

James 1:9-11

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[0 : 00] What are you worth? For the moment, forget about what other people think your worth might be.

What do you think that you're worth? What factors determine your answer to that question? What about money? Is that something that has to come into the equation, to the calculation of what you are worth?

Maybe even suggesting that money might have something to do with it probably sounds just a little vulgar. But is that a factor in your estimation of what you're worth?

So a good job that provides a generous income places you that little bit higher in the pecking order. Is that something that, though you maybe recoil a little from saying, well, that's what I believe, maybe actually that's what you think.

We use the language of worth in speaking of others. Usually the very wealthy will say, he's worth 10 million or she's worth 30 million. And I think most of us are impressed by the wealth of others in greater or lesser measure.

[1 : 28] But there is at the very least a certain curiosity about those who are very wealthy. And as I say, maybe if in our more honest moments we might even say that we're impressed by them.

You may not be. I can't speak for yourself. Well, just to maybe draw that out a little, imagine the scene here in Bonacord on a Sunday morning.

And there's a young couple come into the church, maybe a couple you've never seen before. You engage them in conversation. Well done. That's a good thing to do. And the conversation is going fine.

And they mention, oh, yes, we've just moved to the city. We've just bought a house and we're going to be living here for a time. And, you know, the conversation carries on.

And you say, well, so where's the house? Well, where are you living? Oh, it's just five minutes from here in the car. And Rubislaw Den South, do you know where that is? What do you think when you hear that answer?

[2 : 27] Now, for those of you who aren't familiar with Aberdeen, that is a really expensive street in Aberdeen. A little bit of background. You know, what's your reaction when that's the answer that is given?

Well, I'll leave you to imagine that scene and how you imagine you might react. If our estimation of others is influenced by their wealth or success, then I think necessarily that must also inform our estimation of ourselves.

And if having lots of money makes us more valuable as people, what about not having much money at all? Well, the necessary inference is that that makes us less valuable as people.

In our passage, verses 9 to 11 in the first chapter of James, James is dealing with this fundamental issue of what is our value or worth as believers.

And he does so by addressing the question of what determines our worth or volume. And he does this by unmasking a popular misconception and by also, in parallel, establishing the true grounds for a believer's worth or volume.

[3 : 49] So, he unmasks a misconception and he establishes the true reality of what determines what we are worth. And the manner in which he does this is by addressing two hypothetical believers, one who is poor and one who is rich.

What I want to do this morning is to look at these two believers who are addressed in these verses and look at each of them in turn and the charge that James addresses to them.

So, we'll begin where James begins with considering the believer in humble circumstances. Verse 9, So, first of all, who is this brother in humble circumstances?

Well, it's not a difficult question. This is a believer who is poor. The word James uses is quite vivid and could be translated, the one who does not rise far above the ground.

And that captures it quite pictorially. And you can see how the brother in humble or lowly circumstances is an attempt to do justice to the language that James uses.

[5 : 09] I guess our English expression describing somebody as dirt poor kind of captures the idea of what James is saying. But this is not just about financial poverty, but it's also about what often accompanies that.

And so often those who are financially poor will also be considered poor or deemed poor in terms of their social status in a given society or community.

Now, we know something else about this believer who is being addressed that's implicit in the charge that James addresses to him that we're going to come to in a moment.

But at this point, I just want to draw out something that we learn about him implicit in the charge that is addressed to him. And what's implicit in the charge is that this believer has bought into the idea, or at the very least is tempted to buy into the idea that his poverty determines his worth.

He can't walk tall in the world. His place or her place is to grovel in the dirt. That is where he or she belongs because he or she is poor.

[6 : 30] Now, who does this believer represent? Well, the believer represents all believers across time who are in similar circumstances. But I think we can justifiably broaden the application in a way that I hope makes it more relevant to more of us.

I think this believer represents all those who imagine that their worth is determined by their circumstances or by the fact that they consider themselves to be lacking in some way.

So this would not just be about being poor, but lacking in other ways. Maybe lacking in intellectual capacity. You're not as smart as you'd like to be.

You're not as smart as others. You haven't got the degrees that others have got. And you feel less because of that as you compare yourself with others. Maybe you feel lacking in sporting prowess in terms of your looks or good looks or lack of good looks as you consider that to be the case.

Maybe lacking in personality or popularity. In fact, we could say that the believer that James is addressing here addresses any believer with, to use the language we often use, with low self-esteem for whatever reason they might suffer in that way.

[7 : 51] But what is such a believer to do? Because James addresses such a believer and levels a charge towards them. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

Well, what does that mean? What is his or her high position? The expression high position is just one Greek word, hypsos.

And I mention it because we can recognize it from the English words that are derived from it. So we get the English word hyper from this word hypsos. Now, while identifying how a given word is used elsewhere in the New Testament is not some kind of magic wand to interpret any and every passage, it is helpful on occasion to identify how a word, a given word, is used elsewhere.

And I think on this occasion it is helpful. And particularly I'm thinking about the way Paul uses this word hypsos, translated high position, in his letter to the Ephesians.

So in Ephesians chapter 4 and verses 7 to 8. Let's just read those two verses. Ephesians 4 verses 7 to 8. So Paul is speaking about Jesus.

[9 : 25] He's speaking about his ascension to heaven. He quotes from the Old Testament and he speaks of when Jesus ascended on high. And that expression on high is the same word that James uses in our text.

So let's take note of that and then ask this question. How do we as believers connect with the heavenly realms of which Paul speaks Jesus ascending to?

What is our connection with heaven? Well, I think Paul gives us an answer to that question in his letter to the Philippians. And this is the only other text we're going to read to draw this out.

In Philippians chapter 3 and in verse 20. He's speaking about believers and he is describing something of who we are and of our identity.

And at the beginning of verse 20 he says this, But our citizenship is in heaven. He's saying to the believers, he's saying that as believers, their citizenship, our citizenship is in heaven.

[10 : 39] That is who we are. And so what James is saying to poor believers or any believer who questions their worth or value is this, Don't glory in what you have or don't have, but in who you are in Christ.

In Christ we are citizens of heaven. And this citizenship or identity grants us some heavy duty blessings in the present.

Forgiveness of sin, peace with God, adoption into God's family, and we could go on. And that same citizenship assures us of future blessing.

The certain hope of participation in the eternal kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth to be inaugurated by Jesus on his return.

So what James is saying to these poor believers who imagine that they're worth less, who imagine that they're not at the same level as others who are wealthy and talented and successful, he's saying, don't focus on that.

[11 : 48] Focus on who you are. Focus on who you are in Christ. Focus on your high position. You are a citizen of heaven.

That is who you are. And that is what should determine how you view yourself. Jesus is saying to poor believers, your pockets may be empty, but you possess riches beyond compare.

Others may see you as groveling in the dirt, and maybe in your weaker moments you see yourself as groveling in the dirt. But God sees you as seated in the heavenlies with his beloved Son.

That is how God views you. So don't focus on your poverty. Don't be dragged down by external circumstances or what you lack, whatever that might be.

Now just as an aside, but I think an important aside or corrective, or perhaps not a corrective, but to avoid any misunderstanding, James here is not glorifying poverty.

[13 : 02] He's not denying that poverty is a wretched condition. Far less is James removing our responsibility as believers to provide for the poor.

Indeed, in this very letter, he urges us in that regard in chapter 2 and verses 15 and 16. He explicitly says that we have a responsibility to provide for those who are poor, to alleviate their poverty, to bring them up out of poverty.

That is what we should be seeking to do. James 2, verses 15 and 16. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

So it's a rhetorical question, but it's clear what James is saying. He's saying you have an obligation, you have a responsibility, you have a privilege to provide for the poor, and not just occasional charity, but to provide in such a way as to enable such to be lifted up out of poverty.

That is what we should seek for those who are poor. Or if we are poor, to use whatever resources we have to leave poverty behind. James isn't talking about that.

[14 : 15] He's talking about a reality saying, if you are poor, if that is your circumstance, don't focus on it as that which determines your value or your worth as a person, and very particularly as a believer.

Well, that's just kind of an aside. How are we to understand the charge in the sense of the language that's used here? James chapter 1.

I'm in 1 Peter. James chapter 1. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. We've tried to identify what this high position is, and we're suggesting that that points to this reality of our identity in Christ as citizens of heaven.

Fine. But what about this language of taking pride in our high position? We generally think that being proud is a bad thing. Why are we being encouraged to take pride in our high position?

Other versions of the Bible translate it somewhat differently, to boast or to glory in our high position. The word that is used carries the idea of rejoicing.

[15 : 30] This is the joyous pride possessed by the person who values what God values, who has come to understand what is valuable in God's sight, and who has bought into that, and identifies that, and embraces that, and has come to understand that their own value is not a function of the house they live in, or the cool trainers that they've got, or whatever it is, but of who they are in Christ, citizens of heaven.

So James is speaking to you. He's speaking to me. He's speaking to all of us. He's saying, don't focus on what you don't have, be that wealth, or degrees, or good looks, or popularity, or whatever it is, but on who you are in Christ.

And notice how such perspective provides a solid and unchanging foundation for personal identity. You see, the other things that we've mentioned on which many ground their self-worth are fragile and insecure.

So today you may be wealthy, but there's no guarantee that your wealth will be there tomorrow, or next month, or in five years' time. Today you've got that gorgeous girlfriend, but maybe tomorrow she'll dump you.

Now, I'm not wishing that on anybody, but it's not a secure foundation on which to determine how valuable you are. Today you're popular.

[17 : 06] Tomorrow you may be put to one side as some other cool kid comes on the block. Just a word to those of you who are not Christians.

If you're not a Christian, if you're not trusting in Jesus as your Savior, if you're not a citizen of heaven, then you are missing out big time. You see, these great privileges concerning our identity are for those who are trusting in Jesus.

And as they have been enabled to put their trust in Jesus, so have been adopted into His family and have become and have been granted heavenly citizenship.

So what I would say to you this morning is trust in Jesus and receive from Jesus your new identity in Jesus. Well, that is what we can say about the first hypothetical believer that James is addressing, the brother in humble circumstances.

We need to move on to the second hypothetical believer. And we'll spend a lot less time on him or her because in some senses he or she is the flip side of the other one.

[18 : 25] And so a lot of what we have to say is kind of like obvious. Not all of it, but some of it. So who is this second individual addressed? Well, we have that in verse 10.

But the one who is rich, the one who is rich, who is she? And who does she represent?

Well, this is James speaking about a rich believer. I think it is worth making that point explicitly that James here is, I would argue, addressing another believer.

He's addressed the poor believer and now he's addressing the rich believer. Some, on the basis of what James goes on to say about this individual, wonder whether this individual is a believer at all.

But I don't think we ought to come to that conclusion. Rather, I think that the word brother, they'd in verse 9, is to be understood as descriptive of both those who are addressed.

[19 : 30] So, you have the brother in humble circumstances. And then in verse 10, it's but the implicit, the brother who is rich should take pride, and so on and so forth.

So I'm just setting that down as a marker that it's my conviction, I'm persuaded here, that James is speaking to two believers. One who is poor, we've already considered that, and now he moves on to one who is rich.

So this is a believer who is rich in financial resources, and with that, in all probability, rich in the matter of social status and esteem in society, and probably, though it ought not to be, probably also in the church.

He's wealthy, He's rich, He's successful, and people admire that. People are impressed by that. People want to be connected to those who are in such circumstances.

Who does he or she represent? Well, it's the flip side of the coin to what we've already looked at when we thought about the poor believer. He or she represents all those through the ages who are wealthy or prominent, but perhaps also those who are blessed in other ways, with a great intellect, with good looks, with sporting prowess, with popularity, with the cool trainers, or whatever it is.

[20 : 59] James is speaking to those in such circumstances, and for such, the temptation is to build their sense of self-worth around these attributes or privileges.

And what should such a believer do? A believer who is wealthy, a believer who is rich, a believer who does enjoy a number of seeming advantages, not even seeming advantages, but actual advantages over others.

Well, James says this. He says that such a believer should take pride in his low position. Now, what does that mean? Or what is such a believer being urged to do?

I think there are two elements to this. First of all, such a believer is to acknowledge the fleeting nature of his wealth or external advantages.

That's the whole sense of what he goes on to say. The one who is rich should take pride in his low position because he will pass away like a wild flower for the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossom falls, and its beauty is destroyed.

[22 : 09] In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. The rich man is being told to recognize that, to acknowledge that. James isn't denying that there is a certain beauty.

There is a certain advantage in wealth. He speaks about its beauty, but he's saying though it's in many ways a good thing, it is a resource that you can enjoy and employ in so many ways, it is passing, it's fleeting, it's here today and gone tomorrow.

So, the rich man or anybody who is building their sense of worth on some kind of advantage that they have or are perceived to have should remember that those things are fleeting, they're passing, they're here today and they're gone tomorrow.

But I think there's a second element in this charge to the rich man to take pride in his low position. I think it is this, that the rich man or woman should acknowledge that their wealth does not provide them with any advantage or spiritual status before God.

Before God, that rich woman is poverty stricken. That rich man is but a pauper. This is her low position.

[23 : 30] Before God, she is as needy as the poor man and as with the poor man, she has nothing to bring to the table to secure acceptance before God.

In the world or in society or perhaps even the church, the rich man's wealth can open many doors. But that wealth doesn't open the door of heaven.

In fact, Jesus says it makes it more difficult to squeeze in. But why take pride in this reality or this low position as we've endeavored to describe what James means by that?

Well, I think the rich man is to take pride in that recognition of his or her low position because to recognize this reality will drive the rich believer to rest evermore in Christ and appreciate evermore the very same and elevated identity that he enjoys in Christ and in Christ alone.

You see, as we draw the threads together, you see that though James seems to be urging the poor man and the rich man to proceed in opposite directions, one to take pride in their high position and the other to take pride in their low position, he is at heart actually telling them to do the same thing.

[24 : 56] To the poor man he says, don't dwell on your poverty. Dwell on and glory in who you are in Christ. And to the rich man he is saying, don't dwell on your wealth.

Dwell on and glory in who you are in Christ. So in whatever category you place yourself or maybe you think you're somewhere in the middle, which is where normally we imagine we are.

The charge is the same. Dwell on and glory in who you are in Christ. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for the solid foundation that we have in Christ. We thank you that our identity is indeed centered on that eternal reality of who we are and who we have become in your Son.

And we do pray that you would help us to ever focus on that. We acknowledge and confess that so often we are prone to buy into that lie, to buy into that misconception that somehow our value or the value of other people is determined by other factors.

[26 : 13] Help us to be careful and disciplined in not allowing ourselves to go down that track in our thinking and in our estimation of ourselves and of others.

And help us rather to glory, to rejoice in who we are as citizens of heaven. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.