

A Faith That Works: Woe to the Rich

James 5:1-6

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 9, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's text is addressed directly at rich people. And it has some pretty harsh things to say. There's no call to repentance or word of grace. All you find is disapproval and condemnation. **It's not your typical NT text. It reads more like an OT prophetic passage.**
 - Usually when you're in a NT epistle, it's addressed to the church. It's written to Christians. So even if there is a harsh warning not to love money or not to make an idol of riches – there's usually a word of encouragement and a call to repentance. But here in James 5:1-6, there's nothing of the sort. **And that's because these words are not addressed to the church. James is speaking over his Christian audience.**

- ❖ **Commentators all say that the rich that James has in view here are *not* rich Christians in the church.** Now he *was* talking to rich believers back in chapter 1:10 and to church members of the wealthier merchant class in last week's passage at the end of chapter 4.
 - **But here in chapter 5, James turns his attention outside of the church – to the wealthy 1st-century landowners who were notorious for exploiting their laborers.** And many in James' audience were those laborers – their victims. He mentioned this oppression back in chapter 2, when he was baffled that they would show partiality towards the rich – towards the ones who were oppressing them. Listen to **chapter 2:6**, “*Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*” So “the rich” in our text are these same non-believers who were oppressing and accusing Christians and blaspheming the name of Christ.

- ❖ **Now why would James shift gears and suddenly address non-Christians in a letter written to Christians that would've been read when the church assembled?** Did he really expect his Christian audience to pass on these words of condemnation to their antagonistic landlords who were oppressing them?
 - **No, James is drawing from a deep tradition of prophetic literature, and like an OT prophet he's proclaiming a “Woe to the Rich”.** Just read Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, and you'll come across whole chapters dedicated to proclaiming, “*Woe to Assyria. Woe to Egypt. Woe to Babylon.*” But of course, these prophetic books were written to Israelites and not to the rulers of these other nations or their citizens. There was no expectation that an Assyrian or Egyptian or Babylonian was going to read it.
 - That prophetic woe – that word of condemnation written about some group outside God's covenant community was written so that God's people would hear and hear two things: **(1) a word of comfort** – knowing that God will bring a just vengeance on their oppressors, and **(2) a word of warning** – not to emulate or envy the ones who oppress them. Don't show them partiality!

- ❖ That's what we have here in chapter 5. **We have a word addressed to those *outside* the church, so that primarily those *within* the church would hear a word of comfort regarding God's vengeance and a word of warning concerning our tendency to envy the rich or to emulate their wickedness.**

- ❖ Church, I'm explaining this to you because, as I do my best to faithfully preach this text, just know that I'm going to be speaking over you as I address those outside the church. But in this prophetic manner, you should understand that it's still a word for you. You may not be the direct audience, but you'll find what this passage has to say to be extremely relevant.
- ❖ **Nowadays you hear so much talk in news reports and in cultural analysis about the rise of new populism over old concepts like socialism and Marxism.** We live in this cultural moment where so many see the world as dichotomously divided between the *haves* and the *have nots*; between the rich and the poor; between the oppressors and the oppressed.
 - **That's how many would try to explain all the problems of society. Everything is viewed through an oppression matrix.** Through a power struggle. That means those in power – which runs parallel with those who have wealth – they are assumed to be the oppressors. They may not be conscious of the ways in which they're oppressing others. They might plead ignorance, but they are oppressors nonetheless.
 - That's the Marxist point of view. **And redemption, within this worldview, is achieved when you can destabilize that hegemony of power.** The entire system that serves to protect the interests of the oppressor must be overturned. That's the underlying worldview of many popular movements today.
- ❖ Now what we'll see in today's passage is an acknowledgement that the possession of wealth does convey a degree of power. **But from the biblical worldview, being rich and having power is not necessarily wrong or evil. It doesn't automatically make you an oppressor.**
 - Now it could. That's the emphasis of today's text – where the rich and powerful have become oppressors and how they have it coming. But the biblical worldview is not the Marxist worldview. **Having wealth and power is not the problem. Hoarding wealth and power for selfish gain is the problem.** And the Christian answer is to wield whatever amount of wealth you have and whatever degree of power you hold – towards the goal of serving the poor and marginalized around you.
 - As we consider four unique woes directed at the unrighteous rich in the world, let's be sure to listen and discern what we have to learn as followers of Christ.

Woe to Those Who Selfishly Hoard Their Riches

- ❖ The first woe issued is **(1) a woe to those who selfishly hoard their riches** – to those who accumulate wealth and power with no concern for how they might be employed to benefit more than yourself or your family. This woe begins in v1. Let me read it again, "*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*"
- ❖ The reason commentators think "*you rich*" is addressing "*you unrighteous rich / you oppressive rich*" is because of these miseries that are coming upon them. The only other instance of that word in the NT is found in **Romans 3:16** where it describes what lies at the end of the path for unrighteous sinners. **So we're talking about a final reckoning on a final day of judgment.** That's what's coming down the line for these unrighteous landowners.

- ❖ And their reaction when that day comes is quite telling. Weeping and howling are common reactions in prophetic literature. That's how the wicked react to the Day of the Lord. Listen to **Isaiah 13:6**, "*Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!*" (cf. Isa 15:3; Amos 8:3) **So James is using familiar prophetic language to convey that this is a prophetic woe to the rich regarding their coming judgment.**
- ❖ Now let's see why the unrighteous rich are deserving of such misery and judgment. Look back at vv2-3. **Notice how it's because of their selfish penchant for hoarding.** "*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.*"
 - In the ancient world, wealth was not measured by property value or investment portfolios. **A person's wealth primarily consisted of three things: harvested grain, clothing, and precious metals or jewels.** So James is describing a scenario where wealth has been hoarded – stockpiled to excess – to the point that the harvested grain has rotted; the clothing has been moth-eaten; and the gold and silver have corroded.
 - Again, as we've noticed in the book, James likes to borrow from Jesus' teaching, particularly from the Sermon on the Mount. Here we hear echoes of Jesus' warning in Matthew 6 – to not lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, "*where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.*" (Mt 6:19)
- ❖ **Both James and Jesus are saying that if you don't use your treasure to do good in this world (which is God's intent) but hoard it instead – then your treasures will eventually corrode and go away.** The moth is nature's way of corroding treasure. Rust is time's way of doing the same. And the thief is humanity's way to corrode. **All three taken together represent the fleeting nature of worldly wealth when it's not put to its intended use.**
- ❖ There's an old **Aesop's Fable about a Miser** that conveys this point. As the story goes, this miser buried all his gold at the foot of a tree. He never spent it, never put it to good use. He would just visit his hiding spot every day to admire his gold coins. Well, a thief picked up on this pattern and figured out what this miser was hiding, so one night he dug up the hidden treasure and made off with it. The next day, when the miser discovered his missing gold, he was overcome with grief. He tore his clothes and cried out in pain.
 - A passerby heard his cries and inquired about what happened. When he learned that this miser had no use for his money but to hoard it away, he handed him some stones. He said, "Here you go. Put these stones in the hole and cover it back up. How are they any different than your gold coins?"
- ❖ **The point is that if you don't put your money to good use – if you just hoard it away – then it's as good as a bunch of stones.** It's worth as much. Look, if you have wealth, it's because God gave it to you for a good reason. He designed gold not to rust but to help the poor. And garments not for feeding moths but for clothing the naked. **But if you hoard that wealth, then you waste that wealth.** It will corrode. It will rot and rust and go away.

- ❖ **Look back at v3 and notice how corroded treasures (rotted and rusted riches) will one day serve as evidence against the unrighteous rich.** “*Their corrosion* (the corrosion of your treasure) *will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.*” In other words, if your life concludes with a bunch of corroded treasure laid up in your storehouse or bank account – **then at the final judgment, that corrosion will serve as evidence of your misuse, of selfish stewardship.** You failed to use earthly riches for godly purposes.

- ❖ Notice the emphasis, at the end of v3, on how the unrighteous rich are doing all of this hoarding “*in the last days*”. **The last days is not a reference to their retirement years – but rather to the idea that we are all living now *in the last days*.**
 - From a NT perspective, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ marked the end of one age and the beginning of another. We are living in the last days, in the end of the ages (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2). And the next event to mark the final end will be the return of King Jesus. That’s what comes next. And it could come at any time.

- ❖ That’s what James says a little later in vv8-9. He says, “*the coming of the Lord is at hand*” and “*the Judge is standing at the door.*” So it’s utter foolishness to be hoarding wealth when it’s so clear that we are in the last days.
 - **Imagine if a billionaire was told he only had a few days to live and all the money he set aside for a rainy day would go to waste if it wasn’t spent or invested –** wouldn’t you agree that it would be foolish and downright evil if he left his billions stored away in a vault to simply rot?
 - Well, according to James, our lives are like a mist that vanishes, and the return of Christ is at hand. **So everyone should be living as if these were our last days, as if the end of time could come at any time.**

- ❖ Church, as we explained, this text is primarily a woe to the unrighteous rich outside of the believing community of God. It’s a condemnation against them for hoarding wealth and wasting wealth. **By storing up treasures in this life, they’re storing up wrath in the next.**
 - But this prophetic woe is also a warning to the Church. Don’t follow the patterns of this world. **Don’t envy or emulate their accumulated wealth.** Now I think it needs to be said again, that the biblical worldview is not condemning money in itself. The Bible doesn’t say it’s wrong or oppressive to be rich. **But it does take issue if your plan is to die rich.** It’s wrong to end your life with a hoard of wealth gone to waste.

- ❖ I think it’s important for us to ask ourselves if we’re living like these are the last days. **In these last days, am I using my God-given wealth and opportunity for God-ordained purposes?** Or am I following the pattern of this world – selfishly accumulating wealth without a clear plan or purpose for its good use? Take this text as a warning – to not waste the wealth God has entrusted to you to do good in this life.

Woe to Those Who Selfishly Defraud Others

- ❖ So the first woe is to those who selfishly hoard their riches. The second is **(2) a woe to those who selfishly defraud others**. Those who have not just neglected the needy – but have actively cheated those under their power or influence. Listen to v4, *“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”*
- ❖ **Here James is proclaiming God’s disapproval and condemnation for how these wealthy landowners cheaters their workers of their pay.** In those ancient days, in that kind of agrarian economy, most people lived at a bare subsistence level. Meaning they depended on a daily wage. They would hire themselves out to rich landowners, mowing and harvesting their fields, and at the end of the day they would be compensated for that day’s work.
 - The Law codified this in order to protect day laborers. Listen to **Deuteronomy 24:14-15**, *“¹⁴You 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.”*
- ❖ But that must have been what these unrighteous landowners were doing to some in James’ audience. They were holding back wages, defrauding them. For that, they were guilty of sin. **And the cries have reached the ears of the Lord.**
 - Now notice in v4 that it’s the wages that are crying out against the rich – not the workers. It’s the unpaid (or underpaid) wages crying out. That’s fascinating. **This is not a person but an inanimate object crying out.** It’s like how in Genesis 4:10 we read of Abel’s blood crying to the Lord from the ground. And in such cases, these cries to the Lord are cries for justice or deliverance.
- ❖ James says these cries have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts (or angel armies). **It’s a stress on God’s almighty power, and how he’s coming to exact just vengeance on the oppressors of his people.** God doesn’t take lightly the pained cries of his people. He hears, and he will act, within his sovereign timing, with his almighty strength.
 - That is a word of comfort to God’s people. If you are the victim of injustice, if you have suffered under the hand of oppressors, if you have sued for justice but come up short – then cry out to God and leave vengeance to him. **Romans 12:19** reminds us, *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.””* Take comfort in that promise.
- ❖ **But this is also a word of warning to any Christian who's in a position of power – particularly if you employ the services of others.** Shudder at the thought that the Lord of host is coming to exact vengeance on oppressors – on those who selfishly defraud others. God forbid that you would do the same. Make it your goal that no employee, no worker, no laborer under you would ever cry out against you in this way.

Woe to Those Who Selfishly Indulge Themselves

- ❖ So we've seen woes to those who selfishly hoard and to those who selfishly defraud. Third, James proclaims **(3) a woe to those who selfishly indulge themselves**. To those who live in the lap of luxury without a care for those who suffer. Listen to v5, "*You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*"
- ❖ **James has in view the unrighteous rich who are living luxuriously and self-indulgently with little concern for the suffering of others**. It brings to mind the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in **Luke 16:19**. There we're introduced to a rich man, "*clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.*" Jesus is describing a life of self-indulgence. He has unlimited resources at his finger tips, and yet he won't lift a finger to help a poor man named Lazarus who laid at the rich man's gate every day begging for scraps.
 - **Now there are those who will try to argue for a moral distinction to be made between those in v4 who are actively defrauding the poor and those in v5 who are simply ignoring the poor – being so caught up in themselves**. Of course, it's usually the latter who make that argument. "Say what you will about my self-indulgent lifestyle, but at least I never cheated anyone. I never mistreated any of my servants or employees. At least I'm not like those oppressors in v4."
- ❖ I'm sure the rich man would've argued the same. "Say what you will about my fine clothes and sumptuous feasts. Sure, I'm guilty of excess. And I didn't do much to improve Lazarus' situation. But I didn't cheat him. I didn't oppress him or make him poor in the first place."
 - But James already reminded us back in chapter 4:17 that, "*whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*" So the rich man can't take comfort in the fact that he didn't defraud or oppress the poor. Because by failing to help the poor (Lazarus), he's complicit by a sin of omission. Of failing to do the right thing.
- ❖ **If anyone listening right now is not a Christian, I hope you to hear what James is saying**. Yes, he's confronting those who are actively oppressing and defrauding others. You would probably join him in condemning that behavior. Thank God that you're a decent person, and you wouldn't hurt or cheat anyone, especially someone poor and needy.
 - **But what about all those times you knew the right thing to do – you knew you could have helped someone in need – and yet you walked past them or drove through the intersection or simply turned a blind eye?** That would still be sin, and you would still be under condemnation. And a day of judgment is coming!
- ❖ James is not pulling any punches. He wants you to understand. **Otherwise you'd go on indulging yourself in this life – not doing anyone any harm but not doing them any good either**. Unaware that you're fattening yourself like livestock for "*a day of slaughter*". That's the language of v5. This is day of judgment will be a day of slaughter! **So don't let your conscience off the hook by assuming that these woes are reserved for those who are actively oppressing the poor**. No, these are for anyone who can selfishly indulge themselves while ignoring the cries of the poor.

- ❖ And as a Christian, let me be the first to admit that I'm just as guilty as you. **It's just as easy for me to walk past those in need – as I'm on my way to indulge my own pleasures, to pursue my own passions, and to fulfill my own needs.** Like you, I wasn't bothering or harming anyone. And yet, like you, I too was fattening myself up for a day of slaughter.
 - But by God's grace, I was saved from that slaughter. **I was rescued by a Savior who took my place in the slaughter.** *"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."* (Isa 53:7)
 - **And he took up his cross and bore my sins on it – including my complicit sins of omission, my failures to help the poor and powerless.** I'm only safe from that day of slaughter because I've been rescued by the Lamb of God. And that rescue, that salvation, is available to anyone – if you would only believe and receive Jesus as the Lamb who was slaughtered in your place. Friends, in the midst of all these woes, I want you to still hear a word of gospel grace.

Woe to Those Who Selfishly Oppress the Righteous

- ❖ So far we've considered a woe to those who selfishly hoard; to those who selfishly defraud; and to those who selfishly indulge. Now in v6, James sets his sights back on those more active in their mistreatment of others. This fourth woe is **(4) a woe to those who selfishly oppress the righteous.** Listen to v6, *"You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you."*
- ❖ Now I know it's a bit surprising that James would accuse the rich of not just condemning but murdering the righteous. Homicide is not out of the question. Persecution against the early Christians could get violent. **But James probably has in mind the practical outcome of all the cheating and defrauding by wealthy landowners on poor day laborers.** If you keep back their wages or take away gainful employment – the poor will eventually starve to death. In that sense, the rich and powerful are murdering the poor and lowly. That's how they're complicit in their death.
- ❖ **Throughout the history of the Church, God's people have suffered under unjust oppression.** Sometimes it's happens on a large scale through systematic persecution. Sometimes it's on an individual level through personal mistreatment or neglect by someone in a position of power.
 - **Whatever the case, it's these kinds of prophetic woes against oppressors that have historically sustained the Church's perseverance and protest against injustice.** When James says the righteous does not resist, he's not suggesting that God's people are to respond to oppression and violence like doormats. No, he simply means the righteous don't respond to violence with violence.
- ❖ We're living in a cultural moment where there's a lot of talk about civil disobedience and the need to protest and resist those in power – those who have abused their power, whether positionally, politically, or economically.

- ❖ And all this angst in society today is like a powder keg ready to blow. So many are so frustrated and so convinced that they have to take matters into their own hands and see to it themselves that justice gets done. **They have no God to turn to. No higher power who issues woes of condemnation upon their oppressors, so they feel compelled to take power for themselves.** Responding to power with power and violence with violence.
- ❖ But the Church is called to respond in a drastically different way. **We can can respond to abuses of power with peaceful protest and to violence with non-violent resistance.** Why? Because we worship a God who hears our cries; who issues his woes of condemnation; and who promises to bring down his vengeance and justice upon oppressors, in his timing and according to his righteousness.
 - **We don't have to take matters into our own hands and see to it ourselves.** That's the hope being offered in a biblical text like ours this morning. That's the word of comfort we can draw from a prophetic woe that wasn't directed towards us.