

James: Practically Real Faith Paradox

James 1:9-12

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on May 5, 2024.

James and His Pair of Paradoxes

Wester's dictionary defines a PARADOX as "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true." An example of a paradox is "the beginning of the end." The Bible uses many paradoxes, teaching us that the weak are strong, the empty are full, the slave is free, the cursed is blessed, and death brings life. These are all statements that, at first, could strike a person as being contradictions. But the longer you follow after Jesus, the more you realize the truth in them. A paradox is a powerful vehicle for biblical truth because it makes us think.

James uses paradoxes in our text today to communicate how God's wisdom steadies a shaky life. First: "Let the brothers of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation" – the paradox is the *rich poor*. And the second: "But let the rich boast in his humiliation" – the paradox is the *poor rich*. Combined, these two paradoxes spoke to James's persecuted, scattered brothers and sisters in Christ. They can speak to us today, too. If you feel out of synch with the popular culture, if you sometimes look around you and feel like a fish out of water, like you just don't fit, like the whole world is a tuxedo and you are a pair of brown shoes, this text is for you today. And for those who are suffering and struggling for their faith socially, relationally, economically, professionally – this text can speak to you, too. (read text)

The Rich Poor

The first paradox of the rich poor is a powerful statement. It emphasizes that the low are to be considered highly. In Greek, the verse reads, literally, "the brother, the lowly" and then "his exaltation" reads "in his height." So we can translate this statement, "The lowly brother ought to boast in his height!" The low are exalted, considered highly.

Who are the low? The context requires us to understand the low as poverty-stricken Jewish Christians who were poor because of their faith. And because they were economically low, they were low in the eyes of the world and, no doubt, in most instances, in their own eyes. James's former church members, scattered around the Roman Empire, considered themselves lowly.

These Jewish believers were convinced that they were less important, less valuable, less significant because of their poverty and their struggles.

These issues with class and socio-economical status persist today. James teaches paradoxically that a such a person, lowly, should instead boast in their exaltation. How can James say this?

Well, first of all, implied in the text is that this person who is low, is a brother or a sister in Christ. This lowly person is a part of God's family. "And if we are children, than heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17a). This lowly brother or sister is in fellowship with God, with God's people. Further, the Apostle Peter tells us, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession.." (1 Peter 2:9). If this person who is struggling could just understand these amazing realities for their life and hang on, they could then realize their true height, their true reality. The low are truly high.

It is imperative for the low to grasp hold of this and understand that one day a mighty reversal is coming in which the low will be exalted and the high brought low. Once a general sat at a table in a royal court next to the court chaplain. In the course of the meal, to make conversation, the general turned to the chaplain and asked, "Pastor, in this moment together here, could you tell me something about Heaven?? The court chaplain looked at the general carefully and said, "Well, yes, I could. The first thing I would tell you, general, is that in Heaven, you will not be a general."

James is so confident and certain of the grand reversal, so certain that the low will be exalted, that he encourages the humble believer to "boast" in it. This is supposed to be a joyful boasting. James uses the same word that Paul uses in Romans 5:2 speaking of rejoicing in the hope of glory and again in Romans 5:11 to refer to rejoicing in reconciliation. Here James orders the lowly to paradoxically and cheerfully boast in their height.

Why does the poor person, or the lowly person, get to experience this great moment of exaltation? It isn't because he is economically poor, but rather his poverty should produce a sort of lowliness of spirit because this will keep a person open to God. This has been something that Jesus was concerned with from the beginning of his public ministry. Luke 4:18 records the first words Jesus spoke, and they are a quote of Isaiah 61:1:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor...” This is why the Incarnation came through Mary, as she affirmed herself in her Magnificat (the song she sang in response to being told her role in the birth of the Savior). “He has looked on the humble estate of his servant” (Luke 1:48). Luke’s quotes the beatitude this way: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). Their financial poverty inclined them to spiritual poverty as Matthew made clear in his record of the first Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 5:3) James did not pity his poor brothers and sisters or encourage their commiseration. Instead, he saw them as spiritually advantaged.

James provides wisdom for believers regardless of the time period. Especially if those believers live in a culture that equates prosperity and wealth with happiness/God’s blessing and humble circumstances with misery/God’s displeasure. The lowly who are in the middle of struggle and hard times are tempted to doubt. No Christian who has been oppressed either economically, socially, or both has not at some point doubted.

A living faith has its ups and downs because it is the faith of a living person who is imperfect and a work in progress. But to those who are doubting, James stands deep spiritual truth on its head here and paradoxically claims that Christians are the rich poor, the low high, and commands that “the low brother ought to boast in his exaltation.” This truth shouts for attention in our upside-down world. Perhaps no one needs to hear it today more than wealthy believers, the people to whom James aims the second paradox.

The Poor Rich

People can sometimes consider the rich to be overprivileged, but Jesus taught that they are underprivileged – spiritually. That is the point of the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17). Thus, after Jesus told him to sell all that he had, he “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:22). Jesus’s resulting pronouncement – “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:24b-25) – teaches that it is impossible for a person who *trusts* in wealth to get into Heaven.

Wealth can easily convince a person that they are fine and can lead them to ignore the primary requirement for entering the kingdom of God: helpless dependence. It is difficult for a rich person to present themselves as humble beggars before God. Our rich culture is, therefore, disadvantaged and underprivileged.

But what about the small minority in James's day: the wealthy Christian. They had not suffered financial deprivation yet. Did their wealth present a problem? Of course it did, just as it does for rich Christians today. Material wealth can lure the wealthy person to focus their attention on things. Jesus warned us against things and stuff when he called it the deceitfulness of riches that can strangle spiritual life (Matthew 13:22). The more you have, the greater the likelihood of delusion, of trusting something other than God. Further, Jesus said it directly: "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

In Revelation the Lord warned against pride and independence: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). Following this line of wisdom, Paul tells Timothy, "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" (1 Timothy 6:17). Those with great wealth tend to regard what they have as eternal. This is why so many people want more and more and more. So many live under the illusion that their houses and their accounts will go on and on forever.

The entire New Testament, as well as what we see in people's lives, suggests that riches are a potential danger to spiritual life. Jesus views them as a spiritual liability, rather than an asset. His beatitude goes to the poor, not to the rich. "You are blessed because your poverty directs your soul to me."

Realizing this, James's paradox of the poor rich makes good sense: "And the rich (should boast) in his humiliation." The last part can be rendered "lowliness" (it is the same word just used to describe the position of the poor). He is telling them to see the value of their lowliness, their smallness, to help keep those lofty motives that swell out of the desire for prosperity in check.

Not too long ago, I watched a television interview with a televangelist who had purchased three private jets with the resources available to him from his viewing audience. As he walked the interviewer down the hall, he showed off framed pictures of the planes as if they were his children, so proud he was of them. After he got to the third picture, he mentioned that he had asked his viewers to send in more money so he could invest in another private plane to better travel to share the good word at places all over the world. This was a person who had let greedy motives swell out of control and overwhelm his entire being.

James teaches the rich Christian to cultivate the poverty of spirit that one experienced at salvation, when they realized how lost they were without Jesus. How broken they were. How spiritually disadvantaged they were and how they needed Christ. Rich believers are to work out of that sense of lowliness, to focus on it, to make that sense of lowliness and sufficiency in Christ their boast. Not their stuff, not their wealth.

The implications for Christians today in this text is significant. Especially for those who live under the specter of western affluence. James tells believers that, as possessors of immortal souls, it is a debasement to instead build their lives on perishable, temporary wealth. Never, ever, as a Christian, find yourself outgrowing the poverty of spirit that you realized in your salvation experience.

What did you have without Christ? Nothing. What did you earn apart from Christ? Sin, death, hell. This realization of lowliness must become more and more pronounced. We, like Paul, must honestly and progressively see ourselves as “the chief” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). James’s paradox screams at us here: “The rich should boast in his humiliation.” This is wisdom.

The brilliant paradox here can stand on its own, but James adds an illustration to drive the point home. James reaches back to the rich treasure of Old Testament illustrations, especially Isaiah 40:6-8, and says, “...because he will pass away like a flower of the field. For the sun rises and, together with the scorching wind, dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance perishes. In the same way, the rich person will wither away while pursuing his activities.”

In southwestern Oklahoma, in the summer, the heat sores so much that by midday, the ground outside becomes so hot a person cannot walk barefoot on it. The heat is so intense that plants must be watered at night, or they will burn. The constant dry wind blows hot, like a constant space heater running, and it can turn spring flowers into a brown patch in only a few days. The sun rises like a ball of fire bringing a furnace of heat, the flower hangs its head, and the petals fall from the flower. In the Greek, James writes literally, “the beauty of its face is destroyed.” What a powerful picture James paints of the danger of trusting in and boasting on riches and wealth. What a warning for those who consider themselves highly.

This can be true for both rich and poor – the person who focuses on this life rather than on the one to come. But James applies it especially to the wealthy because James is concerned that the rich man is more apt to think that his flowers and his stuff are eternal and forever. “In the same way, the rich person will wither away while pursuing his activities.”

A week or so back, our yard was dotted with little yellow bursts of dandelion activity. Then, a few days later, the dandelions scattered into the wind. James is saying that the person who trusts in wealth, in the here and now and not in Jesus Christ, will be like a parched dandelion in a sudden gust of wind! Poof!

Life is temporary and transitory and ephemeral for all of us. A mayfly lives for around one day. It would be ridiculously foolish for the mayfly to spend its entire lifespan weighing itself down collecting “treasures” that it would then drop at sundown when it ceased to be. James is telling us how foolish people can be, the mortal flowers of the field that we are, to glory in our riches, especially when there is eternity, forever, beyond this life. John Wesley once wrote: “I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit, coming from God, and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf; a few months hence I am no more to be seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven...”

The Eternally Rich

James concludes this discussion with a beatitude promising eternal life:

“Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

Perseverance, strength, toughing it out through the various trials of life that come to both the low and the high brings the divine compliment and prophecy “blessed.” Consider this verse carefully. Meditate on what will come to the person who endures. “He will receive the crown of life.” Because this person is a believer, he already has eternal life, just as Jesus promised; “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life” (John 5:24). Therefore, when he receives the crown of life he receives the final full endowment of life. God is rewarding love for him.

James connects love to faith here in 12. It is important to lock that away. To remember the implicit understanding that love and faith are connected. Loving Jesus means making Jesus your treasure, not stuff. Not money.

James is teaching that loving God is essential to trusting God. The steadfastness of your faith under trial wins the crown of life because the crown of life is promised to those who love Him. Love is implicit in faith.

The wise will choose what is best for the long run. The fool looks ahead a short span, five years, ten years, and plans what they think will benefit them the best. The wise fixes their sight beyond the grave because they know the high will be made low and the low high.

The poor can be rich because Jesus is their treasure. The rich can be poor because they can love stuff more than the Savior. So, regardless of what the bank account says, strive to live a paradoxical life of being the rich poor.