

Proverbs 18:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The poor useth intreaties; but the rich answereth roughly.

Analysis

This proverb starkly contrasts communication styles of the poor and rich. 'The poor useth intreaties' (תַּחֲנוּמִים/tachanumim, supplications/pleas)—speaking humbly, appealing for favor and mercy. 'The rich answereth roughly' (אָצוֹת/azzot, harshly/fiercely)—speaking with arrogance and contempt. The observation is descriptive, not prescriptive—depicting fallen human behavior, not God's approval. Wealth often breeds pride and insensitivity; poverty often necessitates humility. James confronts this dynamic: 'Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?' (James 2:6). He condemns partiality that honors the rich while despising the poor (James 2:1-4). Jesus reversed these values: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3) and 'woe unto you that are rich!' (Luke 6:24). The incarnation itself demonstrates God's character—though infinitely rich, Christ 'became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). Believers must resist the world's pattern, treating all people with dignity regardless of economic status (James 2:9).

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern societies were hierarchical. Kings, nobles, and wealthy landowners exercised power over peasants, laborers, and slaves. The poor had minimal legal recourse against oppression. Job lamented: 'The poor of the earth hide themselves together' (Job 24:4). Prophets repeatedly condemned the rich for crushing the poor (Amos 8:4-6; Isaiah 3:14-15; Micah 2:2). However, the law protected the poor: prohibiting partiality in judgment (Exodus 23:3; Leviticus 19:15), requiring generous lending (Deuteronomy 15:7-11), and commanding

provision for the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). Jesus's ministry prioritized the marginalized—'the poor have the gospel preached to them' (Luke 7:22). The early church demonstrated radical economic sharing (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), and Paul organized relief offerings for impoverished believers (2 Corinthians 8-9).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does your speech reflect humility or arrogance, especially toward those with less power or resources?
2. In what ways does wealth—or the pursuit of it—tempt you toward insensitivity or contempt for others?
3. How can you imitate Christ's voluntary poverty and humble speech in a culture obsessed with status and self-promotion?

Interlinear Text

תַּחֲנוּגַּיִם	יֹדֵבֶר	כִּי	אֲשֶׁר	יֵעָנֶה	עֲזוֹת:
intreaties	useth	The poor	but the rich	answereth	roughly
H8469	H1696	H7326	H6223	H6030	H5794

Additional Cross-References

James 2:3 (Parallel theme): And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: