

Series James

This Message Faith Without the Fear of God is Dead part 1

“The Judge is standing at the door”

Scripture James 5:1-11

James wrote this letter to Jewish background believers who were in difficult circumstances. He desperately wanted to provide them with spiritual instruction and encouragement in order to keep them faithful to Jesus. At the beginning of the letter, he acknowledged the trials they were facing and he urged them to persevere in their faith. He said that they should consider their difficulties as opportunities to grow in their faith — that perseverance would enable them to become spiritually “mature and complete.”

In the subsequent sections of the letter he emphasized their need to seek guidance from God. He gave instructions about how to handle temptations — how to avoid falling into sinful habits. He stressed the importance of obedience to the word of God, urging them to put into practice the truths presented in God’s word.

Beginning in the 2nd chapter of the letter, James gave instructions about how his readers were to act in specific problem areas. They were to demonstrate love and mercy to everyone impartially. They were to validate their faith through appropriate deeds. James placed a great deal of emphasis on the “disciplined life.” He explained that the control of the tongue was the greatest evidence of a disciplined life.

James wanted his readers to follow the guidance of “the wisdom that comes from heaven” and not make choices based on their own desires and attitudes. He said that this would be possible only if they were humble and eager to live according to God’s standards.

James was very concerned about the terrible relational problems that had developed between believers. He pointed out that these problems were evidence that the readers were acting according to the ways of the world and, as a result, they were living as the enemies of God. He urged them to get back into an acceptable relationship with God by humbling themselves, submitting themselves to Him, drawing near to Him, repenting and changing their behaviors.

The previous subject was “Submission to the Will of God.” We learned that believers were not to slander and judge people because God was the only One qualified to be both Lawgiver and Judge. We also learned how foolish it was for believers to plan out their lives without taking into consideration God’s sovereign control over human activities and destinies.

That’s a brief review of passages we have previously thought about. James systemically addressed the issues of the reader’s worldliness and their spiritual immaturity. He wrote as both prophet and pastor, denouncing evil behavior and urging his readers to turn back to God-pleasing ways.

Today’s study is the beginning of the wrap-up of James’ instructions and pronouncements. In the reading you will recognize an echo of the very first theme from chapter 1. The key word at the beginning of the letter was “perseverance.” In our reading today the key word is “patience.” Both words relate to the need of believers to endure through the various trials and temptations they were facing. Our reading today was both a warning and an encouragement to the 1st Century believers and also to us.

Read James 5:1-11

Commentators are somewhat puzzled by verses 1 through 6 because these verses seem out of place with the other parts of the letter. Overall, the letter was written to turn the hearts and minds and behaviors of believers away from the pollution of worldly ways and to point them towards spiritual maturity. Verses 1 through 6 are the only verses in the letter which are not specifically directed to believers.

James described how these ungodly rich people were guilty of “hoarding resources, cheating their employees, living a self-indulgent lifestyle, and even murder.” Because of such evil behaviors, these rich people faced divine judgment. There was a special kind of “misery that was coming upon them,” which would be carried out “in the day of slaughter.” The question is why James inserted this information concerning non-believers in his letter.

I think there is a logical reason. If we analyze the previous topics in this letter, we will notice that each topic began with a description of a spiritual problem or issue: temptation and deception, listening to God's Word without taking action, giving preference to a rich person over the man who was poor, ignoring the brother or sister who was without clothes and daily food, presuming to teach without being qualified, harboring bitter envy and selfish ambitions, fightings and quarrels, slander.

Consistent with this pattern, James introduced today's topic with a description of the evil deeds of rich people. Then he contrasted their attitudes and behaviors to those expected of believers. The motivations of believers were to be different than those of non-believers. Believers were not to be aggressive in lifestyle. They were not to adopt the evil self-promoting habits of "rich people." They were to live in expectation of the Lord's return and the day of His judgment.

The "rich people" described in these verses had no intention of living under the authority of God or seeking His guidance. Their efforts to achieve material success were self-directed and, as time went on, they became more and more displeasing to God and more and more greedy and unethical and exploitative in their actions. They were perfect examples of the kind of people described by the Apostle Paul, "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction." Then Paul explained the reason: "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (*1 Timothy 6:9-10*).

James inserted verses 1 through 6 in the letter in order to warn his readers about the dangers of living outside the will of God. These verses were in logical sequence to verses at the end of chapter 4, where James denounced those believers who had made their plans to get wealthy without seeking guidance from the Lord. James did not want his readers to become engaged in activities which would lead them further and further into worldly practices.

Unfortunately, because the recipients of this letter were living in poverty, their desires for wealth and possessions were luring them further and further away from their devotion to Christ and love of others. Already, they were criticizing each other, and there were “fights and quarrels” among them. Already their circumstances were so unChrist-like that it would be only a small step for some of the believers to become thoroughly corrupted by materialism. The description of rich people in verses 1 through 6 was James’ attempt to make real the dangers of being caught up in the love of wealth.

In the 1st Century, wealth was determined not only by the amount of money a person had, but also by such commodities as grain, oil, and clothing. James reminded his readers of the impermanence of these tangible items. He wrote that hoarded wealth does not last. Grain and oil can become rotten, moths can eat holes in expensive clothing, and gold and silver can become corroded.

James went on to explain that wealth is often obtained through dishonest and exploitative practices, when rich people take what rightfully belongs to others; for example, the wages earned by workmen. Wealthy people typically pursue a self-indulgent lifestyle. Since they had money in abundance, whatever they desired in regard to luxury and pleasure was obtainable. The final crime of the wicked rich mentioned by James was their condemnation and murder of innocent people. The implication was that rich persons act unjustly toward those who have no ability to defend themselves.

James provided this description of rich people so that his readers would recognize the dangers of forsaking God in the pursuit of worldly ambitions. Not only did the forsaking of God have implications during the years of life on earth, but the ultimate danger would be having to confront God, the holy righteous Judge, at the end of the age. Believers knew that everyone would stand before God and give an account of their actions “in the last days.” James identified it as a “day of slaughter” for evildoers. James wanted his readers to know that the pursuit of wealth to the neglect of pursuing God was sheer folly, and that the temporal accumulation of wealth was not comparable to the benefits of an eternal relationship with God.

In verse 7 James began to apply his instructions to the situation of his readers. James wanted his “brothers” in the Lord to patiently endure their circumstances, to endure even the abuse and oppression of the rich people around them. He wanted them to control their materialistic desires and patiently persevere “until the Lord’s coming.”

The recipients of this letter were apparently so wrapped up in their difficult circumstances that they had lost sight of their spiritual goal. Instead of using their circumstances as opportunities to become spiritually stronger, they had adopted worldly attitudes and ambitions as a way to get ahead materially. They were questioning the value of following the Lord since this would require them to experience hardship, practice self-denial, and endure suffering.

James would agree with that assessment. “Yes,” he would say, “living to please God through the trials of this life is difficult, but it is definitely worth the effort, because at the return of Christ, He will reward you and punish the wicked. Be faithful and patient and wait for the Lord’s coming!” James had made this same point earlier in chapter 1, when he wrote: “blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (*James 1:12*).

In his exhortation for the readers to “be patient until the Lord’s coming,” James made use of three illustrations. The first illustration was that of the farmer who waited patiently “for the fall and spring rains.” In Middle Eastern countries, wheat and barley seed was sown in late September and early October. The early rains fell in October and November. The spring rains came in April and May as the grain was growing. There was nothing the farmers could do during the winter months but to wait patiently and hopefully for the harvest to ripen.

The term “patience” by itself implied passivity. There wasn’t much of anything the farmer could do between sowing and reaping. In the context of the difficulties of the believers, patience meant that they were not to retaliate against their oppressors or try to take matters into their own hands in regard to their circumstances. In verse 8, James added the expression, “stand firm,” to his call for “patience.” The recipients of this letter needed to apply both terms to their lives. On the one hand, they needed to slow down and not rush into questionable self-directed activities. They needed to have a more passive and detached attitude toward their troubles. On the other hand they needed to be on their guard against temptations and inappropriate activities, and they needed to actively maintain their faith commitment to Jesus.

The expression, “stand firm,” means to “put forth a determined effort.” In view of the Lord’s coming, believers were expected to keep themselves spiritually strong, to keep their hearts focused on the ways of the Lord, maintain their hope in the promises of the Lord, and remain unmoved by the adverse circumstances of life.

References to “the Lord’s coming” are given in Scripture to stimulate “hope” and to convey “certainty.” The preceding sections of this letter indicated that the believers had lost their hope about the future, and in their despair were acting in worldly ways. They had lost their confidence in the Lord. In verses 7 and 8 James was trying to turn their thinking back to the “hope” and “certainties” that the Lord was going to set everything right. The first steps on the way back required the believers to “wait on the Lord” with “patience” and to “stand firm” on the promises of God.

We must understand the word “near” in the context of this age. When the New Testament uses the term “last days,” it refers to the period between the day of Pentecost and the return of Jesus Christ. This is the age of the Holy Spirit, the age of gathering souls into the kingdom of God. The early Church lived in the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ, and believers were exhorted to live in faithfulness and to always be ready for that glorious event.

The instructions in verses 7 and 8 concerned the attitudes and behavior of believers toward the evildoers who were oppressing and persecuting them, individuals like the rich people described earlier. The instruction in verse 9 is concerned with the behavior among believers. The fact that believers were “grumbling against each other” was evidence that they were not waiting patiently for the Lord’s return. According to verse 9, the believers would be judged for this behavior. James stated that “the Judge was at the door,” another way of stating that “the Lord’s coming was near.”

We can understand the stress that the believers were under, and that they could lose patience with each other. However, James was not going to accept from them any excuses for their negative attitudes and their complaining. It was James’ belief that the believers needed a renewed vision of the soon-to-return Christ. The renewed vision would restore “hope” and bring contentment and stability to their lives in spite of their adversities.

I stated earlier that James’ exhortation concerning patience was built around three illustrations. The first was the patience of the farmer. The second illustration was that of “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” The readers understood that all the Old Testament prophets experienced affliction and rejection and reproach because their task was to denounce the sins of the people. Their messages were always unpopular.

In spite of the unfavorable circumstances of their lives, none of the prophets abandoned their callings and turned away from the Lord. James wanted his readers to consider how these prophets remained faithful and steadfast, and he wanted his readers to follow their examples.

The third illustration was Job. It is interesting that James did not use the word “patience” in his description of Job. Job was not, in fact, a good example of a patient man. He was, however, an outstanding example of perseverance throughout his time of affliction. Job had to deal with the loss of his children, everything that he owned, and excruciating bodily pains. He was confused about the causes of his afflictions, but he did not forsake his confidence and trust in the Lord. He affirmed his faith by saying, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (*Job 1:21*), and, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?” (*Job 2:10*). Job was a man who kept the end in sight. “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes. ... How my heart yearns within me!” (*Job 19:25-27*). Job was able to bear up under the severity of his afflictions because he never lost sight of God.

In verse 11 James wrote, “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.” Perhaps the readers did know this truth intellectually, but they had not been behaving in a way in which they themselves would qualify for God’s blessing. Quite the opposite, they had set themselves up for judgment. James wanted them to turn their lives around and to live like Job lived. If the readers would do this, then they would be rewarded for their perseverance as Job was rewarded for his perseverance. God gave him “twice as much as he had before” (*Job 42:10-17*). He was proof of the blessing that “the Lord finally brought about.”

James was convinced that the Lord would also do this for his readers because the Lord “is full of compassion and mercy.” James was pleading for stout-hearted perseverance in the trying circumstances that were confronting his readers. There were four requirements in his exhortation: The readers needed to have “patience,” they needed to “stand firm” with “hope” and “confidence,” they needed to change their negative attitudes and stop complaining, and they needed to begin to follow the examples of the prophets and Job.

This is instruction that still applies to believers today.