

*Wisdom and Wealth*  
**James 1:9-11 (2:1-7; 4:13-5:6)**  
John Breon

In our society long lines are unavoidable, unless you're rich. Over a lifetime, the average American will wait in line anywhere from two to five years. The key word is *average*. Wealthy Americans routinely avoid lines altogether. From airports to amusement parks to lines in front of stores to buy iPhones, people can buy their way to the front or use money to bypass lines completely (Steve Rushin, "The Waiting Game," *Time*, September 10, 2007, 88).

James writes about faith being tested and the need for prayer and wisdom to enable us to come through that testing. One test Christians go through is the test of wealth. How do we use what we have? Do we use it to get ahead of everyone else, even in the church? Even worse, James describes some who use and mistreat other people in order to get more money for themselves and further set themselves apart from and above the people around them. On the other hand, do we use money and possessions to serve each other, to bless others, and to glorify God?

**1:9-11** Humble, or poor, Christians should take pride in their high position. They are believers, followers of the "royal law" and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord will exalt them at the final judgment. The trial of poverty will lead them to maturity if they continue to trust in God. Those who are rich should take pride in their low position. James is using irony here. He's saying that those who are rich should realize that their wealth doesn't mean much in view of the shortness and frailty of life. If James is thinking of Christians who are wealthy (he uses the word "rich" only when he's talking about unbelievers), he could be saying that they rejoice in sharing the same heritage as poor believers. Because they're not mastered by their wealth, they can lose it and still trust God.

This paragraph also points to the "reversal of fortunes" that Scripture often mentions. Think of the Hebrew prophets. Think of Mary's song when she pictures God lifting up the poor and sending the rich away empty.

Think of Jesus' repeated statement that the first will be last and the last will be first. When God acts, the low are raised up and the high are brought down. In Genesis, Joseph goes from prison to prominence. In Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar goes from ruling in the palace to grazing in the field like an animal. "God declares his values, and human values are negated. This is how it will be at the end of the age. James wants his readers to rejoice in this coming reality" (*The New Bible Commentary*)

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? (2:1-7)

Reading this passage I think of the courtroom scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. That story is set in the South in the 1930s. The white people sit in chairs on the main floor while the black people sit in the balcony. I'm too young to remember legal segregation, but we all know that part of our history. James says there's no place for that kind of discrimination in the church, among God's people.

In this section James begins with the familiar address: "My brothers and sisters." Then he reminds them who they are: "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." This is one of the few specific references to Jesus in this letter, and it shows a high view of Jesus and reverence for him. Now James

presses his point: as Christians, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Then he illustrates what he means.

The scene James describes is some sort of assembly, a Christian gathering. It's possibly some sort of judicial assembly that involves the church. Paul had told the Corinthians to settle disputes among themselves in the church (1 Corinthians 6:1). James seems to have something similar in mind here. But this could apply to any gathering of God's people.

Picture this: two people come into your assembly, one wearing fine clothes, the other wearing shabby, filthy clothes. One is wealthy, one is poor. You say to the wealthy person, "Here, take the best seat." You say to the poor person, "Go stand over there or sit here on the floor." So the deck is already stacked against the poor person. We might imagine the wealthy person has brought the poor person to court for some reason, knowing that his own wealth will get him a more favorable hearing. But for the church to accept and respond to the economic differences between these two would be showing favoritism. The church becomes judges with evil thoughts. The church that claims the glorious Jesus as its Lord would become an unjust, biased judge. In such a case, the church would be acting like those who persecute Christians instead of acting like Jesus.

The reason to identify with the poor and not show favoritism to the wealthy is that God honors the poor (v 5). For James, "the poor" are a group of people he practically equates with "the Christians, the pious, the humble." It's interesting to ask ourselves who we identify with here. Most of us probably want to be seen as the humble, pious, Christian poor. We tend to compare ourselves with those who have more than we do so we don't see ourselves as wealthy. But if we compare ourselves with those who have less than we do—and as Americans we have more than nearly everyone else in the world—we see that we may be in the wealthy group that James warns about.

God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom God has promised to those who love him. In chapter 1, James says that God has promised a crown of life to those who love him (v 12). Here, God has promised the kingdom to those who love him. The kingdom is God's reign in present power as well as the future when God rules over all.

Instead of siding with God and honoring the poor, James' readers have insulted the poor. They give preference to the rich who are dragging believers into court. They're slandering the noble name that was spoken over them in baptism. Believers are identified with the name of Jesus. Some of the rich people they're favoring go so far as to slander the name of their glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

By discriminating against the poor in favor of the rich, these Christians side with people who oppress and persecute poor believers and who blaspheme God. So these Christians find themselves opposing God. They're failing the test that wealth presents. They fail to obey the law of their Lord: "Love your neighbor as yourself." They need wisdom and grace from God to enable them to side with their brothers and sisters and to honor them. We need that same wisdom and grace because God still calls us to identify with the poor, to learn from them, and to share with them.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (4:13-5:6)

I once led a study of James at a church retreat. One man in the group got really agitated over what James says about poverty and wealth. He didn't like being challenged regarding his desire to have a lot of money and he didn't want to be told how to use his resources. He especially didn't like this section. But James is just part of a long biblical tradition that's in the Law, the Prophets, the teaching of Jesus, and the writings of Paul. He's dealing with the theme of testing through wealth.

In 13-17 James speaks to merchants, stockbrokers, and entrepreneurs. They're always planning, making deals, forecasting the market, looking to see where they will go next to carry on business and make money. James says, "Think about this! You're always saying where you'll go and what you'll do today or tomorrow. But you don't even know what will happen tomorrow." Then he reminds them of the frailty and shortness of life: "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

Now James isn't condemning planning in itself. He's not even condemning making money. He's denouncing proud confidence in the future based on ourselves. These merchants make their plans in the arrogance of self-sufficiency. Then they boast and brag about all they do and all the money they make for themselves. James says that kind of arrogance is evil (16).

Instead of this presumptuous and arrogant preparation, he says, "You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" This is what God has always required: that God's people walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We recognize that we have no guarantee of anything but this present moment, so we put ourselves in God's hands and we seek God's will for how we're to live this day. We live with God that way in each day that God graciously gives us and we eventually come to God's goal and purpose for us.

If these merchants James addresses were Christians, we'd expect them to put God's will first. Maybe they were in the church and praising God and saying the right "church" words. But they divided their lives into separate compartments. Church and God were over here, the business was over there, and they really had nothing to do with each other. I remember

reading some years ago a quote from the president of a major corporation. He said, "I believe in God, family and the business. But at the office that order is reversed" (Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger Files*).

James says to seek God's will in every area of life. There is no area of life outside God's realm. All that we are, all that we have, is from God. We need to be thankful and seek the ways God wants us to manage the life and relationships and possessions God has entrusted to us.

Knowing that and not doing it is sin. Verse 17 refers to what James has just been saying. Knowing to be humble and to seek God's will and not doing it is sin. If we seek God's will and then don't do it, that's sin.

A principle of discipleship is to do what we know to do. The same principle applies in knowing God's will. We do what we know God wants and then God gives guidance on where to go from there. We use what God has given and then God gives more.

Suppressing what we know, ignoring God's will that is clear to us, hoarding what God has given us closes us in on ourselves. We stagnate. We are bound. We die. That's what sin does.

In 5:1-6 James turns his attention to another wealthy group—landowners. The poor Christians are being tested by these rich oppressors. The landowners James addresses here are likely not members of the Christian community. Here especially James sounds like an OT prophet condemning oppression of the poor by the rich. The word of warning may also include those in the Christian community who show favoritism to these wealthy oppressors (as in chapter 2).

James warns these wealthy landowners about the coming judgment of God that should cause them to weep and wail. This is because their wealth, all they've hoarded and piled up, is rotten, moth-eaten, and corroded. They will weep because their wealth is only temporary and because they'll be judged for their selfish use of temporary goods.

Not only have they kept their wealth for themselves and failed to share, but they've also actively oppressed the poor who work their land. As the corruption of their wealth will testify against them, the wages they've failed to pay their hired laborers cry out against the landowners. Not only that, but the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of

Hosts. That means judgment is certain. For God to hear the cry of the poor is for God to bring judgment on their oppressors.

James echoes a lot of what Jesus teaches. Warnings about the deceitfulness of riches and the dangers of wealth are all over the Bible. C. S. Lewis sums up that teaching pretty well when he writes, "Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it,' while really it is finding its place in him" (*The Screwtape Letters* 132).

The Bible also teaches that God owns the whole world and everything in it. We're to use what we have with gratitude and as stewards or managers who don't own but are entrusted with the Lord's goods to use.

Let's seek God's will about our money and possessions. Our faith will be proved genuine if we submit to God's will and share generously with those in need, rather than keeping everything to ourselves. Faith may also be proved genuine as we learn how to receive from God and manage what God entrusts to us. Let's help each other live the way God calls us to live—with hands open to God to receive and to give.

Bob Benson tells about speaking at a retreat. He was talking about letting go, holding life with an open hand. Everybody was looking at him, then all of a sudden everybody's eyes went to the right and he was just standing there. So he looked to see what was going on. There were walnut leaves blowing off the trees outside. It's not a *herd* of leaves, but whatever it's called, a bunch of them were floating down all at once, enough to attract all those people's attention.

Bob said to the audience, "Let's just be quiet for a minute. Everybody listen." They listened, wondering what he was up to. Then he said, "Did anybody hear the walnut tree complain?" Of course they didn't.

Sometime God had said to the walnut tree, "If those leaves stay on all winter, then one night there will come a hard freeze. All that water will freeze on those leaves. It will snow and they'll get so heavy it will break all of your limbs. It would be better if you would just let go of those leaves in the fall. I'll give you some more in the spring."

The walnut tree just said, "Okay." It just dropped those leaves. We ought to be at least as smart as a tree.

Think of all the things you hang on to. All the stuff that's part of your life.

Now can you put it all into your open hands? Can you imagine all that is you and yours in your hands? Then the hard question for us all comes to mind. Can you hold it all with open hands, or must you grasp and hold? Is there something or someone you feel you just have to at least keep a thumb on?

I wish for you the joy of holding life with an open hand. Just let go of all the stuff you've had to worry about and hang on to and protect, and drag, and fight everybody else away from. If you could just believe that you could hold them open. [God will] help you with your marriage. He'll help you with your kids. He'll help you with your hopes and dreams. (*Something's Going on Here* 129-31)

Can we let go and entrust ourselves and everyone and everything we love to the will of our good and generous and wise God?