9-8-24

James 5:7-11

James has been pretty tough the last several verses. At the end of chapter 4, he has chewed out Christian businessmen for their arrogance in not submitting their lives and plans to the Lord. In chapter 5 he pronounces condemnation on the rich who are greedy and actively causing the poor to suffer and even die. These may be Christians who have lost touch with the reality of being in Christ; they may be pagans who are outside the church; or they may be people in the church who think they are Christian but are not. Regardless, the outcome is the same: their horded riches testify against them and they will face harsh judgement in the end.

James now comes back to gently admonishing and encouraging the church under his care. He again calls them “brethren”. These verses do tie into the previous stringent admonitions because he begins with “therefore”. James realizes that the people in these churches are suffering persecution and they are suffering persecution at the hands of the rich.

The rich were able to bribe officials so that they could steal the people’s land and avoid paying them for any work done. The often-poor Christians had no recourse. This is difficult for us to grasp in this country. We usually have recourse. There are laws that protect us from being taken advantage of; there is a court system that we can turn to. Granted, it doesn’t always work; but most of the time we are able to fight for rights that we have and win. This was not the case in the day and age of James.

Because this was the reality of life, James told them what they had to do: “*be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.*” Again, something very hard for us to comprehend; but that was life for these people. The natural reaction is to be angry and even to plot vengeance. And, if somebody does us wrong, the most reasonable reaction is to get mad. But as Christians, we are called to deal with anger in the proper way.

And we are called to deal with being wronged in the proper way. Are we as Christians allowed to use the court system when we have been wronged? Sure, we have that option that the first century Christians didn’t have. And this especially applies to those outside the church. If we are wronged by someone within the church, it is a different matter and Paul discusses that in 1 Corinthians 6. But if we have to press for our rights, we must be sure that it isn’t out of vengeance. The Bible is very clear that vengeance is the Lord’s and not ours.

Even though it may not be as prevalent for us as it was for those James was writing to, what James says still applies. Sometimes we are wronged, by a person or a company, and we have no recourse. We are still to do what James says, “*be patient*”. We have to let it go; if we don’t, it will eat at us and we allow satan to steal our joy. We wait on the Lord, because He will deal with those who refuse Him and hurt His people. Remember what Jesus said to the sheep and the goats: *Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.* Bear in mind that whatever wrong is done to you has been done to the almighty God of the universe. And we are assured in the Bible that all of Christ’s enemies will be vanquished.

The example is given of the farmer who plants seeds and then waits for the crop. He even has to wait for the rain. Think how absurd it would be for the farmer to plant seeds and come out the next day expecting a harvest. So it is for us; we don’t expect the Lord’s wrath to be poured out immediately. He is merciful and gives people time to repent. His wrath will fall in due time; we are to wait.

Again in verse 8, James tells us to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord; in other words, the return of Jesus. This is the second coming of Christ that we call the Parousia. When Jesus returns, He will bring judgement. Every wrong done to His people will be dealt with. When Jesus came the first time, He fulfilled Isaiah 61:2a, “*To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.*” When He comes the second time, He will fulfill part b of that verse, “*And the day of vengeance of our God.*”

Verse 8 also give us something to do, “*Strengthen your hearts*.” Notice how much this contrasts with what the evil rich are doing in verse 5, “*you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter*.” Obviously, those who refuse to turn to Christ and who carry out all their evil selfish desires in this life, are simply adding wrath upon wrath that they will have to face in the final judgement. All the more reason for us to strengthen our hearts. We know that Jesus is coming and He will bring His people more good than we can possibly imagine.

Recall what James tells us back in chapter 1, “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*.” Put this into practice; be patient when wronged waiting on the Lord so that your heart will be strengthened and not fattened.

Next James turns to a slightly different category, but still regarding patience. And he is talking about others in the church. Any one who has children or has been a child knows what sibling rivalry is. Brothers and sisters get into arguments and fights; often times for no good reason at all. Well, we in the church are all brothers and sisters in Christ; and we can do the same thing. And just as parents tell their children to knock it off, the Holy Spirit, through James, is telling us the same thing.

Now sometimes something serious takes place that needs to be dealt with, but that is not what James is talking about here in verse 9. He is talking about minor habits or personality traits that happen to rub us the wrong way. The very natural thing for us to do in this case is to complain about the person who irritates us. Ok, here’s what James is saying, ‘Don’t do that’.

Remember how much trouble the Israelites got into for grumbling. But more to the point, it will damage a church. I think we all know that it can lead to serious division and it can lead to hurt feelings in our Christian sibling whom we are supposed to love. A church is to be unified; we are to be in the process of being perfected as the bride of Christ. And that can’t happen if we are in the habit of complaining about each other. Once again in another way, James tells us that we must control our tongues.

If someone irritates you, pray for them. Ask the Lord to work in their lives to change whatever it is that is difficult to deal with. Or better yet, pray for yourself. Ask the Lord to work in your own heart to be more tolerant, understanding, and loving toward your fellow Christian.

There is another important detail that James points out: to complain about someone is judging them. We considered judging a few weeks ago and recognized that there are many times and many situations in which we are to judge. But there are some where we are not. If a person has an annoying personality trait or habit, we don’ know why. We don’t know the person’s heart or what happened to them in their life to cause them to act this way. We are not to judge what we don’t know. And in this case Jesus’ words apply from Matthew 7, “*Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you*.”

James relays this teaching of his half-brother when he lets us know that complaining about someone else opens us up to judgement ourselves. And that is because each and every one of us probably irritates someone else; none of us are innocent. James has reminded us that the coming of the Lord is near; now he says that “*the Judge is standing right at the door.*” The Lord and the Judge are one and the same. Because His return is imminent, we must never brush off the judgement by thinking that we have plenty of time.

Certainly, people have known that the return of Christ has been imminent for almost 2000 years. For us that’s a long time. But when faced with eternity, 2000 years aren’t even noticeable. It is very easy for us, even as Christians, to become complacent. We mustn’t do that. As the apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 3, there will be many mockers who will say He hasn’t returned after all this time, don’t worry; He’s not coming. And Peter says of course they have forgotten about the flood and all the people who ignored God’s warning then.

Peter then goes on to remind us that with the Lord, 1000 years is just a day. Very often folks will try to apply that to the seven days of creation; trying to make the Genesis account match up with evolution. But that is misplaced; although it has been 2000 years for us, it’s only been 2 days for God since Jesus was here. The question is sometimes asked, “If you knew that Jesus was coming back tomorrow, how would you live today?” Hopefully the answer is ‘no different from any other day’; we ought to live each day as if He were coming back tomorrow; He might.

James points to some Biblical examples of those who suffered and who exhibited patience; they stood strong in their faith in the Lord no matter what happened to them. First he mentions the prophets. In general, the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that these people did great and mighty acts for the Lord; but also: “*others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground*.” (Heb 11:35-38)

What the churches James was writing to were going through was nothing new; it was nothing unexpected. Jesus warned us that we would face persecution for being His followers. But James was letting them know they were in good company; they were right in there with the heroes of the faith. The very ones we count as being blessed because they endured. Thus, if we endure, we will be blessed.

This of course begs the question, ‘Why does God allow His people to be treated like this?’ For one thing, God wants as many to come to Him as possible because He is merciful. He works through His people, so we are the ones bringing the Gospel. In this fallen world, this will bring opposition and persecution. So, we suffer due to God’s mercy on others but our suffering is short and will be nothing compared to our reward. Another thing is that we are to be like Christ. Christ suffered; so we will suffer. Thirdly, suffering in Christ will purify us. It helps to perfect us to be the bride of Christ.

James also brings up the example of Job. Job suffered terribly at what appeared to be simply a challenge from satan. Yet all of what Job went through and his reaction to it brought God glory. In James’ examples. The prophets suffered directly because of their stand for the Lord. Job suffered simply because he was attacked by satan. He didn’t know about the council in heaven and he never was told. He just suffered. He complained and wanted some answers from God, but he never lost his faith. And because of that he was richly rewarded.

I think this kind of suffering applies more to us. In some parts of the world, just being a Christian brings about persecution; the kind of suffering the prophets endured. For us, it is more like what Job went through. We face frustrations, difficulties, and even calamities. It seems like they just happen. But we don’t know what is going on in the spiritual world. You can be sure that we are under spiritual attack simply because we are Christian.

It is very important for us to endure all these sufferings with patience, maintaining our faith in Jesus. Our sufferings do benefit us in God’s providence, but more importantly, if we remain steadfast in Christ in the midst of suffering, we bring glory to God and shame to satan. Satan wants us to turn from Jesus and for those who are not truly rooted in Christ, suffering will do that.

Cling to Jesus during suffering, even if we don’t understand why. As James tells us “*the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.*” While it may not seem that way while we are going through bad times; the Lord will bless us many times over just as He did for Job.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You went through tremendous suffering while You were here on earth as a man. You experienced physical pain, mental anguish, and a broken heart. You felt loneliness and betrayal. There is nothing we can go through that You have not suffered. You even accepted the wrath of God in our place.

So You know how difficult it is for us when we suffer. We sometimes falter and wonder if our Father has stopped being faithful to us. We are reminded that even You cried out on the cross, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?*” But You, Jesus, said it in complete faith and trust. Help us to cry out to God in complete faith and trust; knowing that He is kind and compassionate; and that He cares for us.

When we suffer Lord, may Your Holy Spirit help us to persevere and endure; so that we may become the perfected bride of Christ. Help us to know that any suffering He allows is by His infinite wisdom and that His arm is never too short to save. And save us He will. No one can snatch us out of His all powerful hand.

We praise You Lord in Jesus’ name

Amen