

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

SERIES: LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

By Danny Hall

A year ago it seemed that dot-coms were going to change the economic world, and we were riding a huge wave of euphoria because everyone was going to get rich quick. But oh, what a difference a year makes! An incredibly harsh dose of reality has dashed people's hopes and dreams. People are cashing out of the stock market all the time. It's a whole different economic world from a year ago. We in this valley understand all too well the allure of the promise that if we make enough money, get the right product, or have the right experience, our life will be better. So much of our lives are caught up in trying to find satisfaction, success, and good feelings about ourselves through what we have, what we've experienced, and what we've achieved—in other words, the things of this world. But we also know all too well that it's an empty promise.

The Bible has a lot to say about materialism, possessions, and money. The apostle Paul wrote, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10a). The pursuit of it has a corrupting influence, if not in a criminal sense, at least in a moral sense of taking our eyes off the things that really matter and putting them on the temporal things of this earth. We'll hear some pointed words about this issue in James 1, and then we'll look at some other Scripture passages to try to gain God's perspective on the issue of possessions.

What James wants us to do in his letter is to look at the practical issues of life through the eyes of faith. You and I have to deal with the material things of this world; we can't get away from them. But how do we become grounded in a faith perspective on our material life?

James 1:9-11:

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Reading this, perhaps the first thing to cross your mind is, since you're neither rich nor poor, this doesn't apply to you. But in reality, this is about our perspective on our possessions no matter what economic stratum we find ourselves in.

James is writing these words to people who are in exile, facing the first blows of persecution against the church, suffering for the cause of Christ. There is some economic stratification in this church. Chapter 2 refers to the fact that in the church assembly there are both wealthy and poor, and how the rest treat each of them says something about how they understand God's law of love. The vast majority of believers in this early church are from the lower echelons, not the upper. James has a word from God to both those who find themselves in the humblest circumstances and those at the higher end. James begins by asking them (and us) to have a certain perspective on the position that they find themselves in, no matter what it is.

A perspective on position and possessions

First of all, James has a word to the poor, those in humble circumstances. His word to them is, "Take pride in your high position!" That's an odd command to people who are poor, who have only a meager, subsistence level of living, who may have to worry from one day to the next where their next meal will come from. But James realizes that even for the poor, it is possible to be totally materialistic in their focus. When they don't have all they think they should have, they want more. This is what you and I can apply here. Probably none of us want to be super-rich, but we do want to be more comfortable. We become absorbed with getting what we don't have. James' admonition to the poor is for them to look at their position differently, to take their eyes off what they don't have and place them on the life they have in Christ, to look not at their standing in this world but at their standing before God. They have been seated in the heavenlies with Christ. They have an exalted place as a child

of God in his kingdom. Every spiritual need they have is met in Christ. God is their loving and trustworthy Father. In God's eyes they have been given a high position. So even the poor, who in this world's eyes have no power, no acclaim, no influence, no material wealth, before God have the riches of heaven itself.

For us, even though life might not be all we could dream of, we have the calm assurance that we are God's children. We are loved by him unconditionally and promised a future kingdom that is beyond measure, as well as his sustenance and help and presence with us right now. There is an exaltation, a lifting up, of all who come to Christ. When we find ourselves disadvantaged, rather than despairing or becoming bitter, or being driven to gain what we don't have, we can rest in the glory that is in Christ.

James also has a word to the rich. "But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position." There's a play on words here. The word for "low position" is really humiliation. It comes from the same root word as "humble circumstances." The brother of humble circumstances is lifted high, and the brother who is high is humbled. The perspective that God wants for who have been blessed materially is to take pride in their humiliation. What he means by that is that they are to understand that what they need to glory in is not their material achievements—such things offer them nothing in the way of eternal good—but the fact that they are humbled before the cross like everyone else, men and women in need of a Savior. No matter how much they earn or achieve, no matter how much power they acquire in this world, it gains them no influence in God's kingdom. But when they acknowledge the bankruptcy of their spirit, their absolute and total need of Christ's forgiveness, and their dependence on the loving grace and mercy of God the Father, at that moment they achieve true greatness.

What really matters, regardless of our position in this world, is that we understand our absolute poverty before God apart from his grace, and understand and rejoice in the true riches of his kingdom.

James goes on to give perspective on possessions themselves. Verse 11: "For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business." All the trappings of wealth and power that we either have and glory in, or wish we had and strive for, are empty. There is no lasting value to them. If we are caught up in them we lose a sense of personal value. Even as we go about our business, they are fading away. You really can't take it with you, and sometimes you can't even keep it while you're here.

James wants us to see two things about possessions. First, they are temporal, meaning they have to do with the things of this world and have no value in God's eternal kingdom. Second, they are temporary, and anything they buy for us is only temporary. It's true that we all need material things for day-to-day living, but it is so easy to get caught up in the race to get more. James warns us through this stark picture of the scorching sun drying up the plant until it finally blows away, that that's what life is like when we rely on the things of this world to bring us fulfillment and security.

This perspective that James calls us to have on our position and possessions suggests three qualities (among others). Let's look at some other passages in Scripture that attest to these qualities and help us fill in the picture of how we need to approach our position and possessions.

Trusting God to supply our needs

The first quality is trust. By that I simply mean believing that it is God who is the supplier of our needs. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the following (Matthew 6:24-33):

"No one can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

We have to believe that God, who richly loves us and knows what we need, will give it to us. That's the first quality that comes into play if we truly want to live out a proper attitude toward our possessions.

Ginger and I were missionaries overseas for a number of years, and we lived on support. This meant we trusted that God would raise up individuals in churches, mostly in this country, to give to support our work, both for our salary that we lived on and for the funds that we ministered with. Support can be up and down, so it was easy to get lost in thinking, "I need to write a better support letter, and I'm going to make sure when I'm home that I give a better talk when I'm up in front of the church."

We moved to Vienna in 1984. The dollar was at its strongest in modern history by February 1985. In Austria we got 25 shillings to the dollar. Within two years the dollar totally crashed. The Group of Seven had decided the dollar was inflated and depressed it. The cost of everything stayed the same, but over two or three years the value of our dollars dropped to less than half of what it had been. So the cost of U.S. missions worldwide doubled. All of a sudden we found ourselves overseas with barely enough to live on. It was easy to think we needed to write more letters and things like that, when in reality what we had to do was trust God. We had to believe God would move in the hearts of his people. He did miraculous things and provided support for us in ways we would never have imagined. It was one more lesson in trusting.

In 1997 I came to PBC, and it was the first time I'd had a job with a paycheck in twenty years. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, because I didn't have to worry about raising support anymore. Then I realized I was living in Silicon Valley, buying a house, and so on, and I caught myself thinking, "How am I going to make it? What elder do I need to talk to about my salary?" It sank in that the only thing that had changed was the method. If I couldn't believe that the God of the universe was the One who supplied, then I was trapped in that never-ending cycle of grabbing for more, wistfully thinking that things could be better with more, which would lead to despair and bitterness.

So that first step in progressing toward real freedom from possessions is trust, actually believing that it is God who is the supplier of my needs, if I am faithful to him and seek his kingdom first.

Being content in all circumstances

The second quality is contentment. In Philippians 4:12-13 Paul says:

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. 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. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Philippians 4:13 is one of those "top twenty-five" verses quoted, one of those all-time hang-on-to-it promises. But the context of the verse is contentment. Paul is saying, "I have had everything I needed, and I have also had nothing. I've been filled and I've been hungry. The secret is that I've learned to be content no matter where I am because Christ is the one who strengthens me."

Contentment comes from realizing that God has me right where he wants me, that he's building into my life, that the riches of Christ himself are within me, and I can face anything that happens, whether things get better or worse. Contentment is a function of my really believing that God is the supplier, that he is at work, and that he has called me to have a part in the world that he's placed me in, to minister for him and to live for his glory.

But contentment is a hard thing. Envy subtly creeps into our hearts so often. We have stark pictures of it in our language-it's the "green-eyed monster." for instance-and we know how it can eat away at us. John D.

Rockefeller was once asked, "How much money is enough?" He said, "One dollar more." So it doesn't matter where you are on the scale, it's so easy to think, "If only my circumstances in life had been better."

Ginger and I have had all kinds of lessons in contentment as well. Some lessons have been harder than others. We have one son, Christopher, who is now a senior in high school. We both love kids, and when we first got married we thought we'd have lots of them. But Ginger had three miscarriages before Christopher was born. At that point they thought they had found the medical problem that was causing her miscarriages, and we were excited about the prospect of having more children, only for her to have five more miscarriages after that. She was not able to carry any more children. During the first series of miscarriages, back when we were in seminary, one of our best friends was going through fertility problems, too. She was at a point of absolute despair over their infertility, and it was wrecking her life. Eventually God dealt with that and really turned her life around, but at that particular point, this friend was so caught up in her bitterness and despair that it was poisoning her and her husband and family.

In Ginger's own walk with the Lord, she came to realize that she had a choice in this matter. She could choose to despair about not having children, and later, about the fact that we didn't have as many children as we had wanted; or she could choose to be content with what God had given us. In fact, she would look at me and say, "I can thank God that I have a great life and a great husband [her words], or I can despair about the fact that there's something I wish I had but don't." Ginger taught me great lessons in contentment by trusting that God's ways were best and we could trust him. She made a choice to believe, and through the strength of Christ, to be content.

In like manner, in my travels in Eastern Europe, so many times our team would be taken into the home of a Christian family, and they would lay before us meals that we knew exhausted their supply of food. They might eat watered down soup for the rest of the week for the chance to lay before their guests the best banquet they could pull together, and do it with joy in their hearts. It was a humbling experience to see the possibility of being joyful and content in the smallest of things, in the midst of all that deprivation and pressure.

Showing compassion

Finally, the third quality suggested by this perspective that James teaches is compassion. In 1 John 3:17 John writes:

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

If we truly have a faith view of possessions, it turns us into people of compassion and generosity. It allows us to be givers of all that we have, little or much. To meet the needs of others, to bring joy to the lives of others, to care deeply for one another, is part of the beauty of being in the body of Christ. Not far from each of us are people with needs that we might be able to meet. A godly faith view of possessions sets us free to be generous, to take our eyes off ourselves and look at others, and in the name of Christ extend compassion and caring.

It is absolutely phenomenal that here in this valley with all this wealth, there could be people who are poor and in need! Now take all the non-Christians out of this equation-there's enough wealth in the churches of this valley that no one should be hungry or poor! When we are able to look at our possessions through eyes of faith, trusting God to supply our needs, being content in him rather than in some earthly prize or toy or achievement, we will be set free to be compassionate and generous men and women who reach out, touch the lives of others, and meet needs. We will be able to get out of our own little self-centered world and be sent out as Christ's ambassadors of love and compassion to the world around us.

Issues concerning money are complicated and difficult. The Bible is full of passages about material things. One sermon is not going to answer all the questions. We need help and we need each other. But God has given us stewardship, placed into our care possessions and opportunities, and he asks us to be faithful with them, to be men and women of trust and contentment and compassion. To be content in God because we trust in him and thereby to be free to give as his servants is what it truly means to have faith eyes about the things of this world. It is a doorway to true living and true happiness

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