

## **“The Rich Poor” – James 1:9-11**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com)]*

Welcome back to church! This is day one of our first phase of transitioning back to in-person gatherings in the wake of this recent pandemic. And it is *really* good to see your faces! I have missed you more than you know. And I thank God that each of you are well enough to be here this Memorial Day weekend.

Memorial Day is, of course, a day set aside in our nation to remember those brave men and women who have sacrificed their very lives for our freedom and security. We thank God for them. And in their sacrifice, perhaps we can see a shadow of Christ’s sacrifice for us. Indeed, every time we gather at church it is a Memorial Day of sorts, where we remember what Christ has done for our salvation. That’s why we gather.

Christ died on the cross as a substitute for sinners like us. He took upon Himself our sin and the just punishment that we deserved for those sins. He suffered that agony, so that we would be spared God’s wrath. The blood He shed provided full atonement for those who would trust in Christ to save them. And we gather every Sunday to remember that. Indeed, we gather on Sundays to memorialize His resurrection that proves that God the Father accepted Christ’s work on our behalf. He is our boast. As Christians, we have declared that He is our only hope in life and in death. And the Gospel announces that He would save every sinner who would turn from the sin and self-reliance, admit their need of the Savior, and trust in Christ alone to save them by His work (not our own).

I hope that is what you came this morning to memorialize. It’s great to see everyone’s face in church again. But the chief reason we are here is to give glory to Jesus Christ. And I commend Him to you. Jesus can save you today, through faith. Trust in Him and He will change your life. And if you want to speak with me about that after the service, let’s do it. Or if you want to connect later in the week, I’d encourage you to fill out one of those response cards at the door as you leave. But don’t waste the opportunity to seek answers about this salvation that you still have. That very well could be the reason that God brought you here today. And I hope the sermon will help steer you to the Savior as well.

To that end, take your Bible and meet me in James 1...

Today we will get to the last part of James’ introduction. A few weeks ago, when we were considering the structure of this letter, I explained how James (like other New Testament authors) uses the letter’s opening to introduce us to the dominant themes that we will find throughout the letter. There are three of them.

Trials/Temptations (1:2-4)

Wisdom (1:5-8)

Riches and Poverty (1:9-11)

James will then restate each of these themes in greater detail in the rest of chapter 1 and then expand on them in even greater depth (and in reverse order) in chapters 2 through 5. Knowing this, we have spent more time on the letter’s opening because how James introduces these themes there shapes how we understand them later.

For example, one of the things I have labored to show in these sermons is the relationship between these themes. Later it can sometimes feel as though James is jumping abruptly from one topic to the next, creating the

impression that there is not much of a relationship between each section. But by slowing down with his introduction we have been able to see that there is a relationship. Times of trials and temptations are times when we discover our great need for wisdom. And one aspect of life that thrusts upon us the greatest sense of trial and temptation is our poverty or prosperity. All of these matters relate. As one author explains,

“James addresses these two groups of Christians [i.e., the rich and the poor] at this point because our economic situation is not incidental to how we cope with trials. Christians are more affected by wealth (or lack of wealth) than we like to think. James' advice on this, coming at this very point, suggests that our outlook and reactions can be significantly swayed by where we find ourselves on the economic scale.”<sup>1</sup>

With that in mind, it's time for us to consider his opening words on riches and poverty, which some would argue is the central (and yet most neglected) theme of the letter. We've considered his first words on trials and wisdom. Now we'll look at the wisdom he shares related to our perspective on poverty and riches, one of the “*trials of various kinds*” that result in the aforementioned “*testing of your faith*” (1:2-3). Follow along as I read from James 1, beginning today in verse 9. This is God's Word...

*“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,<sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.<sup>11</sup> 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)

Verses 9 and 10 each contain what is known as a paradox. G. K. Chesterton described a paradox as “truth standing on its head shouting for attention.”<sup>2</sup> If you want a more professional definition, you can search Merriam-Webster's online dictionary and find that it defines a paradox as “a tenet contrary to received opinion” or “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.”<sup>3</sup> When you start speaking of the exalted status of the poor and lowly and the humiliation of the rich, I'd say we are dealing in statements “contrary to received opinion” and “seemingly contradictory” and “opposed to common sense.” But none of those impressions make the statements of verses 9 and 10 false. Rightly considered, they prove true after some focused reflection. And the absurdity of the statements invites our reflection, doesn't it? They're like truths standing on their head saying “Look at me! Look at me!” So let's have a look...

Both the “*lowly*” and the “*rich*” are called to “*boast*” in something. Maybe that seems like an odd instruction to you because you're thinking that boasting is a bad thing. Well, generally speaking it is a bad thing because generally speaking what someone is boasting about is rooted in pride. Even James points this out in 4:16, where he uses the same term, saying, “*As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*” Every other occurrence of the word in the New Testament comes in Paul's writings and he often has negative associations in mind as well. For example, in Romans 3, he states,

*“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.<sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”* (Romans 3:21-27a)

What is Paul saying here? He's saying that the Gospel obliterates our boasting. If we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the person and work of Christ alone, then we have nothing to brag about. Our salvation is a gift, not an accomplishment. At least not our accomplishment. All glory is owed to our God and Savior. “Being saved by faith gives us no basis for boasting—in fact, it completely undermines it.”<sup>4</sup> That's Paul's point

in Romans 3. With texts like this in mind, it's easy to see why boasting gets a bad rap and why we may be curious why James calls the rich and poor to engage in boasting. Isn't boasting a bad thing? Generally, yes. But not always.

The word is sometimes employed with a positive twist when the content of our boast is the Lord and His work. In that case, our boasting amounts to "rejoicing or glorying in God."<sup>5</sup> As Sam Allberry explains, "This is not boasting that is contradicted by the gospel (boasting in ourselves), but boasting in the gospel (boasting in what God has done for us)."<sup>6</sup> Here's a wonderful example of this in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

*"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"* (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

That's it. It's not the boast of your arrogance. It's the boast in the Lord. If we are going to boast, let it be boasting in the Lord. And I believe that is exactly what James is calling these Christians to do in verse 9, when he says, "*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation*". It's not a personally achieved exaltation. It's a graciously given exaltation. More on that in a moment.

First of all we must see who this command is issued to. James is addressing the "*lowly brother*" here. Perhaps your translation refers to the lowly here as the "poor" brother (NLT) or the "brother of humble means" (NET). "Lowly" is a more literal translation, but given the contrast introduced in the next verse we are left with the sense that their lowliness has been brought on by their humble circumstances and poverty.<sup>7</sup>

James tells the poor individual that he should "*boast in his exaltation*". Literally the Greek text says that he should boast in his "height," which in this context would mean is "exalted position."<sup>8</sup> But, of course, if you've ever been poor and lowly, you may be asking yourself, "What exaltation?" That's a valid question. What's so exalted about being poor? Nothing comes to mind. But James is not referring to any and every poor individual. He is referring to the Christian poor, as the word "*brother*" makes clear. So perhaps there is nothing exalted about poverty in general, but there is something exalted about being a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Paul told the Romans,

*"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."* (Romans 8:16-18)

Paul was seeking to foster the same kind of perspective that James is seeking for his readers. Are you lowly Christian? Well don't forget you are a child of God and there's no greater height than that! Are you suffering now in humble circumstances? Consider those sufferings as nothing compared to the glory that is coming to you in Christ. "*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation*" (James 1:9). That may look upside down to the world, but that's because the world itself is upside down. They don't know what you know. They don't know Jesus. They don't know what He came to accomplish. Mary, the mother of Jesus, said it beautifully in her song:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the*

*thoughts of their hearts; <sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:46-55)*

Yes, that is Mary’s song, but she’s singing about us, the Church. Regardless of our place and status in this world, we were, at best, beggars outside the gates of God’s kingdom. But God in Christ took us up, removed our filthy rags of sin, and gave us a place at the family table. Ours is a rags-to-riches tale. If you are in Christ, you have been raised to new heights. That is the beauty of the Gospel. And one commentator explains,

“However materially lacking life might be, James says the poor believers are to consider their 'high position' (1:9). This is what the gospel has given them. *Spiritually*, James tells them, *you have it made*. There is an incredible inheritance to look forward to. All that the Father has for his Son has been extended to those who are Christ's. It is an unfathomable prospect, and one that begins spiritually now with our standing before the Father in Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

But note the already/not yet dimension of our exaltation. It is already real, but its full experience is not yet. Again, James wants you to see that your present status in the eyes of the world says nothing of your everlasting status secured by the blood Jesus shed for your redemption. And even now that status is real. Your exaltation is an already/not yet kind of exaltation. Through Christ, Paul says, “*we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God*” (Romans 5:2; cf. 5:11). We have been given the hope of glory! Resurrection. Restoration of all things. Reigning with Christ. The hope of glory.

Yet our exaltation, biblically speaking, is not all future oriented (what theologians call, eschatological). It’s now too. It’s already. Are you feeling lowly in your poor estate? Listen to what Peter says of you:

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)*

James would say, “Boast in that exaltation that is yours in Christ!” Back in December I preached three sermons (which you can revisit online) on the present, exalted reality that Christ has brought us into as described by the writer of Hebrews in these verses:

*“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (Hebrews 12:22-24)*

The author is not saying that one day you will come to that place. He says “*you have come*” to Mount Zion. You’re not at Sinai. That’s not your mountain. You have come to Zion. That’s your mountain. When you sang those songs in worship to God this morning, you were joining a chorus of saints in glory and innumerable angels around the throne of heaven. You are in some profound sense part of that, hidden with Christ on high (Col. 3:3). And James is saying to the lowly brother, “Boast in that exaltation that is yours because of Christ!”

But I know that can seem abstract and mysterious. I get it. It’s no less true. But I get it. James is much more concrete in this context. In as much as our poverty provides an arena for the testing of our faith, it *can* (though not automatically) confer to us the same benefits that James spoke of in verses 2 and following. In that sense, one aspect of our boasting may be the very rejoicing he calls for at the start of the letter.

*“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* (James 1:2-4)

As we’ve seen, the adversities of life can produce priceless character in us. They are needed to ready us for the glory that awaits. And perhaps, in a way, the adversities of poverty can help an individual see their need for deliverance more readily than the individual who has never had to suffer without. As David Platt writes, “If you are poor, you should boast in the fact that your circumstances are actually leading you to trust in God; and in the absence of physical resources, you are driven to boast in your (paradoxically) rich status as a child of God.”<sup>10</sup> I hope that doesn’t sound insensitive. I think his point is that there may be a sense where our disadvantages can actually put us at an advantage to seeing our need for the Lord. Poverty itself is not a good thing. But when, by God’s grace, it produces in a person “a lowliness of spirit which keeps him [or her] open to God”,<sup>11</sup> then we have found something to rejoice in. Whenever our economic poverty inclines us to spiritual poverty and, therefore, to the Savior, then we will thank God for it in glory. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” Jesus declared, “*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:3).

Perhaps James’ word choice actually hints at this connection. Robert Plummer, a biblical studies professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, points out,

“James does not use a common Greek word referring narrowly to economic poverty (*ptōchos*). Instead, by employing *tapeinos* ('lowly' or 'humble'), he draws a thread from the rich tapestry of prior biblical revelation in which those who are brought low by financial poverty also frequently find an accompanying poverty of spirit (humility) that is pleasing to God (e.g., 1 Sam. 2:8; Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20).”<sup>12</sup>

I’ll have more to say about that next week. But before I pivot off this point, I should clarify that economic poverty does not guarantee the kind of spiritual poverty that leads us to Christ. It’s not automatic. We can love and serve the god of riches, whether we possess wealth or not. “If scarcity of goods inherently improves one’s spirituality, no biblical text would ever command help for the poor!”<sup>13</sup> But of course, as you know, those texts abound. We should try our hardest to lift people up out of their poor estate when God gives us means and opportunity to do so. This is what God has done for us. As we do it for others, we show ourselves to be children of this God. So help the poor and needy. And don’t you dare twist what I’m saying to dress up your lack of hospitality as though it were some pious desire to help people see their need for Christ and not trust in riches.

My point today is that we all are prone to see our trails (including those caused by poverty) only in terms of their disadvantages (which are real, to be sure), but James would have us adopt a perspective that looks below the surface and looks to God for wisdom to catch a glimpse at what God may be up to in and through them. He wants us to see that God doesn’t waste our trials. That He can turn our disadvantages into advantages. And He can accomplish something wonderful through them and a great exaltation on the other side of them. So, James says, “*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation*” (James 1:9) and “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds*” (1:2).

But what about the rich person in verse 10? What is that person to boast in? And who is that person? A Christian? A non-Christian? How are we to make sense out of that paradox? That’s what we will consider next week. It’s the balance to this sermon. So I hope you will join us next week, because many (if not most of you) are probably being addressed more directly in verse 10 than you are in verse 9. To be continued. I’ll close with this summary of verse 9 from Sam Allberry,

“James is urging his readers, when the world is looking down on them because of their circumstances, to remember that because of Christ they are spiritually rich. The tendency can easily be towards bitterness, especially if there are wealthier Christians around who are suffering less. They are instead to boast: to take great pride in the fact that in the sight of the only One who matters, they are as exalted as they

could be. In Christ, they could not be more highly regarded by the Father. That is what they need consciously to remember in times of trial. The discipline to keep this perspective will help them to persevere and stand the test (v 12).”<sup>14</sup>

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Allberry, *James for You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 26.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 35.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox?src=search-dict-box>; Hughes, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Allberry, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Allberry, 25.

<sup>7</sup> “The word ‘poor’ (ταπεινός) has its background in the Hebrew ‘ānāw, with its nuance of ‘humble’ or ‘lowly.’ The LXX uses this word ‘to depict a person who is of little significance in the world’s evaluation, even one who is oppressed by the world.’ Martin explains the various terms James uses for poor, showing that ‘poor’ (ταπεινός) usually implies the social status of James’s readers and ‘poor’ (πτωχός) their economic state, and that the former refers to those who are poor because of their religious choice to follow Christ. Hence the people under discussion in this paragraph are literally poor, but they are not the totally destitute described in 2:2, 5–6, 15–16, and James uses this term to highlight their spiritual state of humility as well.” Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 54-55.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Allberry, 27.

<sup>10</sup> David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in James* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 231.

<sup>13</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 55.

<sup>14</sup> Allberry, 27-28.