

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 22:1-2; 8-9; 22-23  
SECOND LESSON: James 2:1-10  
September 5, 2021

***“The Influence of Money”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Once upon a time a church was in dire financial straits. The Session was desperate. They simply did not have enough money to keep the church doors open another year. There was a huge hole in the budget, and people were giving as much as they could. But there was one member of the congregation, a Mr. Jones, who was quite wealthy. Despite his wealth, however, he never gave very much to the church. They had always welcomed him with open arms when he attended church, but he always put \$2 in the offering plate, and if he wasn't in attendance the church got nothing. So the members of Session talked it over and decided that one of them should go talk to him. The unfortunate elder who got the job came and knocked on the door of the mansion.

Mr. Jones welcomed the elder in, but he became quite angry when he found out that he was being asked for money. He folded his arms and replied angrily. “Did you know my sister's husband passed away suddenly? And left behind four children for her to raise by herself?”

“Oh no,” replied the elder. I'm so sorry. I didn't know that.”

Mr. Jones continued, “And did you know my brother is addicted to gambling, and he is deeply indebted to loan sharks who say they'll kill him unless he pays up?”

Now feeling very small the elder replied, “I'm so sorry, I wasn't aware of that either.”

“And did you know,” Mr. Jones continued to rage, “that my mother is very sick? She requires round the clock care which she can't afford and will have to sell the home she's lived in for 40 years.”

By now the elder was filled with shame. “I am so sorry to hear that, Mr. Jones, please accept my humble apologies.”

Mr. Jones then leaned back in his chair and said, “If my family has so much trouble, and I won't give them a single cent, why do you think I'd give anything to you?”

What a nice guy!

Favoring the rich is something we are all socialized to do. It's unconscious to defer to the Mr. Jones' of the world in the hope that we will benefit somehow. We have been taught from very young to treat with respect and deference the “important” people, those with money and influence. When I was growing up the doctor, the lawyer, the business executive and the school principal all got treated much differently from the cashier at Acme or the

municipal groundskeeper and much, much differently from a homeless person. We instinctively react with respect to wealth and disrespect to poverty.

As much as WE are socialized to do this, however, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century it was even more so the case. People actually believed that the rich were morally superior. Of course, this was a rumor spread by the rich. The reasoning went that only the independently wealthy could afford to be moral, because everyone else had to pay bribes, lie, steal and cheat to get by. Sounds good in theory, doesn't it? Society at the time reinforced this because it was built on a system of patronage. Those with money acted as patrons for those with less money. What they got in exchange was public praise and adoration, any dirty work that needed doing done, and people who would jump at a moment's notice when called. In case you're wondering, the Italian mafia derives a lot of its structure from this model. Any wealthy person in the Roman Empire could be a patron, and patrons usually had patrons. It was definitely a "it's not what you know but who you know" world. Business deals happened this way. Loans and networking happened this way. Even marriages were sometimes arranged this way. Eventually when Christianity became legal churches were often endowed by wealthy patrons in the same way.

I give all this background just to make clear how completely shocking and at odds with the wider culture James' words were. James said, "If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" Many in James' audience would have no doubt have objected with, *But of course we welcome a rich man in! Of course we lead him to the best seat in the house! He's rich! Maybe he'll give some of that money to the church. As for the poor person? He's just going to need something. He'll use up resources!*

I'd like to say that churches aren't like that anymore, but we know that that is not true. Just this past week I heard about a Presbyterian pastor who a number of years ago left a prominent congregation in California when the Session took him to task explaining in no uncertain terms that they hired him to bring in the money, not preach the bible. He wasn't supposed to reach out and care for everyone. He was supposed to court the rich. He left shortly thereafter for a smaller church with no such financial aspirations and served happily for ten years.

People in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would think you insane for not giving the rich man preferential treatment. People today with a worldly point of view think the same thing. But in practice, James pointed out, it was the rich who caused all of the problems. In practice the more power and wealth someone has the more damage they can do. And the rich then and now worked the system in their favor. James said, "Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?"

In our society the poor are ignored, because they don't have any money to build a cathedral or add a new wing onto the school, hospital or university. Our aristocracy is based on money. And it is still widely assumed that lower income people do not deserve the same respect as upper income people do, never mind the complicating factor of race. The educated are worth more than

the uneducated. White is better than black. If that is not what we experience in our own limited frame of reference, just a short jaunt out of our comfort level is enough to bring reality to the fore. It's not even necessary to go that far beyond our own doorstep. Poverty is rife in Philadelphia and Chester. The poor are stepped over. The rich are honored. It is a basic fact of life in the world. We might not tell a homeless person "Stand there," or "Sit by my feet" on a Sunday morning, but most churches don't go out of their way to welcome them either.

James turned upside down the cultural assumption that rich people were good and poor people were bad. Of course, the reverse is also not true. All rich people are not bad and all poor people are not good. There are good and bad people found at every economic level. But if we truly believe that all are children of God then we cannot allow our instinctive cultural biases to take over. If we are to love our neighbor, that means everyone.

Money is an issue that is central to our faith. You may have heard the expression—"The last thing to get saved is a Scotsman's wallet." Money itself is neither good or bad—it just is. Why we should think a person more worthy because they have money is not logical. Money is a possession. It is something outside of ourselves. But people try to curry favor with the rich in the hopes of reaping some of the benefits of financial prosperity. In this the rich are to be pitied, because they never know who their friends truly are. But rich, poor or in-between, we demonstrate just how much we trust God by what we do with our money. In the average congregation today 20% of the people pay the majority of the bills while the other 80% coast. At Penn Wynne it's even worse. 90% are being carried by 10% of the congregation. This should not be the case. And perhaps I have failed by not preaching adequately on the subject. I too dislike the subject of money. But we show what we really believe in our tithes and offerings. We demonstrate at a gut level that we trust God to meet our needs when we give a percentage of our earnings month by month. It actually strengthens our faith. I don't believe in being legalistic about these things, but if you ever want to figure out what a tithe of your income is in biblical terms take your income and deduct all of your taxes—both income tax and property tax. In the Old Testament there was no separation between the Temple and the state. It was all one so the whole amount was tithed. In our case, however, 10% of whatever is left after taxes is more appropriate. That number is a tithe. And if for whatever reason you cannot give 10%, then I encourage you to pick a percentage and stick to it. Giving is a spiritual discipline. Not many of us are fond of the word discipline. But living by it brings freedom from fear because we are actively trusting in God to be our provider and supporting God's work in our community. We are trusting not in our ability to hold on to money, but in God's ability to hold on to us. Money has far too much influence in this world of ours. It is a tool, and should never be a master. Amen

Proverbs 22:1-2

**1** A good name is more desirable than great riches;  
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

<sup>2</sup> Rich and poor have this in common:  
The Lord is the Maker of them all.

Proverbs 22:8-9

<sup>8</sup> Whoever sows injustice reaps calamity,  
and the rod they wield in fury will be broken.

<sup>9</sup> The generous will themselves be blessed,  
for they share their food with the poor.

Proverbs 22:22-23

<sup>22</sup> Do not exploit the poor because they are poor  
and do not crush the needy in court,

<sup>23</sup> for the Lord will take up their case  
and will exact life for life.

James 2:1-10

**2** My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. <sup>2</sup> Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. <sup>3</sup> If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," <sup>4</sup> have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? <sup>6</sup> But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? <sup>7</sup> Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

<sup>8</sup> If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. <sup>9</sup> But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.