

# Rich and Poor

James is a book about necessities. Our modern bookshelves are crowded with books about money management



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and investments, career success, strategic planning, beauty secrets and diets and exercise programs promising health and longevity. But what about the inner person, the spiritual, the connection with God? In last week's study James spells out the reasons for us to weep: 1) when you have lost your connection to God, 2) when your pride gets in the way of balanced thinking and 3) when you see others through judgmental eyes. Curious how all three of those reasons for personal grief are affected by your attitude toward wealth.

James writes: "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are among you" (v. 1). In all my years of preaching, any time I talked about the poor or disadvantaged and their needs there was a negative reaction from someone in the congregation. Today, in a national culture that celebrates success and wealth it is good to read words about how Christians should understand and handle our income. We are seeing today the ancient idea that wealth and success are gifts for those who deserve them, while the rest of the population will just have to find their own way. When will we figure out that wealth and possessions have an expiration date?

Jesus often pointed out the inability of wealth to produce a meaningful spiritual life. In Mark 10:21 Jesus said to a rich young seeker of spiritual life: "One thing you lack: go and sell your possessions, and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Money is not the problem – our attitude is! James is repeating Jesus' frequent warnings that the wealth of this world will be consumed by moth and rust and stolen by thieves (Matthew 6:19-21). James uses the same language as he points out his readers' wealth is "laid up treasure for the last days" but it will be worthless. Wealth is not innately evil, but we elevate its importance through our pride and greed. What is on your list of critical life values: Love? Compassion?

Generosity? Serving God? What do you want for your children: God's blessings? a solid value system, a sense of fulfillment, even joy in what they do?

James' words come straight out of the social structure of his day: the rich controlled the land and wealth, keeping the poor in debt and servitude with no chance of success. He speaks of fraud and heartlessness as the methodology of the ruling class, still common in much of today's world. This text has roots in key Old Testament passages in which God confronts the use of wealth and treatment of the poor, workers and even the foreigners in Israel's land (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Jeremiah 22:13-14). Obviously we modern Americans must listen to James, examine our pre-conceived attitudes about the rich and poor and find ways to help the "poor" of our world experience God's grace and learn to live a more fulfilling life.

After his clear spoken words to those who were successful and rich within the church (vv. 1-6), James offers encouragement and direction to those who have been exploited by the rich (vv. 7-11). At the time of this writing, Christians believed that Jesus would return any day. But years had passed, the friction between the haves and have-nots had not lessened, and divisions were occurring within the churches. James uses the illustration of the farmer "who waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (vv. 7-8). He warns them (and us!) that "the Judge (God) is standing at the doors!" (v. 9). We all need the reminder that neither time nor circumstances control Jesus' return or God's love for us.

My first two churches in southeastern Oklahoma and west Texas were full of farmers. There are few sights as beautiful as golden wheat fields stretching to the horizon or herds of cattle grazing green pastures. Those farmers understood how a sudden storm can wipe out a wheat crop or draught and disease can decimate a herd. I witnessed the faith and hard work of those families in good and bad

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years. They prayed daily, worked hard and trusted God. James says the troubles of this world are not God's final word.

James reaches back to three treasured examples that his readers would have known well. First: Remember "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" (v. 10). They would find encouragement in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel and many others who lived in Israel's darkest hours and suffered rejection, yet remained faithful in tragic times. We live in a nation of plenty and freedom, but there are challenges and injustices, so we keep on because we believe God's promises beyond today.

Second, James uses the epic story of Job as an example of endurance (v. 11a). Could any tragedy be more shocking? Job, like us, held on to God, raged against the tragedies, struggled with answers that did not satisfy him and came to a new understanding of God's love and faithfulness through all.

Third, James offers the ultimate example of hope played out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. "You have seen the purpose of the Lord ... who is compassionate and merciful" (v. 11b). There was unfaithfulness and blatant rebellion by generations in Israel against God, yet he loved them and renewed their hope. Between James' day and, now ours, the promises of God have not dimmed.

James is frank and powerful. It is hard to imagine the pressures and dangers that faced those early Christians. In addition to the overall hardness of life, they lived under the threat of government injustice, rejection by a pagan society, threats from some Jewish leaders and poverty. Much of the church today lives in a similar world. How does your faith react to the stress of our modern society? Are you more focused on how soon the Lord will return or do you see these days as an opportunity to live out the grace of God and offer hope to those who suffer, those who are prisoners of their own greed, or those who have no peace of heart? The world's example that divides rich and poor is not our standard as the grace-born people of God.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*