How the Love of Money Impacts Relationships with Others

James 5:1-6

**Come now, you rich people, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have corroded, and their corrosion will serve as a testimony against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of armies. You have lived for pleasure on the earth and lived luxuriously; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous person; he offers you no resistance.**

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the fifth chapter of the epistle of James. Today we are beginning the final chapter of this epistle, which will begin by discussing the behavior of those who place their total worth and dependence on their wealth. In the previous chapter we discussed how the actions of a follower of Christ can either prove that faith is strong or weak. Last Sunday we were looking at the frailty of life and we discovered that when someone is arrogant in thinking that they have total authority over their lives that results in very bad consequences. Chapter 5 verses 1-6 address the rich and make it very clear that those who place their dependence on their wealth, abuse those who are not as rich as them and rely entirely on their comfort are not using the situation they have been put in to glorify God, their only concern is to elevate themselves. We will discuss three crucial points in our time together today that will allow us to think carefully about our own lives and where we place our reliance. Firstly, we will learn that where we place our reliance will have eternal consequences. Secondly, the way we treat others who do not have the blessings we have shows others how legitimate our relationship with Christ is. Finally, we will discover that if our only desire is to have comfort in this life then that is all we can expect.

In verse 1 James addresses his audience for this passage. His audience are the rich who live in the communities all around the known world at that time. We must remember that this epistle is addressed to Jews who are believers in Christ who have been dispersed all over the world. After identifying the audience, he then tells them that they need to “weep and howl” because there are about to be many miseries which will be coming upon them. Why are the rich being told to expect to experience miseries? Is it evil or wrong to be wealthy? The answer to that question is no because even in the ministry of Jesus there were some who helped to finance the ministry. We are told that Joanna the wife of Chuza and Herod’s steward Susanna helped to finance the ministry. These women had funds, which they used for the work of the kingdom. Therefore, it is not evil or wrong to have wealth. But, as we have discussed before, the major problem with wealth and followers of Christ is that people become so enamored with how much money they have that it gets in the way of their relationship with God. One great example of this is the exchange Jesus had with the rich young man in the gospel of Matthew chapter 16 verses 16-23 **“And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do so that I may obtain eternal life?” And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not give false testimony; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to Him, “All these I have kept; what am I still lacking?” Jesus said to him, “If you want to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property. And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at them, Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”** This discussion explains for us exactly the problem that James is addressing in this first verse. The rich are not evil because they have money and great possessions. They are evil because they have used those riches to mistreat others. They are to expect miseries in the future because they have taken the riches God had blessed them with and abused those who were not as fortunate as them. As we continue through the passage, we will find out how they had done that.

Another interesting part of this passage is that the disciples ask Jesus a question that gets to the attitude that the people of that time had towards wealth. When Jesus told them how difficult it is for a rich person to get into the kingdom of God, they responded by asking Him “Then who can be saved?” The assertion here is that if even the wealthy have a tough time getting into heaven won’t it be even more difficult for others to get there? This is the traditional idea that wealth automatically means that God has blessed that person and they are assured of salvation. Jesus makes it clear that it is not wealth that saves, but a repentant heart that puts the gospel first. The final statement Jesus makes is very powerful. He says that with God all things are possible, so even the wealthy can be saved with God’s guidance.

As we move on to verses 2-3, we see that James is telling them that their reliance on their riches is misguided because the things they had put so much faith in are now rotting, becoming moth-eaten and are corroding. These three categories address everything that the rich usually concern themselves with the most. The rich are concerned with their stores of food, which are rotting, their fancy clothing which have become moth-eaten and their treasures which are corroding. Silver and gold are certainly pretty, but those metals will eventually decay just like everything else in this world. Once all those possessions have faded away, it will eventually lead to the person having their flesh consumed by fire. If the only thing someone lives for is their earthly possessions, then when they are all gone there is nothing left to live for. This is why it is so important for all people to realize that being worried about their possessions is really a waste of time. Nothing we have in this world is going to last, even our physical bodies. Katie and I joined the wellness center at Brethren Care this week because we want to exercise and enjoy the gift of being together. Exercising and taking care of our bodies is a great thing to do, but it can be easy to become so obsessed with personal fitness that it becomes our idol rather than using our exercise and nutrition to show others that we appreciate the blessing of good health and that through our healthy lifestyle we can glorify God with it. Therefore, the rich have allowed their love of money and possessions to become an obsession and because of that obsession it has resulted in them mistreating their fellow man.

In verse 4 we find examples of how the rich have mistreated others because of their obsession with wealth. James writes that the rich have withheld pay from their laborers who did work for them. Not only was the pay withheld, but those who were mistreated have cried out to God for justice. God has heard their cries and will be taking action to right those wrongs. This verse gives us the opportunity to discuss a question that many people in the world are masking today regarding evil and how a loving God can allow evil things to happen such as James is discussing in this passage. The first thing we have to say in answering such a question is confirm that we live in a fallen world where sin has corrupted everything that we see. Our bodies have been affected as well as creation in many ways. Sin has corrupted everything because man chose to rebel against God by refusing to follow one simple command in the Garden of Eden. That choice had consequences that have been passed down to all people since that time. All of us are fallen creatures, prone to sin and not acting in ways that glorify our creator. Because of the impact of sin there is evil and there are things happening in the world that are not in line with the way that God created it. Therefore, we must first acknowledge that the world has fallen and is dealing with the consequences of sin. The second part of the answer to this question is that even though man rebelled against God, He did not forsake His creation. He sent His Son Jesus Christ to the world to rescue it from the consequences of sin and to heal the broken relationship caused by Adam. Even though sin has been defeated by the death and resurrection of Christ, we still must live in a world corrupted by the original sin of Adam. There will always be evil and imperfect things that happen in this fallen world. Unfortunately, people will suffer, and bad things will continually happen. We know this is true because even the Apostles who professed faith in Christ had to face horrible deaths because of their faith in Christ. However, death is not the end and God will have the final say over all evil. Since God exists and is holy, He will see to it that every evil act and vile thing done in this world will be addressed on the day of judgment. This should help to bring us comfort because if God does not exist this means that all of those who have perpetrated evil things in the world have escaped punishment through death. The fact that God exists provides justice for all who have been persecuted for doing what is right. God has heard the cries of those who have been mistreated by the rich and He will be taking adequate action against the rich. Now we know what miseries James is referring to in the passage.

Verse 5 shares the idea that the rich have become fattened and have enjoyed their pleasures at the expense of the poor. This is once again confirming that there are people in this world who seem to benefit from the misfortune of others and therefore take advantage of those people. In Psalm 73 the Psalmist expresses his frustration at how it seems like the rich keep getting richer and the poor continue to be stomped on. He expresses the anger that those who are being mistreated have when they see how the rich benefit from their evil treatment toward others. Even though that seems to be the case, the Psalmist concludes that he is not concerned with earthly wealth, but that his treasure is in God alone. Please look at **Psalm 73** with me. (Read together). All these evil things are happening, but God still exists and is there when we call upon His name. Money and possessions will all fade away, but our God lives eternally, and He is our portion forever.

Our final verse for discussion today elevates those who have been unjustly abused by the rich. The poor have been condemned and put to death because of the unjust treatment by the rich. This idea was already mentioned by James earlier in chapter 2 verses 6-7 when he made the point that it is unwise to show favoritism towards the rich. Treating the special and giving them the best seats at banquets does not make any sense because it is the rich to take the poor to court and say things against them. Even though the rich have treated the poor so harshly, the poor do not offer any resistance to them. What James means is that many times, because of the bribery and evil in this world, the poor do not seem to get the justice they so rightly deserve. What we have already discussed is the fact that even though there seems to be so much evil in this world and the evil seem to get away with a lot, we can take comfort in the assurance that God will see to it that the evil face judgment for all they have done in this world. Jesus promises to us that in the new heaven He will address all the evil that has been done here. **“and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).** All the things that have caused us pain in this world will be removed and we will never have a reason to cry again. Those words of comfort need to be in our minds as we contemplate the injustices that we see taking place around us every day.

So, as we conclude today, let us take with us three lessons we can gain from this teaching. The first lesson is that we must never allow the love of money or possessions to get in the way of our relationship with God. The things we enjoy on this earth are just temporary blessings that help to make our experience here better. We cannot take these things with us when we go. The saying “he who dies with the most toys wins” is misguided human wisdom and will merit us nothing. The second lesson is that defrauding others by withholding from them what they are due is not just wrong, but it is a rebellion against God. James wanted the rich to know that by not paying others what they were due was withholding from them the blessings they were to be receiving from God. We are stewards of what God has blessed us with. We must make certain to treat others with respect and when we owe them something we need to take care of them. Finally, living on the broken backs of others is not what God has designed for us to do. No matter who someone else may be or what they may be able to do for us, all people deserve to be treated with the same level of respect. All people are image bearers of God worthy of dignity. We need to use everything we are given to treat others the same way we want to be treated. Therefore, today’s teaching comes back to the golden rule. Let us always follow this rule knowing that the way we behave will either bring honor or dishonor to the God we serve. Prayer and Q/A.