

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Money Dances”
James 2:1-10
July 15, 2018

James has found himself a bit uncomfortable with things going on in his church... and I think we all would too if we had been there. James has been paying attention to people's actions and noticing that they don't really line up with their beliefs... and after a while, James just can't keep silent about it.

And I don't know, but I don't think it's because James is the legalistic church leader that Martin Luther made him out to be. Luther thought James was opposed to grace... but I think that's more of Luther's baggage than what is really going on in this letter.

In fact, I think James loves Jesus, and James loves his church... and he wants to see them thrive in God the way Jesus invites us to thrive. But James sees that there are a few things his church and his fellow Jesus followers are trapped by... a few sins that so easily entangle that you don't even realize you're all tangled up... you just go around living half free...

It would be a bit like one of the lame people that Jesus healed walking around with a limp the rest of their life because they didn't realize that they don't still need the crutch. They're just so used to carrying it around.

James can see... that his beloved church is carrying around a few crutches... They don't know it, but they're still limping. They think they are free to dance and free to love... but they don't realize that the crutch is holding them back... keeping them tangled up.

And so, out of love and hope, James writes them a letter. And in this letter, he hits on a number of things that he wants them to see, but the one he touches on the most is the same topic that Jesus seems to touch on the most... and that is their money.

In fact, some have said that the letter of James is the first sermon about money we find in the history of the Church. Money isn't the only thing James talks about in this letter, but it sure comes up a lot.

And I'd venture to guess,
that's because of all the crutches we live half bound to,
of all the things in our life that we don't realize what power it has over it,
money rises to the top.

It's a funny thing, isn't it?...

The way money is such an emotional topic for us.

In our marriages it's one of the top two topics that lead to divorce.

In our society it's at the top of what divides our politics.

In our churches it's one of our most uncomfortable topics... and so most pastors I know, including myself, don't like to talk about it too much.

Money is one of those things that has all kinds of emotional baggage for most of us.

So, in our personal lives we tend to do one of two things:
we obsess about it in order to control it all,
or ignore it... hoping that we can avoid the whole thing.

But both tactics end up in the same place... leaving us blind to the emotional power that money is creating in our lives.

Blind to the power of fear... Blind to the power of anxiety...

Blind to the negative images of God that money creates...
images of duty and obligation.

Blind to the patterns of consumption it cultivates...
patterns of never having quite enough.

You know... there have been studies that have shown that most people think they would make enough money for everything they need in life... they could be content if they just made.... What do you think?

If they just made.... 10% more than whatever they currently make.

We don't realize it most of the time... but money is full of emotional triggers for us... triggers that keep us all bound up and living differently than our deepest values.

That's what's happening to the folks in James's church. And from the outside, it's pretty obvious to us, isn't it? They are showing favoritism to those with more... and ignoring those with less.

And I'd bet they don't even realize it. It's just happening. It's just the natural way they are interacting with folks that come through their door for worship. I mean... just try to imagine the scene that James describes.

Say the President of Jerusalem University walks in their door one Sunday morning... and of course... something in them swells just a bit. They're excited he's there and really hoping he'll stay because it would mean some great things for them.

Maybe it would be the start of a trend. Over time, he might bring some of the faculty or students with him. Not to mention that his tithe would sure help their budget. And just think of the impact their church could have... being known and recognized in their town might give them a larger witness for Christ.

Of course, they're excited to have him there!

They're probably a bit nervous too... on their best behavior. The preacher knows she's got to get her A-game on. Maybe the choir would have a last-minute substitution to sing one of their best. Whatever the case, they pull out all the stops. They are bound and determined to impress this guy. It's going to be a good day in worship.

Oddly enough, he isn't the only visitor that day. There is a man there... with his two children...who aren't dressed very well... and look a bit dirty. And they are welcomed too... folks try to be polite. The usher points them to an empty pew where nobody else is sitting... but otherwise no one talks to them. There is a kind of loneliness they experience.

No one offers them a second smile.

No one brings them a cup of coffee.

No one asks about their lives... or what brought them to church that day.

It's not that they meant any disrespect. They didn't even know they were doing it. It's just the way our emotions tend to control our actions without even realizing it.

But James, he's watching, he sees this, and he says, "This is outrageous!" "This can't happen!"

Sure, we expect that kind of thing out in the marketplace... where it's a dog-eat-dog world. But in the church, things are supposed to be different.

In the church, people's hearts are supposed to be different, right?

I know all of us hope that's true... but I also know that when it comes to money, there's a tension that we Christians feel an awful lot of the time. And I think it's tension from living in two different worlds, two different realities, at the same time.

We've got one foot in the realm of the things we see and hear; the realm of college tuition and car payments, and the realm of paying the mortgage and trying to set something aside for a rainy day.

And we have another foot in a different kind of realm... one that's less concrete and harder to see... one that we know in faith and spiritual intuit—

one where money doesn't define us

and God's generosity is always flowing to us...

One where we desire to be generous toward others the way God has been generous toward us.

You and I know these two realms, don't we?

One realm and its messages and goals, we live in Monday through Saturday. Another we try to hear and remember here on Sundays.

The thing is, we live in both. Both are a real part of our lives... and we need to acknowledge that. Both ask certain things of us, don't they? They have a way of competing with each other and rubbing up against each other. And so, there's a real tension we live with, isn't there?

The tension of which is primary, and which is secondary...

of how much of our lives we invest in each of them...

of which of these realms do we really trust?

I think if we're going to be honest with ourselves, if we'll pay attention to what crutches we're carrying around... then we'll find that our trust in each of these two realms has a way of shifting, back and forth.

It's in constant flux for us. A constant negotiation.

You put your right arm in one, and you pull your right arm back out.

You try putting your left arm in, then you pull your left arm out....

You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself about.

"That's what it's all about!"

Is it really?

It's a bit dizzying isn't it?

...This tension that we have with money and our faith.

But that is not what God desires for us.

That constant hokey pokey... that exhausting dance... where we're always spinning around, clinging to the crutches we don't even realize are tied to our backs.

James' church wasn't a bunch of selfish, greedy, inconsiderate Christians. That's not how I see it anyway. They just didn't realize what they were doing. They didn't see all the ways that their emotional baggage around money was strapped to their back...

and the way it was keeping them back from living out of the freedom of God's great generosity... the way it was keeping them from the dance of joy and love, instead of spinning about.

And so... I've started to wonder, how might James's church have looked differently if they really were free and alive in God's generosity?

I'm pretty sure that really only happens.... when

we're cultivating an awareness of God's goodness,
and God's life

that is **already** and **always** around us and flowing to us.

So...how might have James' church been different if it had that kind of awareness?

If they could see God's abundance flowing to them through what had already been given, rather than seeing only what they did not have.

If they could see God's abundance in the beauty of nature: the red cardinal in their back yard, the vast stars on a summer night, the dancing of the green trees, the running of an Ozark river.

Or if they could see God's abundance in the beauty of their relationships they already have: the gift that their spouse is, and the gift that their children are, the many gifts their parents have been, the gifts of their friendships...

Or if they could see God's amazing generosity coming to them in their work: the gifts of school and learning, the gifts of shaping people's homes and healing their bodies, the gifts of plowing, and planting, and reaping something in their work.

How would each of them have been different if they could recognize the profound gifts of life that have already come to them, rather than only see what they do not have?

I imagine the dance they are doing would be a little less like the hokey pokey, with a bit of generosity one day, and pulling back the next... spinning around and tripping over their baggage when it comes to money...

and a bit more like... a **church wide ho-down**...

They allemande to the left

and allemande to the right.

Before you know it, they promenade and do-si-do...

And everyone is all in!
the poor man and his two children,
the President of Jerusalem University,
the choir director and the pastor, they are all in,
from the greatest to the least,
grabbing one another, arm to arm,
flowing from one person to the next,
with no real attention to who they are getting, and who they are giving,
and what they are wearing,
or how they look, or what it might mean for the future.

Instead, everyone is pulled into the dance...
Their inhibitions are down, their joy is high, their hearts are pumping,
and their spirits are soaring.

This is what it looks like to live into God's generosity.
Something in us is freed, and opened up, and we dance together.

Sure, there are still bills to pay,
and kids to send to college...
There are still uncertainties about the future,
and choices that have to be made.
Those things don't go away.

But when we are caught up in the dance of God's generosity... those things don't give us tunnel vision any more... They find their proper place in the dance.
And the emotional baggage around money comes off,
and we are free to live deeply from our values.

This is my hope for me, and for each of you.

And so,
may you recognize the goodness of God that is already yours.
May you know the abundance of God's generosity to you,
and let go of the crutch strapped to your back, tangling you up.
And with all that has been entrusted into your care, may you find the joy of participating in God's great generosity.

Amen.

Reflection

"I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are?"

~Jesus