

Lifestyles Of The Rich And Humble • James 1:9-11

It's hard to figure out who's rich and who's poor for wealth and poverty are relative. If a person makes more than two hundred thirty-nine dollars a year in the central African country of Burundi, that person is counted among the richest half of all the people in that nation. But in Switzerland a working couple earning fifty thousand dollars a year could be classified as in the poorest half of all the people in that nation.

It's hard to define who's rich and who's poor but we all tend to do it. How we classify ourselves affects how we see ourselves, how we relate to other people and how we live our lives. That's why some of the most practical advice in the Bible is in James 1:9-11.

There are two very strong recommendations in this passage. In fact, the Bible uses words like "should" and "ought" almost as if these are direct orders that come from God. But we have to be careful because there actually two prescriptions here and you want to be careful that you don't take the wrong prescription. One is for the poor; the other is for the rich.

Answer this question: Compared to other Christians in the church would you classify your financial situation as above or below average? If you decide that you are poor in comparison to other people, your prescription is in James 1: 9. If you decide that you're rich in comparison to other people, then your prescription is in James 1:10-11.

Maybe a few statistics will be helpful. Economists generally classify people in terms of household income. Otherwise a child with no income would be considered poor even if he lived in a million dollar house. The average household income

in the United States is about \$39,000 per year.

Another way of deciding if we're rich or poor is how we compare to the income of different segments of society. For example, anyone who earns \$17,000 a year or less is in the lowest twenty percent of wage earners in the United States. If your income for last year was more than \$102,824 then you're in the top five percent of all wage earners in the United States.

The official definition of poverty in the USA is a total household income of less than \$14,000 per year for a family of four. It's amazing that over fourteen percent of the American population is below the poverty line – that's 35.7 million people living in poverty in this country.

With all those statistics and with all of our personal experience most of us can decide whether we consider ourselves to be rich or poor.

James 1:9 first gives the prescription for poor Christians:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

This is an amazing statement. It is an order to be proud and God usually considers pride to be a sin! Pride is something we're supposed to avoid. And yet here God is telling us that we should be

proud. It's a good thing to be proud if you are a Christian and you're poor because you have a high position because of your relationship to

God. When a person is a Christian he or she is directly connected with God through Jesus Christ. God calls Christians his sons and daughters and that is a high position indeed.

Toward the end of Ronald Reagan's first term, he came to Columbus, Ohio to speak at a national

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convention. I just so happened that year to be on the Executive Committee of the organization sponsoring the convention so I was one of about ten or twelve people who sat on the platform with the President of the United States. Afterwards I went to a reception and had my picture taken with the president.

Also at that convention were some major donors to the Republican Party, persons whose wealth made me very poor by comparison. But they had to sit on the floor of the convention center while I sat with the President on the platform. Those people were far richer than I was or ever will be but because of my position on the committee I got to walk back stage with the Commander-in-Chief.

I've got to tell you, it felt kind of good. I was proud to have that high position and I really didn't think very much about the amount of money that those "big hitters" had. For at least that moment, I had a privileged position that their money could not buy.

James 1:9 is telling those of us who are poor in money that we have a high position with God that a trillion dollars could never buy. To be a Christian is to sit on the stage with God himself, to walk with him, to talk with him. It is to share the rule of the universe in future positions of authority that not even the angels are qualified to attain. To be a Christian is to hold a position with God that should make the soul so glad that the money of the richest people doesn't even matter.

Those who have less money, fewer possessions, smaller houses or no houses at all should not be sad but glad. They ought to feel great pride in their high position as a believer in Jesus Christ. Instead of feeling poor, feel rich! Instead of feeling weak, feel strong! Instead of feeling like a nobody, feel like somebody who has a special privileged position with God. And if someone asks what right you have to think you're so important, you can tell them

that God gave you that right because you are a Christian.

So much for the advice to poor Christians. Next comes the advice to rich Christians in James 1:10-11.

But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wildflower. 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 man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

I think it's interesting that there are four and a half times as many words giving advice to the rich than to the poor. The poor people have thirteen words of instruction and the rich people have fifty-eight words of instruction. Apparently God thinks being rich is a much bigger problem than being poor.

Being rich can be very dangerous. There are relatively few people who handle wealth well. There is a subtle evil that often accompanies wealth. It's a pride that somehow says that I'm better than another person because I have money, because I have clout.

Think of it the next time that you fly on an airplane. I don't recall that I have ever bought a First Class ticket but I have often flown First Class because of upgrades. In the waiting area I hold my First Class boarding pass ready and when an announcement comes that says that I can go ahead of all the other people, I do. I walk on while they have to stand there and wait even if they got there first. When I get on the plane the flight attendant takes my jacket and hangs it up on a hangar while the other people have to roll theirs up in a ball and put it in the overhead compartment. And then I sit down in an especially spacious and comfortable chair (often leather in many airlines) and the flight attendant asks me what beverage I would like. I can have whatever beverage I want for free and as of-

ten as I want. The poor people in the back have to wait until the cart comes around and then they only get one cup of coffee or a glass of coke. My meal is better and it's served on china instead of plastic. The bathroom is closer and there is seldom a line. There's even a curtain drawn so we First Class passengers don't have to put up with prying eyes of the tourists in the back. And when the curtain is drawn there's an unspoken rule that those of us in first class can go back to the coach section but the coach passengers must never part the curtain and invade our First Class territory. At the end of the flight the coach passengers always have to wait while the First Class passengers debark first.

Many times as I sit there, mineral water in hand, and watch the poor people file in like cattle to their tight seats, struggling to find places to put their belongings, I'm tempted to feel superior. Even though I didn't pay any more for my ticket than they did, somehow my position makes me feel like I am better than they are.

And what should I do? The Bible says, "The one who is rich should take pride in his low position." Maybe that means getting on last. Maybe it means hanging up my own jacket. Maybe it means volunteering for a center seat in the back row. At the very least it means that when I sit in First Class I should not be proud that I have wealth or status. If I am going to be proud I should take pride in the low position that is mine as a person. I need to remember that where I sit on the airplane or how much money I have in the bank has nothing to do with my true value or position as a person.

To "take pride in a low position" means that my true value is not in riches or high position, but someplace else. It is realizing that the ground be-

fore God is absolutely flat. To become a Christian means coming before God and admitting your inability to win his favor – regardless of whether you are rich or poor. (The only reason anyone ever becomes a Christian is because God is gracious enough to forgive our evil and give us new life in Jesus Christ.)

If I'm going to be proud I need to be proud of knowing what my real position is before God. Proud of realizing that money doesn't matter and proud to realize that God reached down to me the way I really am and took a "nobody" and made him into someone who belongs to him through Jesus Christ.

James adds a reason for those who are rich to

remember. He explains that wealth can quickly disappear. It is like a wildflower that springs up in the Israeli desert. A photographer might capture its magnificence

with a close-up lens but then a sirocco wind comes and literally within minutes the flower is wilted and dried out. It is ugly and dead, just like that.

And so James says that those who get their status, their importance and their relationship to other people on the basis of their wealth need to remember that wealth can instantly disappear. It can happen on a business trip. "The rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business."

Imagine leaving home flying First Class. You have lots of money and everyone treats you as though you are special. You fly to a distant place and there you suddenly get sick or you are mugged and your wallet is stolen. You are in a place where nobody cares who you are. Suddenly you're nobody and riches don't matter. It really can happen.

Maybe the best way to grasp what it means to be rich and yet to take pride in a lowly position is a

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true story from a biography that I read about a man who was really really rich. It was family money but he also worked hard. I suppose you could say that because of his true humility and hard work he really had every right to that wealth. He lived in a huge mansion and everyone around him did whatever he asked so he had this astonishing power. He had it made. He had everything. But the people who knew him best, even those who worked for him, really liked him. They sensed his character. Instead of being a snob he was truly a nice guy.

Anyway, eventually he decided to have a major change in his life and did a most amazing thing. He decided to leave home, move to a country where people were extremely poor and do volunteer work there to help them. In fact, he spent the rest of his life there. But when he went he took no money with him and went as a complete stranger. He started all over again and went and lived with these poor people.

Among my favorite parts of his biography are stories about times he had run-ins with rich people who treated him poorly. They thought they had so much and he was so poor. He just let them make fools of themselves.

He was quite a man. He lived out what the Bible tells all rich people to do. He who was rich took pride in his low position.

Now I want to tell you who he is. I don't think I can pronounce his original name, but I think that you will be very familiar with the new name that he took on when he became poor. He took the name "Jesus."

In the words of II Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

So here's the deal. If you are poor, don't think so much about the money that you don't have. Instead fill your head with pride over how important

you are to God. And if you're rich, don't think so much about the money that you do have. Instead fill your head with pride that in the low position that is yours without money, God reached down and gave you the opportunity to be like Jesus.

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