

Martin White. 27th January 2008. James 1:9-12

Rich and Poor.

In the time that the New Testament was written, churches were spreading quickly across the Roman Empire, among all sorts of communities and all sorts of social groups. So the Early Church (and therefore the Letters in the Bible to the Early Churches deal a lot with the issues that this raises:

- Multicultural - people from many cultures being squashed together!
- Slaves and free people
- Prostitutes and 'good people'
- Former idol-worshippers and former Jews
- People who had run away at the scent of trouble and people who had suffered persecution for the Gospel
- Educated and sophisticated and uneducated and unsophisticated
- And rich and poor

And the Bible offer very wise teaching on how all of these diverse people are to be together as one Church - to the Glory of God, and so that as 'The Father makes us One, so the world may know...'

And one of the most enduring of these differences is the fact that most churches are made up of both rich and poor people together.

Which one do you think of yourself as?

Back in the First Century, it must have been a common thing for rich, successful, 'important' people to be sitting next to slaves who had nothing - and people who had empty stomachs and no idea when their next meal would be - extremes of wealth and poverty.

We know from the Letters written in the NT that working through these issues was a big deal, and that churches were getting it wrong, whether through ignorance or prejudice or snobbery.

In the Church in Corinth, there were problems where the rich were arriving first to communion and eating the food and drinking all the wine before the poor slaves had finished their work and got to the meeting.

Lots of the Letters in the NT give very practical teaching on how to work out all these issues.

I don't know if this has ever been an issue for people before; how do we live as part of one Body, when some of that body has lots and some has very little? How do we cope with having some people in designer clothes and beautiful houses and the latest and best one of everything, when others of us are almost going under financially, sinking in debt, arguing with their spouse about money, lying awake at night worrying about finances and being scared to open bills and bank statements.

How do we stop the issue of money and possessions being something that divides?

How can we stop half the church from coveting and the other half from putting too much security in money or being indifferent to how their brother or sister is doing, or feeling guilty about having nice things or hardening their heart to real financial need around us?

I have been in both places - I have had times when I haven't been getting more and more into debt each month and getting letters from the bank; I have had times when I have literally spent my last money and have had no idea where any more would come from and I remember hearing people talking about something they have just bought, and really struggling, thinking "Why do they deserve that?" And, probably much more often, have wasted money and shut off my mind to other people - in case I ended up feeling guilty.

Today I want to look at James 1 - some of the most practical teaching on money - and how it can affect our relationships, especially within the Church.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. (James 1:9-11 NIV)

The context of this passage is trials/testing of our faith. A few verses earlier, James has said:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4 NIV)

And then the very next verse after these on money says:

...Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12 NIV)

A trial is something that tests us, but with the understanding and aim that we pass the test; and this issue of money - whether we have got lots of it or not enough, is a trial that I believe that most of us go through
Romanian pastor - 95% of Christians who face the test of persecution pass it; 95% of Christians who face the test of prosperity fail it.

Our church (like every church) is being sifted and tested. The tests James mentions through the rest of the letter are: persevering, wisdom, faith, money, speech, anger/relationships, caring for the poor, & being doers; not just talkers. These tests are allowed by God to develop and strengthen our faith and make us mature.

Whether we have enough or too much, we are in a test; Heaven is watching. It is tempting to think "If I had a bit more money, I wouldn't be struggling like this." Or "If I wasn't burdened down with all these cares and responsibilities, *and then* I'd be happy". The truth is that the reason we don't all win the lottery every week we pray about it is that God has allowed us to be in the situation we're in, because He wants to work in us and allow our faith to be tested so we can persevere and be mature and complete; not lacking anything - which is even more important to God than us driving a new sports car!

And it's not that one test is better or worse than the other; they're both hard. Martin Luther told a story about someone who fell off the left side of his horse, got back on and fell straight off the right side.

And this is what the Bible says money is like - we can fall off either side, but we need to keep on learning until we can get on the horse long enough to get somewhere!

Proverbs has a very wise prayer in it:

Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
Give me neither poverty nor riches,
But give me only my daily bread.

Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
And say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
And so dishonor the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:8-9 NIV)

So starting with the rich, I want to talk about how we should respond to the test of Money.

But actually this is relevant for everyone, because nowadays, you can be poor, but still try to live a rich lifestyle on credit; the issue isn't our bank balance, it's our heart attitudes.

There are a number of tests of riches:

- **Materialism**; which can become a love of Money
- **Cares of this world**;

The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, (Luke 8:14)

Millionaires seldom smile--Andrew Carnegie

- **Forgetting God**; as in Proverbs 30, and as in much of Israel's history.
- **Superiority**; we live in a society that often judges people by their accent, their clothes, their car, their possessions, their career. As soon as we start measuring ourselves against anyone else, we've got problems!

You don't have to be very rich to have problems with this;

A.W. Tozer said: "Money often comes between men and God. Someone has said that you can take two small 10p's, and shut out the view of a panoramic landscape. Go to the mountains and just hold two coins closely in front of your

eyes--the mountains are still there, but you cannot see them at all because there is a coin shutting off the vision in each eye."

It doesn't take large quantities of money to come between us and God; just a little, placed in the wrong position, will effectively hide our view.

James says that the way we can deal with this is to realize that everything we own is just short term.

"But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business." (v.10-11)

The last words of Queen Elizabeth I were "Everything I have for one moment of time."

The key to handling riches, if we have them, is to resist the very strong urge to put our security in them and instead remember that whatever you have is not going to last - even if you agree to pay for the extended 5 year warranty that they're trying to sell you!

You might be rich, but actually you should "take pride in your low position" as an owner of lots of stuff that isn't going to last and is going to end up in a landfill; or as dust - like you are!

And the reason that God has allowed you to have what you have is to be tested as a faithful steward of what God entrusts to you.

You are to remember that it is His money, not yours, and He hasn't just given it to you so you can enjoy yourself more and more and accrue more and more stuff.

In fact, you have been given the "low position" of steward - God's servant. And if you read on in James, there are plenty of suggestions as to what the purpose of your wealth is:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27a)

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. (2:1)

- If God has blessed you with a nice house; take up your low position & practice hospitality
- If God has blessed you with two coats; then serve the person who has none.

God is about a great work in His Church - He is carefully watching us as we face the different trials that we go through. And He is working in each of our lives to mature us and prepare us, so that we earn the crown that He wants to reward us with.

So if these are some of the tests of having money, how about when we are poor?

Because, in Deuteronomy, it clearly identifies the Israelites' poverty and hunger and time in the desert as being a test from God - and it gives some insight into why God allowed the test → to know what was in their hearts:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, (Deuteronomy 8:2-3 NIV)

You can't plant fields in the desert or hold down a job or pop out to the shops!

If the tests of wealth are materialism, cares, forgetting God and superiority; then the **tests of poverty** are temptation to covet, be jealous, steal and, sometimes, to measure yourself by the World's standard - what you've got or not got and so see yourself as worthless or a failure.

- **Coveting/jealousy.** The Bible is very real about this - Psalm 73 gives a really honest account of this... and a way out:

Surely God is good to Israel,
 To those who are pure in heart.
 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
 I had nearly lost my foothold.
 For I envied the arrogant
 When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
 They have no struggles;
 Their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from the burdens common to man;
They are not plagued by human ills. (Psalm 73:1-5 NIV)

No doubt about it! God is good
...But I nearly missed it; missed seeing His goodness.
I was looking the other way,
Looking up to the people at the top
Envyng the wicked who have it made,
Who have nothing to worry about,
Not a care in the whole wide world. (Psalm 73:1-5 the Message)

I think this is a very clear picture of what it feels like to start glancing at other people and allowing a little comparison to creep in.

And the answer is to gaze at God instead.
In the psalm, the writer finds his way back to God - it finishes:

Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever...
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
(Psalm 73:25-26,28a)

He looks back to God, and instead of comparing himself to other people (a game you can never win!) he looks back to God and declares that being near God really is the incomparably greatest thing we can ever have...that alone is enough.

- **Low self-worth**

The World might be saying "You're poor and insignificant" But the truth is, if you are a Christian you are incredibly rich and privileged - you have been adopted by the Most High God and He has assured you that for all eternity you will be with Him in Glory.

God doesn't measure you like the World does; the World may write you off as a failure; insignificant; worthless.

God says "Take pride in your high position; as for you, it's good to be near Me."

One commentator, talking about this passage, said:

“Wisdom = seeing things as they truly are” (Alec Motyer)

And that is exactly what James is saying:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

(v.9)

Several commentaries point out that the words “High position” are used elsewhere to refer to our “exalted place in Heaven” (Douglas Moo)

One goes on to say that in the next chapter, James expands on this:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? (2:5)

This teaching that the Poor have a “high position” goes against what the World says; but it's not some mind game to make things feel a bit better, or some fantasy world that we can slip into (like playing the “what would I do if I won the lottery” game; it is eternally, solidly true.

You may be struggling financially - and may be right in the middle of a hard time of testing.

I want to tell you something that hopefully will give you faith for the situation you're in.

Remember that God hasn't abandoned you; He is not punishing you; He is leading you through a trial to build in perseverance and to leave you mature and complete; not lacking anything... and He has given you a high position of honour - “Hidden in Christ; seated at the Right Hand of God”

Promise - If we persevere under trial, then we will receive the Crown.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12)

- **...a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:25)**
- **...the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:4)**

So whatever they are, if we can see this 'bigger picture' then we can be content and even rejoice in our circumstances - whatever they are, because God is at work, making us 'mature and complete; not lacking anything' through them.

Does that mean we relax and stop worrying about it if we are struggling financially and thinking 'it doesn't matter; everything will be fine when I get to Heaven.'?

No, it means we work harder now, because we are going through a trial - and if we persevere, then our faith grows and we become mature and complete, not lacking anything.

I think that saying "God is allowing me to be tested financially so that I become mature and complete, not lacking anything and I know that if I am faithful with little, then in the future I will be rewarded with much" is probably a more helpful way to look at it than "I'm drowning in debt"

And, I believe, it will encourage us to work harder at getting to grips with our finances than just trying to scrape together the minimum payment each month when the bill comes through the letterbox.

The stakes are high; God is about a great work in His Church - He is carefully watching us and working in each of our lives to mature us and prepare us, so that we earn the crown that He is waiting to reward us with.

- **Pray for faith**