

“On the Way with Saint James (Part 3):  
The Humble and the Heat”  
Leviticus 19:9-18; James 1:9-11; 2:1-12; 5:1-6

## **Introduction**

How long *is* the Way of Saint James—the famous pilgrim route that ends in western Spain? What kind of terrain? What kind of people are you going to meet along the way? How long does it take to finish the journey?

It depends where you start. If you start in Switzerland, it’s going to be a lot longer than if you started in the Pyrenees. And you’ll meet different people.

We open Saint James’s pilgrim guidebook today. And the lesson we read is hard to hear. It’s not about the terrain or the distance. Rather ...

What characters will I meet? What kind of character must I have to pass the test and reach the end of the trail?

### **I. 3 Characters: God, the rich, and the poor**

As we scan James’s guidebook, it seems he’s got 3 characters that we’ll meet. Who?

1:9—James introduces us to “Believers in humble circumstances.”  
Then in 1:10 we have “the rich.”

2:2—We have “A man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing.” Then, same verse: “A poor man in filthy old clothes.”

2:5—We have: “those who are poor.”  
Then in 2:6—Again: “the rich.”

5:1—“Rich people.”  
Along with, 5:4—Workers and harvesters who don’t get paid; who cry.

Over and over: The rich, and the poor.

The third character we notice is God. God is watching, waiting, and later, acting.

So there are James’s characters. What are they like?

How did the poor get poor? Were they foolish? Sinful? Maybe. Probably not.

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On the pilgrim trail, not everyone starts at the same place. Some are born wealthy, others poor.

If you're born and raised poor; you enter adulthood poor. Especially in the first century, you don't have much chance of *not* being poor. Your day-to-day *life* is marked by powerlessness, by feeling out-of-place. Even if you aren't begging for food and money, people think you're going to.

So imagine, then, you're the poor man in 2:2. You come into church. Your work clothes *are* your church clothes. Where do you sit? Can you hope to make friends? Serve? Feel at home?

The service finishes. You go back to work. Chapter 5 tells us what the work week is like for you. 5:4—sometimes the boss pays you fairly; often they don't. But you have to keep mowing and harvesting because that's how you survive.

To make it easier for all those people who don't want to see you, smell you, talk to you, next time you come to church, you head straight for the back row of the balcony

The rich person. What are they like? Look at 2:2. You come to church. You have on your expensive clothes and your ring. You get to sit wherever you want. And you're probably *running* the church, not worrying about whether you'll fit in. Maybe you're running the town, and you're visiting the church. People *respect you*.

Monday comes. You make sure (5:4) that there's enough workers in the field. You pay them as little as possible. You live (5:5) “in luxury and self-indulgence.”

Final character: God. What's God doing on this part of the pilgrim trail?

James says: He's watching and listening. He can see (5:4) the rich woman refusing to pay her laborers. He can *hear* the workers groan in the field and weep on the way home.

And sometimes God says things. Like through James. Especially to the rich person:

2:8 — “You know my commandment. *Love your neighbor as yourself.*”

2:13 — “If you are not merciful, there's going to be no mercy for you.”

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5:1 — “Some day you’ll wear the clothes and cry the tears of the poor.”

5:5 — “It doesn’t seem like you’re a full-grown cow on its way to the slaughterhouse. But.”

1:10-11 — “It doesn’t *seem* like you’re a flower that will be withered by the sun’s heat. But.”

Three characters along the pilgrim path:

The poor: ashamed, powerless, dishonored.

The rich: privileged, proud, powerful.

The Lord: seeing, hearing, speaking.

**II. Or ... 5 Characters: Rich, poor, God, a good usher, and a bad usher.**

If we skim James’s guidebook, there’s 3 characters. But if we *read* it, we see that there’s more. Not 3, but 5.

The rich person, the poor person, God— yes. But also, two *ushers*. A good usher and the bad usher!

*Ushers?* You mean, the person who hands you the bulletin and tells you where you can sit? Yes.

Look at the beginning of Chapter 2. The rich person and the poor person walk into the church. They meet the usher.

James is not asking us—“Are you the rich person, or the poor person?”

James is asking us: “Are you the good usher, or the bad usher?”

Am I the person who (2:3) pays special attention to someone because of their *clothes* and *jewelry*? Their *wealth*? Am I the kind of person who puts the person in ugly clothes in the back row?

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Do I try to fill my church with respectable people? Or am I—2:8—totally committed to what Jesus commanded: “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Do you realize that you are ushers? Where do I seat people? How do I greet people? Why?

James tells us what life is like for the poor person; for the rich person. He says: along your journey, these people will come into your life, your church. What are you going to do, ushers?

He says: Love your neighbor as yourself. Honor all. Make no distinction based on power or privilege.

### **III. Actually, there are 4 Characters**

At first, there was the rich, the poor, and God. A closer look revealed two more: a bad usher and a good usher.

But actually, there are not 3 characters. Not 5 characters. But 4 characters. Who?

James says we’ll meet the rich and poor. But that’s not James’s concern. James is concerned that the rich and the poor are going to meet *us*. What are *we* like?

No matter how much we have in the bank, or the quality of our clothes, what matters is my character. Am I “rich in spirit” or “poor in spirit.”

When the poor man and the rich man meet us along the trail, and walk alongside us into the church the question is: “Who do I want to sit next to? Which one do I want to be like, spiritually?”

Do I want, more than anything, to be like the poor man, (2:5), who has become, by grace, “rich in faith, an heir of the kingdom!”

If you’re going to inherit the kingdom of God—guess what you *don’t* need? You *don’t* need more money and power. You don’t need rich and powerful people to like you. You’re not banking on the wealth of this world. You don’t have a diversified portfolio. All your investments are in Jesus Christ and his kingdom. You’re poor in spirit, rich in faith!

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But if you’re “rich in spirit,” you have to have rich friends. You must pretend to respect and honor some really awful people to get their wealth and status. You will pretend to like the kind of people who (2:6) oppress the poor, who drag the vulnerable into court; people who really (2:7) hate the name of Jesus.

James is saying—many of us are “middle class in spirit.” It’s so easy to end up becoming a church that is “rich in spirit.”

Friends, the only true church is the church who is “poor in spirit” — the church that has nothing but Jesus; the church that—because it has Jesus—has *everything*.

How do you know if you’re “poor in spirit”? How do we know if *we*, IPC, are “poor in spirit”?

James tells us. Twice, James tells us who the poor in spirit are. Look at 1:12; look at 2:5. The poor in spirit are those who love him. “Those who love him.” What a breathtaking, convicting four words. Those who love him. We are a poor-in-spirit church, if what we’re looking for in everyone who walks into our church—long time member, first-time guest—is *love for Jesus*.

When we elect elders to our Council. Who are we looking for? Those who have money? Those who love him.

I need a mentor. Someone to help me figure out how to live my life. Who am I looking for? Those who have success? Those who love him.

We’re serving communion next Sunday. Who is welcome at the Lord’s table? Those who look good, seem good, act good, sing good? *Those who love him*.

How much bread and wine does a wealthy person get if they love him? A little cube of bread; a tiny glass of juice. How much does a person with no money get? A little cube; a tiny glass. Who sits at Jesus’ table? *Those who love him*.

There are our characters. The poor in spirit, those who love him. The rich in spirit, those who do not.

But I said there are four characters. Who are the other two?

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Well, they’ve been kind of hiding in the shadows. I’ve said that “God” is one of the characters. True enough. But our final two characters are:

The Lord Jesus Christ.  
And God the heavenly Father.

Jesus Christ was rich. But when he showed up on the pilgrim path and came along “to church,” he was the one in humble circumstances. The richest person in history and eternity, became poor.

But after a life in humble circumstances, a life lived in kindness to the poor, what did Jesus experience? Not exaltation. But humiliation.

Jesus faded away. He withered like grass in the scorching heat. He had his clothing stripped off of him.

Jesus was the worker who was not paid his wages. The laborer: abused, crying out to God. He was the condemned-and-murdered innocent one.

Jesus wasn’t given a bad seat in church. He was ushered outside the *city*, and humiliated and crucified. He didn’t sit on the floor; he was laid in a tomb.

No one else has ever had what he had, and lost what he lost. Honor, prestige, authority, power, life, glory.

*Unlike* the prodigal son, he spent none of his wealth and power and privilege on himself.

But *like* the prodigal son, his only hope was that his Father might give him a gold ring for his finger, and fine clothing. His only chance was that the Father might exalt him, and give him the kingdom, promised *to those who love him*.

And the Father did. The Father is the good Usher, who sees the poor in spirit, rich in love, and says to Jesus: “Son, yours is the kingdom. Come up here and sit in the best seat!”

Because Jesus has everything, he can be the Good Usher. He’s not giving out seats based on what he can get from us, because he doesn’t need anything from us.

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He can give the seats of honor, simply, to those who love him.

Friends, we've got to become people who love him.

That's all that matters.

Everything else will follow.