The Bible and Bread: Interpreting Scripture

Week 7 Fall 2025

The Letter of James

Introduction to James from The Message ~ Eugene Peterson

When believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business—and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with.
The letter of James shows one of the church's early pastors skillfully going about his work of confronting, diagnosing, and dealing with areas of misbelief and misbehavior that had turned up in congregations committed to his care. Deep and living wisdom is on display here, wisdom both rare and essential. Wisdom is not primarily knowing the truth, although it certainly includes that. It is skill in living. For what good is a truth if we don't know how to live it? What good is an intention if we can't sustain it? According to church tradition, James carried the nickname "Old Camel Knees" because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer. The prayer is foundational to the wisdom. Prayer is always foundational to wisdom.

The Letter of James
Introduction: The Wesley Study Bible

While discussing those NT writings he regarded as central to the Gospel, Martin Luther dismissed the letter of James as "an epistle of straw" (*Preface to the New Testament*, 1545). For John Wesley, however, this small letter was central for Christian faith and life. In his journal, he described James as a remedy against the general temptation of leaving off good works in order to increase faith (*Works*, June 5, 1741). Elsewhere, Wesley observed that, when James wrote his letter, "That grand pest of Christianity, a faith without works, was spread far and wide; filling the church with a 'wisdom from beneath,' which was 'earthly, sensual, devilish,' and which gave rise, not only to rash judging and evil speaking, but to 'envy, strife, confusion, and every evil work'" (Sermon 61: "The Mystery of Iniquity," ¶19).

The Letter of James has a heightened emphasis on Christian identity born out of concern with the hardships of life as pilgrims in a foreign land. James refers to his audience as "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1). "Twelve Tribes" calls to mind the end-time restoration of the scattered people of Israel, whereas "Dispersion" suggests experiences of alienation and homelessness. The result is an unsettled status in the world. As the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* puts it, "Christians… live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory" (5:1-14). We should not be surprised, then, that James' instruction centers on problems related to the status of believers in the world, the pressures and challenges of living in exile, and the identity of God's people.

James 5:1-6
NRSVUE
Warning to Rich Oppressors

5 Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the
miseries that are coming to you. [2] Your riches have
rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. [3] Your gold
and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence
against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You
have laid up treasure[a] during the last days. [4] Listen!
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. [5] You have lived on the earth in luxury and in
pleasure; you have nourished your hearts in a day of
slaughter. [6] You have condemned and murdered the
righteous one, who does not resist you.

Footnotes
a.5.3 Or *will eat your flesh, since you have stored up fire*

James 5:1-6
The Message
Destroying Your Life from Within

5 1-3 And a final word to you arrogant rich: Take
some lessons in lament. You'll need buckets for the
tears when the crash comes upon you. Your money is
corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy
luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life
from within. You thought you were piling up wealth.
What you've piled up is judgment.

4-6 All the workers you've exploited and cheated cry
out for judgment. The groans of the workers you
used and abused are a roar in the ears of the Master
Avenger. You've looted the earth and lived it up. But
all you'll have to show for it is a fatter than usual
corpse. In fact, what you've done is condemn and
murder perfectly good persons, who stand there and
take it.

Lexical Summary
plousios: rich, rich man, people
Original Word: πλούσιος
Part of Speech: Adjective
Transliteration: plousios
Pronunciation: PLOO-see-os
Phonetic Spelling: (ploo'-see-os)
KJV: rich
NASB: rich, rich man, people, rich man's, rich people
Word Origin: [from G4149 (πλοῦτος - riches)]

1. wealthy
STRONGS NT 4145: πλούσιος

a. properly, **wealthy, abounding in material resources**: Matthew 27:57; Luke 12:16; Luke 14:12; Luke 16:1, 19; Luke 18:23; Luke 19:2; ὁ πλούσιος, substantively, Luke 16:21, 22; James 1:10, 11; οἱ πλούσιοι, Luke 6:24; Luke 21:1; 1 Timothy 6:17; James 2:6; James 5:1; Revelation 6:15; Revelation 13:16; πλούσιος, without the article, **a rich man,** Matthew 19:23, 24; Mark 10:25; Mark 12:41; Luke 18:25.

Core Idea
Strong's Greek 4145, plousios, designates one who possesses material abundance. In Scripture the term functions as a spiritual diagnostic: revealing the heart, challenging priorities, and contrasting earthly wealth with the surpassing riches of God's grace.

Distribution in the New Testament
Plousios (and its inflected forms) appears twenty-eight times, concentrated in the Synoptic Gospels (especially Luke), with additional occurrences in Paul, James, and Revelation. The pattern is deliberate: the Gospels expose the peril of riches, Acts is silent as the church shares resources, the Epistles instruct affluent believers, and Revelation unmasks the emptiness of worldly affluence.

AI Overview 11-10-2025

To be considered rich or wealthy in **North Carolina**, one must earn a significant income or possess a high net worth. For example, being in the top 1% of earners requires an income of at least $591,600 based on 2022 tax data. Alternatively, being wealthy can be defined by a high net worth, with a $1 million or more in liquid assets considered a common threshold for being a high-net-worth individual.

Income-based definitions:

- Top 1% of earners: An adjusted gross income of at least $591,600 based on 2022 tax data.
- Upper class household: A household income of at least $227,586 is needed to be considered upper class in North Carolina, given the median household income is $113,793.
- Upper-middle class: A six-figure salary is generally considered the minimum to be a "rich" person in cities like Raleigh ($131,513+) and Charlotte ($129,044+).

AI Overview 11-10-2025

Globally, having … $93,170 in net worth can place a person in the wealthiest 10 percent…

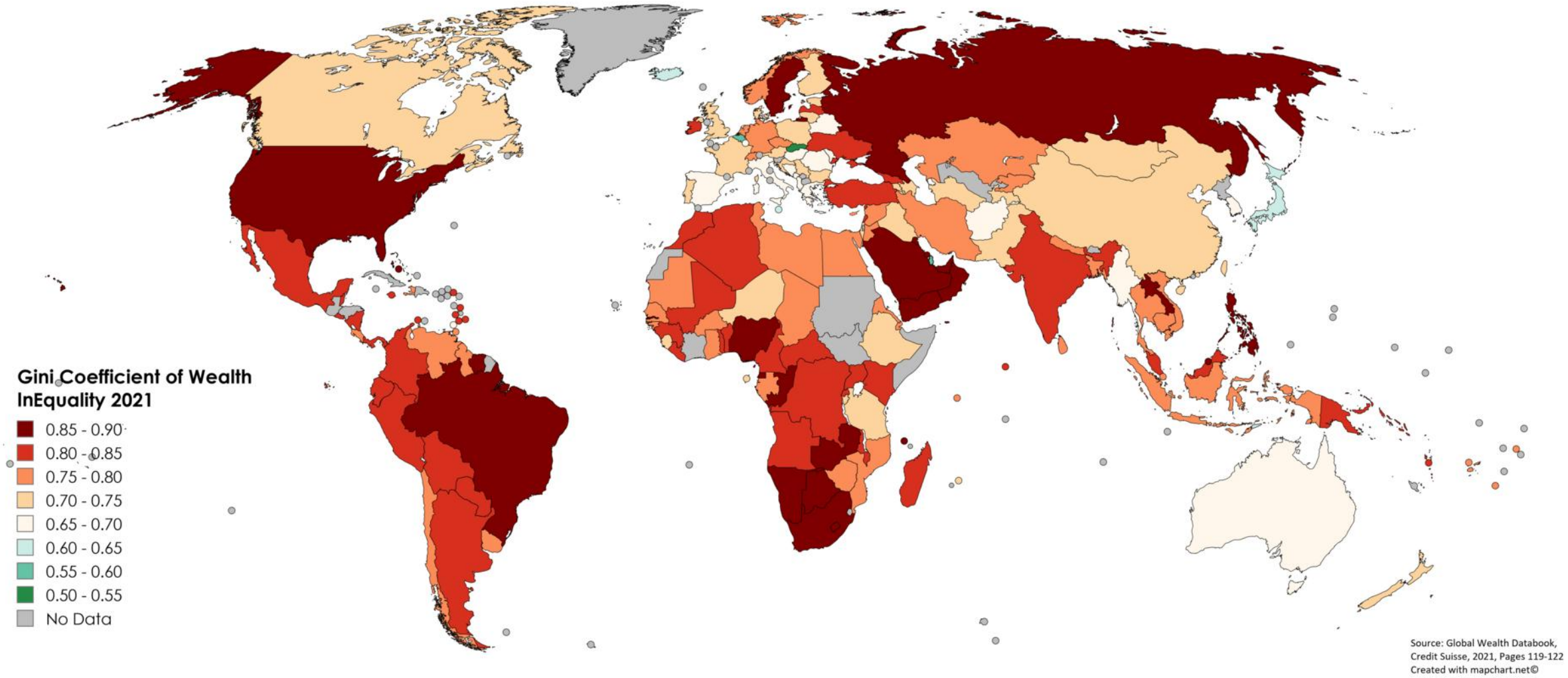
Defining wealth and riches:

- Rich: This term often describes a high income and expensive habits. It can be a temporary state, as those with high earnings might not have built lasting financial security.

- Wealthy: This refers to a larger, more sustainable financial picture. It's a result of building a net worth by accumulating assets (like real estate and investments) and managing liabilities, making it possible to withstand financial shocks.

Global financial milestones:
According to the 2018 Global Wealth Report, having a net worth of … $4,210 can place you better off than half the people on Earth.

A net worth of $93,170 or more can put you in the wealthiest 10 percent of the global population.



Gini: Higher Gini coefficients signify greater inequality in wealth distribution. A Gini coefficient of 0 reflects perfect wealth equality, where all wealth values are the same, while a Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100%) reflects maximal wealth inequality, a situation where a single individual has all the wealth while all others have none.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_wealth_per_adult

The top 1 percent of Americans control some 40 percent of the nation's wealth. ~ Joseph E. Stiglitz ~ **The Price of Inequality**

According to Wesley wealth is dangerous because it can corrupt and lead to sin. Whatever our level of income, desiring more than is necessary to sustain our families and ourselves is morally destructive. Riches lure us from sharing with those in need and toward exploiting and isolating the poor for selfish financial gain. The dangers of wealth also harm the rich by leading into a self-centered lifestyle, a false sense of moral superiority, a distorted understanding of divine favor, and to the destruction and negligence of those in need. These traits are in absolute opposition to God's character and God's expectations of God's people. When blessed with more than what we need, the excess should be shared.

See: Wesleyan Core Term *Danger of Riches* in the Letter of James.