

A Lesson for Rich Christians

Brooks A. Kanski

M.A., Old Testament

NT 512

April 2024

(4,308 words)

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in humiliation, because like a flower in the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits” (Js. 1:9–11 ESV).

A Letter for the Poor and the Rich

In his letter to Jewish-Christian congregations dispersed throughout Palestine and Syria (the members of which were mostly poor, underpaid, and socioeconomically despaired laborers on agricultural lands owned by wealthy and remote landlords), James “the Just” (Jesus’ half-brother and leader of the early Jerusalem church) demonstrates how the pursuit of transient riches on this earth jeopardize one’s eternal riches promised to us in the eschaton. For the poor specifically, this letter is a message of hope and of encouragement to endure the temporary trials of this world, which include oppression by the rich (e.g., the landlords). God identifies with the poor and He has chosen them for His Kingdom, within which they will be the exalted. For the rich, this letter is quite the opposite. James’ letter to the rich is a message of warning against the perils of possessions, pride, partiality and favoritism, oppression of the poor, double-mindedness, self-centeredness, self-indulgence, and the pursuit of one’s own desires and plans without giving a shred of consideration to the will and glorification of our God.

Some scholarly claims go as far as to claim that James’ letter is a damnation of the rich, irrespective of their faith and their evidentiary works thereof. A similar but less extreme claim also gets made that James cannot envision a person being both rich and Christian. But a careful reading of Js. 1:9–12, 2:1–17, and 4:13–5:6 demonstrates that while riches (and the pursuit thereof) are often found at the root of one’s sin, the riches themselves are a moot point in the face

of transformed living¹ vis a vis a renewed heart (Eze. 36:25–27), an indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9–11), an outpouring of compassionate works, and a way of life lived to carry out God’s will in His glory. Maybe this is the real implication by James when he says: “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Js. 2:17 ESV).

James 1:9–12: Both Poor and Rich have Identity in Jesus Christ

In his commentary of the book of James, Moo makes a perfect summary of verses 9–11 in chapter 1: “James, then, exhorts both poor and rich Christians to remember that the sole basis for their confidence is their identification with Jesus Christ” (Moo 12). Moo then goes on to elaborate that we all should be seeing our lives from a heavenly perspective, and for the rich to do so, they must: “remember that their only lasting security comes through their relationship with the ‘man of suffering’, ‘despised and rejected by mankind’” (Moo 12). This closely echoes a similar takeaway from Blomberg, in which he says the rich should *exult* in their spiritual dependence on Jesus Christ, but not on their transient possessions and earthly goods². Like the flower of the grass in v. 10 and Isa. 40:6–8, so our worldly objects – houses, cars, jewelry, bank account balances, toys – will pass away as Christ ushers in the eschatological reversal of the exalted being lowered and the lowly being exalted³.

Isaiah prophesied this greedy behavior, not just of the first century Israelites, but equally of those in the first century early churches, and of us today: “8 Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. 9 The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: “Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. 10 For ten acres of

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A biblical theology of possessions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

² Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A biblical theology of possessions*.

³ Dan McCartney, *James* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

vineyard shall yield but one bath⁴, and a homer⁵ of seed shall yield but an ephah⁶” (Isa 5:8–10 ESV). So much herein mirrors what we are taught in Js. 1:9–12. Here in Isaiah we have Israeli landowners continuing to acquire more and more land in a self-fulfilling, self-gratuitous expansion of possessions. In their pursuit thereof, they become covetous (Exo. 20:17) and end up driving out or, as Oswalt puts it, ‘dispossessing’ the poor⁷. Through this process, the rich became immune to seeing God’s hand in the works of the world and they became spiritually-stunted in their self-sufficiency. If we read forward into v. 13 and 14, we read that the outcome for these Israelites was that they must be humbled (or brought low) and exiled from God’s land (i.e., the Diaspora). Fast forward to late-40s A.D. and we must wonder if James was issuing a parallel warning to the addressed congregations (and now to us today): be careful to not lose your identity in the King of the Lowly, Jesus Christ (Zech. 9:9), or you may find yourself exiled from the presence of God in the eschaton.

Yeshua gives so many teachings in parallel with what is taught here in Isa. 5. Firstly, in Lk. 12:16–20, we have the Parable of the Rich Fool in which we are taught about the self-centeredness and foolishness of the rich man whose land yielded, as provisioned by God, a remarkable crop. However, instead of glorifying God for the crop and finding means by which the excess of his crop could be shared with the poor, he became greedy and sought a way to store all of it for himself. He scrapped his original barns (which were probably adequate as is!) and spent real capital constructing much bigger barns, within which he could store the excessive crop. Then, after storing crop well in excess of his needs, the man became self-indulging in it.

⁴ Approximately eight gallons.

⁵ Approximately eight bushels.

⁶ Equal to one bushel.

⁷ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986

With crop “laid up for many years”, the man could now relax and eat and drink while yet again, finding no way in it to glorify God and His other image-bearers. The consequence of this is well-summarized by Bock: “Ironically, the years of ease this man eagerly anticipates are unexpectedly cut short by the one who has authority over his life. He did not fulfill his moral responsibility before God to care for the needs of others. Now God issues a rebuke and takes action: he calls the man a fool and requires his soul. God rejects his covetousness. The soul that had hoped for ease is now ordered to attention. ἄφρων (aphrōn , fool) is an important term, for in the OT a fool is one who either acts without God or without wisdom about potential destruction. All the benefit of self-directed planning and labor comes crashing down by God’s command. God demands an account of the man’s mortal soul, and his grain and wealth cannot pay his debt” (Bock).

Then, in Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount (specifically Matt. 6:19–24) and in Matt. 16:26, we are taught very bluntly that we cannot serve God and money at the same time, and that a pursuit of the latter in lieu of the former and His glorification results in a forfeiture of the soul. Hagner summarizes this delineation between money and God as follows: “Most important is where one’s heart lies (i.e., what controls one’s interests, energy, and commitment). There is no absolute requirement here for poverty. But the individual disciple must be sensitive to that point at which wealth and possessions are not compatible with authentic discipleship. Jesus asks for uncompromising commitment to God’s will and purposes. This is what it means to store up treasures in heaven. The person who stores up treasures on earth “is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21) and is in the end “a fool.” The person who is distracted from unqualified discipleship because of a covetous eye exists in a deep darkness and is to be pitied. The nature of discipleship is such that it allows no such divided loyalties. If one chooses to follow Jesus, the commitment and service entailed are absolute. It is impossible to be a partially committed or part-time

disciple; it is impossible to serve two masters, whether one of them be wealth or anything else, when the other master is meant to be God” (Hagner 160).

Emphatically, Yeshua asks the rhetorical question in Matt. 6: “Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Matt. 6:25 ESV). In other words, there is no price tag you can put on one’s soul, so there is no amount of acquired worldly possession that can be used to barter back or repay indebtedness for one’s soul. The only redemption for one’s soul is by the blood of Jesus Christ and we know from Js. 2:17 that faith therein is evidentiary by the believer’s compassionate works and selfless acts of love and mercy towards others⁸.

James 2:1–17: The Cruelty of Words with no Action

In this passage from the second chapter of James’ letter, the ugly and painful side of partiality and favoritism get exposed. It’s hard to read this passage and not have a hurt heart from the rich’s treatment of the poor in it; yet, how many of us are guilty of doing these things ourselves? Have you recently paused to consider that your partiality and favoritism of or towards others is a direct transgression against God and his law of love? James make this explicitly clear for us in verses 9–13. Or that the oppression of the poor is a direct attack on Jesus, who lowered himself from royalty into poverty so that the poor could have hope (2 Cor. 8:9)?

But maybe the most ‘in-our-face’ verses from this passage are verses 15–16: “15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” (Js. 2:15–16 ESV). First to note from this passage is that James goes out of his way to specifically call attention to the poor treatment of ‘brothers *and sisters*’ (e.g., widows⁹). While

⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

⁹ See also Isa. 1:17.

‘brother and sister’ was representative of the family in the messianic community, in the Greek, both men and women would have been sufficiently implied by just ‘brothers’. However, here James makes a specific plea on behalf of a marginalized part of the population – widows – just as he did in 1:27. McKnight also observes¹⁰ that the imagery of nakedness is extreme and very shameful (especially in Jewish context) and the lacking of even daily bread demonstrates their desperation (see Acts 6:1). Despite their desperation, the passerby responds with the verbal encouragement of “Go in peace, be warmed and filled”, yet gives them none of the things they need for life. In that response, “peace” in the Greek is ‘eirēnē’ (εἰρήνη), which translates into the Hebrew word ‘shalom’ (שָׁלוֹם). According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs definition: shalom is the completeness (in number), the safety and soundness (in body), the welfare (in health and prosperity) and peace.

On that basis, McKnight points out that the use of shalom here in this response makes it a falsely pious and cold-hearted blessing towards the brother and sister in need¹¹ (e.g., May God’s peace be upon you; may God warm you; may God fill you up, however I of course have nothing to give you right now). Or as Allison put it: “One cannot eat or wear words; the stomach can starve while the ears are full” (Allison 466).

McKnight provides a summary of the exchange that overall gives readers a reason to reflect back on their identity in Jesus Christ, the Lowly King: “The neediness of the brother or sister shocks us when we see the contrasting behaviors of the messianists: they say things that sound pious (2:16a) but do nothing (2:16b): “and yet you do not supply their bodily needs.” Their lack of “daily” food (2:16a) is met by a fierce refusal to respond to the needs requisite to the body. The description here is tragic: the messianic community is connected to the Messiah

¹⁰ Scott McKnight, *The letter of James* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011).

¹¹ McKnight, *The letter of James*.

who became poor in order to make others rich and who taught in word and deed to show mercy to those in need; the community is connected to the Scriptures of Israel, which from beginning to end advocate mercy and compassion for those in need; and the community is filled with poor who know the underside of oppression. Yet—and this is what perplexes James into strong words—this group of those who say they have faith in Jesus the Messiah, the glorious one who became poor, does nothing for those who make their needs obvious” (McKnight). Ultimately, through this example and the resounding take-home message delivered in v. 17, James is telling us that the a ‘routine profession of faith’ in Jesus Christ will not save without a lifestyle of mercy and compassion inspired by a renewed heart and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The parallel teaching from Yeshua comes from Matt. 25:31–46, which may be one of the most powerful teachings we have from Yeshua. In this passage, Yeshua separates the sheep to his right and the goats to the left. He then proceeds to welcome the sheep to his right into his kingdom because: “35...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:35–39 ESV). Hereafter in v. 45–46, Yeshua then condemns the goats on his left to hell for eternity in not caring for or ministering to “the least of these”.

From these teachings of Yeshua alongside Js. 2:1–17, Christians must remember that other people are fellow image-bearers of God and there will be numerous instances throughout

life in which we come into contact with others less fortunate than or in more dire circumstances than we are. In those instances, it is our commandment to act compassionately and show them love through more than just our words, prayers and blessings, which in so doing is a direct glorification of our LORD God.

James 4:13–5:6: Make Room for and to Glorify God in every Aspect of Life

In v. 13 – 17, James introduces us to traveling merchants who are not necessarily rich, but are adequately well-off to travel at their leisure and have every intention to pursue making money (i.e., through the making of far-out business plans)¹². Yet, nowhere in these plans do the merchants make room for God and His way of life. These plans of the merchants are ultimately self-serving and do nothing to seek the glory of God, which is ultimately what James is rebuking them for (i.e., not necessarily for their wealth, but for their failure to glorify God in their wealth and the pursuit thereof).

How many of us can put ourselves on the receiving end of this specific exhortation by James? Americans, including myself, are very good at: 1. going out on self-serving pursuits to make more money (and making extensive plans to do so), 2. spending that money we made on self-indulging travel and leisure, and 3. boasting about both of those things to others through pictures and Instagram. But where in that process did you either seek, through prayer, God’s will for your business ventures or take an opportunity to glorify God in those business ventures or even along your personal travel? According to Allison, it’s OK to pursue these things, but in doing so, you must leave room for God’s will¹³ and attend to what His will is via prayer. Otherwise, James says, you are ‘boasting in your arrogance’, which is wicked!

¹² Moo 192.

¹³ Dale Allison Jr., *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle of James* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2013.

The confidence and certainty of the merchants' plans in this passage can also be observed in the context of 'boasting in arrogance'. In v. 13, the merchants speak in certainty about the outcomes of their plans (i.e., we *will* go here, we *will* spend a year there, and while there we *will* make a profit). Yet, we don't have to know Prov. 27:1 to know that we have no idea what tomorrow may bring. Moo, who calls this the "height of foolishness¹⁴", draws attention to James' comparison of life to a mist and then makes the following statement: "...James obviously intends to emphasize the extremely short duration of life. Illness, accidental death or the return of Christ could cut short our lives just as quickly as the morning sun dissipates the mist or as a shift in wind direction blows away smoke" (Moo 193). The rebuke of the merchants in v. 13–17 for their arrogance and self-sufficiency reaffirms the preceding lesson in v. 6–10 and helps summarize the major take home message for all of Js. 4: humble yourself before God, who is sovereign and gracious, and He will exalt you. Or, as Schnider puts it: "those who fail to live according to the *Conditio Jacobaea*¹⁵ will fall victim to desire and pride and will love the world, whereas those who live with that *Conditio* will have an attitude of prayer, be humble, submit to God and be near God" (Schnider 108).

The shift in rebuke from 4:13–17 to 5:1–6 is a clear shift in audience from 'rich Christians' to 'rich, non-Christians'. Here, James is rebuking the rich, non-Christians for their self-indulgence in worldly possessions and in v. 3, James affirms their judgment with a fiery metaphor: "Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days" (Js. 5:3 ESV). Not only is this fire representative of God's final judgment, but it is also representative of the lake of fire at the 'second death', as revealed in Rev. 20:11–15.

¹⁴ Moo 193.

¹⁵ "If the Lord wills it"

Blomberg makes an important observation on verse 3 of chapter 5: unused, excess wealth is of no utility to Christ's Kingdom and the failure to use it to glorify God will be used as evidence at judgment. Blomberg further clarifies that the condemnation is not for owning wealth, but for hoarding it in lieu of feeding the kingdom's needs.

Most of the exegetical analyses on the teachings from James are evaluated in the context of an individual. However, these teachings and specifically those of 4:13–5:6 beg a question similar to one Blomberg asks in *Christians in an Age of Wealth*: what role do business owners, corporations, the capital markets and governments play in this conversation? Are there companies and brands we as consumers buy from, which may not utilize business ethics in line with our Christian worldview? Are there any brands in your home that are representative of companies mistreating or underpaying employees, domestically or abroad? How do your employer's ethics align with your Christian worldview and the discussed teachings of James? How can you, a disciple of Christ, be salt and light in these situations (Matt. 5:13–16)? These questions, in addition to the questions we must be asking ourselves (and God, through prayer) on an individual basis should inform our way of contemporary Christian living.

Concluding Thoughts: Pursue God's Will and Give Him *All* the Glory

Similar to Yeshua's rebuke of Peter in Mk. 8:31–33 for being concerned with 'things of man'¹⁶ (i.e., the equivalent of 'things of Satan'), we in America today also often succumb to conforming our lifestyles with the lifestyles of those around us. This phenomena has been totally amplified through social media, which literally notifies us of how our family, friends, favorite celebrities and 'role models' are living their lives. That in and of itself makes it really unpopular to live our own life in a different way. And that, by human's (sinful) nature, is difficult!

¹⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Baker Academic, 2008), 403.

But, we know from Lk. 9:23 that discipleship is not supposed to be comfortable or convenient. True discipleship is a commitment of undivided loyalty to Jesus Christ that requires us to go out and have an impact on the world, *even if that means changing ourselves and our lifestyles* in the face of cultural norms and social practices¹⁷. A call to discipleship of Christ is the most supreme religious calling any of us can receive and as such, following that call (i.e., following Jesus, in action) is the most supreme religious commitment any of us can make¹⁸. If we opt to take the road less traveled, potentially risking our worldly possessions and secular pursuits on behalf of Yeshua Ha-mashiach, then we ultimately gain what really matters¹⁹.

As the presented research of Blomberg and Moo throughout this analysis made very clear: it is not the riches themselves that corrupt a believer's heart and turn them away from the grace of God. It is their reliance on self, the boasting in possession-ridden arrogance and the pursuit of a self-indulging lifestyle, *with no consideration for the reliance on, the will of and the supreme glorification of God* that ultimately hardens their hearts and sets them on a path drifting away from an eternal life in the presence of God and the Spotless Lamb.

Application to My and Lauren's Ministry

For many years, Lauren and I were in complete disregard of these teachings, living life in New York City subject to the ultimate pursuit of (transient) wealth creation and the advancement of our careers as we ourselves deemed most fit. If we weren't working, we were, literally, eating, drinking and being merry. Or, we were traveling abroad and continuing our self-indulgence there. And all of this was being boasted of to others on social media! We basically lived a life hitting every no-no James gives us in this letter (scary to look back on!). But by the

¹⁷ Leif E. Vagge, *An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism* (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 2009).

¹⁸ David E. Garland, *Luke: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2011).

¹⁹ Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials* (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 29.

grace of our loving God, this has all been revealed to us and we've since repented of this lifestyle. Although we still often face the temptation of these things and definitely still fall short in these regards, we've come a long ways in seeking the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2) alongside the refinement of our hearts (vis a vis an indwelling of the Holy Spirit) so that we may be more discerning of God's will, and what is good and acceptable and perfect in the glorification of Him in all that we do.

Anyone who knows me and Lauren on a personal level knows that we are beyond blessed with the lifestyle we've been afforded to live. Even when we had our backs turned on God, He was gracious to us and patient with us like an ultimate Father would be. It hurts to look back on and realize how selfish and arrogant towards God we were. We are certainly undeserving of His grace. Yet, like the prodigal son, He welcomed us home regardless; and for that, Lauren and I have committed to picking up our cross (daily) and continuing to not only explore what His will is for our ministries, but how we can continue to give Him glory in literally anything it is that we are doing.

As we continue to seek out His will and pursue the missions He's put in our lives, we ask for your prayers around the following:

- That God would help Brooks and Lauren raise Ashton in a Christlike way, one in which she won't stray from her faith and will avoid the pitfalls (and more) which we ourselves succumbed to
- That God empowers Lauren to share the good news of Jesus Christ with her social media platform, as well as continue to inspire women worldwide to re-visit their faith
- That God equips Brooks and Lauren with the resources and inspiration they need to continue ministering to the believers and non-believers in their ministries

- That God blesses the mission of Cheerful Givers in its first year, and that He provisions the organization's efforts in "Project Africa"
- That God continues guiding Brooks on his character formation efforts in humility and righteousness, and that He continues preparing Brooks for the evangelical efforts he is being called to

Bibliography

- Adamson, James B. *The Epistle of James*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1976.
- Allison Jr., Dale. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle of James*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Blackaby, Henry. *Experiencing God: how to live the full adventure of knowing and doing the will of God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.
- Blomberg, Craig. *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013.
- Blomberg, Craig. *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A biblical theology of possessions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Luke : 2 Volumes*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996.
- Garland, David E. *Luke: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Zondervan, 2011.
- Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 1-13, Volume 33A*. Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2015.
- Johnson, Luke T. *The Letter of James: a new translation with introduction and commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.
- McCartney, Dan. *James*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.
- McKnight, Scott. *The letter of James*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011.
- Moo, Douglas. *TNTC James*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Ogden, Greg. *Discipleship Essentials*. InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Schnider, Franz. *Der Jakobusbrief*. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1987.
- Stein, Robert H. *Mark*. Baker Academic, 2008.
- Vagge, Leif E. *An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism*. The Catholic Biblical Quarterly.