

Treasure in the Last Days

James 4:13-5:8

We are, I think, two or three services away from finishing our study on James, the half brother of the Lord Jesus. In January, we looked at passages from the gospels and the book of Acts where James was mentioned or made an appearance. Starting in February, we began to work our way through this five chapter letter that James sent the early Jewish disciples of Jesus who had left Judea and were struggling to live for Christ out in Greek and Roman places where there was little sympathy for a way of life defined by a village carpenter from Galilee of all places. So it wasn't an easy life for these Galileans and Judean Christians far from home.

And James has written his letter in a stern, dusty, desert fashion that must have reminded the Jewish disciples who read his words of their own prophets from home, and John the Baptist and Jesus himself. The book has an Old Testament ring to it that I told you in January puzzled and upset Martin Luther, a medieval German Catholic monk who, fifteen hundred years after Jesus and James, had thrown over the whole medieval system to base his life on a concept of grace he had found in his Bible.

Luther was a New Testament professor overwhelmed by Israel's stern, holy, desert God until one day he read in a letter from Paul that "*the righteous man shall live by faith!*" So Luther kept reading Paul's letters and took to heart statements of Paul like this one, written to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God, so that no one may boast.*" And on this foundation, God's grace, given to us if we will only believe it is so, on this foundation, Luther built a life where God's holiness was not too scary for him to reach for and try to understand.

And Luther's insistence that what the Word of God actually said about grace and faith and forgiveness outweighed the religion taught by the medieval priests and bishops and popes set in motion seismic forces in Western Europe that would result in the steady rise of a new civilization where popes and kings and bishops and priests would have less and less authority and influence over people's souls. And the question we're still trying to answer today is what and who will take their place. King and queens and lords and ladies hung on for four hundred years before most of them were swept away in the First World War. Republics and democracies are on the rise to the extent they can hold together and not be swept away themselves by revolutions and tyrants.

So what is the place for God and church and kingdom and gospel in the struggle to set standards and boundaries and guidelines for all of life? Well, the original reformers, Luther, Calvin, and

the rest only began to give us coherent answer, caught up as they were in the tidal forces their own gospel set in motion. Even so great changes took place! Individual freedom and individual responsibility had to grow in societies where each person was encouraged to learn and interpret the word of God in light of his own conscience.

But the early Reformers were conservative in that they believed that every word of Scripture was absolutely true and absolutely authoritative correctly understood. That is the tradition that came down from Luther and Calvin through Puritans like Jonathan Edwards and Father John Spencer to us. That the Word of God is absolutely true and absolutely authoritative in absolutely every instance correctly understood is in our Statement of Faith today. Now this morning I've added the phrase "correctly understood" because I've learned through hard experience that what God says in his Word, the purity and goodness and wisdom and love that lives in God's heart is entirely foreign to us.

It's a fact we should take to heart because, in the chaos and warfare in the centuries following the Reformation, there grew a school of thought that the Bible is not necessarily true and not necessarily authoritative. Immanuel Kant, a philosopher, held that religious truth should be private truth, that what people think about God and other intangibles only applies to their own thoughts and feelings and should not be given weight in the world of cause and effect and facts.

At about the same time, a theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, took Kant's logic a step further and said, in so many words, that God gave us a Bible to engage our hearts and minds so that we could evolve as the Bible did, he claims, from a state of fear and alienation toward God to a state where our hearts are so warmed and enlightened that we can make moral and ethical decisions without consulting what the Scriptures command. So, for Schleiermacher, the stories the Scriptures tell didn't necessarily happen. The particulars of God's commandments don't necessarily apply. If our hearts are right and our intentions are good, we can follow our hearts!

I mention Kant and Schleiermacher because their concept of how God engages with people and what the Scriptures are for have run amuck in the hearts and minds of modern people, most of whom have never heard of Kant or Schleiermacher. But unless and until we make it our business to read and know what the Bible really says about right and wrong and marriage and family and life and death, we will drift in the direction that Kant and Schleiermacher set people spinning some three hundred years ago. And that tide is sweeping us away from God and away from truth...and, most dangerously, away from grace, because grace is one of those particulars that drift beyond our reach once we decide that we can follow our hearts over and against what the Scriptures teach in particular.

And it is that kind of drift that causes modern Christians to hear James the Just, the ancients called him, but we hear him and we're tempted to think of him as James the Grouch. But he sounds grouchy to us because he had no patience for the sort of drift that was already at work in the ancient church centuries before Kant and Schleiermacher would teach it as a philosophy. James sounds foreign to us because he learned with his mother's milk that strange heavenly language where purity and goodness and wisdom and love are expressed in a way that keeps our hearts on the straight and narrow.

It is that language, foreign as it may sound, that James has been speaking to us. Have you heard him this winter and spring? *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world... You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity toward God. Therefore he who wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'God desires earnestly the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.'*

And it is that zeal that lives in God's heart to be first in our thoughts and affections that sets James to scolding us again in our Call to Worship. *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there and make a profit' - yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring!"* You read this and you almost want to say, "What's your problem now? Are you against planning? Are you against business trips? You against people making a profit or having money?"

We hear James this way because we're worried about our prerogatives. We wonder what kind of God wouldn't want us to work hard and plan well and prosper. But it's not being in business or being on the move or having money that's got James scolding us again. It's the fact that we are so wrapped up our work and our plans and our future that we live and act as if God weren't sovereign and he didn't matter. Religion becomes a sideline or a hobby, and Christ becomes a mascot, and not the pearl beyond all price, not the treasure in a field we sell our house to get our hands on.

James knew we'd have to work, he knows business trips are necessary, and profits are good. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were both rich, probably both worked hard. Yet it was in their hearts to spend a fortune to see Jesus buried with honor on the day that he died for us. In the book of Acts, Barnabas came to Jerusalem one Pentecost, a rich landowner, and he left the city some years later having sold his lands to see God's people set up in the holy city and he become Paul's mentor. So it's not a sin to plan well and work hard and have money! The point here is that it's a great sin, a dangerous sin, to fail to love God first and treat him like God.

What James is after here is a heart orientation. So he keeps scolding! *“Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming your way!”* Both the commentators I look to for help in understanding James noted that James’ words here are an echo of what Israel’s prophets had been saying to God’s people all the centuries they were in the Promised Land. And the point here again is not that it’s a crime to be rich, more that it’s a danger. *“You cannot serve God and money,”* Jesus taught. *“The love of money is the root of all evil,”* Paul warned us. The picture James draws here is of people suiting themselves and feeding themselves and dressing themselves all out of proportion to what they really need and what God put us on the planet to really do.

And both commentators were quick to note that there probably weren’t many among James readers who could hold gold and silver long enough that it would rust, or who had enough clothing stored up that the moths could get at it. Remember James opened this letter encouraging his readers to *“Count it all joy my brothers and sisters, when you are faced with various trials...”*

It is likely here that James excoriates the rich as a way of encouraging his readers to remember his brother’s words, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall be comforted.”* The quintessential *“righteous man”* James has in mind and writes about here, who was *“condemned and murdered”* by the wealthy and powerful, but *“did not resist”* was almost certainly Jesus, whose principal crime was that he tore apart the temple shopping mall on the busiest holiday of the year and cost the temple authorities a fortune.

Jesus wept that week at the city gates on Palm Sunday and at Gethsemane as Maundy Thursday turned into Good Friday. And James’ point here is that now the tables are about to turn and it will be the rich and powerful and selfish who will be weeping. *“You have lived in luxury on earth and self indulgence. You have stored up treasure in the last days. You have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.”*, So James speaks to the oppressive rich. But to his readers, James has a different message.

“Be patient therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious harvest of the earth, persevering at it till the land has had the early and the late rains.” His words about early and late rains was a local thing, probably brought tears to the eyes of his readers who were far away from Judea and Galilee. Israel was a temperate enough place that you could reap two harvests a year, in the early fall and in the spring. And there were two rainy seasons that were timed to nourish each harvest if God was good and it actually rained.

But the spiritual harvest that Jesus taught about in the Parable of the Sower was a more certain thing than the physical harvest that sometimes failed if the weather wasn't right. Because the spiritual harvest Jesus promised us is founded on the unconditional grace that belongs to those souls who know their poverty and despair in tears of saving themselves and turn to Jesus for the purity and honesty and goodness and wisdom that their own souls can't provide.

So James writes to them and to us, *"You also be patient. Fortify your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."* Jesus put it this way, he said, *All that the Father gives me will come to me. And the one who comes to me I will never, ever cast out."* Paul put it this way, he said, *"For I am confident of this very thing, that God who began a good work in you will perfect it till the day of Christ Jesus."* Tears are necessary and valuable because it is tears about this life, tears about the state of our souls that will lead us to seek grace. And grace, once we've found it, will never let us down. Two inconvenient facts have led James to teach in a direction we seldom want to hear nowadays.

The first is the depth of the Fall. Because we've listened to a Serpent, our own tongues can be poisonous, our own hearts can become faithless and double minded with God, posing as his children and living as his enemies. And the second is the certainty of Judgment Day. We will answer to God as to whether we have trusted in him and learned to love him and treat him as God in our own lives. And the only solution to these realities is for us to turn to God for his grace and power which can free us now from how deep we've fallen, and can save us then on Judgment Day because we belong to Jesus and he has made us his own, as a gift by his grace which we could never earn.