

MBC – 9/23/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH
“God’s Justice on Injustice”
 James 5:1-6

We are returning to our study in James after several weeks off. I would remind us that James is the earliest NT writing, back when all the Christians were converts from Judaism. James didn’t write this epistle explain the Gospel to them, he wrote to ask: “How has your faith in Jesus Christ changed your life? Is it just talk, or is there evidence of the new birth?,

So he gives a series of tests: How does your faith react to trials? To temptations? Do you show partiality to certain people? Do you take care of widows and orphans? Do you acknowledge the sovereignty of God when you make your plans? And here, he is asking the question: “How do you respond to evil injustice in your world? - to people who rip you off, do you wrong, and laugh all the way to the bank? What does your faith in Jesus look like when that happens?”

But he doesn’t actually address believers at all in our passage for this morning. He addresses it to the rip-offs and con artists. Let’s read it—

- Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, 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. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

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You wonder how the *Precious Moments Bible* illustrates *this* passage in. There is no Gospel here, no mercy, no pity – and not even a call to repentance. It’s just bloody, bare-knuckled, brutal condemnation. James is going OT on these people. He sounds just like Isaiah, or Ezekiel, or Amos pronouncing doom and judgments on the nations.

- So who is he talking to here? And what is the application for you and me? Let me make two important points before we jump in—

1.) The Bible is written (almost exclusively) to and for believers (and the elect who haven’t yet believed).

Ephesians was written to and for the Christians in Ephesus. James wrote this letter to Jewish-Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire. And most of the Bible is written to and for *God’s people*, those with whom He is in a covenant relationship, and who have His Holy Spirit to spiritually illumine His Word to their hearts.

- This should be pretty obvious, right? Unbelievers don’t believe God or what He says; they don’t obey what He says – and by and large, they don’t read what He says! So by and large, they are not being addressed in the Bible because God doesn’t cast His precious pearls before swine.

(But there are some exceptions like the prophecies I mentioned, and this passage in James.)

But it's important to remember that the Bible is to and for God's people. We never want to take promises and blessings that God has for His own people, and give them indiscriminately to unbelievers: I've heard Christians do this: e.g., "Just remember that God has His angels watching over you. . . He hears your prayers. . . read some Psalms and see how comforting they are. . . read Proverbs and get wisdom for parenting" (while you are still rejecting Christ?) . . .well, no, those are all for His children. Don't ever treat the Bible as though it's some sort of self-help book for everyone.

*That said, God's Word is the very thing that He uses to save *His elect*. So yes, God's people use God's Word as seed to sow that He might draw His sheep to Himself.

2.) This passage is *about* unbelievers, but it's written *for the sake of* believers.

Let me explain: James is condemning these people to hell. There is no offer of forgiveness or call to repentance. Their judgment is sure, and it's coming: he mentions this coming judgment at least 4 times in these verses – Jesus is coming, and for these people, He will have a sword in His hand and it will be a day of slaughter. So this passage is not *about* Christians.

➤ It's *about* unbelievers, but it's not *to* them or *for* them. James is using a rhetorical device here known as "apostrophe," where he turns from his audience to address another group, in this case evil, wealthy Jewish landowners who oppressed and abused fellow Jews in the Diaspora.

*Now if one of these people wander into church some Sunday, yes, they could hear the Word and get saved. That could happen this morning, praise God! But the class of people he describes are what we call *reprobate*: they will never come faith in Christ, they are not elect. And most of them would never even hear or read what James says about them here.

So he isn't writing *to* these wicked, oppressive, rich people. They are going to read this. He is writing *about* them, *for the sake of* Christians: to encourage them that God will indeed judge those who oppress and abuse them—

➤ Look at the "therefore" - James 5:7 "Be patient, *therefore*, brothers, until the coming of the Lord."

Why can they be patient? Because the coming of the Lord will mean their vindication when God judges these people who abused and mistreated them so badly here on earth. He's saying "Take heart! Be patient, and know that the judgment of your enemies is coming! Just as certain as your salvation, is their judgment!"

*So James is still writing *to* true believers – to test their faith: Will they wait on the Lord to bring about justice for His people? When it seems that everyone is corrupt, the bad people are getting away with being bad, and God's people are taking the brunt of it – will they still believe that God is going to right every wrong, and bring about justice for His people?

James really is taking on the role of the OT prophets who preached against injustice. You hear a lot about "social justice" these days – does God care about "social justice?" Listen to the prophet Amos—

➤ Amos 4:1–3 ¹“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan (He is talking *about* their women), who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ ²The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. ³And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon,” declares the LORD.

➤ Amos 8:4–10 ⁴Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, ⁵saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, ⁶that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?” ⁷The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. ⁸Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?” ⁹“And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head;(it’s not always a curse!) I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.

Again, those he is talking *about* probably never heard these prophecies – it was for the sake of God’s people to take courage that God would act on their behalf. It reminds me of what I read in Exodus this week. When the enslaved Hebrews were being tormented and oppressed by the Egyptians—

➤ Exodus 2:24–25 ²⁴And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

➤ Luke 18:7 Jesus said: ⁷And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

Jesus meant for His people to take great comfort in that: When evil people oppose the Gospel and the preaching of God’s Word, and call the Word of God “hate speech,” (and pastors get censored on YouTube) they will not win. Beloved, Jesus will win, and He will defeat and punish His enemies. And we should rejoice in that—and we should even pray for it. Something stopped me in my tracks a couple weeks ago in Rev.6. John saw a scene in heaven—

➤ Revelation 6:9–11 ⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you *will judge and avenge our blood* on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The souls of these martyred saints are crying out to God for *justice* on their murderers – and these are people who are completely sanctified in heaven – crying out for judgment! Now look at—

➤ Revelation 8:3–5 ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints (the saints still on earth) on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the

saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. (What are the saints on earth praying for? The same thing as the martyred saints in heaven – God’s judgment on wicked persecutors of the church. Listen:) ⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (And what follows are judgments from God on unbelievers in response to the prayers of His people. So what were they praying for? Justice.Judgment. And God answers their prayers!)

Beloved, it’s not a bad thing to long for God’s justice, to pray for it, and to rejoice in it when it comes. Paul comforted the suffering Thessalonians by saying this—

➤ 2 Thessalonians 1:4 . . . we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. ⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— ⁶since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

So be comforted that justice is coming, evil will be repaid, and it won’t be long—

➤ Psalm 58:10–11 ¹⁰The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. ¹¹Mankind will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.”

The primary application of this passage is not for the wicked, rich oppressors. It’s for believers like you and me to take heart that justice will be done for the glory of God, and for the sake of His people: *“He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.”*

But there is another obvious application for us: Christian, if this is the description and fate of the wicked, oppressive rich, then make very certain that none of what we are about to read describes you! Amen? Now let’s look at it.

I. The coming judgment on the oppressive rich.

➤ James 5:1 ¹Come now, (Listen up!) you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

This sounds like the weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth that Jesus said will come from those in hell. And that’s exactly what it is! The judgment on these wicked people will ultimately be the Lake of Fire when Christ returns and judges His enemies and ours. Then he lists their sins. First, they are—

A. Hoarders.

➤ James 5:1–3 ¹Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have

corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

They are just like that rich man Jesus described in Lk.12 who built bigger barns to hold more and more – and then God said, “Time’s up, fool. Now you are going to hell and you won’t take any of it with you!” Hoarders live as though this life is all there is, and they have to accumulate as much as they can – but they forget what James said in the previous passage—

➤ James 4:14–14 . . . you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

And then – they leave everything here. And what started on Hoarders, ends up on Storage Wars! But the tragedy is that in the meantime, it’s going to waste when others could use it. James is repeating Jesus: It is a lost cause to hoard earthly treasures because moth and rust will destroy, thieves will break in and steal. Inflation will eat into your savings.

*You only have to go to your fridge or your freezer for an illustration, right? How many leftovers do you throw away in a week: “Oh, but it’s too good to throw away!” But you do. While people in China are starving. . . I read that Americans throw away 30 – 40 of the food supply.

➤ Janice and I have seen everything that Jesus said, happen to our stuff. When we lived in L.A., we had jewelry handed down by her grandmother – some kids broke in our house and stole it. My very first suit, some friends bought it for me so I would have something to preach in – a few years later I went into my closet and it had moth holes in it – and, it had actually shrunk, because it didn’t fit me.

*How many times have I gone to use a tool that was rusted or broken. Think about it: Is there any material possession you own that you can guarantee will be there when you need it? Nothing this side of heaven is permanent. And while all of the stuff you are hoarding is rotting, or rusting or falling apart, it’s also going to waste if others could profit from what you tried to squirrel away.

John Calvin said, “God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for months; but on the contrary, He has designed them as aids and helps to human life.” Jesus wasn’t exaggerating when He said—

➤ Luke 12:33 ³³Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. (Don’t let them disintegrate in your storage unit!) Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.

➤ Hoarding is a sin against *stewardship*: God gives us our stuff to use for ourselves, to meet the needs of others, and to use for the sake of the Gospel – not to hang in a closet, sit on a shelf, or get furry in our refrigerators. I really think that we need to ask ourselves, “How are we *using* and *investing* what God has entrusted to us to help others and further the Gospel?” When something we have tried to save goes in the trash, *I think we should ask why that happened.*

But the people James is denouncing couldn’t care less. They are like some world leaders today like Vladimir Putin who is worth perhaps 400 billion, or Kim Jung-Un who is a billionaire even though his people are malnourished and starving. But people like this would rather see others starve to death than part

with their riches. James says that these sins will all be brought out as evidence to condemn them when Christ returns—

- ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

Now James knew that gold and silver don't rust or corrode – ladies if that gold ring turns your finger green, uh, I hope you have the receipt! It's figurative language: what they treasured most here on earth will ultimately only send them to hell—

- Ezekiel 7:19 ¹⁹“They will throw their money in the streets, tossing it out like worthless trash. Their silver and gold won't save them on that day of the LORD's anger. It will neither satisfy nor feed them, for their greed can only trip them up.”

There is only one thing they are storing up that will be with them after they die—

- Romans 2:5 ⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up *wrath* for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

B. Defrauders.

- James 5:4 ⁴Behold, 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.

When James wrote, aside from slaves, day laborers made up most of the work force. They would get up in the morning, go to the town square and hope that someone would hire them for the day – exactly what you see at Home Depot in larger cities today. And these workers expected to be paid at the end of each day – Jesus told a parable about that, didn't He? And the OT had rules for people who would employ these workers—

- Leviticus 19:13 ¹³“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning.
- Deuteronomy 24:14–15 ¹⁴“You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. ¹⁵You 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.

We know folks who live paycheck to paycheck, but these simple folks lived day to day in supporting their families. If they missed a day's pay, they missed their daily bread.

- But the wicked rich James is talking about didn't care – they kept back some or all of their worker's wages. Maybe it was to have leverage over them: “If you want your pay, finish the week,” or maybe it was to use their wages for their own investments.

But heard the workers' cries – *and God knew*. Look at v.4: James calls God “the Lord of hosts,” “Lord Sabaoth.” This means the God who is Commander-in-chief of the hosts of heaven. The LXX translated

this name as “the Lord of powers,” or “the Lord of omnipotence.” That’s Who heard their cries, and that is Who would settle up with those who defrauded them.

- Back in my college days I was discipling a man with cerebral palsy. John was physically handicapped, and had the mentality of about an 8 year-old. But he worked as a custodian to support himself, and was barely able to live in small apartment. One day John found out that his apartment manager had been coming into his apartment and stealing money he kept in a drawer. John told me, I told our college pastor, Lynn, who was a very gentle man – but also very strong: he’d flown F15’s in Viet Nam. He said, “Let’s pay a visit to John’s manager.” So we showed up and the manager was very surprised. Pastor Lynn said very calmly, “Look, we know what you have been doing to John. And you might think that you can get away with this because John is handicapped, but you need to know that John is a child of God. And when you mess with one of God’s children, God knows. And *God will* settle all accounts.”

The rich and powerful who cheat us common people, those who rip off the elderly and steal their retirements are not going to get away with it, beloved! The Bernie Madoff’s of this world will reap what they have sown. God will pay them back for their crimes.

And their judgment will be compounded by the fact that they abused and oppressed others solely for their own wanton pleasures. They are—

C. Selfish indulgers.

- James 5:5 ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

The word “luxury” means to live a soft, easy life and “self-indulgence” means to give yourself over to every wanton pleasure. Paul said about certain enemies of the Gospel—

- Philippians 3:19 Their end is destruction, their *god* is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

These people don’t just enjoy nice things – they plunge headlong into dissipation.

- But in 1 Peter 2:11 Peter warns Christians: ¹¹“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

I.e., Master your desires. Control your passions. Realize that giving yourself over to your appetites and pleasures puts you in spiritual peril. You can’t serve two masters. Listen to what Solomon told his son—

- Proverbs 21:17 ¹⁷Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

God *designed* us to enjoy pleasure as His good gifts, but when pleasure becomes your god, you are in trouble. Solomon thought he would see what would happen if he gave himself over to his appetites—

- Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 ¹I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ²I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What

use is it?"³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. ⁹So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure. . .

➤ ¹¹. . . and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

The people James is describing never get it: their appetites are insatiable, and what makes it so evil is that they indulge them at the expense of others. And he says—

➤ **You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.**

Do you see the irony here? The ESV Study Bible says: "Like the cattle in their fields, the rich gorge themselves on luxuries and fail to realize that they are headed for the final slaughter."

➤ *It reminds me of that ancient Twilight Zone episode, "To serve man." The nice aliens were fattening up humans. "Noooo . . . it's a cookbook!"

The more these decadent indulgers stuff themselves on pleasure, the more wrath they store up for the day of wrath. Finally, James says that they are—

E. Murderers.

➤ James 5:6⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

The wicked rich could do whatever they wanted, take whatever they wanted, and then bribe judges and control the courts. And they could even get away with murder. – not much has changed over the centuries, amen? The most famous illustration of this Scripture is in—

➤ 1King 21 – Wretched, evil King Ahab *coveted* a vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. He offered him money for it, but Naboth wouldn't sell and it made Ahab sick. His even worse wife, Jezebel, saw her hubby pouting and she said, "I'll get you that vineyard sweetie!" She arranged to have to 2 scoundrels swear that they had overheard Naboth cursing King Ahab – and Naboth was condemned and stoned to death. And Ahab got his vineyard!"

In that same chapter, when the Prophet Elijah heard what had happened he declared this to Ahab—

➤ 1 Kings 21:19–20 . . . 'Thus says the LORD, "Have you killed and also taken possession?"' 'Thus says the LORD: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood.'"

Jezebel later suffered the same fate: she was pushed out of a window, and wild dogs ate her dead body. God's takes injustice against His people very seriously.

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So how should we respond when we see injustice all around us: abortion, sex trafficking – and people just look the other way. Go back to their video games. Think about what is happening to the Uyghur Muslims in China: over a million people have been imprisoned, tortured, forced sterilizations – children taken away – and mass murders. The Olympics are still happening in China – hey, that's where all our stuff is made. Can't rock the boat.

And Christians are still being persecuted and murdered around the world, more than ever in 2021 – especially now in Afghanistan which is controlled by the Taliban

So what do we do as Christians? We are always a minority. We don't have a lot of money or power or armies. I want to just peek at what we will look at next week. Look with me at—

- James 5:7 ⁷Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.

We aren't told to go vigilante. Take matters into our own hands. Form a militia. No, be patient, wait – on what? *“The coming of the Lord.”* He's saying, “Jesus will bring the sword. He will judge.” James says in v.5, it will be a day of slaughter. That's why we can be patient and rest. Justice will be done. Count on it—

- Romans 12:19–21 ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves,

Why not? Because, hey, one day, God will just give everyone a free pass and we will all join hands and sin Kum-By-Yah for the rest of eternity? No: *“but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

*One of the greatest sources of frustration, anger, and impatience in our lives is because we think that injustice and unfairness will never be punished. We sin in all sorts of ways because we fear that if we don't do something, wrongs might never be made right. Beloved, the biblical solution is to believe God that every wrong will be made right, every sin will be punished, no exceptions.

So we can rest and trust our heavenly Father. He *knows* what's happening. He *hears* our cries. Remember, He hears the prayers of His people, crying out for justice. And Jesus is coming. And once we get that, it frees us to stop thinking about vengeance and do this instead—

- ²⁰To the contrary – because God will judge and avenge: “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

You will only do this if you are convinced that God is just, and He will bring about justice. You can be patient – that's next Sunday.

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But let me close with this thought: How do we **know** that judgment will come on all unrepentant evil, oppressive people? He is a just Judge? God has given us proof – and it's in the Gospel: Judgment has already begun, at the cross—

- For Christians, the judgment on our sins has already taken place, there, at the Place of the Skull, 2,000 years ago when Jesus died in our place, as our Substitute, to take every last drop of punishment for our sins. That is Justice, and it's also Mercy for us who believe.

But the Cross is also the guarantee – that the day is coming when He will also punish the sins of all of those who didn't believe, who didn't trust Christ. They won't have a Savior, they won't have a Substitute who took their sins on His own body. So they will have to pay for their own sins. Every last drop.

Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your hearts! God has given us a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and all who cry out to Him for mercy will have a Substitute and a Savior. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved!"