

**Bethel Fellowship Church, Minneota, MN**  
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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Years ago a young man pulled a prank in New York City that proved not only how gullible people are, but how enthralled they are with stardom and worldly success. He got a couple of bodyguards and a crew of photographers to follow him around, and then he walked out of the NBC studio like a famous celebrity. Hundreds of people flocked to get their picture taken with him as he walked around Times Square. Just because they thought he was a rich, famous movie star or pop singer, they mobbed him.

We live in a culture that idolizes money, fame and power. People want to “get ahead” in the world, and that means they want to be popular, they want to be rich, they want to have influence. They want to be respected, even exalted. And when they achieve this kind of success, often they bask in it. You can hear it in some of the music today. You can see it in the flashy cars and fancy clothes that people wear, especially in the big cities.

But you don’t have to go far from home to see it. Lots of people have this attitude, even people like us. Not that any of us are celebrities or drive Ferraris or wear designer clothing. But even though we aren’t super-rich, we are still quite capable of looking down upon an unwashed homeless person in rags. And even though we aren’t super-rich, we still know the temptation of pride after buying a nice, shiny, expensive car or truck and driving it down the road for everybody to see.

Or even having a pocketwatch like this one here. But I’ll save that for later.

By nature we hate being poor, being lowly, being disrespected by people who are richer, more popular, and more powerful. And what do we love? We love status. We love being recognized as successful by this world’s standards, with cars and houses and jobs that command respect. And oh, how ruthless we humans can be sorting out the popular from the unpopular, exalting the rich and powerful and humiliating the poor and lowly. Just ask any inmate of the average American high school who gets bullied every day.

But this is nothing new. This has been going on for all of human history. It certainly was going on when James wrote his letter to the Jewish Christians who were scattered from the persecuted church in Jerusalem. And in our study of James’ letter, we’ve reached the first place where James says something about it. Right after he writes about rejoicing in trials and asking for wisdom to face trials, he says:

James 1:9–11 9 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, 10 and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 11 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.

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This is a simple passage with a powerful message, in two parts. The first part is aimed at the lower-class, poor brother, and the second part is aimed at the rich, upper-class brother. James tells each of these brothers exactly what they need to hear as he leads them to the same point of view – not the point of view of the world that idolizes money, fame and power, but the point of view of those who worship and serve the living God.

We need to hear both parts of this message. We need to hear the part aimed at the lower-class, poor brother as well as the part aimed at the rich, upper-class brother. We need to hear both parts because we are in a different situation than the people James wrote to.

In his day there wasn't really a middle-class. There was only the lower-class and the upper-class. Either you were poor, or you were rich. But today the largest segment of our society is called the middle-class — and most of us are in it.

And because of that, we may face double the temptation. Back then, the poor were tempted to covetousness and the rich were tempted to pride. But from day to day, even from hour to hour, we can be tempted to both. One moment we can be tempted to covet riches, and the next moment we can be tempted to pride in the riches we already have. That's why we need to hear James' message today more than ever.

## **Exposition**

### **I. Let the Lowly Brother Boast in His Exaltation**

So let's begin. James spends most of his time in these three verses talking to the rich, but he starts by talking to the poor. "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation," he says at the beginning of v. 9.

"Lowly" doesn't just mean poor. It means exactly what it says — lowly, of the lowest level of society. They're nobodies. Not only aren't they rich, not only aren't they famous, not only aren't they powerful, they're poor, despised, and oppressed.

Even before they left Jerusalem, these Jewish Christians would have been lowly. Most of the Jews were already lowly when Jesus was born, since the Roman Empire had conquered their country and ruled them with a heavy hand. Some of the Jews were rich and powerful, of course, since some of them collaborated with the Roman Empire. Those who controlled the commerce at the Temple were especially rich and powerful. But any Jew who turned to Jesus would have lost most of the status he once had.

And when the persecution began, they were scattered like dust in the wind. Now they are far from home, despised for being refugees, despised for being poor, and despised for being followers of Jesus — the unbelievers around them thought they were part of a crazy cult, and they laughed at them.

Imagine being in their shoes. You've turned your life over to Jesus, and what is your reward? Poverty. Humiliation. Lowliness. And from what James says in the rest of this letter, oppression and injustice.

In James chapter five we learn that some rich people are cheating the poor. They are working them hard, but they aren't paying them what they need to survive. And when

these poor laborers can't make ends meet, they have to borrow. When they can't pay their debts, the rich drag them into court, as James says in chapter two. And then the rich withhold their already meager wages to pay their debts, adding insult to injury. These poor people are in slavery to these rich oppressors.

Their lives are harder than most of us can imagine. Some of them are probably starving. Their clothes are turning into rags and they can't afford to buy new clothes. To keep the men healthy enough to work, what food there is has to go to them, so the children rarely have enough to eat. Their poor parents have to watch them suffer as they go hungry and their weakened bodies fall victim to disease. And the lower they slide down this slope of poverty, the more their neighbors despise them and mock them.

Surely they must be tempted to covet the riches of the wealthy every time they see them go down the street in their nice clothes, nice and fat with all the food they feast upon, their hair shiny with expensive oil.

If only, if only . . . if only I could be like that rich man. If only people greeted me with smiles like that, giving me gifts instead of yelling at me to get lost.

And the children must look at those rich men and think, if only my father were like that. They look at the rich children with their nice toys and little ponies and they think, oh, how I wish I had such nice things!

And the wives must look at the rich women and think, oh, how beautiful they are! Such fine clothes, such rich colors, such exquisite jewelry! Look how the men turn their heads to look at them, and how the other women burn with envy! And what a luxury it must be to have so many servants, and to be carried around like a princess! If only I could be like that. But no, their lives are full of blood, sweat, and tears.

They must be tempted to discouragement, depression, even bitterness. They might even be tempted to cry out against God, to wish they had never turned to Jesus, to think that maybe they should just turn away from the church, go back home, and try to pick up where they left off. This is a trial, a real trial.

But what does James say to these lowly people? Does he say, "God wants you to be rich?" Does he say, "Whatever you see that you want, name it and claim it?" Does he say, "Sow a seed and God will bless you with health and wealth?" No. James says, "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation!" In other words, "Let the lowly brother boast in his high position!"

How could you say such a thing, James? Don't you understand how bad things are? Don't you know how poor we are, how despised we are? How can we boast in exaltation when all we know is humiliation?

But I think James knows first-hand what he's talking about. Don't forget where and how he grew up. If he's the brother, the sibling of Jesus — and I think he is — then he grew up as the son of a construction worker in the poor Jewish town of Nazareth. And just three miles away was the rich city of Sepphoris, the jewel of Galilee.

James and Jesus and their father would almost certainly have done construction work in Sepphoris. They would have walked from their poor neighborhood to work on the mansions of the wealthy people there in Sepphoris, and then walked back home at the end of the day. I've been to Sepphoris, and I've visited the house of a rich man that archeologists have dug up. A stunning mosaic was laid on the floor with tiny colored bits of tile, work so fine that you can even see the blush on a woman's face depicted in the mosaic. That man was so rich his house even had indoor plumbing, believe it or not, with a toilet that had constantly running water. Incredible wealth at the time.

What do you think James must have thought when he saw that day in and day out? Surely James must have been tempted to covet the wealth of those people, even to envy them. He might have even cursed his poverty. He knows what his friends are going through. He knows how humiliated they must feel. Yet he calls them to boast in their exaltation!

Exaltation? What exaltation? The very exaltation we caught a glimpse of in verse 5. In verse 5, James tells them they are no different than their rich masters before the throne of God. Look back at verse 5:

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

God "gives generously to all," or as the King James says, "giveth to all men liberally." God even gives wisdom — more precious than all the money in the world — not based on whether you are rich or poor or black or white or male or female or Greek or Jew but generously gives to all who ask in faith.

As my old pastor, Dr. Clearwaters, used to put it, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." The lowly, the oppressed, the ones left to rot in the ditch of society, are exalted to stand as equals before the Lord with the noblest born rich man, if they are brothers.

Keep your thumb in James, and turn to 1 Corinthians 1 for a moment:

1 Corinthians 1:26–29 26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (ESV)

The foolish, the weak, the low, the despised — exalted! Exalted in the Lord, called to be brothers in unity!

Now, back to James. Do you see that the exaltation James is talking about has nothing to do with the world or the things of this world? It has nothing to do with money or fame or power. The high position James is talking about here comes from being a *brother*.

That's the key word. "Let the lowly *brother* boast in this high position." The "brother" or "sister" is a Christian, a child of the living God, a servant of Jesus Christ, a member of

the church, the very body of Jesus himself. The Christian has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. His life is hidden with Christ in God. No amount of money in the world could buy this. No unbeliever, no matter how rich he is, can even come close to the high position that the Christian has.

Can you boast in this high position? Are you a Christian? That is, have you thrown yourself upon Christ as your only hope of bringing glory to the God you have offended time and again? Are you following Christ? Then you can boast in this high position.

The boasting that James encourages the lowly brother to do isn't a vain boasting, not some kind of self-flattery. He isn't trying to boost their self-esteem. He isn't telling them that there is some kind of nobility in being poor. He isn't telling them that the more poor they are, the more exalted they are.

What James is doing is pointing them to their position in Jesus Christ. He is helping them to have the right perspective. Don't look at your lives the way the world does. Don't measure your success by the standards of this world. That's all a lie. The truth is that what really matters is where you stand spiritually. And if you are in Christ, then you are on top of the world. You are the most successful man in the world if you are a faithful servant of Jesus, no matter how poor you are and no matter how despised you are.

And that is exactly what we need to hear today. None of us are as poor as these people to whom James is writing this letter, but we are all certainly less rich than many people in this world. We are all tempted at times to wish for earthly possessions that we can't afford. We may even be tempted to resent the way the rich and powerful look down at us, from the cosmopolitans who call this part of America "fly over country" to the popular kids in school who treat you badly. We may even be tempted to envy.

Do you know the difference between coveting and envying? To covet something is to want something very much, perhaps a little too much. But to envy is to resent someone else for having that thing you covet — so much that you despise him for having it.

It's one thing to covet a fancy car, but it's another thing to despise the guy driving it because he has it and you don't. That's envy. And if you hear that fancy car got pounded by golf-ball sized hail and was covered in great big dents, you might even be secretly glad. That's *schadenfreude*, and it has no place in the heart of a Christian.

Watch out for that bitterness if it rises up within you! Envy is one of the works of the flesh that Paul writes about in Galatians 5 where he says, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:21b).

Don't covet the riches of the wealthy. Don't resent them. Don't envy them. Rejoice for them that they have what you don't. And pity them for their spiritual poverty, if they are unbelievers. Pray for their salvation.

And thank God that you are the wealthiest people in the world, if you are following Jesus Christ as his disciple. That goes for all of us — men, women, single people, married people, grown-ups, and all of you little boys and girls, too, if you are following Jesus.

But the only way to follow Jesus is in loving obedience. If instead of loving Jesus you love the world and the things in this world, then none of this will mean anything to you.

What is most important to you? Examine yourself. Have you been longing for something in this world that if only you could have it, you would be happy?

I know what that's like. When I was a boy I used to page through the catalogs that came in the mail – oh, how I wanted so many things that I saw in those catalogs! And I remember once seeing a pocket-watch in the store, and I just had to have it. I was obsessed by it. All I could think of was that pocket-watch until finally I got it, and then I treasured it. Here it is, with its cracked glass, half a century later. See? It doesn't have to be a fancy car. It might just be a cheap watch, to a little boy.

Maybe there is someone here who has been thinking this way, maybe even this week. You've been dreaming about some new toy, a new gun, a new computer or cell phone or car or some other thing. Maybe it's just that mysterious thing called popularity. If only you could have it, *then* you would be happy. You wish you were rich enough to buy it, or you wish your parents were rich enough to buy it for you. And maybe every time you see someone else with that thing you want so much, you bristle.

Set your sights higher than that! Be wise — and if you aren't, then ask God for wisdom! If you are a disciple of Christ, then you already have something more valuable than anything you could ever buy — not just twice as valuable, not just ten times more valuable, not even a million times more valuable, but *infinitely* more valuable.

If you have never turned to Jesus, turn to him today so that you, too, can boast in such a high position! In Jesus, we have so much more to dream about than all those worldly things you wish you could have. Don't let those things define you!

So what if the other kids in school only care about worldly things and make fun of you? So what if your neighbors drive new cars and go to the Caribbean every year while you drive a beat-up Ford and hardly get a break? Boast in the high position God has given you in Jesus! “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.”

## **II. Let the Rich Brother Boast in His Humiliation**

But now let us turn to the second part of the message James gives us here in our passage this morning. After he says, “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,” in v. 9, he says, “and the rich in his humiliation” at the beginning of v. 10. What does he mean by this?

Here's what he does NOT mean. James does NOT mean that being rich is itself humiliating, any more than being poor is intrinsically noble. The Bible never condemns riches in and of themselves.

But wait! Doesn't the Bible say, “Money is the root of all evil?” No, it doesn't. What does the Bible really say? Read 1 Timothy 6:10:

1 Timothy 6:9b–10 9 . . . 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. 10 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.

Money isn't the root of anything there. The *love* of money is *a* root, not of all evil but of all *kinds* of evil.

God made Job a rich man, and after Job passed his test God made him even richer than before. God made Abraham a rich man. He made Solomon a rich man. And in the New Testament, in Acts 5, we see clearly that we in the church still have private property rights to do as we see fit with our money. And Paul, in 1 Timothy 6, acknowledges the existence of rich Christians without rebuking them for their wealth.

I could go on about the goodness of money in its proper place. The Bible teaches us to work. The Bible teaches us that it is right and just to be paid for our work. But those are other sermons for other days. The point is this: whatever James is saying, he can't be saying there is anything wrong with just being rich.

So just what *does* he mean by “the rich [exalting] in his humiliation?”

The answer lies in the rest of vv. 10–11:

James 1:9a, 10b–11 9 Let . . . 10 . . . the rich [exalt] in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 11 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.

In other words, your riches won't last. They're here today and gone tomorrow. The man who dies with the most toys does *not* win. You can't take them with you when you die. As Job said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21b).

So when James tells the rich brother to exalt in his humiliation, he's telling him not to be proud of his riches, not to be conceited, not to look down on the poor, not to depend on his riches or look to them for happiness, but to remember that his riches are worthless compared to what he has in Jesus.

This is why John says we should not love the world or the things in the world:

1 John 2:15–17 15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

How much do we love the world without even knowing it? How does a fish know it's wet? You and I are rich compared to most of the people of this world.

How many people slept on the ground last night from New Delhi to Minneapolis? We take it for granted that we have soft beds and perfectly conditioned air and hot clean water and soap and private bathrooms with toilets that flush. Go for a long hike far away

from all those things, and you won't take them for granted again. At least not for a while. We so easily forget how rich we are. Even the poorest among us here have nice places to live, nice clothes to wear, even toys to play with.

But loving these things too much is absurd. They are passing away, along with our desires for them. We won't desire them in heaven like we do here. Or even later in life. I had to dig this pocketwatch out of the bottom of a box. I'd forgotten about it, even though I was once obsessed with it.. That's the way these earthly desires are. They fade away. They're not what makes life worth living.

Don't forget Pastor's sermon last week, when he preached on:

Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [lit. "rational service"].

Whether you translate that "spiritual worship" or "rational service," what's the alternative? It's bad. Unspiritual worship. Irrational service. "A double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Unholy. Unacceptable to God.

Live for God, not for your riches. Living for our riches is as silly as living for a dandelion. When the drought comes and the sun burns down and turns all the grass brown, how long will that flower be there? Not even till the end of the day, in the hot summer of Israel where James grew up.

The flower will fall and its beauty will perish, leaving nothing behind — just like your riches, just like you. As James says, "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."

You're here today and gone tomorrow. And on your deathbed, your toys won't matter. If you have a deathbed. It could be as sudden as a car crash. Both you and that fancy car could be gone in the blink of an eye.

Those who live for the things of this world discover that happiness slips through their fingers like sand. How many people commit suicide when they lose their wealth every time the stock market crashes hard? And how many celebrities have committed suicide even while they were still rich and famous?

Yet all too often professing Christians covet the trappings of worldly success. You see it in the so-called "prosperity gospel" being preached to people who need Jesus but instead are sold the promise of health and wealth.

And some professing Christians not only covet wealth, they trade away their integrity in pursuit of it like Gehazi, who chased down Naaman and tricked him into giving him money. From cheating on taxes to breaking the law as businessmen to cheating in school, many trade true spiritual success for a counterfeit of success — doubly counterfeit, since not only are they pursuing the counterfeit success as this world defines it, but they are pursuing it deceitfully.

Do not trade your integrity for wealth. Do not trade true spiritual success for a counterfeit. Do not waste your trials by failing so miserably. Rejoice in them as you treasure what really matters. If you are a Christian, then you have something that nobody else but Christians have:

Ephesians 2:4b–7 4 . . . God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

How easily we can forget the real treasure we have. It can happen in a heartbeat. It can happen when you walk out of a store wearing a new dress, ladies. It can happen when you drive out of a dealership with a new truck, gentlemen. It can happen when you show your friends that new toy you just got, children, or when *your* diamond is a little bigger, or any other silly thing Satan can use. When you feel that little shiver of pleasure at feeling elevated by riches, fall on your face before God in repentance. Boast not in your riches, but in your humiliation.

Remember how lowly you are. You don't deserve to take your next breath, much less inherit eternal life with Jesus — and neither do I. And remember what Paul wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 6:17–19 17 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. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 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.

And here is where the rich man and the poor man meet. The two parts of James' message meet in the middle. The poor man and the rich man meet as they both take hold of that which is truly life, storing up true treasure in heaven together in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

Is it any surprise James says these things here? He heard his brother Jesus preach these things. Jesus taught:

Matthew 6:19–24 19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 23 but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! 24 “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.

That's right, you can't. It's one or the other. Maybe James didn't understand it all when Jesus said it, but he sure does now — and he knows it is true.

So whether you feel like you're lowly or whether you feel like you're rich, remember what really matters. What really matters is your position in Christ.

Love Jesus, follow Jesus, and rejoice in your high position in him, no matter how poor you are — and never forget how lowly you are before your Lord, no matter how rich you are.

I'll say it again, because that was a bit long. If you forget everything else I've said, remember this. This is the proposition — the moral ought, the “thus sayeth the Lord” how you should go forth and live your life, the exhortation that turns a lecture into a sermon.

Love Jesus, follow Jesus, and rejoice in your high position in him, no matter how poor you are — and never forget how lowly you are before your Lord, no matter how rich you are.