

When We Are Not in Control

James 5:7-13

Last week, James challenged our tendency to materialism by encouraging us to live in the reality of the coming of Christ. And that just makes sense, doesn't it? Because Christ is coming to make all things new, should we really put so much emphasis on material things that will pass away? Because Christ is coming to judge the world, what sense does it make for us to resent those who have gained power and wealth by unrighteous means? No, in the light of Judgment Day, both greed and envy are revealed to be not only wicked but ridiculous.

But oftentimes, when we think about Judgment Day, we are fearful. We know in the face of our coming King's absolute power and holiness, we stand helpless. But James tells us that the certain coming of Christ should actually strengthen us in many of the helpless situations in which we might find ourselves today.

For example, what do we do when we are helpless to make others believe what we are saying? Some folks tend to swear. Now James isn't talking about the sort of vulgarity or profanity that is all too common these days, even among our most prominent politicians. No, he's talking about the practice of taking oaths. Back in his day, pagans would swear by various objects, appealing to them to bear witness to the truth of their statements. Roman men would even swear by their reproductive organs – that's where our word "testify" comes from.

Of course, the Jews of James' day didn't do such ridiculous things, because they knew there was only one True God. But they still wanted to give their statements more weight than they would otherwise have, so they tried to work around the second commandment. So, instead of taking the Lord's Name in vain, they would often swear by the Temple or by the Heavens. It is this practice that James condemns.

And the temptation to make our words have more weight is still with us. I especially noticed this among the boys at CHA. I suppose the most popular phrase you heard up there was, "Are you going to eat that?" You also heard "I didn't do it" a lot. But you also heard them tacking on "I swear" whenever anyone seemed to doubt what they were saying. And frankly, the more improbable the statement, the more intense the oaths tended to be.

For example, let's say you saw a kid with a black eye. It's obvious that he had been in a fight, but for him to admit that would mean confessing to a rather serious infraction of the school rules. Moreover, admitting he had been in a fight would force him to reveal with whom he had been fighting, and this would get the other combatant into trouble. So, to avoid personal punishment and to avoid "snitching" on a peer, the conversation would go something like this. "How did you get that shiner?" "I ran into a door. I swear!"

So, why do you hear this sort of swearing so much more commonly among schoolboys than among adults? It's probably because they know they have so little power to control what's going on around them. But we aren't immune from situations like these. In a day where so many different truth claims swirl around us, convincing anyone of anything is harder than ever. In our helplessness to persuade others, we might be tempted to swear, or to appeal to our experience, or our education or our

age to give our words more weight. But James says we should not swear. We should let our yes or no be sufficient.

But we must not avoid oaths for the wrong reason. We must not stand on the truth of our own statements as a point of personal pride. In saying a simple “yes” or “no” we must not think that trying to persuade others is somehow beneath us. No, James says we should avoid such oaths in order to avoid the sort of judgment on all pride that will come when Christ returns.

For in the light of our coming King, does it matter so much whether others think we are telling the truth? Christ knows whether what we say is in accordance with His Word and His will. And because He is coming to bring perfect justice, to set all things right, He is the One Who will measure all truth claims. For He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So, if the certainty of the coming of Christ should help us avoid the fear that often makes us swear, it should also help us avoid congratulating ourselves when life seems to be going our way. For let’s face it – one of the main reasons we tend to be merry or cheerful, as verse 13 says, is because things are turning out the way we want them to.

This is certainly true for me. I tend to be in a much better mood when folks in my church and my family are happy and healthy, when there’s enough on my calendar to keep me occupied but not enough to make me feel overwhelmed, when I’m feeling well and strong. On days like that, it’s easy to imagine that I’m in control, to think, “I got this.”

But nothing could be further from the truth, could it? I can’t control when I or other folks in the church get sick. I can’t schedule hospital visits and funerals weeks in advance. I don’t know when a problem will arise in the presbytery that needs the Stated Clerk’s attention. Even on those days when I’m tempted to think, “I got this,” I’m only a phone call away from having more trouble than I can handle.

So let’s take another look at verse 13. Given what James has said about the certain coming of Christ, we’ve already seen that we shouldn’t try to assert control over awkward social situations by swearing. But we also shouldn’t imagine that we are in control on our good days, congratulating ourselves when we are cheerful. Instead, we should give the credit to Christ our reigning and coming King. That’s why when we are cheerful we should sing psalms, songs of praise.

Now, we might choose a psalm such as the one we read responsively this morning. For as we sing such a song of praise and thanksgiving, we also bring our pride in check, for we are reminded that it is God Who is responsible for all the sorts of things that make life pleasant and even possible. We are reminded that God created light, that He’s the master physicist Who came up with the concepts of matter and energy. God is the One Who flung the stars into space and Who gave the earth its firmness. God is the One Who gives us, and all the plants and animals, air to breathe. God is the One Who makes the rain fall, the One Who makes it possible for the grass and crops to grow.

So of course when we are cheerful, when our life is rich and full and abundant, we should turn away from pride and self-congratulation, and give praise and thanks to the God Who created everything, to Christ our coming King Who even now rules and reigns over all the circumstances of our lives.

But that then raises the toughest question for us, doesn't it? For if our coming King is in charge of all those awkward social situations which tempt us to swear, and if our coming King is responsible for all the blessings that make us merry and cheerful, then what about the days that we or our loved ones suffer? What are we supposed to do then?

Well, we might want to swear in a different sort of way, venting our rage and frustration with our words. Or we might turn our backs on cheerfulness, giving ourselves over to discouragement or even despair. Instead, in the first part of verse 13, James counsels us to pray. Because we know that our King is coming, because we know He holds all power over Heaven and Earth in His hands, He is the One from whom we should seek relief.

Now, we'll look more closely at prayer next week, at how we should pray and with whom we should pray, and for what we should pray. But in today's passage, James reminds us of something we must do while we pray. Because it is Christ and not us Who is in charge, we must wait while we pray for Him to help us. We must wait, even if that means we must go on suffering in the meantime.

Now, many times, we are tempted to think that if we suffer, that means God isn't pleased with us, or doesn't love us. But nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, in verse 10 James points to the example of so many of the prophets Who suffered because they spoke the words of God. Elijah was pursued by the wicked Queen Jezebel to the point where he wanted to die. Jeremiah was thrown in prison, and even cast down into a waterless cistern to die. John the Baptist had his head cut off because he dared to condemn Herod Antipas for his sin.

And still today in so many parts of the world, our Christian brothers and sisters suffer for upholding God's Word in the face of wicked cultures who don't want to hear the truth. From house churches that must hide from the authorities in China to Christians fleeing from Iraq and Syria to escape from ISIS thugs, there are so many who are now enduring incredible trials because of their faith in Christ.

But in verse 11, James gives us an even more extreme example of endurance in the face of suffering – Job. Job lost everything he had. He lost his wealth, which in those days was composed principally of livestock. He lost his children. He lost his health – he was covered with sores, and the only way he knew to treat them was to scrape his skin with a piece of broken pottery. His wife was anything but sympathetic – she told him to curse God and die. And the only comfort his friends offered was to blame his troubles on some sin they thought he must have committed.

So, what did Job do when he hit bottom? He prayed – passionate prayers. He prayed for God to give him relief. He prayed for God to give him justice. He prayed for God to explain why all those horrible things had happened to him. Through his anger, through his confusion, through his tears he prayed. And his continued prayers, along with the fact that he never lost hope in God's perfect justice, demonstrates his endurance in the midst of suffering, as he waited for God to intervene, to make things right.

And how did Job endure? How did the prophets endure? How do so many of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world endure? And how can we endure the suffering, the pain, the grief that comes into our lives?

Because of what we know about our King. We can wait, even as the farmers wait for the rain to fall, because we know Jesus is coming. We can endure injustice because the Judge of all the earth is standing right at the door. We can sing praises even through our tears because we know, as James says in verse 11, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

And how do we know all that? When we look at the cross, we remember that Christ not only chose to share in our suffering so that He could understand what we're going through, so that He could sympathize with us. No, He chose to go through such terrible loss, such terrible suffering because of His love for sinners like us, because He wanted to have mercy on us, because He wanted to save us from the sin that lies at the root of everything that is wrong with the world today.

No, we may not understand why we have to suffer any more than Job did. And we may have to wait a long time for the justice of God to be displayed, just as the prophets did. But the God they trusted, our Lord Jesus, still rules over Heaven and Earth, holding His orb and scepter with hands that were pierced for us. He is a King on whose power we can rely. He is a Judge we can trust to bring justice. For He is a Savior who has died to save us and to heal us and to make us His own forever.