

## James - The Letter of Straws: The Emptiness of Riches

James 4:13-5:6 Common English Bible

*Pay attention, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such-and-such a town. We will stay there a year, buying and selling, and making a profit." You don't really know about tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for only a short while before it vanishes. Here's what you ought to say: "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." But now you boast and brag, and all such boasting is evil. It is a sin when someone knows the right thing to do and doesn't do it.*

*Pay attention, you wealthy people! Weep and moan over the miseries coming upon you. Your riches have rotted. Moths have destroyed your clothes. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you. It will eat your flesh like fire. Consider the treasure you have hoarded in the last days. Listen! Hear the cries of the wages of your field hands. These are the wages you stole from those who harvested your fields. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of heavenly forces. You have lived a self-satisfying life on this earth, a life of luxury. You have stuffed your hearts in preparation for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who doesn't oppose you.*

I don't view myself as wealthy, but that is not probably surprising, because my guess is most of you don't see yourselves as wealthy either.

According to Charles Schwab's 2019 Modern Wealth Survey they found some interesting data.

- 59% of Americans live paycheck-to-paycheck

- 44% carry a credit card balance

- only 38% have built up an emergency fund

I doubt there are many here who struggle with those realities

But the other thing they found is what people consider being "wealthy"

- Having a million dollars isn't enough

The responses varied by generation.

- Boomers, for example, said they needed \$2.6 million to be considered wealthy

- Gen Z'ers said they needed significantly less: \$1.5 million.

It averages out to about \$2.3 million for one to be considered "wealthy" in this survey

You all know what I make a year, as the church council approves my salary and financials are always available to anyone who wants to see them.

And I am pretty certain that I am not in the top half of the income levels of this church

But if I take my after tax salary and run it through a world-wide calculator, and you will get slight variations based on the calculator you use --- But the average suggests that I am in the top 1.5% of all the people in the world

Yet, I would imagine that Nancy and my pay does not put us in the top quarter in the USA

The median USA salary is 60,366 and in a family of 4, (2 adults and 2 children), are still in the top 6.4% in the world

But that is irrelevant --- by any standards, I am rich --- we are all rich

We do not live paycheck to paycheck

We have money in the bank

And James is speaking to ME to all of us

In Lima, Peru there is a concrete barrier that literally separates the rich from the poor.

Lima has some of the poorest slums in the world, and multitudes live in squalor.

The wealthy built a wall to protect themselves from the high crime rate of the slums. But the wall has become a symbol of the vast divide existing between the rich and the poor.

Can you, for a moment, imagine a man clambering to the top of the wall?

Imagine if you can James, the brother of Jesus, climbing up there because he wants to preach to the folk on both sides of that wall.

First, he turns toward the rich people and boy does he give them an earful --- that's Chapter 5 verses 1-6.

And if you have read this chapter (as I hope you have read the entire Letter of James) you know that verses 7 - 11 are intended for the folk who live on that poor side of the wall.

I am not going to focus on that part of the Letter, but instead want to focus on what James has to say to us.

"Pay attention, you wealthy people!" James calls out to us.

And the words he speaks echo the words that his brother Jesus spoke.

Jesus spoke more about money than he did anything else.

He knew the challenges that wealth can bring to people.

Mark 10

As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?"

Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. You know the commandments: Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't cheat. Honor your father and mother."

"Teacher," he responded, "I've kept all of these things since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, "You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

Luke 12

Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourself against all kinds of greed. After all, one's life isn't determined by one's possessions, even when someone is very wealthy." Then he told them a parable: "A certain rich man's land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here's what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That's where I'll store all my grain and goods. I'll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, 'Fool, tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?' This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren't rich toward God."

Matthew 6

"Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

"Pay attention, you wealthy people!", then James continues: "Weep and moan over the miseries coming upon you."

Is that what Jesus wants?

Misery to come upon us?

I think he wants us to be mindful of what Jesus taught and what Paul affirmed:

(1 Timothy 6:10 Common English Bible (CEB))

The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

And if we are honest --- making money is often our goal.

So what are we to do?

As I began working on this week's sermon, I was drawn to a book that I read decades ago. It has been revised and republished many times since. It is Ron Sider's *Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger*. If you have never read it, I highly suggest it.

In conclusion, he offers us three suggestions on what we must do if we are to follow the mandate of Jesus.

He writes:

We need to change at three levels. Appropriate personal lifestyles are crucial to symbolize, validate, and facilitate our concern for the hungry. The church must change so that its common life presents a new model for a divided world. Finally, both here and abroad, we must make the structures of society more fair.

By appropriate personal lifestyles he argues we need to simplify our life.

And he uses the founder of Methodism, John Wesley as an example.

Christians, Wesley said, should give away all but "the plain necessities of life"—that is, plain, wholesome food, clean clothes, and enough to carry on one's business. One should earn what one can, justly and honestly. . . . But Wesley wanted all income given to the poor after bare necessities were met. Unfortunately, Wesley discovered, not one person in five hundred in any "Christian city" obeys Jesus' command.

"Any 'Christian' who takes for himself anything more than the plain necessities of life," Wesley insisted, "lives in an open, habitual denial of the Lord." He has "gained riches and hell-fire!"

...

We need not agree with Wesley's every word and concrete standard to see that he was struggling to follow the biblical summons to share with the needy. How much should we give? Knowing that God wants every person to have the resources to earn a decent living, we should give until our lives truly reflect the principles of Leviticus 25 and 2 Corinthians 8.

And what are those principles?

In Leviticus it is the principle of the year of Jubilee, when all debts are forgiven, and people are given a fresh start.

In 2nd Corinthians, Paul was writing to the church in Corinth sharing what the Macedonians had done.

They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.

And he reminds the Corinthians why they should do this

A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. As it is written, The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little.

Franklin D. Roosevelt reminded us of this principle when during the great depression he proclaimed:

The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

So for Sider, the second challenge is that the church must model this behavior. We must become a beacon in reaching out to lift up our sisters and brothers.

Does our budget show our priority in ministries that are focused on compassion and justice?

And then finally, we must seek to make the necessary societal changes so that fairness is what rules the day.

But where does one start?

With you

According to The Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, charitable giving among individuals is down this past year. Most studies suggest charitable giving is about 3% of income in the USA with the poor giving a higher percentage than the rich.

One of the things we can do is evaluate our own giving patterns.

Nancy and I give 10% to the church and support numerous other charities as well.

How about you?

Are you following the teachings of James, or John Wesley --- or for that matter Jesus --- in how you use your wealth?

Start by evaluating your spending

Are the things you are purchasing necessary?

Seek to find ways to give away more

Our current clothing drive for Family Promise

In 2010, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates made a pledge --- to give away at least half their wealth.

Today 204 billionaires have joined this pledge

We may not have the resources that those families have --- but we can make a difference, by doing our part.

"Pay attention, you wealthy people!", because James is showing us the biblical way of living

Bishop White shared this prayer as a benediction to the 1996 General Conference.

And now, may the Lord torment you. May the Lord keep before you the faces of the hungry, the lonely, the rejected and the despised. May the Lord afflict you with pain for the hurt, the wounded, the oppressed, the abused, the victims of violence. May God grace you with agony, a burning thirst for justice and righteousness.

May the Lord give you courage and strength and compassion to make ours a better world, to make your community a better community, to make your church a better church. May you do your best to make it so; and after you have done your best, may the Lord grant you peace.