

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part three

Teaching #1803 - Sunday, May 10th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

RICH MAN - POOR MAN - And The Way Each One Should Think About Life And God

James 1:9-12 - "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, [10] and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. [11] 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. [12] Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

It's important to keep these verses in the context of what James has just been saying. He's just identified the chief enemy of joy and completeness in Christ - "**double-mindedness**"(8). We saw this is more than just fleeting thoughts of doubt, like a person **trying** to trust God, but wrestling with fear and unbelief. God has infinite patience with weak wrestlers in faith. "**Double-mindedness**" describes a **divided approach** to God and life. It's a person trying to keep a foot in both camps - a person who is trying, in Jesus' words, to "**serve two masters.**"

To be strong, James says, in prayer or in anything else, you have to put all your eggs in one basket. And the basket is **God**. But that's not easy for any of us to do. It's hard because we live in a material world, and it's easy for that visible world to become the center of gravity for our lives. The power base of our planning, dreaming, achieving, and living majors on the **material** and marginalizes the **spiritual**. In other words, we put our eggs in a **material** basket rather than a **God** basket.

James high-lights two groups of people in the church:

1) **THERE ARE LOWLY PEOPLE WHO ARE NEEDY AND IN DEEP DISTRESS**

James 1:9 - "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation...."

Remember, James is writing to Christians whom he describes as the **twelve scattered tribes** (1). Most were poor to begin with. Those who had wealth probably had to leave behind their land, houses, and investments. James writes to remind them that their poverty, while a genuine trial, is not the **essence** of their situation. James still calls them to "**boast in their exaltation**"(9). What they **have** is still greater than what they've **lost**.

They have something in Christ - an "**exaltation**" - that can't be corrupted or threatened by the physical trials they are going through. But they will lose their joy in Christ if they don't, as James taught in **verse 4**, allow "**steadfastness to have its full effect**" in their time of loss and trial.

James, like a spiritual optometrist, is trying to fit them with lenses that are properly focussed on what they have **not** lost in Christ Jesus and on what Christ can still **perfect** in them - remember **verse 4** ("**...that you might be perfect, and complete, lacking nothing**") - if they will look to see where God might be **taking** them, instead of just mourning over the trying situation they are facing.

"Don't allow the world to confuse **you** about where true value lies in life! And don't confuse the watching **world** about what is most important in life by acting as though, in your poverty and in your trial, you have nothing bigger to cling to or hope in. Let your steadfastness in Christ Jesus send a message to those who need to see a relationship with Christ that changes the way you view even the most difficult circumstances of life." That's what James is saying to the poor and lowly among these scattered Christians.

"As you scramble in the dust of Syria and Northern Palestine, far removed from your home and your friends and your possessions, as you dig in the dry, foreign dust to build some kind of new dwelling, **boast** (that's the very word James uses) in a Savior and a hope that can't be quenched, that sustains the soul."

When you are poor there is a tendency to think that the worst thing about your life is its **want**. It is easy to focus on **lack**. Covetousness doesn't just grow in the heat of the rich. Also, very silently and gradually, an underground **anger and bitterness** can grow toward all those Christians who aren't doing all they should to help you out.

And that attitude *feels* very righteous. Both those attitudes, the *covetousness* and the *anger*, can harm your own soul and, equally devastating, can damage the testimony that the satisfaction you have in Christ isn't shaken by the loss or lack of material goods.

Yes, rejoicing in the Lord is more easily said than done. Don't grieve over your lack, but rejoice in Christ Jesus. There are better things by far to glory in than riches! Keep focussed on the eternal. That will keep your heart free from worry, sorrow, envy and grumbling. Patience, like James taught in **verse 4** of this chapter, will begin to have its perfect work in your soul. ***Boast in the exaltation you have eternally in Christ Jesus***, says James.

2) **THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE FLOURISHING MATERIALLY AND ABUNDANTLY BLESSED WITH GOODS**

James 1:10 - "...and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away."

James doesn't repeat the verb "***boast***" from **verse 9**, but the structure of the sentence implies this is still his command as he turns his attention to addressing the rich. Just as the lowly brother is to "***boast in his exaltation***," the rich is to "***boast in his humiliation***" (**10**). We may not be used to this strange wording, but the idea is a dominant one and runs through the whole Bible:

Jeremiah 9:23-24 - "Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, [24] but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

Clearly, the prophet is addressing groups of people with different strengths. He calls them to turn from what would be the most *natural* source of their security, pride and pleasure, and to work all the more diligently at *boasting* (notice, the same word as is used by James) exclusively in the Lord.

1 Timothy 6:17 - "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy."

So, what does James mean when he says the rich man is to "***boast in his humiliation?***" He's actually issuing a warning. Our world takes great stock in riches. It finds money and power very impressive. That makes it easy for rich Christians to *believe* wealth *is* impressive - to become *puffed up* about wealth and power. It is more common than we know for Christians to *share* the world's assessment of the glory of riches.

This is the particular problem, in James wording, that the *trial* of wealth brings. To the rich James says, "***Instead of boasting in your wealth, boast in your humiliation***" What can this mean? James is deliberately calling the rich and the powerful to regularly *pull themselves down* - to think less about their wealth and power and more on their dependency and lowliness before Almighty God.

James would say to the rich, "***Don't hug your wealth. Confront your wealth each day with Biblical truth.***" The rich man must actually "***boast in humiliation***," says James. That means he must work harder than most people to cherish a contrite spirit. He must turn up the volume on words like, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit.***" The rich person, more than anyone else, should wake up in the morning and say "***What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?***"

This, says James, is the ongoing battle for the mind of the rich Christian. He might be so foolish, if he's not very careful, to view his position in life through the eyes of the world around him. His wealth and earthly power might make him deaf to what James and Jesus and the rest of the Scriptures say about ***deepening his commitment to the things of the Spirit and glorying in Christ Jesus.***

The rich Christian must tune in every day to how utterly lost and helpless he is, and how worthless all the wealth and power in the world is if it's at the expense of Christ and His Word and His people.

3) **THE ANNUAL DEATH OF PLANT LIFE - JAMES' METAPHOR WITH A MESSAGE**

Even in the church, sometimes we listen to God's Word and sometimes we don't. After giving his instruction, specifically

crafted first for the *lowly* and then for the *rich*, James picks a common picture to crystalize the earnestness of his instructions:

James 1:10b-11 - "...because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. [11] 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."

The *annual death of vegetation* suits James' purpose in our text. In fact, the whole Bible uses this picture over and over again:

Isaiah 40:6-8 - "...*All flesh is grass*, and all its beauty is *like the flower of the field*. [7] The *grass withers*, the *flower fades* when the *breath of the Lord blows on it*; surely the *people are grass*. [8] The *grass withers*, the *flower fades*, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Psalm 103:15-16 - "As for man, his *days are like grass*; he flourishes *like a flower of the field*; [16] for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more."

Less subtle is **Psalm 49:16-17** - "Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. [17] For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him."

When something is repeated over and over in the Scriptures, God is trying to remind us of something we are most likely to forget - "**You will need to bring this to the front of your mind over and over again!**" In other words, just reading this casually once or twice won't have the effect the Holy Spirit desires.

Many passages speak of people being like the *grass*. James says the rich are especially like the *flower* - the bright blossom that stands out in the middle of a field of grass. Its beauty makes you think it's special - that it's not really like the rest of the grass. But it is. It won't last any longer than the grass around it. It looks so good and makes such a stunning impression. You'd think it was more permanent than it is. But next week it's off the scene.

The seasons, says James, are God's gigantic clock that never needs winding and can never be stopped. He placed the seasons to force us to *see* the passing away of our earthly bodies and goods. We *see* everything material about us fading away. How silly and trite and utterly small to either complain about our lack or glory in our abundance.

4) **OUR GREATEST DANGER LIES IN BECOMING PREOCCUPIED WITH THE VISIBLE, MATERIAL SIDE OF LIFE**

James 1:11b - "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."

Strange words these. The rich man will "**fade away in the midst of his pursuits.**" That is, he will fade away while preoccupied with other things. Because he has been sucked in by this wealth-honoring world to glory in his power, he won't even see it all coming to an end. He will be all wrapped up in his earth-shaking concerns and then he'll just be gone. And the irony of it all is the same world that was egging him on as it cheers his accomplishments and admires his possessions, will remember all his efforts, says James, like they remember the grass that was cut down last week.

There are many places in James where you can see him reflecting on things he heard Jesus, his blood relative, say. James, more than anyone else in the New Testament, sounds like Jesus. It's as though he could hear Jesus all over again. This is one of those times. James remembered Jesus saying this:

Matthew 24:37-39 - "As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. [38] For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, [39] **and they were unaware** until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."

It's important to understand that when the text says "**they were unaware**" it doesn't mean they were uninformed or unwarned. Noah preached at them for years about the flood. The people chose not to tear themselves away from the ordinary pursuits of their lives. They refused to **make themselves free** to act on what Noah was telling them.

Jesus takes this story of Noah from the *beginning* of world history and says it will be exactly like that at the *end* of world

history. The striking similarity is that *people at the **end of the age will be living life as if everything still had a long time to go***. People will just be consumed with the normal events of life. Like those in Noah's day, they won't be able to picture the great change coming. They *heard* about it, but they didn't *plan* on it ever coming.

The point of Jesus' words isn't that there is some inherent sinfulness in these normal daily events. It's not a sin to be involved in eating, drinking, or marrying. Nor is it a sin not to know when Jesus is coming again. But it is a colossal blunder to live as if He's not coming. It is the height of foolishness to think of life as an uninterrupted continuum. It's a sin to be preoccupied with the wrong things to the point of being unprepared for the most important things.

There is, however, one difference between James' words and those of Jesus. Jesus was talking about people not being ready for His *return*. James isn't talking about Jesus' *return*. He's talking about our *departure*. It's not a sin not to know the day we're going to die. But it is a sin not to live each die like it may be that day.

And that's James' warning. Riches have a horrible capacity to *drug* us and *distract* us from the ultimate issues of life. In fact, riches make it seem for all the world that they *are* the real issue of life. In this world people *do* pay great attention to the wealthy. They *listen* to the voice of the wealthy. They *admire* the power of the wealthy. The wealthy can *do* things others can't. Pile all that evidence up and why wouldn't we think wealth is the biggest issue of life?

Enter our text from James. For a guy who's going to last about as long as a cut flower, you have bigger things to think about than either your wealth or your lack of wealth. Both rich and poor have their own battles to win. And James will finally tell us what is at stake:

5) THE JOY OF LIVING FOR THE CROWN OF LIFE

James 1:12 - "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

This is a general wrap up statement for this section about the poor and the rich. The essence of it is keeping our eyes on the target - "**the crown of life**"(12). Into every life come *trials* that draw our hearts away from that target. James momentarily left the *general* topic of trials he introduced in *verses 2-4* and zeroed in on two trials in detail - *poverty and wealth*. Now, in *verse 12* he returns to the simple term "*trials*" - "**Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial....**"

Even in this verse we're reminded of the wording of Jesus - "**Blessed is....**" James had his own beatitude to wrap up this section. The man who remains steadfast under trial - who doesn't waver - who isn't double-minded - who allows steadfastness to have its perfect work - **that man** will receive the "**crown of life.**"

I think James would have given terrible altar calls. He never offered much to people just for a one time confession of sin. He never offered much to people just for wording a certain prayer. But if you *finished the whole race* - if you *allowed steadfastness to have its full effect* - if you *used every trying circumstance to magnify your position and trust in Christ Jesus* - if you *stood the test* and *lived in this blind, lying world without compromise or double-mindedness* - then you receive the "**crown of life.**"

"**The crown of life.**" It's a phrase not used very often in the Scriptures. One other place where it *is* used is also directed specifically to a **church**. And it's directed to Christians under the fire of trial. In other words, the phrase is used in exactly the context that James uses it:

Revelation 2:10-11 - "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. [11] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

To get what James is saying we have to change the way we think of receiving a crown. In our understanding, a crown is handed down through royal blood line. It's a product of royal heredity, like new Princess Charolette. The New Testament has a different image in mind. Paul makes this point most clearly:

1 Corinthians 9:25 - "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

The crown was given to the winner of the games. It was presented to the athlete who excelled about all trials and tests. It was given to the one who laid aside all the weights and hindrances, the one who endured right to the end.

“But I thought salvation was all by grace through faith, Pastor Don. You’re making it sound like a lot of work!”

Yes. Salvation *is* all by faith. And that’s exactly what the trials - the **tests** - reveal. They pull to the surface of my life chunks of hidden **unbelief**. They reveal places where what *I* call faith is nothing more than empty talk. And it’s the mercy of God that He allows these trials and tests **now** while the unbelief can still be brought to the Cross of Jesus for free grace and cleansing. That’s the **whole point** of these opening twelve verses of James. That’s how the trials remove what’s **lacking** in my faith.

Blessed is the one who understands, who endures, who watches the passing of time, and who never loses track of the end of the race.