

Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

#1 Being wise in wealth or want

James 1:1-11

James writes to “rich” and “poor”

The richest people in Australia were announced last month and the top four reveal some interesting differences:



- One gained their wealth mostly by way of **inheritance**
- Another **refuses to pass on** their wealth to their offspring
- Three of them got rich by **exploiting** the planet’s natural resources
- One has given millions to **charity**, but allegedly nothing to the **tax** man
- One is campaigning for **climate** action, but not the one with a green-friendly surname!

I doubt anyone listening right now **counts themselves in the same company** as these four. Am I right?

And yet, according to CEDA,¹ Australia is ranked number 1 in the list of Top 10 major economies with the **highest median wealth per adult**. From a global perspective, **many of us are** considered to be “rich”.

The New Testament Letter of James is written to some who were **rich** and some who were **poor**. Both, in James’ original audience were **facing many trials** due to their association with Christianity.

REFLECT

I wonder, when you read The Letter of James, **do you put yourself in the shoes of the rich or the poor?**

When I was young I listened to music on **vinyl**. Nowadays it’s cool, right? Back then it was just “normal”.

On my dad’s amplifier there was a knob marked “**balance – left and right**”. Some records were produced in what was called “**pure stereo**”.



¹ CEDA – the Committee for Economic Development of Australia – is an independent, membership-based think tank formed in 1960 <https://www.ceda.com.au/NewsAndResources/Opinion/International-affairs/Australia-tops-global-wealth-rankings>

The sounds of instruments and voices came out **exactly as the musicians were spaced across the stage** from left to right when they were recorded.

If you turned the balance knob **fully to the left** you could remove the sounds of instruments and voices on the right of the stage.



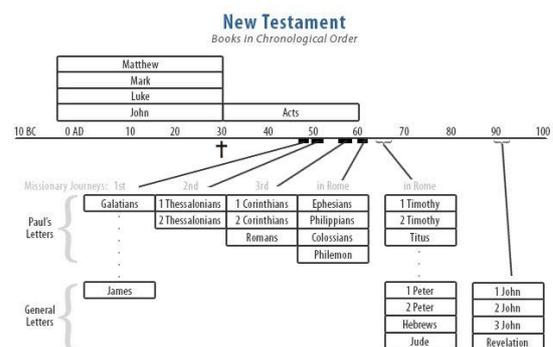
If you turned the balance knob **fully to the right** you could remove the sounds of those on the left.



Bible scholar Mariam Kamell suggests that many Christians in the modern **West** have been **deaf to the teaching** meant for them in the Letter of James; **the teaching directed at the “rich”**. It’s as if we have had the balance knob **fully turned to one side** and have missed what is meant for us.

Intro to James

Let’s look at the Letter. James 1:1 suggests that the first “listeners” of this letter, a mix of rich and poor Christians, were mostly of Jewish background among those spread out across Palestine and Syria.² Many scholars agree that the author is James, the brother of Jesus, and leader of the Church in Jerusalem.³ And he was writing in troubling times, close to when Jesus was crucified.⁴



When the original house churches heard this letter, they did so from beginning to end in one sitting (or standing 😊).

Some may say The Letter of James is all about faith and works. Others will say, James is on about wisdom from God. But when you hear the whole letter read aloud, one key them is dominant, and a clear pattern, **common to many ancient forms of teaching**, is apparent.

² The dispersion or “diaspora” of Jews across the Roman empire due to persecution was widespread

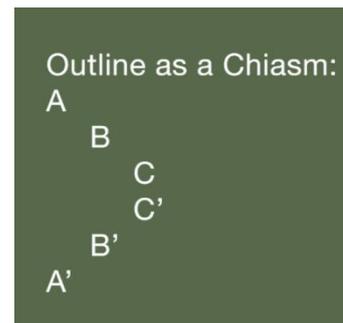
³ Acts 15:13

⁴ Possibly as early as 48AD, making this one of the earliest New Testament documents we have

The three key themes of The Letter of James are:

- A. Trials in the Christian life,
- B. Wisdom, and
- C. Riches and Poverty

All three are previewed in James 1:1-11. And, as the diagram opposite shows, across the whole letter the three form a chiasmic pattern.⁵



Note how topic “C” is most prominent and therefore would have been most memorable from the whole teaching exercise.

We can conclude that the major theme in this letter is **riches and poverty** in the Christian community. We know that in the Gospels **Jesus** taught far **more about the dangers of loving wealth**⁶ than he did about prayer or sex or family. Paul taught Timothy⁷ to **warn the rich** among his congregation about the **temptations** wealth imposes on one’s life. He even highlighted **Jesus’ voluntary poverty** as the means by which we receive true, spiritual riches.⁸

So, let’s now **zoom in on that third theme** as found in our reading from James 1:1-11 to get a preview of what’s to come in this series.⁹ In verses 9-11 we read:

⁹ Believers in humble¹⁰ circumstances should take pride¹¹ in their high position,¹⁰ and the rich [should take pride] in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

⁵ from the Greek meaning ‘mark with a letter’ and the Latin meaning ‘crosswise arrangement’

⁶ E.g. tally up and compare these topics in Matt. 5-7

⁷ 1 Tim. 6:9

⁸ 2 Cor. 8:9

⁹ In chapter 1, James teaches both rich and poor about facing trials as Christians. He says:

1. Be joyful that trials give opportunities to mature in faith (2-4)
2. Secondly, ask God for wisdom, don’t search everywhere else for it (5-8)
3. And thirdly, consider trials the great leveller between rich and poor (9-11)

¹⁰ Can be translated “humiliating” circumstances.

¹¹ “boast”

Firstly, note verse 9 is written to the “poor” in the churches. What were they like? Chapter 5 reveals that some were casual laborers for wealthy farmers. Many of the poor in these house churches would have had no fixed address. Little or no actual money. Maybe one **coat** to wear. Some would have feared daily for **safety** or even for their very lives?¹² On top of all this, they were facing marginalization, threat, and persecution for becoming Christians.

It’s true to say, then, that apart from a few exceptions, most people listening to me here in Melbourne **would not in similar circumstances**. So, verse 9 **may not be for you**.

Let me say, **if you are** in similar circumstances to those I’ve described, or you live in relative poverty and face trials for following Christ I am **deeply sorry** and **concerned** for you. James would say to you, as he did to those ancient ones, **ask God** to help you **think** of your **spiritual situation, as the opposite** of your practical circumstances. The Gospel of Jesus assures us that the God of the universe is with us to **provide**, to **comfort**, to **sustain**, to **hang on** to us. This is not true for others who have **no-one** and **nothing** to help them in trials. Earlier in chapter 1 James warns us not be be “doubters”, double-minded people. Some in James’ day hedged their bets, choosing to pray to God but to keep seeking idols and mystery religions for comfort. But James gave us confidence to trust in God through faith in Jesus Christ. Through Him we have the **promise of eternal life**, the **comfort** of the Holy Spirit now. James will also show that the poor should also be blessed with the **practical help** of a generous and supportive community of faith, their church (but the “rich” Christians must play their part for this to be true!).

Those who don’t see themselves among the “poor” among those ancient recipients of James’ letter need to turn the “**balance knob**” all the way in the other direction. We need to listen clearly to the teaching most likely **meant for us**: the teaching to the “rich”.

In verses 10 and 11 James calls **rich** Christians **to boast in your humiliation**.

¹⁰[Let the] the rich [boast] in being brought low, because they will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is

¹² Even a cursory study of 1st Century Jewish or Roman society will show this

the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Who, then, are the “rich”? These were probably artisans and traders, land owners, “free-men”, those with family, and those with possessions and means. It’s wasn’t the top four rich Christians in Palestine!

The Gospel of Jesus brings an **inversion of fortunes**. Mary sang about it when she found she was pregnant with Jesus, praising God who **lifts up the lowly and brings the lofty down**.¹³

James borrows an image well-known in scripture of the withering plant to describe the life of all mortals.¹⁴ More than this, everyone knew the impact of the **Scirocco winds**.¹⁵ [Arabs today refer to it as the Khamsin winds.] Big dust storms from the desert with terrible scorching heat devastating whole fields. That’s what life for those **who love wealth** above God looks like to James.



When **trials** due to faith in Christ are added, James says we should note the fleeting fragility of life and consider **trials** as **the great leveller**.

Craig Blomberg recalls that old bumper sticker that read, **“The one with the most toys wins.”**



Blomberg says, it’s the follow-up bumper sticker that best sums up James’ warning to the rich - **“The one who dies with the most toys, still dies!”**

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6

⁶there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that[Ⓜ] we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

The Bible warns that an **appetite to acquire** and a **want for wealth** often leads to **rejection of God** and to the neglect or **exploitation of others**.¹⁶

¹³ Luke 1:52

¹⁴ See Job 14:2; Isa. 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24

¹⁵ Scorching winds and heat

¹⁶ Matt. 6:19-24 and 1 Tim. 6:10

REFLECT

Jame's words to the rich are a warning, yes, but they are also a **word of grace** to us. He calls the rich to "**boast**" in being **brought low**;¹⁷ to **take pride** in knowing we are **not really above** anyone else at all! In essence, the Gospel of Jesus **saves us** from the **delusion** that money, possessions, and worldly status **secure our lives**. Possessions and money won't help us when life is cut short. Being "brought low" graciously helps us perceive the true riches we have in Christ.

God offers **to rich and poor alike** a spiritual security and **new community of love and peace**. But the rich must learn that wealth is to be shared **generously**, to **aid the poor**, to **do justice**, and to spread the Gospel.¹⁸

No wonder James counted trials as a **means of joy**,¹⁹ not because of anything good in trials, but because through them, with the wisdom of God at hand, our faith and understanding can **mature**.

Our first lesson in the Letter of James then is clear:

- We must turn the "balance knob" all the way over to hear the teaching of this letter most likely **meant for us**.
- Let's understand the **existential urgency** that comes with this fragile and brief life on earth.
- **Seriously savour** the **sweet aroma** of common life of generosity in community that God offers both rich and poor in the Church,
- And, be sure to heed the bible's warnings about the **desire to acquire**, and the **want for wealth**.

Steve Webster St Michaels North Carlton June 2021

¹⁷ Paul instructed Timothy to tell the rich not to be haughty (1 Tim. 6:17) and venerated Jesus for his humility (Phil. 2:3-11).

¹⁸ E.g. Micah 6:8; Gal. 6:10; 1 Timothy chapter 6

¹⁹ James 1:2-4