

*Eternity is the Great Equalizer: James 1:9-11*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
Sunday morning, April 27<sup>th</sup>

Eternity is the great equalizer. When we look at ourselves and others in light of eternity, we all stand on level ground. The world may think more highly of those who are wealthy, those who have powerful jobs, those who are well-educated, those who live in nice homes. But eternity is the great equalizer. Because in eternity we won't be comparing salaries, or careers, or education, or houses. Each one of us will either be in heaven basking in the wondrous glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or suffering the eternal punishment of hell. That is our eternal destiny—heaven or hell. And in eternity it won't matter whether we were wealthy or poor, whether we had a high-powered career or not, whether had a good education or no education, whether we had a nice house or no house. None of that will matter.

The challenge for us in this life and in this world is to have an eternal perspective in the midst of the here-and-now. This is part of becoming a mature Christian who is steadfast and not double-minded. We need to view things in the way God views things—not in the way our culture views things. This is the instruction that James gives us in the verses we're going to look at this morning.

It's difficult to know exactly how verses 9-11 fit into the context of James 1. The instructions in this letter come to us in a kind of rapid-fire sequence, and James isn't always explicit about how each topic is related the ones before and after it. But the theme of these verses has been steadfastness in the midst of trials. We saw that in verses 2-4, that we should count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds, for we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. And we are to be steadfast, so that we may become spiritually mature and complete, lacking in nothing. And then in verses 5-8 we're told to ask God for the wisdom we lack, and we are to ask in faith. We are not to be double-minded doubters who are like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. And then when we look ahead to the verse right after our text, it says in verse 12, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trials, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." So these verses that we're going to look at this morning (verses 9-11) are preceded and followed by this theme of steadfastness in the midst of trials.

I think James' intention in verses 9-11 is to instruct both the poor and the rich how to have an eternal perspective on wealth.

And that eternal perspective will produce steadfastness. It will make us mature believers and protect us from double-mindedness.

James wants us to see the world with spiritual eyes. He wants us to view poverty and wealth through God's eyes rather than earthly eyes. This is so applicable to us today, and so important for us to hear, because we are all so affected by money. We look in our own hearts and we look at the world around us, and we can see what a profound impact money has on everything. Some people are puffed up with pride because they have lots of money, some are bitter because they feel they deserve more money, some are depressed because they don't feel like they have enough money, some are anxious because they don't know if there will be enough money in the future, many will do crazy and foolish things to get more money. We are infatuated with money! Obsessed with the pleasures and comforts that money can buy and the status and prestige that money can bring.

As Christians, how should we think of money? How can we face trials, whether rich or poor, and remain steadfast, stable, not wavering back and forth in a world that considers money to be so important, and in a world where money can come and go so quickly? I believe these are the questions that James deals with in the verses before us.

Let's look at the two individuals James addresses here. First of all the lowly brother, and then the rich. We'll look at "The lowly brother's exaltation," and then "the rich brother's humiliation."

#### THE LOWLY BROTHER'S EXALTIION

James uses the term "brother" to refer to his fellow-Christians to whom he's writing. In verse 2 he wrote, "Count it all joy, my brothers . . ." And he's not excluding women, here. He's using this term inclusively to refer to all believers. And in verse 9 he's continuing to speak to these believers, and here specifically to those who are lowly. The NASB says, "the brother of humble circumstances." The same word is used in James 4:6, where he quotes from Proverbs, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." In that verse the contrast is between the proud and the humble. In 1:9-11, though, the contrast is between the rich and the humble (or the lowly). And therefore we understand the word in this context to be referring to a person's socioeconomic situation. The passage is talking about the rich and the poor. Verse 9 is a brief word of encouragement to believers who are financially poor.

I think James would look at us in this room, and he would say that we are extremely rich. Because the folks he was writing to, they had been dispersed from their homes due to persecution.

They had to flee from their homeland, and as a result life in general was a major struggle. Therefore according to James' standards, and as we compare ourselves to the world as a whole, we are very wealthy. We have food on the table each day, we have roofs over our heads at night, we had means of getting here this morning. These are things that many people in the world cannot take for granted.

Having said that, though, I still think this instruction to the lowly brother can be a great encouragement to many here. This is applicable. Maybe you work hard at your job. You spend your money wisely. You plan and budget and try to save. And yet it always feels like you're barely getting by. Maybe you're on the bottom rung of the ladder in your career, and you haven't gotten the promotion you thought you would get. Or maybe you find yourself out of work, and the future is very uncertain. And the price of gas (and everything else) keeps climbing. And you just feel like there's never going to be any light at the end of the tunnel.

Well, this verse encourages all of us with the truth that there IS light at the end of the tunnel, and it is a glorious light, indeed! This verse tells the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation. What does that mean? We may look at that word "boast" and think that it's a prideful and wrong thing to do. We shouldn't boast. We should be humble. And that's true. In fact, in James 4:16 he describes this wrong kind of boasting. In that context he warns against doing things in our own strength and making plans for the future without acknowledging God's sovereign will. He writes, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you *boast* in your arrogance. All such *boasting* is evil." This is an interesting word, and it's one that Paul uses a lot. And the only places in the New Testament that it appears outside of Paul's writing is in these two different verses in James. And as we look at the way that Paul uses the word, we see that the issue is what you boast in. It's not wrong to boast, it just depends on what you're boasting in. In a couple places Paul quotes from Jeremiah 9:23-24, which illustrates this well. The verses say, "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, 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.'"

We are not to boast in our wisdom or our might or our riches, but we are to boast in the Lord and in the relationship we have with Him. And it's in this way that the lowly brother can boast in his exaltation. What is this exaltation? What is the high position that the poor Christian enjoys? Philippians 3:20-21 speak

of ways in which all Christians are exalted. It says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” This is the great exaltation that Christians have to look forward to. We are citizens of heaven. Even though we deserve hell because of our sin, we have been given this amazing inheritance because of Christ’s work on the cross. And therefore the lowly brother must not despair. Instead there should be hope and rejoicing and anticipation of the great exaltation that is ours as Christians. Something much greater than material wealth will be ours, and it will be ours for eternity. We will dwell in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and enjoy His beautiful majesty for ever and ever. “let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.”

#### THE RICH BROTHER’S HUMILIATION

In the next two verses there is a different command given to those who are rich. Verse 9 speaks of “the lowly brother’s exaltation,” and verses 10-11 speak of “the rich brother’s humiliation.” Many commentators think that James is referring to a non-Christian in this verse. The word “brother” is absent here, and when James talks about rich people later in his letter, it is very negative. The rich are spoken of as evil people. If this verse is referring to the rich as unbelievers then James is using irony in condemning the rich. He’s saying, “The only thing the rich have to boast in is the fact that on judgment day they’re going to be utterly humiliated.” Like a flower of the grass they’re going to pass away. They’re going to be condemned.

But it seems more likely that as James wrote these verses he intended for the words “brother” and “boast” to be implied in verse 10. This is something that happens all the time in our speech and in our writing. If there are two parallel statements, we may abbreviate the second statement. This is what I think James is doing here. “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation,” meaning “let the rich [brother] [boast] in his humiliation.”

These statements are paradoxical. They are contrary to our common perceptions, and they show how the kingdom of God is totally opposite to the kingdom of man. The world tells the rich person to boast in his exaltation and the poor to grovel in their humiliation. But God’s Word tells the poor brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich to boast in his humiliation. God’s kingdom is upside-down according to the world. But it would be better to say the world is upside-down according to reality.

The rich brother must boast/exult in/ rejoice in the fact that his earthly riches are of no eternal significance. There must be no boasting in material wealth, but rather there should be boasting in our identification with Jesus Christ, who was the Suffering Servant. We should strive to be like our Savior: to be humble, to serve, to make sacrifices for others. Because this is what really matters. This is what will have lasting value. Not your money! But your humble, Christ-like life.

James is communicating a very similar message to both groups, but he's telling each group specifically what they need to hear. He's saying to the poor Christian, "Don't be depressed because you are poor in this life. Instead, rejoice because you are rich. You have an inheritance in Christ that is more valuable than all the money in the world." And James is saying to the Christian who is materially wealthy, "Don't think that your earthly riches make you more important than anyone else. Don't boast in your money. It's not going to last. Instead, boast in your lowly position. Boast in the fact that you are a hell-deserving sinner whom Jesus Christ saved by His grace."

James is telling both groups of people to focus on eternity. Eternity is what gives rich and poor alike an appropriate perspective on earthly riches. Whether you have money or not, look to eternity. Look to what matters. Look to what is truly important. And then live accordingly.

Verses 10-11 give us a vivid illustration of the brevity of life, and the fleeting nature of earthly riches. "like a flower of the grass he will pass away." His life on this earth will end. You're not going to be here forever! This life is passing away. And then verse 11 continues the illustration even more vividly. "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." I think at the end here he's referring to the rich in general. He's making a general statement about wealth. If you are pursuing riches, you need to realize that the riches and the pursuit of those riches are fading so quickly. Don't be blinded by the material things of this world. Don't let them blind you to the things that really matter! It's so easy to think that this stuff around us is important, but it's going to be gone so fast.

Let me read you a few verses from the Old Testament that make this point, and they use the same illustration which James is drawing upon here. First of all, Isaiah 40:6-8, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Similarly, Psalm 103:15-16, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the

field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” These verses remind everyone that our lives are so short. Our time on this earth is fleeting. So look to eternity and make your short life count. Remember: “Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Concerning riches, Psalm 49:16-17 says, “Be not afraid when a man becomes rich, when the glory of his house increases. For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him.” We can so easily delude ourselves into thinking that these possessions we have are going to last. But they’re not. Our lives are fleeting, and our possessions are, too. And when we die, we aren’t going to take any stuff with us. It’s been observed that you never see a U-Haul behind a hearse. Because none of your stuff is going with you.

Let’s look at one more verse that is so applicable to these issues that James is talking about. It’s something Jesus said in Matthew 6:24. He said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” This is an insightful verse, and it’s very helpful to first ask the question: what does it look like to serve money? It doesn’t mean that you do good works on behalf of the US currency. A \$100 bill has no needs. So, serving money cannot refer to somehow meeting the needs of money. No, you serve money by putting your hope in money to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart. You put yourself in the place to benefit from the things that money can buy. That’s how a person serves money. Hoping in money. Delighting in money and the things money can buy. Seeking satisfaction in money.

Likewise, you serve God by putting your hope in Him to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart—by putting yourself in the place to benefit from His beauty and greatness. You hope in Him. You delight in Him. You seek your satisfaction in Him. Serving God does not mean you do good works to meet God’s needs. God has no needs. You serve Him by hoping in Him and asking *Him* to meet *your* needs. This is what it means to be a Christian. Christians are not people who serve God by working for Him in order to meet His needs and hopefully earn some reward from Him. That’s not biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity is serving God by going to Him for satisfaction and delight. Going to Him to meet all your needs. Running to Him because you see that He is the only source of eternal pleasure. Becoming a Christian involves turning away from the pursuit of money and worldly pleasure, and seeking your ultimate pleasure in God.

This is why we can’t serve both God and money. We will ultimately put our hope in one or the other. In the end, our lives

will reveal either that we were hoping in money, or that we were hoping in God. Examine your heart today. Examine your life. Is your hope in money, or in God? James makes it plain to see how foolish we are to hope in money, because it will surely pass away.

The lesson for all of us in this passage is to view our life circumstances through the lens of eternity. Eternity is the great equalizer. It puts us all on the same plane, and it puts everything in its proper perspective.

On Friday evening Stacy and I were on a date, and we parked up on Mt. Washington and took the incline down to Station Square, where we had dinner and then walked around for a little bit. And as we looked at the Pittsburgh skyline from Station Square (from ground level), there was a certain building that looked like it was tallest building in Pittsburgh. But when we went back up the incline to the top of Mt. Washington, the perspective changed. From one perspective, the view was deceiving. The building that was closer to us appeared to be the tallest. But that perception was wrong. We had to see things from that higher perspective to see things accurately.

That's the lesson that we need to learn from these verses. Don't view wealth from the perspective of the here-and-now. That view is deceiving. It's false. And it will lead you astray. You have to view wealth through the perspective of eternity. And when you do that, whether rich or poor, you will find true satisfaction in Christ and you will glorify Christ with your life.

It glorifies Christ when there are poor Christians who feel like they lack nothing, because of the joy they have in Him. And therefore they are not concerned by their lack of money. It doesn't make them depressed or anxious or bitter. It just makes it easier for them to look forward to heaven.

It also glorifies Christ when wealthy Christians see that the pleasures and prestige of money are fleeting, and that Christ's kingdom is forever. And therefore they live well below their means so that they can give generously to kingdom work. They want to make their lives count for what really matters.

In both of these cases, Christ is shown to be precious and satisfying and glorious. He is exalted above money. Jesus is more precious than the stuff in this world. This is my closing exhortation to you: Ponder this week how you can make that statement with your life, that Jesus is more precious than the stuff in this world. How can you show the world around you that your treasure is in heaven, not in this world? Serve God, not money. Don't put your hope in the fleeting pleasures of having wealth. Put your hope in the eternal treasures of knowing God.