

Is it okay to be a rich Christian?

James 1:9-11??, Psalm 49

I suspect that there will be very few questions that we could ask that will grab people's attention more than the one we are asking today from James 1. Is it okay to be a rich Christian? If we are honest, I suspect most of us want to be rich, or at least richer, but is rich compatible with being a Christian? Is it possible to follow the man who 'had nowhere to lay his head' whilst living in Berkhamsted and owning two or more cars? One of the most frequent complaints against the Roman Catholic Church concerns their great wealth held at the same time as the majority of Catholics in the world live in poverty. So what do you think? Is it okay to be a rich Christian? Let's have a show of hands. I'm going to give you 4 options. There are more options but this will do for starters:

1. It is wrong to be a rich Christian
2. It is a sign of God's blessing to be a rich Christian
3. It is dangerous to be a rich Christian
4. Poor Christians are more Biblical than rich

Do you know what? I could find myself agreeing with every one of these statements at different times. I suppose if I had to be pressed to pick just one I'd probably go for number 3. I'll explain why later. As Christians we need to get our thinking sorted out as regards money. I meet people who say (often quite self righteously), "I don't want to be rich," using *that* tone of voice which implies that if you are rich, or do want to be, then you are definitely inferior to them. The problem is that many people who talk like that seem to spend all their

time worrying about paying the bills or affording a holiday or not having a pension. Can I suggest that if you genuinely don't want to be rich that you don't then moan about being poor!! It seems to me that Paul had the right attitude when he said, *"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."* Phil 4:12 He knew what it was to have money and not to have money and neither states affected his walk with God – and to my mind that is the key point. Does my financial situation decide the quality of my faith and the type of people I'll associate with?

But we need to understand that the issue of money has been a prominent one right from the birth of the church. Jesus spoke a great deal about it, in fact more than about any other subject. Consider this:?

- 16 of 38 parables were concerned with money/possessions.?
- 1 of 10 verses in the Gospels (288) deal directly with money.?
- The Bible has 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2000 verses on money/possessions.??

Why this emphasis on money and possessions? Because Jesus understood so well the potential damage that a wrong understanding of money can bring. Recent research from George Barna, the American social researcher, confirms that money still has a real hold on our lives.:?

- 50% of Christians consider money to be the primary indicator of success.?
- 19% of Christians believe you can tell how successful a person is by examining what they own. ?

What about you? How do you gauge someone's success in life? James is clearly saying that material success does not automatically mean that a person is truly successful in life. We know that ...don't we? How many screwed up rich people provide fodder for our gossip columns? James challenges us to be contrary in our thinking and change our way of measuring success. To try and get an eternal perspective on the matter.

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I. An Eternal Perspective changes our view of people (vv. 9-10).?

If you had to ask anyone in James' time why someone was poor they wouldn't hesitate – they've sinned, God is punishing them! Similarly, someone who was rich was obviously being blessed by God. Put simply - your physical blessings exactly mirrored your spiritual depth. We no longer believe that today... or do we?

James calls for a radically different view of people.? *"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position."* What James means by that is that although he is materially poor, he has become ?spiritually rich in Jesus Christ.? Though he has no honour in worldly terms, he is exalted and given dignity in Christ.? The rich man enjoys the opposite experience.? Though materially rich, he has been humbled.? by the recognition that his riches cannot bring ?him eternal life.? By humbling himself, the rich man will receive true riches in Christ.? Both the rich man and the poor man find their hope ?in the fact that in Christ all are equal and God is not impressed by our ability to create wealth. Their ?material standing does not matter.? The poor man is not kept from

the treasures of heaven by his poverty. The rich man cannot gain the treasures of heaven by his wealth. An Eternal Perspective changes our view of people.

II. An Eternal Perspective changes our view of possessions (vv.10-11).

* Possessions and their possessors pass away. James uses the example of the wild flowers which appear for a time and then are scorched by the arid winds and die. So it is with possessions and their possessors. They are here for a very short time and then they are gone. Did you catch the words of Psalm 49? In v11 the Psalmist says that the rich man's tomb will become his home forever and v16 reminds us that, no matter how splendid their house is, it will be left behind. I suppose the most obvious example of people trying to take it with them are the Pharaohs but many centuries later when their graves were penetrated the vast fortunes that they buried with them were all still there – to the last penny. The point is that we cannot place eternal significance on that which is temporal. Material wealth does not last. We cannot depend on it to secure eternal blessing. We will die one day and our wealth will be gone. To depend on that which we cannot take beyond the grave is foolishness.

How many people here have *not* heard of Bill Gates? He's the richest man in the world at present with a fortune estimated to be around \$60B. How many people have not heard of Andrew Carnegie? A good few more people now. Well in his day he too was the richest man in the world and that was no more than 90 years ago. Who has not heard of Cornelius Vanderbilt. Almost everyone, and yet in the early to mid 1800's he too was considered to be the richest man on earth with a fortune in today's money of \$100B. Pretty impressive, eh?

But we've just shown that, no matter how successful you are financially, in 100 years from now its unlikely that anyone will remember you because of your wealth? But... someone is going to remember my name no matter what because my name is engraved on the palms of God's hands. ?100 or 50 or perhaps 10 or even 1 year from now, our possessions are going to mean nothing. We will be gone or they will be gone or both. They don't last. A little couplet that used to be quoted regularly in my early church experience went like this, "Only one life, twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."??

* Possessions and their power to seduce. The problem is that it's all so seductive. The world views true treasure in terms of bank accounts, houses, stocks, cars, boats, businesses, etc. In the world's eyes, the accumulation of these treasures *is* significant. The importance of people is measured by how much of this treasure they own and control.?? How seductive is this view of possessions? Just consider the financial scandals of the recent years. Enron, World Com, all the dot.com casualties. The desire to gain possessions and the accompanying sense of control and prestige they give led these executives and businesses into personal and corporate ruin. ?This is what happens when possessions become the possessor. As one man described it, it's like a fly that lands on flypaper and thinks it's his flypaper. He doesn't realize until too late the flypaper has him. James is trying to help us adopt a view of possessions which keeps the possessions from possessing us.??

Are your possessions possessing you??? Are you neglecting your spiritual life because you are consumed with accumulating more?? Is your family suffering so that you can maintain a certain lifestyle which you have come to associate with success?? Do you have trouble giving to God or people who might be in need?? Do discussions of money and possessions dominate your conversation with your spouse???

* A Radical View of Possessions??. James presents us with a radically different view of possessions and wealth. True treasure, from the biblical standpoint, is to be in a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship should change the way we view wealth and poverty. Whether you have little or much in terms of earthly goods will matter nothing when you stand before God. God will not comment on my Armani jacket or my Gucci loafers. ☺ God will not ask how much we had but rather what did we do with what he gave us. Remember the parable of the talents in Luke 19 and the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12.

CONCLUSION:?? I said at the beginning that my own belief is not that being rich is wrong – it isn't. Nor is poor better – sometimes we are poor because we are lazy or adverse to taking risks or afraid to do something different. People choose to be poor for all sorts of mixed reasons. If God has blessed you with the ability to be a wealth creator then do it to the best of your God-given ability... and be generous with the proceeds. Much of God's work is built on the back of generous wealth creators who have managed to combine the ability to make money with a soft heart for God's work. Very few are gifted in this way and that is why I believe that the pursuit of wealth carries with it significant spiritual dangers and is therefore not for everyone. My fear for many of us is that by

striving for wealth we will fall into the trap mentioned by Jesus and lose our own soul.

If you feel that there must be more to this life than what you have just now, don't try to fill the emptiness of your life with things that will only fade and pass away. Jesus Christ is the only one who can satisfy the deepest longing of your soul. He alone will give you eternal treasure, the pearl of great price. View your possessions through the eyes of Christ. Someone has well said, "The man who has no money is poor. The man who has only money is poorer still." Close in prayer and offer help.