

James 4:13-5:6

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Do open your Bibles to James chapter 4. We'll pick it up at verse 13. And before we get there, let's pray one more time.

! Amen.

The 1942 film classic, Casablanca. I wasn't there when it was first released. But it opens with a voiceover.

If you've seen it, you'll know this. It says this. With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully or desperately towards the freedom of the Americas.

The narrator then describes the journey that people took through France. There's a little map that you can see and all of that. And people went through France and across the Mediterranean through Casablanca where they had to wait before they moved further on.

[1 : 10] But this is what we do when life is hard. We look at others who seem to be thriving and we want what they have. And we order our lives after that.

We head off in that direction. When things get difficult, we look for a way out. And this can be true in any area of life. Work is hard. Marriage is hard.

Relationships are hard. And so we turn, hopefully or desperately in some cases, toward the freedom or perceived freedom of another option. And of course, this moment in our culture, that is positively encouraged, isn't it?

Regardless of the consequences. If you're not happy where you are or things aren't absolutely optimal, you're encouraged positively to go and look elsewhere regardless of the consequences. That can also be true in the Christian life. Especially in a world where being a Christian is viewed negatively. When being a Christian is something that actually costs you in the context of life.

[2 : 12] We find ourselves drawn to what we feel would be an easier, more comfortable, more straightforward, more fulfilling, it might seem, way of life. And so we go quiet on our faith and we do what we're told in the workplace, no matter how compromised it makes us.

Or we adapt what we believe in order to accommodate what the culture is saying. We'll do anything so that we're not ostracized. So that things aren't unbearably difficult. So that we don't fall the wrong side of the opinions of those whose opinions really matter to us.

If we can just change how we think and act, if we can just adopt the ways of the world around us, well the criticism then it dries up. And when the criticism dries up, life gets a whole lot easier.

And we've studied this letter over the last couple of months. We've seen that this is the mindset that James is challenging in his hearers. If we could paraphrase our film, we might say this.

With the coming of Christ into the lives of these first believers and the opposition from the Jewish religious leadership that has followed, many eyes in persecuted and scattered Christendom turned hopefully or desperately toward the freedom and recognition of the established religion.

[3 : 25] That was the pull. The pull was back to the old ways of Judaism. And these Jewish zealots that are persecuting these Christians, making their life very difficult, the trials that they are going through because of this, are trying to win them back.

Win them back to their cause. And so what has happened is, many that James is writing to have adopted the same approach as the zealots. So the zealots are going after them, persecuting them, making life difficult, haranguing them, giving them a hard time and all of that.

And James is saying that he sees this in the response of the Christians. In their words and actions. In the hope that they will be accepted. They are trying to curry favor with the rich and influential religious leaders.

They are doing that also because they think that they can hold the two together. They can be acceptable and they can achieve the righteousness of God. They can fight the way the world fights

and bring in the righteousness of God.

They are doing it on their terms. And James has rebuked this behavior pretty directly up to this point. If you have been with us, you will have heard him. He does not pull his punches. But this morning what we discover is that James is speaking to the opposition.

[4 : 37] He is speaking to the opposing forces. The Jewish oppressors. It is a fascinating move. The come now that opens verse 13. Chapter 4 verse 13. And again in 5.1.

They tie this section together. James is using first of all a parable. And then a prophecy directed towards the enemies of God's people.

And he is doing this as a warning to them. They need to repent of their oppression. But the fascinating thing is that James does this by speaking to these beleaguered Christians.

He gives them the parable and then the prophecy. And what he is trying to do then is encourage them to stay the course. Encourage them to endure with Christ no matter how painful it becomes. He is trying to encourage them to see that it is worth it to keep going with Christ however difficult things get. Because of where the alternative ultimately leads. Sounds quite strange doesn't it initially when we hear that.

[5 : 38] But this is actually a common method in the Old Testament with the prophets in the Old Testament. So if you were to go to Isaiah chapter 13 verse 6. God says this. Wail for the day of the Lord is near.

It will come like destruction from the Almighty. Sounds quite similar doesn't it? Verse 1. Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Wail for the day of the Lord is near and destruction is coming.

Now in this case he is speaking to Babylon. Who are oppressing God's people. But he is saying these words to Israel. The prophecy is to Israel about Babylon.

Babylon so that they would see what judgment was coming to those who rejected their God. And the traitors in this parable in 4.13. And the rich in 5 verse 1 are the same people.

And he isn't introducing just a new category here of rich people. We've been meeting the rich all the way through the letter. The rich are the same group that James has referred to throughout. The Jewish ruling leaders who have rejected Christ.

[6 : 38] Chapter 2. And blasphemed his name. 2 verses 6 and 7. So James' logic in the letter has been this. He said initially to this group of beleaguered Christians.

Your trials are sent by God in order to mature your faith and make you more like Christ. Therefore don't respond to them by getting angry and trying to play your opponents at their own game. Instead, humble yourselves in repentance. Return to God and trust that he will exalt you in the end. That repentance will affect how you speak to and about other people.

Don't stand above the law of neighbor love in the context of the community. Pursue unity. And now he says, And don't forget what God will do to those who oppose you.

He's saying don't forget the end of the story. And so what he's doing is reminding us all this morning that walking away from obedience to Christ, whether it's for the sake of an easier life or for the sake of success or acceptance, even if you think that by doing that you're very clever and you are going to serve the advance of God's kingdom, James is saying it's not worth it.

[7 : 55] It's not worth it. Don't go there. Here's why. Three reasons. Number one, the Lord sees. The Lord sees.

4.13 Come now you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. It's like James is using a parable.

And he's describing God's enemies as traveling traders. It's a picture that the Lord Jesus uses over and over again in the Gospels. If you're familiar, he uses the image of business and trading and economic transaction in lots of his parables.

So Matthew 18.23 Matthew 21.33 Luke 16.13 Those who were authorized by the Sanhedrin to, That's the context of the book of James. Or chapter 9 verse 1 in the book of Acts. Those who were authorized by the Sanhedrin to, Bring any belonging to the way, that is, any who have become Christians, men and women, bound to Jerusalem.

[10 : 03] Go and get them. They've been scattered from Jerusalem. Go and get them. And if they won't renounce their Christian faith, bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem. That's the context of James. And what's happening then in this parable is, These traveling men from Jerusalem are

trying to reincorporate these new disciples of Jesus back into their apostate Jerusalem.

That is their prophet, so to speak. The economic metaphor continues. 5 verse 3. You have laid up treasure. James says, In the last days, behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you.

5 verse 5. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. These leaders of old Israel have stored up for themselves the spiritual treasure of the gospel that they have been given.

They have also kept the gold and silver of the temple for themselves, verse 3. They are rich in wealth because of that and in spiritual resources. But instead of sharing those riches with others, as they were called to do, instead of being a light to the world as they were called to be, they oppress and they persecute the people of God and the Lord sees it all.

James is telling them what they have done. The Lord knows. He sees it. They should have known that they are precarious.

[11:34] Life is a mist, verse 14. Their lives, they think they are so strong and yet he reminds them, Your life is a mist, verse 14. They should be asking whether the work that they do is really of the Lord, verse 15, but instead they boast of their own strength.

Even though they have heard that Jesus is God's Messiah, He is the Lord who has come, even though they know that that is right, verse 17, they serve themselves. And the Lord sees it all.

James is warning the enemies. But remember, apart from that one guy back in chapter 2, mentioned with the robe and the ring who comes into their meetings, the leaders of this persecuting regime are not necessarily going to hear what he's saying.

What he's doing here is reminding these oppressed Christians that he understands what is going on. And so when James is calling them to obedience, when he is calling them to follow Christ and return to Him rather than adopting the ways of their oppressors, he isn't naive.

He knows how hard it is. But more than that, he is encouraging them that God sees what is happening and God knows the arrogance of the powerful enemies of the church.

[12:59] Whatever is going on in your life in terms of opposition because you're a Christian, the Lord sees it. Nothing that the opponents of the church get up to escapes the gaze of God.

But he doesn't just see. Secondly, the Lord judges. 5 verse 1, Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You've fattened your hearts, verse 5, in a day of slaughter.

Now we've already seen that the rich in James, as I said earlier, aren't just people with a strong bottom line. They are the ones who possess the ring and the robe that marks out their authority. Chapter 2, verse 2. They are the ones who oppress this church and blaspheme Christ's name. And here we are shown what James has already promised. Do you remember back in chapter 1, verses 9 to 11, then these opponents will fade away in the midst of their pursuits.

[14:13] This is how that will happen. All of this imagery is Old Testament imagery of judgment. The call to weep and wail echoes Isaiah 13, as I said.

Isaiah 14, it's there as well. Isaiah 15. They all speak like this when they promise the enemies of God's people that judgment is coming. And the language of decay.

Do you notice that? Your riches have rotted. Your garments are moth-eaten. That echoes Isaiah chapter 50, verse 9. It says this, Behold, the Lord God helps me, who will declare me guilty.

Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment. The moth will eat them up. These are the words of the suffering servant in Isaiah chapter 50. And James is applying them then to these exiled believers.

He's saying both that they're walking the same path as the Lord Jesus Christ, the suffering servant. But also that just as God judged Christ's enemies, so he will judge the enemies of Christ's people.

[15:22] These opponents would have looked so impressive. They had all the prestige. They had all the cultural capital. They had all the influence.

All the wealth of the temple at their disposal. All the power and influence of a religious establishment. It was a heady mix of religion and politics, all exercised in the name of God.

It would have felt impregnable, completely impregnable, to James' scattered flock. In fact, in many ways, this system was impregnable. No one would have had the ability to challenge the authority or

make any headway in bringing about change.

But just as Jesus offered His own denunciation in the Gospels of this system, remember in Luke, Luke 23, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Jesus says, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill or crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town.

Sounds like the parable just before. Just as Jesus offered His denunciation of this group, so James is doing the same. Yet again, we hear Him echoing the words of the Savior.

[16 : 33] He's telling this beleaguered group, remember what Jesus has said. The leaders, they were supposed to be a light to the world. They were supposed to bring the gospel of Christ to the nations.

They were supposed to bring out and spread abroad the riches of this good news. But instead, Israel opposed God's Son during His ministry, and they are continuing to oppose His followers. They have hoarded for themselves these physical and spiritual blessings. Verse 6, They have even condemned and murdered the righteous person. Because of this, the misery of God's judgment is coming to them.

Our context today is different. The church in our day doesn't face exactly the same systemic opposition.

We do have a religious establishment. We do have a state church that at an institutional level has put the treasure of the gospel away somewhere in a cupboard or in a vault or something like that.

[17 : 37] It has forgotten that it exists for the sake of the world and not for its own sake as an institution. And so the light of the gospel doesn't shine as it should and God will judge that. As He will any church that purports to be a church but doesn't get the gospel out, doesn't proclaim Christ and Him crucified, keeps that gospel, that richness, the wealth from others.

others. God will also judge every force that stands against His church. Every voice that raises itself arrogantly against His people as they, as you, as we seek to serve Him faithfully wherever He has placed us.

So when the temptation comes to step back from faithfulness because the opposition feels too intense. It feels impossible to you to do otherwise.

And look, it is intense when your job is on the line, your means of providing is on the line. It is intense when your children are getting a hard time at school for their faith or when your church gets its charitable status revoked for hate speech or when your PayPal account gets shut down because you hold extreme views or you're not considered for adoption because you would raise the child in the Christian faith.

The list could go on and on in our day. The temptation to step back from the cross-shaped path of discipleship when that is what it means is significant.

[19 : 23] So we have to remember that that opposition is on the clock. It is time limited and that time is ticking and God will deal with these opponents.

If we know that that is where we're headed, if we know that is what is going to happen, don't choose to leave the struggle in the present because it's quite simply not worth it.

It isn't worth it in the end. Instead, what must we do? Well, James tells us we must lift our voices to the Lord. Cry out to Him for mercy because thirdly, first, the Lord sees.

Secondly, the Lord judges. Thirdly, the Lord hears. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud are crying out against you when the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

Again, James is echoing the language of Jesus. I hope we've seen that as a kind of melody all the way through this letter. It's like He's saying, remember what Jesus said.

[20 : 29] You're in the midst of what Jesus promised was going to happen. Remember what He said about how to handle this. Again, it's the language of laborers and harvests that Jesus used.

And again, He has in view spiritual labor and spiritual harvest. Remember, when Jesus saw the beleaguered crowds, His heart was open because they were like sheep without a shepherd, we're told.

And He said this, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. So pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest. Matthew 9. And again, in John 4, He connects the work of His disciples in harvesting fields when He says, John 4.35, Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest.

Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life so that the sower and reaper may rejoice together. That language from Jesus is referring to the apostles and the prophets of the book of Acts, that first wave of ministers.

And it is the cries of these laborers, these harvesters, in the face of this opposition and obstruction by the Jewish leaders that have reached the ears of the Lord of the heavenly armies.

[21 : 44] There should have been a harvest of souls for these laborers in the gospel. But that harvest has been held back by the persecutors. That activity itself cries out to God, verse 4.

Wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you have kept back by fraud are crying out against you. The Lord hears. all the way through the Old Testament when God's people are oppressed, they would cry out to Him and He would deliver them.

Remember Genesis 4, verse 10, Abel's blood cried out to God. Exodus chapter 2, God's people are in slavery to Pharaoh and what do the people do? They cry out to God and He remembered His covenant and He rescued them.

When James uses language of the cries of these marginalized Christians having reached the ears of the Lord of hosts, He is connecting them to the history of the people of God. He is connecting them to the history of a people who when they cry to their heavenly Father, He hears and He answers.

James is telling this group in the face of all of the impressive strength of this ruling religious establishment that is pursuing them in the name of God and doing so so forcefully, James is telling them that they are the true people of God.

[23 : 09] That as they cry out, they are connecting themselves to the history of God's people and they are serving God's true King, the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who is Himself, the God who rescues His people when they call on His name.

And the wonder is that in less than 40 years from James' writing here, the Lord acted on those cries.

He saw what was going on and He judged the nation. These oppressors who lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence have fattened their hearts and the day of slaughter came in AD 70. The Roman armies burnt Jerusalem to the ground. They destroyed the temple. As the symbol of old Israel's rebellion. Jesus promised this in Matthew 24 and it came to pass. Jesus kept His word and He will keep it again when He comes to vindicate His people.

When He comes to destroy His enemies. When He comes to rescue His church from their suffering. God hears His people. God responds when His people call on His name.

[24 : 25] When the pressure of the negative world threatens to squeeze us into its mold. Don't forget this. God hears the cries of His people.

God hears the cries of His people. So don't step back. Don't be fearful. Call on the God who hears and who will answer.

God comes where He's wanted. Do you want Him? Do you see it as a priority to call on Him in the daily battles for faithfulness? Some days it feels like there are moment by moment these battles for faithfulness because the pressure to give in the pressure to concede just to go with the flow for the sake of not being that person those battles can just come like rapid fire some days.

If we will make it as Christians in these days we need to go to new levels of prayer. We need to fight to make it a habit that gets so ingrained in us that it almost becomes a part of who you are.

But above all as we listen in on James' prophetic rebuke here of the oppressors of this scattered community of saints let it remind you that the alternative to faithfulness is just not worth it in the end.

[25 : 48] It isn't. Whether you're tempted to retaliate to the persecution with the same anger and hostility as the world or you look hopefully or desperately to the apparent freedom of another way of life remember that God sees and He judges those who turn their back on Him.

He sees and He judges those who reject His Son the Lord Jesus. It's not worth it. But also take heart be encouraged that in the midst of your struggles God hears the cries of His people.

when you put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation you are united to His beloved Son and the Lord looks on you with love and acceptance and He delights to hear your voice.

So as He is growing you in Christ-likeness on the path of cross-shaped discipleship as He's making you take up your cross daily and follow the Lord Jesus as Jesus told us is page one of discipleship it is essential if we are going to be faithful disciples that we die to ourselves and we follow Him on that path of self-denial and He sends trials into our lives to enable us to do that to force us to have

to do that more and more and to draw us to Him as He is making you more like Jesus remember that you can cry out to Him and just as He did with the Lord Jesus He will lead us through the suffering and one day having made us more like Christ He will vindicate us and justice will be done and He will bring us into the peace and security of glory slow down look up and keep on let's pray together