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James 5:1-12

Tenth Message

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LIVING WISELY IN LIGHT OF THE LORD'S COMING

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

Unlike many on our church staff, I'm not a big basketball fan. But I do enjoy watching the NCAA tournament. It's a thrill to see underdog teams beat the powerhouse schools. I enjoyed watching the Final Four basketball tournament yesterday, but I must say that I get annoyed by all the advertisements that suggest our satisfaction and joy in life comes from what we can buy, that the desire of our heart is only one credit card swipe away. Evidently, the "good life" comes from what we drive, what we wear, and what we eat and drink. The good life is a life of self-indulgence, and if we are not living a life of luxury, then we are not fulfilling our destiny.

Chapter 5 of James exposes the danger and foolishness of living as though the comfort and ease of this life is all that matters. The apostle emphasizes that the Lord is coming soon, and that our true destiny is far greater than whatever gain or loss we experience in this life.

James wrote his letter to a broad spectrum of Christians scattered among the nations. Many of them were being persecuted throughout the Roman world because of their devotion to the way of Jesus Christ. Their businesses were being boycotted, and many were losing their jobs. Some had even been thrown out of their homes and schools. Many who were working in the fields were dying of starvation because the wealthy landowners were not paying them their just wage.

The text begins with a direct word to the rich oppressors:

To the oppressors: Repent for the Lord is coming.

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (James 5:1-6 TNIV)

It's important to remember that the letter of James was read to both small and large assemblies, devoted followers of Christ as well as non-believers who were curious about the faith. Whether these "rich people" were believers or not is unclear. What is clear, however, is that James is rebuking the wealthy landowners not because they are rich, but because they have acquired their wealth by exploiting those who worked for them.

James uses very strong and vivid language, like that of the Old Testament prophets, to awaken within these wealthy landowners some sense of justice. In effect he is taking them to the great high court, and like any good prosecutor, his accusations come quickly and forcefully.

In verses 4 and 6, James describes the crime:

The Crime: Theft and murder

you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields.

You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

By failing to pay those who worked for them they essentially condemned the laborers to starvation. These wealthy landowners treated people as things, as objects, as a means by which to advance themselves. Instead of using their power, position, and resources to help those in need, they took advantage of them for their own personal gain. Instead of giving the harvesters the hard-earned daily wages that would keep them alive, the rich oppressors found ways to keep the money for themselves and in effect, murdered their innocent workers.

Verses 3 and 5 display the evidence.

The Evidence: Hoarded wealth

Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

The evidence of their ambition and greed is obvious. No CSI team is needed to discover the clues of their flagrant oppression. Their accumulation of valuables is so excessive that it just sits there rusting and rotting away from disuse. It all testifies against them that they have way more than they could possibly ever need.

Hoarding wealth and depriving others is always wrong, and it especially makes no sense living in the "last days." (The "last days" began when Jesus ascended and sent his Spirit to the church, and they end when Jesus Christ comes again at the end of the age.) Why spend so much on things when end of all things is near? Not only will their wealth waste away, it will easily corrupt them with arrogance and pride that will devour them like a raging fire.

Like a pig before slaughter, these wealthy landowners have gorged themselves on a life of luxury and self-indulgence. They have gotten fat while their workers die of starvation and neglect.

The testimony: Prayers of the oppressed

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

The local magistrates were in the back pocket of the wealthy landowners, so these workers had no recourse except to appeal to God. James assures them that their prayers have reached the heavenly high court. The Lord Almighty has heard their cries. Nothing escapes his attention, and no one is beyond his reach.

The verdict and sentence: Guilty! Judgment is coming

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you.

All the evidence is in. They are guilty as charged. James warns the rich oppressors that even though the innocent may not have risen up against them, the Lord is coming and he will bring justice.

I am reminded of the warning Jesus gives in his parable of the rich fool:

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15-21)

Spending our time and energy on increasing our own personal store of wealth just so that we can keep it for ourselves is wrong and foolish. How easy it is for us to believe the lie that our security and satisfaction comes from preserving our possessions.

My resolve to not be too attached to the things of this world was tested not long ago. My teenage daughter, Olivia, wanted to invite her sophomore homecoming committee friends to our house to paint banners and practice their dances for the upcoming Spirit Week. One of the main reasons we remodeled our house was so that our kids would feel good about inviting their friends over. It was time for us to put up or shut up. Even though our floors had just recently been refinished, we told Olivia that she could have her small group of friends over at the house.

The plan was for all the activity to happen outside under the warm sun. Of course, it rained that day, and over 50 teens showed up. They were in our house, drawing posters and practicing their dance moves. Afterward, of course, there were not only scratch marks but also permanent marker marks on the floor. God has a great sense of humor and timing. From the very beginning we were reminded by the Lord that our house was just a possession to be used for hospitality and outreach. God is gently teaching me that it is his house, not ours.

James gives a sobering word to the rich oppressors, but within his prophetic word of coming judgment can be found the seed of pardon. The terms “weep” and “wail” are used by the Old Testament prophets not only to tell those who have sinned against the Lord of his coming judgment, but also to call them to repentance.

The prophet Joel said:

The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful.

Who can endure it?

“Even now,” declares the LORD,

“Return to me with all your heart,

With fasting and weeping and mourning.

Rend your heart and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate,

Slow to anger and abounding in love,

And he relents from sending calamity.” (Joel 2:11b-12)

The proper response of the rich oppressors to this word of rebuke from James is to grieve over their sin and repent of their actions. James makes it clear that the Lord is coming soon, so the exceedingly selfish lifestyle of these rich landowners is not something to be envied or emulated. Quite the contrary, it is a cause for repentance.

James follows his word to the oppressors with a word to the oppressed. In verses 7 through 11 he addresses brothers and sisters in Christ who have been treated unfairly and are suffering great hardship. His word to them is to persevere through it all for the Lord is coming soon.

It is a word that we need to hear, because many of us are suffering right now in a variety of ways. It may be due to poor health or financial strain. Or it might be because we have a sour marriage, rebellious children, a domineering parent or an overbearing boss. Whether we are young or old, the different seasons of life can be very difficult. During our time of hardship we can easily struggle with our faith. We struggle with trusting God and walking in his path, because walking his way often does not end our trial or relieve our suffering.

It is tempting to go the world’s way, but James has three exhortations on how to persevere in times of injustice and suffering. His first exhortation for the oppressed is to be patient.

To the oppressed: Persevere for the Lord is coming.

A. Be patient.

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. (5:7)

James calls upon the oppressed to be patient because there will be an end to their suffering, if not in this life, then in the life to come. No matter how bleak or hopeless it seems right now, the Lord will not let injustice go on forever, so be patient.

The term used here for “be patient” implies having a long fuse. It means not getting bitter or resentful when we are hassled. It involves having self-restraint and not lashing out in retaliation when we are provoked. It carries with it the spirit of not taking revenge, even if we feel justified in doing so.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt 5:11). It is no accident that immediately following that statement, Jesus reminds his listeners that they are salt and light in the world. I believe we have an amazing opportunity as Christians to have a tremendous impact on those around us by the way we patiently and humbly respond to adversity and insult.

I can’t help but think of Dr. Martin Luther King. Last Friday was the 40th anniversary of his tragic death. I am humbled and inspired by how he courageously led the civil rights movement based on the premise of non-violence. By his actions and those of others an amazing change began to take place in the hearts and minds of many individuals. Not only were they drawn to the cause of equal rights, they were also drawn to Christ, who supplied many of the peaceful protestors with the inner strength to love others even in the face of extreme hatred.

Their self-restraint in the midst of severe persecution was a very productive element in achieving the results they wanted. This same

kind of patience is illustrated by James in the example he gives of a farmer:

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

Palestine had a unique climate feature. The farmers had to wait for not just one, but two seasonal rains before their crops would produce. The early rain came in October, preparing the soil and helping the planted seed begin the process of germination. The late rain, in March, swelled the grain and guaranteed a good crop.

The farmer had to patiently wait for both rains. He could not despair or grow desperate during the long wait. He was not disappointed or deterred by the delay. He understood it was all an integral and helpful part of the growth process. If he became impatient and began digging up the planted seed, then he would disrupt and destroy his crop.

Just as the farmer does not disturb the planted seeds but waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, so too we are called to wait patiently upon the Lord and trust that he will bring about justice and a harvest of righteousness.

Psalm 37 has been a word of encouragement to me in this regard:

**Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
Do not fret when men succeed in their ways,
When they carry out their wicked schemes.
Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
For evil men will be cut off,
But those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land. (Psalm 37:7-9)**

Vengeance and retribution are the prerogative of God alone. Our job is to be patient.

James's second exhortation for the oppressed is to stand firm.

B. Stand firm

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (5:8-9)

Stand firm literally means, "strengthen your heart." The same verb appears in Luke 9:51, where Jesus "set his face" to go to Jerusalem and to all the suffering that awaited him there. When facing extremely difficult circumstances it is easy for our hearts to despair and become discouraged. But James encourages us to be strong. Don't give up on the Lord, and don't give in to the temptation of taking out your fear and stress on each other.

When things are not going well for us it is easy to resent the wellbeing of others and judge them harshly for what we believe to be their untroubled life. We are called to be loving brothers and sisters, not judges over one another. There is only one Judge, and he is standing at the door. His coming is near.

Our heart is strengthened because we know that God is not far off, asleep at the wheel, and oblivious to our needs. The Lord has not abandoned us. He is with us in the midst of our difficult circumstance, working out his program for good. With that in mind we do not ignore or escape our present reality but stand firm, rejoicing that the Lord is coming soon.

To illustrate patience and perseverance in the midst of suffering, James asks us to consider the prophets, and in particular Job.

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (5:10-11)

Even though Job in the face of great adversity had his moment of darkness and wished he had never been born, nevertheless he steadfastly endured his trials. It is important to note that though Job persevered until the end he did not suffer in silence. He freely shared his grief, fear, and desperation. He poured out his heart and mind to the Lord.

It is striking that at the end of his ordeal Job says to the Lord, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted... Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:2-5).

God ultimately made Job prosperous again, but the greatest blessing he received was the very presence of the Lord in the midst of his suffering. During his darkest hour he experienced first-hand a full helping of the compassion and mercy of the Lord.

This is how Job was able to persevere, and how we are able to endure as well. We can endure patiently because we confidently know that the Lord is with us. He loves us and his compassion and mercy towards us is limitless.

Persevering in the midst of suffering is not easy. We are tempted to do anything and say anything to make life a little bit easier. But James says we must not compromise our faith or our integrity, especially in what we say.

This brings us to the third and final exhortation by James for the oppressed:

C. Be true to your word

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned." (5:12)

James is referring to the practice of backing up a promise with an oath. He is not forbidding taking an oath in legal matters. His concern is with our everyday conversations in life and in business. He is well aware that under intense pressure it is tempting to bolster the strength of our word by saying that it is guaranteed by the resources and authority of God.

James, like Jesus before him, forbids swearing an oath because we tarnish the name of God when we don't follow through. Instead, we are to live with such honesty and integrity that a simple "yes" or "no" will be sufficient.

When you are suffering hardship be patient, stand firm, and be true to your word, for the Lord is coming soon. Nearly 2,000 years have passed since these words were written and the Lord has yet to return. Are we to be worried or panicked? No. The apostle Peter explained that God is not slow in keeping his promise, but in his mercy he is delaying his return so that no one should be unprepared when he comes.

So, how prepared are we? How does knowing that there is an end coming, a Judge coming, influence the way we live right now? Do

we share the perspective of James, that we are living in the last days? That the Lord is coming soon? If so, we will view our entire life differently, including our wealth and our sufferings.

This passage from James rebukes my greed and forces me to take an honest look at what I am treasuring in my heart. Whether it comes to my home, car, TV, computer, or clothes, there is very little I seek to possess but don't already have. I have been praying for the Lord to teach me contentment. The apostle Paul's words to Timothy have been helpful to me in this regard:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... be rich in good deeds, and be generous and willing to share... In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Tim 6:6-12; 19)

Contrary to all the commercials and advertisements, satisfaction and contentment does not come from our possessions. It does not come from what we drive, what we wear, or what we eat and drink. It comes from letting go of our attachment to the fading glory of the temporary things of this world and clinging to the Lord and the eternal life found in him. The "life that is truly life" does not come from the path of greed, luxury or self-indulgence but from pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Many of you have been an incredible example to me in how you have used the gifts of your earthly resources for spiritual benefit. I have seen firsthand the blessings that have come about from the way in which you have opened your home for teenage Bible studies, loaned your cars for Mexicali Outreach, your boats for the water ski trip, and your generous contributions to buy and fix a home for orphans. Thank you for your wonderful example. Keep up the good work.

The Lord is coming soon. We have confident hope that this life is not all there is. We are able to persevere through our difficulties. They will not last forever, and while they are here they are helping to shape us into God's image.

On our own, we are unable to have this perspective. Everything within our human nature tells us to think of ourselves first, to take the easy way out, to protect ourselves by relying on our own resources, to promote ourselves by tearing down those around us, to compromise rather than stand firm. This is the way of the world.

But God, being rich in his mercy and grace, has given us a new way, a new perspective, a new nature. By relying on his Spirit within us we can patiently endure until he comes again. We are a pilgrim people, looking forward to a heavenly city. The things of this world are not what holds our attention, not what satisfies us, not what motivates us. We hold lightly both the luxuries and the difficulties of this world.

As we take a close look at our heart and find there the sin of selfishness and greed, we are invited by our Heavenly Father to grieve over our sin and go to him with a repentant heart. He is gracious and compassionate to forgive us our sins, and we can be confident in the pure cleansing we receive through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Father, we thank you that you are a faithful and very generous God. You have blessed us with so many blessings through your Son Jesus Christ. Your mercy, grace, and forgiveness are unlimited. Father, we repent of our selfishness and greed, and we pray that whatever resources you have given us, spiritual and physical, that we invest them for your glory and not our own. Help us, Father, not to put our hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put our hope in you. Help us to be rich in good deeds, generous, and willing to share, laying up treasure for the coming age so that we may take hold of the life that is truly life. We look forward to the time when you are going to set things right. Deliver us, Father, from impatience. Strengthen us to humbly endure. Please give us, Lord, that spirit of quiet, restful, humble obedience to you. We thank you for the way you pour yourself out to us and satisfy us in every way. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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