

**Common Sense Christianity**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

<sup>1</sup>My brothers and sisters do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? <sup>2</sup>For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly (*synagōgē*), and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? <sup>6</sup>But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? <sup>7</sup>Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? <sup>8</sup>You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>9</sup>But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup>For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. James 2:1--10 (NRSVA)

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. James 2:14--17 (NRSVA)

**Sermon**

I cannot read or study the Book of James with all its practical implications for God's people without thinking of the story of the deacon that showed up at the parsonage one day asking to speak to the minister's wife, a woman known far and wide for her charitable impulses.

"Sister," said the deacon, "a terrible situation has come to my attention. There is a family in our town in serious trouble. The husband and father in this family recently died, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are on the verge of starvation. Moreover, the family is about to be evicted unless someone pays their rent of \$400."

"How terrible!" exclaimed the minister's wife. "Deacon, tell me who is the landlord, I'll call him immediately, and arrange to pay the rent."

The deacon wiping his eyes with his handkerchief said, "Thank you sister, I knew I could count on you. Make the check out to me, I'm the landlord."

I believe that the book of James was written by a Jewish Jesus-believer to a predominately Jewish audience. This becomes apparent if we realize that the word rendered "assembly" in our NRSV in Greek is the word for synagogue (*συναγωγή*). The term usually rendered "church" or "assembly" in Greek is "ekklesia". Furthermore, a closer reading indicates that this section in James addresses how people, whom we might call Messianic Jews, are to treat curious or interested non-Messianic Jews, who come into a gathering of Jesus-believers in their synagogue. Also, this congregation of Jewish Jesus-believers would have retained most if not all the prayers,

customs, and style of non-Messianic Jews in their synagogues.<sup>1</sup> So, let us see these folks in fine clothes as members of the Jewish elite, who have come either to check out this Jesus-believing synagogue, as potential believers or curious antagonists. Several scholars believe that these rich Jews could have been arbitrators in matters of community disputes, etc. Thus, the need to impress them.

In short, the author is asking his fellow Messianic Jews why they are treating the non-believing Jews in such a super honorific and deferential manner instead of being loyal to and honoring their less socially prominent members or visitors. Especially, since some of these elitists are the same people who are hauling members of the synagogue into the religious courts (beit-din), cheating the poor of their wages, dispossessing them of their property, and insulting the name of the Lord Jesus, the one who constitutes their community. Therefore, believers must remember that it is the law of indiscriminate love, the Royal Law, that is the holy glue that binds the community to God in Christ.

Overall, the book of James is very practical in its moral wisdom and ethical instructions for those who believe Jesus is the Messiah. Furthermore, the author views all members of his Jesus-group in a very democratic way. Throughout the book of James, the author is constantly holding up what I think are the common-sense realities of a day-to-day life in God. For James, it does not make sense for those who profess that there is only one God, one Christ, to neglect all that implies morally, ethically, and spiritually in their relationships to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today we see two examples of the followers of Jesus, like our landlord deacon, professing or saying one thing and doing another. I would like to point out that we do not know if those assembled in the synagogue, which may have occasioned such passages as our texts today, was a worship service, a study group, or a meeting where people have come to together to iron out disputes or issues within the community in the presence of an outside mediator, as I mentioned possibly the person or persons with the fine clothes and jewelry. Regardless, James says that when the believers assemble they are not to show partiality to the wealthy and influential people to the dishonor of the poor or those of lower honorific standing. Nor are they simply to acknowledge their brothers and sisters in Christ, who are in dire need of the necessities of life and dismiss them with supercilious, religious platitudes.

Now, I hasten to mention that some of the Jewish believers assembled in James would have been people, who for various reasons could no longer maintain an honor standing among their peers. They may have also been economically poor but definitely socially marginalized. If there are wealthy members in the synagogue, they are told in chapter 1 that if they are to be truly wealthy they must become poor and humble in spirit despite their wealth and the honor status it accords them by the world and not lord it over others.

If these wealthy people are not Jesus-believers but potential believers and the congregation is courting them for financial or political reasons, shame on the church that dishonors those of lesser status in such a crass, solicitous, and worldly manner. In the new covenant community, the Christ community, such worldly status seeking and posturing are out of place.

James reminds his readers and listeners that from the beginning the Jewish poor, the widow, and the orphan have been of special concern to God. These are symbolic of God's elect, who because of circumstances beyond their control, have become dispossessed of the barest

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<sup>1</sup> Stern, David H. Jewish New Testament Commentary (Kindle Locations 20551-20556). Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Kindle Edition.

means of livelihood and honor standing and must live day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, by faith in God's protection and provision. Such people are of special concern to God and ipso facto should be for the new covenant community at large. Such people have no allusions of self-sufficiency as the wealthy or employable. These people must truly, truly live by faith in God through the beneficence of others and their wits. Therefore, they are not to be neglected, minimized, or dishonored because they are under God's special care.

The poor that James talks about are not the universal poor or the lazy and criminal poor, but the needy brothers and sisters in Christ. The universally poor will become a growing concern among Christians in Western Europe after the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s and earlier 1800s with its higher standards of living and surplus economies. The universal poor are, I am sure, a concern to God and should be to us, but James points out that in his collective-minded community of faith, concern for the poor and needy are primarily for the brother and sister in Christ.

Let me belabor the point with further explanations. The poor in scripture may not have anything to do with a person's financial means, such as the widow of a wealthy man or an orphan from a wealthy family, who have no relatives to take them in and act as guardians and status holders. Thus, the poor are those who have little to no authority or power to control their plight, which prevents them from taking their proper place of honor alongside others. The death of a husband or a child's parents were beyond an individual's control and unless a male relative took the widow or orphan in or the elders of the community appointed them a good and righteous guardian from among the village they were totally on their own with little hope, except possibly as indentured servants or beggars. Another group of the poor or dishonored were those folks who due to misfortune, bad decisions, or unscrupulous money lenders had lost their lands, homes, and the means of making a living and providing and protecting their households.

There were no government welfare job-retraining programs, no free, public education or scholarships for vocational/technical training available; no homeless shelters or temporary accommodations for the displaced as a rule. There were no hospitals, treatment programs for the mentally ill, or the chemically dependent; no free nationally mandated walk-in health care at every hospital. The poor that scripture is talking about were true victims, people with no opportunities to better their plight in life because of social and economic constraints placed upon them. These poor may be compared to many of the poor Christians in some third world nations today, who do not have the means and wherewithal to be self-reliant and are victimized by the elite, their governments, and people of other religions. These poor are without a government genie in a bottle to give them a helping hand. All these brothers and sisters in Christ have is a hope that God will sensitize others to their circumstances and render aid. Speaking of genies and the disparity between needs, wants, and expectations reminds me of another story.

It seems this fellow was walking along a beach when he spied a rather odd-looking bottle half-buried in the sand. He picked up the bottle, rubbed it clean, and pulled the cork out of the top of the bottle. Immediately a genie flew out. "O thank you, thank you!" said the genie. "I've been in that bottle for 4,000 years. In gratitude for my release, I'll grant you three wishes."

"Well," said the fellow, "I've always wanted to be wealthy, what about a billion dollars in a numbered Swiss account." Immediately, a piece of paper appeared in his hand with a numbered Swiss bank account. "I've always wanted a new, red Ferrari." "Poof!", and there was the Ferrari.

"Now, I've always wanted to be irresistible to women," the fellow concluded. "Poof!" and he was promptly turned into a box of chocolates.

James tells his listeners not to offer patent, religious platitudes to those in need, such as "Bless your heart, just hang in there, keep praying, God hears your prayers." "God may not answer the way you want but God will answer, just keep the faith." To Christians who say such things, especially to other Christians in dire straits, the response is "Fool, God has heard their prayers and because you know their need, you are the answer." Share with that person as your brother and sister in Christ. Share in a way that does not insult the dignity of the person and honors them as an equal in Christ. Then, after their immediate needs are met, help them find the long-term answers and assistance that they may require - don't abandon your brother or sister in Christ after giving them a warm coat, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a glass of milk to abate their hunger and keep them warm.

To such helping, I add a word of caution - keep good personal boundaries. Understand where the person's problems and needs begin and end, and their responsibilities in the matter. Also, let the helper be very aware of his or her limits, resources, and abilities. Keep a clear focus on the immediate needs, and do not become an enabler - a do-gooder as opposed to a well-doer. There are professional people and organizations whose very existence is aimed at helping and caring for people in trouble, distress, and need - use them, and make sure they are responsive.

In all of this, it is often hard to allow the homeless, the poor, and the social outsiders the right to choose not to be helped according to other people's opinions. Not all the poor and homeless are victims of society or mentally ill just because their life values don't mimic the majority's. In such cases, once we have informed people of the help available and the proper responses to that help, we must honor their right to choose. However, their choices should not violate the rights and privileges of others.

I know most of us donate to various and sundry charities and causes beyond our church. Most, if not all of us, probably don't see our government's public welfare system and assistance programs, as well as our foreign aid programs, as an extension of our Christian consciousness. Our welfare system, despite all its administrative shortcomings, reflects our concerns as the electorate for others and other nations. Our church directs the lion's share of its outreach budget to local organizations that help families in distress, abused children, and the homeless here in Albuquerque. These organizations have trained staff and facilities dedicated to helping the needy in our community, effectively, efficiently, and with integrity. Furthermore, there has not been a person who has come in search of fellowship at this church since I've been here that has been turned away, discounted, or made to feel less than an equal with whomever they sat next to in our pews or at our tables.

In this evaluation of how we treat the needs of our own Christian brothers and sisters in this church, the transient, and the needy of our community, I believe is on target with James' insight. I have not seen an act of discrimination against anyone based upon race, social position, socio-economic status, gender, age, or any other reason. I think this church should be humbly proud of our interpersonal relationships now, our commitment to the needy in our community and around the world, especially when we take in to consideration our nation's aid and disaster relief efforts for our fellow Americans and other countries.

Having said that, let us not become too self-satisfied and complacent, let us never forget James' admonitions or encouragements to embrace and live by the truths of God and not the ways and values of the world.

In closing, let me say something else. I personally am fed up with people trying to manipulate Christians into giving more and more of their time, talents, and resources to humanitarian organizations and causes that assume a need that may or may not be real. Sometimes charitable appeals are based upon someone's notion of relative deprivation, keeping up with Joneses, not a genuine human need. For an extreme example: There are people who

don't have a TV or cell phone, and as Christians we should provide them with one each. There are kids, who may not get toys for Christmas so we must provide them with toys like other kids. Yet, we neglect them, their needs, and the reasons for their depravation 364 days out of the year. We must be careful not to be victimized by our need to feel good as a member of a noble herd at the expense of greater issues and needs. Not everyone needs to keep up with the Joneses to be valued and treated with respect and honor, this is doubly so in the Church. Therefore, be conscientious and discerning while remembering "17 faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

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