

James 1:9-11, 2:1-13, 4:13-17

Riches and Poverty

Chapter 1:9-11

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

Chapter 4:13-17:

¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.

Chapter 2:1-13

¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² 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. ³ 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,” ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ 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? ⁶ 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? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? ⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. ¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Background notes:

Helpful summary:

‘worldly poverty serves to throw into relief the glory of our riches in Christ, and worldly wealth pales before what we gain when we are joined to him.’

(page 91, ‘The Message of James’, Alec Motyer)

Why these passages?

The segments from chapter 1 and chapter 4 seem to go together, so it makes sense to deal with them together. Both emphasise the impermanency of our existence, and therefore the uselessness of boasting in either our riches (chapter 1) or our plans (chapter 4).

Chapter 2 builds on the themes introduced in chapter 1.

How to use these notes:

As usual, the following questions are merely guides for you to work through the passage. They aren’t necessarily what you would want to present to your group as a study exactly as is.

You are unlikely to have enough time to deal with all of the passages in a lot of detail. I would suggest focussing on one of them in more detail, and letting the others add context.

Chapter 1:9-11 Poverty and riches:

- Is James anti-riches?
 - Remember the key verse and key idea in chapter one is verse 4: maturity which comes through trials. Remember also that just before these verses, James has encouraged them to ask for wisdom, for God’s perspective on their situation.
 - Both the rich and the poor are being encouraged to consider their lives (their present situations) in the light of eternity (that neither riches nor poverty last forever) and in the light of this goal of the Christian life: maturity.
 - (Notice also that James refers to Abraham and Job favourably later on in the letter, even though they were very rich men)
- In what ways do you think we are tempted to ‘boast in our riches’?
- What would it look like to boast in ‘being brought low’?

Chapter 4:13-17 Boasting about tomorrow:

- Is this saying that it is wrong to plan? (Why/why not?)

- It seems to be the attitude with which people make statements about what they are doing that James has a problem with (see verse 16 'arrogance')
- What is he saying then?
 - Could this include people who are so tied to their dreams that they are not willing to let God change them? Who haven't submitted even their dreams/hopes/plans for the future to God?
 - Our security cannot be in our plans, because we don't know if we will even be around to see them through.
 - 'We assure ourselves that time is on our side and at our disposal... We make our plans as it personal ability... and the profit motive... were the only issues to take into account. We overlook frailty... and ignore the fact that even the small print of life is in the hands of a sovereign God...' page 160 'The Message of James', Alec Motyer.
- Are you willing to say 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that'? That is, are you willing to submit your life humbly to God?
 - What would it look like to do that?

Some questions that might be helpful regarding 2:1-13:

- Why does James make such a strong connection between faith in Jesus and favouritism? (verses 1-4) (Another way of wording this is: what is the connection that James makes between faith in Jesus, and favouritism?)
 - Notice also the description he gives for Jesus: 'our glorious Lord Jesus Christ'. Why would he use this description in this context?
 - (Glory can be understood as all of God's goodness and greatness revealed)
- 'James teaches by a clear implication that in both status and judgment the Lord Jesus Christ, who is himself the Glory, must reign supreme. As to how we accept others, we must ask how he would accept them... As to how to we appraise others, we must ask how he appraises them. As to how we act towards others, we must ask how he would act towards them. Our values, priorities and activities must ever be governed by the definition of true glory displayed in the person, conduct and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.' Page 86 'The Message of James', Alec Motyer.
- What does partiality show about our perspective on wealth and poverty?
 - i.e. Remember the challenge of chapter 1:9-11 to have a different perspective on financial position.
 - See also 2 Corinthians 8:9 for a different way to conceive of riches and poverty.
 - Do you think of yourself as rich or poor (spiritually or otherwise)?
 - Are we judging by the standards of the world, or God's standards?
 - In view of Jesus' glory, none of us look particularly great (rich or poor).

- (Chapter 4:11-12 gives more insight into this: we have no right to judge because that is God's role). If we judge the poor by treating them with less respect, we demonstrate disrespect for God's choice (v 5) as he clearly values the poor. Who are we to do otherwise?
 - See Deut. 10:17-19 for a helpful verse on this point.

- Do you think we 'show partiality' at St. Hilary's? In what ways?
 - What particular dangers are there for us in this regard?
 - Who are the 'poor' around us? (ie. Is it just material poverty or other things as well?)
 - Who has social capital/respect/preference in our community?
 - Who is in danger of being excluded?

- In what ways do/could we demonstrate *impartiality* in our community?
 - This question should lead into considering verses 8 onwards. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.