

An Irishman's Flask

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Could you turn with me to James chapter 1 and verses 9 through 11. James 1, 9 through 11.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But 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. In the same way the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. The story is told of a group of laborers or workers gathered round their lunch. One's English, one's Scottish and one's Irish.

I know there's no Irish people here. You're all from Ulster so that's okay. The Scotsman asks the Englishman, What are you having? To which the Englishman replies, A ploughman's lunch with cheese, pickles and bread.

[1 : 18] The Irishman asks the Scotsman, What are you having? To which the Scotsman replies, The leftovers of last night's Stovies.

The Englishman then asks the Irishman, What are you having? I'm not even going to try. The Irishman replies, Ice cream and coffee.

On the way home last night, I stopped by Asda and bought a flask. This morning I filled it with ice cream and coffee because the instructions to the flask said, It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold.

It's only one or two that got that. It's not only an Irishman's flask which is filled with unfortunate contrasts, but we as Christians, and especially as Christians within the community of the church. The early church was a very mixed up place, far more than we think. There were all kinds of divisions, one of which was between the rich and the poor.

[2 : 27] Remember, James is writing to Jewish Christian believers, many of whom have become poor on account of their faith in Jesus.

How then are poor Christians to relate to rich Christians? How is that contrast between poverty and wealth to be equalized so that in the church of Jesus Christ, the poor and the rich can live as one family?

There are in these verses, James 1 verses 9 through 11, three contrasts. Humility versus wealth, exaltation versus loneliness, and beauty versus ruin.

Such an equalization, such wisdom, as we looked at last Sunday evening, requires a change of heart and attitude in both the poor and the rich.

A change which to use the theme of the book of James is faith at work. Such faith leads to a church in which wisdom and maturity reign, an Irishman's flask.

[3 : 51] And by the way, I know there are at least two Irish passport holders in the church this evening because I signed their passport. First of all then, humility versus wealth.

Humility versus wealth. Verse 9 begins, the brother in humble circumstances. Or more literally, the brother of humility. And that brother is being contrasted with the rich man in verse 10.

So here we have our first contrast, humility versus wealth. James isn't saying that rich people aren't humble, nor is he saying that humble people can't be rich.

He is simply contrasting the humble with the rich. And this makes difficult reading for us as Christians in the West because without exception, we are all rich.

We're all wealthy. What we need to understand is that the book of James, along with the Gospel of Matthew, are the two most Jewish books in the New Testament.

[4 : 54] They are filled with Semitic wisdom and heavily influenced by the Old Testament. And in particular, these verses are referring to the thought world of the Psalms.

The humble poor are those the Lord rescues. For example, in Psalm 35, verse 10, the Psalmist asks, Who is like you, Lord?

You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them. Now, there were fantastically rich believers in the Old Testament, but the vast majority of them were dirt poor.

And as you look through the teaching of the prophets, especially, you learn that they were often poor because the rich had oppressed them, stolen from them, and were persecuting them.

A couple of years ago, we went through the book of Amos together in the prayer meeting. And time and time again, in Amos, the Lord condemns the way in which the rich in Israel were denying justice to the poor and placing a tax burden upon them they could not hope to pay.

[6 : 16] Brother was oppressing brother in a vicious cycle of economic tax and debt. And that, more than just about anything else, brought on Israel the judgment and condemnation of God.

Yes, there were very rich believers in the Old Testament like Abraham and Solomon, but the vast, vast majority were poor, one reason of which was heavy-handed economic persecution ranged against them by the rich.

So let's come back to this, to James chapter 1, verse 9, and this contrast between the brother in humble circumstances in verse 9 and the rich man in verse 10. Remember from James 1, 1, we learn that James is writing to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.

They are Jewish Christians who have fled from Jerusalem. They are under persecution. They had to leave everything behind them in Jerusalem. their homes, their employment, and their possessions.

Now they are left with nothing. They are refugees living outside the geographical bounds of Israel in places like Antioch.

[7 : 33] But even here, there are ethnic Jews who perhaps aren't Christians, but who are rich and are making life hard for these poor Christians.

And then in verse 2, we learned that these Christians were facing trials of many kinds, the major one of which we believe was their economic poverty. They were dirt poor.

And in the ancient world, a place with no security system or legislation governing a minimum wage, there was no way to get out of poverty other than to sell yourself to be a slave.

And so, for those to whom James was writing, it had all happened because of their faith in Christ. They'd lost everything because of Jesus.

And the rich had all the power of Roman and Jewish law behind them, but had taken everything these poor Jewish Christians had away.

[8 : 40] Now, there are strong debates among the commentators as to whether these rich people referred to in verses 10 and 11 are Christians. I'm falling down on the side of saying that they are Christians.

And these rich Christians, these rich Jewish Christians, are in the same churches as these poor Jewish Christians.

Perhaps some of these rich Jewish Christians had stayed rich because they weren't as open about their faith in Jesus as others had been. Or perhaps it was actually because they had been complicit in the oppression of others.

We don't know for sure, but what we do know is that James is contrasting them with the poor. The brother in humble circumstances, the Christian who is poor on account of his faith in Jesus, the rich. It's not a flattering comparison. But that's the way it is in the church. That's the way it's always been in the church. That's the way it always will be in the church.

[9 : 51] It's an Irishman's flask filled with contrasts who must live together in harmony and oneness in Christ Jesus. It takes faith at work for those who have been made poor on account of the rich to call the rich in their churches brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christ. The thing is that from the rest of the book of James as we'll see, it would seem that the rich people in the church, though they are Christians, have not stopped thinking rich.

they tell the poor what to do in society outside the church. And they think they can still tell the poor within the church what to do.

They want to be treated as special in the church. As worthy of more respect than anyone else in the church. In the world, money talks.

For the rich in the church in James' day, they still thought money talks. But James' first concern was not for them, but for the poor.

[11:11] Those impoverished Jewish Christians who were struggling to make ends meet because they were unwilling to renounce their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. And it's really hard for them, can't you see, to call the rich in their churches brothers and sisters.

But that's precisely what they must do. They must treat them as brothers not because of their wealth, but because of their common faith in Jesus.

You see, the early church was a far more mixed up place than we give it credit for. Now, perhaps the same economic inequalities do not necessarily apply in our own church system in Scotland and definitely not in Glasgow City Free Church.

There are those of us who are more affluent than others, but the same economic pressures simply do not apply. However, there may be different factors which lead to inequality to different kinds of wealth.

There may be personal charisma. Some of us have it in bucket loads. Others, in teaspoonfuls.

There may be physical health.

[12:29] Some of us are on our prime. Others of us have struggled with poor health our whole life through. There may be superiority of gift.

Some of us may be uber gifted. And others of us think we don't have many gifts at all. There may be career inequality with some who because of their professional status lord it over those who have none.

I'm not conscious of any of these things existing in Glasgow City Free Church, by the way. But they and other forms of equality make our church no different from any other church.

An Irishman's flask. And maybe it's hard for those of us who aren't wealthy, whatever that term means, either in giftedness, in personality, in career, in popularity, whatever, to live in harmony with those who are.

But that's the nature of faith at work. That together we must live as one family for the glory of God. And that's very much tougher than we think.

[13:44] It is a real challenge to call Captain America brother. But we desperately need the grace of Christ to do so.

humility versus wealth. Secondly, exaltation versus lowliness.

You understand I couldn't use the word highness here. Exaltation. There are many psychological, social, and economic undertones running through these verses.

So I'm having to be fairly selective. Yes, in the first point we understood the contrast between the rich and the poor in terms of the sociology of the church.

The church must be able to incorporate both if it is to be the genuine, authentic church of Jesus Christ in which God's wisdom reigns. However, in the second point we're trying to understand the psychology of rich and poor in the church.

[14:53] How rich sisters are to relate to poor brothers and poor sisters are to relate to rich brothers. So James begins, the brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

So brother, he says, you're poor because you have been persecuted for your faith in Jesus Christ. you've lost everything because you dared to become a disciple of Christ and you spoke of how in the cross of Christ God's salvation has taken a hold of you and made you into a new person.

You're poor and the house which once belonged to you in Jerusalem now belongs to a rich person who swallowed it up as part of his property portfolio at your expense.

Brother, you might be poor but don't think poor because the spiritual reality of your position, James says, isn't one of lowness but one of highness.

you may be economically empty but you are elevated beyond what a rich man's money can ever earn for him. You are the son of God.

[16:11] You are the daughter of God. You are a member of the royal family of God and Jesus Christ as your elder brother. All the rich man has to look upon are his riches, his golden coins but you have the infinite riches of heaven at your disposal and no amount of gold or silver can buy that.

Your position in the eyes of God isn't one of lowness but of highness. You may be wearing the clothes of a commoner but you are rich beyond your wildest imaginings and certainly beyond what this world can offer you.

Your rags you see brother hide the riches. Your rags hide the riches. So why think poor? Why think of yourself as a second class citizen compared to those whose riches hide their rags. Boast not in your poverty as some do.

Boast not in what you once were as some do. Boast of how the mercy of Christ has lifted you beyond any earthly calculation of wealth and through how his blood shed on the cross for you. [17 : 26] You are richer than a king. James continues that the one who is rich should take pride in his low position.

So sister you are rich because God has blessed you in business and because while some put their heads above the parapet to declare their faith in Jesus you kept quiet. You haven't lost anything at all. And even if you have been as faithful as you know how to be it has cost you absolutely nothing.

but think dear sister what do your earthly riches compare to the great spiritual riches which are yours in Christ Jesus.

Would you willingly give all your earthly riches up just so that you could know Christ better and walk with him more closely. And more pointedly dear sister were you saved because of your wealth or despite your wealth.

[18 : 46] If you remember you came as a sinner to Jesus declaring that you were empty naked blind and helpless he did not accept you because of who you were in spite of who you were.

You can't put your trust in your bank balance and at the same time in the Lord Jesus Christ. But when you chose to be a Christian you chose the latter.

Dear sister you might be wearing the clothes of a king. If you are a Christian in whom the spirit of God is working you are a commoner like the rest of us.

So why think rich? Why think of yourself as a first class citizen compared to those whose rags hide their riches? God is not impressed with your wealth, your charisma, your giftedness, your power, your status in society, your intelligence, your popularity.

What impresses him is the sacrifice of Christ on your behalf and the grace he showers upon you in him. Without that grace you are poorer than an insect.

[20 : 12] See what James is doing here? It is utterly ingenious. He is calling upon us to put our faith into practice to make faith work by adjusting our attitudes both to ourselves and to others.

If we are poor we are fabulously rich in Christ Jesus. our rags hide our riches. We if we are rich are desperately poor without Christ Jesus.

Our riches hide our rags. Why then do the rich in this world's eyes try to lord it over the poor and in the church of God of all places?

Why do rich people expect to be given the seat of honour at conferences and be treated as royalty by those who covet their money? And why do poor people allow themselves to be duped into treating the rich with over respect?

Slobbering over them to be noticed to win their favour? James says make your faith work. to use the previous verses this is the essence of wisdom to know that true wealth comes from God and cannot be seen by other people that in Christ is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

[21 : 42] Never judge a book by its cover. Under the rags of so many Christians I know are spiritual riches and under the riches of so many other Christians I know are rags and I know whose company I prefer to keep.

Exaltation versus loneliness. And then the third contrast briefly is beauty versus ruin.

Beauty versus ruin. There are in my home village in the north two ways in which funerals are conducted.

One involves a hearse the other involves a trolley. Most local people use the trolley. So after the service of the church the coffin is loaded onto the trolley and is rolled or carried by hand the mile or so to the graveyard.

Both Alan and myself have descendants who are on that trolley. And everyone takes their turn of pulling or carrying the trolley.

[23 : 02] As it passes through the village all the shops close all the heads bow and the traffic stops. The whole world grinds to a halt as the trolley passes through the village and everyone pays their respects.

It doesn't matter whether that person in the coffin is the Duke of Sutherland himself or whether he is the most notorious drunk in the village, whether he's the village doctor or the poor soul who was the

village idiot because for those few minutes of time the whole village stops as the trolley passes by. And every couple of minutes the undertaker will shout change and those pushing or lifting the trolley will move away and new people will take their place. And as I think back over all the years of the trolley I remember what my father used to say to me about my home village.

It's not a very nice place to live but it's a great place to die. And I remember the local doctor sorry I'm being really cheerful tonight aren't I?

I remember the local doctor he was a very impressive man who everyone loved. He had a loving wife and two wonderful children who I was in school with.

[24 : 28] He had recently retired but while playing golf with a group including my father he dropped dead of a heart attack on the 14th green. He got the trolley treatment.

Then I think of a local man who was a notorious drunkard and he abused and hit his wife to the point that she left him. Nobody really trusted this man but though he was a local boy they were good to him.

That man was all by himself one night when he drunk himself to death and he too got the trolley treatment. For those few minutes it did not matter or quit what you had been doing when you died. Sealing a deal to turn the gardens into a tourist paradise or raising a cheap blended whiskey to your mouth.

For those few minutes the whole world stopped as the trolley carrying your earthly remains was wheeled or carried to the village and everyone paid their respects.

[25 : 37] Oh that rich man in the church whose business was so very important to him that rich man whose decisions affected hundreds and who thought he deserved to be treated as special in the church.

He was signing off on multi million pound deals. Suddenly he faded away like a flower of the grass which is beautiful for a moment then the sun rises and withers its bloom.

I love the way in which the NIV translates the end of verse 11. The rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. He'll get the trolley treatment just as surely as the poor man does.

For a moment there is beauty but in the long term for the rich man there is only ruin. And why is that? Because he has spent his entire life working for that which makes him rich here and now. He valued the riches of this world as of higher value than the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus. There is ruin for the man who thinks this way.

[26 : 48] Whether he is rich or whether he is poor. And the ruin of which James speaks in these verses is eternal as opposed to the beauty of which he speaks which is so temporal and quickly fades away.

Some people twist the text of scripture to say money is the root of all evil. It is not. It is the love of money which is the root of all evil.

And here in James chapter 1 verses 9 through 11 James is saying that if we want to preserve the integrity of the Irishman's flask in that both poor and rich Christians worship and fellowship with each other in the same church in which they call each other brother and sister, then money, status, wealth, giftedness, charisma, popularity, career, they matter, not a whit.

What does it mean when a Christian fixes their eyes on their poverty before God but their riches in Christ Jesus.

Well as we close let me apply this text in a couple of ways. First of all let's stop judging one another using crooked measures. Let's stop judging one another using crooked measures.

[28 : 15] we must not, we dare not build up pecking orders of importance based on any measure of worldly wealth whether that wealth be status, riches, health, power, charisma, career, giftedness.

James is going to go deeper into this as we go through his letters. So let's stop slobbering over the rich. It is a curious fact that the vast majority of our church planting efforts seem to be concentrated in relatively affluent areas.

Does this perhaps constitute a judging of one another by crooked measures? Likewise the viability of a church in our denomination is often judged purely by its financial sustainability.

ability. Is that not using a crooked measure to judge others? And then secondly, let's start promoting true vital Christian unity among us.

Let's start promoting true vital Christian unity between us. True Christian unity begins when everyone in the fellowship of the Irishman's flask we call the church knows and understands their

station.

[29 : 43] It begins when the poor think rich and the rich think poor when it's what's on the inside that counts not the outside. we came as sinners to Jesus altogether empty handed and our salvation is entirely of his grace.

There is no room for boasting here. But having come to Jesus we have become the sons and daughters of the living God, his royal family here on earth and it's all entirely of his grace. So what then is my station in the church? I am a sinner saved from ruin. by the grace of Christ. I won't get the trolley treatment because my saviour took it in my place.

That's the path to true Christian unity. When what matters isn't what a woman's got or does not have in her pockets but when she's filled with the grace of Christ.

The church is an Irishman's flask. It is filled with contrast and polar opposites. But it's the grace of Christ and our common salvation in him which makes us one. So in whatever form your poverty manifests itself in pounds, personality or power, think rich.

[31 : 05] You have been blessed in the heavenly places with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. And in whatever form your wealth manifests itself in pounds, personality or power, think poor.

It is only by grace you have been saved through faith. Boast not in who you are or what you have but by grace what Jesus is doing in you and for you.

Then perhaps the Irishman's flask we call the church won't be such an object of scorn to our society as much as something that attracts our family, our friends and our neighbors to Jesus.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you that James doesn't pull his punches. He's not slobbering over those who are rich in order to get their money to support his ministry in Jerusalem.

He's just telling it the way it is. He's being faithful. And Father, so often we've slobbered over rich people because the truth be told we want their money for something. Lord, forgive us, we pray.

[32 : 19] Forgive us for thinking of them in those terms, for belittling them and thinking of them only in terms of a bank balance as opposed to a soul in desperate need of salvation in Christ Jesus.

Forgive us for belittling those who seem to have little to contribute. Forgive us, Lord, we pray, and help us to put our faith to work in the way we view both ourselves and others in this church.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.