

# MONEY IN THE BOOK OF JAMES – Pt #1

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The book of James is clear and practical when it comes to the importance of living out the reality of the gospel. Even though this letter isn't lengthy, a substantial portion is devoted to how wrong money-thinking leads to wrong and destructive actions. And given that so much of James speaks to money issues, we can know that this is really important.

There are four sections in James that overtly target money-issues. In this article I'll cover the first two:

## **Anyone can have the wrong money-focus (1:9-11)**

So, first, in James 1:9-11, the author makes it very clear that both the poor and the rich can have the wrong focus when it comes to money. And both the rich and the poor are addressed not only here, but later in the letter as well:

*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of 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. - James 1:9-11*

Those who don't have much should focus on how rich they are in Jesus. And, those who have done well financially should focus on how poor they are without Jesus. The only treasure that has real value is found in Jesus, and both those who have means and those who don't can get it wrong and veer off course.

It's also important to know that the context for these verses is the critical need for wisdom and steadfast faith in our Christian journey. It's easy for everyone to lose focus and move our attention to what we have or what we don't have. But that is foolish and takes us off the disciple's path.

I think it's fair to say that James, and most of Scripture, has amplified warnings for the rich (see Luke 18:25), but the poor are not immune to destructive financial thinking. When Jesus said, *No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate*

*the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.* (Matt 6:24), we need to be careful about thinking that this only applies to those who have more than we do.

And when Jesus said, *Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.* (Luke 12:15), we need to know that greed is not just a rich man's problem.

And, when the author of Hebrews wrote, *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for [God] has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Hebrews 13:5), we all need to know that if we love money, we're saying that Jesus is not enough for us.

## **The sin of financial favoritism (2:1-2:13)**

In James chapter two, the author really goes after our tendency to pander to people with money. Attention and consideration based on a person's financial success was a problem two thousand years ago and it's a huge problem today. When we do this, or when church leaders do this, we're embracing a worldly and godless way of thinking.

James says that in financial favoritism we are making a bold statement that money or worldly success is what determines one's value. And we're showing, in our partiality, that we have evil thoughts or intentions. When we do this, money is our priority, not God, not the truth of the gospel or the welfare of our neighbors. When we show financial favoritism, we're fixated on ourselves and we're missing life in Christ on many levels.

This is also wrong because it rejects the people that are most likely to embrace the gospel – those who have no hope in this world. It says that first place goes to those with money, and if that's not you, you're a second-class citizen.

But believing the gospel means we live under the law of liberty and we're no longer enslaved to a sinful, worldly structure. When Jesus is our

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treasure, everything changes and money no longer sets the course.

The Bible has a lot to say about our tendency to hang on to favoritism or partiality in different ways. And for a foundation against this, from the Old Testament to the New, there is a consistent message that God cannot be bribed and there is no partiality in him. Everyone is sinful and helpless, and everyone needs the gospel, and everyone who believes, believes because of God's mercy and not because of intellect or spiritual sensitivity or earthly success. And this means that we should be very careful about why we admire anyone and how we treat everyone.

Now, to be clear, James also wants to make sure there's no "wobble room" or gray area so he says, *...if you show partiality, you are committing sin...* (James 2:9)

Thank God that there is no partiality in him. He offers himself to absolutely anyone who is done with self and trusts Jesus – poor or rich, black or white, male or female, Jew or gentile, murderer or addict or successful suburbanite.

As an aside, there's an interesting passage about the implications of this in Ephesians 6:9, where the Apostle Paul says that masters should stop threatening those under them because God is both your master and the master of those under you, and there is no partiality with God.

So, if you have authority over others, you need to be very careful about how you relate to them. It's easy, and worldly, to adopt a heavy-handed or intimidating approach that says that they are inferior and you are better than they are. The reality is entirely different.