

Faith That Works: Greed, Patience, and Justice
By Jason Huff
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Deuteronomy 24:10-15,17-22; 2 Peter 3:8-15; James 5:1-12

Our final Scripture reading today is James 5:1-12. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy, perfect, and sacred Word. “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon 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 workmen 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 innocent men, who were not opposing you. Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, 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 consider 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. Above all, my brothers, do not swear -- not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.”

Who do you relate to most in the Bible? I think most people have a favorite Bible character. People love Jesus, no doubt, we Christians tend to be taken with Jesus. But most of us find someone we relate to that speaks to us in a certain way. A lot of people relate to Peter – the brash guy who doesn't always say the right thing, who makes serious mistakes, bull in a china shop, but he genuinely loves Jesus. Maybe you relate to the prodigal son in the parable who came home after wandering away from the faith. Or maybe you relate to Mary and Martha, pulled between all the work that has to be done and wanting to stop and spend time with Jesus. When I was young, I admired Solomon and his wisdom. When I went into ministry, I said I wanted to be an Isaiah, bringing a message of hope, rather than a Jeremiah of gloom and doom.

But what's true about all the people I mentioned – except for Solomon, who went off the rails – these are people we are supposed to want to be like. How often do we hear the Pharisees and say, “That's me! That's me!”? How often do we hear the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad because he couldn't imagine selling all his possessions to follow Jesus and say, “Me too, brother?” How many of us want to admit that we're like the prodigal son's brother who's mad because nobody recognizes his faithfulness when his brother comes home and has a feast thrown in his honor?

Maybe we don't say it out loud, but if we're honest with ourselves, we can relate to some of the enemies of Jesus. I believe that's intentional. These folks are in the Bible as warnings to us. It is very easy for us to assume that once we say we believe, because Jesus is forgiving all is well. But there are people who aren't right with God scattered throughout Scripture, descriptions of these folks too, and it's wise to pay attention.

James changes his tone in today's passage, and for the first time, he addresses unbelievers. The letter was meant for the church, but James goes on a rant against "the rich." Once he's done, he goes back to addressing brothers and sisters in the church. Now either he's just having a moment, or he's got a point. I believe he is addressing those who are a part of the church body who need to repent, and quickly, of their riches before it is too late, because those riches are going to keep them from the kingdom of God. Let's look at the first section of James' letter to find out how this warning might apply to us.

Misery is coming on the rich. Why? Everything they own will pass away at death and judgment. They have invested in clothing, fineries, gold and silver. But their wealth has rotted and corroded because all their purchases aren't even used. Moths eat clothes in the closet, not the clothes you wear. Bowls, dishes, settings, luxury items corrode because they aren't even polished. They are hoarding things they don't even use!

We're not talking about what you see on TV, people who hold onto useless stuff because of personal issues and mental conditions. We're not talking about holding onto every newspaper since 1943. We're talking about holding on to excess wealth for one's self. Having plenty, having enough to share, having enough to bring joy to others, and yet keeping it sitting in a closet, rotting away. That rot is what will testify against them before God. It's a harsh judgment, but one we need to hear.

In our modern world, we must evaluate what this means for us. For example, most of us will live long past retirement. Not a given, by any stretch, but unlike virtually any time in history, on average if we retire at 65 we'll live another 15 years. Those of us with kids are looking at college expenses way outpacing inflation. In a world where guaranteed pensions are all but gone, how do you define hoarding your money? It doesn't mean not saving for retirement, saving for college, and saving so that you aren't causing others grief later in life.

Following James' logic, we see it more as this: what do we buy that has little or no purpose? What do we buy that doesn't benefit others and doesn't even benefit us? How enamored are we with things that don't matter? Driving a new car, having the latest and greatest? Buying out of fear of missing out, or thinking it won't come back around again? I learned that lesson with CDs and DVDs. I'm glad for some purchases, but so much of it is unused most of the time. It's money I regret spending in my teens and 20s. Everybody has something that they're more than willing to spend money on wastefully, depending on your habits and hobbies. This is where we must be mindful, willing to give it away, to sell it and give the proceeds to those in need, because stuff that has a hold on us holds us back from Jesus.

Oskar Schindler spent his fortune helping Jews escape the Nazi regime. He wasn't a deeply moral man; they were workers in his factories; they allowed him to continue making money. Yet he spent over a million dollars saving nearly 1,100 souls, almost going broke. There's a point in the film *Schindler's List* where they honor him and he has a breakdown, wondering if he could have saved more if he had sold his car or his gold lapel pin. He is stricken by those he lost because he casually held onto more of his wealth. He's a man honored today by the Jewish people for what he did. Maybe this was just a Hollywood scene. Yet none of us wants to face the idea that we loved our stuff more than we loved our neighbor.

It's a heart issue. One person, Jesus told, "sell everything." Another He welcomed into the Kingdom giving away half his wealth – and that was a man known for cheating others as a tax collector! Where is your heart with God about what you have? What could you not part with? Do your things define you? What hold do they have on you? I admit, dealing with this issue in James over the past several weeks, I've got some things going up on EBay. What will you do to combat the hold of material goods on your life?

Some of the other issues here may apply to us. The rich failed to pay their workers their wages, and the cries of the impoverished reach God for judgment. I would go into more detail here if we had business owners in our congregation – but seeing that we don't, I just want to expand this a little to think about our own purchasing ethics. We may not have workers, but it matters how we treat the people who work on our behalf. Might be tipping our waitress. Might be avoiding companies that exploit others. We can't know every situation, and many corporations (despite what some say) are very ethical. But as much as it depends on us, we act justly towards others.

Have we lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence, condemning and murdering innocent men by withholding their financial due? By our culture's standards, none of our CrossWay regulars lives in opulence. I don't think any of us have intentionally kept someone from keeping their families fed and clothed. But again, we must look at it beyond a literal perspective. Do we live for self-indulgence, what we might call leisure, and pay little attention to the needs around us?

A luxury is something we don't need. That describes a lot of things in my house and, probably, yours! There are 2.6 TVs in the average American home. That's gone down, but only because those under 25 use phones to watch videos. Our economy sells leisure. Having free time isn't bad, but in that free time, what do we do? Do we amass more stuff, do we play around with stuff, spend all our time and money on our pleasures, or do we take an interest in those around us in need? *How is God's call to love our neighbors as ourselves reflected in how we spend our time, talents, and treasures?*

Because we have a choice. We can live justly, we can live to serve others, we can choose career paths and make life choices that show our neighbors matter, that we care about others, or we can choose to live for ourselves. Ultimately, this condemnation is for that second choice. Not everyone who lives for themselves gets rich; there are plenty of broke selfish people. But we cannot live for self any longer. We live for Jesus. That's the heart of being a disciple.

The second section about patience at first seems unrelated, but James tells the church how to do with the fallout of greed in their culture. A relatively few wealthy families had the means to buy up land from those who were subsistence farmers and exploiting them. They broke Jewish law about returning ancestral lands and paying workers, the whole bit. What were they to do? A lot of the wealthy exploiters had positions of authority and power. Bribes could be paid; judges could be bought. What was their recourse?

James gives an answer that is unpopular these days. Be patient for the Lord to come and justify you. The Lord will repay. Be like the farmer who waits on the rains, toils in the fields waiting for a crop, doing his work without yet seeing the benefit of his labor. Look at the perseverance of the prophets, who spoke the Lord's word faithfully even though it meant suffering for years at the hands of those who didn't want to listen. Job lost everything he had, he persevered, and the Lord eventually brought him justice. Be like them, James says. "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."

Our world says slow justice is no justice. Justice delayed is justice denied. We've heard the slogans. It *is* unjust to delay justice once all the facts have been heard and the truth is fully known. But the fact is, not all the facts are in yet. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us this – "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God's justice is coming. The only reason that it hasn't already taken place is because some will repent. Some will, by the grace of God, enter the Kingdom of God. Some who have mistreated you will have a change of heart, like Zacchaeus who met Jesus and gave back all he'd stolen. Those who don't, well, their ill-gotten gains will be used as evidence of their guilt.

But what about justice now? It's not easy to be patient when the unemployment check is four months late. It's not easy to be patient when bills are coming due. It's not easy to be patient when it seems like others have their lives together and we don't. Why doesn't God step in and do something about our situation right now?

James anticipates this because he warns against grumbling against one another. We can be wronged by someone and then turn that righteous anger into unrighteous anger at others. Instead of pursuing true justice, we grumble that our friends or neighbors have more than we do. We can grumble that they aren't doing enough to help. It can lead to us lashing out at those who are trying to help.

There's a phrase that Catha and I use often that reminds us of a simple truth when lashing out happens: "hurt people hurt people." People who complain, grumble, or go further and try to hurt others...we remind ourselves that those vicious remarks or cutting comments are coming from their own wounds. They lash out in their pain at the first available target. We understand it, we forgive it. Everyone is hurt sometimes, and everyone lashes out sometimes because of it. We forgive and forgive again because Jesus has forgiven us and shown us grace.

But for some people, anger and rage at life's injustices becomes a regular way of life. That's what James addresses. Yes, you've been wronged, but that's no reason to turn on one another. Wait for the Lord to carry out His judgment. Violence and looting in our streets, which we've seen recently, isn't about justice -- it's the end result of grumbling about the unfairness of things, and often people who have nothing to do with the real injustice are hurt! Injustice cannot be solved with more injustice! Do we need to do our best to end injustice in our world, in our country? Absolutely! We do what's within our power to treat people with love and kindness and respect. We work to end injustice. But when we take matters into our own hands – that's what James is talking about. That is what will be judged, when we wind up hurting our neighbor

James then turns to a final thought – don’t swear by heaven or earth or anything else but use “yes” and “no”. Jesus said much the same thing. We really don’t make oaths this way now, but in that era, without police, with limited judges, how could you know someone wouldn’t go back on their word? You invoke something religious. Pledge you will be in trouble with your god if you break a promise. You stake your life and maybe your eternity on your oath.

Sounds good. And yet these pledges didn’t mean much. The Pharisees said you didn’t have to keep a pledge if you swore on God’s temple or God’s altar, for example, but you had to keep your word if you swore by the gold in the temple or the gift on the altar. Jesus called them out on it because it disrespected God and their promises both. It made their oaths useless. Say yes or no; keep your promises, but don’t bring God into the equation.

For James’ audience, wronged as they were, mistreated as they were, needing support and help and finances as they were, it would have been easy for them to try and take a shortcut. Just keeping your word wasn’t enough for many lenders who might consider extending you credit. It would have been easy – take a pledge, swear an oath, then you get your loan, your seeds, whatever. It might not seem like anything, but it is – breaking the straightforward teaching of Christ to deal with your problematic situation.

And that’s the thing we can chew on today...*shortcuts can short-circuit our relationship with God*. There are as many tempting shortcuts as there are problems in life that would make us consider them. I’ll give you my example. We pay massive taxes on our home; ridiculous, unfair. It’d be easy to figure out a way to put the house in the church’s name so that it would be part of a non-profit and be tax free. Lot of money in doing that. And yet every time I’ve thought of it, I’ve thought, *how does getting around my personal property taxes honor God?* Especially since the church doesn’t really own our home? The Holy Spirit keeps shutting that down.

For you, your shortcuts may be different. Might be anything from cheating on a test in school because you “deserve” a better grade to getting out of paying a ticket for breaking a law because “everybody does it.” (Of course, there are bigger, more dangerous shortcuts too.) But I bring up the little ones because they still cause damage to us. They are still our way of trying to make our own justice rather than letting God settle scores.

Here’s the wrap-up. Greed will be judged, so don’t get wrapped up in it. There will be injustice in the world due to the evil of the greedy, but be patient and God will lift you up in due time. Whatever you do, don’t turn on one another and take shortcuts to justice. This is a tough world with real sin and real evil in it, but we are followers of Jesus. We don’t fall into the trap of believing that wealth can make us truly happy. Only a real relationship with Jesus can do that. May we trust in Him, patiently waiting for Him to come, avoiding the pitfalls of this world and enjoying the freedom that comes from finding our hope and justice in Him.