

Upside Down

James 1:9-11

The Bible turns the wisdom of the world upside down, especially in terms of greatness and importance. The Bible turns the wisdom of the world upside down in terms of those things of which we ought to boast! The world says that the rich should be able to boast in their riches, taking confidence and strength from those riches. The powerful should be able to boast in their power, glorying in the accumulation and exercise of that power over others. And they do. They boast of themselves—of their power and influence and authority.

And the poor, the weak, the unfortunate, all those judged to be lowly in terms of this world, they are the ones who should always be conscious and aware of their lowliness. They are the ones who should live with humility, even humiliation, because of their lowly position and standing in life.

The Bible turns that upside down. James says that it is the lowly one who should “glory in his exaltation,” verse 9. And the rich are to glory in their humiliation, verse 10. That’s what we have before us this morning. It is a necessary correction to the spirit of our age, a spirit that all too often infects the church. We make heroes out of certain men, those who have gained power and influence. We make idols of such people, even treating them as false gods. And we feel sorry for the weak and poor, we are condescending to them, dismissive of them, even at times insulting or degrading.

The Bible turns all of that upside down, and presents to us an entirely different declaration of greatness. From Jesus’ own lips, we read, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be

comforted. Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.”

With that blessing laid before us this morning, let’s look at what James has to say about boasting, turning the teaching of the world upside down.

v.9

That doesn’t seem to make sense, does it? The word translated “glory” means to boast, a proud and exulting joy. Usually attributed to those with obvious reason for such pride. Those in the world who boast are those with money. Those with power. Those with beauty. Those with great accomplishments.

James says to the contrary that the lowly brother is to boast. But not in his lowliness. In his exaltation. So we have,

I. THE EXALTED POSITION OF LOWLINESS.

That’s a consistent theme throughout Scripture, isn’t it? The exaltation of those who find their place in,

A. The lowly position of humility.

This is well demonstrated by Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was a godly woman who rejoiced in God her savior when she was told that she would bear the son of God in her own womb, for in her own words, “He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant.”

This is the position to which you and I are called, beloved. A lowly state. The exalted position of lowliness. As Jesus declared, Mat. 19:30 “But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

This is your calling, every one of you who is a follower of

Jesus. This is to be your identity. Lowliness. Humility. Even poverty. And this is to be the description of the church as a whole, from,

1 Cor. 1:26 “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God--and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- 31 that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

Do you see how different that is from the attitude of the world which is so thoroughly creeping into the church of our day? Do you see lowliness as your calling, even your calling as a church? The power and the strength is not of you. The glory is not in you. It is all in God. So let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.

Remember the context of all this, including what we studied a few weeks ago,

v.2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”

Let those trials humble you! That you may be perfect and complete. And seek God’s wisdom in the midst of them all, in the trusting faith of believing that he is a merciful and kind father to do you good.

Then glory in those circumstances. Glory in your own humility and weakness. Even as Paul expresses of himself so personally,

2 Cor. 12:9 “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

The lowly position of humility is to be ours. And yet, James calls that position your “exaltation.”

v.9

So we see,

B. The exalted position of spiritual riches.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.” That’s a spiritual reality, not necessarily a physical one. The exaltation is not the sort of selfish message found in the modern day prosperity gospel, that if you would just trust in Christ he will make you rich and successful. The promise is not one of worldly advancement, but clearly one of spiritual exaltation. And that is what we should boast about!

Mat. 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven...5 Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.”

Those are the riches we are promised. The kingdom of heaven. The inheritance of heaven and earth. God exalts the lowly with the blessings of his own grace.

James 4:6 “But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

James 4:9 “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

Also, 1 Peter 5:5 “Likewise you younger people, submit

yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.” 6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

Again this grand theme, God has regard for the lowly! That is their exaltation. God exalts the humble. Not the proud and arrogant. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

That, beloved, is a lesson you must come to understand fully in the depth of your soul, for it will change the way that you live and transform your whole outlook upon life. It will transform the goals you have for your life, for all too often as Christians we imitate the world in setting worldly goals. Such as riches, the goal of financial prosperity. That’s why so many people send their children to college--so they can earn the most money possible. Or the goal of outward strength and beauty--that’s what we pursue, giving undue attention to our appearance or undue stress upon physical abilities or strengths. Or simply the goal of worldly accomplishments--educational or professional. Even personal or political.

All too often we strive after the success of this world. We strive for the exaltation which this world has to offer. And in doing so, we despise the position of lowliness which God has exalted.

Yet, further, we fail to understand what will happen to those who are rich and successful in the eyes of the world. And if you were to ask the rich man how money he will leave behind in his will, the honest answer is simply, “All of it!” So, you see, the rich man will lose everything. And I believe that is the emphasis of, v.10

Let the rich man boast in his humiliation. He will lose so much more than the poor man! That’s his humiliation, it is the great extent of his loss. Thus we have for the rich man,

II. THE EXALTED POSITION OF HUMILIATION.

NOT the exalted position of riches! Not the exalted position of outward beauty and strength. Not the exalted position of worldly accomplishments. But rather the exalted position of humiliation because he will lose all those things! And that should be his glory! That should be his boast, that he will lose all that he has for the sake of Christ.

Consider the example of the Apostle Paul in,

Phil. 3:2 “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, 4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. 7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Confidence in the flesh. Self-confidence. “If anyone else

thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so.” Yet Paul boasts of his humiliation, he boasts of what he had lost!

Yet this is his glory, that those external things of the flesh would be counted as rubbish, even dung. From verse 8, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things.”

That’s his glory! That is the exalted position of humiliation. So back in James we see that,

A. The rich man will lose all his riches.

v.10 “...because as a flower of the field he will pass away. 11 For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass...”

It is not wrong to plan for retirement. It is not wrong to save money for a time when you expect to need it. Indeed, that is the essence of financial wisdom. But it is wrong to live your life for the accumulation of wealth, as if by that wealth you can obtain success or happiness. Because your glory and exaltation is to be in the loss of all those things, that you might gain Christ and be found in him.

Godliness is not the path to financial prosperity, obedience to God’s laws are not a sure-fire path to financial success. And while obedience to God’s laws and the recognition of his wisdom with regard to how you handle your money may well bring you some temporal rewards, that’s not the ultimate goal.

Consider what Paul writes to Timothy about those who “who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.” Actually he describes them as “men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth.” And his

application is clearly stated, “From such withdraw yourself.”

1 Tim. 6:6 “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. 11 But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

His instructions to those who are rich are also very plain,

1 Tim. 6:17 “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. 18 Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, 19 storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

The rich man will lose all his riches, and that is to be his glory, that will be his boast! And secondly,

B. The rich man will lose all his outward beauty.

The illustration is of the beauty of the flowers, beauty that withers.

v.11

The emphasis with these words is, of course, the outward appearance, the beauty of its appearance. The beauty of how it looks on the outside.

Such a powerful image. Such great contrast. The beauty of a flower in bloom will only give way to rapid and complete decay. Consider, for example, the beauty of a rose, a symbol for us of love and affection. Yet that beautiful rose that might represent and express a husband's love for his wife will only last a couple days. Then it begins to droop, and fade. Eventually the petals simply fall off and die, the flower withered and destroyed.

We see this same image in other places in the Bible, too.

1 Peter 1:24 "All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away."

The contrast, of course, is made clear in the next verse, "But the word of the LORD endures forever."

Beauty fades, our beauty. It can never last. Such is our condition as creatures, compared to the eternal and unchangeable beauty of God. Consider the OT passage Peter quotes,

Is. 40:5 "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" "All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever."

And with great compassion God addresses us as an understanding father to his beloved children,

Ps. 103:13 "As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. 14 For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. 15 As for man, his days are like grass; As a

flower of the field, so he flourishes. 16 For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. 17 But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting On those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's children."

And so, beloved, glory in these things! When you lose your outward beauty and strength, boast in your exalted position of humiliation. Don't just endure it, glory in it! Whatever you lose in terms of the successes and blessings of this world, glory in that loss! Boast about that loss, that you might embrace the exalted position of your own humiliation. And with that, add this final boast,

C. The rich man will lose all his worldly accomplishments v.11b "So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits."

In all his pursuits. In his whole way of life, and the word could have special reference to all his "business journeys." He will lose it all.

I read earlier of Paul's personal testimony,

Phil. 3:5 "...concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

No one had more zeal than Paul! If anyone could claim the righteousness of the law, it was he. He had done great things, so he thought, for God. He had it all in terms of this world's accomplishments. And he counted them all loss.

So also with those who attain to great heights of success in this world. The rich and famous, we might say. More than you or I, they will be humiliated, for they shall lose more. And all of that leads me to summarize some very specific,

III. APPLICATIONS.

Actually, one main application. One very specific and personal application from this whole text and this entire sermon. And that is to humble yourselves. People of God,

A. Humble yourselves as unto Christ.

Humble yourselves as Christ humbled himself. He who epitomizes what it means to be humbled. In fact, in the most personal of all the invitations of the gospel, Jesus bases his invitation upon this realization of his own lowliness, the same Greek word as we find in verse 9.

Mat. 11:28 “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

That’s Jesus. “I am gentle and lowly in heart.” Sad to say, that is not an accurate description of many Christians today who would consider themselves otherwise quite godly. But this is godliness. This is Christlikeness. “I am gentle and lowly in heart.”

Paul goes into more detail in,

Phil. 2:5 “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Beloved, that is your calling just as it was Jesus’ calling. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” Though he

was God, he humbled himself. He learned obedience through suffering. So it is to be for you.

James 4:10 “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

Secondly, as a second application,

B. Humble yourselves unto unity with one another.

The Bible is so intensely practical. This is not a theology lecture. Nor is it a merely philosophical discussion of religion. This is a sermon, calling you to respond to the word of God as that word calls you to do. So you who are lowly, who glory in that exaltation of lowliness, humble yourselves such that in that way you will be able to achieve unity with one another.

In the church, especially. Go back with me, please, to Philippians 2. I already read about the reference to Christ. Now let me read what Paul says just before that reference.

Phil. 2:1 “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Where does unity come from? How can we become “like-minded, ...being of one accord?” Humble yourselves! That would be Paul’s joy! He is pleading with the church. If there is any love in you at all, then fulfill my joy by being of one mind.

And how does that come about when the church is full of people with different ideas and different opinions? Only one way, and this is the very definition of the lowliness and humility I’ve

emphasized throughout this sermon,

Phil. 2:4 “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

You could take out the words “only” and “also” to make it even stronger. Those words aren’t in the original. “Let each of you look out not for his own interests, but for the interests of others.”

That’s humility. That’s lowliness. And that is your calling. Likewise,

C. Humble yourselves unto peace with one another.

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

There is only one way for you to be at peace with one another. There is only one way for us as a church to enjoy the blessings of peace. Each one of you must be longsuffering! Each one of you must bear with one another in love. And to do that, you must glory in your lowliness.

That, beloved, is how Paul describes a life “worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” And I beseech you, I urge you with all the authority of God’s word, I urge you to live in this way, exalting, boasting, in your own lowliness.

Mark 9:35 “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”