

Scripture Reading: James 5:1-12 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

<sup>1</sup>Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. <sup>2</sup>Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. <sup>3</sup>Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

<sup>4</sup>Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth [Lord of Hosts]. <sup>5</sup>You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

<sup>6</sup>You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

<sup>7</sup>Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. <sup>8</sup>You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

<sup>9</sup>Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. <sup>10</sup>As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

<sup>12</sup>But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. I have been doing a series of sermons going through the Epistle of James. Last week, we finished chapter 4 and today we have come to the last chapter – chapter 5. Next week, we will be finishing this epistle.

Today's Scripture Reading began with some very severe-sounding words directed toward rich people. It's not a sin to be rich, but the people that James is addressing here have gotten their wealth by taking advantage of other people. The severe words used here are quite striking and I note that in this paragraph, James never calls these people "brethren." Apparently, he does not regard them as fellow believers. Perhaps they are what we call "nominal Christians" – persons who are involved in the Christian community in some way, but have not really been born-again and aren't actually living by Christian standards.

If we look at the previous paragraph at the end of chapter 4, we can see that James makes an appeal to some other business-minded people who are a part of the Christian community but who James seems to regard as having some hope that they can reform their misguided behavior.

Let's read some verses we looked at last week. James 4:13-16 – "<sup>13</sup>Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' <sup>14</sup>Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. <sup>15</sup>Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.' <sup>16</sup>But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil."

These businessmen are not being mindful of the fact that God is sovereign over all of us and that life is fragile and uncertain. James tells these people that they have an arrogant attitude and he exhorts them to acknowledge God in their decision-making. Verse 15 tells them the proper attitude we should have: humility before God and acknowledging that He owns our lives and can redirect our plans if He chooses to do so. James here is showing that he has some hope for these people, and so I think that he regards them as fellow believers, but ones who are living according to the standards of this world and not according to the standards of God's kingdom. He exhorts these misguided Christians to get their attitudes and priorities right.

But his approach to the rich people in the first paragraph of chapter 5 is very different. James is condemning these people from the beginning to the end of that paragraph. He doesn't call them brethren and he doesn't give an exhortation to them like he gave to the people in the previous paragraph, so Bible scholars say it is likely that James doesn't regard these rich people in chapter 5 as fellow Christians.

I have entitled today's sermon "Material Riches vs. Spiritual Riches." In verses 1-6, James has some severe words to people who are only interested in their material wealth. In verses 7-12, he addresses people he calls "brethren" and in those verses we read about a way to spiritual riches.

Let's read James 5:1-2 (and the beginning of verse 3) – "<sup>1</sup>Come now, you rich, weep and wail for your miseries which are coming upon you. <sup>2</sup>Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. <sup>3</sup>Your gold and your silver have rusted ..."

With his manner of discourse, James is taking the tone of the Old Testament prophets. Those words "weep" and "wail" were used by the prophets to depict what happens to the wicked when the day of judgment arrives – for example, Isaiah 13:6 – "Wail, for the day of the Lord is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty." And Jesus Himself echoes this sentiment: Luke 6:24-25 – "<sup>24</sup>But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. <sup>25</sup>Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."

These rich people in James 5 have hoarded gold and silver and other material possessions. And they have purchased fine garments, but James points out that their garments will deteriorate over time. Even their gold and silver are said to be rusted. Actually, pure gold and silver don't rust like other metals do, but James is using the most dramatic language he can. James regards these people as destined for judgment in the end. Let's read verses 3-4 – "<sup>3</sup>Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!" The rust will be a witness against these people in a future time of judgment. The treasure they have stored up will also be a witness against them in the last days. How did they gain this treasure? Verse 4 – "<sup>4</sup>Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth."

This phrase "the Lord of Sabaoth" is an Old Testament phrase meaning "Lord of Hosts" or "Lord of Heaven's Armies." The word "Sabaoth" is a Hebrew word meaning a large force of people – in English, we use the old-fashioned word "hosts" for this, but the idea behind it is an army of people, which, in this context, refers to God's army of angels. And so some modern English translations of this phrase say "the Lord of Heaven's Armies," which you may have heard sometimes in Pastor Bruce's sermons in the book of Joshua, since he is using the New Living Translation for his messages.

Look again at verse 4 here. These rich people have been exploiting their workers, not paying them a fair wage and therefore enriching themselves at the expense of others. These exploited workers have cried out in agony at this injustice, and James tells his readers that the Lord of Heaven's Armies has heard these cries. These cries, too, will be evidence against those selfish rich people at the time of judgment.

Verses 5-6 – "<sup>5</sup>You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. <sup>6</sup>You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you." These people are living luxuriously, but they are like the pig or the calf that is fed very nice food so that they become fattened and will one day face the day of slaughter and be consumed. This life of luxury and wanton pleasure will also be evidence against

these rich people on the day of judgment. The righteous people they are exploiting are often powerless to stop the exploitation. That is the way it has been for so much of human history.

Well, in history there have been numerous instances of exploited peoples rising up in rioting and rebellion. Sometimes, they have some limited success in righting some wrongs, but so often the rebellion is defeated and injustice continues. So, for much of human history, those people suffering injustice just have to endure it.

This brings back to my mind an intense feeling I had back in my early college days. During my teenage years in high school, despite having a good Christian upbringing, I often questioned Christianity for a variety of reasons. Is Christianity true? What about the evidence for evolution? Did humankind evolve by chance or is there actually a God who created us? I had these kinds of questions as I left home for college. I'm grateful for one of the campus Christian ministries there for introducing me to some helpful books that could answer many of my questions. Also, I read through the whole Bible for the first time. I marveled at the storyline of the Bible. I was impressed that this Bible had answers to the key issues of human existence: where we came from (God created us in His image and created this world), why we are in the mess that we are in (Adam and Eve falling into sin and rebellion in the Garden), and what the solution to our problem is (the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our sins and then salvation comes when we place our faith in Christ and trust Him as our Lord and Savior).

But not only did I receive answers to my questions and not only did I find the way of salvation from sin through repentance and faith, but there was another thing that was on my mind intensely during my early college days. As I was learning more about the world around me, I became increasingly distressed at the injustice I saw in society. The kinds of exploitation that we read about in James chapter 5. In the newspaper and in my history books, I was seeing all kinds of injustice and cruelty in the world. It was really disheartening. I often felt despondent. But, here in the Bible, we read that *there will be a day of judgment in the end* for all those people who have sinned against God and sinned against their fellow human beings and who remained in defiance against God and never turned away from their sin and reconciled themselves to God. It was comforting to me to know that despite the injustice I was seeing in the world, one day God will judge all actions.

Let's read about the final Day of Judgment in Revelation 20:11-15. In the book of Revelation, John is given a variety of visions of future events, and he writes this in chapter 20, verses 11-12 – “<sup>11</sup>Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.” Books were opened, and in them are written the deeds of the unrighteous persons, both small and great, who had died without God, and they are judged by the things written in those books, all their misdeeds.

Verses 13-15 – “<sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. <sup>14</sup>Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. <sup>15</sup>And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The people whose names are written in the Book of Life are those persons who had placed their faith in Jesus Christ, repented of their sins, and accepted His gift of salvation. All other persons are judged by the deeds written in the other books – great persons and ordinary persons, all of whom had remained in rebellion against their Creator. The destiny of all such persons is the lake of fire.

However, there is a way to avoid that fate. By trusting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and repenting of your sins and accepting His sacrifice on the cross for your sins, you can escape the destiny that awaits the unrighteous. We Christians aren't perfect, but through faith in Christ who paid the penalty for our sins, you can spend eternity with God instead of joining the fate of the unrighteous.

Returning to James chapter 5, we have here some severe words towards selfish rich people who love their wealth and luxurious life, and who have gained their wealth through exploiting people less powerful than themselves and without regard to God. James condemns such deeds in the strongest terms. This is not the way Christians are to live. As we read about in James chapter 2, the way to salvation is by honest faith in Christ, a faith that will manifest itself in God-honoring behavior. Let us now move on the next paragraph in James 5, where we read about a way to build spiritual riches in our lives as Christians. Please note that James starts using the word "brethren," since he is now addressing his fellow believers.

Last week, I told you of the importance of humility in living out our lives: humility toward God (acknowledging His sovereignty over our lives) and humility toward one another (for example, not criticizing other people unfairly). Another manifestation of a humble approach to life is patience, as we read about here in the next paragraph. Last week, I said that the merchants mentioned in chapter 4 were not acknowledging the fragility of life, and now in this paragraph, we read how we ought to acknowledge the reality of this physical world and the plain fact that it takes time for growth to occur – both physical growth and spiritual growth.

James 5:7-8 – “<sup>7</sup>Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. <sup>8</sup>You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” Be patient. Learn something from the farmer's life: it takes time for God's good earth to produce crops – that's the way God designed this planet that we inhabit. Accept the reality of it. And spiritually, we must also be patient as we grow in grace, strengthening our hearts and correcting our behavior. *It takes time* as you read the Scriptures and experience life in the Christian community and experience the ungodly nature of society outside these walls ... *it takes time* to learn and to grow as Christians.

From my own experience I can tell you that as I live life and sometimes misbehave, certain passages of Scripture come to my mind and I realize that I failed to live up to some Christian principles written there in the Bible. I repent of my misbehavior and I remind myself that I must do better the next time that I face a situation like the one that I failed to respond to properly. That is why I am a strong advocate of consuming large amounts of Scripture – read your Bibles frequently, daily, and read large amounts of it. Then, when the temptations of life come, you may flee the temptation quickly when you recall what Scripture says ... or sometimes if you fall into sin, you can soon recall a Bible verse that relates to that sin, and then you can commit yourself to do better the next time you face a similar situation. This process has happened to me repeatedly through the course of my Christian life, and that is why I advocate that you read and study large portions of Scripture so that you will be equipped with the proper ways to behave as a Christian. AND that you keep in close fellowship with your Christian brothers and sisters, being an active part of the church fellowship. Spiritual growth takes time, and I think it is really important to develop both of these habits: read your Bible, and actively participate in church life.

A key passage I have lived by is Hebrews 10:24-25 – “<sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” It's really important not to forsake attending church ... it's really important to come to church so that you can

encourage your brothers and sisters and so that you yourself can be encouraged in your own spiritual development.

Let's return to James 5:7-8. Be patient. Both physical growth and spiritual growth take time. But we are also supposed to be active during this time. Patience isn't laziness or inactivity. We do what we are supposed to do, and acknowledge that growth takes time. Use that time to strengthen your hearts, read the Scriptures, be involved in the fellowship at church, and be involved in exercising your spiritual gift at church. We are all given different gifts by the Holy Spirit to exercise for the benefit of the whole church community, as 1st Corinthians 12 states and as I have mentioned to you in many of my previous sermons over the years.

It is interesting here that James says in verse 8, "... for the coming of the Lord is near." This is a part of our motivation: that *the coming of the Lord is near*. We should always be ready for the coming of the Lord. We don't know when that will be exactly, but we should live lives in anticipation that He could come at any moment.

Some liberal scholars and many Christians have been puzzled by the statements that Jesus and the apostles made about the Kingdom of God being "near" or that the coming of the Lord is "near." Two thousand years have passed since these statements have been made, so how can the coming of the Lord be "near"? My commentary written by theologian Douglas Moo has some helpful comments here – he says this:

But what is crucial is to understand this "nearness" in the appropriate temporal framework: salvation history. With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But—and here is the crucial point—the length of this age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* [return of Christ] could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.<sup>1</sup>

Let me repeat: *Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the parousia [return of Christ] could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization.*

Let's move on in today's passage. James 5:9 – "Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door." I said a lot about Christians judging other Christians in last week's message. Don't do it. The coming of the Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, is near.

James 5:10-11 – "<sup>10</sup>As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful."

Here is an example of suffering and patience: the Old Testament prophets. They obeyed the Lord and proclaimed the message that God gave them, even though God told several of the prophets ahead of time that many people will refuse to listen. Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, and others.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 224.

And in the New Testament as well. In Acts chapter 9, the Lord Jesus called Paul to be an apostle of Christ, and the Lord had this to say in verses 15 and 16 – “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; <sup>16</sup>for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” The rest of the book of Acts tells the story of Paul’s many triumphs and tribulations, but he remained faithful to his call. At the end of his life, Paul wrote this in 2 Timothy 4:7-8 – “<sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; <sup>8</sup>in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

I pray that each one of us will remain faithful to the task that the Lord gives to each one of us that that we follow the example of the prophets and apostles.

In James 5:11, we are given the example of Job. Many of you know his story, told in the book of Job, the book just before Psalms in your Bible. He is said to be a blameless and upright man. But Satan said to God that Job is faithful just because he enjoys material blessings from God. So, God allows Satan to take away Job’s wealth and then also his health. Job suffers, but in chapter 1, verse 22, we read “Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.” And at the end of chapter 2, verse 10, we read “... In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” Job endured much suffering, but he remained faithful, and at the end of the book we read that the Lord restored his health, his family, and his property. Let us remain faithful through whatever difficulties we must face.

Let’s look at the last verse in today’s passage, James 5:12 – “<sup>12</sup>But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.” I like the comments John MacArthur makes in his Study Bible about this verse, let me quote him:

As he has done repeatedly in his epistle, James stressed that a person’s speech provides the most revealing glimpse of his spiritual condition (cf. James 1:26; 2:12; 3:2–11; 4:11). “do not swear...any other oath.” As Jesus did before him (Matt. 5:33–36; 23:16–22), James condemned the contemporary Jewish practice of swearing false, evasive, deceptive oaths by everything other than the name of the Lord (which alone was considered binding). “Yes be Yes.” Again echoing Jesus (Matt. 5:37), James called for straightforward, honest, plain speech. To speak otherwise is to invite God’s judgment.<sup>2</sup>

Again: *A person’s speech provides the most revealing glimpse of his spiritual condition. James called for straightforward, honest, plain speech. To speak otherwise is to invite God’s judgment.*

Let me close today’s message with some lessons we ought learn:

- We read a condemnation of those people who are focused solely on their material wealth, often exploiting their employees. This is the way to destruction. Do not follow their example.
- Be fair in your dealings with people. Do not be consumed with material wealth.
- Cultivate inner virtues, such as humility and patience. Spiritual growth takes time.
- Do not criticize or complain about other people unfairly. You will be held accountable when Jesus returns.
- Be always ready for the return of Christ.
- Emulate the patience and endurance of the prophets, apostles, and notable men like Job.
- Be true to your word.

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, John. *NKJV, The MacArthur Study Bible: Revised and Updated Edition* (Function). Kindle Edition.