

## Riches and Poverty—Reasons for Rejoicing

James 1:9-11

9/19/1999

The book of James, Chapter 1. We'll read together verses 9 through 11. James, chapter 1, verses 9 through 11.

“Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withers the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in *his* ways.”

The outward circumstances of people can oftentimes be very misleading to the superficial observer. For example, he may observe two people—one who is crippled, and another one who is healthy. And one might naturally tend to think that the healthy person is better off than the crippled person, when in reality—when all things are considered—the opposite may in fact be the case.

For example, in Psalm 119 and verse 67, we read, “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but *now* have I kept thy word.” You see, the afflicted crippled man may be the man who is saved and on his way to heaven, because his afflictions were the very means God used to arrest his rebellion and pride and *bring* him to submission and salvation. The healthy man, on the other hand, may be one who is going astray and on his way to hell, in his self-satisfaction and pride and rebellion, and is therefore of all men to be most *pitied*. And so we need to be aware, and we need to *beware* of the misleading tendencies of outward circumstances, and not be deceived into false conclusions as a result of them.

No nowhere is there more of a danger of falling into the misleading tendencies of outward circumstances, and being deceived into false conclusions as a result of them, than in the area of the unequal distribution of wealth. We tend to think that those who are rich are *always* better off than those who are poor. It would seem that greater wealth would be a tremendous advantage in so many ways, when in fact the poor are often far better off regarding the things that are *really* important, while the rich are often entrapped in a complacent self-sufficiency that sets them up for destruction.

Now James has just warned us about double-mindedness in verses 6 through 8. And this double-mindedness is the condition of one who cannot make up his mind as to whether to trust in the Lord *or* to trust in the things of the world as his final object of hope. And this double-mindedness nowhere manifests itself more than in the contest between God and money. God is very powerful, yes. But so is the wealth of this world. And the vacillation in the human affections between God and money is the cause of a great deal of double-mindedness that exists in the world today.

James attempts to counteract this all-too-common tendency towards double-mindedness that is the *result* of the love of money by providing some perspective on the true blessedness that both the poor and the rich have through the Gospel. Now what James is saying to us in these verses is that it is Gospel privileges, not outward circumstances, that are the source of *true* joy, both for the rich and the poor.

Now the poor, no less than the rich, can be entrapped by an idolatrous trust in wealth as the source of security and deliverance from trials, rather than trusting in God *alone*. The poor can fall into this idolatrous trust in wealth by *wishing* that he *had* some, and believing that if he did, it would *save* him from his troubles. The poor man's problem is one of envy and lust for wealth, looking for deliverance from a false savior, if only it would appear.

The rich, on the other hand, fall into an idolatrous trust in wealth by trusting in the money that they *do* have to buy their way out of problems, or to provide a shield for them *from* problems. And their problem is one of a misplaced trust and a self-sufficiency, so that *he* winds up relying on a false savior as well.

And so both the rich and the poor need to gain a proper perspective on where their real source of happiness and security and joy should really lie. By doing so, they will be saved from that double-mindedness that does so easily beset the people of God. And so the cure for double-mindedness is to gain a proper perspective on those things that could become a source of competition for our trust in God and our affections for God.

Now in verses 9 through 11, which I just read to you, James helps us to do exactly that by telling both the poor man and the rich man what it is they ought to be *rejoicing* in, and what it is that is an entirely *inadequate* object of rejoicing, namely financial wealth. And so what he is telling them, as I said, is that it is Gospel privileges, not outward circumstances, that are the source of *true* joy for both the poor and the rich. So in the first place then this evening, let us consider together what the source of joy should be for the poor—what the source of joy should be for the poor.

Now James exhorted the believers in verse 2 of this chapter to be joyful in the midst of trials. And he now supplies them with an additional reason for joy, a reason that exists at *all* times and under *all* circumstances. Now the poor often feel as though they are in a continual and unrelenting trial as a result of their poverty—especially if that poverty is a result of persecution for Christ's sake, as was apparently the case with those to whom James is writing. Many believers were thrown out of business or out of work because of their conversion to Christianity and the hostility that they generated among the prevailing Jewish community. And as a result, many of them were thrust into a condition of poverty.

And so the lack of money can seem like a continuous burden and difficulty from which there seems to be no deliverance. Continuous money problems and the lack of resources to meet important needs can put a great strain on the attitude of the Christian. It can fill him with a complaining and with a bitter spirit. It can also place a great temptation before him in terms of questioning God's faithfulness to him and His provision for him, producing doubt towards God and double-mindedness as to his *confidence* in God. If God really is true to His promises, he asks, why do I have such a difficult struggle in the area of finances?

Now the Bible is very clear that the poor *do*, in fact, have a *very* difficult time of it in this life. For example, Proverbs 10 and verse 5 says, "The destruction of the poor is their poverty." Proverbs 14:20 says, "The poor is hated, even of his own neighbor." Proverbs 19:4 says, "The poor is *separated* from his neighbor." Proverbs 19:7 says, "All the brethren of the poor do hate

him: how much more do his friends go far from him? He pursues them with words, yet they depart from him.” Proverbs 22 and verse 7 says, “The rich rules over the poor...” Proverbs 30 and verse 14 says, There is a generation who devours the poor from off the earth.

So the Bible is very clear that the poor *do* have a very difficult time of it. To suffer destruction, rejection, servitude and exploitation because of a state of poverty is a very difficult condition to *endure*. And yet, even in the midst of these negative circumstances, James tell us there is ample cause for rejoicing—a cause that totally eclipses to the eye of faith all of the difficulties and trials that poverty brings to the Christian—and that is that *he* has been exalted by God.

Notice if you will verse 9. “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted.” Now this phrase “low degree” refers to his external circumstances as to his wealth and as to his standing in society, because it’s contrasted with the rich, in verse 10. And so the contrast is between those who have not and those who *have*.

Now to the eye of sight, poverty is something that is very difficult and it’s very depressing. To suffer destruction and rejection and servitude and exploitation because of poverty *is* a difficult condition to endure. But to the eye of faith, there is much to rejoice in and to be filled with thankfulness for. The poor Christian, James says, is *exalted*. And this exaltation that the poor Christian has is the cause and the source of his rejoicing.

Now what is this exaltation, and of what does it consist? Well, the poor Christian must understand that his low condition is an external condition, and that it is a temporary condition. But his *exaltation* consists in his *inward* spiritual wealth and standing and privilege that is eternal. So externally, he is very low. But that condition is temporary. *Internally*, he is very wealthy, and that condition is eternal. And so let’s consider together, then, what this exaltation is and of what it consists.

First of all, the poor Christian is in a state of being exalted because he has been delivered from slavery to sin and to Satan. He has been delivered from *slavery* to sin and to Satan. Stop and think about it for a minute: What a *bondage* and what a condition of *lowness* the vast majority of the world is in. They are in a state of bondage to sin and to Satan, enslaved to their lusts and to one who is *bent* on destroying them. But the Christian has been freed from that bondage and slavery, and he is exalted far above most other men in that respect, in that he is the Lord’s *freedman*. And all of those who are running around out there that seem to be oh, so free, are in the worst state of bondage. And in that sense, he is exalted far above all of the unsaved people, irrespective of their outward circumstance.

Secondly, he has been blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. You see, here is someone who has a great *deal*. You know, externally, he doesn’t have much, but spiritually and internally, he’s got a *lot*. He was chosen and elected to be saved before the foundation of the world. He is loved by God and predestinated to be adopted as His own son. He has redeemed him by the blood of Jesus Christ. God has given him an inheritance in heaven. God has *sealed* him with the presence of the indwelling Spirit. That puts him in a pretty exalted position: chosen before the foundation of the world; predestinated to be adopted to be God’s own

son; redeemed; having an inheritance in heaven; having the presence and indwelling of the Spirit; *that* is a high position.

Thirdly, he is exalted in that he is *rich* in non-material things that last forever. He is *rich* in non-material things that last forever. In Second Corinthians 8 and verse 9 it says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became *poor*, that you through his poverty might be made rich.” Now what Paul is telling us is that as Christians, irrespective of our outward financial circumstances, we are rich. James goes on to say, in chapter 2 and verse 5, “Has not God chosen the poor of this world *rich* in *faith*, and *heirs* of the *kingdom* which he has promised to them that love him?”

According to Matthew chapter 6 and verse 20, we have treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, nor thieves break through nor steal. And you see, *spiritual* treasure and *inward* riches are best because they *cannot* be lost and they *will* not be left behind.

And so the poor are rich. They have been made rich by Christ. They are *rich* in faith. They are *heirs* of the kingdom. They have *treasure* in heaven. And in First Timothy 6:6, it says, “Godliness with contentment is *great* gain.” And so if they have *godliness* and they have *contentment*, they have *gained* a lot.

The fact that our souls have been adopted and saved is worth *more* than all of the wealth of all of the world put together. “For what shall it profit a man if he gain the *whole world* and lose his own soul?” But if he has *gained* his soul, then he has more wealth than all of the world put together. You see, men have their billions, but you have your soul. Who’s richer? And so we are rich in non-material things that last forever: *rich* in faith; *heirs* of the kingdom; *treasure* in heaven; *great gain*;--*plus*, our own souls. What more could a person want?

Fourthly, he is exalted in that he has the *unspeakable* privilege of being a child of God. He has the *unspeakable* privilege of being a child of God. There is no higher status. There is no more exalted position than to be a son of God. The sons of the wealthiest people on earth, or the sons of the most powerful rulers on earth, are but mere *worms* compared to the sons of God. If one’s importance is measured by who one’s father is, then there is no comparison between our *exalted* position as being sons of God and their exalted positions of being a mere son of Ronald Reagan, or whoever—Bill Gates.

You see, the sons of God have an incredible privilege and standing—a phenomenal exaltation. They have God’s love and favor. Nothing can separate them from it, according to Romans 8:39. They have direct access to God. They can come *boldly* into His presence, Hebrews 4 and verse 16. They possess *all* of the resources of God, First Corinthians 3 21 says, “*All* things are yours.” They are joint-heirs with Christ—Romans 8:17 says that we will share in all of the privileges that Christ does, as joint-heirs with Him. We are seated in the heavenlies, a position of privilege and honor and blessing beyond compare, according to Ephesians 2 and verse 6. We are clothed in fine linen, which is the righteousness of the saints, Revelation 19:8. We have a crown of glory that fades not away, First Peter 5:4. We have the bread of life to feed us, and the water of life to quench our thirst for all of eternity, according to Revelation 21 and 22. We have a home in the New Jerusalem, whose streets are paved with gold and whose walls are made of gemstones.

Now I ask you, has the poor been exalted? It is true that all of these comforts of which I have just spoken are as *nothing* to the eye of sight. But to the eye of faith, they are a cause for *ecstatic* joy and a sense of personal exaltation that is *beyond* expression. This word here, “let him rejoice,” is a very, very strong word. It has the idea of, Let him *boast* with ecstasy! In another context, it would be such a boasting that would be sinful. But here, it is a rejoicing in the *privileges* that are there for us.

Therefore, if you view yourself as a poor Christian, do not complain because of financial poverty, but rather, remember your privileges; stir up your faith; rejoice in the exalted position and privilege that God has given you, a position far above those who *outwardly* are rich and increased with goods and seem to have need of *nothing*, but who are in reality, as Revelation 3:17 says, Wretched and miserable and blind and poor and naked. And *rejoice* in the fact that though *you, outwardly* appear to be wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, in fact, *you* are the one who is rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, because you have Christ, and when you have *Him*, you are rich and exalted beyond comprehension. That’s the assessment of our own Savior, when, in Revelation, chapter 2 and verse 9, speaking to the persecuted church in Smyrna, He says, “I know thy works and thy tribulation and thy poverty, but thou art *rich*.”

God measures wealth differently than we do. We tend to look at the dollars, and the stocks, and the bonds, and the property, and the automobiles, and the house. And we tote it all up, and we say, Wow, I’m at this level! God doesn’t care a snap of the fingers about that stuff. It’s *meaningless*! He paves the *street* with that stuff. The true wealth, you see, is in our relationship with God and our standing and privilege in His presence.

And so when God says of the Christians at Smyrna, “I know thy works and thy tribulation and thy poverty, but thou art rich,” so is every true believer rich, irrespective of what his outward condition may appear to be.

So don’t let your poverty get you down. But rather, remind yourself every day of how *rich* you really are, and how much you have. And if all you can think of is this one verse, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul,” recognize that if you have your soul and it’s saved, you’re more wealthy than all of the people together on the face of the earth. And let that be a source of rejoicing to you—that you have your soul.

Well, having considered together then, in the first place, what the source of joy should be for the poor, in the second place, let us consider together what the source of joy should be for the rich—what the source of joy should be for the rich.

Now, in verse 9 it says, “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted,” and I’ve just explained what the exultation consists of. Verse 10, it says, “But the rich”—speaking of the rich brother here—“let him rejoice in that he is made *low*.” Now the rich, too, has something to rejoice in as well, but it is certainly not his riches. Unfortunately, many people *do* rejoice in their riches, and view *them* as the source of their happiness and their security. Scripture bears ample witness to this fact.

Proverbs 10 and verse 15 says, “The rich man’s *wealth* is his strong city.” That’s what he *trusts* in. Proverbs 14:20 says, “The rich has many friends.” Proverbs 19:4 says, “Wealth makes *many friends*.” Proverbs 22:7 says, “The rich *rules* over the poor.” Psalm 49, verses 6 and 11 says, regarding the rich, “They trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;...Their inward thought is, that their houses will continue forever, their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names.”

Now because of their wealth, the rich are very prone to say to themselves, “Self, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. For I am rich and increased with goods and I have need of nothing.” And it is precisely those kinds of attitudes that wealth tends to produce that *blinds* the rich to their need of God and their need of salvation. And it is for this reason that Jesus said in Matthew 19:23 that a rich man can *hardly* enter the kingdom of God. In fact, he went on to say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

And so *riches*, we must understand, riches are a terrible blinding influence on people that fills them with self-sufficiency and with self-importance and with pride. They are a tremendous hindrance to salvation and to eternal happiness. Therefore, for a rich man to be brought low, to be humbled to the point that he sees himself as a poor and miserable sinner who needs Christ as his Savior, is an *extraordinary* and *unusual* expression of God’s power and mercy. Because not many wise, not many noble, not many mighty, and not many rich are called by God. So those who *are* called by God and are thereby brought *down* from their self-sufficiency and self-importance and pride have great cause to rejoice *continually* that they were saved from the blinding power of wealth and the deceitfulness of riches, because not many rich people are.

And so the saved rich man says, Thank God for the day I was brought low. Thank God for the day I saw my *real* poverty and nothingness and was delivered from the illusion of self-importance and pride and from trusting in uncertain riches. I see my wealthy friends going on in the broad way of ease and comfort and affluence, straight to hell and destruction. But by God’s mercy, my wealth-blinded eyes were opened and I came to see that in spite of all my possessions, I am nothing and less than nothing, and vanity. My eyes were opened to that awareness that, although I am nothing, Christ is everything, and that to have Him is to have everything, and without Him is to have nothing. Thank God for the day my eyes were opened!

And so this is how the rich Christian thinks. His great joy is that God brought him low enough to see his sinfulness, and thus his need of Christ, and opened his eyes to the temporary and transient nature of riches to see the folly of putting his trust in perishable possessions that very soon fade away.

Notice, if you will, verses 10 through 11. It says, “But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withers the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perishes: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.” And so the rich, viewed as a rich man, without being made low, and without having Christ, is the most temporary and transient of conditions, and is of all people the most to be pitied. Both the rich man and his riches are in a very temporal

condition. And all of his blessings are external. And he will have his morning of glory, but his afternoon of withering, and the eternal night of death. He is blinded now; he is destroyed later.

Turn over to James, chapter 5, verses 1 through 6. In James, chapter 5, verses 1 through 6, James says, “Go to now, you rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. Your gold and silver is cankered,” or rusted; “and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire.” Anybody want to be rich? “You have heaped treasure for the last days. Behold, the hire of the laborers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, cries: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth,” or, the Lord of Hosts. “You have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; you have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and killed the just; and he does not resist you.”

Now do you see why someone would rejoice in being delivered from *that*? Do you see why they would rejoice in the fact that my flesh is not *going* to be burnt as fire. I don’t need to “weep and howl for my miseries that shall come upon you.” My possessions are not corrupted, because Christ has saved me.

You know, it’s pretty easy to become envious of the wealthy. Any time you’re tempted to do so, just stay in this passage for a couple of minutes, and be glad you’re not one of them. Because if you *were*, the likelihood that you would be saved would be slim to none.

Now it’s true that wealth, considered by itself, does not keep a man from being saved. Many wealthy men *were* saved, as Job and Abraham—very godly men. But they’re the *exception* rather than the *rule*. And the problem is, is that our natures are so prone to the love of money, which is the root of all evil, that to *have* money exposes us to *such* a temptation that few to none are ever able to stand before it.

When you think about wanting more wealth, just think for a few minutes about all of the temptations that come along with it, and ask yourself—Aren’t I *really* better off where I’m at, given the weakness of my character and constitution, to rejoice in what God has given me, and to focus on my spiritual and *eternal* riches, and to not worry about whether I’ve got this or whether I’ve got that, because I’ve got Christ and I’ve got my soul, and so I’ve got everything?

So to you who are outwardly poor this evening, I say to you, Remember your spiritual exaltation and your spiritual wealth. Focus on that; remember that; meditate on that; and rejoice in that. And let that be the salve that assuages those difficulties that *come* to you in your poverty. And to those of you who are outwardly rich, remember the mercy that brought you low and thereby brought you to Christ, and rejoice in that and meditate *much* upon the fact that you are *nothing* and *less* than nothing, and vanity, and that your wealth did nothing to commend you to God, and it does nothing but tempt you to go *away* from God, and to view that with a very cautious and calculating eye, much as you would a caged lion. And be sure to keep the door shut between your affections and the lion, because it is all too easy for that door to open and to be eaten up by it. Remember how low you are, and thank God for bringing you low, and bringing you to an awareness of the blinding nature of riches.

Let, then, these perspectives deliver you, whether rich or poor, from the double-mindedness that is so destructive to faith, and may God have mercy on all of us to neither be envious of the outwardly rich, nor to be self-exalted if we *are* outwardly rich, but rather, for both of us as Christians, whether rich or poor, to rejoice in the *true* wealth and to thank God for the fact that He brought us low that we might be exalted by *Him*, not by our bank accounts, in due time.

Well, shall we pray together? Father, thank you for the riches of Christ—Paul styles them “unsearchable riches of Christ.” That is, we can dig through the pile as long as we want, and never get to the bottom of it. Father, may these riches be the real value system of our lives, and may we measure our wealth by how much of *Christ* we have in our character and conduct and thoughts and behavior, not by how much we’ve got in our bank accounts or our lands.

Father, thank you for sustaining us when we were poor, and for those who still are, thank you for sustaining them yet. I pray that having food and clothing, we might therewith be content. And Father, if we have more than food and clothing, help us not to be high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God who gives to all men richly those spiritual gifts. Help us, then, to be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, knowing that all that we have has been given.

And Father, none of us here today is either rich or poor—it’s a relative thing. Compared to some, we’re rich; compared to others, we’re poor. Father, help us to look upon those who have less than we do with pity, and look upon those who have more than we do, with thankfulness—not only that you have been generous to them, but that you have delivered us from the temptations that are peculiarly theirs. Father, we pray that we might be people who are filled with joy, whatever our external financial condition is.

Save us, Lord, from double-mindedness. Help us, Father to have that stability that comes from trusting in God alone, and not trying to serve two masters. For they who will be rich pierce themselves through with many sorrows. Father, if you bring wealth, we are grateful for that. But oh, Lord, let it never be the goal and purpose of our life.

Father, we pray that you would receive our thanks for the fact that Christ was willing to become *poor* that we might be made rich. Help us, then, to use whatever resources we have to help *others* be rich in the things of God. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.