

BE PATIENT UNTIL THE LORD'S COMING

James 4:13-5:11

Key Verse: 5:7

“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.”

In today’s passage James warns rich people and exhorts believers who were suffering under rich oppressors. James teaches a proper Christian attitude toward business and wealth. Then and now, there are always the rich and the poor. The rich oppress the poor in order to make more money and live more luxuriously. The poor suffer in many ways under the heel of the rich and try to get justice, but rarely do. They become frustrated and begin to plot against the rich. Because of social injustice, riots break out and people are badly hurt, even killed. This happens generation after generation and there seems to be no resolution. But James shows us how to deal with this issue. James rebuked the rich sternly. At the same time, he exhorts believers to be patient by putting their hope in the Lord’s coming. Let’s listen to his words of wisdom and be patient, putting our hope in the Lord’s coming.

First, if it is God’s will, do it (4:13-17). It seems that 4:13-17 are addressed to Christian businessmen. Verse 13 says, “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’” The purpose of business is to make money--no doubt about it. Business travel in the first century was actually fairly common. The people James addresses were planning to make money in other cities in the future. They made brilliant strategies and prepared thoroughly, confident of success. Good planning is not wrong. The problem is that they did not consider God’s will. In other words, they were consumed in the material realm and blind to spiritual realities. In verses 14-16 James admonishes them to realize what they don’t know about their future and about human life, and what they should do and not do.

First of all, we should know that we don't know what will happen tomorrow (14a). At the beginning of this year, we did not know that Covid-19 would totally disrupt our plans and lives. So many people lost loved ones and many more lost their jobs. Many business plans were totally invalidated. In the parable of the rich fool, one prosperous businessman made many plans to expand his business. He said to himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But suddenly, God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" Jesus said, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God" (Lk 12:16-21). We don't know what will happen in the future, but we do know who holds the future in his hands. We should trust in God and include him in our planning.

Secondly, we should know what human life is. James says, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (14b). A mist is a cloud of fine liquid droplets, which can appear and disappear suddenly. The Bible tells us that human life is fleeting. Moses said, "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Ps 90:10). David said, "For my days vanish like smoke...My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass" (Ps 102:3a,11). When we realize the truth about human life, it humbles us to consider seriously how we live in this world. Moses said, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12).

Thirdly, we should know what to do and not to do. Verse 15 says, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" God is the sovereign Ruler over history, and life and death. God has his own plan and purpose for creation, and he always works for the good in all things (Ro 8:28). His will is good, pleasing and perfect (Ro 12:2b). When we know that God's will is best, we seek to follow his will in everything, including business. God always guides us in the best way for his glory and for our good. So we should always keep in mind the words, "If it is the Lord's will." To a Christian businessman, making a profit is not most important. Doing God's will is most important. The implication is that not only must the purpose of

business be godly, but the way it is conducted must also be godly. Christian businessmen can never say that the ends justify the means.

The Puritans, who sought to follow God's will, filled their speech and correspondence with the Latin equivalent: "*Deo Volente*," which means "God willing." They frequently wrote in their final greetings of a letter, "D.V." This signature can be helpful, but what really matters is to yield to God's will. This implies that we make practical decisions that follow God's will, not just do as we please. Sometimes God's will requires sacrifice and pain. We must seek to do it anyway. Then we can experience that God is good in any situation.

In verse 16 James diagnoses the root cause of their problem: It is arrogant pride. He says, "As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil." Boasting is the expression of self-centeredness and self-glory seeking. To speak as though we accomplish whatever we will or plan without God is boasting. When Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was walking on the roof of his royal palace, he viewed the hanging gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. He said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30) Immediately, divine judgment fell upon him. He lost his sanity and began to live like an animal (Dan 4:33).

After warning Christian businessmen, James gives a general application to all believers in verse 17. He says, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." Normally we think of sin as doing what God forbids. God's law says, "do not commit adultery," "do not murder," "do not lie." When we violate these commands we sin. We call these "sins of commission." But there is another kind of sin. It is not doing what God commands us to do: "love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength," "love your neighbor as yourself," "love one another," "forgive one another." If we fail to carry out these commands, this too is sin. We call these "sins of omission." If we know God's will and do not do it, we sin. To sum up, to every human being, acknowledging God as God and knowing his will is most important. Knowing God's will is not enough. We must do his will; otherwise, we sin.

Second, warning to rich oppressors (5:1-6). Here, James rebukes rich oppressors who seem to be unbelievers. From verse 1, James' tone is harsh: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you." It has been said that money is like a drug to rich people which keeps them in a constant state of manufactured pleasure. As they enjoy luxury, they are free from many of the struggles that ordinary people face. They disregard those in lower social classes, and most ordinary people are afraid to speak honestly to them. But James was fearless and direct in calling them to weep and wail. Why? It was because misery was coming upon them. This reminds us of the prophecy in Revelation that the merchants will weep and mourn when the world economy suddenly collapses under God's judgment. "They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: 'Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'" (Rev 18:19)

In verses 2-3a James explains why misery will come upon the rich even before the final judgment: "Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded." Here the rich are likely landowners who hired many workers for their fields. Their wealth was held in stored grain, fine clothes and precious metals rather than stocks, bonds, and bank accounts as in our days. The point is that their wealth was vanishing before their eyes. But something worse is coming. James says, "Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days" (3b). Since they did not use their wealth to serve God and needy people, but only for their pleasure, they will face God's terrible judgment. Their flesh will be eaten by the fire of hell (Rev 21:8).

In verses 4-6 James brought specific indictments against the rich oppressors by saying, "Look!" First indictment: "The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you" (4a). To withhold wages from laborers is a serious matter. They and their families depend on their daily wages to survive. These laborers were crying out. Who heard them? The rich turned a deaf ear, and the courts ignored them. But their cries reached the ears of the Lord Almighty (4b). The rich were guilty of sin (Dt 24:15). Second indictment: "You have lived on earth in luxury and self-in-

dulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter” (5). Though they had far more than what they needed, they never shared with anyone. Instead they indulged in luxury and pleasure-seeking. They were overfed like cattle gorging on food, unaware that their slaughter was imminent. Third indictment: “You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you” (6). This tells the consequences on the poor when their wages were withheld. They might have tried to sue the rich, but their voices were not heard. It was because the landowners controlled the courts with money. The poor could not oppose them because they had no way to use the system and were helpless. Deprived of justice, they lived in such poverty that their existence was threatened. In truth, they were murdered by the rich.

Usually ordinary people envy the ungodly rich and are in awe of their glamor, power and wealth. But in reality, the ungodly rich are characterized by hoarding, defrauding, self-indulgence and murder. Their problem was not that they had wealth, but that they did not use it properly. The Bible does not say that money is evil, but that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1Ti 6:10). We need money. But there is a danger that we may love money, thinking that we can serve God and money, too. But Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Mt 6:24). When we serve God, we are free to use money for his glory and to help the needy. But anyone who serves money becomes a slave of money and falls into traps and many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction (1Ti 6:9). What should be our attitude toward wealth? Apostle Paul taught: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1Ti 6:17-18).

Third, be patient and stand firm (5:7-11). Now James turns his attention to Christian brothers and sisters who were suffering under rich oppressors. In this part the key words are “patient” and “persevere,” which are repeated six times (7[2],8,10,11[2]). It is not easy to be patient while experiencing harsh treatment. It is easy to become angry, resist, fight against, and try to destroy

the oppressors. Or, in such a frustrating situation, it is tempting to give up and live in fatalistic resignation without any hope. But James says, “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming” (7a). What does it mean to be patient? The Greek word “be patient” (*makrothymēsate*) comes from a compound of “long” (*makros*) and “temper” (*thymos*). The idea is to “set the timer of one’s temper for a long run. Think long. Focus on the final lap in the race of life. Have a long fuse.”¹ When we become angry, holding our temper is not easy. But we need to think beyond the present moment to an entire lifetime and even into eternity.

Be patient? Until the Lord’s coming? It is hard to be patient even for an hour. How can we be patient until the Lord’s coming? We don’t know when the Lord will come. The world even scoffs at the Lord’s coming, discouraging faith (2Pe 3:4). However, we can know for sure that the Lord is coming. Jesus repeatedly promised that he would come again (Rev 22:7,12,20). Regarding the certainty of this promise, Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mk 10:31). This gives us a clear reason to be patient. For when the Lord comes in power and great glory, he will bring justice. He will reward those who keep their faith; at the same time, he will judge those who do evil. This is our hope. When we have this hope, we can patiently endure. James gives three pictures of patience in verses 7b-11.

First of all, be patient like a farmer. Verse 7b says, “See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.” In ancient Israel, proper rainfall was crucial to a fruitful harvest. But this was beyond human control. So farmers should wait patiently, trusting God. While they were waiting, they watered the seed and pulled weeds--over and over again, day after day. We can learn a lot from them. While we are waiting for God to fulfill his promise, we should keep on doing what we know to do--praying, believing, spending time in the Word, fellowshiping with God, and being a blessing to others.²

¹ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Dallas Theological Seminary; Zuck, Roy B.; Walvoord, John F.

² Meyer, Joyce, *James* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2019), p. 126.

With the farmer's example in mind, James said, "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (8). Knowing the Lord's coming is near strengthens us to stand firm, no matter what happens, and to overcome trials and hardships. The Lord's coming is our vindication. In verse 9a James says, "Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged." When pressure from the world is strong, it is easy for Christians to grumble against each other in frustration. This makes things worse for everyone. There is no excuse for complaining or blaming others. Those who do so will be judged. Judgment is imminent. James said, "The Judge is standing at the door!" (9b)

Secondly, be patient like the prophets. Verse 10 says, "Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." When the prophets spoke the truth against injustice in the name of the Lord, they were persecuted. Consider Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and others. Some were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword (Heb 11:37a). Nevertheless, they spoke the word of God faithfully to the end.

Thirdly, be patient like Job. Verse 11 says, "As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about." Job's suffering was so severe it frightens us. Almost no one names their child Job. But the point is that he persevered. How could he? Though Job cried and complained about himself, he refused to renounce God. Rather he said, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26). He also confessed, "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). With this faith he persevered through all the trials. Finally God blessed him even more than before.

In the time of suffering, the early believers thought it would never end. They might have felt that God was cruel to allow such suffering. But James concludes, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (11b). God does not only see our sufferings from afar. He suffers together with us. When the early Christians were persecuted by Saul, the Risen Christ identified himself with

them, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Ac 9:4) Though he is the Almighty God, he is so merciful to weak and suffering people. He comforts, encourages and strengthens us. As we depend on him, we can be patient and overcome all things. Let's be patient until the Lord's coming!