

JAMES 1:9-11  
RICH MAN, POOR MAN

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, 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.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Word of God is countercultural and counterintuitive. Though modern theological thought stresses the need for individuals to endeavour to be acceptable in the sight of social mavens, God’s Word presents the sorrowful observation that the whole of human existence is contaminated by sin. Consequently, we are easily swayed by a person’s social standing or their financial worth. If we are impressed by anyone, it should be that the person knows God, or rather is known by God.

James addresses this issue early in his letter to the dispersed Jewish Christians of the First Century. The issue is of such significance that he will address the tendency of Christians to exalt people on the basis of social standing or on the basis of net worth. James will constantly remind his readers that we are to avoid favouritism toward people, instead esteeming godliness and righteousness. In order to introduce this vital topic and to explore the issues involved, join me in study of the text for this day.

**BOASTING THAT IS ENCOURAGED** — “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation.” Two people are in view as James begins this portion of his letter. He speaks in generalities as he identifies a brother Christian, and a wealthy outsider. It is important to keep in mind that James is speaking of Christians. When he speaks of “the lowly brother,” do not overlook the fact that he identifies him as a “brother.” Christians are identified as belonging to “the brotherhood” [1 PETER 2:17], because it is composed of brothers in Christ. Ladies, because we live in a world that has never learned the English tongue, the concept is inclusive, embracing even distaff members of the community of faith.

Generally, boasting is seen in a negative light in the New Testament. We could multiply examples, but a few verses should demonstrate the veracity of that statement. Paul cautions Jewish believers that their boasting exposes them to serious consequences. “You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law” [ROMANS 2:23]. Later, in the same letter, he stresses the need for faith and the exclusion of boasting when he writes, “What becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith” [ROMANS 3:27].

Writing the Corinthians, Paul is adamant that “no human being [can] boast in the presence of God [1 CORINTHIANS 1:29]. In fact, he will ask these same proud Christians, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:7]? He concludes, “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:6]?

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Defending himself against accusations that he is not a “real” apostle like those whom he refers to as “super-apostles,” Paul tells the Corinthians, “We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:12].

Echoing a statement made to the Romans [cf. ROMANS 2:23], Paul warns the Galatians, “Even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” [GALATIANS 6:13]. In the encyclical we have received as the Book of Ephesians, one of the best known passages tell us that salvation is the gift of God through faith. Then, clarifying what is meant, the Apostle informs readers that salvation is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” [EPHESIANS 2:8, 9].

From this brief review of cautionary statements concerning boasting, I learn that we must not boast of self. Our merits and our worth are transient at best and unworthy of boasting. Boasting in individual accomplishments or personal position excludes grace, assuming pride for something over which we ultimately have no control. Though we may work hard, preparing ourselves for success, it is God who blesses us with quick minds and capable bodies to accomplish all that we do and to achieve whatever position we occupy. Our responsibility is to glorify Him in all that we have and do.

Neither should we boast against others. To despise others, as men identified with the world do, is a sign that we have forgotten who made the difference. The apostle rebukes such people: “Why do you judge your brother [ROMANS 14:10, NET BIBLE]?” Tertullian translates this verse, “Why do you nothing him?” He who makes others nothing forgets that God is all in all to himself. Grace is totally different: “We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray and slaves to various passions and pleasures” [TITUS 3:2, 3]. Think of what you *are* in such a way that you do not forget what you *were* before grace made the difference.

There is, however, boasting that is commendable before the Lord. If boasting is for the glory of God, to exalt God, not yourselves, it is commendable and praiseworthy. “My soul makes its boast in the LORD” [PSALM 34:2]. Boasting of God’s goodness, His mercy, or His power is commended in the Word of God. We have nothing to boast of but our God—not wealth or riches or wisdom, but the Lord alone. Jeremiah writes, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD’” [JEREMIAH 9:23, 24].

Remembering our privileges, we can boast in what we have in Christ. Translated literally, ROMANS 5:3 states, “We boast in our sufferings.” The apostle does not say, “We must boast *of* our sufferings,” rather, we are to boast *in* sufferings. Such boasting is possible only as we learn to rejoice in trials. This godly boasting honours Christ who gives us strength in the trials we face. Therefore, we are not ashamed when we suffer as Christians. Paul’s teaching is explained by Peter, “If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” [1 PETER 4:16]. The world thinks it is a disgrace, and you think it glorious to suffer for Christ. Look forward to the reward. This is how we may take pride in God and his ways.

The “lowly brother” likely refers to Christians who are enduring trials. Consequently, they are probably impoverished through the actions of their persecutors. In any case, they do not enjoy social standing within society, and hence, they are lowly. The author of the Hebrews Letter describes what these early Christians were experiencing when he writes, “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” [HEBREWS 10:32-34].

James contrasts the boasting of the “lowly brother” with “the rich.” I do not believe that “the rich” refers to Christians. James is generalising, to be certain. We cannot make absolutes out of generalisations, but he saw the rich as those who persecuted the lowly. As an example of what he is speaking of, consider the following accusation found later in the letter. “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” [JAMES 5:1-6]. Clearly, James neither sees “the rich” as godly, nor does he hold their actions as exemplary.

Nevertheless, the “lowly brother” is to boast “in his exaltation”; He is to rejoice in the knowledge that Christ is with Him. Verses such as the following are virtually foreign to our theology in modern Canada. “It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” [PHILIPPIANS 1:29]. Modern Christians seek the glory, but reject any suffering for the cause of Christ. We are instantly ready to quit the race should someone hurts our feelings, but we really know nothing of opposition because of our Faith. How we need to face up to the words of the author of the Hebrews Letter. “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” [HEBREWS 12:4]!

Dear people, as a congregation, I urge us to watch out that we don’t slip into the trap of considering the worth of a person by the size of their portfolio. In the church of the Living Son of God, the poor are every bit as valuable as the wealthy to Christ the Lord. He died because of sin—all sin! Therefore, we must not permit ourselves to become “Sunday morning Christians” who invite others to attend the services on the basis of their standing in society. Instead, we must look for spiritual worth in all people, seeking godliness in those whom we will esteem and those whom we will seek to lead us.

“The rich” are to boast in their humiliation. Whether professing Christ or whether living as though He did not matter, those who are living solely for the plaudits of this dying world are urged to think soberly. They are to consider the brevity of life, the poverty of their soul, and the length of eternity. The consequence of living for the moment, without considering the eternal nature of the soul, is horrifying. In fact, this solemn prospect serves as the basis for what James writes next. The Bible does not say that the rich cannot be saved, but it does warn of the difficulties that accompany wealth.

Perhaps you recall the caution Jesus gave His disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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” [MATTHEW 19:23, 24]. How shocked the disciples were when they heard these words! The Master turned upside down their long-held standards of estimating the worth of individuals. Social certainty was demolished with one word.

Jesus’ words anticipate the teaching Paul provided several decades later. “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”

The Apostle continued by cautioning those possessing wealth, and social stature, “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. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 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 6:9, 10, 17-19].

What, then, is a rich Christian to do? According to the Word, those who possess wealth must recognise that God has permitted them to hold their riches for His glory. They must see that they are appointed as stewards to administer the grace of God, for the goods they possess, if they are godly, are held in trust for the glory of the Master. Know that riches pose a danger all their own, and treat them accordingly. Soon, James will remind his readers of the transitory nature of all that we now hold, which is a mirror of the transitory nature of our very lives.

**WHAT WEALTH WILL BUY** — “Like a flower of the grass [the elite] will pass away.” In the latter portion of **VERSE TEN**, James employs a simile that was undoubtedly familiar to his readers. Anyone who had ever lived in Palestine would have understood what he was saying. He actually draws from the Psalms when he employs this word picture.

“As for man, his days are like grass;  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and  
it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.”

[PSALM 103:15, 16]

Similarly, Peter uses this same concept to convey the certainty of God’s Word.

“All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers,  
and the flower falls,  
but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

[1 PETER 1:24, 25]

The Middle Eastern sun “rises,” and its heat scorches the anemone and cyclamen flowers, quickly causing their beauty to perish. They become mere withered grasses, suitable only for kindling fires. The beauty of the flowers of the Judean landscape is compared to the beauty of a wealthy man’s busy life. All of the hurrying about to maintain success and influence soon passes; and James is clear that the rich are made busy because of their wealth.

According to James, the hustle of the wealthy individual is much like an industrious rich farmer who is told at the precise moment of the apogee of the accumulation of wealth that he is utterly poor toward God and his life is at its end. Perhaps you will recall the story Jesus related, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” [LUKE 12:16-21]. Similarly, the affairs of the rich in James amount to nothing in the end. Surely something as favourable and disarming as wealth and beauty and the attendant social standing they bring would have been more enduring. But those who possess such riches fall quickly under the harsh heat of this perishable life.

The rich man should beware, according to James, because he “will pass away” together with all his undertakings. In the very movement and manner of displaying the beauty of a wealthy life, all will be lost. This is the order of things—impermanence, transience and loss are rules for the things man esteems. The biblical meaning of this loss is reflected in 1 CORINTHIANS 3:12, 13, “If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.” The biblical view cautions that should a believer build a life of service upon the perishables of worldly value, then all of it will be consumed in the fire of judgment. Wealth is but a tool to be used for God’s glory, and not solely for our own comfort. Wealth is a gift that has lasting value only as it is used to honour the Lord.

Nothing of earthly possessions contributes in itself to the kingdom of God. Indeed, wealth has eternal value only insofar as it is used to honour the Lord. Honouring the Lord, who gives us the ability to make wealth, requires wise use of all that He entrusts to us—caring for the needy, advancing His cause, and bringing the lost to faith in Him. The allure of wealth is illusory and invites disaster because of the high cost of making and protecting it. Using riches for their own sake exposes the total lack of lasting value in wealth. Thus the life of the rich and their wealth together fade away.

Kurt Richardson correctly observes, “The overall context for this hard truth about the wealthy and their wealth is the instruction of the Christian community; the rich can be a coequal part of the community of believers. But let their holding and use of the wealth and position be carried under an umbrella of humility. The rich cannot boast in their wealth because confidence in wealth belongs to the enmity of the world system against God’s values.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, **James: New American Commentary, Vol. 36** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 1997) 70

James suggests a proper way of relating and worshiping among believers of different economic statuses through a kind of spiritual exercise. His intent is similar to Paul's instruction found in 1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31. "The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it." Especially note Paul's final statement here, weighing its import in light of James' warnings. "The present form of this world is passing away." The impermanence of this life must induce humility.

**THE BREVITY OF LIFE** — "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." It is vital that we focus just a little longer on the meaning of our existence. A little later in his letter, James will forcefully confront his readers with the brevity of life. "You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" [JAMES 4:14]. Your life has all the permanence of a morning fog; your life can be compared to smoke drifting in the wind [cf. PSALM 102:3], or to the vapour of breath on a frosty morning [see JOB 7:7].

Prosperity is a test. The prosperous individual is counselled to boast in his humiliation. The reason for this seemingly strange admonition is that if he is saved he must recognise his sin, his need for salvation, and the fact that no amount of his money can buy this salvation. This wealthy man must approach God on the same basis as does the poor man. In the end, all physical wealth fades away. James quotes ISAIAH 40:6, 7 to describe the wealthy individual. The rich man needs to recognise the vanity of wealth as something not to be trusted, because wealth and those who trust in wealth, rather than in God, are transitory.

Years ago, as a young Christian, I frequently heard older saints quote a couplet that captured the intensity expected of those who professed to follow Christ. Perhaps you have heard this at some point in your life. "***Just one life, 'twill soon be past; what's done for Christ, is all that will last.***" Those saints were saying, as James says, that we must get our priorities right. Rich man, poor man—rejoice and boast in the knowledge that God has shown you mercy. Rich man, poor man—boast in the humiliation that comes from the knowledge that the things of this earth are transient and destined for dust.

We live in a world that unconsciously drinks in the world's propaganda that worth is determined by the size of an individual's bank account. Youth no longer want to grow up to be policemen or firemen serving their communities, but they want to be rock stars or movie stars adulated by adoring masses. Assisted by educational mavens—experts in social engineering, our children have adopted the lie that self-worth is a reflection of popularity, instead of recognising the lasting worth of character and godliness.

In a similar manner, we measure the impact of a congregation by the number in attendance, by the social status of those who are present on a Sunday morning and the moneys received by that congregation. We have convinced ourselves that the names of those attending our services determine whether we enjoy the blessing of God, rather than knowing the will of God as revealed through the Word of God and ensuring that each member is held accountable to do what God wills. Church, in our materialistic, socially relevant view, would not be recognised by James.

James would challenge us to question the world's assessment of worth and value. Rock stars live shorter lives than do the rest of society, and far too many are immoral. Their wisdom is often called into doubt by the choices they make in their personal lives. In a similar manner, the spiritual impact of a congregation is not determined by the social acceptability of those attending, but rather by whether those in attendance obey God and honour Him in the conduct of their lives. The power of a congregation is not measured by the moneys held in reserve in the bank, but by the prayers of the people who share the worship of the assembly and by the witness of the Word among the people of God.

Balancing the Christian life is difficult, and the more so because we are so heavily influenced by the world in which we live. Our eyes are inundated with images of violence and distorted sexuality, and our ears are filled with messages promoting hatred and godlessness. If that were not bad enough, our minds are constantly assaulted with the twisted message that good is evil and evil is good. Is it any wonder that modern Christians fail to live according to the Word God has given? The pulpits of contemporary Christendom are as susceptible to being swayed by the half-truths that parade as wisdom in this fallen world, and thus Milton's ancient adage that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed may well be applied to the churches of this day.

Thus far in his letter, James has instructed believers the proper way to meet trials. Actually, he anticipates that we will experience trials, perhaps holding the view Paul would later express when he warned Timothy that, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" [2 TIMOTHY 3:12]. He has spoken of the necessity to become mature, drawing on the wisdom that God alone is able to provide. He has cautioned against allowing oneself to persist in two minds. Now, he continues his encouragement for believers to view life in the light of eternity. In total, James is teaching us how to balance the Christian life, seeing God at work even in the hard times.

Part of the balancing that is required to make a success of life is recognising the brevity of our existence. Whatever we may accomplish in this life must be done **now**. This theme of the necessity for urgency is found throughout the Word of God. Far too many of the professed saints of God have become complacent about serving God. Focused on this dying world, they are more intent on securing themselves for time rather than securing themselves for eternity. Jesus warned that we must work now. He said, "Night is coming, when no one can work" [JOHN 9:4]. Our drive to be socially acceptable dissuades us from being witnesses as Christ appoints us to be. Our concern for how others view us, our worry that someone may think less of us if we live for Christ, turns us from obedience and enervates the vigour of the indwelling Spirit of God.

Think about this. The average church requires more than forty people to win one lost person to commitment to Christ. A stunning percentage of churches never see a baptism in the course of a year, or even in the course of many years. I can only conclude that modern Christians are not convinced of the shortness of life, nor of the peril of the lost. The average church does not even grow biologically, which would indicate that we are not even bringing our youth into the Faith. The youth of the average congregation pass through the doors, hear the teaching of the Word, and choose the excitement of this dying world. Somewhere around age thirty, those same youth often wake up to the realisation that life is transient. Though some will turn again to the Faith of their parents, most will shove the terrifying knowledge of their lost condition far to the back of their minds because they cannot deal with the implications arising from that knowledge.

It is in responding to this precise concern that many contemporary churches miss the boat. It sounds so reasonable to say that we must win the next generation if we are to have a future. The reason this view is so dangerous is that there is an element of truth in it. Indeed, we must win the next generation. However, if we fail to reach the current generation, our efforts for the future are for naught. We will have constructed a house of cards without a sound foundation on which to assure growth.

After years of study, I have come to the conclusion that such an approach to church growth and life is contrary to the Word of God. Where is that famous verse that tells us to focus our soul-winning efforts on the young? Parents are assigned responsibility to train their children, and churches are to include all whom God appoints to life within the fellowship. But nowhere are we given a mandate to focus our resources on the youth. Perhaps it is because youth are less threatening to us than are the parents of youth. However, the Word of God teaches us to “make disciples of all nations,” focusing on those who are of sufficient mature age to decide for Christ and for the truth.

I have observed the salvation of the lost among the churches for several decades. I have observed that winning children to the Faith is exciting, but seldom do children bring their parents to faith in the Son of God. It does happen on occasion, but it is the exception instead of the rule. I have also witnessed many women who come to faith in the Son of God. Wives have minimal influence in bringing their husbands into the Faith, and ultimately they have little impact on turning their children to faith in the Saviour without the influence of a godly father in the home. Peter does acknowledge that husbands “may be won” through the conduct of their wives, but such response to feminine godliness is exceptional rather than normative. However, husbands have great influence on bringing their wives to faith in the Risen Saviour. Fathers are highly influential in turning their children to righteousness.

Would you build a church that experiences perennial growth and power with God? Then focus on the men of the community. Speak to the struggles they have and present the message of life in the Son of God. Those men, coming to faith in the Living Lord of Glory will bring their wives and their children into the Faith. Thus, Christ will be glorified and the church will prosper and the spiritual power of the congregation will be seen throughout the communities about us.

What has this to do with the verse before us? Truly, we are rich Christians in the midst of a richer society. We dare not ignore the “lowly brother,” but we need to come to grips that as rich Christians we must learn to boast in our humiliation. Embracing our humility in Christ, we will reach out to our world and honour the Lord through turning many people to righteousness. All mankind is dying to see one church that lives thusly.

Again, we are fading away in the midst of our busy lives. Time is passing, and we are unconsciously surrendering to the siren song of being socially acceptable. The time to be godly is now. The time to win the lost is now. The time to live boldly for Christ is now. Our world is dying to see one church that believes the Word of God and lives as though Christ were indeed Master of all. Will we be that church? My prayer is that we will indeed be that church. Amen.