

A Prophetic Voice

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to the passage that Derek read, James chapter 5. So I'm going to look at the really the first half of this chapter tonight.

Now for those of you who've been here over the last few weeks, or if you're familiar with the book of James, or just to introduce something that people sometimes say about James, lots of stuff happens in James.

James addresses many different things, topics, situations. But one of the key things, one of the threads if you like, that runs through the book of James, and the thing that I want you just to bear in mind right now as we start, a question if you like, is this, how should I live in the light of the Lordship of God?

We've said that James is a very practical book. He wants to address the people who he's speaking to, Christians, and say, okay, how are you living? How is your Christianity making a difference?

So how should we live in light of the Lordship of God? The fact that he is not just some idea, but that he is the Lord, and that he is over our lives, and that has big implications for us.

[1 : 13] And James says many challenging words. We saw some of them last week in the second half of chapter 4. And tonight, the passage that we are looking at is no different.

He turns first of all to speak to rich people. And he has some very strong words to say. And so I want to tonight just look at two main things.

So the first is to look at what he says to these people who are well off, but thinking about this, the theme that comes through James also of humility. So the first thing is godly humility and wealth.

And then the second thing, when we look at the second half of what I want to be studying tonight, is godly humility and the oppressed. So the effect of the Lordship of God, the need for godly humility and the rich, and then how this whole subject touches on those who are oppressed.

Those two things. So James addresses those who are well off and who are exploiting people, who are reveling in their riches, who love how wealthy they are, and who have no care for the poor and for the people who they may be exploiting as they get rich.

[2 : 32] Now in some ways, having that kind of concern is quite on trend in our society. It's a noble thing to be concerned about. Exploitation.

Generally speaking, we don't like that. Much in the media that you will read will be against that kind of behaviour, and rightly so. James, though, isn't just addressing this subject because it makes him feel upset.

He's not just being on trend, if you like. James is, what James writes here is thoroughly biblical, and what I mean by that is it's consistent with who god is, what god wants for society, and it's consistent with the way people are portrayed and the way god wants people to be treated through scripture.

So what I want to do, just as we start, just as we get into this subject initially, is to see a very few examples, to trace this very briefly through the Bible. I'll just read them, you don't have to flick about and look them up.

Just to see how deeply biblical and how this comes out of God's concern for people. It's not just a trend, it's to do in fact with the fact that God made people in his image and there is an inherent dignity in humankind, and so therefore exploitation, the kind of exploitation that James is talking about is distasteful to him and to God.

[4 : 00] So let me just pick up a few references that display this. Leviticus might be a book that gives you the fear, you might think. I've not been there for a while, and I'm not going to go there because it's complicated, or it's old sounding.

But in Leviticus we have actually a lot of practical teaching for the community of God's people. And one thing that God institutes, if you like, and he commands them, is this concept of jubilee, which I'm not going to say a lot about, but it basically meant that those, or it took away from the possibility of people in a very selfish way, in a wrong way, heaping up for themselves more and more and more and more and more and other people getting poorer and poorer and poorer and poorer.

And it dealt with that situation. So land was to be returned rather than overly accumulated or wrongfully accumulated. That's a principle that God works into the fabric of his people's civic life, their consciousness of how they should live, how they should treat one another.

New Testament, Jesus says this one line, you may know this line. Just remember it again. Jesus says, do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.

See that word there, store. Because really what he's bringing out is what James is talking about here, this idea of hoarding people who just accumulate massively and they keep on accumulating and they keep on accumulating because it's in the accumulation of wealth or stuff or people who they preside over and tell what to do, they basically own, that they feel a sense of security or purpose.

[5 : 47] It's in that sense of hoarding, storing. So Jesus says, don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Because of course as we'll see, it's a futility. So Leviticus and Jesus, and that brings us to a passage here where James says, Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eating. Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

Strong words like I said. But it's this idea of these riches that have been accumulated that will eventually do what Jesus said, they will do you no good and they'll just corrode.

Even, we know gold and silver won't corrode, but Jesus uses this example here to show how they may as well, it's so purposeless accumulating these things over and over again for no reason.

Or at least for the illusion that they will give us a sense of continuing importance, significance, something to hold on to.

[6 : 56] Jesus says it's all going to go. And in many ways we know this, don't we? There's something about the way we understand life that tells us this. This is really God reinforcing this through this book.

It's thinking of a film, Citizen Kane, a character in that called Charles Foster Kane, who's a newspaper magnet very successfully. He gets hugely rich and I don't know if you've seen it, but the final scene of that movie is, sorry to spoil things, his death.

But it's remarkable because it's him in this huge palace, this great vast place that he's bought for himself.

With this kind of aerial shot looking down on this enormous room, with all these riches and treasures that he's literally accumulated, stacked up around him. And he perishes very lonely.

And it just made me think, it's like just a desperate old man in a junk shop. All these things that were so important to him, just gone.

[8 : 07] For him, gone. And so there's that sense of the futility of stacking up stuff and trusting in these things. And that's really what is brought out consistently in the Scriptures.

And we are always asked, is there something apart from the Lord that we think will give us significance now and hope for the future?

Is there anything that you put your trust in, that you think now gives you more meaning because you have this thing, more significance than other people, and that you're holding onto as a thing that somehow will give your life more significance, will perpetuate it for longer or whatever it is.

So that's the first thing, this idea of hoarding that James brings out here, but he also brings out and speaks against exploitation. So that's the other main thing that he's speaking about in this section.

Exploitation, those who are getting rich at the expense of others, maybe particularly in this case, laborers, people who they simply have working for them, who they treat really badly, pay them a pittance, don't care about their conditions, couldn't care less as long as they're getting rich.

[9 : 22] So again, let me just pull out a few verses from the Bible back to Leviticus. This is a thoroughly biblical concern, it's a thoroughly godly concern. Leviticus chapter 25, see the concern that is expressed in this verse for the brother or sister who becomes poor.

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner. Take no interest from him or profit.

See the concern there for the person who becomes poor. Don't exploit him, don't say, ah, brilliant opportunity, I can get rich. You care for him or her. You don't take more from that person than they can afford to give you.

Another prophet in Amos chapter 6, these words, again, very strong words to those who love to celebrate their riches at the expense of others.

In Amos chapter 6, woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, who anoint themselves with the finest of oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

[10 : 34] Now that brings in a slightly different thing. These verses and the biblical teaching isn't saying riches in and of themselves, anointing yourself with oil, having a couch is wrong.

But it's these people who say these best couches, the brightest, most expensive couch I could possibly have bought, and I love it, and I will anoint myself with this oil, and it is the finest oil.

I have all of these things and couldn't care less about those who are exploited, those who are poor, and in this instance, the ruin of Joseph.

The ruin of Joseph. If you like, in broad terms, the bigger picture, the spiritual picture, the church, the church, God's people.

And again, bringing us back up to our chapter in James chapter 5, we read these words in verse 5. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

[11 : 36] You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. They're blind to the reality that James is trying to awaken within them, these people that he's speaking to, these people who are wealthy and who are misusing their wealth and maltreating those who are around about them, maybe their own employees.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. There's no sense in these people of regard for the other. There's no sense here of what we read earlier about the brother who has become poor of caring for that brother.

And this is a thoroughly biblical, a thoroughly godly concern. Remember, and it may well have been James' experience to remember, what we read of in the early church.

What was one of the marks of the early church? The Holy Spirit comes, Pentecost happens, the remarkable outpouring of gifts. The Gospel is preached, the church is born, if you like, in New Testament terms, and those who had nothing suddenly find that their brothers and sisters who have extra are saying, I don't need this, let me sell it, and let me give you what you need.

There was the church acting this principle of not just reveling and hoarding and building up stuff, that would ultimately do them no good, but in saying, I don't need this.

[13 : 01] I want to give to you so that you have enough. That was the church acting out this principle that we're looking at here. So, I hope you can see this is biblical, it's godly, and it's what James is seeking to bring out here.

Again, as with the illustration that used earlier of the movie, though, this is something that we see in life, and I think even as human beings we have a sense of how vile this can be sometimes, don't we?

I should have, I was going to get this to you on the slides, but I was thinking of a painting by a German painter called Otto Dix, who was an expressionist painter who painted kind of post-war, and there's a painting called Metropolis, and it portrays that it's a triptych, so it's a three-panel painting.

The main central panel is of a wonderful kind of ball that people all dressed up in their finery, which is fine. But one of the side panels is of a beggar.

I think it's even possibly somebody who's come out of the war, a soldier who's maybe lost a limb or something, sitting in abject poverty. The point is, not don't enjoy yourself, not don't buy a nice dress, but the point is this painter recognized the horror in that period, maybe post-war, particularly we see this working out at different periods in human history, of people who came out of this time of turmoil and who thought, right, it's all about pleasure now, it's all about enjoying ourselves, it's all about accumulating.

[14 : 30] It's hugely self-indulgent. It's not displaying the kind of humility that James goes on to call for in his letter.

It's showing complete disregard for those who are wounded, damaged, poor, broken. So, you know, that painter recognized how vile the human heart could be in showing such disregard for those who were outcasts.

So, how much more horrific to the King of Kings, how much more horrible that is to God. And James, with that clarity, with that clarity where he sees and asks that question, how is it that you should live in light of the Lordship of God, says to those who are so wealthy and who are abusing their wealth, I have to bring this to your attention because you're in a dreadful state, absolutely dreadful state.

And he wants to call, well, actually he speaks so sharply to them and there's no expression here of him calling to repentance.

The words are so harsh towards him. There's these words of judgment, but we'll come back to that shortly. So, this first section of what we're looking at tonight is very stark, very graphic, in many ways, it's words of judgment to these people.

[15 : 59] The second section that I just want to go and look at just now is godly humility and the oppressed, people who are oppressed, godly humility and the oppressed.

Now, sometimes again, people say, well, there's so much going on in James and sometimes what he does is he makes a kind of random right turn into a completely different subject matter. Seems strange for him to go from talking about the poor, sorry, the rich, to talking about being patient.

So, is this one of these cases where James seemingly takes a kind of random right turn? Well, no, because if you look at what he goes on to speak about now from verse 7 onwards, be patient there for brothers until the coming of the Lord.

Verse 8, you also be patient. He keeps on speaking about this throughout this section. First of all, this is relevant because he goes back with me to chapter 1. This is one of the key things that he wants to emphasize right at the start of the letter.

So, it's entirely within the context of the letter as a whole, if you like. Remember, he's speaking to embattled Christians and he wants them to know right from the start how to remain steadfast in the face of difficulty.

[17 : 10] So, you go into chapter 1 and you read in verse 2, count it joy, my brothers, when you meet trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. So, it's within the context of what James has already been talking about.

It crops up again in chapter 1. But it's also completely relevant in the light of what he's just been talking about, surely, isn't it? If he's writing to a fellowship of people, maybe some or many of whom are oppressed, are finding life really difficult for various reasons, but also because they're financially broke and being oppressed, then it's so relevant to talk to them about how they can remain patient and live dealing with this kind of hardship.

And that's what I want to bring out in some ways, just in this next little section. There is a question, people are sort of divided over whether or not the first half of this chapter, the first section where he's talking about the rich, is written to Christians or non-Christians.

People say on different sides. In many ways, I don't want to go into that just now, but it applies in both cases, doesn't it? Because whatever there's a body of people, in this case Christians, who are oppressed, even more so maybe in the case if they're being oppressed by other Christians, how important then to consider that question, how can I deal with this?

These people are oppressing me. They're making my life an absolute misery. I've got nothing. My family are starving and these people are just showing me hatred all the time.

[18 : 44] James wants to say, how then do you live in the light of the Lordship of God? Always the relevant question to ask yourself when you face a situation of hardship.

So that's what he goes on to bring out in this next few verses. And what he says is, he speaks to them about their attitude. He's interested in that he speaks so harshly to those who are so rich and who are oppressing the poor with these words of judgment.

But then he also addresses those who are suffering. He does that consistently. And that is not important. Think about the way that you feel when somebody gives you a hard time.

The potential in us is always, even if we've been wronged to hate or to seek to get our own back, to seek to get back the person who's been getting at us.

And of course, the problem then is that we may end up acting in hateful ways or in violent ways or whatever as we seek to get back to them. And so James is asking these people to consider the way that they live in light of the troubles that they're going through.

[19 : 56] And what he says to them is, be patient. So in many ways this comes out of what we've read in chapter 4, rather. In chapter 4 verse 6, we have these words.

God opposes the proud that gives grace to the humble. He gives grace to the humble. And that's what they're being asked to consider. That God will oppose the proud, these people who have no concern for anybody else only regard for their wealth or whatever.

But he gives grace to those who humble themselves, which is what they're having to do. Patience becomes a theme then. Now he brings this out in a few different words throughout the passage.

So let's just bring these out for a minute. First of all, in verse 7, be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. So this use of the word patient is, in some ways, a kind of, it requires them to be passive.

It's about enduring, which is the understanding we have, isn't it, of patience? Being able to bear with a situation. Be patient until the coming of the Lord.

[21 : 03] Second one is in verse 8, you also be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord, as at hand. See that word, establish your hearts. So the sort of nuance, if you like, of patience in this particular verse is of, sort of stealing yourself, standing firm, a slightly more active sense of being patient.

Being able to hold where you are in your faith and in your trust in the Lord in the middle of your difficult situation that you find yourself in.

And in verse 11, behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. And he goes on to give the example, you've heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you've seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

He brings to their attention, a figure who they would no doubt have been familiar with, the person of Job, and the particular, again, the nuance, if you like, about patience here, is of persevering, a kind of active resolve to be in the place that God wants them to be, to remain in their faith and to stay steadfast in who they are and what they believe and as a community, not just to strike back, not just to seek retribution.

But to be patient. Patience is one of the hardest things to master. Don't you find that? Particularly when somebody's consistently given you the kind of life you don't want.

[22 : 35] So James calls for patience. He also, as we've seen, that he deals with so very often in this book, asks them to consider how they speak. Now this comes out particularly in the last verse of this section in verse 12.

So he says there, let me just read that, but above all my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but like your yes be yes and your no be no so that you may not fall under condemnation.

So that you may not fall under condemnation. He's saying, it's really important for you still to consider the way that you live. Yes, you're being oppressed. Yes, sometimes it's hard. You consider your life and the way that you respond to this.

So here he's speaking about swearing, taking an oath. This puts me in mind, in this valley we're looking at the Sermon on the Mount. So this is fresh in my mind anyway. But Jesus says these words, doesn't he?

He speaks about this importance of not swearing oaths lightly, of not sort of making promises and then kind of disregarding them the next minute. And what Jesus is really talking about to the people who are hearing him, the people who are hearing what it means to be part of his kingdom, is that you must be people of integrity and truthfulness.

[23 : 53] That is how you are to, your speech is to be characterised by truthfulness. So again, you may think, well, a random thing to James to suddenly start speaking about, but consider again, in light of the circumstances they face themselves, many of these people were having a hard time, don't swear by oaths. Don't make rash promises in your troubles.

Don't make oaths against people. Don't make, don't curse, if you like, against those who are oppressing you. And the way that they speak, the way that they talk about others is so very important.

It's also, I think, significant. He brings out this idea of truthfulness because, if you're to go back into the first half of the bit that we looked at, those who are rich are accused, and verse 4 it says, Behold the wages of the labourers who sow fields which you kept back by fraud are crying out against you.

So, in light of the fact that these people are being lied to, potentially, these rich people are held up as accumulating and lying and accumulating by false pretenses, or however it is, they're not truthful.

He says to the brothers, the Christian community that he addresses, you be truthful. Doesn't matter if you're being lied to, it's not right. And of course we seek for justice, and we are grateful that the Lord will ultimately bring justice, but you be truthful, you be characterised by truthfulness in the way that you speak.

[25 : 35] And that applies to those who oppress them, but it also applies within the fellowship. It is the case, isn't it, that within a family or within a church fellowship, within a group of friends, when times are really difficult, when there's a lot of stress and a lot of pressure on people, there's more pressure on the, if you like, the unit, the family unit, the friendship group, cracks begin to appear, people say careless words, frustrations boil over, sharp words, rash promises, curses, we know what it's like.

In the heat of the moment, James says, watch the way you speak. Again, he says it, he says it so many times, and he says it again here. So James is really saying here there's a need for a kind of humility, a godly humility to you who are oppressed.

When our natural reaction would be to assert self, or even to claim rights. Now again, rights are important, people should be treated well, but James is saying in a situation where maybe these people didn't have a union, they didn't have any rights really.

He's saying, well your responsibility is to watch the way you speak. Now just to finish off, we've seen these very strong words to those who are rich and who are way out of line in the way that James looks at things, and then these words requiring patience to the oppressed.

Why all this? Why should they listen to what James says? Why is it worth their while? Very difficult thing to do what James is asking.

[27 : 18] Well it's worth their while and they should do this, and the thing that makes the difference is the fact that the Lord is coming again. That's the thing. Remember the initial question, how do we live in light of the fact of the Lordship of God?

The Lordship of God makes a difference now, and it makes a difference now to you and me also because the Lord is coming again. That changes everything. He is the Lord of the life now, and he will one day return, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

And so what James is wanting the people to understand is that in this time of hardship, they have hope. Because the one who is their Lord, the friend who sticks closer than a brother is with them now, and he will sustain them, and one day he will come back and they will know the joy and the relief and the blessing of his presence, his security, and he will take them to be with him, and they will know great rejoicing.

I want to briefly show how this is something also that is thoroughly biblical and that is a consistent promise to God's people. So let me just do what I did earlier, just a few brief verses just to show this principle, God's people who are so oppressed.

In a Psalm, Psalm 37 from verse 8, we read these words, Refrain from anger and forsake wrath, fret not yourself, it tends only to evil, for the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

[28 : 56] In just a little while the wicked will be no more, though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

Remember that word meek, the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. In Matthew, in chapter 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, again this was close to my mind when I was thinking about this, Jesus says these words in Matthew chapter 5, Blessed are those who are poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, those who are poor in spirit, who recognize the poverty of their own heart, their own self, the fact that they need the Lord God for theirs is the kingdom.

They may not have any kind of kingdom right now, you may not have any kind of kingdom right now, but one day you will know that kingdom fully. Then he goes on to say this, Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. There's that word again, blessed are the meek.

Meek doesn't mean some sort of poor, pathetic person who never chirps up or says anything. The meek are those who won't constantly assert themselves over God and say, God this is what I expect from you in my life, or over others though they may be wronged. The meek are those who know the justice of God, who trust in the justice of God, who wait for the justice of God, who seek the power of God in their lives and who trust in him, who aren't constantly pitting themselves against even their enemy, as Jesus goes on of course to speak about loving your enemy, praying for those who persecute you.

So the meek will inherit the land, wonderful promise to God's people. Brings us back up to date if you like again in James. And in James chapter 4 verse 10 we read these words, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

[31 : 01] There's another promise for God's people, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. That is what God's people wait for. We know that sense of being his children now, his forgiveness and his peace and his blessing.

And we know that one day we will be with him in glory. And that is the humbling and the exalting that we remember. And then finally the chapter that we're looking at just now in verse 11, James writes, behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. We consider those blessed.

Now we need to be reminded of that, don't we? Because when things are tough, when we don't feel like remaining steadfast, don't feel very blessed. We think, God you've forgotten me. My friends have forgotten me.

Maybe your friends have. Remember that those who remain steadfast are blessed. And so this is the call, the difficult call that James asks of those who are listening to his letter.

And so the question for people in James' day, the question also for us, for you and I tonight, and for our friends, the friends that we know and maybe speak to and maybe you try and witness to, the question often people ask nowadays is how do I act or how do I live in the light of constantly shifting world events?

[32 : 28] Things are so, so difficult. The headline I noticed in one of the papers yesterday or today was Trump, what next?

You know there's that sense of what and everything's going to happen next. I make no comment on Donald Trump. But people feel that in all kinds of different ways, don't they, about life, about our circumstances, about political events.

What next? How do I have any certainty for the future? Well, the certainty that we mentioned and that I want to come back to, there is a game changer and that has a bearing on every one of our lives, on your life, on my life, is that the Lord Jesus will come again.

That's what's brought out throughout this passage, that Lord Jesus is coming again. That has fundamental consequences for every single one of us.

It is the game changer. It is the game changer for those who feel so secure in their palaces with all of their stuff and their huge bank accounts and their massive influence, won't get them anything when the Lord returns to judge the living and the dead.

[33 : 39] He is the one who will bring justice on the earth. And he is the one in whom, and if this is you tonight, if your trust is in something other than the Lord Jesus, then you need to think very seriously about that. Jesus is coming again and he will judge the living and the dead.

This is a call to repentance. If Christians are caught up in this sin of putting their trust in something other than him. But it's also the game changer for those who are oppressed, because as I've said, sometimes the way we deal with oppression is to think, well, if I could get revenge, that's my satisfaction. That'll feel good. That'll change things for me.

We can get justice. Now, justice is right and we want justice and we stand up for people's justice. But even sometimes in justice, we don't feel fully satisfied. Maybe we get justice in one thing and then another injustice happens.

The thing that will make things right is when the Lord comes again to judge the living and the dead, and those who are oppressed but who are trusting in him, those that describes in verse 6, you've condemned and murdered the righteous person, the one who seeks the righteousness of Christ.

Then we will know joy. Then you will know peace. Then you will know freedom. Then you will know fullness of what it means to see him face to face.

[35 : 03] And we see this ultimately in Jesus, don't we, in Christ's own life, the one who was so afflicted, who was so oppressed, but who didn't retaliate, who didn't retaliate, who didn't come back down off the cross, and who then was glorified.

The firstborn over the dead. That will be for us, for those of you who are trusting in him, that sense of oppression, glorification awaits you to know him and to be with him.

And Jesus himself says, let me just finish with these words. To give you hope, John chapter 16, Jesus says, truly, truly I say to you, you will be sorrowful, speaking to his disciples, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. So Jesus says those words to his disciples, and that's you tonight, if you know him and trust in him.

That is your hope. And we pray that that will help us to be steadfast in all the situations we face. Let me pray.

[36 : 25] Father, we pray for grace. We thank you for your grace and your mercy towards us. Have mercy on us, Lord, so often our trust can be in other things than you, if that's the case for us tonight then.

Please speak very clearly to us and draw us in no uncertain terms to see you as the wonderful Savior that we need.

Please help us, Lord, if we feel, if we are in great trouble, help us as a church to care for one another, to practice the kind of love, practical love and mercy that you would have us practice.

But help us, Lord, always to look within our own hearts so that even if we've been wronged, we seek to be the kind of people that you would have us be. We seek to speak as you would have us speak. We seek to reflect the goodness of God, the love of God and the patience that you would have us have.

And we do look forward to the day, Lord Jesus, when you come again. Thank you that this is a promise and we ask that in this promise we would meditate on that and that that would be at the center of our vision in all that we face.

[37 : 42] In Jesus' name, amen.