



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 4 – James 5:1; 5:13-20; Matthew 16:17-18; 1 Peter 1:1-12

Day 1 - James 5:1

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.

Understanding the Passage:

Wow, what a way to start off week four! Using language that would make some of the Old Testament prophets proud, James attacks those who oppress others because of their great wealth. It would be tempting, at this point, to turn our attention to the context of the audience that James is so harshly addressing. Or perhaps look at a few other translations to see if we can soften this scripture a bit. That way we could keep a safe distance from the text and anything that might remotely apply to our current situation in 2018. There is certainly some context to be considered here, namely the manner in which the rich were obtaining their wealth, as well as how they used it. But, we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn't allow James' warning to touch our hearts at least a little bit. There is nothing wrong with wealth in and of itself, in fact, John Wesley was once quoted as saying "earn all you can." But regardless of the context, the universal warning to readers is that great misery lies at the end of a life filled with greed and money as its end goal. That false God will never lead to real happiness or eternal value.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What do you spend most of your day thinking about or working towards?
- If "home is where the heart is," where have you been living lately?
- Take a moment to project your life forward ten years, then twenty, and finally towards the end of your life. Based on your work, relationships, and spiritual walk today, where do you see yourself in the future?
- How is your financial situation? Are you struggling, comfortable, or stressed about the future? How might you invite God into a conversation surrounding your bank account?

Day 2 James 5:13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them,

anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Understanding the Passage:

I once heard a story about a lady praying for God to open up a parking place for her during the Christmas shopping season. She drove around and around the lot, praying out loud. Sure enough, voila, God must have intervened because a minivan pulled out right in front of the entrance. Right in front! And on a cold and rainy day! Yay, God.

I suspect you can detect the sarcasm. At first, this story annoyed me greatly. Do you really think God has time to worry about our parking place? Is that what really matters? Surely God is interested in more important things. And yet, the overarching message of this passage is that we are to consecrate all of life with prayer. Through prayer, our suffering, our happiness, our sickness, our sin, our regret, our relationships, good times and bad times, small stuff and big stuff, and everything in between – all of them can be experienced as sacred, as holy, and God can be involved in all of it. And prayer is the best tool for facilitating that sacredness. Most of life is made up of small stuff – parking spaces and what to have for dinner, paying the bills and hauling the kids to softball practice, figuring out how to get the brown patch off the lawn and why the disposal keeps throwing the breaker. Take all of that out and there isn't that much left. So now, I have come to believe that the parking lot lady was right. I want to consecrate everything by talking about it with God. I think a conversation with God can make even Christmas parking miracles holy moments.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Have you ever had difficult times which turned out to be really holy moments?
- Based on the devotional above, what do you think it means to say prayer is “effective?” Effective for what?

Day 3 - James 5:19-20

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Understanding the Passage:

These days we often shy away from calling people out when they are wandering in sin. It is understandable when we read scriptures like, “only Jesus is the judge” or “plank in our own eyes.” Let's face it, we have historically not always done the best job as Christians calling others to repentance. But James concludes this section and the letter with an encouragement to mutual correction. Different from the type of judging that James condemns earlier in the letter, holding one another accountable was crucial to preserving the culture and community of believers. It is a form of edification and solidarity that says, “we are in covenantal relationship together, and because I love you I am willing to have a hard conversation with you about how your life has been going lately.” The difference here, of course, is what type of relationship do you have with someone, and where is your heart on the matter? I will likely not be heard by someone if they don't know me very well or if my words are coming from a place of anger

or envy. But if my motivation is out of love, and if this person knows that I care about them, God may very well use me to be a voice of transformation in their lives.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Think of a time when someone called you out on something? Did they do it in a loving way or in a way that made you harden your heart on the matter? Why do you think that was?
- It is often hard for us to hear criticism from others, if you had to hear it, how would you want to be called into repentance?
- Is there someone in your life that you are in accountability with? Someone who can call you out on something and you would listen? If not, consider who that person might be.
- What is one area of your life that God might be calling you into repentance?

Day 4 - Matthew 16:17-18

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Understanding the Passage:

Peter was one of the twelve disciples that followed Jesus during his ministry on earth. Also known as Simon (his given name), Peter was one of the inner circle of three disciples who was closest to Jesus. He would go on to be one of the earliest leaders of the apostolic church after Jesus rose from the dead. Peter was known not only for his great faith but also for his brashness. Peter is one of my favorite disciples because he has great highs and lows throughout his time in the scriptures. The same man who walked on water out to Jesus, who had the ability through the Holy Spirit to see Jesus as the messiah, and who stood next to Jesus when the other disciples fled, was also the man who tried to talk Jesus out of going to the cross, who quickly sank when he saw the waves around him, and who denied that he even knew Jesus three times. Peter is a wonderfully human figure in the New Testament, one whose weaknesses we can relate to, and whose accomplishments can encourage us knowing that God can do amazing things with very flawed people. Peter was not perfect, but he loved Jesus and it was that love that allowed Jesus to change his name to Peter, the rock that would build the early church.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is your favorite story of Peter from the Bible?
2. Do you find yourself relating to Peter's boldness when it comes to your faith?
3. Think of a time that you messed up, how did you respond/learn from that failure?
4. What was the difference, if any, between Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal of Jesus?

Day 5 - 1 Peter 1:1-12

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for

a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

Understanding the Passage:

First Peter is written in Greek, and Greek letters of the first century typically began with a salutation similar to the one from today's reading. The author introduces himself as Peter, electing not to use his proper given name of Simon, indicating that Peter has fully taken on the mantle and calling of his new namesake that was given to him by Jesus. This is a letter of encouragement, written during a time when sufferings and trials were abundant in the early church. The acknowledgment of difficult times and the promise of hope amidst those difficulties is a theme that flows throughout the entire letter of 1 Peter. When our faith is tested by life struggles it is refined like a precious metal that is being formed into the shape that it was created to be. Hope lives within us because it is based on Jesus' resurrection from the dead, his triumph over death. This reminds us that death will never have the final say, and that even when we find ourselves in exile or in great need, the resurrection of Jesus is new life and living hope for us as his followers.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What jumps out to you in the scripture reading today? What did you find interesting?
- What does it mean for you to have hope in Jesus? What are you typically putting your hope into?
- Can you think of a time when your faith was "refined or molded?"
- What part(s) of your faith in Jesus are you currently struggling with? Why?