THE QUESTION

Did early Christians teach that being poor in spirit differs from simply being poor?

Asked by a THF member on April 9, 2026 · published November 9, 2026, updated November 11, 2026 · 7 numbered quotations · the 19 early Christian passages and 51 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-early-christians-teach-that-being-poor-in-spirit-differs-from-simply

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

Clement of Alexandria meant that the blessed poor in spirit are people whose hearts are free from greed, not people who are poor only because they could not get rich. He says the truly rich are rich in virtues and able to use every fortune devoutly and faithfully, so someone with money can be poor in spirit.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 5

The opposite is wealth carried in the soul

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement then gives the other side of the contrast. The person who is not blessed is the one who carries gold or land in his heart and always wants more. Such a soul is unclean because it is rich in lusts and worldly passions, so its heart is a field or a mine rather than set on God's kingdom.

1 “but the man who carries his wealth in his soul, who instead of God's Spirit carries gold or land in his heart, who is always making his possession unmeasured and constantly looking for more — bowed downward and shackled by the world's snares, being earth and bound to depart to earth — how can such a man yearn for and have a thought for the kingdom of heaven, a man bearing not a heart but a field or a mine, who must of necessity be found among the things he chose?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 17
(c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 7, page 6 Read it in the library ›

2 “But into an unclean soul the grace of God does not slip in. And that soul is unclean which is rich in lusts and is in travail with many worldly passions.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 16
(c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 4, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 2 OF 5

Clement names a true and false poverty

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement says there is true and false wealth, and in the same way a real poor man and one who is poor in name only. Being poor in spirit concerns what is truly a person's own. Being poor in worldly goods concerns outward things that are not truly his.

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3

"The man, then, who is truly and rightly rich is the one who is rich in virtues and able to use every fortune devoutly and faithfully, while the false rich man is the one who is rich according to the flesh and has shifted his life into outward possession — the kind that passes away and decays and now belongs to one and now to another, and in the end to no one whatever."

later in the same passage

"Again, in the same way, there is also a genuine poor man and another spurious one, poor in name only. The one is poor according to spirit — that is, in what is his own; the other is poor according to the world — that is, in what is foreign to him."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 19
(c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 5, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 3 OF 5

One person can be both poor and rich

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement says the rich young man went away sad because he did not grasp how one person can be both poor and rich. Salvation was hard for him, but not impossible, if he turned to the riches God teaches and learned to use earthly things rightly.

4

"Failing to understand these things in their proper sense, the man of much wealth and observance of the law — and not understanding how the same person can be both poor and rich, can have wealth and not have it, can use the world and not use it — went away gloomy and downcast."

later in the same passage

"Yet it was not impossible, even amid these things, to lay hold of salvation, if one should transfer himself from sensible wealth to the wealth grasped by the mind and taught by God, and learn to use indifferent things well and properly, and so press on toward eternal life."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 20
(c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 4 OF 5

Cyprian: Peter had no gold but was rich

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Cyprian, in the 3rd century, quotes Paul's call to possess and use this world as though not possessing or using it. He points to Peter, who had no silver or gold yet was rich in the grace of Christ, as a picture of being poor and rich at once.

5

“The apostle also warns us again and says, "Those who buy should live as though they did not buy, and those who possess as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as though they did not use it. For the form of this world is passing away."”

later in the same passage

“Peter also, to whom the Lord entrusted His sheep to be fed and guarded, on whom He placed and founded the Church, says that he has no silver or gold. But he does say that he is rich in the grace of Christ, and wealthy in his faith and virtue.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 13, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 5 OF 5

Others also define poverty by craving and virtue

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Minucius Felix calls Christian poverty a glory, and asks who can be poor if he does not crave what others have and is rich toward God. Lactantius says that in God's sight the poor are those without justice and the rich are those full of virtue.

6

“But that many of us are called poor, this is not our disgrace, but our glory. For just as the mind is weakened by luxury, so it is strengthened by frugality. And who can be poor if he is not in want, if he does not crave the possessions of others, if he is rich toward God? Rather, he is poor who, although he has much, desires more.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Minucius Felix,** *Octavius* 24 (c. 150–270 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 2, page 5 Read it in the library ›

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7 “No one is poor in the sight of God except the one who is without justice. No one is rich except the one who is full of virtues.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 15 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 14, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not explain Clement's wording in the original Greek, so the exact sense of his phrase rests on its context.
- They do not say that the materially poor are shut out from blessing; Minucius Felix even calls Christian poverty a glory.
- They do not settle why Matthew says poor in spirit while Luke says simply poor.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 19 early Christian passages and 51 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–19, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 20–38, in Bible order), then 32 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *19 passages from 8 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · source 1*

1 *Shepherd* And the poor man, being helped by the rich, intercedes for him, giving thanks to God for the one who gives him gifts. And he continues to care zealously for… [continues online] **read ›**

Minucius Felix, *c. 150–270 AD · source 2*

2 *Octavius* 24 (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** “yet who can be poor if he does not want, if he does not crave for the possessions of others, if he is rich towards God… [continues online] **read ›**

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Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 3–7*

3 *Stromata* 2.5 (on point 5) of one's resources, but by the increase of insatiable desire." For it is not small means that makes poverty, but insatiableness. Since the good man is free from that… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 16 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** "is he who is blessed by the Lord, and called poor in spirit, a meet heir of the kingdom of heaven, not one who could not live rich… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 19 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 3** "he is spuriously rich who is rich, according to the flesh, and turns life into outward possession, which is transitory and perishing, and now belongs to one, now to another… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 20 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "it was difficult for the soul not to be seduced and ruined by the luxuries and flowery enchantments that beset remarkable wealth… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 17 (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "also there is a richness in good things, and a richness in bad things, since we know that riches and treasure are not by nature separated from each other… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 8–9*

8 *To His Wife* 2.8 "such women, the churches seem too small. A rich man is hard to find in the house of God. And if one is found there, it is hard to find… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Against Marcion* 29 (1885 English) "repudiation of ambitious projects does poverty afford… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 10–11*

10 *Against Celsus* 21 (1885 English; on point 2) "the poverty which is the opposite of these riches is destructive, for by it the poor cannot bear rebuke… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Celsus* 16 (on point 3) a rich man. He would also have considered what meaning the narrow eye of a needle had for the one who saw that "strait and narrow is the way that… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 12–13*

12 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 4) "could they be prepared for, or at ease in, departing when their wealth fettered them like a chain… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 4** "riches, this wealth, she cannot possess, who had rather be rich to this world than to Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · source 14*

14 *Divine Institutes* 15 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 5** "one is rich, but he who is full of virtues… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 15–19*

15 *Homilies on Acts* (1885 English; on point 5) "neither does wealth make a man strong-minded, nor poverty make him weak: otherwise none of those living in wealth would pass a wretched life, nor would any of those… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Homilies on Philippians* man cared for his wife, his children, his daughters, and his household, and possessed great wealth. The other possessed nothing except a garment of hair. And why should I mention… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 13 (on point 5) riches or poverty; however, let us still see which is the more useful weapon. What defect then seems to belong to poverty? Lying. And what belongs to wealth? Pride, the… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Homily Against Publishing the Errors of the Brethren* 1 (on point 5) "good thing, and impiety an evil thing. Virtue is a good thing, and wickedness an evil thing. But wealth and poverty, in themselves, are neither one nor the other. By… [continues online] **read ›**

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19 *Homilies on Philippians* “and to receive every good thing. And for this reason, the rich man's eyes were fixed on no one else, but on that man alone who had once begged… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *19 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

20 **Job 15:29** He shall by no means grow rich, nor shall his possessions remain; he shall by no means cast a shadow on the earth, **read ›**

21 **Job 27:19** The rich man will lie down and will not continue; he has opened his eyes, and he is not. **read ›**

22 **Proverbs 10:15** The possessions of the rich are a strong city, but poverty is the ruin of the ungodly. **read ›**

23 **Proverbs 13:7** There are some who make themselves rich though they have nothing, and there are some who humble themselves amid great wealth. **read ›**

24 **Proverbs 13:8** A man’s own wealth is the ransom of his soul, but the poor man does not stand up under threats. **read ›**

25 **Proverbs 14:20** Friends will hate poor friends, but the friends of the rich are many. **read ›**

26 **Proverbs 18:23** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

27 **Proverbs 21:17** A needy man loves gladness, loving wine and oil to abundance; **read ›**

28 **Proverbs 22:16** He who oppresses the needy increases his own goods, yet he gives to the rich to his own loss. **read ›**

29 **Ecclesiastes 4:8** There is one alone, and there is no second; he has neither son nor brother. And there is no end to all his labor, and his eye is not satisfied with wealth. And for whom do I labor and deprive my soul of goodness? This also is vanity and an evil distraction. **read ›**

30 **Ecclesiastes 5:10** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

31 **Ecclesiastes 6:6** And though he has lived through the circuits of a thousand years and has not seen goodness, do not all go to one place? **read ›**

32 **Matthew 12:34** You offspring of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. **read ›**

33 **Luke 6:24** But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation. **read ›**

34 **Luke 16:19** Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. **read ›**

35 **Luke 18:23** But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was very rich. **read ›**

36 **Luke 18:34** They understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not understand the things that were said. **read ›**

37 **2 Corinthians 6:10** as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing all things. **read ›**

38 **1 Timothy 6:17** Charge those who are rich in this present age that they not be arrogant, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on the living God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy; **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *32 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 1:12

Matthew 5:3 · 7:14 · 10:42 · 11:28 · 13:54 · 18:20 · 19:5 · 19:23 · 19:24

Mark 6:2 · 10:8 · 10:23

Luke 6:20 · 8:18 · 12:42 · 18:24

John 1:9 · 7:15 · 8:32 · 14:27 · 15:5

Romans 15:19

1 Corinthians 1:26 · 7:29

2 Corinthians 12:9

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Galatians 2:5
Ephesians 5:19 · 5:31
Philippians 4:3
Colossians 3:16
Hebrews 7:2

Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Did early Christians teach that being poor in spirit differs from simply being poor?” on April 9, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY