

Treasure in the Last Days

James 5:1-9

“Wall Street and the billionaire class has rigged the rules to redistribute wealth and income to the wealthiest and most powerful people of this country.” That’s what Bernie Sanders says, and millions of people voted for him to win the Democrat nomination for President. It seems that ever since the stock market crashed in 2008, class consciousness has become all too common in America. As many people’s hopes for prosperity have faded away, they talk more and more about “income inequality,” and look enviously on those whom they consider to be rich.

Now, whatever we may think about Bernie Sanders in particular or socialism in general, it has always been possible for people to abuse their financial power. Some 2000 years ago, James made the shocking accusation in verse 6 that some of the wealthy people he knew were going so far as to condemn and murder the innocent and the helpless. And you can go back even farther. I Kings chapter 21 tells of how Queen Jezebel falsely accused Naboth so that after he was executed, King Ahab could have his land for a vegetable garden. That little conspiracy took place some 800 years before James was born.

Of course, the abuse of the poor continues today, and it goes far beyond economic conditions. A few years ago, the EPC’s Women’s Ministries adopted Hope House in North Carolina, which provides a safe haven for female victims of sex trafficking, women whose bodies are bought and sold for the pleasure of others. And just this last spring, Rebecca Cassell told us about her ministry, “Along the Way,” which seeks to raise awareness that this problem is everywhere.

Now, it’s easy for us to give James a big amen at this point, because none of us would ever treat people so horribly. But in verse 4, James reminds us that it’s possible to harm the poor not just by overtly abusive behavior. We can also harm them by what we leave undone, by neglecting to pay them on time.

And again, this is nothing new, for Moses condemned the same sort of callousness some 1400 years before James wrote his letter. In Deuteronomy chapter 24, Moses said this: “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be sin to you.”

Now, I doubt any of us would disagree with this in principle, and I hope all of us would admit the need to pay those who work for us promptly. But that’s not the only way we can oppress those who are working for us, for what if we pay them promptly but not fairly? Politicians may argue about Federally prescribed minimum wages, but we Christians should care not only about what is legally required, but about the genuine needs of our employees – for isn’t that a good way to demonstrate the love of Christ to them?

But James doesn’t stop there. No, he plunges on into verse 5, condemning those who live in a wanton way, those whose lives are focused on pleasure. And in the Greek, both of these words contain the idea of self-indulgence.

So, this doesn't just apply to what Bernie Sanders likes to call the 1 percenters, the polo-playing, yacht-sailing set, does it? I mean, is it only those who are as rich as Bill Gates who tend to live selfish, materialistic lives? No matter how much or how little we might have, can't any of us be focused on our own desires, on our own pleasures?

No, once again James has stopped preaching and gone to meddling. For it seems that the problem he has in view isn't so much the amount of our riches. No, the problem comes when we focus too much on any of our things. And after all, didn't Jesus say the same thing in our responsive reading this morning? "No one can serve two masters – you cannot serve God and mammon," which means you cannot serve both God and money.

Oh, but doesn't it seem once again that all this is more than a little extreme? I mean, as long as we aren't either actively or passively oppressing the poor, as James says in verse 4, as long as we pay our workers fairly and on time, why shouldn't we have the things we want – at least some of them? What's wrong with spending some of our time and money on ourselves?

Well, all those stereotypes of preachers to the contrary, I'm not here to micromanage your finances. I wouldn't presume to prescribe a certain amount that you should give to the church, or even to charity in general – after all, Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver, and who gives cheerfully out of a sense of guilt?

And I'm not going to tell you how much you should pay your workers, or what your personal budgetary priorities should be. After all, God has entrusted your things to you, and you're the one who has to decide what to do with them. And whoever they may be, God has entrusted your dependents to you to love and support. Since everyone's circumstances are different, where it comes to giving one size definitely does not fit all. But perhaps it would be helpful for all of us to pay attention to what James has to say about our worldly things – maybe that will help all of us put those things into perspective.

When I was in college, my friend Troy Snelling had a 1967 Pontiac LeMans, and my friend John Starks got a 1956 Buick Roadmaster – that Ultramatic transmission was so smooth. So, when we saw an ad for a 1951 Packard for sale nearby, we had to go and see it. As we were walking up the driveway, Troy grabbed me and exclaimed "It's running!" That 288 cubic inch straight eight motor was so smooth and quiet, it seemed we could almost touch it before we could hear it. And it was only \$2500 – I just had to buy it, didn't I?

I put a lot of effort and money into that car over the years – new paint, new chrome, some really sweet wide whitewall tires. So why don't I have it anymore? The body (made by Briggs, and not by Packard, I might point out) was rusting out. By the time I went to seminary, it needed some serious bodywork that I just couldn't afford.

So, when we look at verse 3, what would James have said about my spending priorities? It's not hard to imagine. All the money, all the gold and silver I put into that car had literally turned into rust. But James isn't the only one saying this. After all, he was just repeating what his brother Jesus said in our responsive reading, right? "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal."

But Jesus went on to give us a much better option, didn't He? He reminds us not only that we shouldn't focus so much on our worldly possessions, but that we also don't need to be anxious about

them at all. What did He say? Look at the birds of the air – God feeds them. Look at the lilies of the field – God clothes them. Don't you think He will take just as much care of you? So, why go on worrying about things? Instead of putting so much stock in our stuff, instead of being so concerned about what worldly goods we can gather, Jesus urges us to lay up for ourselves treasures in Heaven.

And in this passage, James also shares that sort of heavenly perspective, although in certainly a less comforting way. For in verse 3 he mentions the last days, and in verses 7 and 8 he speaks of the coming of the Lord.

So, what does the coming of Christ have to do with a proper perspective on our material things today? Well, think about it. My Packard may have gotten rusty, but someone with enough money could have done the full body-off restoration that it needed, if they'd wanted to. But on the day Christ comes again, all our material things just won't matter anymore. In fact, no matter how precious they are to us, they'll all be gone – Peter says that on that day “the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” So does it really make sense to heap up treasure on earth in the last days?

So, knowing that the coming of Christ is certain, what should we do in the meantime? What attitude should we have toward our own material things, and toward the way that the wealthy so often abuse the poor?

Well, you know how dry it has been around here, and how much we have needed some rain. And you know how perfectly helpless we all are where it comes to the weather. The Lord's going to send the rain when He wants to and where He wants it to go. All we can do is wait for it.

In the same way, James says, we must simply wait on the coming of Christ. There's no point in hoarding up material things, knowing how temporary they all are. We don't need to put our faith in any politician's promises of prosperity. We don't need to obsess over “income equality.” We have no good reason to envy or hate those who misuse the things they have. As James says in verse 9, we shouldn't grudge against one another, which means we shouldn't groan or sigh, complaining about our relative poverty or weakness, or begrudging others their wealth or power.

For when Jesus comes again, He will not give Himself up as a sacrificial Lamb – He's already done that. This time, as we say in the Apostles' Creed, He shall come to judge everyone, the quick, the living, and the dead. On that day, the Judge of all the Earth will set all things right. All those who abuse their power and wealth will get what's coming to them.

But we confess something else about Jesus in the Apostles' Creed – that He sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. That means that He rules and reigns over all Heaven and Earth even now, even today. James holds out this same hope in verse 4 when he calls Jesus the Lord of Sabaoth, the Lord of all the armies of heaven. That means that even though we can't make much sense out of so many of our current events, we believe that even in the midst of all the injustice and unfairness in today's world, Jesus is still in charge, still working out His perfect plans, still protecting and providing for His people just as He does for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

On Thursday, as I wrote the first draft of this sermon, the drought briefly broke in Port Gibson, and God poured out some much-needed rain on us. Knowing that He provides for us so richly now, and knowing that His coming in glory is just as certain, let us entrust all our worldly goods to Christ, using

everything we are and everything we have to further the advancement of His Kingdom and the cause of His justice.