urine which was used as mouthwash**. Given the labor involved in getting water, **bathing was rare**.
- Many **merchants lived in tabernae**: one-room apartments at the back of a shop or on the surrounding wall of a luxury home where some shops were located.
- Given the size of the homeless population, **beggars were everywhere**
- **Children** spent most waking hours **on the streets**.
- **No schooling was available for anyone** and **virtually all were illiterate**.

Populus Romanus

Increasing drift of a polyglot population into the city created a primary fact of the first century Rome: it was an **unplanned urban sprawl** complete **with overcrowding, racial strife, poverty, endemic crime, high disease rates** and very low **life expectancy (20-25 years)** for 90% of the population.

Early Christians

When examining **the grave markers in Christian cemeteries** (catacombs) we look for:

- The **number of names**
Four or more = freeborn Roman citizens
Three = freedmen or freeborn foreigners
Two = imperial slaves
One = ordinary slaves
- The **language of the names**
Latin names = Romans
Greek/Hebrew/etc. names = likely captives sold into slavery after battles

For now, we will only say that the **vast majority of early Christians were low class freedmen, foreigners or slaves.**

They **spoke no Latin, were illiterate**, and freeborn Romans thought of them as the **scum of the earth**.

A 2nd century comment about early Christians...

Let no cultured persons draw near, none wise, none sensible; for all are that kind of thing we count evil; but if a man is

ignorant, if anybody is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, let him come boldly. Such people they spontaneously avow to be worthy of their god; and, in so doing, they show that it is only simpletons, the ignoble, the senseless, slaves, womenfolk and children whom they wish to persuade or can persuade.

Celsus, 2nd century aristocratic Roman philosopher

But that is the story for next week!

Early House Churches in the City of Rome

Our task this week is to narrow our focus to **the Christian population in Rome at the end of the first century**. Here is what we want to know:

- Who in the city of Rome was Christian?
- Why did people join?
- What house churches existed in Rome in the 1st century?
- How did they form?
- Where and how often did they meet?
- What did they do?
- Who were the leaders?

Social/Ethnic Identity of the First Christians in Rome

This much we know...

- For 200 + years, Christianity was essentially **a movement of the** (largely urban) **lower classes**.
- **No person from any elite group in Rome** can be positively identified as Christian during the first century and a half of the Christian era.
- Comment in **the New Testament reflects the reality**:

I Cor 1:26-29 "Not many of you are educated, powerful or of noble birth."

Lk. 1:53 "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

Mt 19:24 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

The Actual Evidence

A study of Christian inscriptions: papyri, potsherds, stone, bronze and especially catacomb grave markers clearly confirms that the world of early Christianity was this world of the urban poor.

Shocker # 1: there are **almost no Latin names**. Most are Greek or Hebrew. That means **native Romans did not join the Christian movement**.

Shocker # 2: the vast majority of **Christian grave markers display 1-3 names**. That means they were **slaves, freed slaves and foreigners**.

- Tertullian acknowledges that early **Christians were called a "tertium genus," by opponents**. Celsus, Porphyry, Julian and others charge them with being the scum of the earth.

A 2nd century comment about early Christians...

Let no cultured persons draw near, none wise, none sensible; for all are that kind of thing we count evil; but if a man is ignorant, if anybody is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, let him come boldly. Such people they spontaneously avow to be worthy of their God; and, in so doing, they show that it is only simpletons, the ignoble, the senseless, slaves, womenfolk and children whom they wish to persuade or can persuade.

Celsus, Aristocratic Roman Philosopher

- **By far the largest group were Jewish Christians** - slaves and former slaves (freedmen) from the 40,000 Jewish captives brought to Rome after Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 c.e.
- **Christians** in Rome we can **identify by name** in the late 1st - early 2nd century:
 - **Twenty-six persons** are named in Romans 16. Five are Jewish – including Prisca and Aquila – and most of the rest have Greek names. In other words, **all are foreigners**.
 - **Seven** have common **slave names** and **four have Latin names but speak Greek**, meaning they are likely slaves as well.
 - **Hermas**, whose writings we will look at next week, was **a slave brought to Rome** by a man who sold him to a Roman woman named **Rhoda**. He was freed by her, gained some wealth – and then lost it all. He had only a rudimentary Greek education, meaning he was not an imperial slave.
 - **Rhoda – a Greek name** – was likely a widow of modest wealth. She was not a Roman citizen nor a member of the elite, but **likely a resident alien** living in Rome.
 - **Flavia Domitilla** and **Titus Flavius Clemens** were likely Jewish converts or sympathizers. Titus was a **cousin of the Emperor Domitian**, thus an elite aristocrat, who was eventually charged with “atheism” – a common Roman charge against Jews – and executed.
 - Later, his wife **Domitilla donated a cemetery (catacomb) to Christians** that MAY indicate she was at by then a Christian or a sympathizer.
 - **Claudius Ephebus, Valerius Vito** and **Fortunatus** are mentioned in a letter that has been found as messengers

to Christians in Corinth. **The first two were likely freedmen and Forunatus a slave.**

- **Clement of Rome** was the author of the letter to Corinthian Christians about 95 c.e. **The name is Latin, but he spoke Greek.** Was he the **freed slave of Titus Flavius Clemens**? Perhaps. It was common for freed slaves to take the name of their former owner.

Why did people join?

First, why did Romans not join?

- There are several reasons, but chief among them was the fact that **Romans believed** to their core **that the gods of Rome had given them the empire and success.**
- **All Roman houses had shrines to their gods** and devotional rituals were performed there by freeborn Romans every single morning.
- They thus believed that **lack of loyalty to their gods meant lack of loyalty to Rome, its culture, its people, and its emperor.** The appeal of early Christianity to non-Romans was therefore taken by Romans **as a subversive threat to their whole way of life.**

Now, why did non-Romans join?

- The appeal of Christianity to freedmen, slaves, foreigners and resident aliens **was far more about survival than it was about beliefs or theology.** “Community” and “compassion” came long before theology, creeds or any consensus about “beliefs.”
- **The reason is simple: a hungry and frightened refugee or former slave is far more interested in a meal than in theological beliefs.** The homeless need shelter long before they need a creed.

- **Christians formed “surrogate” families** – the forerunners of house churches – that took in the isolated, hungry, sick and homeless. They called each other “brother” and “sister” ... and meant it.
- **Eventually newcomers would hear all about the Jesus story** and what Christians believed about it, **but compassionate care for the desperate came first.**
- The Jesus story and related **beliefs provided an “after-the-fact” rationale** for why they took needy people into their surrogate families and why they cared about them.
- **The rationale (theology)** was important as a way of articulating the motivation behind Christian compassion, but **was not the reason people joined the movement.**
- Sadly, **later arguments over beliefs and creeds** became **the tools and weapons of intellectuals and the powerful**, leaving far behind any concern for the desperation of the starving and homeless.

Where did they meet?

- **Collegia** – officially recognized groups or associations in the Empire – were **common among foreigners in Rome.** They banded together for economic, social and psychological support.
- Early **Christians quickly borrowed the model**, forming surrogate families. The groups were very small – a dozen or so – and they met in **members’ homes.** **Thus began the “house churches” of early Christianity.**
- **Apartments in insulae were hardly big enough for such meetings**, so some members were obviously well enough off to have homes. Prisca and Aquila hosted such a group. **One**

group met in a warehouse owned by Domitilla. Be sure you remember this!!!

- We know of **at least five house churches in Rome** by the time Paul wrote. **Three** house churches are mentioned in Romans 16 that were clearly groups **of Jewish Christians**. The **two** others were likely **hosted by Greek freedmen of some means**.
- **A 6th century document claims there were twenty-five house churches in Rome** by the early 2nd century. Though evidence for most being that old is pretty thin, there are churches at all twenty-five sites yet today.
- **If all actually existed** and had an average of a dozen members each, that means that early in the 2nd century there were **about 300 Christians in Rome**.

What did they do?

- Sketchy evidence suggests they **met together daily for an evening meal**. After that was forbidden (the *Lex Julia* 110 c.e.) they met early in the morning, shared bread and wine, and went off to work.
- About **150 c.e.** we have the **first full description of their meetings**. Justin Martyr says they met daily and **read from the “memoirs of the Apostles** as long as time permitted.” They were then **addressed by the “President”** who admonished them to follow faithfully the teachings they had heard. They **offered prayers** and then **collected aid** for those in need. They ended by **sharing wine and bread**.
- Afterward, **some took wine and bread to those who were sick or unable to attend**.

Who were the Leaders?

- **Early on** the leaders were likely **those in whose house they were meeting**. By **mid-2nd century they were electing leaders**. While Justin calls the leader the “**President**,” most were called “**Elders**,” suggesting the synagogue background of the Jewish Christian groups.
- A **hierarchy** that included bishop, archbishops, and eventually cardinals and popes **came only after the establishment of Christianity by Constantine in the 4th century**.
- That **gradual mimicking of the authoritarian hierarchy of the Roman state**, in which the **church leadership became the rich and powerful of the Roman world**, is a long and sordid tale that must be told another day.

A Sorry Tale...

By the year 200 c.e. the wealthy and educated were increasingly attracted to the movement. **With the conversion of Emperor Constantine** in the early 4th century, **Christian leaders** (clergy, bishops, archbishops) became **the new rich and powerful of the Roman world**.

With that came **corruption, violence, greed and brutal exploitation of the poor**.

Our questions for Next Week?

- **If early Christians were the desperately poor, the enslaved, freedmen and foreigners, and if they met in the homes of**

the few well off, even rich, among them, **how did they all get along?**

- **Stay tuned!** There is **trouble coming** in these early “families” **over issues that are as alive in Portland today as they were in ancient Rome.**

The Rich and the Poor in Early Christian Communities

- As we have said over the last couple of weeks... **the vast majority of early Christians were the poor, the desperate, the homeless, slaves and freedmen**, all of almost all of whom were **foreign immigrants or slaves brought to the city of Rome**.
- **They met in the homes of the few among them who had acquired enough wealth to live in houses** rather than insulae. These homes were in exclusive sections of the city, surrounded by internal walls with gates that were locked at night.
- These were homes with **carpets and mosaics** on the floors, **tapestries and art works** on the walls, **running water** in the fountain in the atrium, **plenty of food**, a well-stocked wine cellar and a dining room laid out for prominent guests to recline in comfort.
- **Now imagine someone like Domitilla or perhaps Rhoda**, living in this kind of luxury, **meeting daily with** a small but growing Christian group made up primarily of **people from the rat-infested slums of Rome**.
- They would have been **dirty, hungry and stunk to high heaven**, having walked through the sewage filled streets of Rome to get there.
- **The host would have been clean, well fed and well perfumed**. Imagine this collection of folks being in the same room together, and eating evening meals together every single day. At first, they did that. **I bet Domitilla's or Rhoda's rich neighbors loved that one**.
- If you can, try to **picture all that**: the incredible contrast of large numbers of **desperately poor and dirty people sitting around**

on Rhoda's oriental rugs listening to stories of Jesus, talking about the fact that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God...

...and **you begin to have some idea of the setting in which Christianity was born.**

- But if you have been following all this carefully, perhaps **you have already caught a glimpse of the problem: Domitilla did not invite these sick, hungry, smelly, non-citizen, foreigners to her house for a meal, she offered them space in her warehouse!**
- Right there you can see **the beginnings of the trouble** coming down the pike!

An Excursus...

- Think for a minute **what happened in America during and right after the end of the civil war.** Newly freed slaves, uneducated, desperately poor, often homeless and starving, roamed the streets of southern cities frantically looking for help.
- **Small pox, yellow fever, cholera and starvation plagued the camps where newly freed slaves gathered.** White leaders saw the problem, but **no one wanted to allow them to live near the rest of the population** and risk epidemics that could affect their own communities.

Note: if you want to read the tragic story of what happened, read: Jim Downs, **Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction**

- **Rising mortality rates and spreading disease** in the camps finally led Congress to set up what was called the "Freedman's

Bureau” on March 3, 1865 – **the first federally funded health care program in America.**

- The problem was that there were **only 120 doctors and 40 hospitals for the nearly 4 million freed men, women and children.** The result was disease, malnutrition and suffering on a monumental scale.
- Most disturbing of all was the fact that **the underlying motivation** for the Federal program was to get these sick people healthy enough to **get them back out into the fields to harvest the crops of the rich.**
- Or... **think what is happening to frightened refugees on our southern border** locked up in camps where children are dying of the flu and crying for lost parents.
- And think about the ways in the **current covid-19 pandemic** the rich can buffer themselves from the disease and **ride out the restricted economy in ways the poor cannot.**
- If you **understand all that you understand something like the situation of the earliest Christian house churches.**

So back to Rome...

- The **two house churches we know the most about** at the end of the first century were those led by two folks we met earlier. **One was Clement.**
- Perhaps you will remember that Clement was **likely wealthy, well educated, and a former imperial slave.** That is important because he was a leader, had likely been “elected” as president of his group, and **they likely met in his house.**
- We actually have a letter he wrote to the churches in the Greek city of Corinth. In the letter we can tell that **while he has a sincere concern for the poor in his own group, he knows**

almost nothing about how they live and survive. He does not live in their world.

- **Clement's idea of how to help is "charity" – an aid basket** when someone is in a crisis. He speaks as if those in his house church were folk like himself whom he is imploring to contribute to a charity fund for the poor.
- **The second house church we know a bit about was led by the former slave Hermas** who had been freed by his Christian master, Rhoda.
- **Hermas wrote a book purporting to pass along messages he had received in a vision from an angel dressed as a shepherd.** The book, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, was **widely popular** among Christians of the second century and was **often considered "Scripture" and read at the daily meetings.**
- From this book we can tell that **Hermas**, who is marginally literate, **is in a group of folks like himself** and he has been elected their leader – perhaps because he could at least read at their meetings.
- He **knows a little about the lives of the rich**, having once gained a bit of wealth himself after being set free, wealth **he eventually lost, forcing him to revert to living among the poor.**
- **Hermas does not talk about aid baskets.** He claims that **riches are a gift of God to be used to lift people out of poverty altogether.**
- So, from these two writings we can draw **a couple of conclusions.** One is that **Christians were separating themselves into congregations of the like-minded.** They preferred to be with their own kind.

Causes of division among house churches

Because **we are concentrating on the issue of rich and poor**, we haven't taken time to discuss the **other factors that caused trouble** among these house churches. The most significant was the **bitter animosity between Greeks and Jews** that spilled over into riots and violence in cities across the eastern part of the empire and impacted Rome as well. **This too caused house churches to be groups of a similar folk**, divided from other house churches not only by socio-economic differences, but also by language and culture.

- Second, it is clear that **animosity was beginning to develop between rich Christians and poor Christians** over how to address the desperation of slaves, the newly freed, immigrants, foreigners, the sick and the homeless.
- Economic diversity – rich and poor together in a single congregation – was becoming a **casualty of the enormous income gap that characterized the city of Rome**.
- **And that brings us finally to a book in the New Testament**. We don't often hear much in church about **the book of James**. We don't know who wrote it, where he lived or when he wrote.
- It is nominally in the form of a letter, but **it reads like a house-church sermon** - like the one Justin Martyr talks about where the "President" admonishes members to follow the teachings they had heard about from the reading of the "Memoires of the Apostles." (See week Two)
- We know that **later in the second century it begins to be quoted in the midst of this growing divide over the enormous economic and social gap** that was troubling the house churches of Rome.
- The one thing we can tell is that **James was writing to the leaders and rich Christians who were coming to dominate these small house-church groups**. Here is what he says:

James. 2:1-16

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. **For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly**, and **a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in**, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, **"Have a seat here, please,"** while you say to the poor man, **"Stand there,"** or, **"Sit at my feet,"** have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God 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? But **you have dishonored the poor man.**

Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name which was invoked over you? If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors....

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. **For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy**; yet mercy triumphs over judgment. What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of 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 does it profit?

- And then, **specifically addressing the rich** that were beginning to dominate these small early Christian "families," James **drops the hammer...**

James. 5:1-5

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, **the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.** You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

- Tough words, but **may I gently suggest** that this message is as **relevant today as it was in the year 100 c.e.!!!**