

September 5, 2021

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-17

“When A Poor Excuse is a Good Excuse!”

Proverbs 22:1-2 Common English Bible

22 A good reputation is better than much wealth;
high esteem is better than silver and gold.

2 The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord made them both.

8 Those who sow injustice will harvest evil;
the rod of their fury will come to an end.

9 Happy are generous people,
because they give some of their food to the poor.

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22 Don't steal from the poor, because they are poor.

Don't oppress the needy in the gate.

23 The Lord will take up their case
and press the life out of those who oppress them.

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James 2:1-10 Common English Bible

2 My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the
faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory.

2 Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and
fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. 3 Then suppose
that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes,
saying, “Here’s an excellent place. Sit here.” But to the poor person you
say, “Stand over there”; or, “Here, sit at my feet.” 4 Wouldn’t you have
shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?

5 My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn’t God chosen those who are
poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t God chosen
the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?

6 But you have dishonored the poor. Don’t the wealthy make life difficult
for you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court? 7 Aren’t they the
ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism? 8 You do
well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your

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neighbor as yourself. 9 But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. 10 Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. 11 The one who said, Don't commit adultery, also said, Don't commit murder. So if you don't commit adultery but do commit murder, you are a lawbreaker. 12 In every way, then, speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. 13 There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment. 14 My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? 15 Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. 16 What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? 17 In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

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A man said to his friend, "I can't break my wife of the habit of staying up until five in the morning."

"What is she doing?" asked the friend.

"Waiting for me to get home."

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Bad habits!

A woman walked up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch.

"I couldn't help noticing how happy you look," she said. "What's your secret?"

"I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day," he said. "I drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods and never exercise."

"That's amazing," said the woman. "How old are you?"
"Twenty-six."

And this one...about not learning...A man hired a bush pilot to take him caribou-hunting in Canada. He asked the pilot to land in a remote place.

The pilot said, "There aren't any caribou in this area."

The hunter said, "Yes, there are. I was here last year." Sure enough, in a few hours the hunter returned, dragging two caribou.

The pilot said, "You can't load two caribou. The plane can't bear the weight."

The hunter said, "Well, I did it last year. Same size plane, same size caribou." The pilot reluctantly agreed, and they took off.

The pilot was right. The plane couldn't carry the load, and crashed into the side of a mountain.

Fortunately, no one was hurt. Observing the wreckage of his plane, the pilot got angry at the hunter: "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. I knew this plane couldn't carry two caribou. Now we're stranded on this mountain and no one will ever find us."

"Don't worry," said the hunter, reassuringly. "The rescue team will find us in no time. We're just a few hundred feet from where we crashed last year."

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So do you think it's a sin to be poor? I doubt there are many who would think being poor is a sin...but there are lots of folks who do see the poor as less than the rich. And usually a poor person is defined as someone who cannot or will not pay their bills.

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Have you ever been around when a poor person...or let me describe them as an unkempt person comes around looking for help? Have you ever walked into the subway or a bus station and found folks there who are looking for a place to be that's warm, dry, and possibly to be able to get some funds from those who are passing by? The next question is how do you react or behave when you are around folks like that? And the next

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question is have you ever been the poor person who was treated unfairly or was overlooked?

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MANY years ago before we were a ministerial family we attended church and served on some committees and complimented the pastor on his or her sermons. And in that particular church there was always a meet and greet time where we did like we here at Monmouth First used to do pre Covid. That is we all were encouraged to get out of our seats and go around the sanctuary to greet people.

One Sunday I did what we really were not supposed to do, and which of course most everyone did...and that is I did not look for folks I didn't know I spotted a person who had become a friend and I headed to talk to him. I didn't have anything particularly earth shaking to discuss or anything and honestly I imagine I had visited with him just a few days before...but for some reason on that Sunday I headed to him. He saw me coming and nodded his head but just as I got to him he noticed his new principal who must have been a visitor that Sunday and he blew me off so he could go talk to him. I still remember standing there with my hand stuck out in the air and no one with whom to shake hands. It was pretty comical but obviously if bothered me if I can still remember it to this day.

Another time when I was about 14 I was in a group called DeMolay. This is a group sponsored by the Masons and is an international fraternal organization. I went through the initiation rites and then the memorization process for the first few steps and then expected to be selected to begin serving as an elected officer. But...that didn't happen...they just kept overlooking me. I'm sure it didn't happen over a long period of time but I got tired of not being selected and I still remember sitting there one night disappointed I had been passed over and having a friend's father come to me and basically try to console me. (BTW) when this happened I think it encouraged me to get even stronger and more committed to the Boy Scouts and that in turn pushed me toward achieving the rank of Eagle so it all worked out. But I still remember what it felt like to be overlooked.

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When I worked for Upjohn we had a fellow with whom I trained one day. He was a fine salesman in the StLouis office and he took me to a hospital so I could see what that type of sales looked like. But here was the problem, he was also a male model! In fact a few months after this training day he was given an ultimatum, either give up his very lucrative male modeling career or give up being a salesman for Upjohn...guess which one won? Anyway...on the day I was working with him we must have spoken with 25 nurses on different floors and several doctors. One time I had to go back to take a brochure or some samples to a nurses station we had just spent several minutes visiting at. I could have told you the name of every nurse there and probably even named some of their children as well. I went to the car got the samples and the brochure walked right back to the station...and NONE of them even remembered ever seeing me before! But when I mentioned I had just been there with Jim...they sure remembered him!

OK...I know that is not really showing you that I was like the poor man in today's scripture...but did you hear what happened to him? So they have this church, it was a fine looking place...very clean...and the church women were proud of how the floors looked and how the decorations were all done. And on this particular day of worship they were blessed to have one of the community's richest people come to worship.

This fellow had a LOT of gold rings on his fingers...kind of a show off if you know what I mean. Kind of a Liberace sort. He even dressed like Liberace and if you saw him you definitely noticed him. Everything about him screamed that he was a person of influence and money...and the church needed money! So when he came in on that day, kind of breezing along and looking important the church folks were sure to find him a place of honor to sit! In fact several got up and offered him their seats!

Weirdly right after he came in there was another fellow who came in. He was not wearing fine clothes and he certainly did not have any rings on his fingers. And it may have been more than a week since he had his last

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bath. He was NOT offered a special place in worship and in fact he was told to simply sit on the floor...they didn't want him to soil a chair.

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And of course when James tells this story he goes on to proclaim that we should not show favoritism! And in fact he turns the table when in verse 5 he says, "My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court?"

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So, in other words...its the rich who are oppressing folks like us and it is the poor whom God has chosen! And James even goes so far as to say that if we really want to live the royal law according to scripture, the one that says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Then you must understand that law is designed so that we don't show partiality in any way. And if we don't obey that part of the law...or if we for instance commit murder but don't commit adultery...well we can brag all we want that at least we aren't adulterers or murderers...but by treating the rich better than the poor we have also broken the entire law! In other words if you break one part of the law of love...you are guilty of breaking all the parts.

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All of this goes on to be illustrated in the next section of James when he says that if we encounter someone who is cold, naked, and hungry...and we at least notice them and say to them, "Go, stay warm, buy some clothes, eat well!" And we don't actually do anything to help them...well, once again we are doing wrong...we are sinners!

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The law we are to follow is the Law of LOVE. And I suppose one could argue that it wouldn't be right to show favoritism to the poor either...but somehow even James doesn't seem to consider that much of problem. So, how would that look? A rich person breezes into church and all the people rise up to greet and welcome and give up their seats...but not for the rich person but rather the poor person who came in right behind the rich

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person? In fact it seems that from James...we can't really be guilty of showing favoritism to the poor over the rich, at least not to the point of it being treated as a sin if we do.

I think the real issue here is if we can do something to help someone...we better be about doing it! The Law of Love tells us that is exactly what we are to about. James seems to be working with Leviticus 19:12-18 and it says, "12 You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God's name in doing so; I am the Lord. 13 You must not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not withhold a hired laborer's pay overnight. 14 You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the Lord. 15 You must not act unjustly in a legal case. **Do not show favoritism to the poor or deference to the great;** you must judge your fellow Israelites fairly. 16 Do not go around slandering your people. Do not stand by while your neighbor's blood is shed; I am the Lord. 17 You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your fellow Israelite strongly, so you don't become responsible for his sin. 18 You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

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So...it seems that we are not to show favoritism at all. But of course the real problem is far more likely to be us showing favoritism to the rich - rather than the poor...but we are to LOVE all our neighbors.

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And I'm going to close with this thought...around 20 or more years ago our church looked at a situation they were in at that time and decided they needed to change it to STOP showing favoritism to specific folks. Those folks were the able bodied. If you remember our building was as far from being handicapped accessible as a building could be. There were several options mentioned and explored...SEVERAL...LOTS...and it took a LONG TIME. But finally a decision was made and now we are acting on it. And someday...hopefully in the next few months...we will see it come to be!

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But here's the thing...the entire time we were investigating and voting and debating about what to do...there were very few who thought we shouldn't do something. And here's why...I have hosted clergy gatherings at our church off and on for several years. A few years back one of our clergy was in a wheelchair with very limited mobility. She decided to come even though our building was not friendly to her. Now if you remember...a wheelchair could come in by LeAnn's office and as long as you wanted to stay on that level all was good. So that is what we were doing that day...but then she realized she needed to go to the restroom. Now this was before we had the handicapped accessible restroom by the OLD pastor's office. So she had to go to the restroom that was in the hallway...that does not have a door big enough for a wheelchair. Suffice it to say it was a frustrating and very embarrassing situation and actually a scary one as well because there was a risk she would fall.

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Just a couple of months ago Anita and I went to Mayo's whenever we go there Anita uses a wheelchair and we are so grateful for how easy it is to get around there. After our Mayo visit we decided to go up to Door County and I wanted to visit Peninsula State Park while we were there. I wanted to climb the new observation tower. When we checked into our hotel/resort the proprietor told us folks were a bit upset with how much that new tower had cost. So I really wanted to see what all the fuss was about. We got to the tower...I climbed it and Anita sat in the van. There was no way she could climb all those stairs. Then when I got to the top I saw that going in the opposite direction there was a ramp...and it went back a long way into the woods and wound around and finally came out about 100 yards from where our van was parked. I went down got our wheelchair and told Anita I thought I could push her at least part way up the ramp...as it turns out the ramp was completely ADA compliant and we made it all the way to the top! Anita got to enjoy the view and see the Eagles and the Bay and the island and all the other sites. She was thrilled...and so was I. You think it's no big deal when we don't make every effort to make all our places welcoming to ALL God's people? Trust me...when you are the one being told you are not completely welcome...it is a big deal.

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The Law we are to follow after all is a simple one...LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS!

As we celebrate communion today...we take it with our neighbors...we celebrate together. Let us always work together no matter how long it takes to make all God's people feel welcome and loved! Amen.

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