

*Faith That Works: Understanding Wealth and Temptations*

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*Proverbs 12:12-13; Luke 14:7-11; James 1:9-18*

Our final Scripture reading today is from James 1:9-18. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, infallible Word. “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” “You get what you pay for.” “Don’t just stand there...do something!” All of these are pieces of conventional wisdom. They’re statements we generally hold to be true. We base our lives around many pieces of conventional wisdom, things that are just accepted in society. Ordinary knowledge is important. Things like saving money for later expenses, getting seven to eight hours sleep, eating healthy...many things, we do automatically based on the wisdom we’ve collected over the years that most people agree with.

But conventional wisdom can be wrong. Conventional wisdom once said that smoking could have health benefits. Conventional wisdom is also very cultural. Here, we try to figure out what tip we should give a waiter for good service, somewhere in the neighborhood of 15-20%; in many countries, giving a tip is considered a bribe and is incredibly rude. One of the reasons that this time is so stressful for everyone is that there’s no fully accepted conventional wisdom on our pandemic – we are exhausted trying to weigh all the evidence that has been thrown at us rather than having conventional wisdom we can trust.

As we continue in study of James, we’ll see him attack the conventional religious wisdom of his day...a lot of which is still believed in our own day and age. James helps us think about things with a godly point of view rather than a worldly point of view. And while he’ll come back to the topics of wealth and temptation several times during his letter, it’s here that he first begins to dismantle the conventional wisdom found throughout Judaism and early Christianity in his day.

James starts with this: “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.” I don’t think anybody 2,000 years ago or today is going to immediately agree with what James is saying here. It goes against our conventional wisdom.

The Bible is very ambivalent about wealth. We have a fair number of people in the Old Testament who were very well-off in their day...Abraham, Jacob, Job, David, Solomon, and others. The fathers of Israel weren't exactly impoverished by worldly standards. When Joshua had finished leading the Hebrews on the conquest of the promised land of Israel, he told them "to return to your homes with your great wealth."

Yet the law of God found in Deuteronomy warns the Israelites, "You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me. But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth." The prayer of the barren Hannah who is given a son named Samuel includes the line, "The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts."

The proverbs saying that laziness brings poverty and diligent hands bring wealth, but the proverbs also warn against trusting in riches. Ecclesiastes laments how some diligent folks are poor while the evil get richer. Over and over, the Bible doesn't condemn wealth as inherently bad, but it looks at it cautiously and with great concern about how it corrupts.

All of those wise teachings didn't stop the conventional moral wisdom of the world, one that the Israelites of the 1<sup>st</sup> century believed and we tend to believe as well. Conventional religious wisdom of the day said that those who are rich have been blessed by God because they deserve it, and that we should listen to them – and that the poor have sinned against God in some way to be brought to such a low state and don't deserve our ear or our respect.

In Jesus' day, maybe surprisingly, while there were a fair number of wealthy people, a significant number of them were the religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees. They were not respected for their wisdom or teaching alone; they were respected because they had the money. They assumed that their wealth and their religiosity went hand in hand. They commanded respect; they were given prestigious seats at every event and gathering; they were given preferential treatment not even because they spent their wealth but because they had it.

And so it is today. Pastors and religious folks are hardly the wealthy today, but we still put the wealthy on a pedestal. We give as much weight to the opinions of celebrities and the folks with money as we do to genuine experts, if not more so. And we do it in every arena. Politicians favor those with big pockets. Charities look to say what their donors want to hear. We favor the rich in the hopes that they will fund our visions, our projects, our dreams.

James tears away at this practice like someone ripping off a Band-Aid. "The brother in humble circumstances should take pride in his high position." What? What high position does the poor person have? Now let's start at the beginning...James calls this hypothetical person a brother, which means this person is a Christian believer. That's key here. James isn't speaking about every poor person. But what James is saying is this: *the faithful believer who is poor financially is in a good starting place with God.*

Some of you might be heading for the “off” button right now, and I understand completely. Being short on funds, wondering where the mortgage payment is going to come from or how to buy next week’s groceries, is simply awful. It feels terrible. And in our society, sometimes we’re made to feel like we’re somehow incompetent merely because our jobs don’t pay well or we don’t have one at the moment.

Yet it is when we have a limited income, when we do not know where the next dollar will turn up, that Christians are most fully aware that we are reliant on God for everything. We know that if we’re going to have what we need, God is going to have to show up. God is going to have to arrange that bag of groceries or that job interview or that rent check. We are involved in the details, but we turn to God in those moments, knowing we need Him.

Believe it or not, that is why we can take pride. Pride not in a selfish, evil way, but in a way where we boast in the Lord. We can say, “Yes, I was at the end of my rope, but God saw me through.” We have an exalted place because God can show His goodness through us and to us. When God shows us through these difficult times, we have a story to tell about His grace to us. And perhaps most importantly, being poor does not mean that God is punishing us. When we are poor through no fault of our own, He has counted us worthy of the testing of our faith.

In comparison, the rich have a double strike against them. First is that the rich are in no less need of God’s grace and compassion than the poor, but because of wealth, our first thought is not being saved by God but being saved by our bank account. The rich are in a precarious place because a rich person might say they are a Jesus-follower, but it might really be the case that they trust their money instead – and unless they are tested, it’s hard to know the truth.

What’s more, wealth is so come and go – as James puts it, “the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.” Wealth is fleeting. It fades. Even when what it buys is valuable, the sheen of it goes away; it’s not as exciting as it once was. Values tumble; inflation robs.

I’m going to do some confessing here, and some of you have heard this before, but I think it illustrates the point well. When I was much younger, had no debts and few expenses and cash to burn, I loved music and movies, and I bought CDs and DVDs like they were going out of style. I was an early adopter for both. I told myself that I would lend stuff out from my library for others to enjoy; I told myself that they would retain their value; I told myself I would enjoy them. I did enjoy them, for a time.

But CDs have gone the way of the dodo. 90% of my collection you can stream on Spotify or YouTube for nothing. Now the thing that’s valuable again are records – who would have ever predicted that? DVDs are passe; now everything’s not just Blu-Ray but 4K and UltraHD. What was considered beautiful on a 27-inch screen is now faintly blurry on a 50-inch screen. I haven’t bought like that in two decades. And yet I share my embarrassment over my poor choices to say that wealth is fleeting. Things that we think will hold up in value don’t. Nobody wants the china and silver we were told would be valuable, either. I enjoy my collection of movies and music still, but it also is a lesson in how quickly stuff can fade before your eyes.

Don't trust wealth, James is saying, and most of all, don't let it affect your relationships in the body of Christ. Don't honor the wealthy person because of their wealth or shame the poor person because they are poor. Don't show favoritism. We believers are brothers and sisters of our heavenly Father; we're related by love that's stronger than blood. We must always show care and concern and help for one another because we are siblings adopted through Christ. Don't let appearances deceive you.

Let's move on to James' second takedown of a familiar piece of conventional wisdom. James starts by setting up a key difference between trials and tests on the one side, and temptation on the other. James says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." Trials can be good; tests can be worthy. As we learned last week, we can have joy in the midst of them. Tests prove our faith, work out the kinks, show us our weaknesses, show us where we need to grow, how God can help us. Once we've endured our testing, once we reach the end of our earthly race, we will receive the victor's wreath that God has in store for us.

But temptation is a very different thing from testing. James says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.'" For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." The difference between trials and temptations seems really small, but there is a huge gulf between them. When someone is put through a trial of their faith, there is (like in all things) the choice we have to sin, to do the ungodly thing. Trials aren't given to us to tempt us to sin; trials are given to us so that we can make the best choice, see where our faith is weak, and with the Holy Spirit's help shore up those weak points. God always intends trials for our good, for the strengthening, encouragement, and holiness of His people.

God does not tempt. God does not put an obstacle in someone's way and push them toward sin. That's because sin is, by definition, disobedience to God. God is not tempted to evil because it's not in His nature. God will not lure someone to do something evil because to do so would be evil. Snares to sin and wickedness are not laid in the way by God.

We could argue that the devil lays traps and snares for us, and we'd be right; we do read that elsewhere in the Bible. From Adam and Eve in the garden, the devil has been a liar trying to cause the downfall of humanity. But James has no use for the conventional wisdom that "the devil made me do it." We know enough not to say that God is tempting us, which was ancient conventional wisdom. We've moved the source of our temptation to the devil instead and blame it all on him. We still point our fingers at others, as Adam and Eve did when they got caught.

But why does temptation occur, according to James? We are dragged away and enticed by our own evil desires. Those words "dragged away and enticed" are Greek words from the fishing world. Being dragged away is being lured out of one's safe spot. Being enticed is being lured like a worm on a hook lures a fish. We are caught like a walleye on a hook that we ourselves baited with our own desire to do what displeases God. We might hear outside voices, other people, the devil, who knows, encouraging us to bait the hook. But nobody puts that worm on for us. Nobody can make us go fishing for sin.

And James warns us that we must watch out for sin. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin; sin fully-grown gives birth to death. If we aren't watching out for sin, it can kill us – physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. A person who makes excuses, who blames God, who blames the devil, for their evil deeds – that person may not be saved at all. We who are believers must take responsibility for our actions. We cannot hold to the conventional wisdom that temptation comes from outside and that we aren't responsible. Temptation starts in the human heart. It's painful to tell you all about how I was foolish in the ways I spent my money when I was young. But responsibility is key to growth and passing God's testing.

James loves us as beloved sisters and brothers; that's what he calls us, and that's why he doesn't want us to be tricked into the false belief that God is after us or attempting to make us sin. No, he says, instead think of God this way: He's a stable, trustworthy gift giver. "Every good and perfect gift is from above," James says, "coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

You want to know what God does? *He doesn't tempt; He blesses.* He doesn't lead us into sin; He gives us good and perfect gifts. He doesn't accuse; He who put the stars and planets in the heavens loves us and showers His grace and compassion on us. God doesn't shift with the times; He isn't unreliable; He isn't the conventional wisdom that changes day-by-day. God is always perfect, always trustworthy, always reliable. Don't look at your circumstances and accuse God; look at your circumstances and say, "Blessed be the Lord, who has brought us this far."

Because not only does He give us good gifts, He gives us the ultimate gift of life through His son Jesus. James finishes this section by saying, "He, [the Father,] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." When God brings us to new life in Jesus, it's a new birth, by His decision, by His wonderful choice.

He brings us to that life by bringing us to faith and belief through the word of truth – through the gospel message that His son Jesus has paid the price for our sins, has triumphed over death and the grave, and offers us eternal life. We are the firstfruits in that the firstfruits are the very first part of the harvest. The firstfruits are the promise of all that is to come. We who believe know Jesus, know we have eternal life, and we ourselves – through our lives and actions and beliefs – we become the firstfruits of the Kingdom. The new birth, the change that happens in us, is the promise of all that God has in store to come when His Kingdom comes in all its fullness. God is not malicious; He never urges us to sin; no, through His Son He redeems us, cleanses us, makes us whole, and makes us His children.

So friends, as we wrap up today, our simple summary is this: don't get wrapped up in wealth. Don't favor the people in the world who have it. God isn't calling us to material wealth but to spiritual wealth found in Him. And He will not tempt us to sin. He will send trials to us, but only to refine our faith and make it as strong as oak. May we move forward in faith with a better understanding of wealth and temptation.