

A CASE FOR JAMES'S CONDEMNATION OF THE RICH IN JAMES 5:1–6
AS ADDRESSING FALSE BELIEVERS WITHIN THE BELIEVING
COMMUNITY

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Abstract: *Although many commentators consider James 5:1–6 as referring to unbelieving rich outsiders, there are several indicators in the Epistle of James that suggest that James is addressing unregenerate false believers in the believing community in the passage. First, 1:10–11 most likely refers to the rich believers, so James is addressing an audience made up of both rich and poor believers. Second, James has already denounced those who have the means to help the poor but only pay them lip service in 2:14–26. Third, in 4:13–5:6, James is rebuking two different classes of people among the audience, the self-sufficient merchants (4:13–17) and the rich (5:1–6). Fourth, in his letter, James issues strong warnings to those whose deeds and words show that they are self-deceived about their religion (e.g. 1:22–27). It is likely that the rich in 5:1–6 are part of those people, and James is calling them to repentance.*

Key words: *the rich, false believers, self-deception, unregenerate, warning, call to repentance*

Jesus warned that on the day of his return, there will be many who address him as Lord and claim to have done many works in Jesus's name but he will tell them he never knew them (Matt 7:21–23). His warning is affirmed when we find that the NT epistles identify false believers in first-century churches. By “false believers,” I mean those who profess faith in Christ but are unregenerate.¹ Paul mentions “false brothers” in 2 Cor 11:26 and Gal 2:4. Thus, “false believers” is a valid category that has existed since the first century of the church's history. James has those false believers in mind when he warns against the kind of faith that cannot save those who possess it in 2:14–26. This article will primarily focus on the false believers in 5:1–6.

Most commentators have understood Jas 5:1–6 to refer to the unbelieving rich outsiders who are oppressing James's readers. This article will argue that while the passage may certainly apply to the rich outside the church, James is mainly addressing rich and self-deceived false believers inside the church and issuing a strong warning against their oppression of their poor brothers. There are many indicators for this within the letter and this paper will address four of them. First, James 1:10–11 most likely refers to the rich believers, so James is addressing an audience made up of both the rich and poor believers. Second, James has already denounced those who have the means to help the poor but only pay them lip service in 2:14–26. In this passage, James seems to have those church members in mind who refuse to

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¹ For a detailed discussion of false believers, see C. Adrian Thomas, *A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Joseph K. Pak, *False Believers in the New Testament* (Deer Park, NY: Linus, 2011).

use their means to help the poor, and they would certainly include the rich. Third, in 4:13–5:6, James is rebuking two different classes of people among the audience, the self-sufficient merchants who do not factor into their plans God’s will, which presumably includes helping the poor (4:13–17), and the rich who are abusing and neglecting the poor (5:1–6). Fourth, while James prohibits the readers from speaking evil against other brothers as God alone is the judge who is able to save and destroy (5:7–9; also 4:11–12), James is also issuing strong warnings to those whose deeds and words show that they are self-deceived about their religion (1:22–27). It is likely that the rich in 5:1–6 are a part of those people, and James is calling them to repentance. We will look at these four indicators in turn.

I. AN AUDIENCE MADE UP OF BOTH RICH AND POOR BELIEVERS IN 1:9–11

1. *Two major views on the identity of “the rich” in 1:10–11.* In this short letter, *ὁ πλούσιος* (“the rich”) occurs five times, *οἱ πλούσιοι* (“the rich” in plural) once, and *ὁ πτωχός* (“the poor”) four times, a frequency which shows that these are important terms for the author. Scholars are divided over whether the “rich” in 1:10 is a Christian or not. This is an important question because it determines whether the message is directed to rich Christians about themselves or to poor Christians about rich non-Christians.² Those who think that the rich are within the believing community tend to take the “heroic” view, maintaining that James is calling on the affluent to humble themselves and demonstrate a certain heroism in their loss of wealth. Others take the “ironic” view, namely that the rich are outsiders and James is telling them to boast, ironically, in their own humiliation, since they are facing doom.³ If the rich person addressed is a believer, then James is exhorting that person not to boast in his wealth but in his identification with Christ and his people, which is a matter of humiliation in the eyes of the world.⁴ If the rich person is an unbeliever, then James is using irony to depict his condemnation: the only thing they can boast about is the eschatological humiliation that is coming to them in the judgment.⁵

Maynard-Reid argues that the issue of whether the rich person is a Christian or not has no relevancy because James did not have in mind two distinct communities, Jewish and Christian, since he wrote his letter during the early period of the church before the two groups were clearly distinguished.⁶ However, the text does not seem to support this claim. James introduces himself as “the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” in 1:1 and later commands the readers to remain impartial as those who “hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory”

² George M Stulac, “Who Are ‘the Rich’ in James?,” *Presbyterion* 16.2 (1990): 89–102.

³ Alicia J. Batten, “Rotting Riches: Economics in the Letter of James,” *Vision* 15.1 (2014): 40; Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 85–86; Dale C. Allison Jr., *James: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 206.

⁴ Douglas A. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 44.

(2:1). It is unlikely that James would have referred to himself and the readers in this manner if he were including non-messianic Jews as a part of his audience.

2. *Arguments for the non-Christian view.* Stulac acknowledges that a common approach among commentators such as Joseph B. Mayor, J. H. Ropes, and James Adamson has been to read 1:10 as speaking to rich Christians based on grammatical considerations: the verb “boast” in 1:9 is anaphorically referred back to by 1:10 and “the brother” in 1:9 is understood as the subject for 1:10 also (making the subject of v. 10 “the rich brother”), contrasting the poor brother with the rich.⁷ According to this view, 1:10 is teaching self-abasement to the rich as it is teaching self-respect to the poor.

An alternative approach taken by scholars such as Martin Dibelius, Sophie Laws, Peter Davids, Scot McKnight, and Dale Allison has been to read 1:10 as speaking about rich non-Christians based on several observations. First, the exultation of the poor brother is thought to be too dissimilar to parallel that of the rich person. Second, the absence of any hope or commendation given to the rich in the letter seems to indicate that “the rich brother” is a non-Christian. Third, the rich along with their wealth will pass away like a wildflower.⁸ This view sees uniform condemnation of the rich (1:9–11; 2:5–7; 5:1–6) as persecutors and blasphemers.⁹ According to this interpretation, which Stulac holds, the wealthy in 2:2 and 4:13 are either potential or new converts, and James does not use the term “the rich” to address them because he reserves it for the unbelievers who are the enemies of the church.¹⁰

If the rich in James are the rich unbelievers outside the church, how does Stulac explain the fact that James addresses them using second person pronouns (e.g. 5:1–6)? He holds that since second person address is prevalent throughout the letter, James must be employing the second person rhetorically toward people not actually receiving the letter in 5:1–6.¹¹ However, nowhere else in his letter does James use second-person pronouns to address people who are not actually receiving the letter. Stulac is correct in saying that James uses the word “the rich” in a consistently negative way, but this is probably because the rich James is addressing are not rich unbelievers outside the church but rich believers who are oppressing their poor brothers and thus in danger of the eschatological judgment. Stulac acknowledges that there were rich believers in the church as referenced in 2:2.¹²

⁷ George M. Stulac, *James* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 192. Allison notes that this is the interpretation of most commentators though he himself does not agree with it (204–6).

⁸ Stulac, *James*, 192. Also Dan McCartney, *James* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 192–93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193; McKnight does not see the rich in 2:2 as potential or new converts but as unbelievers: “There is considerable doubt that the fancy dresser in 2:2 is actually part of the messianic community since messianic and non-messianic Jews might have assembled in the same synagogue” (*Letter of James*, 85). McKnight thinks James is probably referring to the priestly establishment when he speaks of the rich (85–87). Allison holds that the setting is not a worship service but a court for a legal dispute, and the rich man is an unbelieving Jew (*James*, 389).

¹¹ Stulac, *James*, 195.

¹² *Ibid.*, 197. Also, Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 108.

3. *Jeremiah and Jesus as backgrounds to James 1:10–11.* Many scholars believe that James knew Jer 9:23–24, which includes instructions for the rich not to boast in their riches but in the Lord. If so, James would have had the rich in his community in mind, not rich outsiders, just as Jeremiah 9 is instructing the rich among God’s people, not outsiders. In early Jewish literature, Jer 9:23–24 was regularly used to cause God’s people to reevaluate their understanding of wisdom, strength, and riches and to warn about God’s judgment on those who trust in them.¹³ Since the target audience of the early Jewish literature was God’s people, not Gentiles, and James seems to be alluding to Jer 9:23–24 in Jas 1:10–11, it is highly likely that James is also warning the rich among his readers, not outsiders.¹⁴ This is also consistent with other texts such as Jas 2:1–7 and 4:13–17 which tell the readers not to be allured by wealth. James also may have in mind Jer 9:25–26, which states that God will punish those who are circumcised merely in the flesh but uncircumcised in the heart along with the pagan nations. This precisely describes those still unregenerate inside the believing community—false believers.

When he warns the rich, James is also faithfully reflecting the teachings of Jesus. Jesus pronounced woe to the rich (Luke 6:24), told the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor in order to follow Jesus (Matt 19:21), and said it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Mt 19:26). The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21) demonstrates the deceitfulness and danger of riches, and James’s words are similar regarding the fate that awaits the rich. Thus, in his epistle, James seems to be pronouncing the truth he received from Jesus.¹⁵

4. *Diverse socio-economic backgrounds of James’s audience.* Warden rejects the view that the author thinks of the rich in 1:9–11 as part of the community of believers on the grounds that the author’s later statements in 2:6–7 and 5:1 become incomprehensible.¹⁶ The author is clearly on the side of the poor and asserts that the rich will perish like the flower of the grass.¹⁷ Thus, Warden rules out the possibility that the rich were among the readers. However, it is far from certain that there were no rich believers among James’s readers, especially when false believers are taken into account.¹⁸ Paul writes as though the Corinthian believers were drawn largely from the poorer classes, but that does not mean that rich persons were not in the congregation. The church in Jerusalem, though generally poor, also had wealthy believers—such as Barnabas, Ananias, and Sapphira—with means to provide for the

¹³ H. H. Drake Williams, “Of Rags and Riches: The Benefits of Hearing Jeremiah 9:23–24 within James 1:9–11,” *TynBul* 53 (2002): 281.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 36.

¹⁶ Duane Warden, “Rich and Poor in James: Implications for Institutionalized Partiality,” *JETS* 43 (2000): 249.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸ Mitton, *Epistle of James*, 39. Dibelius entertains this possibility when he states, “but if [James] was thinking here of Christians as well, then these are people whom he considers no longer to be included in a proper sense with Christendom” (Martin Dibelius, *James* [rev. Heinrich Greeven; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], 87–88).

whole community (Acts 2:44–45; 4:34). According to Meeks, there was a large number of Christians from higher social classes, and the church, like the larger society, was stratified.¹⁹

Thus, Warden fails to take into consideration the fact that NT churches had members who came from diverse social backgrounds including the rich, as Meeks, Theissen, and others have argued.²⁰ When the author condemns the rich, he is following the footsteps of the OT prophets who condemned the rich that oppressed the poor among the people of God (Micah 2:2; 3:1b–2; cf. Deut 15:7–11; 24:14–15) and of Jesus who also had strong words against the rich who did not help the poor (e.g. Luke 16:19–31). It would be difficult to maintain that the OT prophets and Jesus primarily directed their condemnation to the Gentiles, not to the rich among God's people who were the recipients of the prophetic messages. It would also be difficult to sustain the argument, as Warden does, that James does not deal with the possibility that at least some of the rich landowners were believers.²¹ Consequently, there is a long history that supports the rich in 1:10–11 as referring to Christian believers.²²

Therefore, it is highly likely that James is addressing an audience with various social levels including the rich and is calling on them to care for the poor (2:14–17) which itself is an evidence that some had the means to do so.²³ In short, in 1:10,

¹⁹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 52–53.

²⁰ See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 51–55, who also references other scholars who hold the same view.

²¹ Warden, “Rich and Poor in James,” 251.

²² Williams, “Of Rags and Riches,” 273–82. Williams cites these sources: J. B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 62–66; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary* (1st ed.; TNTC 16; Leicester, UK: IVP, 1985), 68–69. Williams also references for comparison the following sources: J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James. The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Comments* (repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 45–46; F. Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (HTKNT 13/1; Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 74; J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916), 145–46.

²³ Batten, “Rotting Riches,” 41. Some concede that there were some wealthy individuals coming into the church as new converts (2:2; 4:13) but argue that James avoids calling them “the rich” and reserves the term “the rich” as a uniformly offensive term referring to the non-Christian rich who are the enemies of the church. They do not seem to consider that James may be addressing the rich inside the church who are oppressing the poor brothers. Painter sees the critique of the rich in 5:1–6 as an indication that James is reluctant to speak of the rich as brothers and that is why he avoids the endearing term where it might have been used (John Painter, *James* [Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012], 70). Those who argue that the rich in 1:10–11 are non-Christians maintain that the absence of the word “brother” in 1:10 is deliberate. Only the eschatological judgment awaits the rich (1:11), and the rich in 2:6–7 and 5:1–6 are unbelievers.

In response, it is worth pointing out that in 2:14–26, a passage that clearly deals with those who are in the church and claim to have faith but without salvific faith (see especially 2:14), James similarly avoids using the word “brother” or “believer” to refer to someone who claims to have faith but has no works. (However, in other passages the rich are addressed as believers or brothers [1:10–11; 5:1–6] because James is not dealing with their salvific status but addressing them as members of a believing community.) Thus, when James addresses the rich, he seems to have in mind primarily those false believers inside the church who do not have saving faith. Nystrom correctly observes, “It is possible that the ‘rich’ in James includes wealthy members of the Christian community whose pattern of life gave little or no evidence of Christian commitment, thereby disqualifying them from true membership” (Da-

James seems to be addressing rich professing believers who are in the church, not rich unbelievers outside the church.²⁴ Though it is possible that there were godly, rich believers in James's community, he does not seem to have them in mind since he is addressing the situation in which the rich believers are oppressing their poor brothers.²⁵

II. DENUNCIATION OF THE UNREGENERATE FALSE BELIEVERS IN JAMES

1. *Test of faith as unifying theme of James.* James 1:22 states, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."²⁶ Brosend argues that this is a thesis statement of the letter of James and the remainder of the letter is the exploration and application of this thesis.²⁷ In this thesis statement is the warning against self-deception of a hearer of the Word and not a doer, of having a religion that is empty and foolish.²⁸ Hiebert cites other scholars such as McNeile and Lenski approvingly as they argue that the central theme of the letter of James is the need for genuine faith which manifests itself in life.²⁹ James's purpose is to urge his readers to test their own faith by the criterion that faith without works is useless (2:20).³⁰ James provides a series of tests for the readers to determine the genuineness of their faith.³¹ "The testing of your faith' (1:3) seems to be the key which James left hanging at the front door, intended to unlock the contents of the book."³² Hiebert also affirms that "*tests of living faith* is indeed the unifying theme of the epistle and ... provides ready access to its contents."³³

vid P. Nystrom, *James* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997], 55). I believe such people are primarily the ones James has in mind when he addresses the rich in his letter. In sum, it seems best to see the rich in James as rich believers inside the church—primarily false believers.

²⁴ In his letter, James sharply rebukes those who had the means of helping the poor brothers but did so with only empty words (2:15–16). James declares that such people do not have saving faith (2:17–26) even if they think they do (2:14). James then has a reason to be concerned about the eternal destiny of those who considered themselves believers but whose faith was no better than that of the demons because their alleged faith did not yield works that demonstrated saving faith (2:19; cf. 1:22).

²⁵ Scholars seem to be in consensus regarding the *Sitz im Leben* of Palestine before AD 70 in holding that the majority of the population there consisted of peasants subsisting on a small plot of land. Continued poor harvests and the economic power of rich landowners frequently forced them off their lands to eventually become hired hands and be subjected to economic exploitation by the wealthy. Seneca addresses the problem of large landowners dominating the economic scene of the first century (see Dirk G. van der Merwe, "Rich Man, Poor Man in Jerusalem according to the Letter of James," *Acta patristica et byzantina* 21.1 [2010]: 22–29).

²⁶ Bible quotations are from the ESV unless indicated otherwise.

²⁷ William F. Brosend, *James and Jude* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ D. Edmond Hiebert, "Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James," *BSac* 135.539 (1978): 223.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 224.

In James, faith is tested by its response to the word of God (1:19–27), its reaction to partiality (2:1–13), its production of works (2:14–26), its production of self-control through a controlled tongue (3:1–18), its reactions to worldliness (4:1–5:12), and its resort to prayer (5:13–18).³⁴ The word of God is the means of regeneration in James (1:18), but hearing the word must be followed by continued obedience to the word (1:22–27); otherwise the hearing is useless (1:22–25). True obedience to the word must reveal itself in the power to control the tongue (1:26) and beneficial social activity and personal purity (1:27).³⁵ The rich James is rebuking in his letter are those who have failed in these tests by oppressing the poor and refusing to help them.

2. *Self-deception of those who fail to do the word.* Davids argues, correctly in my view, that anyone who thinks receiving the word means less than doing the word deceives himself when he thinks he received the word—he is self-deceived about his salvation.³⁶ Stulac supports this view based upon James's own choice of analogy in 1:23–24.³⁷ The analogy shows that the hearer of the word who does not do what it says is like a man who sees his reflection in the mirror and goes away without doing anything about it. James is warning the readers not to be self-deceived about their very salvation.³⁸ To persist in sin which kills (1:15) and claim salvation from death is self-contradictory and self-deceiving.³⁹ The rich James condemns in his letter stand guilty as charged in this regard.

Moo argues that in 1:22 James is showing his dependence on Jesus's teaching (e.g. Luke 11:28).⁴⁰ No one emphasized as strongly as Jesus the need for people touched by God's grace to respond with radical, world-renouncing obedience.⁴¹ People who merely listen to the word deceive (*παραλογιζόμενοι*) themselves (1:22). The same verb is used by Paul in Col 2:4 about false teachers who deceive people by fine-sounding arguments. In both of these contexts, the idea of "deceive" clearly conveys the meaning of being blinded to the reality of one's true religious state: thinking that they are right with God when they really are not.⁴² Moo suggests that those who hear the word and attend church or seminary, or even those who teach as seminary professors but do not "do" it should be all included in this group and are mistaken when they think they are right with God.⁴³ God's Word cannot be divided, and those who fail to do the word, even if they want the benefits of its saving power, have not truly accepted God's word at all.⁴⁴ I believe the rich James is addressing in his letter fit into this category perfectly and that is why James does

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 225–31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁶ Davids, *James*, 97.

³⁷ Stulac, *James*, 74.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Moo, *James*, 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

not have anything positive to say about them and instead issues such dire warnings against them.⁴⁵

3. *The rich who oppress the poor as false believers.* In 2:6, James mentions the rich are “the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court.” The legal action was probably over issues of debts, wages, and pledges.⁴⁶ The verb *καταδυναστεύω* (“oppress”) in 2:6 is used elsewhere in the NT to mean “to oppress, exploit, dominate” (Acts 10:38), and in the LXX it is used of socio-economic oppression (e.g. Deut 24:7; Jer 7:6; Ezek 18:7; Amos 4:1; 8:4; Zech 7:10), especially the oppression of the poor, widows and orphans.⁴⁷ Vyhmeister takes the rich in 2:6 as a part of the defective Christians, or false believers, in the congregation who oppress their brethren by offensive tongues (3:5–6), jealousy and strife (3:14–15), boastfulness (4:13–17), or failure to pay just wages (5:1–6).⁴⁸

McKnight thinks that the behaviors of the rich in 2:6–7 are wholly inconsistent with following Jesus Christ and thus they should be considered non-messianic Jews.⁴⁹ Earlier in his discussion of the identity of the rich in 2:3–4, McKnight had concluded that “the evidence is not clear enough to render a confident verdict. I suspect James is casting into bold relief the behavior of Christians toward one another, but his emphasis is on the behavior of those who claim to have faith, not on the religious status of those to whom they are showing partiality.”⁵⁰ Those who claim to have faith but whose behavior reveals them to be otherwise precisely fit the description of false believers. McKnight decides that the rich in 2:6–7 should be distinguished from the rich in 2:3–4 and considered non-messianic Jews even though there is no clear textual evidence to support such distinction.⁵¹

However, would professing believers, albeit defective ones, really blaspheme God’s name (2:7)? After all, they would still consider themselves genuine believers. Yet, it is by their conduct the rich can and do blaspheme God’s name. As Beyer puts it, “Any bad or unloving action can contain [blasphemy], either because it resists the holy will of God or because it causes the enemies of Christianity to calumniate it (1 Tm. 6:1; Jm. 2:7; R. 2:24; Tt. 2:5).”⁵² Martin translates the phrase “blaspheming the honorable name” as “bringing Jesus’ name into disgrace.”⁵³ Thus it is not necessary to see the rich in 2:6–7 as unbelievers outside the church just because they are said to blaspheme Jesus’s name. In 2 Pet 2:2, the way of the truth is said to

⁴⁵ This does not mean that he sees no possibility of salvation for them, as I will later argue.

⁴⁶ Van der Merwe, “Rich Man, Poor Man in Jerusalem according to the Letter of James,” 27.

⁴⁷ Nancy J. Vyhmeister, “The Rich Man in James 2: Does Ancient Patronage Illumine the Text?,” *AUSS* 33 (1995): 265–83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ McKnight, *Letter of James*, 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 142. Allison comments that such distinction hardly commends itself as there is no textual warrant for it. Not only is it unnatural but also 2:6a is left without antecedent if it is separated from 2:2–4 (*James*, 376).

⁵² Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, s.v., “βλασφημία,” *TDNT* 1:621–25.

⁵³ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 66.

be blasphemed because of false teachers among the Christians. In Rom 2:24, Paul says that the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the way Jewish people violated their own laws. These verses make it clear that blaspheming God's name can be done by the conduct of God's people. James then seems to be calling out the rich false believers in 2:6–7 as those who blaspheme Jesus's name by oppressing their poor brothers.

In 2:13, when James says that judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, he is looking back at the two groups mentioned in 2:1–7: those who are guilty of partiality and the rich who are oppressing the poor and thus blaspheming God's name. But James is also looking forward to those in 2:14–26 who only help the poor with empty words but with no action and thus fail to demonstrate their alleged faith. In sum, James is addressing an audience that includes those who prove to be unregenerate though they profess faith, and one prominent group among them are the rich false believers who oppress their poor brethren.

III. JAMES'S REBUKE OF TWO DIFFERENT CLASSES OF PEOPLE IN THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY IN 4:13–5:6

When James tells the readers to be patient and not grumble against one another waiting for the judgment of the Lord in 5:7–11, the context suggests complaints were directed against the merchants and the rich landowners of the church. In 5:9, James plainly states the complaints were directed to one another in the church, not to outsiders (“Do not grumble against one another, brothers”). Still, many commentators take 5:1–6 as addressing unbelievers outside the church, even though there is little disagreement among the commentators that James is addressing Christian merchants in 4:13–17.⁵⁴ Therefore, we will take a closer look at 5:1–6 and make a case that James has rich false believers in mind in this passage.

1. *Why many scholars view the referents in 5:1–6 as outsiders.* Davids sees the landholding class that is denounced in 5:1–6 as clearly being outside the messianic community.⁵⁵ He sees the concept of the passage as that of “the late Jewish denunciation of the rich built upon the prophetic condemnation of the wicked who were rich.”⁵⁶ Mayor states that there were rich members of the church as seen in 1:10; 2:2; 4:13, but sees the brethren in 5:7 as opposed to the rich here and concludes that 5:1 refers to unbelievers (though still applicable to all who follow in their foot-

⁵⁴ McKnight is an exception as he argues that James has unbelieving Jews in mind in 4:13–17 partially because he sees the connection between 4:13–17 and 5:1–6 (*Letter of James*, 247). Allison holds that James is addressing the letter to the Jewish diaspora (1:1) including both messianic and non-messianic Jews, and the rich James rebukes are all non-Christian Jews (*James*, 647–48).

⁵⁵ Davids, *James*, 174; also, Martin, *James*, 175; McKnight, *The Letter of James*, 254. Commenting on 5:6 where the rich are described as having murdered the righteous person, McKnight acknowledges that though he leans toward the view that the rich are unbelieving outsiders, it is far from clear since there were violent people inside the messianic community also (265).

⁵⁶ Davids, *James*, 175. Peck views 5:1–6 as unique in that it is not addressed to anyone in the church but entirely to people outside—the rich who are on the verge of destruction. See George Peck, “James 5:1–6,” *Int* 42 (1988): 291–96. Peck holds that James is not exhorting members of a congregation in this passage but making a statement about “God’s view of things in the community at large.”

steps).⁵⁷ Both Davids and Mayor seem to assume that since the rich James is addressing are denounced by God, they must be outsiders since God would not condemn believers to eternal judgment. Such an assumption leaves no room for rich false believers in the church.

Stulac lists fourfold evidence for the view that in 5:1–6 James is rhetorically addressing unbelievers who are not receiving the letter: (1) James does not call them brothers in the passage; (2) James refrains from any specific Christian address and employs his specific label “the rich people”; (3) there is no instruction or exhortation but thorough condemnation with no chance for redemption; (4) this is in keeping with many OT passages condemning rich oppressors and affirming their needy, righteous victims (Pss 109:31; 146; Isa 5:22–24; Amos 2:6–7).⁵⁸ Stulac sees two purposes for this passage: (1) to encourage the suffering Christians with the fact that judgment will come upon the rich so they may leave the judgment to God and persevere in righteousness without envying the rich; (2) to warn that judgment does come upon such sin, so they avoid becoming materialistic themselves.⁵⁹ However, none of these points disproves the rich James is addressing are inside the church, not outside, just as the rich oppressors that the OT prophets condemned were not the Gentiles outside of Israel but the insiders of Israel. Therefore, there are commentators who view 5:1–6 as at least including the rich believers.⁶⁰ Acknowledging that some wealthy persons may be part of the church to which he writes, Martin rightly raises the question about why James would decide to include the indictment of the rich (5:1–6) in a letter to be read only to church members if the rich he is addressing are outsiders.⁶¹

2. *James’s view of the rich.* How did James view the rich within the church? James has nothing positive to say about them because he is not addressing rich believers as a whole but only rich false believers. They pursue worldly things (1:11); receive preferential treatment in the assembly (2:4); oppress the believers and drag them into the court (2:6); blaspheme Jesus’s name by their conduct (2:7); and defraud, condemn and murder the righteous (5:4–6). It seems that 2:7 is referring to the rich as a part of those in the congregation who manifest who they truly are—false believers—by their speech and conduct (3:8–16). James equates those who curse their brothers to salt ponds that cannot produce fresh water (3:11). They have jealousy and selfish ambition that is demonic in its source and manifests vile practices

⁵⁷ Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*, 153.

⁵⁸ Stulac, *James*. Similarly, Laws, while noticing that the opening of 5:1–6 is identical with that of the previous section, sees striking contrasts between the two sections, the greatest of which is that, unlike the previous section, in 5:1–6 James uses language which is prophetic in tone and not in the author’s style and pronounces sweeping denunciation of the rich leaving them no chance to repent in a fashion similar to that of the Lukan “woes” (Sophie Laws, *The Epistle of James* [BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1980], 196–97).

⁵⁹ Stulac, *James*, 163.

⁶⁰ For example, Painter holds that though the rich in 5:1–6 are largely outsiders, both those inside and outside the circle of communities are in view (*James*, 160). Also Patrick J. Hartin, “‘Come Now, You Rich, Weep and Wail ...’ (James 5:1–6),” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 84 (1993): 59.

⁶¹ Martin, *James*, 176.

(3:14–16). James speaks about those who wish to be friends with the world and thus make themselves enemies of God (4:4). In 4:8–10, James summons the sinners who are double-minded and laugh in pride, to mourn, weep, and humble themselves. This is similar to the warning issued in 5:1, except that 5:1–6 specifically targets the rich. When in 5:3 James says their gold and silver have corroded, it reminds the readers of James's words in 1:11 that the rich will fade away in the midst of his pursuits (cf. 4:13–14). Therefore, the rich James is mainly focusing on throughout his letter seem to be a part of those who claim to have faith but fail to show it by their conduct (2:14).⁶²

3. *Moo's interpretation of 5:1–6.* Moo duly notes the connection of 5:1–6 to its preceding passage (4:13–17) and following passage (5:7–11), both of which address the church, and yet concludes that 5:1–6 addresses the unbelievers because no deliverance is promised to them.⁶³ It is not clear whether Moo considers the possibility that James may be addressing the rich unregenerate members of the church even though James specifically addresses the problem of non-salvific faith in 2:14–26. The argument that since non-Christians are addressed in 5:1–6, the passage must be referring to those outside the believing community ignores the clear evidence in the epistle of James for the existence of false believers in the church and the rich complexity of the makeup of the Christian believing community from the very beginning until the present day. The reality is that the believing community has almost always been a mixture of genuine and false believers, regenerate and unregenerate, wise virgins and foolish virgins as in Jesus's parable in Matt 25:1–13.

Moo points out that “the rich” bears not only an economic sense but a theological one as well and in 5:1–6 is used to refer to those who are not only wealthy but also using their wealth in a sinful way, including selfish accumulation of money and possessions.⁶⁴ He concludes that James is pronouncing judgment against the rich outsiders here so that his readers would not envy their fortune and bear the wrongs they were suffering, knowing that God is their avenger.⁶⁵ However, exhort-

⁶² Asking how Christians could have fallen into such a state as described in 5:1–6, Richardson points out that James had already shown how friendship with the world is a constant temptation for believers who do not resist the deeper temptation of envy as envy creates its own worldview that justifies and rationalizes the evil consequences of any act to secure more wealth. See Kurt A. Richardson, *James* (NAC 36; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 203.

⁶³ Moo states: “This section is closely related to 4:13–17 both in style—the two are introduced with the imperatival *age nyn, Come now*—and in content—a pursuit of wealth that disregards God and his purposes in history is condemned in both. But the prominence of the eschatological consummation ties 5:1–6 closely to 5:7–11 also. If 4:13–17 is directed both to the church and to the world, and 5:7–11 clearly to the church, 5:1–6 unmistakably addresses non-Christians. This is clear both from the many biblical and extrabiblical traditions concerning unrighteous wealth that James utilizes, and from James' failure to hold out any prospect of deliverance for those whom he condemns in this paragraph. . . . James proceeds to announce the condemnation of these rich landholders (v. 1) and justifies their condemnation on the grounds of their selfish hoarding of wealth (vv. 2–3), their defrauding of their workers (v. 4), their self-indulgent lifestyle (v. 5) and their oppression of ‘the righteous’ (v. 6)” (*James*, 159).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 211. Moo's logic is that James cannot be pronouncing judgment on all rich people since James's congregation also has rich people and they, being believers, would not be eternally condemned and therefore James must be addressing the unrighteous rich outside the church in 5:1–6. However,

ing the poor believers not to envy the rich and to bear the wrongs do not seem to be the only purpose of 5:1–6. If there are rich false believers in the congregation, as I have been arguing, then James is also very concerned about their eternal destiny and the judgment they will face. They need to mourn and weep, turn their laughter to mourning, and their joy to gloom. They need to humble themselves before the Lord; then he will exalt them (4:9–10). James holds out hope even for those he calls “adulterous people” (4:2–4). God gives more grace (4:6) to those who seem to be pursuing friendship with the world (4:4), only if they humble themselves before the Lord in repentance (4:6–10).

How about Moo’s objection that James does not hold out any prospect of deliverance to the rich in 5:1–6? Just because there is no explicit call for repentance, it does not have to mean that repentance is ruled out. One reason James does not give any words of promise to the rich false believers in 5:1–6 may be that such a promise had already been issued in 4:6–10 addressing the wider group of unregenerate believers. Also, as Painter points out, in Jonah’s message to Nineveh there was no call for repentance, only a proclamation of impending judgment (Jonah 3:4); however, when the people repented, God had mercy on them.⁶⁶ Repentance is always a possible outcome when imminent judgment is announced.⁶⁷ Besides, why would James preach the message of denunciation of non-Christians in a letter addressed to the church? Moo answers by quoting Calvin who opined that James is exhorting the believers to be patient, knowing the final outcome of the rich oppressors.⁶⁸ However, if James is exhorting the believers, one wonders why James did not directly address the believers. There is no other place in the letter where James addresses anyone other than his readers. Therefore, it is more natural to read 5:1–6 as addressing the rich oppressors who are in the audience. As Moo himself admits, 1:10 implies the presence of rich Christians among James’s readers.⁶⁹

As Moo correctly points out, the hoarding of wealth demonstrates false priorities and deprives others of their very life—another instance in which failing to do good is sin (4:17).⁷⁰ Thus, just as 4:17 is directed to the believing merchants in the church, 5:2–3 is directed to the rich landowners.⁷¹ There is little ground to argue that, while the merchants addressed in 4:13–17 are insiders, the landlords in 5:1–6 must be outsiders. It is better to see both groups as inside the believing community who are in pursuit of worldly gains and, in the process, are either neglecting the

Moo is ruling out the group of people that James clearly posits in his letter—the professing false believers in the church including the rich who are oppressing their poor fellow believers.

⁶⁶ Painter, *James*, 153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 159.

⁶⁹ Moo, *James*, 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷¹ This is further supported by the fact that in first-century Palestine the division of work between landlord and merchant was not as developed as in later centuries as commerce and farming were directly linked in such a way that the landlords brought their goods to the market and dominated the market (Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 87–88).

poor (in the case of the merchants) or actively abusing and oppressing them (in the case of the landowners).

4. *The nature of the judgment in 5:1–6.* What is the nature of the judgment in 5:1–6? James's words, "you have hoarded wealth in the last days" (5:3), are ironic. Believers are commanded by Jesus to lay up their treasures in heaven, but the earthly treasures these rich believers have laid up will witness against them in the final judgment. That James describes the coming judgment as the time of the reversal of fortunes and the day of slaughter for which the rich have fattened themselves (5:5b) suggests that the rich believers do not realize that the impending final judgment will be the time of their judgment, not deliverance, even as they are selfishly and ignorantly hoarding and spending wealth for themselves.⁷² They are self-deceived about their salvific status and do not realize that their profession of faith is no better than that of the demons (2:19).

A similar concept to 5:5 is found in Isa 6:9–10, a passage cited by several NT authors (Matt 13:15; Acts 28:27; cf. Rom 11:8; John 12:40), and James's mention of the fattening of the heart seems to similarly refer to making oneself ignorant and uncomprehending.⁷³ James already warned against a self-deceived heart whose faith is useless (1:26). James exhorts the brothers to establish their hearts in preparation for the day of judgment (5:8–9). For the rich who are fattening their hearts, the day of judgment will be a day of slaughter (5:5).⁷⁴ James's words in 5:5 and 1:26 combined would be applicable to those in the community who only pay lip service to the poor but in reality oppress and abuse them and thus are denounced by James as having dead faith though they themselves claim to have faith (2:14–17).

5. *The meaning of "murdered the innocent one."* When in 5:6 James charges the rich as having "condemned and murdered the innocent one," this brings to mind James's words in 2:6b, "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?" Thus, Davids sees 5:6 as addressing "judicial murder," James's moral estimate of the result of the judicial process, "an evaluation made repeatedly of the legal assaults of the rich on the poor in the Jewish piety-poverty tradition."⁷⁵

Davids interprets 5:6b as James posing a question, "Does he not resist you?" meaning that the poor resists the rich by calling for justice before God's throne because a parallel exists in Rev 6:9–11 where saints make such accusations against their persecutors.⁷⁶ Byron also takes it as a question, unable to comprehend that

⁷² The expression "the day of slaughter" is found in Isa 30:25 where the day of the Lord is pictured and in 1 En. 90:4 which has many parallels to Jas 5:1–6 (Moo, *James*, 165).

⁷³ Laws, *Epistle of James*, 203.

⁷⁴ At the same time, James is calling the rich oppressors to repentance realizing their dire fate at God's judgment seat (cf. 4:6–10).

⁷⁵ Davids, *James*, 179; also, Painter, *James*, 156; Martin, *James*, 181. Meynard-Reid sees the murder as the economic oppression of the poor by the rich (*Poverty and Wealth in James*, 93).

⁷⁶ Davids, *James*, 180.

James would be stating that the poor do not resist the rich.⁷⁷ In fact, as Maynard-Reid points out, in first-century Palestine, many poor peasants, oppressed, and unjustly treated by the rich landowners, turned to brigandage and highway robbery for retaliation.⁷⁸ Zealots were “not only involved in civil and social revolt against Rome but also in social and economic revolt against the local, ruling rich class that they saw as their political, social, economic, and national enemy.”⁷⁹

However, such an interpretation seems unlikely since James does not condone a violent solution and is telling his readers not to respond in this way but to leave the judgment to the soon-coming Judge. Their non-resistance magnifies the guilt of the rich and embodies the patience 5:7–11 enjoins.⁸⁰ Therefore, Laws is probably correct in taking it as a statement in which James is speaking of the righteous as accepting the sufferings visited upon him.⁸¹ James immediately addresses the believers to be patient and not grumble, imitating the prophets and Job who exemplified patience in the midst of suffering (5:7–11). Hartin correctly observes, “The reaction of the innocent person is noteworthy. No matter what the rich do, the innocent person does not retaliate—he does not meet evil with evil. This surely is in accordance with the Gospel teaching of turning the other cheek (Mt 5:39).”⁸² This is also how James is telling the poor brothers in the congregation to respond to the oppression of the rich since the day of judgment will be the day of their vindication.⁸³

Thus, James is ending 5:6 by saying that the poor do not oppose the rich. This is also consistent with James’s instruction to the poor believers not to grumble against one another but patiently wait for the coming of the Lord (5:7–10). This makes perfect sense if the rich in 5:1–6 are those in the church. If the rich in 5:1–6 are taken as unbelieving rich outside the church, the command not to grumble against one another in 5:7–10 does not flow naturally from the rich oppressing the

⁷⁷ John Byron, “Living in the Shadow of Cain: Echoes of a Developing Tradition in James 5:1–6,” *NovT* 48 (2006): 273. McKnight also interprets 5:6b as an interrogative, “Does he not resist you?” and views their resistance expressed in crying out before the Lord (*Letter of James*, 266).

⁷⁸ Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 92.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* At the same time, Maynard-Reid acknowledges that many sought release by crying out to God and turning to spiritual messianic movements (93).

⁸⁰ Allison, *James*, 688.

⁸¹ Laws, *Epistle of James*, 207.

⁸² Hartin, “‘Come Now, You Rich, Weep and Wail ...’ (James 5:1–6),” 60.

⁸³ Byron comments on the identity of the righteous person in 5:6: “Suggestions for the identification of this righteous one have ranged from Jesus as the one executed by the Jewish aristocracy to James himself as the titular head of a righteous community under attack. The general consensus, however, is that the statement is not referring to a specific individual but is a collective singular used to describe all who are righteous, poor, and oppressed.” See Byron, “Living in the Shadow of Cain,” 262. Byron cites representatives of three interpretations: (1) Theophylact, *PG* 125:1184 as quoted in *ACCS* 11.55; Irenaeus *Haer* 18.3; and Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief*, 199, as scholars who hold that Jesus is in view; (2) K. Aland, “Der Herrnbruder Jakobus und der Jakobusbrief: Zur Frage eines urchristlichen Kalifats,” *TLZ* 69 (1944): 103; and Hegesippus in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.15, as those who think James is in view; (3) Ropes, *James*, 292; M. Dibelius and H. Greeven, *James* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 239; R. P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 182, as taking collective singular view. Byron himself argues that there may be a reference to Abel here (273).

poor in 5:1–6. Motyer rightly points out that there has been no period in church history when James's words to the rich in this passage would not apply to some church members.⁸⁴ "Come now, rich" in 5:1 parallels "Come now, you who say" in 4:13, and the referents in 4:13 are clearly believing merchants. The command to "weep and howl" are the same implicit summons to repentance, similar to that in 4:9 ("Be wretched and mourn and weep").⁸⁵ Though it is objected that there is no call to repentance and there is only future judgment pronounced on the rich in 5:1–6, the call to weeping can certainly be considered as a call to repentance and the references to the future judgment can be pronounced on those who are inside the church as well as those who are outside. In 5:1–6, James sounds very much like the OT prophets who pronounced condemnation against the rich who oppressed their poor neighbors.⁸⁶

IV. STRONG WARNINGS ISSUED TO THOSE WHOSE DEEDS AND WORDS SHOW SELF-DECEPTION

Commentators who take 5:1–6 as addressing rich unbelievers outside the church notice that James's command not to grumble against one another in 5:9 is seemingly intruding into the material.⁸⁷ Brosend notes Dibelius's objection that the warning in 5:9 disrupts the continuity.⁸⁸ Brosend's attempt to defend the continuity based on repeated uses of ἀδελφοί ("brothers") in verses 7, 9, and 10 is not convincing.

Moo, Martin, Allison, and others interpret the grumbling in 5:9, not as grumbling against the rich, but as taking it out on other brothers, grumbling to them and blaming them for the difficulties.⁸⁹ This interpretation is weak since it has to assume that the readers are not grumbling against the rich who are oppressing them, which is the most natural interpretation.⁹⁰ James 5:9 follows 5:7–8, which commands the readers to be patient. Patient about what? "Therefore" in 5:7 makes it clear that the readers are to be patient about the situation described in the previous passage in which the rich oppress the poor and the poor are not to resist them. There is no grammatical or contextual indication that 5:9 starts a new thought; rather, it continues the same topic of being patient and not grumbling against one another. In addition, when James instructs, "do not grumble against one another,

⁸⁴ Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Test of Faith* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1985), 164.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Moo points out that the word "rich" rarely occurs in the OT as a synonym for the wicked. In some of the intertestamental Jewish writings to which James is indebted, rich people are presented in such a carefully nuanced way that though they are prone to pride and exploitation of the poor, they can still be redeemed and are encouraged to honor God with their wealth (*Letter of James*, 66).

⁸⁷ Laws, *Epistle of James*, 213; Moo, *James*, 170; Martin, *James*, 192.

⁸⁸ Brosend, *James and Jude*, 143.

⁸⁹ Moo, *James*, 170; Martin, *James*, 192; Allison, *James*, 705.

⁹⁰ McKnight argues that, by grumbling against one another, James may be referring to a type of violence against the oppressors, whom he takes to be rich outsiders (*Letter of James*, 275). This only works if the audience consists of both messianic and non-messianic Jews, which is unlikely, as I argued above.

brothers, so that you may not be judged,” it is clear he is addressing the relational issues within the community. He is implying that the rich believers who oppress their poor brothers will be judged by God, but if the poor brothers grumble against them, then they too will face God’s judgment. Only God has the right to judge his people (4:11–12), and he will judge the grumblers as well as the oppressors (cf. 1 Cor 3:10–17; 2 Cor 5:10).⁹¹

When 5:1–6 is rightly seen as addressing the rich false believers in the community, the grumbling of 5:9 no longer appears to be an intrusion since James is commanding the believers not to grumble against the rich brothers who are oppressing them. They will be judged for their sins (5:1–6), but those who grumble against them will also be judged by the soon coming Judge (5:9). God alone is the judge, and he is the one who will either save or destroy the rich believers (4:12). James warns the rich oppressors about the coming judgment unless they repent, but those who are oppressed by them should not grumble against them but rather consider their trials as pure joy (1:2–4) trusting God and remaining faithful under trials (1:12), letting God be the judge of the rich oppressors.

V. CONCLUSION

Earlier, I mentioned that those who think that the rich in 1:9–11 are within the community tend to take the “heroic” view, maintaining that James is calling on the affluent to humble themselves and demonstrate a certain heroism in their loss of wealth, and others take the “ironic” view—the rich are outsiders and James is telling them to boast, ironically, in their own humiliation since they are facing doom. According to these views, if the rich person addressed is a believer, then James is exhorting that person not to boast in his wealth but in his identification with Christ and his people, which is a matter of humiliation in the eyes of the world. If he is an unbeliever, then James is using irony to depict his condemnation: the only thing they can boast about is the eschatological humiliation that is coming to them in the judgment.

This article has argued for a different approach that takes neither the heroic nor the ironic view but what can be described as a “warning” view: James is calling the rich false believers in the community whose deeds do not match their profession of faith to repentance and to turn from their worldly pursuits by producing works worthy of faith. Such works would include helping the poor, taming their tongues, and drawing near to God with single-mindedness so they may not be condemned but receive the crown of life given to those who love God (1:12). James 5:1–6 would be part of the warning given to rich false believers not to oppress and

⁹¹ Mayor, *Epistle of St. James*, 162. According to Mayor, Theodor Zahn thinks that the mention of “one another” shows that the rich oppressors must have been nominal Christians, though Mayor himself thinks that believers are urged to treat them as brothers not because they were Christians but because they were Jews since Jewish people treated and addressed each other as brothers.

abuse their poor brothers so they may avoid the eternal judgment when the Lord returns.⁹²

⁹² I would like to acknowledge Cassidy Clasen, Conner Flow, Sam Hardy, Jake Helton, Kayla Liggett, Tyler Marcum, and Chrissy Pak for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.