

# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.

---

## THE TEXT (NASB)

Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.

*He that is despised, and hath a servant, is better than he that honoureth himself, and lacketh bread. Classic KJV - Proverbs 12:9*

## INTRODUCTION



Often we think too highly of ourselves.

We want to avoid getting our hands dirty. Our own smugness is making us poor. Self-honour—vanity—is not true honour; it leads to poverty.

Although most of us do not have human servants, we often need employees and equipment to get our work done.



# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

**Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.**

---

## COMMENTARY

### Translation

Note the ESV translation: “Better to be lowly and have a servant, than play the great man and lack bread.” Having a servant in ancient Israel is like having capital for a modern business start-up —something to leverage our efforts. Having servants or staff multiplies our productivity, but it also brings an extra set of responsibilities – like payroll accounting, extra parking, employee benefits and more.

### Be Plain and Simple



One way of playing the “great man and lacking bread” is by buying a luxurious house or a spectacular car, just to impress others, substituting show for substance. Such people tend to live off their capital, rather than investing it in people and equipment in order to create real wealth.

A person who is lightly esteemed, or looked down upon as a “common labourer,” who gets his hands greasy and calloused, is better off than someone too proud to work. The proud man may think that dull, routine, and dirty tasks are beneath him. In contrast, the book *The Millionaire Next Door* provides a great example of the millionaire plumber with dirty hands, but great wealth.

### Noble Worker or Conceited Intellectual?

A healthy, productive business is not to be looked down upon. It’s better to be actively serving others and generating real wealth, than get caught up in our own dream world, financially strapped and squandering our time and capital, “eating our seed grain.” Sometimes education without application makes a person too proud to work—too proud to perspire!

The text warns against smugness causing laziness and self-deception. We do tend to think too highly of ourselves. “Due to a cognitive bias known as illusory superiority, we think of ourselves as better than others, even when we aren’t.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we spend far too much money buying



# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

**Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.**

---

a fancy car or other expensive stuff. We buy things we cannot afford to impress others.

Hebrew scholar Dr. Bruce K. Waltke interprets the text: “To live comfortably without social importance is better than an outward show of affluence to win public praise that conceals poverty.”<sup>2</sup> We need humility to deliberately live below our means, especially when it’s easy to borrow money and look important. We need humility to recognize that we can’t do everything ourselves; we are willing to pay others or buy equipment to get the help we need. But paradoxically, our humility is happier than other people’s vanity.

## OUR CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND FRIEND

Jesus said that it is better to humble ourselves than have someone else humble us.

“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be honoured,” Luke 14:11, 18:14. One way of humbling ourselves is through common, mundane labour.

For example, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:5).

## APPLICATION

- Memorize the text in your favourite Bible translation and think about it often.
- We can deceive ourselves into laziness. Be honest. Are you avoiding difficult, messy, uncomfortable work just because you don’t want to go through the discomfort of doing it? Evaluate yourself.
- Sometimes advertising, the hard-sell type, is used to make up for a lack of referrals from satisfied customers. Make sure you serve your existing clients well, rather than spending much time and effort on advertising.
- Do not honour yourself or boast of your achievements. Publically thank those who have helped make you successful (e.g. parents, teachers, coaches, trainers, instructors, and employers).

Which of these steps, if any, does Jesus want you to take now? Ask Him.



# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.

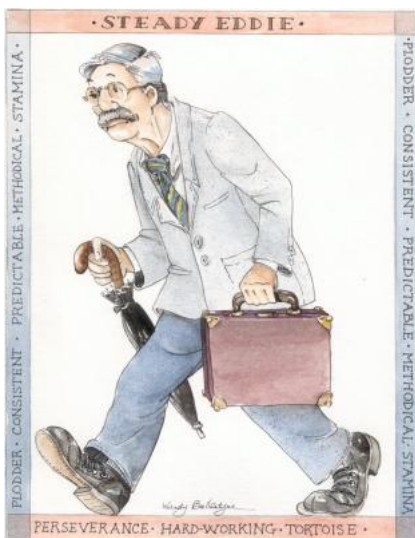
---

## KEY WORDS

advertising, arrogance, better life (quality), bread, capital, honor, humility, servant

## ILLUSTRATION

### Who is Steady Eddie?



Steady Eddie is a rather boring person. In Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, Eddie is the tortoise. He's a plodder; he's consistent; he's predictable; he's methodical. One of the greatest inventors of all time, Thomas Edison, defined genius as "One percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." Steady Eddie doesn't have the full one percent of inspiration but he generates perspiration and produces good results.

Charles Walter, a highly-experienced financial planner and insurance agent, said that after decades in the business he has observed the following: It's not the educated and talented who usually win, but the plodder with stamina and perseverance.

Steady Eddie often shows up in financial planning literature to some degree. For example we catch a glimpse of him in that best seller, "The Wealthy Barber." Barber Roy, the main character in the book, "hadn't missed an entire day of work in thirty-seven years for any reason. He even opened on the morning of his daughter's wedding." Wow! I've known people who haven't had a sick day in ten years, but thirty-seven—now that's impressive! (It's also fictional!)

It boils down to this: In order to make many financial strategies work, we ourselves need to keep



# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

**Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.**

---

working and generating cash flow. Without the steady cash inflow we will continually change our strategies to meet unexpected bumps and potholes in the road. Without the discipline of work we often lose our own health and sharpness.

Steady Eddie won't quit his day job to become a singer. He's not glamorous. He's not intellectual. You might say that he is rather boring—and you're probably right, but I'll tell you another thing about him: Eddie's not broke!



# How do you make yourself poor? (12:9)

Better is he who is lightly esteemed and has a servant than he who honours himself and lacks bread.

---

## FOOTNOTES

1. John Cortines and Gregory Baumer, *True Riches* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 99.
2. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 525.

