

THE HAVES AND THE HAVE NOTS

JAMES 1 v 9-12

Those Christians who are poor must be glad when God lifts them up, and the rich Christians must be glad when God brings them down. For the rich will pass away like the flower of a wild plant. The sun rises with its blazing heat and burns off the plant; its flower falls off, and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way the rich will be destroyed while they go about their business. Happy are those who remain faithful under trials, because when they succeed in passing such a test, they will receive as their reward the life which God has promised to those who love him.

We live in a consumer driven society. One of the misconceptions of our society is that money equals happiness. Some professional footballers who play in the English Premier League earn huge sums of money. Alexis Sanchez, who signed for Manchester United during the January transfer window in 2018, was reputed to be earning over \$500,000 a week. The assumption was that he must have been very happy. Rumours went around that Sanchez wasn't enjoying life in Manchester and was anything but happy. Since then, he has moved on from the club.

Here is an interesting statistic. Compared with Australians in 1958 today we own twice as many cars per person, eat out twice as often and enjoy endless other commodities that weren't around then such as large TV screens, computers, ipads, microwave ovens, handheld wireless devices such as iPhones. We keep in touch with people on Face-Book, Instagram and WhatsApp. It's a far cry from the days when we went to the Post Office to send telegrams to our relatives and friends. But are people happier in 2020s than they were in 1958? Are our lives filled with greater ease and contentment today than they were over 60 years ago? The answer is plainly 'No'. We are not more content. In fact, we are the most unhappy and medicated generation ever to exist. We spend our lives acquiring goods only to discover that they don't satisfy us; they don't provide us with security or make our lives any easier.

James saw the strong temptation to base our security and happiness on material things as a big problem. The reason why it was a problem was because since the persecution broke out many Christians had lost just about everything they had. Their faith was being shaken. How could James encourage faith in a time when material possessions were being lost?

In the first century the Christian community was made up mainly of poor people who had given their all to follow Christ. There were some Christians in the church who had much wealth. There was some tension between them. The wealthy were challenged not to use their exceptional means for self-promotion, but for the promotion of the kingdom of God. At the same time, those with lesser means were challenged not to focus on their lack of material wealth but on their spiritual wealth. James has been writing about counting trials as joy. He now gives two examples of trials; 1 v 9-12. He compares the haves with the have-nots.

I have had the opportunity to visit some third world countries where I have seen the stark evidence of poverty and suffering amongst Christian communities. What staggered me was to discover how happy and

satisfied these Christians were despite their adverse circumstances. These Christians were very poor; they had virtually nothing of this world's goods and yet they had so much joy and contentment in their lives. People living in poor conditions can be happy even if they lack material possessions. This is not how the world sees it. According to commercials, television shows and magazines, happiness comes about when people have plenty of this world's goods. It's simply not true. Joy is not dependent on material possessions. How can Christians who are materially poor have joy in a materialistic society? Follow James's reasoning. You can count it joy when you suffer under poverty because of the role reversal in the kingdom of God.

The first trial James speaks of is the trial of poverty; v 9. James shows what the lowly Christians have going for them. They are exalted in the church. They will find ultimate exaltation in the world to come. The Christians who lack wealth on earth will find unimaginable wealth in their Saviour. The poor Christians' poverty gives them reason for being glad because it has turned into a benefit for them. The benefit is promoting their humility and strengthening their faith in the things that are unseen. Their future is made all the more secure when set against the backdrop of poverty.

This is as true for us as it was for the Christians in the first century. We must not allow the goal of our lives to be the pursuit of riches and security outside of Christ. Our joy is found in Christ and in no one or nothing else.

The second trial James speaks of is the trial of prosperity; v 10-11. We don't tend to think of prosperity as a trial. It is. Wealth brings with it the delusion of security. Possessions can easily become temptations. The wealthy need to practice self-sacrifice to maintain their trust in Christ. James considers temporal riches to be like a wildflower in the field. The sun in Palestine comes up with its scorching heat. When the sun is high in the sky the flowers that were beautiful die and fall away. So too with those people whose lives revolve around temporal riches. This is the vanity of prosperity.

James ends this short section of his letter with a promise which has two parts. We find them in v 12. There is the promise while enduring trials; v 12a. The word 'blessed' literally means 'fortunate'. The Christian who is in the process of enduring a trial for the glory of God is receiving endurance, peace and is becoming mature. There is the promise after the trials; v 12b. Faithful perseverance through trials is worth it in the end. Those who have stood the test will receive the crown of life. The have-nots will then be the haves.