

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Theme: "The Testing of Your Faith"

Lesson: 32

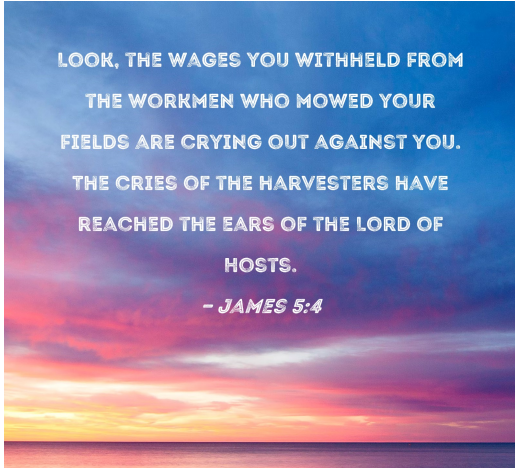
Text: 5:1-6

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Trinity Lutheran Church

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LOOK, THE WAGES YOU WITHHELD FROM
THE WORKMEN WHO MOWED YOUR
FIELDS ARE CRYING OUT AGAINST YOU.
THE CRIES OF THE HARVESTERS HAVE
REACHED THE EARS OF THE LORD OF
HOSTS.

- JAMES 5:4

TEXT AND STUDY NOTES

(5:1) Come now, you rich,

weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

(2) Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.

(3) Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

(Job 13:28; Ps 39:11; Is 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Am 1:3-2:16; 8:9-10; Zeph 2:4-15; Mt 6:19,20; Lk 6:24; 12:21,33; Rom 2:5; 1 Tim 6:9; Heb 1:2; 1 Pet 1:20)

(4) Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached **the ears of the Lord of hosts.**

(Gen 17:1; Lev 19:13; Dt. 24:15; 1 Sam 1:3;

Is 5:9; Jer 22:13; Zech 13:2; Mal 3:5; Rom 9:29)

(5) You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

(6) You have condemned;

you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

(Ezek 16:19; Am 6:1; Jer 12:3; 25:34;

Lk 16:19-31; Ac 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; Rom 5:19; 1 Tim 5:6; Heb 10:38; 2 Pet 2:13)

A Condemnation of Unbelievers (5:1-6)

This section is not directed to the congregations or their pastors, but to a group outside of the congregations which was having a negative but persuasive influence on them. The device of addressing persons not present in the group is called apostrophe, a rhetorical device common in the ancient world. This is the last of five times in the epistle in which James makes reference to the rich. Of the five this is the most severe, with permanent condemnation leaving no possibility of escaping the day of slaughter (5:5).

James is not here leveling a blanket condemnation against rich people for their wealth. From 1:10 it is obvious that the rich had a legitimate part in the congregation, with the proviso that they adopt an attitude of impoverishment over against God. Every previous word of rebuke in the epistle was followed by a solution. Here there is none. The hypothesis that the rich outside of the congregation are being singled out for their exploitation of the poor is less than completely satisfactory. The New Testament writers never really show any interest in economic or political excesses and abuses unless they have a direct relevance within the church.

Luke in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (16:19-31) is most pointed in attacking economic evils, but the real problem with the rich man is less his wealth and more the lack of willingness to share it in assisting the needy. All three synoptic gospels contain the pericope of the rich young man (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30); but since with God all things are possible, even the rich can be saved. Matthew’s explicit inclusion of Joseph of Arimathea as the rich man who buries Jesus (27:57) is a demonstration that the rich can belong to the Kingdom. Wealthy people are not being condemned simply for their wealth. Another avenue must be found.

In Matthew the poor become synonymous with those for whom the Gospel is intended. Matthew’s “poor in spirit” (5:3) becomes simply Luke’s “poor” (6:20). The poor are the ones to whom the Gospel is preached (Matt. 11:5) and the rich can enter the kingdom of God only when they sell their possessions and give to the poor (Matt. 19:21). Christ accomplishes salvation for mankind by exchanging His wealth for the condition of impoverishment (2 Cor. 8:9). The term “poor” becomes another synonym for “Christians,” as they share with Christ in His poverty.

The term “rich” here in James is understood as those people who resist the call of the Gospel, since answering that call means financial inconvenience for them.¹ The rich young man is representative of all those who face this dilemma. Like the rich fool, they are not rich towards God. The rich addressed by James in 5:1 are those who have heard the call to repentance and have understood its demands, but have rejected this call precisely because of those demands. Devotion to their wealth has prevented their acceptance of the Gospel. In retaining their wealth they are having a

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

In the Sermon on the Mount the words appear as a warning to Christians against involving themselves in the pursuit of material wealth and pleasures as the ultimate goals in life. Laying up treasures in heaven refers to concern for other people by bringing them into a proper relationship with Christ’s work. These people are the enduring treasures. In addressing his audience

James’ phrase, “Lord of hosts,” taken from Isaiah 6, is used of Jesus as God’s appointed Judge on the Last Day, as the title “Lord” (*kurios*) is the most appropriate for addressing Jesus in judgment (Matt. 7:21; 25:37). He may also refer to Himself as the Lord of the harvest to whom prayers are to be addressed requesting workers in that harvest (Matt. 9:38). What they have kept for themselves from those who justly earned it was only unnecessary luxury. They were fattening themselves as cattle for butchering on Judgment Day, when they would be slaughtered as God’s enemies (5:5).

The sentence, “You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you” has been taken by some ancient church fathers and some contemporary commentators as a reference to Christ’s crucifixion, though most commentators tend to distance themselves from this Christological interpretation. Preferred often is understanding “the righteous man” in a generic sense. This would allow for James to be included. It seems best to take this as a specific reference to Jesus primarily and to persecuted Christians secondarily. James’ Christology involves the church suffering at the hands of God’s enemies.

LIFE APPLICATION

“The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”
Nothing escapes the ears of God. How is this both terrifying and comforting?