

“Until the Coming of the Lord”

Texts: James 5:1-12; Deuteronomy 11:8-17

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

Throughout the decade or so after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, Jewish Christians who lived in Palestine and Syria faced very difficult circumstances. In the Palestine of James’ day (the mid-forties of the first century) the act of confessing that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah would have been a costly one. Many Jews living in Jerusalem became Christians. But many more sided with the Sanhedrin (the Jewish religious leadership) and saw in Jesus a messianic pretender who diverted the nation’s attention away from the pressing issue of the day—overthrowing Rome’s occupation of their homeland. James is writing to Christians who have paid a great price to profess their faith in Jesus. Many of his readers had been driven out of the Jerusalem area into the surrounding countryside. In the opening verse of this letter, James addressed them as “the Dispersion.” As religious refugees, these people were often at the mercy of wealthy landowners, who were exploiting them for personal gain. It was a difficult time and place to be a Christian. James writes both to offer them words of encouragement and to exhort them not to mere hearers of the word. James reminds his audience that there is a day of judgment yet to come when all of these wrongs will be made right. But until that day comes, God’s people must be patient.

We return to our series on the Epistle of James. We are quickly coming to the end of this series as we make our way into the fifth and closing chapter. We now take up the first half of chapter five (verses 1-12), while next time, Lord willing, we’ll take up the final section of this letter (verses 13-20).

As we have seen throughout our study of James, James attributes the salvation of his hearers/readers to the grace of God, who has brought them forth (to new life) through the preached word. James has told of how God implanted that word within them, and how these same Christians hold fast to their faith in Jesus, “the Lord of glory.” James has told us how the law of God exposes us to be law-breakers, but then goes on to describe how for a Christian, the law of God is a law of liberty. Having been justified by the merits of Christ, the law now serves as our guide for living the Christian life and doing good works.

James has told us that the faith which justifies us, is a faith which manifests itself in good works. True religion can be seen through very specific actions—the taming of our tongues, the care of widows and orphans, avoiding worldliness (thinking and acting like a pagan), and through treating rich and poor with equal respect. James has warned us about our sinful passions at war within us. He has told us how these sinful passions produce jealousy and quarreling, how these passions lead us to seek our own way so as to exalt ourselves over others. James has warned us that because our lives are short, we should not boast about tomorrow. He has comforted us with the reminder that if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us, and that if we seek grace, God is willing to give us more grace. James has told us to seek wisdom from above, because if we do so, we will experience a harvest of righteousness. Indeed, if we humble ourselves before God, God will exalt us. James’ emphasis upon humility continues into chapter 5.

As we turn to our text (James 5:1-12), we find yet another warning to the rich, only this time James’ words are much sharper than his previous warnings. But these warnings are not directed to wealthy Christians within these churches. A good case can be made that James is speaking to those wealthy landowners (outside the church) persecuting the believers to whom James is writing.

Before we go through the passage itself, it is important to recall that this section of James is very closely linked to James 4:13-17, our text for last time. Recall that James was making the point that life is short—we are but a vapor, we are here today and then gone tomorrow. Those who make their daily plans without submitting those plans unto the Lord (“if the Lord wills”) are actually boasting in themselves. As James sees it, this boasting is evil because such behavior arrogantly assumes that creatures determine their own futures, when that determination belongs to our Creator, not to us. Throughout chapter 5, James’ point is that the rich—those who trust their wealth so much that they are lulled into thinking that they, not God, are in control of their own destinies—need to give serious reconsideration to this sinful attitude. Their wealth will fail them on the day of judgment when all things are brought into the open. James is reminding his hearers that it is God who controls their futures, not them.

There has been much discussion about the identity of the “rich” in this particular section of James. As we will see in verse 4, there can be little doubt that James is referring to wealthy landowners who dominated the rural areas to the northeast and northwest of Jerusalem. I will argue that this is a different group of wealthy folk than those mentioned back in chapter 2, where James described a serious problem which had arisen within the churches (i.e., the assembly). The situation which James describes there is that the rich were honored and welcomed in the assembly, while the poor were often treated with disrespect. James reminds his audience that while God may call some to be poor, he has also made them rich in faith. Discrimination in the church based upon wealth or appearance is a sin. Those who act deferentially to the rich—presumably to receive some kind of favor from them—need to consider that it was the rich who were able to manipulate the system to their own advantage. The rich were taking the poor to court, thereby causing God’s name to be dishonored before the Gentiles.

There is no question then that in James chapter 2, James is speaking directly to those Christians who were favoring the wealthy members of these churches (land owners and merchants), while at the same time were dishonoring the poor through shabby treatment. But in James chapter five, the evidence clearly shows that James is speaking of a different group of individuals. For one thing, it is rather striking that in chapter five James speaks of these rich merchants in exactly the same manner as those Old Testament prophets who were warning rich, unbelieving Gentiles of a final judgment yet to come.¹ This warning is far different in spirit and in tone than James’ earlier exhortation about not favoring the rich at the expense of the poor *within* the Christian assembly.

In fact, James’ language in chapter five is quite typical of the wide-spread Old Testament condemnation of wealthy landowners who exploit the poor who work their land, desperately trying to eke out a living. In contemporary theological debate, the sin associated with the wealthy exploiting the poor is picked-up by advocates of so-called “liberation theology,” who argue that the accumulation of wealth is in and of itself sinful, and that in a just society (i.e. a Marxist society) personal wealth should be redistributed so that class distinctions are equalized. Liberation theologians often cite from James chapter five in attempting to make their case. But the redistribution of wealth is hardly James’ point.

It is vital that we understand that what is condemned in the Old Testament is not wealth *per se*, but the misuse of wealth, especially in those instances when those who owned the land gained that wealth through exploiting the poor who worked the land. This is James’ point here. There was no “middle class” in first century Palestine. In addition to those migrant workers who worked the land which someone else owned, there were tradesmen (with particular skills), unskilled laborers (carpenters,

¹ Moo, The Letter of James, 210.

masons, herders, etc., who went wherever work could be found), a few government bureaucrats, and even fewer clerics. A typical wealthy land-owner hired tenant farmers who lived on their estate, worked the land, and who were allowed to keep a portion of their labor for themselves. Such a person was at the complete mercy of the landowner, not only for a place to live, but for the amount of food they were allowed to keep—the excess of which was sold or traded for other necessities. A greedy landowner could make life absolutely unbearable for their tenant farmers, which, apparently was the case here.

Therefore, it is quite likely that James is referring to the “rich” outside the church, who are cruelly exploiting the poor, many of whom, are members of the churches to whom James is writing. It may even be the case that the particular rich land-owners exploiting the poor, were doing so because the poor were Jewish Christians who have been forced out of the Jerusalem area into the countryside because it was increasingly difficult to survive in the cities. Christian refugees would have been forced into migrant farming, or day labor, when many of them had been tradesman doing something else for a living prior to their conversion to Christianity. No doubt that James is writing to warn these wealthy landowners of a coming judgment, while at the same time he is offering a strong word of encouragement to these poor, persecuted Christians, who need to be reminded that their defender is none other than God himself.

The fifth chapter of James opens with a solemn word of warning to these wealthy landowners who were creating such hardship for God’s people. Sounding like an Old Testament prophet, James writes “*come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*” The words “weep” and “wail” are typically used throughout the Old Testament to describe the sounds the unbeliever will make on the day of judgment. This is not a reference to some sort of temporal judgment—the loss of wealth or property—as becomes clear when James’ words are understood against their Old Testament background. Take, for example, a passage such as Isaiah 13:6. “*Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!*”

Echoing a number of Israel’s prophets as well as the specific warning of covenant curse to the wealthy who exploit the poor found throughout the Mosaic law, there can be little doubt that James is speaking of the final day of judgment yet to come, that day when no one’s wealth—no matter how great—can save them.² As is his custom, James may also be echoing the words of woe spoken by Jesus in Luke 6:24-25. “*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.*”

James’ point is clear—those wealthy land-owners who were oppressing the poor, should themselves be terrified of the coming the day of judgment. Those who have not known misery in this life—yet who cause such great misery on the part of the poor—are going to encounter a far greater form of misery than they can ever imagine. Those who exploit the poor will indeed face the full wrath of God on the day of judgment. Here again, we see how Christianity completely overturns the *status quo* of human sinfulness. Those believers who may be poor by human estimation, are exceedingly rich in the kingdom of God. But those who have fame, wealth, and power, in this life, and who reject Christ will have nothing in the next.

The rich trust in their riches. They often see themselves as immune to suffering. Yet they see no problem with exploiting the poor so as to maintain their own wealth. And so in verses 2-3, James reminds them of the folly of this attitude. Says James, “*your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and*

² Moo, The Epistle of James, 210.

will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.” Despite the Marxist ideology of the liberation theologians, James is not condemning wealth itself, but the folly of trusting in that wealth which has been gained by exploiting others. As Calvin so wisely puts it, “God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for moths; but on the contrary, he has designed them as aids and helps to human life.”³

The problem is not with wealth itself. Wealth is a gift from God. The problem James is addressing is that sinful men and women often allow wealth and riches to become the be all and end all of life. What such people forget is that riches will not last. Material possessions rot and decay. The finest clothes are eventually consumed by moths. Even precious metals eventually rust and tarnish. James’ warning here echoes the words of Jesus elsewhere. As Jesus himself warns us in Matthew 6:19-21, “*do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*”

Those who trust in their wealth—rather than grace and mercy of God—will have their arrogance and unbelief exposed for all to see on the day of judgment. As Jesus points out, the rich who were exploiting the poor, have allowed their trust and affections to be tied to their possessions, all the while their hearts have wandered far from the purposes and will of God. Therefore, James reminds the wealthy who were persecuting Christians, that even as their clothes are eaten by moths, and even as their precious metals rust away, that very same corrosion which exposes their folly will be used as evidence against them—a warning which certainly implies the idea of a final judgment, when all that they have accumulated is only so much evidence of their sinful arrogance.

In a very loud echo from Ezekiel 7:19, James warns the wealthy that they will be consumed by fire. “*They cast their silver into the streets, and their gold is like an unclean thing. Their silver and gold are not able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord. They cannot satisfy their hunger or fill their stomachs with it. For it was the stumbling block of their iniquity.*” This is the fate of those whose wealth—which is a great blessing from the Lord—blinds them to that which truly lasts, and which is of infinite value—the favor of God in Christ. Instead of seeing wealth as a blessing, and something which can be used to help others in need, James exposes the sin which provokes God’s judgment. “*You have laid up treasure in the last days.*”

It is important that we not miss the great irony in all of this. The wealthy, those who are being condemned by James, are those people who hoard their possessions precisely because they trust in those possessions instead of trusting in the purposes of God. But the wealth they hoard will eventually rot away and corrode. Instead of storing up wealth, they are actually storing up God’s wrath, because a day of final judgment is coming. But this is the very thing the wealthy cannot see, because they trust in their wealth to save them from whatever may come to pass. As James will indicate later on in the passage, he clearly believes that he is living in the last days—that the Lord might return at any moment—and in this lies the folly of hoarding personal wealth. Their wealth will be of no value to them whatsoever on the day of judgment, and their wealth (which God has given them) will actually testify against them. James has already warned us that life is short, and that our failure to submit our plans to the will of God is but testimony of our arrogance. So here too James reminds us of the folly of that all too common sentiment expressed in the popular bumper sticker, “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

³ Cited in Moo, The Epistle of James, 214.

In verse 4, James moves from the general attitude of the rich toward the purposes of God, to the specifics of their sins against the poor. *“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”* From this text it is clear that James is indeed addressing the issue of migrant workers and the landowners who have exploited them. Again, James words’ virtually echo the accusations that Israel’s prophets made against those doing the same thing. In Malachi 3:5, we read YHWH’s accusation against Israel. *“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”* It is important to notice that the exploitation of the poor is equated with sins tied to the occult, adultery, and lying.

Furthermore, this kind of treatment of the poor was explicitly condemned in the law of Moses. In Deuteronomy 24:15, YHWH commands his people, *“You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin.”* So here in James 5, the brother of our Lord is warning those who have exploited the poor that cries of the poor have reached YHWH’s ears. The implication is that YHWH knows the plight of his people, and will quickly act on their behalf. This is both a warning to those who owe the poor their just wages, and it is also a word of consolation to the poor, who need to know that their cause is a righteous one, and that God himself is their defender.

In verse 5, James gives us yet another reason why God’s judgment is coming against the rich. *“You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”* James never says that God condemns wealth—God is the giver of wealth. What is condemned is wasteful “self-indulgence,” i.e., the use of wealth for sinful pleasure and comfort, when that same wealth was acquired through exploiting the back-breaking labor of those migrant workers and refugees who were gyped out of their wages. While the wealthy horde their gold and silver, and their fine clothes, they fail to see that they are only adding to the evidence of their guilt.

The biblical metaphor of fattening an animal before it is slaughtered applies to those who foolishly horde their wealth while exploiting the poor. James’ point is that there is going to come a great reversal of fortune. The poor who have nothing in this life will be rewarded with all the riches and treasures of heaven. But the rich who have exploited them will fall under the hand of God’s judgment, and their wealth will be introduced into the heavenly court as evidence of their sin. In fact, James can speak of the actions of the rich against God’s people being as grave as though they had actually slaughtered them. Hence the strong language of verse 6. *“You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”* To withhold wages from the poor—especially in the case of those who are being persecuted and who suffer such economic hardship because of their profession of faith in Christ—is as serious an offense *as if* the wealthy had taken their lives. The righteous who have fled into rural Palestine to escape persecution are helpless against those who now exploit them. But those who exploit God’s people are helpless against God who will indeed come to their defense.

The notion that a day of final judgment is coming now opens the door for James to offers words of encouragement to his readers in verses 7-8. *“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.”* This too is language taken from the Old Testament. In this case James’ words echo Deuteronomy 11:8-17 (our Old Testament lesson). In light of God’s promise of a final judgment, Christians must be

patient for that day and persevere until it comes. Farm laborers know something about patience. They must sow the seed, water the fields, weed, and then cultivate the crops before the harvest finally comes in months later. Although his readers have been exploited and treated unjustly, James does not tell them to revolt, or to take matters in their own hands. No, James instructs God's people to be patient. The final judgment (the harvest) may not come today, or tomorrow, but it will come!

In light of this, James exhorts the suffering faithful, *“do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.”* James has already warned us about the destructive power of our speech. In light of the difficult circumstances facing these struggling Christians—caused by those outside the church—it would be very easy to vent that righteous anger upon their brothers and sisters in Christ (as some in the churches were doing). This would be an ever-present temptation. As it is certain that those exploiting the poor will get theirs in the judgment, so too it would be a tragedy for Christians to allow their frustration to cause them to judge others and then come under judgment themselves. So James now reminds these persecuted people that Jesus, the Judge, is soon to return. The implication of his words is that the Christian should trust in the Lord to right all wrongs, even those going on within the church. We should not judge others because we are not the Judge.

James ends this section with a reminder of that which Israel's own prophets were forced to endure. *“As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”* James' best source of hope for the suffering saint is to point them to the faithfulness of God—how God is always faithful to his people when he calls them to suffer. God is always compassionate and merciful, and this is the reason why those now suffering should be steadfast and not just give up.

In light of this wonderful promise of God's compassion, James exhorts his readers not to speak and act rashly, and to continue to watch our words carefully. *“But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”* The patient person should not swear oaths or take vows. It is enough for their “yes” to be “yes” and their “no” to be “no.” We will return to this exhortation next time when we conclude our series on James when we go through verses 13-20.

In light of this, what can we say by way of application?

James is setting forth an application of the blessing/curse principle found throughout the Scriptures. God will indeed bless his people, and he will curse those who persecute them. James does not condemn wealth, but he does expose the folly of trusting in wealth and the great sin of acquiring wealth through the exploitation of others, in this case, the cruel treatment being given to Christian refugees who were forced to flee into the countryside to avoid being persecuted because of their faith in Christ.

James reminds us that God is defender of the poor, as well as the giver of wealth. He also speaks a powerful word of woe to those who think what they've acquired in this life will do them one bit of good in the next! In this, James echoes the teaching of Jesus, who warned us of the folly of storing up treasure on earth, when we should be seeking that heavenly treasure which is found only in Christ.

Despite the word of woe to the unbelieving rich, the good news for all of us—whether we be rich, poor, middle class—is that in Christ, we are given unspeakable wealth, a wealth that does not rot. The robe of Christ's perfect righteousness cannot be eaten by moths. Nor will the golden streets of heaven ever see

tarnish. We need never fear having the true wealth Jesus gives us taken away from us, because it cannot perish. It is a wealth earned not by the sweat of exploited laborers, but through the bloody sweat of the Son of God, who perfectly obeyed the commandments of God, and who voluntarily suffered the wrath of God, for us and in our place. It is a wealth which justifies us before God and allows us to live in his very presence for ever.

And even though the Judge (our blessed Savior Jesus) is at the door, until the coming of the Lord, let us be patient for the harvest will soon be ready. And while we wait, let us never forget that our blessed Lord is compassionate and merciful, and is even now preparing for us a treasure that we can scarcely imagine!