

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Introduction

What makes a person significant? More pointedly, what makes you significant? And what makes me significant? If you asked that question to a dozen people, I suspect you'd get about a dozen answers, because it's a question that human beings have been asking ourselves for a very long time. For some, significance is found in wealth and fame, for others, in cultural impact and legacy. Still others would argue that significance is found in raising up and guiding the next generation who will outlive them to pass on their teachings to even further generations. People go to great lengths and seek to accomplish all kinds of amazing and crazy things to achieve significance in this life. Sometimes, in the eyes of many, they succeed. More often than not, however, despite immense efforts in life, people are forgotten in death far sooner than any of us might be comfortable to admit.

As human beings, we long for a sense of significance, and that is no accident. Made in the image of God, we were given a wonderful and glorious purpose to rule and reign over creation as God's representatives. And yet, so many in our world today find themselves lost and uncertain about what gives them significance or whether they have any hope of ever achieving any kind of significance at all. I would argue that so many people in this world—even those around us in this community—struggle to understand their significance because they are looking in the wrong places. The world tells us to seek fame, fortune, and glory, but God never intended for us to find significance apart from him. If we want to truly understand what makes us significant, we need to understand ourselves through God's eyes and not through the eyes of the world around us.

As we come to our passage in the book of James this morning, we find words written to a group of Christians who lacked status, privilege, and significance in the eyes of the world. These were former Jews who had chosen to follow Jesus at the expense of everything they

A Guide for Non-Conformists: Boast in the Lord — Jas. 1:9–11

Luke Burrow

CBC Ilderton

October 1, 2023

once knew, and as a result, they found themselves persecuted, lowly, and despised. After Stephen, one of the early leaders of the church, was killed for his proclamation of Jesus, the church scattered all over the map, and everywhere they went, they found themselves at odds with the majority culture of their day. They were poor, they were hungry, and by all measures of the society around them, they did not live up to any standards of success. I'm certain many of these Christians found themselves tempted to turn their backs on Jesus and return to the cultural and material privilege they once had as Jews. And that is precisely why James wrote this letter to them, and that is precisely why James sprinted right out of the gate, in verse 2 to dive straight into a discussion on trials—because these believers were experiencing an immense trial, and they needed wisdom and comfort from God.

In our world today, as Pastor Andrew has already mentioned a number of times in this sermon series, God's people have spent a great deal of time in a position of cultural favour. It wasn't very long ago that Christian principles were accepted, respected, and valued as the ingredients to a healthy, thriving society. To be a church member was respectable, to be a pastor was a noble profession, and many people would have generally agreed that Christianity had a net positive impact on the world. However, in recent decades, those tides have begun to shift, and as our culture drifts further and further away from the values it once held, Christians are now increasingly seen as a backwards, hateful, and detestable people who are being left behind kicking and screaming by the steady and inevitable march of progress. Today, an increasing number of people would argue that the world would be better off without Christianity and without Christians. And so, for the first time, we as the church are beginning to realize that James' words to the scattered church of the first century are becoming increasingly relevant to us day by day. This morning, more than ever, we need to hear what they needed to hear.

James has already spoken to these believers about counting it all joy when they face trials—not because trials are good in themselves, but because God is working through their trials to strengthen and sanctify them and keep them to the very end. He told them to ask God for wisdom in the midst of their trials, knowing that he will give abundantly and generously even

A Guide for Non-Conformists: Boast in the Lord — Jas. 1:9–11

more than they could ask or think. He also warned them not to be double-minded, seeking friendship with the world while also seeking to follow God, and instead to devote themselves to wholeheartedly trusting in him alone. Now, as we come to verses 9–11, James continues these thoughts by speaking to these believers more directly about the trials they face.

In the wisdom of the Holy Spirit who inspired him, James' words to the churches in these verses come to us in a sort of interesting form. What we have here are two paradoxes that sound rather strange to our ears when we first hear them. A paradox can be defined as 'a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense, and yet is perhaps true.' As one commentator on this passages noted, Scripture contain many paradoxes, telling us that the weak are strong, the empty are full, the slave is free, the cursed are blessed, and that death brings life. All of these statements seem contradictory to us at first glance, but the more we think about them, the more we begin to see their surprising truth.

The well-loved and well-renowned English writer and philosopher G. K. Chesterton, who was known for his often humorous way with words, defined a paradox as "truth standing on its head shouting for attention." One could imagine a series of truths lined up like a ridiculous group of people standing on their heads, waving their feet and saying, "Hey! Look at me! Up is down! Down is up! Think about it!" These paradoxes indeed force us to slow down and think. They can make us read a little more carefully and consider truths a little more closely. Here, James uses the device of paradoxes to help us think more clearly about what the world tells us about significance compared to what God tells us about significance. He tells us that the poor are rich and the rich are poor, and that despite everything they see with their eyes in the world around them, these suffering believers are more significant than they had maybe ever realized.

James speaks to two kinds of Christians in these verses—those who are lowly and those who are rich, and as we sit here today, his words to both of these groups are relevant and important for us to hear. James tells them, and by extension us, **Boast Your Exaltation** and **Boast in Your Humiliation**.

A Guide for Non-Conformists: Boast in the Lord — Jas. 1:9–11

Boast in Your Exaltation (v.9)

First, James says to **Boast in Your Exaltation**. In verse 9, we find a small but dense verse, which reads, “*Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.*” While there may only be a few words here, they are deep, important words that warrant a closer look and further discussion.

James speaks first to Christians who are *lowly*. This word has a lot of depth and nuance, as it communicates both a sense of material poverty, but also a sense of low status and significance in the eyes of the world. The ESV uses the word *lowly*, and many other translations speak of *the brother of humble circumstances*. If you’re reading an NLT this morning, you’ll see the word *poor*. These certainly were Christians bearing under the weight of not having enough money to eat and live, but also of being rejected by the society around them. They weren’t poor and downcast for no good reason—they found themselves in this position specifically because of their decision to follow Jesus. They were suffering for the sake of Christ, and James wanted them to know that they actually, paradoxically, were more rich than they could imagine.

These lowly brothers are called to *boast*. Normally we think of boasting in a negative light. To most of us, the word provokes feelings of pridefully puffing ourselves up and talking about how great we are. However, in the thought process of Scripture, boasting in itself isn’t necessarily good or bad. It’s *what* we boast about that matters. Sure, we can boast in our own strength and intelligence, and that betrays a sinful pride that doesn’t do any good for anyone. However, Scripture tells us that we can instead boast in God, and that boasting in God is actually a wonderful thing to do! In fact, in other places in Scripture like Romans 5:2, this word can also be translated as *rejoice*, as in when Paul writes that “*we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*” One of the most important verses that explains this concept of boasting comes to us from the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 9, verses 23–24, the prophet writes, “*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.” In his letters to the Corinthians, on two separate occasions, the apostle Paul would quote these words from Jeremiah to a church who greatly struggled with spiritual pride. In both 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul paraphrases this Jeremiah saying, *“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

These lowly brothers are called by James to boast specifically in their *exaltation*. Despite their trials and difficulties in this world, James says either that they are *already* exalted, that they *will* be exalted in the future, or perhaps both. What does he mean? First, this word speaks to the spiritual reality that those who are poor and lowly possess a great spiritual advantage over those who are rich and supposedly self-sufficient. Poverty of any form produces a lowliness of spirit that keeps us dependant upon God and open to his grace and mercy. In Luke 6:20, Jesus said, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,”* and in the book of Matthew, we can find a further clarification when Jesus says, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* If you are rich, if you feel like you have everything you need, that you are a self-made success and don’t need support from anyone, you are far less likely to produce the helpless dependence that drives us to Christ. But if you are poor, such a helpless dependence comes far more easily. In just a few verses, in Chapter 2 verse 5, James says this exact thing. He says, *“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?”* So first, the lowly brother is exalted in his dependence upon God in this present life. But second, the lowly brother can also look with great anticipation to his exaltation in the life to come.

All throughout the Bible, we find stories of those who are poor and humiliated being ultimately exalted by God. Perhaps the clearest example is the Exodus—when God’s people were enslaved in Egypt and lowly in every conceivable way. God did amazing and miraculous

works to vindicate them and free them from slavery, and he even ensured that the Egyptians gave up a great deal of their treasure to the Israelites on their way out the door. In this way, the Exodus provides a taste of what God would ultimately accomplish in Jesus, freeing us from slavery to sin and granting us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, as Paul would say in Ephesians 1. As a result, in the book of 1 Peter, the apostle tells us that we await “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*”

In Christ, we receive a new destiny and a new inheritance that overshadows anything this world could ever hope to offer us. In Romans 8:15–17, the apostle Paul would say it like this, “*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.*” If you are in Christ, you are a child of God. You are an heir of the kingdom, and you possess eternal life. The sufferings of this life can not compare to the eternal weight of glory that is to come for all who have trusted in Jesus’ righteousness on their behalf rather than their own righteousness.

Most of us—maybe all of us—do not face the same kind of material poverty that the churches in the book of James faced. Ever more increasingly, however, we do experience the same lowly social status that leaves us despised in the eyes of the culture around us. In that sense, we could consider ourselves to be lowly like verse 9 says. And so, according to this verse, how should we respond? James doesn’t call us to try and accommodate to the culture around us in an attempt to stay on the right side of history, for that would be quite a double-minded thing to do. He also doesn’t call us to seek to wage cultural war against those who oppose us. No, instead, we are called to a different way. As those who are lowly in the eyes of the world, we should boast in our exaltation. We should rejoice in the eternal hope we have because of the grace given to us in Christ Jesus. We should constantly remind ourselves to live

A Guide for Non-Conformists: Boast in the Lord — Jas. 1:9–11

with the glory of our eternal future in mind and not keep our eyes focused on the struggles and trials of the here and now. Through all our trials God is working to make us perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, that we may be presented blameless before him and enter the eternal reward that Christ earned on our behalf. When we boast in our exaltation, suddenly the reproach of the world doesn't carry quite the same sting, and we realize that the world's assessment of our status has no bearing on our significance as children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

Boast in Your Humiliation (vv. 10–11)

Second, James says to **Boast in Your Humiliation**. In verses 10–11, James speaks to those he simply identifies as “the rich.” Now, many pages have been written and a great deal of ink has been spilled about who “the rich” in this passage are. Specifically, is James referencing believers or unbelievers? You can make good arguments for either side, but after diving into the research for myself, I'm convinced that this verse refers to rich Christians and not rich unbelievers. And if that's the case, then are these not the verses that relate to us the most? As I mentioned earlier, there are certainly ways that we in 21st century North America can identify with the lowly brother of verse 9, but there are also many ways in which our lived experience is very different from theirs. Pastor Andrew mentioned a few times throughout our Proverbs series that we live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world at one of the wealthiest times in all of human history. Despite the legitimate financial struggles many of us face, by any ancient standard and by the standard of a majority of human beings alive on the planet today, we are a fabulously wealthy people. When James takes the time to address rich believers, he really is speaking directly to us, and we should be quick to open our ears to hear what he has to say. He writes, *“and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 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.”*

Those who are rich are also called to boast just like the lowly brother of verse 9. But instead of boasting in their exaltation, James calls them to instead boast in their humiliation. What is this humiliation? First, James tells us directly that the rich will pass away like a flower of the grass. Life is short, it is transient, and no matter how self-sufficient we may feel, our money can not and will not save us in the end. To turn a well-known catchphrase on its head, the one who dies with the most toys still dies! James picks up the use of plant life as a metaphor from the Old Testament prophets to help drive this point home. Here in Canada, we sometimes experience something that could be defined as hot weather, certainly more in recent days, but I think we may struggle to fully understand the weight of this metaphor living at our particular degree of latitude. One commentator described their experience in a way that drives this biblical point home in a helpful way, so I'll quote him at length here. He said—

“Having lived in the arid climate of Southern California, I know what James is describing. In Palestine it is called a Sirocco, and in the Los Angeles basin it is called a Santa Ana. Hot winds rush relentlessly off the desert for a period of several days so that even at midday the bare ground becomes so hot one cannot walk barefoot on it. The heat is so intense that plants must be watered at night or they will burn. I have seen this kind of desert wind turn a spring lawn and flowers into a parched brown patch in only a few days.”

This is what things are like for those who are rich. They may be bigger and more beautiful flowers than the lowly flowers around them, but they don't last any longer when the east wind comes. Their destruction is both *inevitable* and *thorough*. In the same way, as those who are wealthy, our destruction in death is just as inevitable and just as thorough, and we are misguided if we think that our riches and our wealth will do anything to stop that. That is what James intends to communicate here in these verses—we are just as fragile as those flowers of the field. Listen to the other ways that Scripture communicates this reality to us—

- **Job 14:1–2:** *Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not.*

- **Psalm 49:16–17:** *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.*
- **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.*

In response to these passages, one commentator spoke of the helpful metaphor of a mayfly. He said *"A mayfly has its lifetime in one day. What obviously folly if it were to spend that entire day weighing itself down with supposed "treasures" which must be dropped at sundown when it is no more. Likewise, how foolish for us mortal flowers of the field to glory in our riches, especially when there is an eternity beyond."*

So then, part of the humiliation of the rich is that they aren't actually any better off than the poor and lowly in the end. James reminds them—and by extension us—that they are weak and can not outrun death. But there is more to this idea of humiliation, and to understand it more completely, we'll need to go another layer deeper.

Back in verse 9, I mentioned that part of the lowly brother's exaltation is that he is at a spiritual advantage because he is forced to humbly recognize his dependence on God. In much the same way, James is calling the rich to recognize that, whether they realize it or, they are equally as dependent as the lowly. Wealth can so easily turn our eyes away from Christ and onto this world. It can cause us to be prone to pride and self-sufficiency and to trust in our riches instead of trusting in Jesus. It leads us to be the kind of double-minded people who Jesus spoke about in Matthew 6:24 when 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."* Much later, in the book of Revelation, Jesus had these words to say to the church in Laodicea—*"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."* In 1 Timothy 6, Paul would

say, *“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”*

In all of the reading I did to prepare for this sermon, one commentator’s pointed question stood out to me more than anything else, because it caused me to really stop and evaluate my own heart. He said, *“How many of us have fallen so in love with this world that, if we knew we were to die tonight, we would experience genuine sorrow because of missed opportunities for various earthly pleasures? Unless we recognize the utter transience of this life and the potential suddenness of its end, we risk tacitly worshipping the world.”*

Jesus himself taught that it is impossible for anyone who trusts in riches to enter into the kingdom. And what is the way into that kingdom? As I mentioned before, that way is through helpless dependence. If you are in Christ this morning, that means God opened your eyes to the reality that we are all naked, humble beggars before God. Rich or poor, we all bow at the feet of Christ to request mercy and forgiveness for our sins. The law of God crushes each one of us underneath the weight of God’s perfect, holy standard that we have all individually failed to keep and leaves us under eternal judgement and entirely in need of a righteousness outside of our own. None of us could ever come close to earning God’s favour through obedience to the law, and so we come to him humbly, receiving the perfect obedience of Jesus and the reward he earned on our behalf. The rich believer in Jesus knows that he is no greater than his poor and lowly brother. He knows that he is a sinner saved by grace alone. He knows that the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

To boast in our humiliation means to not put our trust in our wealth and our riches, but instead to keep our eyes fixed firmly on Christ. It means not allowing the privileges of wealth to lead us into a double-mindedness that loves the world and the pleasures it offers. In 1 Timothy 6:16–19, Paul says, *“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to*

set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” If we are wealthy—which most of us are by any objective standard—then our significance isn’t found in our wealth, no matter how much the world would try to tell us otherwise. Just like the lowly brother can not allow the world’s negative evaluation of him to define his significance, so the rich can not allow the world’s positive evaluation of them to do exactly the same thing.

Conclusion

In this way, then, the exaltation of the lowly and the humiliation of the rich are actually one and the same. The poor, lowly, despised brother can boast that he is a child of God, that he knows the Lord, and that he awaits an eternal inheritance given to him as a free gift of grace from the Saviour who loved him and gave himself for him. In the same way, the rich brother can also boast in the knowledge that his wealth and riches do nothing to ward off the inevitable destruction of death, but that he, humbled by the same law and given the same free gift of grace in Christ, has received the mercy of God as one who is just as much a beggar as anyone else.

And so, today, as we face lowliness in the eyes of the world, we can boast in our exaltation, knowing the glorious future that God has in store for us as his adopted children. At the same time, as we experience remarkable wealth, we aim not to place our trust in that wealth but instead realize that we are equally in need of grace regardless of how much money, comfort, or societal privilege we may have. We seek to cultivate the poverty of spirit that we all experienced when we first came to Christ. We seek to endure in the face of trials as single-minded people, trusting in God to work each and every trial for our eternal good, and we seek to keep ourselves from the love of money, which is a root of all kinds of evils.

In all these things, we realize that our significance can not be found in the eyes of the world. The lowly brother is insignificant in the eyes of the world, but he finds his significance in Christ. The rich may be told by the world that they are significant and valuable, but that is a false significance that will not stand the test of time. The rich recognize that the world's attempts to bestow significance upon them because of their wealth are empty and hollow, but that their significance is also found in Jesus.

If we want to understand our own significance rightly, we must look beyond the world's evaluations and look to God's evaluations. We must realize that our spiritual identity is the true ground of our significance—not our social status or the dollars in our bank account. The world around us constantly presses its own standard of measurement upon us each and every day, but the book of James is for non-conformists, for those who recognize that true life, value, and significance, are only found in Jesus. And so let us turn our eyes away from the evaluations of this world and toward Christ. Let us not boast in our riches or despair in our lack of riches, but let us instead boast in the Lord who saves us, sustains us, and keeps us to the very end by his free gift of amazing grace. Let's pray.