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Sermon Series: *Good News in Strange Places*, No.6

Poverty

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James 2:1-9 [NIV]

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² 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. ³ 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," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ 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? ⁶ 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? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

In a world that so often seems *full of bad news*, we have been focusing these past weeks on some *good news* and some of the very *unexpected* places it can be found, for the follower of Jesus.

When Jesus was being introduced to His eventual disciple, Nathaniel, Nathaniel's comment was, "Jesus is from Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?"

Well, with that same surprise, you and I might say, "Can anything good – can good news really come from...?" and we name some places like *personal suffering* and those turns of events in our lives that make no *logical sense*.

And the answer is, yes, good news *can* come from those places – for those in Christ.

We talked about the good news we can also find:

- in unexpectedly changed plans,
- in our times of even great weaknesses,
- and ultimately – even in death.

Even in death, there is good news for the follower of Christ.

Today, I'd like to consider just one more of those strange places from where we'd never normally expect to find good news. And that place is: *poverty!*

Poverty.

Our text is James, Chapter 2, if you'd care to turn there with me. James 2, looking at verse 5 – where James asks rhetorically, "*...did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to the ones who love Him?*"

Did not God choose the poor *for these blessings?*

Something was going on in this church to whom James writes, and it was not good, because what was going on in the church was just like what went on in every other social setting of that day.

In James' day, it was completely common for very clear distinctions to be made between people of different

economic classes – and of course, partiality was always given to the wealthier people.

That was just life, you see? Everyone knew the stratum of life into which they fit, sort of like the caste systems that still exist in big parts of our world today.

And regardless whether or not a person liked it, there was very little anyone could do about it.

But, into this social structure bursts Jesus and His truly revolutionary statements about the way the world worked and those prevailing social standards, especially with regard to the poor.

Jesus did not just accept the way things were.

In fact, Jesus declares a whole new way to think about the poor – which is the way He thinks – the way God thinks about them.

"Blessed are they," Jesus said, in all sorts of ways.

It's the very first thing Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and it sets the context for the rest of that block of teaching – and really, the rest of His ministry.

That's one reason why Jesus was so popular: because He saw and He cared about the poor, and most of the people Jesus spoke to were poor.

It's debated whether or not Abraham Lincoln is the one who said, "God must especially love the common people, because He made so many of them."

It's not so much that God *loves* any given poor person *more* than He loves any given rich person, but He does love the poor *as much as* the rich, and that is hard, sometimes, for people to remember and really embrace – because the world around us is constantly trying to tell us something else.

The world around us says that we're blessed if we succeed, if we're happy, if we're wealthy and powerful and well-loved and accepted and on and on. Those are evidences of blessing in our lives – so says the wisdom of the world.

But Jesus says, "No, that's not really so. That's the perversion of the world talking there."

Sure, all that is a sort of "blessedness" that one might feel for a moment, but it's not the sort that last forever.

Actually, Jesus says, the truly blessed are those who experience the *exact opposite* of those things.

Jesus says, "Blessed are – *not* those who *laugh*, but – those who *mourn*."

Jesus says, "Blessed are – *not* the *proud*, but – the *mEEK*."

"Blessed are the *persecuted* and the *insulted*," Jesus says in Matthew 5. But the first thing on His list there is *poor*. "Blessed are the poor," the qualification, "in spirit."

In other words, blessed are those who have needs, and who know they have needs and are not ashamed to admit that before God.

"Blessed are those who know they're needy."

Our world doesn't look at it that way though, does it? Most people just hate to admit they have needs. Most people hate to admit that they can't do something on their own.

That's pride, you see? And it's the opposite of being poor in spirit.

The poor in spirit are those who freely admit their needs.

Or, maybe you could say it as we said last week, "Blessed are those who aren't full of themselves, but are empty enough for God to fill."

Any way you slice Jesus' sort of blessedness, there's a *need component* to it.

In the mind of our world, if you admit to having any need, then you're seen as weak and feeble—less of a person than you ought to be.

But Jesus says in Matthew there, "*No, blessed are the needy.*"

But then, over in Luke 6, Jesus gets more specific as to the type of need.

In Luke 6, verse 20, Jesus declares simply, "*Blessed are the poor,*" and then, "*Blessed are those who hunger.*"

Here, there's no question He's talking about actual economic impoverishment, because He goes on with some corresponding "woes" down in verses 24 and 25, which say, "*Woe to those who are rich and to those who are well fed.*"

Now, does that mean Jesus hates the rich and those who have enough to eat?

No, not at all.

What He's doing here is declaring an intrinsic equality of personhood in His Kingdom.

In Jesus' Kingdom, people are not evaluated and judged by their resources or their social status.

But they are in our world, so in response to that, God tends to lift up those the world tends to push down.

And He also, to some degree, pushes down those the world tends to lift up.

He does that to assert His values—to remind us of the values of His Kingdom.

That's what Jesus is doing here.

He's not saying He loves them more, but He is saying the poor of the world have His special attention. And, He warns those who are so well supplied in this world that they feel they have no need for God or others, He warns them that there is a reckoning coming.

There is a day coming where the earthly and the heavenly Kingdoms will no longer be separated—as they seem to be today, but they will become one. And the values of the world and its kingdoms will fall away, and the kingdom and values of Heaven will be the only thing left.

That's how it's going to work, and here in these passages, Jesus is giving fair warning that all who follow Him must align with His eternal values now.

And especially so about people—how you see and respect people.

Our world says it's good to be rich and well-fed and popular and powerful, and the world treats these people with extra honor and grace.

God does the opposite.

God doesn't mistreat the rich, and He holds all to the same standards of behavior and salvation and everything else.

But, because God loves people and He hates to see them suffer, God gives extra grace and honor to those who suffer poverty in this world.

And this is one tremendous piece of good news found in the strange place of poverty: the fact that God has His eye especially on these and that God's heart is touched by their plight and circumstance.

God sees and hears and lifts up, in a special way, those in need, those this world runs over and makes fun of—or never even sees.

Now, this should not be news. I mean, you can't get far in the Bible without seeing evidence of God's special interest in the marginalized, abused, and impoverished.

Anyone who would sit down and read straight through the Bible would have to conclude that this God has a special interest in the poor, because there are literally hundreds of passages that declare it.

From Exodus, where the law says, "*Leave the land unplowed and unused during the seventh year, so the poor...may get food from it.*"¹

From Samuel: "*God raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.*"²

In the Psalms: "*Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise...and protect them.*"³

In the Proverbs: "*He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done.*"⁴

From Isaiah, where God says, "*The kind of fasting I appreciate is this: breaking the chains of injustice, lifting the yoke, setting the oppressed free, sharing your food with the hungry, providing the poor...with shelter, and clothing those who have no clothes.*"⁵

From Jesus, who declared in His very mission statement: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed.*"⁶

We read of those God honors, like Tabitha from Acts 9: "*In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha who was always doing good and helping the poor.*"⁷

And Cornelius, to whom the angel said, "*Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*"⁸

In hearing from the Church Council, the Apostle Paul reported: "*All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*"⁹

¹ Exodus 23:11

² 1 Samuel 2:8

³ Psalm 12:5

⁴ Proverbs 19:17

⁵ Isaiah 58:6-7

⁶ Luke 4:18

⁷ Acts 9:36

⁸ Acts 10:4

The apostle John declared: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"*⁹

And maybe these and all the rest could be summed up by Proverbs 14:31 which says, *"Those who mistreat the poor show contempt for their Creator, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God."*

You see, there is good news in poverty – for those in need: God cares especially about you. He has a special interest in looking out for you and lifting you up.

And He fully expects His people to do the same.

The fact is, whether it's Israel or the Church, God has always intended for His people to be an army – a force of care to lift up those who are disadvantaged, marginalized, abused, alone, or impoverished in this world.

That's God's intention – God's wish.

I wonder how God thinks that's going...

This is an especially interesting thing to consider at this time of year.

Because these last years have been challenging to so many of us, some have trouble, in these days, finding good news and articulating gratitude.

But really, if those who are truly impoverished can give thanks for the good news of God's blessings in their lives, then what's stopping everyone else?

If earthly wealth winds up stealing our gratitude to God – if we can no longer find any good news in our lives as they are, then maybe we're just too wealthy – too earthly – for our own eternal good.

Maybe we need to personally discover poverty in order to recover gratitude – to seek earthly poverty in order to gain eternal wealth.

That's certainly the opposite of the way the world thinks – but then again, God usually works in ways opposite of our world.

Can you be grateful for the good news that comes in poverty?

Can you thank God for the places of need in your life?

A woman by the name of Melissa Buchanan wrote about this a few years ago.

She said, *"I understand gratitude as that sweet spot of contentment and peace in the moment, despite what is going on all around us...and I learned gratitude, not through what I had, but through what I did not have."*

My mother – a child of the depression, with two Italian immigrant parents and eleven siblings, living in Maine – lived in a deficit all of her life.

Yet she learned gratitude at a very young age.

At times her gratitude was surely tested, but she always seemed to fall into that soft place of being grateful for things that others seemed to take for granted. She used to say she had lived in so many "cold barns," she was always sure to remind her six children to be grateful for our home in the projects, where heat was more plentiful than food.

After leaving my alcoholic father, six children in tow, we moved across town into subsidized housing.

My mother exhibited no shame (at least none that she showed) but only gratitude for her new, warm home. It may have been the projects, but it was a castle to her – and to us. A rental with four bedrooms, two bathrooms, two levels – much more than she had ever hoped for.

I eventually realized that my mother had grown up with such scarcity in her life that any small, beautiful "thing" she could afford was sacred, and her gratitude shone like a full moon on a dark night.

I am now a counselor, and most people that I see in my practice, though often quite wealthy, experience much despair – which is the direct opposite of hope and gratitude.

Despair actually steals gratitude, hope, and joy from us.

I've found that, in the lives of so many, when things get tough, gratitude is quickly pushed aside. It becomes so easy to sit in cold despair rather than holding close the warmth that gratitude has to offer, and it's really very silly when you think about it.

Our response is our choice, and so often we choose pain and misery over comfort.

I find that growing up in poverty...has made me grateful for most everything. On every cold, Maine evening, I enter my warm home thanking God – just like my mother used to do.

I am grateful for my health – especially after losing my mother...watching disease take her, a bit at a time.

I am also grateful for the silly little things we all complain about: trips to stores, high prices, long lines, mortgage payments...

Even that trip, or two, to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

I find that when even a whiff of complaint threatens me, I hear my mother's voice in my ear, saying, "You should thank God that you can still walk through the ice and snow to work, to earn the money to pay for your clothes your car, your food, your home, and ahhh, yes, that heat!"

I remember that I am living and breathing, eating and sleeping, loving and living a precious life, and, I am doing all of these things in a much better position than I could ever have dreamed possible. I have climbed out of the trenches of poverty and, unknowingly, used the daily practice of gratitude as my staircase to do so.

My gratitude today was born out of need, want, pain, loss and despair...of knowing what it's like to have nothing, and to feel like nothing. For that reason, if for no other, I'm thankful for the poverty I've experienced. God's made me a better person through it."

What God did for Melissa, he can do for anyone here. He can bring good – good news – from poverty, of whatever sort you've experienced.

Especially so, maybe, on this Thanksgiving week.

Would you let Him do that for you?

Would you admit your own poverty – that place of need in your life, whatever it looks like: maybe it's financial, but maybe not. Maybe it's relational, maybe

⁹ Galatians 2:10

¹⁰ 1 John 3:17-18

spiritual, maybe it's a need to be released from the pride of thinking you have no needs.

Would you admit your own poverty – first to yourself, maybe, and then to God?

And as you enjoy God's good news – as He lifts you up, would you, then, commit to be one who joins Him in lifting up the impoverished around you?

Closing Prayer: Lord, as we thank you for our blessings, especially this week, let us also receive and thank you for

the poverty: the needs you allow in our lives that help us realize what gratitude means. Thank you for your faithfulness to every part of us, and the truly good news you bring from even the strangest places.

Closing Song: *Great is Thy Faithfulness*

Benediction: May we all welcome the Lord's use of both provision and poverty to shape us into the compassionate and grateful people He wants us to be.