

Passage: James 1:9-11

Please turn in your Bibles to James 1:9-11 (ESV p. 1011 in the pew bibles)

James 1:9-11

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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Praise be to God.

**“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever.”**

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we examine your word this Lord's day, we ask that you would open our eyes to your teaching. Give us minds to learn and faith to believe. Give us hands to work that we might obey and walk in your ways.

As the things of this world, which will soon pass away, compete for our attention, remind us that only your word, o Lord, remains forever. Help us Father to treasure it as our greatest possession and help us, o Lord, to hear you today as you speak to us through it. For we ask you these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

I. Pursuing the Fleeting***Legacy and identity.***

I've mentioned this before, but I am the third generation of missionaries in my family. My entire life I have been in missions as a missionary kid, or as a missionary adult.

The legacy of missionaries in my family is strong. My parents and grandparents were well known. They were people who made an impact and made a difference in this world.

At age 15 I knew I wanted to be a missionary. On my first date with my wife Alicia, I told her that I was going to be a missionary pastor (and crushed her dreams of marrying a doctor). In college and seminary, everyone knew I was going to be a missionary to Peru.

When our paths changed, my world shook. We left the mission field to return to the USA, and I had a deep feeling of despair. People would ask me what we were going to do, and we didn't have a clue how to answer. Missions had ***always*** been my response.

I felt broken and confused. I remember getting angry, frustrated and lots of other emotions guys don't feel comfortable feeling. I was losing something significant to me. I was losing part of who I was. My legacy, my identity.

I had turned something good – missions, and being a missionary – into idolatry. I made the legacy of my extended missionary family and our immediate family something of an identity for myself.

And as we have been learning in James so far, God doesn't leave our idolatries alone. He is a loving Father, and out of love for us, and for his own glory, he works to purify our desires, passions, focuses and identity so that we find all of those things in him. Not in a title, a job or even something as gospel centered as missions.

God is working on freeing us from worshiping those things that become idols to us through the painstaking work of trials.

The section of the letter that we will be focusing on today is focused on prying our spiritually infantile fingers from those things in life that have become more important to us than him.

Verses 9 and 10 begin our section with the words: “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.”

Right away we see a contrast: the poor and the rich. James is identifying a struggle in human life that everyone can relate to. But it is important to realize that in so doing, he is not limiting himself to financial concerns alone.

The words we translate as “poor” are also the same words used to identify someone who is ordinary or undistinguished. With regards to social status, it can be used to speak of someone who is at the lowest tier. In other words, someone who doesn't have a lot of power or influence. (BDAG, Louw & Nida)

The rich, on the other hand have an abundance of earthly possessions. One can be rich financially, and one can also be rich in terms of their influence, social status and distinction in society.

As we can see, the meaning of these two words encompasses more than money. And throughout this sermon when I use the terms “poor” or “rich” I intend for these to represent more than finances, but all things by which we measure our wealth.

John Calvin sees James' use of these terms in the same way. He encourages us see these two polar opposites of “poor” and “rich” as representatives of greater concepts. Speaking of James, Calvin says,

He mentioned the *particular* for the *general*; for this admonition pertains to all those who excel in honour, or in dignity, or in any other external thing. He bids them to glory in their lowness or littleness, in order to repress the haughtiness of those who are usually inflated with prosperity. But he calls it lowness, because the manifested kingdom of God ought to lead us to despise the world, as we know that all the things we previously greatly admired, are either nothing or very little things (Calvin, 285-286).

James, like Jesus, doesn't limit his descriptions to their most narrow meaning. For when Jesus said, "you shall not murder," he was communicating the broader principle that while murder is prohibited, so is anger and hatred. When he said, "you shall not commit adultery" his commandment was far greater reaching than merely the act of adultery, but rather included even the act of a glance with lustful intent.

In the same way, James uses a specific example as a starting point to communicate an issue in life that is far greater than the statement balance of your checking account, and whether or not money has become too great a focus in your life.

James wants us to be free from the desire of status through financial gain, and more than that, he wants us to be free from the idolatry of seeking status or security in anything other than in Jesus himself. "...as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31 ESV).

Idolatry in 2019

Seeking after "the riches of this world" in the days of the early persecuted church no doubt differed significantly from what we face in today in 2019, but the root issue is still deeply applicable to our lives.

In what ways should we take such a message to heart? How are we guilty of seeking after the "riches of this world"? What sorts of things have become our idols?

Idolatry in the church?

Within the last few weeks a lady introduced herself to me and explained that she was from a different church. For whatever reason, she felt it necessary to describe her church as somehow below in status to our church here. She explained, "our church is different from Faith. We are a "blue collar church." When she uttered those words, my heart broke.

From what she continued to share, I could see that in her eyes, our church was higher in some way, than her church. Whether it was the kinds of jobs people in our church had versus the jobs people had in hers, or whether it was a level of education, or church culture, she saw our church, Faith Presbyterian, as something superior or "richer" than her church.

Whether or not she was right to describe our church in this way, or whether or not we would agree or disagree with her is beside the point. I mention this to get us to think about who we are as a church. What do we *actually* portray to people from outside of our church and what do we *want* to portray?

James would certainly have a problem if we had become a church that was known for prioritizing some sort of a superior “rich” mentality *over* the message of the gospel.

I pray that we would all understand and see how sad this is, and that it would break all of our hearts to think that someone would consider Faith Presbyterian as somehow “better” than other churches because of a perception of high intellect, financial power, or larger membership.

As a church, while striving for excellence in all things, we must guard against any notion or sentiment that we are in some way superior or “richer” than others. If we boast, we must not boast in our legacy, our pastors, our choir, our financial resources or influence, our experience or our numbers. We must boast in Jesus Christ alone.

Wouldn't it be so wonderful if people everywhere always felt welcomed into Christ's church here at Faith? If people would know us for our ***preaching of the gospel, our love for Jesus, and our love for others first and foremost***, and that afterwards they would also gain an appreciation for all the other excellent things done here to help support this primary mission?

“...As it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31 ESV).

Individual idols

What about us as individuals? What rivals Jesus in our lives?

It could be something we have or we don't have.

Just as dangerous as idolizing something in our lives that *we have*, can be idolizing something in our lives that *we don't have*.

It might seem harmless to think less of one's self. We can think that we aren't good enough to be a part of different groups, we think very lowly or poorly of our abilities and our current situation.

As we grow in age, our bodies aren't as resilient as they once were. It might start with a few extra pounds here and there, a couple extra chins. Or maybe the look you worked so hard for is slowly disappearing and suddenly your kids are asking who that person is when they see a picture of you in college. You are no longer recognizable to your own children!

A decrease in your health, a major illness, a pair of reading glasses, the loss of hearing, and so on. So many things that can limit our lives and what we used to be able to do.

Maybe you used to be able to run the mile faster than your peers, and now basic physical activities can seem challenging. The ability to do whatever we wanted, is gone. We can idolize *what we used to be, what we used to be able to do and achieve*. We can become bitter over becoming “poor” physically speaking.

Others might constantly compare themselves to others, and consider themselves poor in their own eyes. The desire to be attractive, the hope to have someone you can love, then later the longing for children. All good things, but when others are “rich” in these areas, while you are “poor” how do you *see* and *interpret* these things? Do you consider yourself rich because you have all of these things? Or do you consider yourself poor when you are lacking them?

Where do our grades, degrees, careers and accomplishments fall in this equation? Do they make us feel “rich” if we have them, or “poor” if they are lacking?

If you find yourself thinking of your own positions, accomplishments and possessions on a more than regular basis, you are not alone.

Look back at the Old Testament families. It seems all of them struggled in these areas in one way or another at some point in their lives. Looking specifically at the life of Jacob, Rachel and Leah, we see it very clearly. Without a doubt it demonstrates in a very clear manner why having multiple wives is a really bad idea, but it also gives a very pointed example of the spirit of competition and identity.

Throughout the history of these two wives we read of Leah’s struggle with bad vision, and Rachel’s struggle with child-bearing. We read that Leah was undesirable and Rachel was beautiful. She had Jacob’s heart, while Leah had Jacob’s love through having children.

Both these women struggled fiercely out of competition. Though they had many children, it was never enough unless it was more than their competition. They wanted to be richer, and considered themselves poor. Their focus was on their abilities, their accomplishments. What they cared for most in this world was Jacob’s love for them.

Theirs was not the perspective that James calls us to have. Their idols were such that they consumed them with bitterness and ultimately death. Even as Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, as she breathed her last breath, she named her new-born son “Ben-oni,” which means “Son of my Sorrow” (Gen. 35:18). (Krabbendam, 272).

As we consider our own children, and our parenting. Do we care *most* about them loving Jesus, and that he be glorified in their lives, or has their good and respectable behavior taken over in our minds? Do we shame and guilt them into being well-behaved children so that we look good? Do we want our children and our parenting to “out-do” those around us more than we want our children to be secure in Jesus and in our love?

It is easy to fall into this. Obedience is a good thing. But as most idols, they start in a good place, and then become all consuming.

Like so much of life, the good things God has given us can become more important in our eyes than they should be. Rather than praising God for these gifts that he has given us, we praise the gifts themselves. We make them too important.

Being discontent with your situation, especially when comparing yourself with others, is an easy thing to fall into. We are good at finding discontentment with all sorts of things.

James isn't telling us that we should think more positively about ourselves. He isn't talking about having more self-esteem. James doesn't want you to pat yourself on the back and say, "you can do it!"

He is reminding us that there are certain things that God does not give us in this world intentionally. He knows what we need, and as a good father, he does not give us everything we want or ask for. *He* wants to be enough for us.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Cor. 12:9)

Here yet another testimony from the Apostle Paul teaching us the same powerful truth. Our Father wants us to find our fulfillment not in our lives here on this earth, but rather in him.

James is exhorting us to remember that we are so important to God that Jesus lowered himself to be our Savior, and he did so, so that he ***could be enough for us. So that he could be sufficient for us.***

He came to free us from the disappointment of pursuing the riches or fascinating things of this world. To keep us from falling into the "riches" of fleeting joys, unfulfilling pursuits and fading riches of this world.

Instead, James calls us to realize that all of this will one day pass away like the flower of the grass. It will fade and disappear, while Christ will remain.

These are the riches we have in Christ. Though we are poor, in him, we are rich.

We have seen how the riches of this world can lure and tempt us. Seeking to find security and identity in financial stability, successful careers and even our own appearances and abilities make us create idols of earthly achievements and success rather than boasting in Christ. James calls us to find our exaltation in Christ alone. To that we will turn next.

II. Pursuing the Eternal

Let's turn to the latter part of these verses. Starting at the second half of verse 10:

"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."

It is helpful to remember that the recipients of James' letter are dispersed most likely because of the persecution mentioned in Acts 8, and have probably lost much of their possessions. They were living through and experiencing the fleeting nature of earthly possessions, and yet the loss of what they had would no doubt affecting them.

As their Pastor, James wants them to be free from worry and anxiety, and have assurance that surpasses their situational anxiety. As your Pastor, I call you to the same! We must overcome the worry and anxiety we face in the assurances given us in Christ.

We must remember that our "riches" or our "poverty" should be put in eternal perspective. All finances, status and achievements will pass away – good or bad. Finding security or identity in these things is futile.

Our identity must be in Christ. Our security must also be found only in him. He is our only lasting treasure.

Of course, this message is not unique to James. Jesus himself reminds us of these things when he says in Luke 12:33:

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with *moneybags that do not grow old*, with a *treasure in the heavens that does not fail*, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

Jesus reminds us of the temporary nature of the things in this world, and encourages us to have an open hand with them. He speaks of the fleeting nature of things that can grow old and fail, things that can be taken away or destroyed.

Any idol we cling to in this world is temporary. We can bring nothing with us past the grave. Jesus calls us to invest in eternal investments.

The World's Influence on Us

We live close to the Point Defiance Zoo, and sometimes early in the morning or late in the afternoon we can hear the monkeys shouting and making all sorts of crazy noises.

If you have ever watched them in the zoo, or seen them in the wild, you will notice that they are very curious little creatures. They are very quick, and they can swing around and jump and run high in the tree branches. Their ability to do this helps protect them, and keeps them out of danger.

But did you know that it is actually really easy to catch a monkey? Monkeys really like shiny objects like necklaces, jewelry and coins...anything shiny really. If you get a rock and paint it silver or gold, and show it to a monkey, you are half way there. Next, all you need is a one of those heavy clay pots that have a very small opening...one just wide enough for the rock to fit in, and the monkey's hand, but not both together.

Then you show the monkey the shiny rock and show him that you are placing it in the heavy pot with the small opening and walk away. As soon as you do, the monkey will come down from the tree, reach his hand into the opening and grab the rock, but as he tries to remove the rock, he can't remove his hand while holding the rock in it. If he lets go of the rock, he can remove his hand, but that means sacrificing his shiny rock. The monkey sacrifices his freedom because he cannot bring himself to let go of his shiny rock.

Can you believe how ridiculously easy that is? This crazy monkey trades his freedom for a worthless, shiny rock. I've seen video footage of this happening in Africa. The monkey will not let go of the rock and because of that, the hunter catches him. He literally just walks up to the monkey and puts a collar around him. What a dumb monkey, right?

We all have a little bit of "Monkey Syndrome" in us, don't we?

We see the shiny things of this world and we long for them. What looks better than nice houses, with shiny countertops, shiny cars with shiny hubcaps, good schools and the latest clothing? How about a nice diploma on our walls, or a few letters before our name? We place value in these things, though in God's sight they are no more than shiny rocks.

And once we have grasped whatever it is that we hold as our treasure, it is easy to, like this monkey, not want to let it go. We become slaves to our shiny rocks and are willing to be held captive in order to maintain possession of it.

What is your shiny rock? What treasure of this world has so captivated your mind and heart that it has taken a seat in God's throne? I would encourage you to spend some time searching your hearts. Ask God to reveal to you whatever you have placed as your security or identity.

As I mentioned before, God is in the business of purifying our lives from anything that seeks to compete with our worship of him.

For James it is always important to join belief and reality with action. If we are children of God, we ought to live and walk according to that belief.

That means we must not only believe that idols are evil, but we must rise to battle. We must fight against the impulse to set our focus on anything but Jesus.

III. Giving what we cannot keep

Jim Elliot famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

We cannot live our lives as monkeys, seeking to hoard up and cling to strength, power, and inheritance from a worldly perspective.

Rather than find value in the temporary, we must see these things as nothing, and we must see Christ as everything. That means, as his children, we must see these worldly accomplishments and possessions and abilities as gifts from God for their intended use. To further his kingdom. To bring him glory. To serve others.

Rather than pursue these things, we should give of them freely and abundantly. Our Father, the Creator of the universe, has all good things at his disposal. He intends for us to be conformed to his image, and to give generously as our Father in heaven has given.

Our faith and our works must go hand in hand.

After all, all who believe in Jesus and are united with him, are rich. We are wealthy in Christ.

Not only should we hold our wealth, possessions, our time and our gifting loosely, but we must give of these things generously if we are to heed James' teaching to heart.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, and that in him we have an inheritance that no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, or the heart of man imagined! And he calls us not to be haughty, nor to "set our hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share." (Eph. 1:3,7; 1 Cor. 2:9, 1Tim. 6:17)

Brothers and sisters, our Lord Jesus has given us of his abundance in this life and in the life to come. He has given us of his inheritance as his children and he has called us to be generous with our finances, our time, our service, our forgiveness, and our love.

He calls us to be holy, as he is holy, and the implication here is that we are also to be generous as he is generous.

May we consider the things of this world as they are: tools to aid us in our obedience to him. That with all that we are and all that we have, we might bring him glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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