

## “The Poor Rich” – 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)]*

Take your Bible and let's meet in James 1...

Today we will partake of the Lord's Supper together, but we will have to do so in a unique way. Since we are not passing plates and trying our best to minimize contact in this COVID-19 world, we will be using one of these handy units that you should have picked up at the entrances. During the sermon, toward the end, we will use this to partake of the elements involved in the Supper.

So let me give you a quick tutorial. I know you all are smart enough to figure this out, but for those of you who are planners, let me walk you through it. It's pretty clear there is some juice in that cup and in order to access it you are going to have to peel that top back. What's not quite as obvious is that there is a wafer of bread on top and a second tab for you to peel back to access it. So you will have to peel both back to get to both elements. But not yet. Hold tight. I'll give you some warning. And then we will partake together at the very end. Simple enough, right? Clear as mud.

By now you have likely found your way to the first chapter of James. This will be our second and final week on verses 9 through 11. This will also be our final week on James' introduction. So let's do the most important thing and read the text. Follow along as I read it aloud, beginning 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)*

Once again, we see that James is instructing two kinds of people to boast in something. Last week we considered verse 9, where the “lowly brother” is called to “*boast in his exaltation*,” which is to say that, despite his poverty in the world, he is to adopt a perspective of what is true of him in Christ. He may not have what the world craves, but, in Christ, he has been given every spiritual blessing and an everlasting hope that outstrips any riches he could possess in the world. The believer has been made a child of God and coheir with Christ. There is no greater exaltation that could be bestowed on us. You may suffer now from a physical resource deficit, but there is nothing deficient about what Christ has secured on your behalf. This is why we called them “the rich poor” last week. So, James says, boast in that exaltation. That is more real and definitive than your standing in the eyes of the world.

Today we need to focus on the other side of the equation, which James gets at in verses 10. It's not just the “*lowly brother*” who should boast. It's also the rich, though his boast has a different sound to it because the “*rich*” man, James says, is to boast, not in his exaltation, but “*in his humiliation*” (1:10). Let's call this individual and who he represents, “the poor rich.” And, let me remind you, that while James is using masculine pronouns here, clearly the context is not gender exclusive. The operative word is “*rich*”, and it applies to wealthy individuals of our day as well, irrespective of gender.

But which wealthy individuals does James have in mind? Is it all the wealthy? Or is it the Christian rich in particular? This has been a matter of much debate down through the ages. You might remember last week that we concluded that James was not addressing the poor in general in verse 9, but the Christian poor in particular.

Why? Because he uses the term “*brother*,” which in this context means Christian. So we concluded that the poor in general might not be able to boast in any exaltation, but the Christian poor can because they have been brought into the family of God and thus have been made heirs with Christ in His exaltation. That’s not true for every poor man or woman. But it is true for the impoverished Christian.

Yet when James pivots to the rich in verse 10, he doesn’t repeat the term “brother” (ἀδελφός). This has led many to wonder if James is still talking about Christians or if he’s broadened the referent to all who are prosperous in the world. So which is it? Does James have in mind the rich in general? Or is it the Christian rich in particular? It’s something of a riddle. But the conclusion matters because it shapes how one understands the paradox James is highlighting.

For example, those who believe that James has in mind the rich in general are left to conclude that the statement is ironic, even sarcastic, when it speaks of their “*humiliation*”. If James has in mind the unbelieving rich, “then 1:10-11 sarcastically declare that the proud rich man can look forward to just one thing—his fading away, his judgment, on the last day.”<sup>1</sup>

Since it would make very little sense to “glory in physical destitution,” it would seem that James is being sarcastically prophetic and scathing to say that the rich should boast about their impending destruction and “spiritual humbling.”<sup>2</sup> Verses 10 and 11 remind the rich that there is a shelf-life to their status, an expiration date.<sup>3</sup> These verses penetrate “the façade of wealth to the distressing reality beneath.”<sup>4</sup>

*“...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 1:10b-11)

While it may not be a direct quotation, James does seem to have in mind the words of Isaiah 40, where the prophet cried out,

*“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”* (Isaiah 40:6b-8)

This imagery is common in the Old Testament (e.g., Job 14:2; Ps. 103:15) and evidently these words from Isaiah were important in the life of the early church for not only James, but even Peter quotes them in his first epistle (1 Peter 1:24-25). Their meaning is pretty transparent. Isaiah was contrasting “humanity’s frailty with God’s immutability” and James sees in this a reminder “that the wealth and status of the rich remain remarkably transient.”<sup>5</sup> Even a lifetime of prosperity endures for a short time in the scope of all that is. But prosperity tries to sell us on a lie, one we find it easy to believe, whether we are rich or not.<sup>6</sup> That’s why Jesus spoke of “*the deceitfulness of wealth*” (Mark 4:19). Wealth may not be intrinsically bad, but it can and usually is deceptive.

*“One of the great deceits of wealth is the impression it gives us solidity. It feels permanent and dependable, as if it can be counted on to bear the weight of our lives. We tend to equate wealth with security. Once we have enough financial resources squirrelled away, we know we’re covered. Life can throw what it likes at us, but we have the protective cushion of our wealth. Money enables us to weather the storms...or so we think.”<sup>7</sup>*

But James is trying to force upon the rich the kind of perspective that is so often hard for them to grasp, namely, that your little blip of a life—60, 80, maybe 100 years— will hardly register against the backdrop of eternity and yet the decisions you make now will have lingering effects in the life to come, a life that will stretch for countless millennia. “*What will it profit a man*”, asks Jesus, “*if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*” (Matt. 16:26). There are more important things to life than money. And you can have all the money the world has to offer and it is not going to buy you out of the trouble you’re in before the courts of heaven. Those courts

are just. That Judge is immune to your bribe. What could you offer that He doesn't already possess? Paul's advice to Timothy would be apropos here...

*“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. <sup>18</sup> They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, <sup>19</sup> thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19)*

James is offering similar wisdom and perspective. James, if he is addressing the rich in general, would seem to be saying, “If you put your hope in wealth now, then you're in for a rude awakening when death, the great leveler, parts you from your riches. If you want to boast in those riches now, then you may as well boast in the humiliation that awaits you in judgment.” He wants us to see that riches, though not bad in themselves, are not the firm foundation the world likes to pretend will prop them up forever. They are more like the wildflower we spot in the field, which Sam Allberry describes as “a thing of beauty” when you catch it in “its prime”...

*“There is colour and delicacy. At times in the desert, the landscape is carpeted by wildflowers lending a colourful hue to an otherwise barren view. But their beauty is matched by their brevity. Once the sun reaches full height and blasts the land with a scorching wind, it is not long before the flowers are gone. The colours go, the life withers out of them, and nothing is left. One quick blast of middle-eastern sun, and the whole show is over. Such is the way of things with wealth.”<sup>8</sup>*

That's absolutely true and it's hard to deny that James has it in his mind. Even if James is not addressing the rich in general but the Christian rich in particular, clearly he still would have them grapple with the ephemeral nature of their riches. The rich and their riches will pass away. That's the point of his field metaphor. And that's a point that's harder to deny in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that crippled our global economy and personal bank accounts overnight. We don't have as much control over such things as we'd like to think.

But let's get back to that debated question that I mentioned earlier—is he in fact addressing all rich people here? I don't think so. And I don't think so for at least three reasons. First, while James does use irony on occasion (e.g., 2:19), he doesn't seem to be prone to the “harsh sarcasm” that would be in view if he was saying all rich people should boast in their future, humiliating upending. We just don't see that tact taken in the rest of his writing.<sup>9</sup> Second, the word that is translated “pass away” in verse 10 is not a word used elsewhere in the New Testament of the final judgment that will come upon sinners.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, I think the parallelism with verse 9 is more consistent if both halves were referring to believers, one half addressing the poor Christian and one the rich Christian. So while it is subject to debate, I am inclined to take verse 10 as a reference to wealthy Christians.<sup>11</sup>

And if James is focused more narrowly on the affluent believer, then it does change how we interpret the rich's “*humiliation*” in verse 10. It wouldn't seem right to take it as judgment language since their condemnation, just like their poor brothers and sisters, was already absorbed by Christ on the cross. So what does James have in mind with the “*humiliation*” that is worth their boasting in?

It would seem that their “*humiliation*” is the same low position that all believers share before God. The rich Christian should know that “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Every believer—rich or poor—must bow the knee in faith and lay down their sinful arms in repentance in the same fashion. Your standing in the eyes of the world makes you no more worthy of the grace of God. No one is worthy. As Paul reminded us in the words of the Psalmist:

*“None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12; Cf. Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3)*

To pretend otherwise is to be blind to your need of grace. And no one who thinks himself worthy will experience salvation from the Lord. Only those who recognize that their only hope is mercy and grace, unmerited favor, from the Lord, will ever recognize Jesus as Lord and call out to Him for salvation. It doesn't matter how rich you are in the world, no one is rich spiritually, no one is rich in personal righteousness, no one has anything of worth with which to curry favor with the Lord.

The only hope for any of us is grace, is God's work, is God's initiative. That's Paul's point in Romans 3. It doesn't matter who you are, what you've accomplished, how you've failed, we all experience salvation the same way—as an undeserved gift. No one brings something to the table of their salvation, except their sin. That's our one and only contribution. Jesus does the saving. He does the work. And it's built upon the foundation of His perfect life, sacrificial death on the cross, glorious resurrection three days later, ongoing intercession at the right hand of the Father, and promised return at the end of the age. From beginning to end, it's all of God. He gets the glory forever and ever. Amen!

In that sense then, we are all poor and destitute before God until Christ lifts us up. Even if we are rich in the world, we are poor in every way that matters until God saves us by His grace. And that is why Jesus began His most famous sermon with these words:

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 5:3)

This is the first of eight beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes are what D. A. Carson famously called “the norms of the kingdom.” They are describing what citizens of the kingdom of heaven look like. Thus, they are describing the character of those who have been saved by God and graciously given entry into His kingdom. They unfold in a logical progression. But this first one is the foundation of all the rest. You take it away, then you can't have the others. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* This is the heart of our faith. The entry point. The start. The necessary condition—poverty of spirit.

The word that's translated “poor” comes from a verb that means “to cower” or “to bow down timidly.” It's the posture that we would expect a beggar to adopt. So the adjective that is used here means “to be destitute” or “impoverished” or “beggarly.”<sup>12</sup> I don't know what comes to mind when you hear the word “poor,” but you need to think “beggar.” So the one who is “*poor in spirit*” is the one who literally has nothing to bring to the table spiritually. They are spiritually destitute and realize that the only hope for salvation is the grace of God. They have nothing to bring. They are spiritually bankrupt. They are unworthy. And they realize, therefore, that salvation has to be given or it will never be had. As one writer put it, they are those “without pretense before God, stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security, and self-righteousness.”<sup>13</sup> You might say that there must be a humbling, a “*humiliation*” (to use James' language), that must take place before we ever see our need for salvation. We are all spiritual paupers who know their only hope is to cry out to God for grace and mercy.

It's like the Augustus Toplady hymn, “Rock of Ages,” put it:

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to thee for grace.  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite their poverty of spirit, Jesus declares that they are blessed. Why? “...*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (5:3). The “*kingdom of heaven*” is a huge theme in the book of Matthew and arguably *the* theme of Jesus preaching. There is a lot that could be said about this if we had time today. But suffice it to say that “*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” means that Jesus is their King and that they are part of God's kingdom that

Jesus inaugurated in His first coming and will consummate in His second coming. The people of God are citizens of the kingdom.

Let me give you two implications that we must see here. First, Jesus is saying *only* the “*poor in spirit*” belong in the kingdom. There is no one in the kingdom who is *not* poor in spirit. *They* are the ones who belong in the kingdom. That means that anyone who is trying to earn God’s favor and earn entry into His kingdom is not part of the kingdom. You will never experience God’s salvation until you are at that point where you realize you are spiritually bankrupt. You have nothing to bring to the table to earn or buy or tilt the scale in your favor for salvation. Again, the only thing you get to bring is your sin and guilt. And until you get that, you will never cry out to God for salvation and throw yourself on His mercy and grace. It won’t happen.

But here is a second implication: if it is the poor in spirit who are in the kingdom, then kingdom entry must be a gift. Salvation must be a gift. Do you see that? If it’s the beggars who are the insiders, then it has to be a gift. And indeed it is. That’s why Jesus came to the earth.

You are a sinner whose sin had separated you from God and, apart from God’s grace, will separate you from God forever. Your spiritual bankruptcy prevented you from doing anything to change that condition. So Jesus came to do what you couldn’t do. He lived the life you should have lived and on the cross He died the death that you deserved. He took upon Himself the consequences that we deserved for our sins so that we could be forgiven and spared those consequences. He did this so that those who believe in Him, who turn from their sin and self, who acknowledge their poverty of spirit and need for a Savior, trusting in Jesus alone to save them would be saved. That salvation is a free gift of God’s grace that comes to us through faith in Christ and only through faith in Christ.<sup>15</sup>

That is something that rich and poor Christians have in common. And I believe that is what James wants the rich Christian to boast in when he writes, “*Let...the rich [boast] in his humiliation...*” (James 1:10). He’s saying, “Don’t boast as though you were better or somehow more deserving of God’s grace than any other individual. Don’t forget that you too are a sinner, saved by grace alone. So if you boast, boast in the Lord. Don’t boast in your short-lived riches. Boast in the riches of God’s grace extended freely to someone like you who was spiritually poor and bankrupt in your sin. Boast in that humiliation of spirit from which the Lord lifted up your head so you could see and experience His saving embrace.”

When James tells the rich Christian to boast in his or her humiliation, he is reminding us that we all have an equal standing in the kingdom. This is what I love about the church. This is what I long for the community to see about the local church. We should be a place where the rich and poor in society come together as one blood-bought people, one family, one gathering of brothers and sisters, united under the banner of the Gospel. We should be a gathering where every variety of sinner can come to celebrate God’s personal mercy toward them and their union with us in Christ. We should be a place where the image of God is recognized in every person and dignity is discerned and celebrated in all.

We should be a congregation where every shade of color in our community is welcomed and represented because they know that they can find brothers and sisters in this place, through faith in Jesus Christ, before whom there is no distinction. We need to be a people who show the world that what the Word of God says is true—Christ Jesus brings people together and His cross heals division. As Paul told the Ephesians, in view of the longstanding hostility between Jews and Gentiles:

*“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to*

*the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:13-22)*

O how the world needs to see that in the church in these days. O how the church needs to be the salt to heal the wounds of our society. Not because we ourselves have the power to do so. But because the Gospel we embrace is the power of God unto salvation. Because it alone restores fellowship between God and man and between man and man. Because it is the foundation of true reconciliation. Because in it we have hope. And in this place, we have a foretaste of that. We should.

Let me invite you to take that cup and peel back the top so you can access the elements of the Lord’s Supper ordinance. And as you do, I want you to consider our church. There are people from every generation. There are people of different backgrounds. People who are from different ethnicities. People from different socio-economic demographics. But we all partake the bread and wine as one because we all partake in Christ in the same fashion. None of us were more deserving. All of us were saved in the same way. A body broken in the place of sinners on a cross. Blood shed to atone for our guilt. This is the grace in which we all partake. This is the grace in which we all boast.

Maybe we come to this place poor in the eyes of the world. James says, “*boast in your exaltation*” because in Christ you have been made a child of God, Christ will return for you, you will reign with Him, raised and exalted in glory. Glory to God. Hallelujah.

Maybe we come to this place rich and well off in the eyes of the world. James says, “*boast in your humiliation*” because that was the door through which you came to see your need for the Savior and you bowed the knee with the rest of God’s people in faith, receiving the Lord’s salvation as a gift. Glory to God. Hallelujah.

Most of us rich by global and historical standards. Some of us rich by societal standards. All on the same footing before the cross. Equals. And when we partake of these elements, we remember what Christ has done to secure that as a consequence of our salvation. We remember that there is no distinction. We are all made one—part of His Body—through faith. So we partake as brothers and sisters. The poor rich and rich poor. One. May we never lose sight of this.

And if you are here today, never having trusted in Christ to save you, never having surrendered your life to the Lord, never having confessed your poverty of spirit and need for Christ to save you freely by His work and not your own... Then I hope you will see in this ordinance something of the power of Christ’s work on the cross to make you right with God. I hope you’ll see in it that Christ suffered in your place so that you could be saved. And that once saved, He brings you into fellowship with people who the world tries to keep apart.

But if you have not already done that and you are not in a saving relationship with God through Christ today, then I would recommend that you not partake of that bread and that cup. Instead, partake of Christ Himself. Pray to God to save you. He would save you today, if you would trust in Christ and His work on the cross for your salvation. Confess your need. Believe on Jesus. Trust Him to save you. Receive Him in your heart as those around you, who already have, receive the food. Then come tell one of the pastors or greeters at the doors that you have when the service is dismissed. Then next time receive the Supper with us as a child of God.

For the rest of you, who have partaken of Christ through faith already, remember what He suffered to bring you into fellowship with God. Remember what He suffered to bring you into the fellowship of His Church. And I invite you—together will all the saints as one—to take, eat, and remember...

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 55.

<sup>3</sup> “He offers a comparison (10, *like the flower*); then he proceeds to an explanation (11, *for the sun*), and finally he draws a conclusion (*so will*).” J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, 56.

<sup>6</sup> “The magnetism of riches is powerful and insistent, and we constantly need the wisdom of God to see through the facade. We do not have to be wealthy to desire money, and the desire is as threatening as the actuality (1 Tim. 6:9); we do not have to possess much in order to be snared by the delights of possession. But the Bible never teaches that wealth is wrong - did not the Lord give Solomon, as an intended blessing, riches as well as wisdom (1 Ki. 3:12-13)? Everything depends on how it has been acquired (e.g. Je. 17:11), how it is used (e.g. Lk. 12:19-20) and what place it holds in the heart of its possessor (e.g. 1 Jn. 2:15). Maybe James was thinking about Solomon. Do God's gifts ever come without God's testings, whereby we learn (or fail to learn) to enjoy his gifts? Was this why Solomon got money as well as wisdom? Is this why James illustrates the use of the gift of wisdom by displaying its ability to see the heart of wealth? Or was James just following the teaching of the Lord Jesus and seeing that 'the love of mammon is the most common source of double-mindedness', that fatal flaw (8) which holds us back alike from the gifts of God and from true stability of life?” Motyer, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Allberry, *James for You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For more evidence to this effect, see Blomberg and Kamell, 57ff.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (NACSBT; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 98. Also quoted in Quarles, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by John R. W. Stott in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 39.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this verse see my sermon, “Norms of the Kingdom,” at [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).