

Wrestling with our Status & Identity

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Sermon Audio file

Wrestling with our Status & Identity

James 1: 9-11

Song - Love lifted me

Celebrations - Roger

Video - Community Kids slot by Clare

Reading by James Smith - Luke 16: 19-31

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

30 "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Second reading - James 1: 9-11

9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. 10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. 11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

Intro - James knows that his readers are struggling in the midst of various trials so begins his letter by encouraging his readers to "Count it all joy... when you meet various trials..." He is not telling his readers to pretend that what they are going through is actually fun, nor that they should not be sad, but rather that they/we should choose to trust God's character and presence in the midst of all that we face.

That could be the grieving process of England losing AGAIN on penalties, or the heartbreak at there not being a bank holiday as a result (how absurd that was!). It could be anxiety we are feeling with the removal of ALL restrictions and will we be safe? That feeling could be one you feel in Church as well of

course.

You might be facing a difficult personal issue right now? Tough circumstances are not the final word. God can use these difficult or even dreadful circumstances to bring us to be "mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1: 4) "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning..." (Lam. 3:22-23)

Song - Blessings

Song - I am not alone

People face different tough times, some people face more tough times than others, but for none of us life is easy all of the time. People are different in many ways, and one of those ways is in terms of their status, perceived or otherwise. Now James is wanting to address this, so he speaks openly of those who are poor and those who are rich. When we face tough things in life, it is tempting to look around at others and to compare our trials with theirs. This is especially true when dealing with those who have much and those who have little; which is exactly why James talks about it.

Jesus understood the power and influence of money and material possessions in our lives. 16 of the 38 parables were concerned with money/possessions. 1 in 10 verses in the gospels (288) deal directly with money.

The Bible has 500 verses on prayer, 2000 on money/possessions. For those who say that we should never speak about money in Church they either don't know their Bibles or have cut lots out they don't like! For the record, we don't actually speak about money in Church a lot at all, but I can tell you 4 occasions when we do:-

1. At our Church members' meetings because we are a charity and we want to be accountable and transparent.
2. When we are going through a teaching series in a book of the Bible and that subject is addressed then we will address it as opposed to pretending it's not there
3. When people come to the third of 3 courses we used to run annually, which is called 'Furthering The Journey'. This followed 'Alpha' (which covers peoples' beginning of a journey) and 'Essentials For The Journey'.
4. When we speak to people we have expressed that they'd like to become a member of the Church, and 1 of our 10 values is giving.

The only caveat I'd add to that is that we twice in the last 10 years decided to hold a Gift Day at the Church as we sought God for a new building. And God richly blessed BOTH those occasions...

Social research findings from George Barna: 50% of Christians consider money to be the primary indicator of success, and 19% of Christians believe you can tell how successful a person is by seeing what they own.

Whilst all that might be interesting, today is NOT a sermon about money... phew... James addresses our attitudes related to wealth and poverty. Is this where we find our own significance...? Is this what determines our status...? Or our actual identity, who we are...? Pause... think about it!

See people and possessions through God's eyes => having the attitude of Jesus. The standard view during James' day was that spiritual standing was indicated by material standing, ie The poor were ignored or deemed as being punished by God and deserved nothing, but the wealthy were blessed by God and should be shown favour as a result. So, what you had affected the way people treated you. Today?

We are all aware of the recent horrors on social media aimed at England's non-white players who

missed their penalty last Sunday.

Salvation calls for a radically different view of people. We become mindful that we are all made in the image of God (3: 9), and our status before God has nothing to do with what we have or do not have. And certainly not anything to do with the colour of our skin. While someone poor is not kept from the treasures heaven by their poverty, someone rich cannot gain the treasures of heaven by their wealth. We might think that's pretty obvious, but it was a radical message for those hearing what James said.

What matters is receiving God's grace, and then showing that same grace to every other person, rich or poor.

Don't despise your poverty - The poor look at those who are rich and can envy them. But James tells such a brother or sister to "take pride in his high position" (9). Some day that Christian will be with God, "perfect and complete, not lacking anything", so they must look forward to the future => he does not need to get stressed about the present, but in what God is going to do. And in the present he or she at least

hasn't the temptation to focus on the distraction that wealth brings, so in this they can and should rejoice.

Remember in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to his disciples, and he says to them, "YOU are the light of the world. YOU are the salt of the earth." "Eh...? Us?" It is put so emphatically, as if Jesus were saying, "Yes, you!!" Those 11 men were deeply flawed. They had no qualifications. They had not proved themselves. They had not preached any sermons. Yet he says to them, "You are the salt of the earth."

That was their high position. Similarly, Paul affirmed that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1: 27). It seems upside down to us. BUT God's ways are not our ways. So if you are poor and thinking of that solely in negative terms, just know that that's NOT how God sees it...

Heed the warnings of wealth - James then turns to the comfortable person. Why boast in their 'low' position? Because what they 'have' can carry such a weight in this life and it will all pass away "like the flower." The rich appear to have no difficulties in this life. James is saying they do have trials, and they are related to the wealth and possessions they have. There are ongoing trials of being tempted to trust in what you have and believe that they are some kind of sign of your eternal place or status. Prosperity teaching, often big in America, would support this. James doesn't. Neither do we in this Church... Not only does money not help anyone to receive what God has to offer, it may well be a barrier to it. James wants the rich person to be changed from pride in their possessions to humility in recognizing their own spiritual poverty before God. So, for this believer, our boasting is in the triumph of God over his or her temptation to trust in his wealth for their status. That's a challenge because we simply do not think like that in the West!

Most competitions have as their top prize... money! Those who run these competitions KNOW that's the biggest incentive for people to enter. So how much money do we need to make us truly happy? JD Rockefeller said, "Just a little bit more!!" Isn't that true! Money is certainly NOT bad. The Bible warns us against the "love of money" as being "the root of all kinds of Evil" (1 Tim 6: 10).

What James is doing here is encouraging humility in the wealthy believer. Let's assume you ARE one of these more wealthy people and someone puts your house on a pedestal or envies your car or is in awe of something else you own... it's ok to have these nice things and it's ok to receive compliments from others and not be in denial of what's been said, but what James longs to see is that these believers genuinely

don't see their own identity or status wrapped up in those things. Rather, they can acknowledge the good they own BUT are very open that all that could be gone tomorrow and their trust is ultimately in

what they have in Jesus...

"When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the prince of Glory died. My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride."

Material things are a gift from God bestowed to us. We are managers of those gifts. When we die, it won't matter how much we had but what we did with it that influences our reward in heaven.

Place your security in Jesus - There was a man who loved money more than anything. Just before he died, he told his wife, "When I die, put all my money in the casket with me. I want to take my money to the afterlife with me." She promised she would. At his funeral, just before the casket was closed, his wife put in an envelope. Her friend said, "I see you didn't put all his money in there with him after all then?" "Yes I did, I wrote him a cheque!"

Possessions and those who possess them pass away. James uses the example of wild flowers, here for a time then they die => we cannot place eternal significance on that which is temporal. Material wealth may make us feel good but it does not last, and we certainly can't depend on it to secure our Salvation.

The rich man & Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31). What mattered most at the end of the day...?! Think of Lazarus's position: his home was a pavement: he was in constant pain. But what was the true position of this man? Do we measure it by his possessions, and his outward circumstances, and his bodily comforts alone? He was loved by God, came to faith, experienced forgiveness for his sin, died and went to heaven to be in God's presence. The rich man, however, in his house was a slave to his sins - despite all his millions. He died and went to hell. Who knew the "high position"?

This phrase, "high position" is used in the New Testament to describe the heavenly realms to which Jesus has ascended. This place of glory was Lazarus's home. Who would you have rather been...???

Aside from our salvation, what this passage teaches us is that in terms of our status and our identity, both of which matter to us, if we depend on what is temporary, here today, gone tomorrow, for that, then we are going to become unstuck.

When I was in my teens I had a thick head of hair. Imagine me going to a job where that was a requirement. Imagine people seeing that thick head of hair when I was walking down the street and someone shouting "Hey! There's Roger! I'd recognise him and that hair anywhere!" Imagine me reveling in that, my thick head of hair had given me both status in my work and a sense of identity in who I was as a person.

So my own self worth would have been wrapped up in that, maybe without my even knowing it... Now look at me! If THAT was what I looked to, to secure my status and identity, then I'd be lost by now! Why? "Hair today, gone tomorrow"!!! Seek your security in Jesus, for that will last for all eternity! William Borden was a wealthy Christian growing up in Chicago, the heir of the Borden milk fortune. When he was at University he committed himself to reaching the Muslims of North China. Three years later he sailed for Egypt to study Arabic before going to China. He knew that money could not mean security so, before he left, he gave away his inheritance of nearly one million dollars to various missions. He was in Cairo for four months when he contracted spinal meningitis and was dead within weeks. Under his pillow he had scrawled on a piece of paper the words, "No reserve! No retreat! No regrets!"

Song - The Potter's Hand

Song - Oh Great God (only if time???)

Prayers led by John Weir

Conclusion - We all have trials that God allows us to go through. It will not help us to compare ourselves

to others and it can be tempting to feel sorry for ourselves. This prevents us from rejoicing in what we do have in God. God can be God to all of us in the middle of whatever. When we consider our status and our Identity, don't think materially, think spiritually. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a God's child. What could be better...?!

God says, "Let not the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD" (Jer 9:23).

Song - This is Amazing Grace