

Handling Poverty and Wealth

"Faith Works" Series, June 22 & 23, 2024 | James 1:9-11

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Why does a rooster crow?

Roosters crow for lots of reasons.

Roosters crow to signal that start of a new day. They have uncanny biological clocks.

Roosters crow to establish their hierarchy. The top rooster goes first, and all the other roosters make sure everyone knows where they fall in the order.

Roosters crow to remind everyone about their territory. "This is mine," the rooster is saying.

Roosters crow when they feel something, particularly when they feel threatened.

Roosters crow to get attention. They want you to hear them, see them, and know how great they are.

"Crowing" is another term for boasting. What does it mean to boast?

We have lots of words and phrases for boasting.

To "boast" is to brag or praise yourself.

It's to "toot your own horn" or to get "too big for your boots."

What do you crow about?

James confronts some of our most common reasons for boasting.

James confronts our attitudes about poverty and wealth.

He knows that our identity can be caught up in our money, status, and power.

Consequently, our money, status, and power can become reasons for boasting.

They can also become sources of shame and reasons for ridicule in our society.

James confronts all of it—our shame, boasting, and ridicule. None of it is spiritually healthy.

How does our faith work when it comes to our wealth?

James decouples our identity and self-worth from money, status, and power.

He points us to our true identity and our only real reason for boasting.

James shows us that our faith does work when it comes to money, status, and power.

Poverty is temporary.

In James 1:9 we are reminded that the people who received this letter from James were suffering:

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation ...

James was writing to Christians scattered around the Roman world, who had been persecuted in Jerusalem and Judea because of following Jesus.)

They lost everything. They fled into exile and were impoverished.

In the places they went, they still experienced persecution.

James describes some Christians as “lowly brothers.”

They didn’t have money or power.

Consequently, they were on the bottom rungs of power in society.

They may be ridiculed by others. Worse, they might be simply ignored altogether.

There were poor, socially low, socially powerless Christians in James’ day.

James is not denying the difficulty in being in poverty. Nor should we.

To be poor is to have a difficult time getting what one needs for living. Food is expensive. Housing is expensive. Energy is expensive. Insurance is expensive. Healthcare is expensive. Everything is expensive. If one does not have money, getting things like food, housing, and everything else we need for living can be genuinely difficult.

To be poor in our society means far, far more. It means to experience an assumption that one is somehow less. One is less educated, less hard-working, less successful, and less valuable. That kind of assumption and even stigma are difficult to live with.

But it matters in more tangible ways as well. To be poor is to see even one’s health impacted. To be poor sometimes means living in places that are not safe. Healthy food may be unavailable. I was reminded recently that to live in neighborhoods of Hartford makes one’s life expectancy ten years less than a person living just blocks away in West Hartford.

Poverty can be very difficult.

However, the Bible consistently calls the lowly “blessed.”

The Bible repeatedly talks about God seeing the plight of the lowly and being with them.

In **Luke 6:20-21** Jesus is very pointed in what he says:

... “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

Jesus says that the lowly, the poor, the hungry, those who mourn are blessed.

James says that the lowly are “exalted.”

What does it mean that the lowly are exalted? The word itself is the clue.

The word literally means to be on high or to be from on high.

To be exalted means to be filled with the life that comes from the place from which God sends his Holy Spirit. In **Luke 24:49** Jesus uses the same term:

“And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

To be exalted means to be filled with life that comes from the place to which Jesus ascended after he was resurrected. **Ephesians 4:8:**

Therefore it says,

***“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”***

To be poor is not inherently to be valuable. However, to be poor and to be Christian, and particularly to be poor BECAUSE of being a Christian is to be filled with the life of heaven!

So, James says, boast about your real exaltation!

James disconnects our identity and our sense of value from our money, status, and power.

One's poverty or lack of power and standing is no reason for shame.

James says instead that the poor Christian, and the one who is poor BECAUSE one is a Christian, should boast instead, because they have been exalted, filled with the life that comes from on high!

Wealth is temporary, too.

In James 1:10-11 we are reminded that there are also rich "brothers":

... 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.

The meaning of the phrase "and the rich in his humiliation" is not clear by itself.

The rich what? What has the rich to do with humiliation?

James is continuing a sentence that he has already begun.

Verse nine, the beginning of the sentence, fills in the information we are missing. Again, **James 1:9** says:

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation ...

If there is a lowly brother, then James is likely referring to the rich brother, the rich Christian.

And James tells the lowly brother to boast, so James is likely telling the rich brother to boast.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and let the rich brother boast in his humiliation.

James is speaking to wealthy and powerful Christians, who were also part of the movement.

To be a wealthy and powerful Christian is to experience some humiliation already.

To be a wealthy and powerful person who comes to Christ is to come to a Savior who was a peasant. He was rejected by the powerful people of that day and executed by the Empire. That's humbling.

Not only that, but the Christian movement was banned. To come to the Christian faith was to put one's standing in society, one's wealth, and even one's life in jeopardy. That was a kind of humiliation.

While in society the wealthy experience privileges, that's not the case in the Church. Among the Christians, no distinction was made between rich and poor. In the Church, all are alike. Jew and Gentile are one in Christ. Wealthy and poor are one in Christ.

And to come to Christ means to declare that he is Lord. He is in charge. It is to surrender control. The wealthy Christian has been humiliated.

James uses the image of flowers for the wealthy. It's a common image in the Bible.

James says that the wealthy are like flowers. They come up, look great, and get attention.

However, time passes. James says that time is like a scorching heat of the sun on a flower. The flower, the wealthy person, their "stuff," their standing, and their power will all be gone quickly.

That's ironic because throughout history, the wealthy and powerful have tried to use their stuff to make eternal life as good as, or even better, than this life.

The Pyramids of Egypt stand as testaments to pharaohs who wanted to "take it all with them."

The pyramids were far more than tombs. They were cultural, economic, and religious centers.

However, they served the basic purpose of conveying the pharaohs to the afterlife.

Pharaohs were brought to the pyramid complexes upon death and were embalmed.

They were buried with everything they would need for the afterlife. The pyramids were stocked with jewels, food, furniture, boats, and servants to accompany the pharaohs into the afterlife and to make them wealthy and powerful there, too.

The pyramids were decorated with blessings, incantations, and spells. The pyramids themselves were thought to be part of magically transporting their pharaohs to the afterlife, where they would become gods and continue to bless their people.¹

The pharaohs thought that they could "take it with them."

That's not that different from wealthy people who attempt to biohack their bodies, working to reverse the effects of aging, hoping, at least, to prolong life.

However, wealth is temporary.

Psalm 49:16-17 puts it simply:

***Be not afraid when a man becomes rich,
when the glory of his house increases.
For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
his glory will not go down after him.***

Wealth doesn't go with a person past this life. It has no bearing on eternity. Therefore, it has no value in eternity. It does nothing to provide for eternal life.

Faith in Christ endures.

James tells us that poverty and wealth are both actually trials.

The theme of this part of James chapter one is trials.

James acknowledges that all Christians face trials and tests. In **James 1:2-4** he writes:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

These trials make us perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing we need. What are those trials?

Of course, James is referring to being persecuted because of one's faith, but there is more.

In verses 5-8, James talks about wisdom and doubt. Will we get godly wisdom? Or will we doubt and try to do life on our own? It's a trial, a test.

Here in verses 9-11, James is talking about poverty and wealth. These are trials or tests. How will we do with this trial? The trial of poverty AND the test of wealth can both make our faith complete for life and eternity, if we handle them rightly.

¹ https://www.worldhistory.org/Great_Pyramid_of_Giza/

James is pointing us to our true treasure, whether we are poor or wealthy.

For the lowly, the true treasure is the life of heaven flooding into them in Jesus.

For the wealthy, the treasure is a crucified peasant who rose again and demands their loyalty.

Jesus is the true treasure, whether we are poor or wealthy. He is our greatest possession and our greatest quest in life.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price. In **Matthew 13:45-46** Jesus said:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Jesus is our treasure, and he is the only treasure that lasts forever.

James is pressing us to think about whether anything will come before God.

Jesus himself taught very explicitly on this topic. He called wealth a potential rival, something that could become a master of our lives, in place of and competing with Jesus himself. And Jesus said that we can't have two masters.

In **Matthew 6:24** 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.”

Instead, Jesus said, we are to seek him and his kingdom first, only, and resolutely. In **Matthew 6:33** Jesus said:

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Generosity helps to break the hold of poverty and wealth over us.

Generosity is a critical spiritual habit.

Generosity means giving back to God by giving our resources to him through others. We give of our financial resources plus other resources, like our time, talent, attention, and affection.

When we give generously, we establish that we are not in charge of our wealth.

We break the hold that wealth has on us as a master that dominates us.

So, when you give—particularly through the Church—think of it as a spiritual discipline that establishes Jesus' lordship over our lives and helps us to be free from bondage to wealth.

Faith in Christ is what endures, so we want to nurture that faith, not faith in money.

Boast because you know the LORD.

In *Charlotte's Web*, a pig needs a blue ribbon at the fair to prove his worth and save his life.

Charlotte's Web is a classic children's book.

It's set on a farm and features a little girl named Fern. Fern's dad is a farmer, and she saves a baby pig that was born too small. Fern named the piglet Wilbur. She bottle fed him, raised him, and became friends with him.

At five weeks old, Wilbur was sold to a family on a nearby farm.

Wilbur made friends with Charlotte the spider and other animals at the new farm.

Fern still visited, and life seemed good, but Wilbur heard from the other animals that the family would eventually make him into Christmas dinner.

Charlotte devised a plan to save Wilbur. She began spinning webs that proclaimed Wilbur's virtues. "Some pig" read one. Another said "Terrific." The wordy webs brought visitors.

But the animals realized that a few visitors wouldn't be enough.

Wilbur needed something extraordinary to save his life, like a blue ribbon at the county fair. Without a blue ribbon, he would just be another pig and would end up as Christmas dinner. A blue ribbon would make Wilbur so special that he would live out his days in comfort.

I won't spoil the ending for you. Read the book.

Sometimes wealth can become like a blue ribbon we display to prove our worth and justify our lives.

We go through life needing to prove our value.

Secretly, we're proving our value to ourselves. Sometimes there's someone specific whom we want to see our value. Sometimes we're proving our value to God.

Wealth brings us stuff. And power. And respect. Wealth says that we're somebody.

We're "some pig." We're "terrific." We've got the blue ribbon.

You don't need a blue ribbon or any other achievement to prove your worth.

If you're counting on blue ribbons or wealth or something else to make you feel good about yourself, then by now you probably know that it's never going to happen. It hasn't happened yet, and it never will. You will never be good enough to prove your worth.

And if you're chasing blue ribbons or wealth or anything else to make you seem good enough in the eyes of someone else, then it's time to figure out that it's never going to happen!

Blue ribbons and wealth and all other forms of achievement always come up short.

That's not the Gospel anyway! The Gospel is not about your proving your worth or being good enough. The Gospel is about what Jesus has done in your life.

The Gospel tells us that to be accepted by God, all we need to do is repent of our sin, accept the free offer of forgiveness we get in Jesus, and live for him. It's grace. It's a gift.

When we accept that grace gift, God says to us, "I forgive you! I love you! I claim you. I make you new! I make you mine! I make you fit for eternity!"

Wouldn't you love to hear that today? You don't need a blue ribbon. You just need Jesus.

If you have Jesus, then know and live with confidence because you have the blue ribbon already!

You've already been forgiven for your sin and failure. God has chosen you. You've been adopted as a member of his family. You have been called a son or daughter of God!

Grace has put a giant blue ribbon on your life already!

You didn't earn it. You don't deserve it. You got it as a gift because you belong to Jesus.

So, it's time to stop chasing blue ribbons to prove anything.
If you have Jesus, you have the blue ribbon already!

James tells us that this is the reason to boast—because we know Jesus.

James is inviting us to stop getting our value from our wealth and our blue ribbons.
Our worth and value come from Jesus instead.

That's a wise way to live now and for eternity. James is right. Faith Works.