

Message #4

James 1:9-12

One of the greatest trials that will really test one's faith will be the trial of poverty versus the trial of prosperity. Both are big tests because we live in a very materialistic world. There is perhaps no trial any greater than this that will test whether or not we are double-minded.

In any culture in history there are those who could be classified as poor and those who could be classified as rich. The classification will be relative to the culture. Regardless of the culture, you will see it, you will think about it and you will not stop it. There will be the rich and the poor.

In any city you visit there will be the haves and the have nots. There will be the gated communities and there will be the trailer parks. It has always been this way and in this world that is the way it will always be.

Now if you are a believer, this is a test that will test you and it can eat at you. This is the kind of thing that will truly show the real mettle of your faith. This business of rich and poor is a very important Biblical theme.

For example, when Mary spoke after learning she was going to give birth to Jesus, she said, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones and has exalted those who were humble" (Luke 1:52).

When Jesus was here on earth, he often referred to the economic status as it relates to God.

When Jesus gave the beatitudes, he begins by saying, "Blessed are the poor" (Matt. 5:3).

When Jesus gave illustrations to people when He was here on earth, He often used the wealth and poverty issue. He used a parable of a "rich fool" (Luke 12:13-21). When Jesus spoke of eternity, He gave a story about the rich man who died and Lazarus a poor man who died (Luke 16:19-31).

The danger for the believer who is poor is to be so focused and so double-minded about what he doesn't have on earth, that he neglects what He does have in his relationship with God. A poor person can be a very greedy and covetous person. The danger for the believer who is rich is to be so focused on what he does have that he doesn't realize he will soon be in eternity and it will all be gone. Both poverty and wealth become tests of faith.

James was well aware of the fact that economic status can negatively influence one in regard to his relationship with God. Throughout this book he will bring up this point (2:1-7, 15-16; 5:1-6). In fact, this is a key theme of this epistle. James is writing to Grace Age Jewish believers who had been chased out of their homes by religious Pharisees who were claiming they were right with God. They had money. They had power. They had pomp and the poor Christians were struggling, some of whom did not even have a place to live. James says don't let their money fool you. Don't let their appearance of success get to you.

Keep your focus on the Lord and the crown. In fact, it is the poor who are rich in faith (James 2:5). It is not typically the rich who are rich in faith.

So in this text what James says is this:

REGARDLESS OF ONE'S ECONOMIC SITUATION, HE MUST KEEP HIS FOCUS ON ETERNITY BECAUSE THE ONE WHO DOES THAT WILL WIN THE CROWN AND BE BLESSED BY GOD.

Being poor does not automatically mean one is right with God and being rich does not automatically mean one is not right with God. It is one's attitude one has about God in their situation.

Money is an issue to every one of us and it can affect every one of us for three reasons:

- 1) It is often viewed as that which establishes personal worth.
- 2) It is often viewed as that which gives security. We live in a time when the news says many people live from paycheck to paycheck. So what? The point is, if you have a lot of money you have security. This is the way the world views it.
- 3) It often gives people an advantage over other people. Money gets you into the nice restaurants and can even get judicial decisions to fall your way.

But here is the reality of it. **No matter what one has or doesn't have, happiness is found by realizing we are spiritually rich and that has nothing to do with money.**

Now we think that both men described in these verses are believers. The poor man is a believer and the rich man is a believer. Perhaps there is no greater test of our spiritual condition than attitudes we have about our economic condition. For the poor person the threat is to lose sight of the wealth one has in a relationship with God. For the rich person the threat is to lose sight of the fact that the riches will soon be gone from his/her life.

There are two main trials that will test believers:

TRIAL #1 – The trial for the believer who is poor. **1:9**

It is wise for every believer to realize who saved us. We were chosen and saved by God and by His Word and will (1:18). So if you are poor, it was God who saved you. If you are rich, it was God who saved you.

Now the believer who is poor does find himself in “humble circumstances.” That word “humble” is often used in the Septuagint (Greek Translation of the Old Testament) to refer to the kind of person who has “little significance in the world's evaluation” (Craig Bloomberg, *James*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, pp. 54-55).

James uses different words in this epistle to describe a poor person. The word he uses here “humble” is one that refers to someone who is low and humiliated. It refers to one who is so poor that he/she is humiliated at times (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 440).

The other word James uses in this epistle (πτωχευω) refers to one who is so poor that one is at a beggar level (*Ibid.*, p. 393) (i.e. James 2:2, 5-6, 15-16).

When you are a believer and you are going to church and you don't have much and you look at people who seem to have everything, it can begin to eat at you.

James says this is your test. Your test, if you are in that condition, is to “glory in your high position.” Being poor can have a real advantage over being wealthy because the wealthy person has their high position on earth, but you will have a high position in heaven. In other words, keep your focus on your future, which is rich. **Money has nothing to do with a high position in the sight of God.**

Actually, those believers who are in this condition will get to see God work in ways far above and beyond others. They will get to see God supply needs.

Poverty not only enables a believer to see their need of God, but to see their dependence on God. According to Proverbs, a poor person often has much more integrity than a rich person (Prov. 19:1; 28:6, 11).

Believers who are faithful even if they have been poor are headed to a rich inheritance. Believers who are faithful even when poor are headed to an exalted position.

TRIAL #2 – The trial for the believer who is rich. **1:10-11**

Probably most here are saying, well these next couple of verses leaves me out. But the truth is compared to first century believers, we are very rich. Most of us here own at least one home and some more than one. Most of us here have more than one car. We have computers and TV's and we have a choice of clothes in our closets. Most people of this world live in shacks without electricity and would give almost anything to have what we have. These verses do apply to us.

Now God has much more to say to warn the rich believer than he does to the poor believer.

Message #1 - The rich man is to glory in his humiliation. **1:10a**

Now the rich man is to boast or glory in his humiliation. What does that mean? It means that his boast is not in his wealth, but in the fact that he has humbled himself before God and has spiritual life. Wealth is not found in physical riches, it is found in spiritual realities. To be spiritually rich, one must humble himself before God. This is where real wealth is found in a relationship with God. The rich man will die and will leave all of his toys here.

Message #2 - The rich man needs to remember he will pass away. **1:10b**

The trial for the rich man is that he loses sight of the fact that his life will soon be over. A few weeks ago on the news there was a bunker that had been built by a real estate billionaire in the Czech Republic. The bunker was amazing. The bunker is built so this man can escape a nuclear holocaust. This man truly believes that his money and his bunker are the key to his security. What he doesn't realize is no matter how glorious the bunker, his life is controlled by God and his bunker will not stop his death. The number of his months and days are determined by God and whether you die out on the side of a mountain or in a ditch or in the lap of luxury of some secure bunker, you will still die. Rich people need to be aware of the fact that they are on the same death clock as the rest of humanity.

Message #3 - The rich man needs to know he will wither. **1:11a**

Isaiah used this very same imagery to refer to all people (Is. 40:6-8). All humans are like grass in that they are here for a short time and then they are gone. It is foolish to trust in wealth because it will wither like grass.

Message #4 - The rich man needs to know his beautiful appearance will be destroyed. **1:11b**

The wealthy need to remember all of the beautiful things you had will be left here and won't mean a thing once you leave this world.

Message #5 - The rich man needs to know his pursuits will fade away. **1:11c**

A flower looks beautiful for a while and then it fades and is gone. Riches will fade away as fast as a wild flower. All believers need to realize this. In the midst of whatever we are pursuing, we will come to an end.

The threat for the rich man is not to see God in all he has and not use all he has for God's glory.

Our problem is we are inundated with the world's philosophies. Some believers so fall in love with this world that they lose sight of the transitory nature of this life. We won't last long and we won't be here long.

What James is doing is asking believers to evaluate their spiritual wealth and not physical wealth. Using material standards as a means of determining spiritual status is absolutely foolish.

Lee Atwater died of a brain tumor at age 40 in 1991. He was the campaign manager for George Bush in the 1988 Presidential campaign. Shortly after he was diagnosed with cancer of the brain he wrote this:

“The 80’s were about acquiring—acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn’t I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn’t I pay for an evening with my friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don’t know who will lead us through the 90’s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul” (Cited from David Nystrom, *James*, p. 65).

Now **verse 12** brings this to a conclusion: Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial for once he has been approved by the way he handled himself in the trial, he will receive a crown of life which the Lord will give to those who love him.

Trials are used by God to mold us and shape us. In order for that to happen, we need to pray and ask God for wisdom.

If one is poor, he needs wisdom to cope with that. If one is rich, he needs wisdom to cope with that. We all need wisdom to cope with life.

For the poor man the trial is lack of money. For the rich man the trial is a lot of money.

Let me ask a series of questions and see where we are at on this:

- 1) When your financial security is threatened, is Jesus Christ still your focus?
- 2) When your financial security is great, do you think about doing great things for God?
- 3) When your physical health is failing, is Jesus Christ still worth obeying?
- 4) When someone you love dies, is Jesus Christ still worth serving?
- 5) When someone you thought was your friend slanders you, is Jesus Christ still worth loving?
- 6) If we were to lose everything, would Jesus Christ still be worth honoring?

If you value the crown of life, the answer is yes. If you value that crown, you are rich regardless of the amount of money.