

James 5:1-8 — Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand

Today we start the final chapter in the book of James, covering James chapter 5, verses 1-8.

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Introduction

As we have seen throughout the book of James, James doesn't waste any words or pull any punches. He just says it as it is, and what he has to say is so honest and forthright that it can be quite the smack in the face to us. My sinful nature does not appreciate being exposed in such a clear and open way.

Today we come to another very strongly worded passage, but the centre of the message is a heartfelt appeal to not give up, to be patient, and to establish our hearts so that we will not be led astray by materialism, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. Let's read:

James 5:1-8 NKJV

Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!* ² Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Indeed the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth [or Hosts]. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

⁷ Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See *how* the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. ⁸ You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Summary/Outline

Chapter 5 verses 1-6 starts off with a dire warning to what would appear to be unbelievers — those who live their whole lives for themselves, those who are completely dominated by their sinful nature for their entire lives. Why does James paint such a depressing and terrifying picture of the final destiny of the wicked rich, of those unrepentant people who seem to do so well and get away with so much? So we don't want to be like them. So we will see that, even though they seem to have it all now, their future is so terrible that we should be feeling sorry for them, and not envying them, not trying to be like them, and not seeking the things that they have and the life that they live.

Then in verse 7 James shifts to pleading with believers to not live with an earthly or temporary focus, but to keep our eyes on the coming of the Lord. Why? Because all wrongs will be made right, every score will be settled, and everything that we have sacrificed for the kingdom of God will be so much more than worth it. The fact is that when we get to Heaven and stand before Jesus at the Bema Seat Judgement (the judgement of rewards for all those who are born again), we will be kicking ourselves for not being willing to sacrifice and willingly give or suffer more. When we finally see and fully understand the rich reward or prize that God has waiting for us, we will realise how foolish we were all those times that we chose to seek the temporary or earthly things instead. We will be thinking, “I gave up this heavenly, eternal, glorious reward.... for that rubbish, for that little bit of pleasure, to escape that little bit of stress or pain — how stupid was I.” It really is all about perspective, as we will see today .

The Future Condemnation and Suffering of the Ungodly Rich: The Power of Perspective

James 5:1-3 NKJV

**Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!*
² Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.**

Jon Courson summarises these verses this way: “Because the language in verse seven makes it clear that he is addressing the true believer, James’ harsh words here in verse three are not directed to true brothers, but to those who were only playing church. They are directed to those who thought they would be saved in the last day because of their wealth. They are directed to those who were using their money to be esteemed highly in the church.”

I would add that these rich people probably thought that, because they were rich, that God didn’t have a problem with the way they lived, that God in fact was blessing them. The reality of the situation is that these people had the completely wrong perspective, and their spiritual blindness will cost them dearly.

Let’s have a closer look at verses 1-6.

v 1 **Come now, *you* rich:** James is *not* saying that because you are rich you are an evil person and will therefore automatically go to hell. The main point that James has developed in the first four chapters is dependance on God. We cannot please God if we are living by own strength and following our own sinful human nature desires. If we are depending on God, allowing the Holy Spirit to direct and empower our lives, then we will be blessed with good (unselfish) relationships, both with God and with each other. We will also experience God’s love, joy and peace in our hearts.

However, throughout the Bible, material prosperity has always been a difficult thing for people to handle. There are many examples of riches causing people to stray from the faith because it is so easy to think that riches will make you happy, supply your needs, and protect you. However, only God can do all those things. The reality is that material property is the cause of many sorrows. Consider:

1 Timothy 6:10-14 NKJV

For the love of money is a root of all *kinds of evil*, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

¹¹ But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³ I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, ¹⁴ that you keep *this* commandment without spot, **blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing,**

So the rich that James is referring to here are the unrepentant rich who are trusting completely in their riches, living in luxury, and living independently of God. However it is very easy for Christians to be led astray by riches and shipwreck their faith. As we will see more later, the way to prevent us being deceived by wealth and affluence is to keep our eyes on Jesus, to establish our hearts so that we will maintain the correct or eternal perspective.

v 1 **Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!** This is a blunt warning to those seeking to live the good life, a life where ease, comfort, and financial security is their highest priority. The rich can be very proud and often reject the message of salvation as being foolish because they don't think that they need it — they are content with what they have, their lifestyle, and think that they are safe from harm and hardship. This is a dangerous place to be, and we don't have to be all that rich to be in the place where we don't have to depend on God for our daily provision or needs. I would say that most wage earners in the western world would be classed as rich and self-sufficient. So long as we are employed, to a large extent we can; go where we want, eat what we want, spend what we want, and live where we want. But as we will find out, all these things are fleeting. They will not last.

v 2-3 **Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten.** ³ **Your gold and silver are corroded:** Here we see the destruction of three types of wealth. Food rots (is **corrupted**), clothes get eaten by moths, and precious metals corrode. All material things (e.g. our houses, caravans, cars, and careers) will eventually come to nothing.

v 3 **...and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire:** In the end, the unrepentant rich will rot in hell, and the days of comfort here on earth will be remembered not as a blessing, but as a curse — they will finally see that their riches blinded them to the truth of the gospel and now they are in torment for eternity. Their change in perspective came too late.

v 3 **You have heaped up treasure in the last days:** Instead of heaping up or storing up treasures on earth, we should be heaping up treasure in heaven. Remember Jesus' invitation to the rich young ruler:

Luke 18:22 NLT

When Jesus heard his answer, he said, "There is still one thing you haven't done. Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, **and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**"

Do you remember the response of the rich young ruler? He went away sad. He was not willing to give up his life of ease, comfort, and financial security. What does this tell us about the reality of those who are rich and continue to reject God? Deep down they are still sad, unfulfilled, and terribly insecure — “I need to protect my money, I need more money.”

What Jesus said next about riches is also very sobering.

Luke 18:23-27 NLT

²³ But when the man heard this he became very sad, for he was very rich.

²⁴ **When Jesus saw this, he said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”**

²⁶ Those who heard this said, “Then who in the world can be saved?”

²⁷ He replied, “What is impossible for people is possible with God.”

Think about the words of Jesus here. Riches or wealth make it extremely difficult for someone to leave all and follow Jesus, to repent and make God the most important part of their lives. Please consider carefully how highly material things like education, careers, savings, houses, cars, pleasures, entertainment, recreation etc are esteemed in our western world, but in reality they can so easily become curses. Why? Because they can so easily take our focus off God. We can so easily begin to depend on those things and find our fulfilment in those things instead of God. This is the clear and present danger of living as a Christian in our very materialistic, money driven, western world. I'll say it again, materialism is an enemy to our relationship with God.

I'd rather be born poor and hungry in Africa and know the Lord, than live a comfortable life in Australia and cruise on down the wide and easy road that leads to hell. You don't have to be a brain surgeon to realise that the rates of conversion to christianity are higher in countries where christians are persecuted. To put it simply, generally speaking, more people are saved when life is hard than when life is easy. Here is a quote from “christiantoday.com” which brings things into perspective. As we read, keep in mind that church growth is pretty much stagnant, or even in decline in most western countries.

The Church has seen dramatic and explosive growth in Asia, Africa and South America. The growth of the African Church in particular is jaw-dropping. In 1900 there were fewer than 9 million Christians in Africa. Now there are more than 541 million. In the last 15 years alone, the Church in Africa has seen a 51 per cent increase, which works out on average at around 33,000 people either becoming Christians or being born into Christian families each day in Africa alone.

Strangely, this statistical growth is often met with some scepticism by the western Church. I often hear derogatory remarks about Christianity outside Europe, North America and Australia. There is a superiority complex when it comes to the global Church. There remains a conviction that Western Christians should be congratulated for heading off on teaching ministries to educate church leaders or for raising funds to correct theological challenges in the rest of the world. Christians in Nigeria and South Sudan are facing extreme levels of persecution and the Church is still growing, but it is rare for Christians in the West to think that we have anything to learn from believers there. Very few of our conference speakers, authors, worship leaders or resources originate from 'the rest of the world'.

I believe that we really need to change our perspective on what we think is good for us. Overall, wealth and the things that go along with it (education, career etc) are not good for us because they so easily cause us to become independent of God. Materialism is a huge and powerful temptation to stop depending on the Lord. If we have everything we want, then we won't easily see our need for God. This should also give us pause to consider to how we raise our children; giving them too much can be more harmful than not giving them enough. We need to pray for God's wisdom as we raise our kids.

v 3 **In the last days:** the last days started after Jesus died and rose again. Someone put it this way. Since Christ, we are not heading towards the cliff, but rather, we are heading along the cliff, and could go over at any time. Simply put, the church in the first century was expecting Jesus to come back, therefore, so should we be.

The Sins of the Rich

James 5:4-6 NKJV

⁴ Indeed the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth [hosts]. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

Even today, nothing has changed, both individuals and corporations tend to live indulgently without regard for others. The bottom line is usually always money or profits at any cost. The lengths that many people will go to increase their wealth is often extreme — **“You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you”** (v 6)

v 4 **The cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth:** David Guzik comments: “The title **Lord of Sabaoth** in James 5:4 should not be confused with the similar title *Lord of the Sabbath* (used in Mark 2:28 and Luke 6:5). Instead it is a translation of the idea behind the Hebrew term *Lord of Hosts* (compare Romans 9:29 with Isaiah 1:9), which means “the Lord of armies,” especially in the sense of heavenly and angelic armies. It describes God as the warrior, the commander-in-chief of all heavenly armies...”

The use of this title was meant to give these unjust rich a sober warning. The cries of the people they had oppressed had come to the ears of the God who commands heavenly armies; the God of might and power and of judgment.”

v 16 **You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you:**

As we said before, every score will be settled, every wrong made right. We look around and see that many are not receiving justice. But the Lord of Heaven's armies has promised to ultimately bring justice, equity and fairness to all. It's just a matter of time until the wicked are punished. Just remember that a lot of the justice will come in the afterlife, when they stand before God and face judgement. As the following verses clearly point out, we just need to be patient and allow God's will to be done.

Believers: Be Patient as You Wait for the Lord's Return

James 5:7-8 NKJV

⁷ Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. ⁸ You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

v **7 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord:** Remember who James is writing to; Jewish believers who are being persecuted for their faith. Here he tells them how long they need to wait or endure — until the coming of the Lord. Now we know that this obviously includes the rapture when Jesus comes back to snatch His church from the earth and take us back to Heaven to be with Him where He is (John 14:1-3). However, the Lord could come for us individually at any time. We don't know the used-by-date for our physical bodies. Our waiting is a day by day thing. The chorus of the song "*One day at a time, sweet Jesus*" sums it up well.

*One day at a time sweet Jesus
That's all I'm asking of You
Just give me the strength
To do everyday what I have to do*

*Yesterday's gone sweet Jesus
And tomorrow may never be mine
Lord help me today, show me the way
One day at a time*

Something else important to consider is that we are to leave all vengeance to the Lord. We are to wait patiently for His justice, and not take things into our own hands. Instead of seeking revenge, we should be seeking to bless those who are persecuting us. Paul makes this very clear in:

Romans 12:19-21 NLT

¹⁹ Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say,

"I will take revenge;
I will pay them back,"
says the Lord.

²⁰ Instead,

"If your enemies are hungry, feed them.
If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap
burning coals of shame on their heads."

²¹ Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

v **7 See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently:**

Does a farmer seed his paddock one day, and then go out with the harvester the next? Of course not! Once the farmer puts in the crop, he knows that he's in for the long haul. He must fertilise, spray, and protect the crop until the day comes when it is ready for harvest.

However, as Christians, we can get sucked into the “I want it now” or instant gratification way of thinking. We think that growing as a Christian will happen overnight. “I’ve read my bible for a week now and I’m still not perfect. Come on God, what’s the holdup.”

James’ farming analogy really helps us to remember that the work that God does in us, the growing of our character and our faith, really does take a lot of time; in fact a life time. We wonder why the trials just keep on coming because we fail to see that God has a long term plan in place. This is why we need to develop or cultivate endurance. We’ll see this more later in the chapter.

David Guzik gives a good comparison as to how the farmer waiting to harvest his crops is similar to the Christian waiting for God to bring forth fruit in their own lives.

- He waits with a reasonable hope and expectation of reward.
- He waits a long time.
- He waits working all the while.
- He waits depending on things out of his own power; with his eye on the heavens.
- He waits despite changing circumstances and many uncertainties.
- He waits encouraged by the value of the harvest.
- He waits encouraged by the work and harvest of others.
- He waits because he really has no other option.
- He waits because it does no good to give up.
- He waits aware of how the seasons work.
- He waits because as time goes on, it becomes more important and not less to do so.

v 7 **Until it receives the early and latter rain:** This simply means the early rains that help the seed to germinate and grow, and then the latter rains that help the plant to mature and set seed. The idea here is that, like the farmer, we can do nothing to make the seed grow. If there is no rain, there is no harvest. God alone is responsible for the rain, and He determines how much and when. The same is true for us. We are completely dependant on God for the timing, quantity, and degree of difficulty of the trials that we need to grow in our character and develop endurance and perseverance.

v 8 **Establish:** the Greek word translated as Establish here means to: support, strengthen, confirm, prop up, make fast, establish in a place, to continue, to fix, to make fast. This is a similar idea to what we learned last week when it says in Isaiah 50:7 where it says that Jesus set His face like a stone or flint — He was establishing His heart so that He would continue to do the Father’s will (in His case suffer and die at Calvary), no matter how difficult or painful the immediate circumstances might be.

v 8 **You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand:** So what do we need to establish our hearts to do? Focus on Jesus, to seek the heavenly city, to seek the eternal reward, to trust that Jesus will work all things out in His perfect timing.

Spurgeon gives the following exhortation: “When God shall give you a rich return for all you have done for him, you will blush to think you ever doubted; you will be ashamed to think you ever grew weary in his service. You shall have your reward. Not tomorrow, so wait: not the next day perhaps, so be patient. You may be full of doubts one day, your joys sink low. It may be rough windy weather with you in your spirit. You may even doubt whether you are the Lord’s, but if you have rested in the name of Jesus, if by the grace of God you are what you are, if he is all your salvation, and all your desire,— have patience; have patience, for the reward will surely come in God’s good time.”

v 8 **For the coming of the Lord is at hand:** We talked about this at verse three when we talked about the “last days”. This is similar to the concept that we have been living in the last days since Jesus’ first coming. Jesus could come back at any time.

Establishing our hearts

Here are two examples of Paul “being patient and establishing his heart.” These verses would be good to meditate on so we can establish or confirm or set our hearts to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). The first one is:

Philippians 3:7-9, 12-14, 17-21 NLT

7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him.

[1. — choose to be willing to give up temporary things]

¹² I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: **Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,** ¹⁴ **I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize** for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

[2. — make the deliberate choice to forget the past and look forward to what lies ahead, the heavenly prize]

¹⁷ Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example. ¹⁸ **For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ.** ¹⁹ **They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth.**

[3. — choose to remember the terrible damnation awaiting those who seem to have it all made in the here and now]

²⁰ **But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.** ²¹ He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.

[4. — choose to remember that we are citizens of heaven and are eagerly waiting for Jesus to return as our Saviour]

Another example of Paul “establishing his heart” is:

Colossians 3:1-4, 16-17 NLT

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, **set your sights on the realities of heaven**, where Christ sits in the place of honour at God’s right hand. ² **Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.** ³ For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ **And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.**

[5. — choose to remember that there is a reward waiting for us and we will share in God’s glory]

¹⁶ **Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives.** Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

[6. — we establish our own hearts as we encourage others to establish their own hearts]

Conclusion: We need to keep focused on the end game, on the long haul

One of the best passages that shows the dangerous effect of losing perspective and starting to comparing ourselves to unsaved people is Asaph’s prayer in Psalm 73. Asaph almost gave up living for God; he almost quit. He actually started growing bitter in his trials, until he took the time to seek the Lord. Only then did God reveal to him the big picture. God showed Asaph that, although things looked bad from a human perspective, long term, things were looking just great and were progressing perfectly.

So here we see the power of having the correct perspective, and how we need to guard against Satan twisting our minds to think that God has deserted us whenever God allows us to go through a trial. It is so important for us to put into practice what James says in 5:8, “You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” We need to purposefully and deliberately and daily establish, set, confirm or fix our minds on heavenly or eternal things.

Psalm 73

A psalm of Asaph.

- ¹ Truly God is good to Israel,
to those whose hearts are pure.
- ² But as for me, I almost lost my footing.
My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.
- ³ For I envied the proud
when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.
- ⁴ They seem to live such painless lives;
their bodies are so healthy and strong.

- 5 They don't have troubles like other people;
they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.
- 6 They wear pride like a jewelled necklace
and clothe themselves with cruelty.
- 7 These fat cats have everything
their hearts could ever wish for!
- 8 They scoff and speak only evil;
in their pride they seek to crush others.
- 9 They boast against the very heavens,
and their words strut throughout the earth.
- 10 And so the people are dismayed and confused,
drinking in all their words.
- 11 "What does God know?" they ask.
"Does the Most High even know what's happening?"
- 12 Look at these wicked people—
enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.
- 13 Did I keep my heart pure for nothing?
Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?
- 14 I get nothing but trouble all day long;
every morning brings me pain.
- 15 If I had really spoken this way to others,
I would have been a traitor to your people.
- 16 So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper.
But what a difficult task it is!
- 17 Then I went into your sanctuary, O God,
and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.
- 18 Truly, you put them on a slippery path
and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction.
- 19 In an instant they are destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors.
- 20 When you arise, O Lord,
you will laugh at their silly ideas
as a person laughs at dreams in the morning.
- 21 Then I realised that my heart was bitter,
and I was all torn up inside.
- 22 I was so foolish and ignorant—
I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.
- 23 Yet I still belong to you;
you hold my right hand.
- 24 You guide me with your counsel,
leading me to a glorious destiny.
- 25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
I desire you more than anything on earth.
- 26 My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,
but God remains the strength of my heart;
he is mine forever.
- 27 Those who desert him will perish,
for you destroy those who abandon you.
- 28 But as for me, how good it is to be near God!
I have made the Sovereign Lord my shelter,
and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.