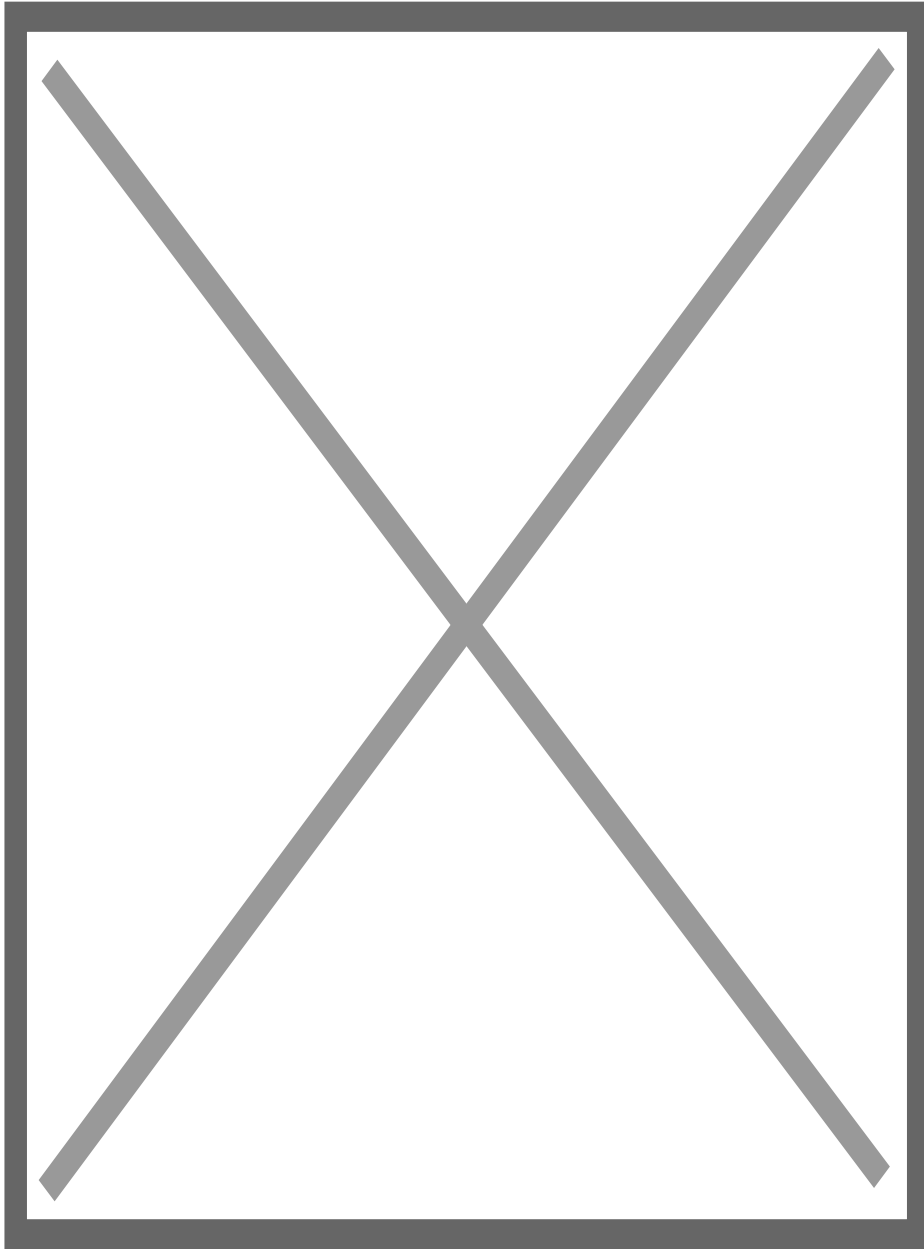


The price of virtue

It is often easier to do good or be good if you are rich. Just ask Job.

by [David Carr](#) in the [October 2026](#) issue

Published on September 25, 2026



Century illustration (Source image: *Job en el estercolero* by Gonzalo Carrasco Espinosa / Creative Commons)

Maybe affluent people—this author included—should reconsider the story of Job. Not the patient Job of James 5:11. Not even Job as an image of innocent suffering. No, let us consider a different aspect of Job, as he appears

at the outset of the book that bears his name: as a man who is both virtuous and wealthy. This Job raises questions about how much virtue wealth can buy.

The first thing the Bible says about Job, of course, is that he is righteous: “That man was blameless and upright, fearing God and turning from evil” (Job 1:1). The second thing we hear is that he is rich by the standards of the day. He has ten children, thousands of livestock, and many servants. He is “the greatest man of those in the East” (1:2–4). He even uses his wealth to try to secure the future of his sons, making a burnt offering of some of his livestock (expensive!) on each of their birthdays on the off chance that they have offended God (1:5).

The narrative unfolds with a dialogue between God and a figure called, in Hebrew, “the satan.” This satan is not the devil; he’s more like a consultant for God. He plays the crucial role in the divine court of providing an alternative opinion to God’s. When God singles out Job as a superlative example of ethical virtue (1:8), God’s official opponent asks a crucial question: “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a protective wall around him, his house and his belongings? You blessed his work, and his livestock flourish in the land” (1:9–10). The satan then suggests that Job will curse God if such protection is removed, and the test of Job’s virtue begins.

But what sort of test? Most readers have assumed that the only thing at issue is Job’s motivation: Is he good because he wants to get good things from God, or is he good with no expectation of reward? Perhaps God’s satan is suggesting something more. Maybe one reason that Job can be so good is because he is already so rich.

After all, it is easier, in many ways, to be good or do good if you are rich. For example, I have a particular interest in fighting interlocked forms of animal and human injustice. I am impressed with how having money gives someone like me more options to fund a lifestyle less dependent on animal oppression—purchasing more expensive ethically raised meat or clearing time to shop for and cook an appealing meatless diet, patronizing often more expensive vegan or vegetarian or farm-to-table ethical restaurants, and so on. And this is part of a life, at least in the United States, where wealth also can buy greater access to an expensive university where one is coached on certain ideas of social justice and behavior, where wealth also can be used to fund feel-good philanthropy or enable forms of volunteerism that would be more difficult for the less well-off. Then there are the ways that it is often easier for the wealthy to flourish by playing by the rules than it is for those at the margins. (And yet many wealthy people disregard some laws anyway.)

Job can be taken as an example of someone who has achieved a certain level of virtue by way of his wealth—and thus is able to play by human and divine rules, to succeed, and thus to do and be “good.” An ethical good conscience, in Job’s context and in ours, can be bought.

In *The Sum of Small Things*, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett argues persuasively that the elite class of contemporary American society is no longer defined by conspicuous consumption. Instead, the members of today’s elite are defined by their expensive college education. That education enculturates people into a set of values and political commitments, and these shared attitudes define today’s elite more than money does. An earlier leisure class spent heavily on visible property and goods. Members of today’s elite often work very hard, gathering assets for their children’s education and their own retirement. Earlier generations of the wealthy demonstrated wealth through donations to church or charity. Contemporary educated elites live out their values as often through green purchases and ethical lifestyle choices unaffordable to those struggling to make ends meet.

But sometimes, even with all the money and planning, life falls apart. The book of Job tells of when such protective hedges come down. Job’s three friends from the East, likely wealthy themselves, try to find an explanation for Job’s suffering. They wonder what he must have done to deserve the suffering he now faces. It is frightening, especially for those hedged by privilege, to confront suffering that is unexplained and therefore uncontrolled. In response, Job steadfastly insists that he has played by the rules and has done nothing to deserve

what he is going through. In his concluding speech, it becomes clear that his achievement of virtue came partly by having the resources to pay to help the poor and attain social status (Job 29). He is a man used to navigating the world with power and ethical capital. These experiences make him particularly incapable of understanding how, having followed the rules—as it turns out, partly because he’s so wealthy—he’s been hit by cascading random losses.

To be sure, social norms are important (including norms of social solidarity). It is good for anyone, financially secure or not, to do their best to live a good life. Our world needs more people like Job who do and give what they can. Yet the book’s association of wealth with virtue might also give us pause, especially in a time like ours. How much might the ability many of us have to follow our values be built at least in part on educational and other privileges? How much might we be like the Job character with which the book of Job begins? And what might this story have to say to us?

First, the book is not anti rich people. It does not belittle Job’s suffering or blame him for it. Indeed, God vehemently rejects Job’s friends when they blame him for his misfortune (42:7–9). Second, the book of Job is not focused on virtue signaling or the like on Job’s part. We are told that Job is a good man by the story’s narrator (1:1) and by God (1:8), not by Job himself. He only speaks about this at the end of the book’s dialogues (29:7–17).

At the same time, the book undermines any tendencies we might have to frame our own social virtue as a special achievement. The satan’s question echoes today: Are we good for no reason? To what extent are some ethical lifestyle choices or political stances built on wealth? Might some such choices and stances be part of performing a sort of privilege that is more about belonging to a well-educated, socially conscious group than effective solidarity with marginalized others?

The book of Job does not provide a definitive answer, but Job’s self-description suggests the beginning of one. His righteousness, it appears, cannot be performed alone, nor is it realized among like-minded and similarly privileged friends. Yes, Job has wealth and status. People defer to him at the gate where justice is decided, silencing themselves and commending what he has to say (29:7–10). But this is because he is a person who responds to the vulnerable in his context and is valued by them. He frees the oppressed who are crying out. He makes the widow’s heart rejoice. He receives the blessing of one fading away (29:12–13).

Centering the cries, perspectives, and blessings of those on the margins—letting them be the guide—might be one way to distinguish substantial action from more self-oriented easing of one’s conscience. In this way, Job holds fast to the central biblical ideal of *tsedeqah* (27:6). This word, though often translated simply as “righteousness,” in fact refers specifically to a person’s care for their obligations to their community, especially the rights of those most vulnerable within it.

Job can thus be a reminder of the broader biblical call toward such relational-communal right relationship, *tsedeqah*, whatever one’s means. We may not live in the same small-scale local context that the Job of the story does, but there are other ways that we can join and support locally driven movements for good, both near and far. And insofar as our commitments are enabled by relative status or means, the book of Job can help us see that and put our efforts in proper, humble, perspective.