

James 5:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text for this morning is quite a long stretch of Scripture. It is, in fact the entire final chapter of James' writing. He begins the closing of what was likely a sermon with these words, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your 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. 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. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of

slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”

Yes, these words are certainly timeless. They could have been shouted out at any point in human history. The Israelites could have shouted this at Pharaoh as they made their way out of Egypt. They could have been shouted by the peasants in Israel against the ruling class during the time of the prophets. They could be part of the demonstrations against the Romans by the Jews in Jesus’ day. And they also would easily find a place within the rhetoric of many in our own country today. And that thought likely makes many of you rather uncomfortable. As it should.

Indeed, it is always easy to blame people with more than you have. As such, “the rich” are an easy target for disdain and hatred. They become so obsessed with gaining more and more wealth that they exploit others. They are willing to step on

people in their endless pursuit of more and more money. They make decisions seemingly without further thought that hurt many people. Even God himself in his Word is calling them to repentance, for crying out loud! They have made themselves fat in a time of slaughter. They have gathered up for themselves things that will pass away and are meaningless in the long run. They are the greatest of fools, and deserve every misfortune that can be visited upon them.

And let us not forget that James tells us how the rich oppress us! We are the victims of their evil schemes. All of our problems are because of the rich who don't give us what's rightfully ours. Indeed, now is the time of their misery and their slaughter. Now is the time for them to get their rightful comeuppance.

However, before we get too far down the path of violence, let us ask a question. What did a rich person look like in James'

day? They had more than one set of clothes. They wore jewelry. They lived in houses large enough to house people in many rooms. They had the resources to procure food that was needed more than a few days in advance. Oh, that's it? They weren't all people living in fancy mansions or mean old men who were plotting to destroy people? I certainly don't see myself or my family as rich, but yet if I were to talk to a member of the church in Jerusalem from the first century, they would think I was some sort of nobility! And they would think the same of you as well. We live in one of the richest nations on earth in one of the more prosperous times that the human race has ever experienced.

Having wealth isn't something that is inherently immoral in and of itself. If we hurt people or do immoral things to protect or grow our wealth, that is when it becomes a problem. This is the message that James is getting at in our text, but it becomes almost impossible to hear in our current political climate. And

this is the problem when we allow our politics to shape our theology rather than the other way around. It is far, far too easy to get wrapped up in the hate and vitriol of our world. It is almost impossible to avoid seeing those who may disagree about this policy or that debate as something that is still just as human as us.

The reality is that life is hard enough without us seeking who to blame and trying to exact vengeance against people who often have done us no wrong. Yes, there are natural consequences for people who abuse others, but we are not called into action against them in this text. We all have our struggles and our trials, which is what James speaks of in the next part of the text, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the

coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”

It is not our job to make the world righteous or good, because that is reserved for our Lord Jesus Christ alone. He is the one who will repay evil for evil and good for good. He is the judge and he is coming. For some, that thought breeds fear and dread. For others, it brings comfort and hope. But either way,

the Lord will return. This has been the promise that Christians just like us have put their hope in through every generation.

It is easy to grumble against one another. I praise God that you all have been able to resist this temptation for the most part. We are a congregation that stands together. Sadly, this is not something that can be said about some gatherings of Christ's people. May he defend and protect us from going down that path. But even without having large scale strife or conflict, it is easy to hold grudges and grumble against one another, even in a private setting. Some of those grumblings may even have merit! And this ought not surprise us because we are all sinners. When sinners do sinful things, it ought not surprise us. However, we need to keep in mind that we too are sinners and we have ourselves done something at some time or another that would give someone grounds to grumble against us.

Rather than grumble, we are called to perseverance. We are called to stand firm. This is something that is hard for the Church to hear. Again and again, we see in the New Testament that we are not called to action, but to perseverance. We are not called to take the sword and conquer the world for Christ. We are not called to purge the world of heretics or evil. We are not called to battle at the drop of a hat. Rather, we are called to suffer.

Indeed, when we want to see an example of what suffering looks like, we need only turn our attention to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It was Christ who suffered for you and for me. What's more, he suffered because of us! It was our sins that lead him to the cross. It was our grumblings and hate that necessitated the only-begotten, sinless son of God to be nailed to the cross and brutally executed. He did that in your place and mine.

And he did it not for the sake of punishing this group or that class of people. He didn't die in order to really make clear his stance on a certain topic. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not give up his life because of politics. He did not die as an unappreciated and failed activist who sought to change the world. No, Jesus died for us out of his love. He died for your redemption and mine. He died not to change the world, but to save the world. He died to pay the price for all of the sin, evil, violence, and vitriol that is in our world today. He died because we need a savior who can be above our petty and ridiculous arguments and wrestling matches. He died so that you and I would have forgiveness for our sins and thereby be as clean and sinless and he was and is.

In Christ we have life, and hope, and salvation. In Christ we have forgiveness of sins. In Christ, we have eternal life. In Christ, we have a kind of riches that the world can never take

away. This is where we find our identity. We don't find our primary identity in our ethnic background, our social class, our level of education, or our political affiliation. We find our identity first and foremost in Christ and him crucified for our sins. This is because the death and resurrection of Christ is for all people. He died for the rich and poor, the highly educated and those with a lower level of education. He died for conservatives and liberals. He died for all people throughout time and he redeems all people the same.

This reality changes how we might view our neighbor. We ought not to view them as inhuman monsters unworthy of redemption or decency. We see them as people who our Lord cared about enough to die for. And if he cared about them enough to do that, maybe we should treat them with some dignity ourselves.

And when we consider our fellow Christians, we are encouraged to see them in a particular way as well. We do not see each other as enemies. We don't try to make a go of things on our own, wanting to only keep to "our kind." Rather, James tells us, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain

on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

We are called to be together! We seek to care for one another when we are ill. We look out for each other. When we see someone falling away from Christ, we reach out to them. Not because we save ourselves, but we help to save someone else. For a person to return to Christ is to cover over a multitude of sins because Christ has covered that person once again in his own righteous forgiveness. This is what we have. This is who we are called to be. May God grant that we are able to love one another enough to not be divided by petty differences in our world, but that we would all see our identity in Christ and

looking to him, walk together. This is what Christ has called his Church to be. It is an incredible thing when it happens. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.