

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 2

---

Volume 2 • Number 2 • October 1978 p. 160a

---

## Acknowledgements

The articles in this issue of the EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY are reprinted with permission from the following journals:

'The Bible in the WCC', *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

'Controversy at Culture Gap', *Eternity*, Vol. 27, No. 5.

'East African Revival', *Churchman*, Vol. 1, 1978.

'Survey of Recent Literature on Islam', *International Review of Mission*, LXVII, No. 265.

'Who are the Poor' and 'Responses', *Theological Forum of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod*, No. 1, Feb. 1978.

'The Great Commission of [Matthew 28](#): 18-20', *Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3.

'A Glimpse of Christian Community Life in China', *Tenth*, Jan. 1977.

'TEE: Service or Subversion?', *Extension Seminary Quarterly Bulletin*, No. 4.

'TEE in Zaire: Mission or Movement?', *Ministerial Formation*, No. 2.

'Theology for the People' and 'Para-Education: Isolation or Integration?' are printed with the permission of the authors. p. 161

# Who are the Poor?

by DAVID C. JONES

ON TWO critical occasions in the gospels, Jesus interprets his mission in terms of bringing good news to the poor. At his inaugural sermon in Nazareth ([Luke 4:16–20](#)), and again in response to the question of the imprisoned Baptist ([Matthew 11:2–6](#), [Luke 7:18–23](#)), Jesus presents his ministry as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, particularly of [Isaiah 61:1](#), ‘He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor’. This much is clear; but precisely who are the poor and what is the good news that Jesus brings to them is not so simple. In keeping with the theme of Jesus as bearer of good news to the poor, the Beatitudes in both Matthew and Luke begin with a blessing upon them. Yet who has not puzzled over how it is that Matthew has: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, while Luke has simply: ‘Blessed are the poor’, and a little later: ‘Woe to you who are rich’ ([Matthew 5:3](#), [Luke 6:20, 24](#)). Are the poor spiritual beggars ‘those who feel their spiritual need’ (Goodspeed’s translation of [Matthew 5:3](#)), or are they the socially and economically oppressed?

There is significant exegetical tradition that minimizes the idea that the poor in view in Jesus’ preaching are a socio-economic group. Matthew is characteristically appealed to for the definitive interpretation of Luke. To cite an example: ‘The elaborations of Matthew—“poor in spirit”, “hunger for righteousness”—make explicit that a religious and not an economic status is primarily in view.’<sup>1</sup> An article in *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, argues that ‘the poor’ takes on a non-economic meaning in the period before Christ and is equivalent to ‘the faithful’. Thus, it is to the ‘spiritually loyal’ that Christ promises the Kingdom in the Beatitudes. ‘Indeed, where “poor” occurs in the gospels in the absence of an obvious or implicit economic connotation it should be interpreted in terms of spiritual fidelity.’<sup>2</sup> A p.216 fairly recent article in a prominent evangelical journal on ‘The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor in Old Testament and Extra-Biblical Literature’ concludes with an appeal for the Christian ‘to remember that there is still a lost mankind which stands, spiritually speaking, widowed, orphaned, and destitute of the family of God.’<sup>3</sup> The one ethical responsibility derived from his study is *evangelism*; the pervasive Old Testament concern of God for the widow, the orphan, and the poor is thought of only in terms of its symbolic value.

The assumption that economic connotations are not very obvious when the poor are mentioned in the gospels is widely challenged in contemporary theology. James Cone is a good example of Liberation Theology in which this challenge is most insistent.

Because most Biblical scholars are the descendants of the advantaged class, it is to be expected that they would minimize Jesus’ gospel of liberation for the poor by interpreting poverty as a spiritual condition unrelated to social and political phenomena. But a careful reading Of the New Testament shows that the poor of whom Jesus spoke were not primarily (if at all) those who are spiritually poor as suggested in [Matthew 5:3](#). Rather, as the Lucan tradition shows, these people are ‘those who are really poor, .. those who are

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Nelson, 1966), pp. 113–14.

<sup>2</sup> R. K. Harrison, ‘Poor’, *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Canon, 1973), p. 516.

<sup>3</sup> Richard D. Patterson, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 130 (July–September, 1973), p. 233.

really hungry, who really weep and are persecuted'. The poor are the oppressed and the afflicted, those who cannot defend themselves against the powerful.<sup>4</sup>

Cone feels 'it is important to point out that Jesus does not promise to include the poor in the Kingdom *along with* others who may be rich and learned. His promise is that the Kingdom belongs to the poor alone.'<sup>5</sup> The light of the poor against poverty and injustice 'is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.'<sup>6</sup> The Kingdom of God is for the socially oppressed exclusively and inclusively. That is, it is given to the poor alone, and it is given to all the poor as such. [Matthew 5:3](#), which presents [p. 217](#) a challenge to both these assumptions, is dismissed rather handily.

Such are the conflicting interpretations of the gospel of the poor. Do they simply reflect the social-class bias of the interpreter? That baleful possibility should certainly put us on guard in approaching the Biblical teaching concerning the poor. I propose to begin with an analysis of the Old Testament vocabulary, since it is important, as a contemporary theologian notes in this regard, to avoid 'the imposition of one language on another'.<sup>7</sup> The next step will be to examine the references to the poor in Isaiah since this is the Scripture directly appealed to by Jesus for the delineation of his mission as the Messiah. Finally, attention will be given to the poor in the New Testament as the Messianic community takes shape after Jesus' death and resurrection.

## I. OLD TESTAMENT WORDS FOR THE POOR

The basic meaning of the English word *poor* is 'lacking material possessions'. The Hebrew Old Testament uses five main terms for those lacking material possessions, all at one time or another translated 'poor' in the King James and other English versions. Closest to the English term with its connotations of *lack* is *ras*.<sup>8</sup> Use of this term is almost totally confined to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but there is a memorable instance in Nathan's parable of the poor man who had nothing but one little ewe lamb which was seized by a rich man having a great many flocks and herds ([2 Samuel 12:1-4](#)).<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word *dal* is more evenly distributed throughout the Old Testament, and is quite consistently translated 'poor' in the King James Version. In distinction from *ras*, *dal* connotes the weak social position of those who lack. [Proverbs 28:3](#) even presents us with the anomaly of 'A poor man (*ras*) who oppresses the poor (*dallim*)'. A third term, '*ebyon*', also evenly distributed throughout the Old Testament, describes the [P. 218](#) poor from the point of

---

<sup>4</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury, 1975), pp. 78-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Orbis Books, 1973), p. 289.

<sup>8</sup> As to form, *ras* is the *qal* ptcp. of *rus*, of which the only instance in the *qal* perf is [Psalm 34:10](#)(11), 'The young lions *do lack* and suffer hunger'.

<sup>9</sup> The only other instances of *ras* outside Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are [Psalm 82:3](#), to be discussed below, and Samuel [18:23](#) where David, when offered King Saul's daughter in marriage, refers to himself as 'a *poor* man and lightly esteemed'.

view of *want* or *need*.<sup>10</sup> The poor are needy persons whose desires for ‘a competent portion of the good things of this life’<sup>11</sup> are frustrated.

The remaining terms to be considered in the basic Old Testament vocabulary for the materially poor are the closely related *'ani* and *'anaw*. Though the singular of the latter is not actually used in the Old Testament in this sense,<sup>12</sup> the plural (*'anawim*) is in such passages as [Job 24:4](#), [Psalm 10:12](#), [17](#), [Amos 2:7](#). Both terms connote *oppression*, and designate the poor as wrongfully impoverished by the rich and powerful. The prophets in particular inveigh against every form of oppression by which people are made and kept poor: dishonest business ([Amos 8:5–6](#)), exorbitant interest ([Habakkuk 2:6](#)), seizure of land ([Micah 2:1–2](#)), nonpayment of wages ([Jeremiah 22:13–17](#)), manipulation of justice ([Isaiah 5:23](#)), deceit and violence on the part of the rich ([Micah 6:12](#)).<sup>13</sup> Such references, of course, could be multiplied many times. These are sufficient to establish the prophetic perspective on the poor as an oppressed socio-economic group.

Taken together, the Old Testament words for the poor paint a picture of a destitute, needy, helpless and oppressed people. The basic vocabulary happens to come together in one text, [Psalm 82:3–4](#). Evangelicals are familiar with the fact that human rulers, those to whom the word of God came, are here addressed as ‘gods’, since Jesus appeals to [Psalm 82:1](#) in an important argument where he explicitly affirms that ‘the Scripture cannot be broken’ ([John 10:35](#)). What God says to the ‘gods’ ought to be equally familiar:

How long will you judge unjustly  
And show partiality to the wicked?  
Vindicate the weak and fatherless;  
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. p. 219  
Rescue the weak and needy;  
Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.

([Psalm 82:2–4](#), NASB)

As in the Revised Standard Version of verses [3b](#) and [4a](#), ‘afflicted and destitute’ represents *'ani waras*, while ‘weak and needy’ translates *dal we 'ebyon*. Those whom the rulers are to protect in the name of God are vividly portrayed through the different words for the poor. What is more important, the imperative of justice for the poor is grounded in the fact that they are the special objects of the Lord’s own concern (e.g. [Psalm 146:7–9](#)).

## II. THE METAPHORICAL USE OF POOR-WORDS

The possibility that Old Testament words for the poor may also be used in a non-literal sense complicates the issue. Simply to raise the question in the current theological climate is to invite charges of class-bias since the idea is associated with an exegesis that is often blind to the Biblical teaching about God’s concern for the literally poor. Still, the possibility does exist as a common feature of language, and ought not to be dismissed out of hand. it

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, [Exodus 23:6](#), [Deuteronomy 15:4–11](#), [I Samuel 2:8](#), [Job 24:4](#), [Proverbs 31:9](#). *'ebyon* is quite frequent in the Psalms, and there is significant use in Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

<sup>11</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, in answer to Question 104: ‘What do we pray for in the fourth petition?’

<sup>12</sup> The only instance of *'anaw* in the singular is at [Numbers 12:3](#) where Moses is described as the ‘poorest’ of men: ‘Now the man Moses was *'anaw me'od* above all mankind on the face of the earth.’

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gutierrez, p. 293.

is not *a priori* impossible that the same term might be used to designate both a sociological situation and an attitude of mind.<sup>14</sup>

Such does appear to be the case with *'ani* and *'anaw*. Both terms, and particularly the latter, are used to denote inward distress as well as outward oppression, especially distress over one's own sinfulness. The person who is 'poor in spirit' is one who has been humbled by God and is consequently humble before God. As the Lord says in [Isaiah 66:2](#): 'To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit (*'ani unecen ruah*), and who trembles at my word.' Surely it is in this sense of bowing before the word of God that Moses is said to be the 'poorest' (*'anaw*) of men ([Numbers 12:3](#)),<sup>15</sup> that 'poverty' (*'anawah*) is to be sought after ([Zephaniah 2:3](#)), and that the Messianic king is declared to be 'poor' (*'ani*, [Zechariah 9:9](#)). Indeed, it is hard to tell whether this use of *'ani* and *'anaw* should be regarded as metaphorical or p. 220 simply as a distinct meaning stemming from the same root idea.<sup>16</sup>

Outward oppression and inward distress are often found together, as in [Psalm 25](#). David begins this psalm with an assertion of his trust in the Lord and a plea that his enemies not be allowed to triumph over him (vv. [1-3](#)). He is at the same time very mindful of his sinfulness and need for pardon (vv. [7, 11](#)). Describing himself as *'ani* (v. [16](#)), in the same breath he prays for deliverance and for forgiveness (vv. [18-19](#)). Thus, the Lord leads the *'anawim* in justice (v. [9](#)), and this includes deliverance from oppression, but the *'anawim* are not simply the oppressed—they are sinners who are taught the way of the Lord (vv. [8b, 9b](#)), who keep his covenant (v. [10](#)), who wait on the Lord (v. [21](#)).

A careful reading of [Psalm 37](#) leads to the same conclusion. This psalm also is concerned with the deliverance of the oppressed from the evil-doing of the wicked (vv. [12-15, 39-40](#)). As a result of the promised intervention of the Lord, the *'anawim* will inherit the land (v. [11](#)). The inheritance of the land is a recurring phrase in the psalm, and its variations provide us with a more complete description of the *'anawim*. They are the righteous (v. [29](#)) who are blessed by the Lord (v. [22](#)), and who wait for him and keep his

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Albert Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh*, trans. Kathryn Sullivan (Liturgical Press, 1964), p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Though Luther, perhaps reflecting his own experience as a religious leader, sees Moses as *geplagter*, 'oppressed'.

<sup>16</sup> The Septuagint uses four main terms in translating both *'ani* and *'anaw*: *ptochos* and *penes*, on the one hand, and *praus* and *tapeinos*, on the other. The relative frequency is as follows:

	<i>'ani</i>	<i>'anaw</i>
<i>ptochos</i>	39	3
<i>penes</i>	14	5
<i>praus</i>	4	9
<i>tapeinos</i>	10	3

It seems clear from the linguistic data that when Jesus referred to himself as *praus kai tapeinos te kardia* ([Mathew 11:29](#)) this was equivalent to *'ani* as used in [Zechariah 9:9](#) which the Septuagint translated *praus*. See also [Proverbs 3:34](#) (*'ani/tapeinos*), cited in the NT at James 4.6 and [1 Peter 5:5](#).

way (vv. 9, 34). Thus, the promise is not simply to the oppressed as such, but to the oppressed as taking refuge in the Lord and walking in his ways.

### III. THE POOR IN ISAIAH

To return to the key text cited by Jesus its Scriptural authority for his Messianic work, [Isaiah 61:1](#) reads as follows: ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me to bring [p. 221](#) good news to the poor (*’anawim*).’<sup>17</sup> The question is: What is the meaning of *’anawim* in the context of Isaianic prophecy?

The Book of Isaiah opens with a scathing indictment of Judah and Jerusalem for their sin against the Lord. Prominent in the call to repentance is the demand for justice, epitomized in the defence of the orphan and widow against the ruthless.

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean:  
Remove the evil of your deeds from my sight.  
Cease to do evil,  
Learn to do good;  
Seek justice,  
Reprove the ruthless:  
Defend the orphan,  
Plead for the widow.

[\(Isaiah 1:16–17\)](#)

Particularly does the Lord press his case against the rulers of the people ([Isaiah 1:23](#)). They were established to govern the Lord’s people righteously, to see that justice was maintained. Instead, they have become a prime source of injustice.

Woe to those who enact evil statutes,  
And to those who constantly record unjust decision,  
So as to deprive the needy (*dallim*) of justice,  
And rob the poor (*aniyye*) of my people of their rights,  
In order that widows may be their spoil,  
And that they may plunder the orphan.

[\(Isaiah 10:1–2\)](#)

In striking contrast to the corrupt rulers of Isaiah’s day emerges the promised shoot from the stem of Jesse ([Isaiah 11:1ff](#)). As in the prophecy of [Isaiah 61](#), the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him (v. 2), and he with righteousness will judge the poor (*dallim*), and decide with fairness for the oppressed (*’anawim*) of the earth (v. 4). In light of the overriding concern for social justice in the first ten chapters, with Ned B. Stonehouse, ‘We must certainly avoid the extreme of supposing that Isaiah’s contemplation of the poor disregards the social conditions of his time and has in view only the spiritual state of Israel.’<sup>18</sup> The Messianic age is an age of justice for the oppressed. [p. 222](#)

And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book,  
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the  
blind shall see.  
The afflicted (*’anawim*) also shall increase their

---

<sup>17</sup> The Septuagint has *ptochois*; as do Matthew and Luke in the quotation of [Isaiah 61:1](#).

<sup>18</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (Eerdmans, 1951), p. 80.



gladness in the Lord,  
And the needy ('ebyon) of mankind shall rejoice  
in the Holy One of Israel.

([Isaiah 29:18-19](#))

The mention of the blind and deaf along with the poor and oppressed introduces a theme that is central to the ministry and prophecy of Isaiah and which highlights the distinctiveness of his gospel of liberation. For Isaiah's commission (in response to his enthusiastic 'Here am I, send me!') was, in effect, in his own day, to confirm a blind and deaf people in their hardness of heart ([Isaiah 6:9-10](#)). The desolation which was to overtake the land was from the Lord, being his judgement against 'a godless nation, the people of my fury' ([Isaiah 10:6](#)). The oppressive nation becomes the oppressed, and that not simply by other nations, but—and the point is crucial—by the Lord ([Isaiah 42:24-25](#)).

The lesson is lost on the blind and deaf servant ([Isaiah 42:18-20](#)). But the Lord promises a day when 'the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped' ([Isaiah 35:5-6](#)).

Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, he your teacher will no longer hide himself, but your eyes will behold your teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left. ([Isaiah 30:20-21](#)).

The eye opening, heart-changing salvation proclaimed by Isaiah brings relief to the oppressed and comfort to the afflicted, the same act of deliverance bearing both aspects as God judges the enemies of his people who nevertheless were the rod of his anger. The Exile as the chastening affliction of the Lord is glossed over in contemporary theologies of liberation, the Exodus being characteristically appealed to as the 'paradigm' of God's liberating activity.<sup>19</sup> But such an interpretation of the Exile is the very presupposition of Isaiah's message of comfort, broached in [Isaiah 12:1-2](#). p. 223

The theme of comfort is particularly developed in chs. 40-66 which look beyond the Babylonian exile to a renewed and restored people. The opening enunciation of comfort explicitly brings into view the background of sin and affliction.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God.  
Speak kindly to Jerusalem;  
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,  
That her iniquity has been removed,  
That she has received of the Lord's hand  
Double for all her sins.

([Isaiah 40:1-2](#))

The comfort in view is the Lord's compassion on his afflicted ('aniyyan, [49:13](#)), whom he forsook for a brief time in his anger, but now gathers with everlasting loving kindness ([57:7-8](#)), offering forgiveness to penitent sinners who, hungry and thirsty, return to the Lord ([55:7](#)). The thirsty ones to whom the great invitation of [Isaiah 55:1](#) is made '(Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters)', are, significantly for our purposes, called 'aniyyim and 'ebyon in [41:17](#) ('The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst'). The basis on which the offer of forgiveness is

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. John H. Yoder 'Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation', *Cross Currents* 23 (Fall 1973), pp. 297-309. Yoder criticizes the selective and exclusive use of the Exodus as a model of liberation.

made, and on which transgressions are wiped out and sins remembered no more ([43:25, 44:22](#)) is the atonement provided by the suffering Servant of [Isaiah 53](#).

He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon him,  
And by his scourging we are healed.

([Isaiah 53:5](#))

Although the poor and weak may be in the right over against the rich and powerful, nevertheless the need for atonement is universal according to the terms of the next verse in context.

All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on him.

([Isaiah 53:6](#); cf. [64:6-7](#))

In light of this, a particular attitude of heart is requisite for fellowship with the Eternal and Most High God whose name is Holy. He dwells with the 'contrite and lowly of spirit' ([Isaiah 57:15](#)), and looks 'to him who is humble ('*ani*) and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word' ([Isaiah 66:2](#)). Just as the [p. 224](#) misery of social oppression loomed so large in the early chapters of Isaiah and had a decisive bearing on the interpretation of the poor in [11:4](#), so the consciousness of sin and need of forgiveness that runs as a thread through the latter chapters must bear on our understanding of the poor in [61:1](#). As oppression by man could not be excluded from the former passage, so humility before God cannot be excluded here.

It is perhaps well to recall here that, in the precise words of the Shorter Catechism, 'The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery' (Q. 17). As the Redeemer of God's elect, Christ's work is to bring them out of the estate of sin and misery into the estate of salvation. The Messianic salvation is a deliverance from both sin and misery. In its proclamation in the book of Isaiah and elsewhere in the Bible, one or the other aspects of our fallen estate may be conspicuous, just as the consciousness of need varies according to individual circumstances, but the Gospel is always liberation from sin *and* misery.

#### IV. THE POOR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As will be readily discovered, this section, despite its heading will not deal with the poor in the New Testament in any thorough way. What follows are some observations on the use of *ptochos*, the predominant term for the poor in the New Testament,<sup>20</sup> which use is both literal and figurative and bears out the conclusion of the preceding section that 'the poor' in Biblical thought has 'both a religious and an economic connotation.'<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> *Penes* only occurs once ([II Corinthians 9:9](#), a quotation from the Septuagint). The 34 instances of *ptochos* are translated in the KJV as follows: 'poor' (31), 'beggar' (twice [Luke 16:20, 22](#)), beggarly (once, [Galatians 4:9](#)). To truly present '*ani* and '*anaw*, *praus* (3) and *tapeinos* (8) should be included. Edwin Hatch discusses the four terms in his *Essays in Biblical Greek* (Oxford, 1889), pp. 73-7. Martin Franzmann effectively argues that *ptochos* in the NT, particularly when used in a figurative sense, retains something of its original sense of 'beggar', a sense which clearly distinguishes the term in classical Greek. His 'Beggars Before God', *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 18 (December, 1947), pp. 889-98, brims with exegetical insight.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (Clayton Publishing House, 1972), p. 81.



The question before us is: In what sense is the New Testament Messianic community or assembly identified as ‘the poor’? A convenient way into this question is to examine two of the Lord’s [p. 225](#) messages to churches in Asia recorded in the opening chapters of the Apocalypse.

The church at Smyrna ([Revelation 2:8–11](#)) was literally poor and oppressed. ‘I know your afflictions and your poverty (*ptocheia*)<sup>22</sup>—yet you are rich!’ Jesus encourages this suffering church, whom he has already made ‘rich’,<sup>23</sup> by promising, not immediate deliverance, but rather the crown of life to those who remain faithful, even to the point of death, and in this way emerge triumphant.

The church at Laodicea ([Revelation 3:14–21](#)), on the other hand, was apparently well-off and at ease. At least, they claimed to be rich and to need nothing. The Lord’s analysis of the situation was quite the opposite: ‘You do not realize that you are wretched pitiful, poor, blind and naked.’<sup>24</sup> In terms reminiscent of Isaiah, the Lord invites the materially rich but spiritually lukewarm Laodiceans to come to him for what they truly need. Surely in this call to repentance (v. [19](#)) and invitation to fellowship (v. [20](#)) it may be said that the Gospel is preaching to ‘the poor’.

Yet there are other passages that prevent us from conceiving of the matter simply in such terms. There is, for example, the remarkable passage in James where the literally poor are declared to be the special objects of divine favor: ‘Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him?’ ([James 2:5](#)).<sup>25</sup> Calvin comments:

Not only the poor, but he determined to start with them, in order to rebut the arrogance of the rich ... God shed his grace on the rich and poor alike, but chose to prefer the latter to the former, that the great ones might learn not to live on self. appreciation, and that the humble and obscure might ascribe all that they were to the mercy of God: thus both would be trained to have a proper and sober-minded attitude.<sup>26</sup> [p. 226](#)

Calvin’s ‘not only the poor’ is supported by [James 1:9–10](#) (to go no further than this epistle), where both the poor brother and the rich brother are addressed in terms appropriate to each, indicating that the good news is for the poor in spirit, whatever outward circumstances may be. Yet [James 2:5](#), particularly when read along with the denunciation of the rich in [5:1–6](#), indicates that the good news is pre-eminently for the socio-economically oppressed, not because poverty is a means of grace, but because God who delivers from sin and misery so chooses to manifest his mercy and justice.

---

**David C. Jones is Professor of Systematic Theology and Dean of Faculty at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. [p. 227](#)**

---

<sup>22</sup> There are two other instances of *ptocheia*, [II Corinthians 8:2, 9](#).

<sup>23</sup> The present tense, *alla plousios ei*, should not pass unnoticed.

<sup>24</sup> The personal pronoun and definite article in Greek make the assertion particularly emphatic.

<sup>25</sup> The NIV reflects the dative, *to kosmo*. James combines the act of poverty with its worldly estimation: those who lack are despised. This is parallel to Paul’s point in [I Corinthians 1:26–31](#).

<sup>26</sup> Commentary on the Epistle of James, *in loc*.