

James 1:9-11
Humiliation and Exaltation

Main idea: Wealth is less about what we have, and more about Who has us.

So it's been about three weeks since Christmas! All the presents have been unwrapped, and some of the toys that children got just a few weeks ago have already been broken, or lost, or put on a shelf rarely to be played with again.

I hope that's not a sore subject for any of you.

Maybe you've already started thinking about your Christmas list for next year. Maybe there's already something that you've got your eye on, something you just now realized that you've needed all your life, and once you get it, within a few weeks, it will already be broken, or lost, or put on a shelf rarely to be used again.

That seems to be a constant with things in this life, doesn't it? Very few things last. They wear out. They fade away. This goes for things, and it goes for our bodies, and it even goes for our very lives. Our lives are passing away right before our eyes.

That's pretty scary when you think about it. We only have one life to live, and that life only has a limited number of years, days, and hours, so we better not waste them.

And yet, we do waste them. I've never known anyone who hasn't wasted at least some of their precious time. The Bible says that we're to make the most of our time, because the days are evil. And it sure seems that way, doesn't it?

But how do we make the most of our time? Do we just try to be more productive, striving to make something of ourselves? Or do we learn to rest in the One who makes something of us?

Well, my sermon this morning isn't really about how we use our time, but it is about trusting in the One who uses all the time, every time the sun rises, to burn away the things from our lives that we so often desperately cling to, but in the end, don't really matter.

James 1:9-11.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. (James 1:9-11)

Father, help us trust not in temporary things, but in You. Help us not to cling to the things of this world, but to Christ. And help us to boast not in what we can accomplish, but in what You can and have accomplished in us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

I think we all know a lowly brother when we see one. That's the person who's humble and knows who they are before God. It doesn't mean they're depressed all the time, or that they have what we call low self-esteem. It just means that they don't boast about themselves, or about what they've done or will do, but they direct themselves and everyone around them to look to God and His love for their source of joy.

If anything, this person actually has what we call high self-esteem and low anxiety. Most of our low self-esteem and anxiety issues come from worrying about how other people see us, and about what others might think about us. The lowly brother, however, is not concerned with man's view of him because he is confident in what God thinks about him.

I think that all of us who follow Jesus ought to strive to be the lowly brother or sister. And when we first received Jesus as Savior, that's exactly who we were in that moment. We recognized that we could not save ourselves, and that only God could save us from our sins.

And yet, I bet you've also, at some point, thought like this:

[Fiddler on the Roof's "If I Were a Rich Man"]



Maybe you've dreamt before, "If I were a rich man, or woman, life would be so much easier." And I'm certainly not saying that money doesn't solve some problems. The correct use of money solves many things that we consider to be problems in this life. But how we view money solves an even bigger problem.

Like all of the book of James, the practical application of our passage this morning is so incredibly simple, even though the theology supporting it is actually quite deep.

The application point is quite simply to boast not in ourselves, in our strengths or riches or accomplishments, but in God, who exalts us. Although we can so easily envy the rich for being rich, it's the lowly, poor, and humble brother who will be exalted by God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."¹

Jesus also said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."² And James says much the same thing. He writes in verses 9 and 10:

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation. (James 1:9-10a)

So how exactly will the lowly brother be exalted? And how exactly will the rich be humiliated? And who is the lowly brother who can boast in his exaltation? And who is the rich who ought to boast in his humiliation?

I always find it so fascinating how we tend to place ourselves in the category of those who will be blessed by God and exalted by God, even when we're quite obviously not. I mean, really, do we have any grounds at all

¹ Matthew 5:3

² Matthew 19:24

for claiming that in this context? Because I don't know about you, but when I compare myself to most of the people in the world, I'm definitely not the lowly brother.

Did you know that if you eat three meals a day and have a roof over your head, you're more wealthy than over half of the world's population? Most of the world lives off of less than \$5.50 per day. That's an annual income of just \$2,000 per year. About a third of the people in the world still have no access to clean water.³ And in Haiti, most people live on less than \$1 per day, and only eat one meal a day, usually consisting of rice and beans.⁴ Their children's stomachs were bulged not out of being full, but out of starvation. Money sure could solve a lot of their problems!

And did you know that the typical person in the bottom 5% of America's income distribution is still richer than 68% of the world's population?⁵ The average American today spends not \$5.50 per day, not \$20 per day, but \$164 per day.⁶ That might be a bit lower for us since we live in a rural area, but the truth is, we have more and spend far more than over two-thirds of the world.

So, are you rich, or poor?

James gave an illustration concerning how the rich man will be humbled. It says at the end of verse 10:

because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. (James 1:10b-11)

Two things. First, I think we can all agree that flowers are beautiful. Jesus said that if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you.⁷ Flowers are beautiful, and God takes care of flowers, which means that God also takes care of you.

But second, the beauty of flowers perishes. At some point, God stops taking care of them. So does that mean that God will stop taking care of us? Will God allow us to perish? Our gut reaction is to say, "No. Of course not." But look what James writes in verse 11.

So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. (James 1:11)

I think James is saying that if you trust in your wealth rather than the source of your wealth, then yes, you need to be destroyed.⁸ God will allow you to perish. At least it will seem that way. If you trust in what you have for your security and pleasure in life, then what will you have when those things are gone? What will you have when all of your plans, all your favorite things, and all of your most ideal circumstances are gone? Can you still have joy and peace even when you have none of those things?

Because make no mistake: they will be gone. We brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it. After Job in the Bible lost everything he had, even his children, he said this:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

³ <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-haiti-food/many-haitians-work-to-secure-one-meal-a-day-idUSN0537682620080505>

⁵ <http://forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/06/01/astonishing-numbers-americas-poor-still-live-better-than-most-of-the-rest-of-humanity>

⁶ <https://www.foxbusiness.com/personal-finance/how-much-the-average-american-spends-per-day>

⁷ Matthew 6:30

⁸ Matthew 6:24

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

This is our first week back together in person, which is awesome. That's certainly the ideal when it comes to being a church.⁹ But can you still have joy and peace even when we're not together? Can you praise Him, even from home, in less than ideal circumstances? Or did you grumble about it? Maybe right now you're gumbling that I'm even bringing this up.

Or maybe you're one of the people who thinks we shouldn't even be in person yet. Maybe you're listening online at home and frustrated that so many of us are here meeting together, against the health department's recommendation.

Either way, we need to all keep this in mind: our joy and our unity, our ability to praise God, to honor God, to love each other does not hinge on us being in agreement on what seems to have become a political issue. I have good Christian brothers and sisters who voted for Trump, who voted for Biden, who didn't vote at all, or who voted for a 3rd party candidate with no chance of winning. Agreeing on who to vote for, who won the election fair and square, if the protest at the capital was peaceful or an insurrection, don't let these things distract you from what's MOST important. Covid, stimulus check money, United States debt, Trump, Biden, even electing supreme court justices, all these things will fade away. Don't let those things distract you from waking up and smiling knowing you are a child of the King! You are loved by God! Your wealth is nothing next to God who loves you and gave his life for you. Have you spent as much time thinking about those things that bring TRUE LASTING JOY as you have spent thinking about and stewing about current events and thinking about how stupid all the people are that don't see things your way?

I hope that's not a sore subject for any of you. I really don't intend to hurt your feelings. I certainly stepped on my own toes a little bit for sure just now. I've struggled to not let the things that make headline news distract me from the joy of the gospel. I've spent a little too much time stewing about people I think are being foolish and irrational and not seeing what's going on objectively. I'm guilty of this. I think most of us are.

Listen, all I'm saying is that wealth and happiness are less about what we have and more about Who has us. It's less about what happened in 2020, what happened on January 6th at the Capitol, what happened at 4 in the morning in the Illinois state legislature. Happiness is less about what we have, and more about Who has us! We all know this, and yet we all struggle with it. Sometimes we're the lowly person, resting in God's grace, and sometimes we're the rich person, acting entitled about what we think we deserve.

Listen, I'm not saying we need to go back to online only. And I'm not saying that meeting together is wrong. I'm also not saying who you vote for doesn't matter, or that things that happen in our government aren't important. They're all important issues and we need to be able to have healthy discussions. But I am saying that we need to be humble toward God and one another, and put others above ourselves. And remember this is temporal stuff that can distract us from the eternal.

Right now, we've been given a gift, like at Christmas time. Our gift is meeting in person again. But will we soon take it for granted again? I hope not. I hope we'll always cherish when we can come together, and not act as if it's broken, lost, or put on a shelf rarely to be cherished again.

We read last week in verse 10 that the double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. And I think maybe we're all a little unstable. Maybe we all have two minds. Part of us recognizes that we're lowly and in need of forgiveness. And part of us boasts in ourselves, like the rich man, and needs to be humbled. And all of us, after we've been properly humbled, will be exalted.

⁹ Hebrews 10:25

That's the doctrine of glorification. After this life, and at the end of time, we'll receive a new body, not like our old body that's frail and able to be corrupted, but a perfect body. A glorified body. A body that's incorruptible, imperishable, and who's beauty will never fade.¹⁰

But in order for that to happen, our boastfulness in ourselves needs to be thrown into the fire so that it perishes. Hebrews 12:29 says:

Our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:29)

That means that God is jealous for our devotion. It's not a sinful jealousy, because God doesn't sin. It's a holy jealousy because He knows that the best thing for us is Himself. And God truly deserves all worship and praise. So when we boast in ourselves, and we cling to ourselves so tightly, God looks at us and says, "I love you, and I won't let you stay this way forever. I will humble you, so that after you've become lowly, I can lift you up."

Maybe this morning, you don't have everything you've ever wanted, but really very few rich people say that. In fact, they usually say just the opposite. Rich people always tend to want more. What rich people really need isn't more, but less. They need to be humiliated. So James wrote, "Let the rich man boast in his humiliation."

Is humiliation fun? No. No one likes to be humiliated. But if you know that your humiliation leads to your exaltation, you'll boast in it. You'll say, "I know I'm sinner, but God's not done with me, and I see now that He's taking away all of what I thought I wanted so that I would see that I have Him, and that He has me." And only then will you be truly rich.

So I hope that if I hurt your feelings this morning, that you'd ask God if it's Him, trying to burn something away from you.¹¹ Because I certainly have things that God is burning from me.

I apologize to you and confess to you that I've often thought some not nice things about some of your opinions. And even worse, I've made some judgmental assumptions about why you hold the opinions you do. I was reading people's facebook posts and spending a lot more time looking down on people than loving them. So I started feeling down. Not in the good, lowly kind of humility sense, but in the sense that you feel when you're in sin, from not living in the joy of Jesus. And it hurts. And it makes it a lot harder to love others.

So I truly am sorry that you've felt the effects of my sinful heart. I want you to know that I talked with a pastoral counselor this week who helped me to think through some of these things, and I'm going to keep talking with them even though it's not a fun thing to do. Because I know that even though change is hard, and repentance hard, the change that brings me closer to Jesus and closer to living and thinking how He wants me to is the change that also brings me joy, lasting joy that no political situation or problem of 2020 can take away. It burns. But I praise God that even as He's humbling me, that He promises to exalt me at the proper time.

He gives and takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

I don't know where you are. Maybe you've always felt so incredibly rich, not merely with wealth, but even with how awesome you think you are.¹² Maybe you were feeling awesome until I confessed that I've had some unkind thoughts towards some of you. And I want you to know that you are awesome. You're fearfully and

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:53, 1 Peter 1:3-4

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 3:15

¹² Jeremiah 9:23-24

wonderfully made.¹³ You were made in the image of God.¹⁴ So I encourage you this morning to recognize that your awesomeness comes from God.¹⁵ Let Him humble you.¹⁶ Don't boast in your opinion of yourself. Boast in God's opinion of you by receiving your Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Or maybe you're on the other side of the spectrum. Maybe right now you feel pretty low. I feel like I've messed up, I'm burnt out, I'm overwhelmed, I've let you guys down. I can wallow in the weight of my sin and inadequacy or I can run into Jesus arms and let his love change me.

Maybe, like me, you know you're a sinner, and you feel the weight of your sin.¹⁷ The encouragement is the same. Receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, and know that through Him, you'll be exalted. You have the right to be called children of God.¹⁸ You have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.¹⁹ So let him who boasts boast in the Lord.²⁰

Listen, what we're talking about this morning is exactly what Jesus did for you. Jesus had every right to stay in heaven and demand our worship. He's incredibly rich! But He humbled Himself. He came down in the form of a man, and instead of worshiping Him, we reviled Him. He was stripped of His clothes, and mocked, and spit upon. He was humiliated. And then He gave His life for our sin.

But after He humbled Himself even to the point of death, He rose from the grave and was rightfully exalted to His throne in heaven so that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.²¹

So, will you confess Jesus today?

¹³ Psalm 139:13

¹⁴ Genesis 1:27

¹⁵ Romans 10:12

¹⁶ James 4:10

¹⁷ Romans 3:23

¹⁸ Romans 6:23, John 1:12

¹⁹ Ephesians 1:3

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 10:17

²¹ Philippians 2:5-11