

## THE DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES

### James 1:9-11

"The brother of humble circumstances should boast in his exaltation,<sup>10</sup> but the one who is rich should boast in his humiliation because he will pass away like a flower of the field.<sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will wither away while pursuing his activities."

### INTRODUCTION

Is there anyone here who doubts the truth of this saying about money, "Here today; gone tomorrow"? In the past 20 years, for example, the purchasing power of a dollar has been cut in half. What cost \$100 in 1996 now costs \$151. Dollars seem to rush ever fleetingly through our fingers. But this is also true of the years of our lives. In verse **4:14** of his letter to the Christian community, James tells us, "You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (ESV). This reminds me of a joke about a man who returned from a foreign holiday feeling very ill. He went to see his doctor and was immediately rushed to the hospital to undergo tests. He awoke alone in a private room. When he tried to open the door to the hallway, he found it locked from the outside. Just then the phone by his bed started ringing and he picked it up. "This is your doctor," a voice said. "We have the results back from your tests. We've found you have an extremely nasty virus that we are completely helpless to destroy or even to slow down!" "Oh my goodness," cried the man, "What are you going to do, doctor?" "Well we're going to put you on a diet of pizzas, pancakes, tortillas & pita bread." "Will that cure me?" asked the man. The doctor replied, "No, but it's the only food we can get under the door!" We can easily make false conclusions about the certainties promised us by our health or by our wealth. Our two Outline points today are The Realities of Riches and The Responsibilities of Riches.

### I. THE REALITIES OF RICHES

**James 1:9-11** is not the random thought it may appear to be. In the previous eight verses, James sought to guide Christ's followers in making sense of life's most difficult moments. He returns to this theme in **vs. 12**. He selects the stresses imposed upon us by money issues to illustrate **James 1:2-3** (Phillips): "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance." Severe persecution in Jerusalem had caused many early Christians to flee to safety. Their lives were endangered and they struggled to find new homes and jobs far from their network of family and friends. **Acts 8:4** (NLT) gives us God's perspective on their "trials": "But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went." Thousands upon thousands across the Roman Empire learned of God's offer of salvation through **Jesus** decades before they would have otherwise!

But this glorious result was not uppermost in the minds of these persecuted Christians. Their struggles often reached the intensity of "testing" associated with removing impurities when refining precious metals. **James 1:1-8** encourages us to be molded by our times of God-designed "trials" and "testing," not folded by them. If we cooperate by calling upon God for "wisdom," we can gain confidence in how greatly God can use us. We'll also enjoy more closeness to Christ as we allow Him to purify us of habits and attitudes He wants us to lose. In nearly 30 years of growing up with his older brother and watching how **Jesus** handled nearly every conceivable personal, family, or community crisis, James learned that Biblical "wisdom" is "the ability to view all of life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, not just for our purposes."

James urges two startling conclusions upon us as we seek God's perspective about our earthly wealth (or lack of it): Christians who are poor have much to rejoice about before the Lord that is not based upon our lack of earthly wealth, and wealthy Christians have much to rejoice about before the Lord that is not based upon our possession of earthly wealth. God's perspective about The Realities of Riches includes:

### A. Earthly Wealth Ends but Heavenly Wealth Is Unending

Persecution cost many early believers in Israel, birthplace of the Church, their jobs or their homes. A famine then struck Israel in A.D. 46, about the time James wrote this letter (**Acts 11:28**). Many of James' readers were reduced by such adversities to "humble circumstances," to society's lower social rungs, which were already crowded by the long-term "poor." Why then would James tell displaced, dispossessed, and sometimes discouraged followers of **Jesus**, "The brother of humble circumstances should glory in his exaltation"? It is because, as **Romans 8:16-17** assures us, "The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children,<sup>17</sup> and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ."

Spanish retail mogul Amancio Ortega, with a net worth of \$75 billion, is reputed to be the world's wealthiest individual today. At his death, his wealth will be passed down, divided, and subdivided. Some relatives will receive large sums and others will be given smaller sums. Would you like to be among his heirs? Regardless of the amount you might inherit from Amancio Ortega, it would be only money that is "here today and gone tomorrow." It could not possibly equal the everlasting inheritance to which we are each entitled as blood relatives of our Savior, **Jesus Christ**, the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" of Heaven and earth (**Revelation 19:11-16**). This is why Paul wrote in **Ephesians 1:18** (NLT), "I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future He has promised to those He called. I want you to realize what a rich and glorious inheritance He has given to His people."

### B. Earthly Wealth Does Not Guarantee Heavenly Privileges

The vast majority of **Jesus'** followers have always come from the common people. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, for example, were all fishermen. **I Corinthians 1:26-29** (NCV) explains God delights in extending Heavenly advantages to the world's most disadvantaged: "Brothers and sisters, look at what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise in the way the world judges wisdom. Not many of you had great influence. Not many of you came from important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in His presence."

The Christian Church is the most democratic institution on earth. Regardless of one's economic or social status, everyone who embraces **Jesus Christ** as Savior and Lord can count upon three eternal truths:

(1) You matter to God. No person can be called worthless for whom the Son of God gave His life to save. **Romans 5:8**, "God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!"

(2) You matter in the Church. The Apostle Paul made the most revolutionary declaration in **Galatians 3:26-28** that had yet been written. He proclaimed all class distinctions were abolished among citizens of Heaven, as the J. B. Phillips translation makes clear: "For now that you have faith in Christ you are all sons of God. All of you who were baptised 'into' Christ have put on the family likeness of Christ. Gone is the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female—you are all one in Christ Jesus."

(3) You matter in the world. Christianity dignifies everyone, rich or poor, by insisting each of us has God-given work to do, even if we're confined to a bed or a wheelchair. Paul urges us, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (**Colossians 3:23-24**, NIV). Of course, we can get carried away with our importance if we neglect Christianity's core truth that our lasting worth is based upon Christ's presence in our lives. A prideful deacon thought he could impress on a class of boys the importance of living the Christian life by pointing to himself. "Why do people call me a Christian?" he asked. After a moment's pause, one boy replied, "Maybe it's because they don't know you."

## II. THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RICHES

Israel's climate is remarkably like Southern Arizona's. Israel's national flower is the cyclamen persicum. The 2" flowers are most often white or soft pink; turning deep pink or crimson-magenta at the base of

each heart-shaped petal. They often grow as wildflowers. A field alive with them can be quite striking. But Israel's hot, dry, southeast winds can wilt them within a few days, as often happens to our wildflowers on dazzling display at Picacho Peak. James' readers fully understood, as we do, his point in **vss. 10-11**: "[T]he one who is rich should boast in his humiliation because he will pass away like a flower of the field.<sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will wither away while pursuing his activities." Here are three warnings about the dangers posed by prosperity:

#### **A. We May Misplace Trust in Wealth that Should Be Placed in God**

In my early 30s, I often stated I trusted the Lord to care for my needs; not my bank account. I'd been active in several mission groups and thought I'd learned the principle of "living by faith" to have my needs met. Then I lost my job unexpectedly and struggled more than a year to find suitable work. I soon realized I'd been placing more faith in my checkbook, and less faith in Christ caring for me, than I'd realized.

#### **B. We May Become More Consumed with Gaining the World's Goods than Gaining Godliness**

How many times did James hear his brother **Jesus** say the words recorded in **Luke 12:15** (NASB), "'Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions'"?

#### **C. We May Assume Greater Wealth Automatically Gives Us Greater Standing in the Church or Before God**

Paul wisely penned these words in one of his final letters, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed" (**I Timothy 6:17-19**, NASB).

Carl loved to ride his horse through his vast estate to congratulate himself on his vast wealth. One day, he came upon Hans, an old tenant farmer, sitting in the shade of a great oak tree with his head bowed in prayer. Hans looked up and said, "Oh, excuse me, sir. I didn't see you. I was giving thanks for my food." Carl sniffed in contempt, noticing the coarse dark bread and cheese of which the old man's lunch consisted. "If that were all I had to eat, I don't think I would feel like giving thanks." "Oh," replied Hans, "it is quite sufficient. But it's remarkable you should come by today, sir. I feel I should tell you I had a strange dream just before awakening this morning." "And what did you dream?" Carl asked with an amused smile. "It seemed beauty and peace were all around, yet I could hear a voice saying, 'The richest man in the valley will die tonight.'" "Dreams!" cried the landowner. "Nonsense!" He turned and galloped away. As Hans watched horse and rider disappear, he prayed, "Lord, have mercy on his soul if he really is to die so soon." Carl could not somehow put the conversation from his mind and that evening he called his doctor. When the doctor arrived, Carl told him the whole story. "Sounds like a lot of nonsense to me," the doctor said, "but for your peace of mind, let's examine you." A little later, his examination complete, the doctor assured Carl he was strong and healthy. "There's no way you're going to die tonight." Carl thanked his Dr. and told him how foolish he felt for being upset by an old man's dream. About 9 a.m. the following morning, a messenger arrived at Carl's door. "It's about old Hans," the messenger said. "He died last night in his sleep." Startled, Carl could not help but ask himself, "Who then truly was the richest man in the valley?"

Does earthly wealth increase our standing before the Lord in this life or the next, or add to our Heavenly rewards? No. But selfishly misusing or foolishly neglecting the opportunities to promote God's Kingdom, which increased prosperity provides us, may lessen our Heavenly rewards. The more wealth God entrusts to us as His stewards, the greater responsibilities He can require of us, according to **Jesus'** words in **Luke 12:48** (NIV): "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who

has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.'" The proper attitude of anyone saved from Hell and for Heaven by the sacrifices of God's Son is that all we own is not ours but the Lord's!

## CONCLUSION

I close with these cautions of being more preoccupied with gaining earthly wealth than eternal wealth:

Wealth allows us to buy most anything to make us happy for a day or two, but only God can give us the wisdom to know how to use our wealth in ways to promote lasting happiness.

Wealth can make our name known to the world but it takes wisdom to make our name worth knowing.

Wealth can buy us the house of our dreams but it takes wisdom to turn it into the home of our dreams.

Wealth may gain us the best health care, but not the good sense to care for our health.

Wealth will make many people pretend they like us, because of what we can do for them; it cannot make anyone genuinely care for us. The Nicholsons, a British family, won a British soccer pool in 1960 equivalent to several million dollars today. They bought their dream home, entertained many people with nightly parties, and realized too late that none of their "new friends" proved to be the "true friends" they had been blessed with before they became rich.

Wealth may allow us to gain lovers, but not love. When a blond American teenager discovered he was inheriting around \$100 million, he said it was "a headache." All his former girlfriends contacted him wanting to start their relationship over, and everyone around him seemed to have a gleam in their eye because of what they wanted from him.

Wealth can take you many places but not to Heaven.

Wealth may allow you to escape paying earthly penalties for wrongs against others and society's good, but it will not allow you to escape eternal penalties for your wrongs against others and against Heaven's God.

Wealth may build a church where others gain **Jesus** as Savior but **Jesus** may still say, "I never knew you!"