

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

PERSPECTIVE FOR PERSEVERANCE

James 1:9-12

By

Steven J. Cole

May 1, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons
via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

May 1, 2005
James Lesson 3

Perspective for Perseverance
James 1:9-12

A few weeks ago, Marla and I went down to the desert and hiked among the beautiful wildflowers that the abundant winter rains produced. They were not quite as spectacular as the Colorado wildflowers in the summer, but almost. But the thing about wildflowers in the desert is, you've got to catch them at their peak, because they don't last very long. The intense heat soon wilts them and their glory fades.

That's the picture that James (1:11) gives us of the rich man: "For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away." The climate of Israel is much like that of Southern California, where I grew up. Normally, the afternoon sea breezes cool things down. But sometimes the wind direction shifts, and it comes in from the desert. In Israel, these winds are called "Siroccos." In California, they are called Santa Ana winds, and they can drive up the temperatures from the 80's to 110 F. It doesn't take long for such hot winds to wilt everything.

James is giving us some tests of true faith. True faith has joy even when it faces trials (1:2-4). It seeks God for wisdom in such times (1:5-8). Here (1:9-12), James shows us that true faith adopts God's eternal perspective regarding poverty and riches.

To persevere in trials with joy, adopt God's
eternal perspective on poverty and riches.

There is a contrast here between the permanent and the perishable. Until we live in light of this distinctive, we will not handle trials or persecution very well. If we get caught up with the world's pursuit of wealth as the key to happiness, we will miss God's way of true blessedness, which centers on eternal riches that cannot be taken from us by any circumstance, including death. First, James speaks to the poor Christian (1:9); then, to the rich (1:10-11); and, finally, he offers hope to all who persevere under trials (1:12).

1. The poor believer must glory in his eternal riches in Christ (1:9).

James gives us a paradox that levels the playing field between the rich and the poor in the church. He says that the poor are rich and the rich are poor. He does not advocate some form of forced or voluntary redistribution of wealth, but he does show that in the church, the world's distinctions—status for the rich and insignificance for the poor—do not hold true (see 2:1-7). Also, note that contrary to a distinctively American heresy, which has spread to other countries, James does not say that the poor brother is to claim his Cadillac by faith. The “name it and claim it” or “health and wealth” heresy is a perversion of God's Word that uses false promises to appeal to the greed of its victims.

The theme of the rich and the poor is woven throughout James (1:9-11; 2:1-7, 15-16; 5:1-6). He draws on the teaching both of the Old Testament and of Jesus. James brings together three elements (gleaned from Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 35-36; and Peter Davids, *Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], pp. 41-47). First, God has a particular concern for the poor (Ps. 68:5; Deut. 10:18). Thus James points out (2:5), “Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith...?”

Second, because God has this concern for the poor, His people should reflect the same concern (Deut. 10:19). Thus James (1:27) says that one aspect of pure religion is “to visit the orphans and widows in their distress, ...” A profession of faith that ignores the physical needs of a brother is dead faith (2:15-16).

Third, the Old Testament sometimes associates the poor with the humble and righteous, and the rich with the wicked oppressor, thus merging the economic with the spiritual (Ps. 10; 37:8-17; 72:2, 4). Jesus did this in the beatitudes, when He said, “Blessed are you who are poor... But woe to you who are rich...” (Luke 6:20, 24). James does the same (2:5; 5:1-6). He condemns the rich that take advantage of the poor.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the Bible automatically identifies the poor as being righteous and the rich as being wicked. The Bible tells of many wealthy men who followed God: Abraham, Job, David, Solomon, Zaccheus, and others.

Wealth is a blessing that God often confers on the wise man, whereas poverty often results from sin or laziness (Prov. 3:16; 10:4; 14:23-24).

While the Bible shows that wealth may be a sign of God's blessing, it also warns about its dangers. The man who desires to get rich falls into a spiritual trap (1 Tim. 6:9-10). The rich are often prone to arrogance and greed (Prov. 28:11; 15:27). They often do not see their need for God, because they trust in their money (Prov. 11:28). Life seems good, they have no needs, and they ignore the obvious fact that riches are of no value in the inevitable day of death (Prov. 11:4).

The Bible also shows that poverty can be a mixed bag. It may result from ignoring God's ways (Prov. 13:8, 18). It can destroy the man (Prov. 10:15), his relationships (Prov. 19:4, 7), and his independence (Prov. 22:7). It can tempt him to steal (Prov. 30:7-9). But, poor people often have integrity and humility, which the rich often lack (Prov. 19:1; 28:6, 11).

Commenting on Jesus' first beatitude, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Luke 6:20), Leon Morris states (*Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 127):

[Jesus] is not blessing poverty in itself: that can as easily be a curse as a blessing. It is His disciples of whom Jesus is speaking. They are poor and they know that they are without resource. They rely on God and they must rely on Him, for they have nothing of their own on which to rely.... The rich of this world often are self-reliant. Not so the poor.

So poverty can be an advantage over wealth if it shows a person his need for God, who pours out spiritual blessings on all who call upon Him.

With that as an overview, James directs the poor man to *glory in his high position*, which refers to his spiritual wealth in Christ. When a poor man trusts in Christ as Savior and Lord, he instantly becomes the heir of a vast fortune. He is a child of the King of kings, with access to all of the King's resources. Paul pictures the believer as seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Paul repeatedly refers to the believer as being "in Christ," which means that everything that is true of Christ is true of us. He tells

the Corinthians, "all things belong to you, whether ... the world or life or death or things present or things to come..." (1 Cor. 3:21, 22). He tells us (Rom. 8:17) that if we are children of God, then we are "heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..."

James tells the poor believer to glory in these precious truths. Skeptics, who have no concept of the reality of spiritual truth, would no doubt mock James' advice at this point. "What good is it to tell a poor man to glory in his spiritual riches in Christ? He's still living in a shack. He still wears ragged clothes. He still eats meager meals. His children are still barefoot and lack good medical care. What good are these spiritual riches to this man?"

But that view stems from a materialistic mindset and ignores the fact that the basic need of every human heart is spiritual, not material. James will go on to say that true faith will supply a poor brother with the basic necessities of life (2:15-16). But Paul says, "If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim. 6:8). The Bible calls us to believe that our spiritual riches in Christ *are reality*. Material riches *are illusory*, a vapor that evaporates before our eyes.

What does it mean, *to glory* in our high position in Christ? The apostle Paul uses this word often, sometimes negatively, but sometimes positively. Negatively, we are not to boast in anything in ourselves. The Corinthians were boasting wrongfully in themselves, and Paul rebukes them, asking (1 Cor. 4:7), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" If all that we have is because of God's unmerited favor, then why do we exalt ourselves, as if our supposed superiority came from ourselves? The concept of "self-esteem" that has flooded the church in the past 35 years, comes from worldly psychology, not from God's Word. Christ did not die for you or me because we were worthy! Quite the opposite, He died for us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8).

But, positively, we may boast or glory in the Lord, to bring glory to Him. As Paul argues (1 Cor. 1:26-31), God has chosen us who are foolish, weak, and despised in the eyes of the world "so that no man may boast before God." He goes on to say, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus... so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:29-31). This is why

the doctrine of election is so important: it removes any ground for boasting in ourselves. If we are saved because of *our choice*, we have grounds for boasting. "I chose God because I'm so intelligent!" But if salvation is *totally* from God, beginning with His sovereign choice of me out of the cesspool of sin, then all I can do is glory or boast in the Lord (see Gal. 6:14).

2. The rich believer must glory in his humiliation in Christ, knowing that it represents eternal riches that will never pass away (1:10-11).

It is a thorny issue to decide whether the rich man here is a believer or an unbeliever. Commentators are pretty evenly divided. If it refers to a rich unbeliever, then verse 10 is using strong irony or sarcasm, saying, "Let the rich man glory in the fact that he's going to be pushing daisies in a few short years!" He will be pursuing more wealth when, just like the spring wildflowers, he will fade away. In this view, the withering and fading of the flower is a reference to final judgment.

That view has much to commend it, but I lean toward the view that James is referring here to rich believers. He mentions rich men coming into their assembly (2:2) and those who travel in business and boast about their plans to make a profit (4:13-16). In this view, the exhortation in its context views both poverty and wealth as tests of faith (1:12). The poor man is tempted by his poverty to devote himself to the pursuit of wealth. Or, he may be tempted to feel neglected by God because of his poverty. James tells him, rather, to focus on his spiritual riches in Christ.

The rich man is tempted to glory in his wealth and the status and power that come from financial success. James tells him to glory, rather, in his humiliation as a believer. His wealth does not put him on a higher spiritual rung than the poor believer. His wealth pertains only to this fleeting life. He and his money will soon fade away. As someone has said, "When the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box." The rich man's mansion, property holdings, and stock portfolio will mean nothing when he is in the grave. So the rich man must not follow the world by glorying in his riches. Rather, he must glory in his humiliation.

Most of us think, "This applies to Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and those type of guys." But by the world's standards, most of us qualify as "rich." Many of us own our own homes. We have computers, TV's, and dozens of other gadgets to make life more comfortable. Most families own more than one car. Our closets are bulging with so many clothes that it takes us a while to decide what we want to wear each day. Much of the rest of the world lives in crowded shacks with no indoor plumbing or electricity, and no clothes except those on their backs. So we need to apply verses 10-11 to ourselves! How can *we* glory in our humiliation?

First, we can glory in the fact that God has opened our eyes to see the vanity of worldly wealth and status. I state this as if it is true of you! I hope that you agree! To live to accumulate the world's junk and to strive after the world's acclaim is futile! Right after the evening news, a program about all of the rich and famous in Hollywood comes on. Sometimes I catch the first minute or two of this program before I grab the remote and click it off. It's thoroughly disgusting. All of these celebrities are stuck on their own glamour and fame. Many viewers probably think, "Wow, that's the kind of life I would like to have!" Christians ought to think, "How tragic! These people are living for vanity—emptiness!"

Second, we can glory in the fact that God has shown us the essence of true happiness and honor. True happiness is to know God. True honor is to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Thus says the Lord, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:23-24).

Third, we can glory in the fact that we now have an eternal inheritance that will never be taken away. Psalm 49 mocks the rich man, who congratulates himself, naming his lands after himself, and thinks that his fame will endure forever. It says, bluntly (Ps. 49:12), "But man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish." But believers have "an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). As

John Newton put it (“Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”), “Solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion’s children know.”

Thus James tells the poor that they are rich in Christ and the rich that they are poor in their humiliation in Christ. He continues,

3. Both rich and poor who persevere under trial should look forward to the crown of life that God has promised to those that love Him (1:12).

Verse 12 goes back to the opening theme of 1:2-4. *Trial* occurs in 1:2 & 12. *Joy* (1:2) and *blessing* (1:12) are related. “Blessed” means happy, but it means more than happy. Happiness is a more momentary emotion, whereas blessedness refers to a lasting condition that undergirds momentary sorrow or sadness. *Persevere* (1:12) goes back to the same word in 1:3-4. And, *been approved* (1:12) is related to *testing* in 1:3. It has the idea of being tested and passing the test, so that God’s “Good Housekeeping” stamp of approval is on your life. Verse 12 brings out four truths:

- A. Both poverty and riches are tests of faith.

Greed is not the exclusive temptation of the rich. The poor man can be just as greedy and materialistic as the wealthy man. The poor often covet what the rich already have. But if the focus of both groups is on getting more money or possessions as the way to true happiness, they do not have God’s perspective.

Both rich and poor are prone to pride. The poor Christian can become proud over how poor he is for the sake of the kingdom, and thus boast in being more spiritual than the rich. The rich can be proud over how God has blessed them and given them such influence. Both need to develop the humility that comes from bowing before God’s grace.

Some may say, like Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof,” “If riches are a test or trial, smite me with it!” But the apostle Paul warns that the desire for riches has plunged many into ruin and destruction, causing them to wander away from the faith (1 Tim. 6:9-10). The test of riches is that it feeds our greed and gets our focus on this world. To pass the test, we must glory in our humiliation.

- B. The way of true blessing is not to be exempt from trials, but to persevere under them.

James does *not* say, "Blessed is the man who never goes through trials." Nor does he say, "Blessed is the rich man." Rather, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." Testing has a way of leveling the rich and the poor. It helps all of us to get our focus on the right things, namely, eternal things. The wealthy Kennedy clan has had so much tragedy hit them that you would think that those that remain would repent and believe on Christ. They have gone through assassinations, cancer, divorces, serious scandals involving the law, sudden deaths through plane crashes, and more. You would think that they could see that worldly riches are worthless in light of eternity! It's only when we believe in Christ and adopt God's eternal perspective that we can persevere under trials with the joy of salvation.

- C. The crown of life is God's reward for those that persevere under trials.

The man who perseveres under trials is blessed in this life, but James' emphasis is on the rewards of heaven. The English name, Steven (or, Stephen) comes from the Greek word for crown, which referred to the victor's wreath in athletic contests. The picture here is of the believer struggling and striving in the contest, but the reward of the crown awaits him at the end if he perseveres. The "crown of life" refers to the eternal life that we will enjoy forever with God. It is not that we earn eternal life as a reward for our perseverance. Rather, eternal life is God's gift of grace (John 5:24; Eph. 2:8-9), but we don't enter into the full enjoyment of it until after we have persevered in the race that God has given us to run in this life. "If we endure, we will also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2:12a).

- D. The strength to persevere under trials comes from love for Christ.

You might expect James to say, "the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who persevere," or "to those who obey," or "to those who believe in Him." But rather, he says, "to those who *love* Him." Why does he say this?

I think it is because love for Christ keeps us from loving the world. Love for Christ motivates us to persevere under trials. Note that love for Christ does not exempt us from trials. Rather, it gives

us the strength to persevere. Love for Christ is the inevitable result of belief in Him. If we don't love Him, we don't know Him (1 John 4:8). When Jesus restored Peter after his denials, He asked him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" (See John 21:15, 16, 17.) Why? Because love for Jesus Christ is the necessary motivation to serve Him, especially when serving Him causes hardship and persecution. If you're struggling with perseverance in trials, examine the quality of your love for Christ.

Conclusion

The famous evangelist, George Whitefield, once told of seeing some criminals riding in a cart on their way to the gallows. They were arguing about who should sit on the right hand of the cart, with no more concern than children arguing about who sits where in the car (in Elisabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man* [Westminster Press], p. 113). Here were men about to die that very day, arguing over who got the best seat!

James would have us see that life is a vapor (4:14). We're all going to die soon. To focus on accumulating wealth if we lack it or to expend ourselves in amassing more wealth than we already have, would be rather shortsighted. Rather, we should focus on the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him. That eternal focus will enable us to persevere in trials with joy.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it wrong for the poor to seek to better their financial condition? What parameters apply?
2. When do we cross the line between having riches and trusting in them? How can we keep in focus the vanity of wealth?
3. In what ways is poverty a test of faith? How is wealth a test of faith? How are they similar and different?
4. If our love for Christ has grown cold, how can we revive it?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.