

Faithful Boasting

James 1:9-11

Introduction

God frequently uses the foolish things of this world to shame the worldly wise. He often uses the humble things to accomplish His purposes. Think of stammering Moses, Rahab the prostitute, Gideon's 300, young David, a remnant preserved in Babylon, a young and seemingly disreputable Mary, and of course the Son of God lying as a helpless infant in a stinking feed trough. God regularly works this way so that we can clearly see that He is the One at work in and through His people. We ourselves have nothing to boast in. And this is where God surprises us yet again. Once we think we have got it figured out ("okay, right, no boasting"), we are told explicitly to glory and boast. The role of a Christian is not simply to give glory to God by passively not boasting. Rather, Christians are to rejoice and glory and boast in the Lord and in the privilege of being called sons of God.

The Poor Brother and The Rich

James says the lowly ("poor," "humble") brother should glory ("boast") in his exaltation. There are several reasons for this. First, there is no partiality with God (Rom. 2:11, 1 Pet. 1:17), and so the poor are at no disadvantage in receiving His favor. When God grants grace, there is great hope in the glories to come and a contentment that overcomes the meanest of circumstances. Second, James is writing to Christians who are likely undergoing persecution. While to the world, this seems like humiliation, for the Christian, trials for righteousness' sake are a blessing and to be counted as joy (1:2, Matt. 5:11-12). Trials for a Christian are a promotion, graduating to the next stage.

There are two primary ways the second part of the passage has been understood. In one view, "the rich" refers especially to those who are not only wealthy but also powerful, those who "oppress you and drag you into courts" (2:6). In this view, James is identifying the rich as an unbeliever, in contrast to the lowly brother. Thus, the boasting here would be meant ironically. In the end, before God, after everything has withered away, the oppressor will boast in the only things he can—his humiliation.

In the other view, "the rich" refers to believers. This makes sense given the ellipsis of "brother" between the two verses. In this view, the rich can boast in his humiliation and really must so as to avoid compromising under the pressure of the world. While it is no sin for a Christian to be wealthy (e.g., 1 Tim. 6:17), wealth brings with it a particular temptation to rely on and grasp after worldly wealth rather than the grace of God. And so this brother needs the reminder to boast in his humiliation rather than in his earthly glory.

Faithful Boasting Follows Thankfulness

Human nature lurches back and forth between finding moral fault in wealth or in poverty. At certain times and in certain cultures, one is evil and the other righteous, and then vice versa. But Scripture makes clear that both bring temptations: "Give me neither poverty nor riches... Lest I be full and deny You...Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8-9). Similarly, both come from the Lord: "The Lord makes poor and makes rich" (1 Sam. 2:7). "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the

Lord” (Job 1:21). Rather than wealth or poverty being the root of man’s problems, as so many would have us believe, the problems lie in the thanklessness of sinful hearts (Deut. 6:10-12, Rom. 1:21). Scripture teaches us over and over not to trust in the material things we enjoy, nor to grasp for them, but in the God who gives the material things to be enjoyed or keeps them back. And the things He delights to give are not to be despised as unclean, but to be received with thanksgiving. Thankful hearts are hearts that can then boast in the Lord in all circumstances. Put another way, thankful hearts can count it all joy.

Boasting as Protection

It is good to see this passage in light of the earlier warning about the double-minded man (1:7). When a poor Christian undergoes trials and persecution, he would be tempted to allow the material troubles to lure him away from Christ. Trusting in God in the face of trials does bring a promise that God will supply our lack (1:4) though often not in the way we might plan. God exalts by granting saving grace and then also by bringing the believer to maturity through trials. The lowly needs to be reminded to boast in this and not to despair when trials come. When a rich Christian undergoes trials and persecution, he too would be tempted to compromise with Christ for the sake of his earthly treasures. He needs to be reminded of the saving grace that was given him entirely apart from his worldly accomplishments. For a wealthy person, grace is humbling. And if the wealthy can boast in that humiliation, then any threat to his wealth or standing is no bother to him, since he knows it and he himself will fade away like grass before the heat of the sun. His consolation is not in his riches (Luke 6:24). When the poor are under fire and feel they have no recourse, they must remember and trust in God’s grace. When the rich are under fire and might be tempted to cling to an earthly safety net, they must remember and cling instead to God’s grace. For both the rich and the poor, boasting in the grace of God is their God-given shield against serving two masters. In fact, glorying in the grace of God is one of the greatest defenses for Christians against all manner of sin. And it is the only thing worth boasting in: “Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might, Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I *am* the Lord” (Jer. 9:23-24).

Conclusion

Faithful boasting is grounded on a knowledge of God’s grace. How do we learn to boast rightly like James exhorts? By remembering to ask of God for the wisdom to boast in His grace in the face of our trials (1:5). Poor and rich alike must boast in God’s grace and in nothing else. Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to thread its way through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. While we are to rejoice in the blessings God has given us, in the main, we should remember that since we are a wealthy people, our temptation will be to trust in those things, and that is a barrier to entering the kingdom of God. We might ask with the disciples, then, “Who then can be saved?” (Matt. 19:23-26). Jesus answered them that this really was impossible for men. But with God, all things are possible. In other words, salvation for the rich is totally dependent on God’s grace. And since there is no partiality with God, salvation for the poor is totally dependent on God’s grace. Who then can be saved? None, but for the grace of God.