

“Boast in the Lord”

James 1.9-12

⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹For 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.

¹²Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

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Introduction

I recently heard a sermon on this text by pastor Jon Taylor [at Presbytery] and enjoyed his pop culture reference - a song by David Wilcox titled, "start with the ending..." a song that suggests ending the marriage now in order that you might give up your weighty expectations and thrive together as a couple; an interesting concept and not without real application in this text. However, it is not what drove me to James.

It has been my experience that elders, when given the opportunity to preach, choose either verses that have come through careful study, or those which come to us by way of a 2X4. The lessons in the latter category are so blatantly obvious they are the first thing out of our mouths when God opens them to speak.

Let's start with the beginning.

James uses the word "brother;" so we know he is speaking to Christians both rich and poor. Both exist in his kingdom; including those wealthy individuals ...these individuals have opened the door - perhaps, as big as a needle's eye - and in return, God has opened a door through which may enter tents and camels.

The first thing that springs from the page is the paradox; the lowly brother in his exaltation - the rich in his humiliation. We see there is something reversed here and we have no choice but to take this apart and try to understand it. It is a clever trick used by the writer, who so obviously wants you to pause and consider the meaning. Or else it is not a trick and the author comes from a perspective foreign to those who think it's a trick. Either way - its meaning saves lives and fuels perseverance.

This text does not suggest one situation is better than the other, rather it tells us how God uses both wealth and poverty to claim your heart captive to Jesus.

If mere volume of words were an implication, James suggests rich people need more coaching than the poor in the art of grasping for the crown. Though they can witness poverty with their eyes, it is a rare blessing that they can know it intimately and apply it. Rich people aren't generally accustomed to condescension, so it is more challenging for them to understand a God who would make such a journey downward.

So, James places some pretty powerful spectacles on the rich in order that they might fix their eyes on that which will glorify God and in turn make them much more joyful as they prepare for eternity.

Let us now examine the wealth of the poor man and the deep poverty from which the Lord has brought the rich man towards salvation.

How does a poor man come to Christ?

People in both estates (rich and poor) require God's righteousness. We receive this through the word, sacraments and prayer, through meekness.

What is meekness? Patient, submissive humbleness. A disposition of long suffering.

In order to feel meek, we must make ourselves less, which is really accepting the reality of who we really are; recognizing that God made us with a stamp, “return to sender.”

Did you see the Far Side cartoon; the possum obits, “Not Faking It?” Have you heard the expression, “juggling halos?” We enjoy using words that lessen the pain of death in order that we can escape the inescapable— everything dies.

Believers who live in poverty don’t need much reminding; having less than their wealthier counterparts, they are closer to grasping their own mortality. They don’t need artful representations of the scorching sun or bitter winds because they are all too familiar with them in daily life. They know poverty like Tarzan knows trees.

Poverty in the U.S. is about worn out shoes, living with electricity – most of the time and the understanding that the \$1 menu is a real alternative to the grocery store. Outside the U.S. the equation changes; calluses replace shoes, bellies swell and ditches replace bathrooms. The word “poverty” can mean different things to different people.

There is a great deal of daily spiritual application in being poor and needy. The evidence of God’s daily deliverance is so visible they cannot deny it when it comes; you pray for bread – you eat bread – you give thanks. You beg God for protection – He provides it – you give thanks. You measure God’s deliverance with every breath. Breathe in – “thank you God.” Breathe out – “thank you...” and so on.

God’s faithfulness in providing daily bread gives enjoyment to the receiver and when we make that connection, we are able to enjoy other blessings we did not see before. Humility consumes arrogance.

The poor believer rarely goes up to a rich man and says, “It’s time for your daily lesson in giving.” Why? They are well practiced in humility – they know their place because they can’t escape its reality.

Those who are fortunate enough to have been intimate with poverty are more aware of our resemblance to dirt - and that Christ is our greatest possession – or better said – that we are his cherished possession. When the scorching sun burns or your crops fade from pests, it is a glorious thought to turn in your mind that the God of the universe who created everything from Kalamazoo to the Kalahari is not only unfathomably fond of you, but descended below the poverty line in order that we might rise with him. He is not a God who does not understand.

Though poor men are as prone to arrogance as the next man, they are greatly advantaged in the art of meekness. Their circumstances keep them in check. And greater than food is the need for constant reminding that their poverty is distributed by a God who loves them and that their suffering is temporary. [I know on the roughest of days, I have repeated the Heidelberg Catechism question on the providence of God over and over...]

The crown awaits.

How does a poor man boast in his exaltation? He reminds himself that he is a citizen of the greatest city that ever has or ever will exist. That in the city of God he is considered royalty and in a very high position. He sings to himself:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for
dress;
Helpless look to Thee for
grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

This is theory to a rich man. The disparity of suffering was played out in the movie, “The Blind Side.” The female lead played by Sandra Bullock laments the damage done to a \$10,000 sofa to a boy who never even slept in a real bed.” It comes from a mindset that doesn’t understand poverty – which leads them to a mis-understanding of Christ, who endured real poverty. Since real poverty is theoretical to them, Christ also becomes theoretical – harder to grasp.

The wealthy get trapped in worldly comforts – not wanting to do anything that takes them away. They instead say:

Botox in my hand I bring,
Simply to my cash I cling;
Bad-day for hair, oh what a
mess;
Help to Thee, not in this
dress;
Foul, I to the champagne fly;
Wash me, chocolate, or I die.

The wealthy are largely ignorant of meekness because they have little experience in condescension. As a result, we see well-intentioned legislators tax the poor with intentions of giving it back. Rich men give charity to the poor, but through other rich men, only to find that the mechanics of the process rob valuable dollars. We saw this in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami, and now in Africa where the continent is completely dependent on foreign aid riddled with corruption. Even the good intentions of the wealthy, when given in ignorance of real poverty, can breed more suffering.

The rich man knows he came in naked, but it’s all academic. He says things like; “there is no bad weather only bad equipment...” but it’s an arrogant assumption because he knows he can buy these things. He forgets that the clock is ticking ; though there are many reminders with age. The psalmist says, “teach me to number my days, O Lord...”³ as a reminder that we our lives are but a whisper in time and will fade away along with all our possessions.

The real theft, in fact, is the wealthy man’s illusion, that his comfort will not go away. He needs reminding of his eventual fate – that no amount of anti-oxidants – organic foods – plastic surgeries –

³ Psalm 90

cups of tea will prevent this. These things may extend life; give soothing comforts, but eventually - naked in – naked out. Everything dies.

Those who worship wealth will perish with their God.

How does a rich man come to Christ? He must see through a poor man's eyes. He must condescend, as Christ did – and even humble himself to the point of death, preaching the gospel to himself daily, thanking God that his estate was assigned by God for his benefit that he (and the beneficiaries of his charity) might have increased joy in Christ.

Pondering mortality is fuel for steadfastness.

After Jesus spoke with the "rich young ruler," he explained, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!"⁴(Note: that wasn't a question). The reason is due to the enticements and entrapments of wealth. This young man walked away from Christ because "he was one who owned much property," property that had given him a false sense of security. His love of *things* kept him from a love of *Christ*.

Wealth (or the lack of it) does three things;

1. Its existence teaches us about God, redemption, and his blessings.
2. It tests the genuine nature of our faith
3. It gives us a higher perch from which to fall.

The rich man lives when he understands that his material wealth will soon pass away and he clings to eternal things rather than temporal. He lives when he desires the righteousness of God and receives the implanted word through meekness. That is – patience, submission and long-suffering.

He fights the temptation to perfect the world around him to serve his own needs – and he doesn't look back to better days, rather takes ownership of the concept that he is a temp worker and is only given such wealth as God has deemed it for his glory.

This is precisely the warning of the Apostle Paul, "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many grief's."⁵ Wealth can vanish like the morning mist, leaving those who have longed for it smitten with misery. It is a tyrannical master that cannot share a throne with Christ.

So – Christ assigns our estates to us to test us, as if to ask; "what is it you truly love and worship." How we handle riches or poverty demonstrates the genuine or not so genuine nature of our faith.

Perseverance bears testimony to genuineness.

Doctrine;

⁴ Mark 10:23

⁵ 1 Timothy 6:9-10

Estates are assigned to believers that they might become intimate with the condescension and exaltation of Jesus and be pressed forward towards the crown of life.

In 2nd Cor we see this; “for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”⁶ - And following this we read “**this benefits you**, who a year ago started not only to do this work but **also to desire to do it**. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it **out of what you have**.

- Jesus established the direction we are to walk by his example. (U vector)
- Jesus placed himself in a low position – submitting unto death.
- Jesus frees us from our sin and frees our hearts that we might do good work in his name.
- Jesus places a desire in our hearts, which is fuels our work that we might press on.
- Jesus gives us the tools we need for that work and manages our estates just so. If he gives you a little, he wants you to accomplish the work with little. And to whom much is given much will be required. We are to complete that work out of what we have.
- Jesus fills us with his presence, which means he adds himself to our estates.
- Jesus is the crown of life.

In order to desire the work of Jesus, we must be poor in spirit – stifling the old man in us so that his creaking bones don’t crowd the voice of the Holy Spirit when he is encouraging us.

There is little difference from wallowing in poverty – or clinging to riches - and covering your ears saying, “I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you...”

Our estates are designed for the work of God, which not only sanctifying to others, but to ourselves – it is an object lesson in death...the decree of God that you cannot ignore. YOU want to learn about trees – you can read up on trees, but you don’t KNOW them until you climb them. You want to know Jesus? Boast in your lowly position that you might increase your knowledge of him and gain the crown of life.

When a rich believer boasts in his humiliation, he is preaching to himself the gospel.

When a poor man boasts in his exaltation, he is preaching to himself the gospel.

The U Vector travels in 1-direction and one is only slightly ahead of the other as they both head towards exaltation – glory – heaven – the crown of life.

[Read a portion of the book, “Jaber Crow,” by Wendell Berry...page 78,79 ending at...”I felt knowledge crawl over my skin.”] Jaber surrounded by a flooding river, standing over it at night. The power brought him back to ...”In the beginning God...”

As Jaber sensed the knowledge in the power and creation of God – we can get the sense of the power and creation of God in the estates that were designed around us. Our estates are designed to shape our view of God and to help understand him and his story of redemption.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 8:9

Christ!

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."⁷

God's viewpoint is eternal. He says

He was exalted.

He was humiliated.

He lived your life.

He died your death.

He rose up – and you will too.

The road to deliverance is a brightly-lit straight path with many hills and dangers. We often veer, preferring a dimmer light and wider path where fears creep and tug, telling us the light is too bright and the goal not worth it or even possible. Yet the Spirit and the word quicken our hearts to "man-up," and pursue that goal laid out for us. It takes an eye on heaven to proceed and fix our position. Then we realize the hills were an exaggeration in our minds and the inconvenience was an idol sloth. We see the death required was not our own and we sprint even faster - desiring no more hurdles, though the whisper in our hearts tells us ahead there are still more fears, more death, more pain. In them lies more opportunity for Christ to tell of His victory.

Conclusion

Are you a truly happy person? If that happiness is centered only in your accumulation of things, memories, or success in personal endeavors, then you do not know what I mean by happiness. Is your happiness in Jesus Christ?

Whether rich or poor, whether through good times or bad, true love for Jesus Christ endures. For that love has been hammered in the crucible of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. It looks with longing to Him in whose image the believer is being shaped.

⁷ John 17: 1-5