THE QUESTION

What did early Christians mean by poor in spirit, and how did they use wealth?

Asked by a THF member on April 11, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 46 early Christian passages and 105 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-early-christians-mean-by-poor-in-spirit-and-how-did-they-use

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

Early Christians taught that being poor in spirit means humility, not simply having no money, since a poor person can still be proud or greedy. They treated wealth as God's gift for helping the needy, warned against greed, hoarding and giving from stolen gain, and asked each believer to give by ability.

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 8

Poor in spirit means humble, not just penniless

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

Archelaus explains that Jesus was not praising money trouble by itself. He defines the blessed poor as people free of pride who carry themselves with gentle humility.

1

"In that saying, however, Jesus did not mean those who are simply poor in worldly possessions, but those who are poor in spirit."

later in the same passage

"That is, those who are not burning with pride, but have the gentle and lowly attitudes of humility, and do not think of themselves more highly than they should."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Archelaus,** *Disputation with Manes* 1 (c. 270–300 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 34, page 8 Read it in the library ›

POINT 2 OF 8

The poor can still be rich in vices

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

Clement separates a true poor man from a false one. Real poverty is inward: being emptied of the passions that crowd the soul. A man with little money can still be full of them, and he must give those up to see God.

2

"Again, in the same way, there is also a genuine poor man and another spurious one, poor in name only."

later in the same passage

"Stand off from the foreign possessions present in your soul, so that, becoming pure in heart, you may see God" — which by another voice is to enter into the kingdom of the heavens."

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 12, page 7 Read it in the library ›

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POINT 3 OF 8

Outward poverty is blessed when chosen for righteousness

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

Clement does not throw out Luke's plain poor. He says both kinds can be blessed, but only when the poverty is borne or chosen for righteousness, by people who turned from worldly honor to seek the good.

3 “And blessed are the poor, whether in spirit or in outward circumstances, that is, if it is for righteousness' sake. He does not simply call the poor blessed, but those who have chosen to become poor for righteousness' sake.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 4.6 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 11, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Riches distract, so keep only what is enough

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

Hermas pictures Christians as people living in a foreign city who should not pile up land and buildings there. He also warns that a rich man's prayer grows weak because his riches pull his attention away from the Lord.

4 “Be careful, then: as one living in a foreign land, make no further preparations for yourself except what is enough; and be ready, when the master of this city comes to throw you out for disobeying his law, to leave his city and go to your own, and to obey your own law without trouble and with great joy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

5 “The rich man has much wealth, but he is poor in matters relating to the Lord, because he is distracted by his riches.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 5 OF 8

Almsgiving is the Lord's most repeated command

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

Cyprian says Christ urges nothing more often than giving to the poor and storing up treasure in heaven instead of trusting earthly goods. He goes on to cite the call to sell everything and follow Christ.

6 “Among His divine commands and heavenly teachings, He commands and urges nothing more often than that we should devote ourselves to giving alms, and not depend on earthly possessions, but instead store up heavenly treasures.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 24, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

Each believer gives according to his means

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

The Apostolic Constitutions ask every believer to give: the poor by fasting a day and setting the savings aside, those with extra by giving more. Chrysostom likewise praises the apostles' common stock but asks his hearers for at least a part, not all.

7 “But if anyone has nothing, let him fast for a day, set that amount aside, and arrange it for the saints. But if anyone has extra, let him minister more to them according to his ability.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 31, page 8** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

8 “They brought all their goods into the common stock. Now I do not require you to give all, but some part.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Second Timothy* (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 44, page 8** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 8

Greed makes money a rival master

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

Irenaeus defines mammon as wanting more than one should have. Chrysostom shows the clash in plain terms: Christ tells us to spare the poor, while greed tells us to take even from the naked.

9 “For mammon, in the Jewish language, also used by the Samaritans, means a covetous person who wants more than they should have.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 10, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

10 “Christ says, "Spare the poor." Mammon says, "Strip even the naked of the things they have."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Philippians* (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 42, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Giving from unjust gain is not real charity

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

Chrysostom warns that money gained by wrong cannot be cleaned up by giving some away. Cyprian blames famine on people who hoard grain and raise prices while the needy go without.

11 “By almsgiving, I do not mean what is supported by injustice, for that is not almsgiving, but cruelty and inhumanity. What good does it do to strip one person and clothe another?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on John* 73 (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 37, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

12 “You complain that less is now produced, as if what had already been produced were given to the needy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 30, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not set one rule about careers or income levels for every Christian.
- Some writers praise selling everything, while others ask believers to give a part, so the passages show a range rather than a single required amount.
- 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 46 early Christian passages and 105 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–46, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 47–50, in Bible order), then 101 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 *46 passages from 15 writers*

Barnabas, *c. 70–132 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistle of Barnabas* (1885 English; on point 7) “turn away him that is in want, who oppress the afflicted, who are advocates of the rich, who are unjust judges of the poor, and who are in every respect… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome, *c. 88–99 AD · source 2*

2 *Second Epistle* 16 (on point 5) earth will melt, like lead melting in fire. Then the hidden and open deeds of men will appear. Almsgiving, then, is good as repentance from sin. Fasting is better than… [continues online] **read ›**

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · sources 3–4*

3 *Shepherd* **Quote 5, page 3** “He offers very few confessions and intercessions to… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Shepherd* **Quote 4, page 3** return to his own city again. Foolish, unstable, and miserable man! Do you not understand that all these things belong to someone else and are under someone else’s authority… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 5*

5 *First Apology* (1885 English; on point 6) “who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to every one in need… [continues online] **read ›**

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · sources 6–8*

6 *Diatessaron* 8 (on point 1) “Matthew 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs” **read ›**

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7 *Diatessaron* 8 (on point 1) “Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the humble, for… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Diatessaron* 28 (1885 English; on point 4) “12:21 So is he that lays up treasures for himself, and is not rich in God… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 9–10*

9 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (on point 5) Keep the commandments”), the Lord, exposing his greed, said, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell all you have, and give to the poor; and come, follow me;” promising… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Heresies: Book III* **Quote 9, page 5** “the saying "You cannot serve two masters" is explained by Him: "You cannot serve God and mammon," recognizing God as God but mentioning mammon as something that exists. He does… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 11–16*

11 *Stromata* 4.6 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 3** “blessed are the poor, whether in spirit or in circumstance — that is, if for righteousness' sake… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 19 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** “that is poor in spirit, and that is the right thing, and he that is poor in a worldly sense, which is a different thing… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Instructor* 3.4 (on point 2) “it is said, "humbles a man," Proverbs 10:4. By poverty is meant that niggardliness by which the rich are poor, having nothing to give away… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 16 (1885 English; on point 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 ›**

15 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 20 (on point 2) 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… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 4 (on point 5) And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him, and said: 'One thing you… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 17–20*

17 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 12 (on point 7) “of heaven belongs to those who have only the soul treasured up. If we cannot serve God and mammon, can we be redeemed by both God and mammon? For who… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *On Patience* 7 (on point 7) the Lord did not seek after it either. Through the apostle, the Spirit of the Lord has declared covetousness to be a root of all evils. Let us not understand… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Against Marcion* 32 (on point 7) “when He saw the covetousness of the Pharisees… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *On Patience* 11 (1885 English; on point 1) “5:3 No one, assuredly, is poor in spirit, except he be humble… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 21–23*

21 *Commentary on Matthew* 11 (on point 8) who were able but unwilling to pay what they owed, they dedicated the debt to the account of the poor. For money was thrown into the treasury by those who… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Against Celsus* 56 (on point 7) set over the affairs of this world. For no man can serve two masters, and we cannot serve God and mammon, whether that name is used for one or for… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Against Celsus* 21 the letter of the law promises riches to the just, Celsus may follow the letter that kills and understand it as worldly riches, which blind men. But we say it… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 24–30*

24 *Treatises* **Quote 6, page 4** “alms, and not depend on earthly possessions, but instead store up heavenly treasures. He says, "Sell your goods, and give alms." Luke 12:33 And again: "Do not lay up… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 5) “Holy Spirit speaks by Solomon, and says, He that gives unto the poor shall never lack, but he that turns away his eye shall be in great poverty… [continues online] **read ›**

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26 *Treatises* (on point 5) help. He said, "Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you; and redeem your sins by almsgiving, and your unrighteousness by mercies to the poor, and God will… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Treatises* (on point 6) “was there any distinction among them, nor did they… [continues online] **read ›**

28 *Treatises* (on point 5) Holy Spirit speaks in the sacred Scriptures and says, “By almsgiving and faith sins are purged.” This certainly does not mean the sins that had already been contracted before, because… [continues online] **read ›**

29 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 6) “you have, my son, so do. If your substance is abundant, give alms of it the more… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *Treatises* **Quote 12, page 5** You who judge others, be for once a judge of yourself also. Look into the hiding places of your own conscience. No, since now there is not even any shame… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 31–32*

31 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 7, page 4** blood, so as to be made like Christ in His death for the adoption of children. For this reason, all you who are faithful must, through your bishop, minister to… [continues online] **read ›**

32 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 4) “being able to intercede with Him continuously on account that her mind and disposition run after money: for where the treasure is, there will the heart be also… [continues online] **read ›**

Commodianus, *c. 250–300 AD · source 33*

33 *Writings* (1885 English) “can healthful poverty do, unless wealth be present… [continues online] **read ›**

Archelaus, *c. 270–300 AD · source 34*

34 *Disputation with Manes* 1 **Quote 1, page 2** “us look again at the fact that in the Old Testament we find the words, "I make the rich man and the poor man… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 35–36*

35 *Divine Institutes* 4 (1885 English; on point 7) “he infuses into some insatiable avarice, that, being chained by their riches as by fetters, he may drive them from the way of truth… [continues online] **read ›**

36 *Divine Institutes* 5 (1885 English; on point 8) “God had given the earth in common to all, that they might pass their life in common, not that mad and raging avarice might claim all things for itself, and… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 37–46*

37 *Homilies on John* 73 **Quote 11, page 5** is defiled? Just as a man who throws dung into a pure fountain makes it all unclean, so also with riches: when anything wrongly gained enters in, it causes all… [continues online] **read ›**

38 *Homilies on Acts* (1885 English; on point 6) “let us now depict this state of things in words, and let all sell their possessions, and bring them into the common stock — in words, I mean: let none be… [continues online] **read ›**

39 *Homilies on Philippians* you want, come and find it among the disciples after the Master. One person showed virtue through poverty, another through riches; for example, Elijah through poverty, Abraham through riches. Go… [continues online] **read ›**

40 *Homilies on John* 8 (on point 7) But he who is earnest about the one must necessarily lose the other. "You cannot serve God and Mammon," He says in Matthew 6:24, "for you must hold to… [continues online] **read ›**

41 *Homilies on Matthew* 56 (1885 English; on point 8) “to this intent you have wealth, to relieve poverty, not to make a gain of poverty… [continues online] **read ›**

42 *Homilies on Philippians* **Quote 10, page 5** Christ Himself has declared that this is impossible. "You cannot," He says, "serve God and Mammon," and, "No man can serve two masters," Matthew 6:24, because they give us… [continues online] **read ›**

43 *Homilies on First Corinthians* 34 “kind of poverty, then, does He give, and what kind of wealth… [continues online] **read ›**

44 *Homilies on Second Timothy* **Quote 8, page 4** “brought all their goods into the common stock… [continues online] **read ›**

45 *Homilies on Matthew* 15 (1885 English; on point 1) “is meant by the poor in spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

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46 *Homilies on First Corinthians* 15 (on point 6) they went to them as to friends and relatives. For this is how they came to the woman who was a seller of purple, Acts 16:14, and she, like… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *4 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

47 **Matthew 5:10** Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **read ›**

48 **Matthew 6:19** Do not lay up treasures for yourselves on the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal; **read ›**

49 **Matthew 19:21** Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." **read ›**

50 **Luke 14:33** So therefore, any of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *101 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.

Exodus 20:12 · 29:41

Leviticus 20:9 · 25:23

Joshua 3:14

1 Chronicles 29:15

Psalms 26:2

Proverbs 3:3 · 3:12

Ecclesiastes 9:8

Isaiah 5:4 · 40:3

Jeremiah 17:10

Ezekiel 16:8 · 16:61

Matthew 4:9 · 4:10 · 5:3 · 5:4 · 5:5 · 5:8 · 5:9 · 5:11 · 5:32 · 5:40 · 6:20 · 6:21 · 7:12 · 7:15 · 8:10 · 10:10 · 10:32 · 10:39 · 10:42 · 15:4 · 15:5 · 22:21 · 23:2 · 23:13 · 23:25 · 23:27 · 25:34 · 25:40 · 26:57 · 27:29 · 27:34

Mark 2:19 · 10:17 · 12:33 · 12:41 · 12:42 · 14:5

Luke 3:11 · 6:29 · 10:19 · 12:42 · 16:9 · 16:11 · 16:12 · 16:13 · 16:14 · 16:15 · 16:16 · 16:17 · 19:15 · 21:3

John 1:12 · 12:5 · 12:6 · 12:25 · 15:5 · 19:17

Acts 4:34 · 8:20 · 24:26

Romans 2:29 · 8:32 · 12:3 · 15:19

1 Corinthians 7:18 · 15:32

2 Corinthians 2:15 · 13:3

Galatians 2:5 · 3:13 · 5:19

Ephesians 6:16

Philippians 3:20 · 4:3

1 Timothy 2:2 · 6:5 · 6:10 · 6:17

2 Timothy 2:5

Hebrews 4:15 · 11:13 · 12:5 · 13:14

James 1:27

1 Peter 2:11

Revelation 3:19

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY