

God's wrath on the Rich.

James 5:1-6

Responsive reading. Psalms 37:16-24

Matthew 6: 19-34

1 Tim 6: 6-21

Today we are starting chapter 5. James has gone back and forth between encouraging, teaching, and condemning his readers throughout this entire book. His theme of a spiritual life, a person's walk in faith has been the focus of everything he has said and these first few verses of chapter 5 are no different.

To put this in some context I think it is helpful to go back and remember what was happening to the people that James was writing to. The church in Jerusalem was under persecution by the Jews who held the political power in Jerusalem and used that power to gain riches. They were oppressing the Christians there in Jerusalem, they would not employ them, nor would they buy their goods, which drove them into poverty leaving them the only option of selling their lands and possessions which then the very same rich Jewish leaders who refused to pay them, would then buy up their land and possessions cheap and then hire the land owner to work their own land for a very low wage.

The response was an exodus of Jewish Christians leaving the church there and seeking out new places to live away from the persecution of the Jews. The people who would be receiving this letter would know full well the treatment and oppression that can come from rich people in society seeking their own gain and glory.

James spends a good portion of this letter encouraging these people, and reminding them that while they may be oppressed, and it may look dark it truly is they who have the riches because of God's promises to them. Sometimes it can be discouraging to look and see people who seem to have it all together, have the nice house, the better paying job, but James reminds us that this all is fleeting, and futile as he says in chapter 1 vs 11. No sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

Reminding us, that earthly treasures do not amount to much, and actually quite frankly can keep someone from the only thing that really does matter, which is Christ. Turn with me to Matthew 19 starting in verse 23. Then Jesus said to his disciples, Assuredly I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, and again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. We will come back to here in a minute, so stay on this page. I have heard it explained that Christ wasn't actually talking about a sewing needle but it was a term used to enter the low gate into the city, not impossible, but difficult.

I think this is wrong, and is simply just a way to try to explain away what Christ simply is saying here. It is impossible for the rich man to enter the kingdom of God. He isn't talking about a gate that is hard to get a camel through, he is talking about an eye of a needle just as he said. We can know this was his meaning because of his disciples response. They were blown away, and said "Who then can be saved!" Jesus responded by saying, that with men salvation is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.

And there lies the center of the issue. It is difficult for a rich man to set aside his riches and rely on God, for his riches gives him what his heart desires, it gives him the power he seeks after and becomes the driving force of his life. We see an example of this in the account of Jesus with the rich young ruler that is recorded right before Jesus remark about how impossible it is for a rich man to be saved. Looking back at Matthew 19 starting in verse 16.

Now behold one came and said to him, Good teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? (First thing to note here, this rich ruler was asking what good thing can “I” do to have eternal life. As if it was something that he could purchase, or bargain for.) Well, Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good, but One, that is God. (Just a side note here, I find the wording here interesting because Jesus is God, and Jesus is good...but I do not think that the rich ruler recognized Jesus as anything but a teacher, or maybe even a prophet but certainly not the Son of God.) Continuing on Jesus tells him, if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.

He said to him, which ones? Jesus said, You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All of these things I have kept from y tough, what do I still lack?

He understood somehow that there was more lacking, to earn eternal life more was needed then just following the mosaic moral code. So Jesus told him... If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me. As we see, this was not something the rich young ruler was willing to do and he went away sorrowful because he had many possessions and was not willing to part with them. Then Jesus followed this interaction with the discourse with his disciples telling them it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle then a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. For their riches, and love of money, and the power it gives them keeps them from it.

We just read last week in James, that is why it is better to be in the house of mourning then the house of feasting, Do not let your earthly possessions and desires keep you from following God, like the rich young ruler. It is better to have your laughter be mourning, and your joy gloom for it is then that you will turn to God, you will rely on God for all things and God has promised that he will never leave nor forsake us. Jesus talks about this again in Matthew Chapter 6, he says do not worry about what you wear, or what you eat, or drink for God provides for the birds, who do not sow or reap yet are fed, If he provides for these, how much more so for you.

It is better to be poor, and in tribulation focusing on Christ, then to be focusing on our own gain and riches. For whatever we have, is only that God allows us to have and has been given to us by him. So when he told the rich ruler, to sell all his possessions and follow him...he was asking for him to give back everything that he was given and not to rely on himself but the rely on and follow God.

It is important to note that God does not condemn the rich because of they are rich. It is their heart that he goes after. He told the rich young ruler to sell all he had, not because what he had in itself was bad, but because God requires complete reliance on him and his riches were standing in the way. Jesus

told his disciples when they asked if this rich young ruler who said he has followed all of the commandments from birth is unable to be saved who then is able!

And that bring us to Jesus' entire point here, back in Matthew 19, verse 26 he tells them, with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Honestly, it isn't just impossible for the rich man to be saved, it is impossible for any man to be saved, on his own and it is only through God's grace, and adoption that anyone can be saved. Nothing that we do of ourselves, but it is God, and God alone who saves.

I think that it maybe harder for the rich man, for he relies so much on his money, and status. But the same can be said for someone who is arrogant, or prideful, who relies on themselves and their ability, or the atheist who relies on his intelligence, and science. With man, it is impossible, thankfully God is merciful, and mighty who is willing and able to save despite our riches, our pride, our arrogance, and unbelief.

So turning now back to our passage this morning, we see James goes on the offensive against these rich people who have oppressed the people who he was previously pastor over. After he has gone through, proving his point about faith not just being words that are spoken but action and a life lived in the spirit and says, Come now you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.

Notice that when James is addressing these rich people that he does not start like has has so often in this letter by addressing them as brothers. I don't think that James is warning or talking to a group of rich people who are true believers. They maybe people in the church, but James is not counting them as brothers and does not even call them to repentance, after he rakes them over the coals like he did those who he called out for slander, and partiality within the church.

James does not hold back any punches here, much like how Paul in Galatians talking of the Judaizers teaching circumcision said they were cursed, and he wishes they would just cut themselves off. James says that the rich man's wealth will be a witness against them in the last days and it will eat their flesh like fire. I think what James is doing here is actually 2 fold. First and most obvious is calling out the corruption and lies of the rich men he is addressing, but he is also showing that these who have oppressed the Christian brothers, who have brought upon them persecution will one day pay for what they have done. And that They who are rich in faith, will be rewarded in heaven, and the rich man's eternal reward will be fire that will eat their flesh. This is both a stark warning for those who are oppressing the poor, and an encouragement to those who are being oppressed, that all these things are temporary, and it is what is eternal that matters. The day of God's judgment is coming, and his wrath will be upon all those who oppressed, and persecuted his children.

James says in verse 4, Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the Lord of the Sabbath. God hears the cries of his children, those who are humble, those who lament, mourn, and weep! Judgment will come upon those or lie, steal, oppress, and persecute. And the actions of these rich oppressors will condemn them, they will speak out against them as verse 4 says the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields

which you kept back by fraud, cry out against you. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury, you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

I was confused by the last part of verse 6 here. James is telling the rich oppressors they have condemned, they have murdered, and he does not resist. So I had to go look to see what I could find who this he is that James is referring to. From what I could tell there are 2 options.

One option is that it could be referring to the person who had been oppressed, who had been dragged into the courts, had their farm lands stolen from them, had their possessions taken and this poor person did not have any representation in the court. They did not resist, they did not fight back against the rich man taking their land. They had no one to plead their case for them. Another understanding of this verse is that the He that James mentions here is God himself. You rich have condemned the poor, you have murdered the just, and God has not resisted you in this. But know that judgment is coming, and all that you have will rust, it will fade, and it become like dust.

James harsh words here for the rich in light of the other parts of scripture we read today are pretty easy to apply to having an eternal effect. To be an eternal judgment against those who persecute God's people. But an interesting thing that I read while studying for this was that about 30 years or so after the writing of this epistle was the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. The very people who had oppressed these Christians were oppressed by the Romans. The temple and city was destroyed. It is kind of a lengthy read, but I want to read the historical account of the invasion of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70. As we read this, keep in mind that it was the Jewish Priests, and men of status who had oppressed the Jewish Christians, and the Christian churches in Jerusalem when this book of James was written. And here, we see God's judgment upon Israel. This is the account of Josephus Flavious a Jewish historian who witnessed this, and recorded the destruction of the temple.

God does not allow such persecution and injustice against his elect for long. His judgment is swift, complete, and just. Everything that these rich Jewish Leaders saw as important, everything that their very society was based on was torn down, destroyed and they were slaughtered by the thousands. This should be a stark warning to everyone that though God may not resist the oppressor, and for a time he may allow it, but there will come a day when he will no longer tolerate the injustice, and will rain judgment upon them.

This passage here in James not only serves as condemnation to the rich who have used their power, and status to rob, and steal, and oppress the poor. It also serves as a warning to anyone who would seek to gain riches. Riches themselves are not the problem, like with all things it is the intent of the heart. Allowing your pursuit of money, and wealth to consume you, to drive you, to become your focus instead of God is the problem.

As Christians we need to guard that we do not let money rule us, and that we do not seek to gain it

through a way that may bring God's judgment upon us. Deuteronomy 24:14 and 15 instructs us in such a thing. It says, You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy. (this is what the Jews were doing in the time of James) whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land or within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it, lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be a sin to you.

Just as we read in James, the worker crying out to God because of the injustice, and fraudulent behavior of the rich employer, and the fraudulent behavior cries out against the rich employer. In this day and age, just like all times before it seems to be common practice to step on the little guy on the journey to the top, to take advantage, to seize every opportunity no matter the cost to gain personal wealth and status. But in doing so the poor are oppressed, and the needy go hungry. As Christians, our goal should be Christ and his glory shown through our actions, and through our lives. We live in such a way that we should bring glory and honor to our father, Not stepping on the little guy to prop ourselves up, but using what God has given us wisely and for his glory.

Paul instructs us in this very thing as we read this morning. Command those who are rich to not be haughty, nor trust in uncertain riches but rather in the living God. Let them do good, be rich in good works, ready to give, and willing to share. Also in Ephesians Paul exhorts us as to why we should labor. It is not for us to seek riches, for as he said in 1 Timothy, Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. In Ephesians chapter 4:28 Paul says, Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need.

Also in acts, chapter 20 Paul show us this very thing by being a living example of what he teaches. He says, I have coveted no ones silver or gold, or apparel. Yes you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this that you must support the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

If we follow Paul's instruction, and his example and keep in mind that all that we have has been given to us by God and that none is our own it will guard us against selfish ambitions and falling into the temptation and snare causing us to fall into foolish harmful lusts.

So in conclusion today, we live in a society were it is not a sin to covet, to lust, and to seek after our own gain. These things are not only accepted, but encouraged. This is not how a christian should live, we should rather be seeking to glorify our Father instead of seeking our own gain. Be generous with that which God has given, be thankful for what he has provided, and be content with what he has given you. Humble yourself before God, and let him be the one who lifts you up,