

This is “Prosperity II”, the text is James 5:1-6, continuing our study of this brief letter, but rich in content written by the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, James. As a way of setting us up for looking at these few verses I thought it would be good to cite Proverbs 18:11, “*A rich man wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall—then here is the key—in his imagination.*” We live in a nation which I think has been trapped in its imagination, thinking that the accumulated wealth of our nation, the accumulated power- we fuss about our defense budget but you need to know that even right now in our so-called [limited] budget for defense we spend more on our defense budget than the next eight nations beneath us; our defense budget is greater than that of the next eight nations beneath us. We are an incredibly powerful nation. But when the heart grows faint, when the mind ceases to believe in its own convictions, no amount of material power will protect us. It is the withering away of the soul, it is the loss of conviction, it is the dimming of any perception of those ideals and truths and convictions by which we understand the dignity and the nobility of man and therefore have trust and belief in our nation as capable of being a defender of those truths – it is the fading away of that that now leaves us a terribly vulnerable society, wasting its opportunities. We should repent.

Indeed that is exactly what James says, doesn't he? Turn your eyes to James 5:1-6 and this is what he 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 eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure 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, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”*

Those are powerful words, I think you will agree. The degree to which they apply to one level or portion of our society or another, or to one family or another in this congregation ought to be made clear by the moving of the Holy Spirit bringing the light of His word to bear upon the realities and needs of our souls.

There are some who say that James' letter as a whole lacks thematic unity being a series of topics just strung together. Well I do not agree; I think there is a consistency throughout all of James' letter. Throughout the letter James is instructing his readers, therefore he is instructing us, in the need for wisdom if they are to react rightly and live well in a fallen world. In the absence of wisdom people are likely to see testing as temptation. What happens when we see a test from the Lord as a temptation? Under those circumstances people turn away from God and try to rely on their own strengths. The minute that happens, they will fall, indeed they have already fallen. If we do not respond to the tests and trials of our day by first turning to God, by first turning to His Word, by first asking that the Holy Spirit would examine us and bring us before the throne of mercy crying out, “God have mercy on me a sinner,” if we do not do that first, then all efforts thereafter will fail of their purpose. So we are a nation staggering.

Trials, of course, come in many ways and various dimensions of our lives: most of us know that. But James in his letter, actually if you turn particularly to chapter 4, actually he is challenging us regarding how we live together as a church, the wisdom that is necessary to function on an ongoing basis as a vital community of faith: what is necessary for that to occur? Being an effective community of Christians requires the ability to witness for Christ, to share the gospel. And then the next step which is to integrate those whom God saves into the life of the body. James challenges us in the first chapter at the end to treat people graciously, for treating people graciously lies at the heart of what it means to be “doing” the Word of God. To do the Word is to be changed, it is to be transformed in such a way that it demonstrates itself in how we live, the conduct of our lives. The question then becomes, what do we do with our treasures and what do we do with our time? Are we the copy of our neighbors or are we an exception, demonstrating a different foundation and set of values and priorities so that the occupation of our time and the use of our resources is demonstrably different than those who do not know the Lord.

The way James characterizes it when you come down to the end of chapter 1 is, are we willing to be those who spend time and resources with people who can give nothing to us in return? James, of course, characterizes them as widows and orphans. We are wise to recognize that it would be wise for us to say marginalized people, people who somehow are shoved out of the normal patterns of life in our culture, pushed to the side and live in constant need. He also says that we need to turn away from the vices and corruptions of the world which stain our souls. We recognize that this too is a matter of how we use our resources and our time. Where do I spend my time, upon what do I spend my money? Are they the sort of things that strengthen me in the faith, that build up those around me, that meet the needs of others, or could they rightly be characterized as self-indulgence?

Saving faith is the kind of faith that enables us to love others whether rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. So we have to ask the question, Do I use my time and my resources to flee and get away from anybody that I do not consider to be “like me”?

Wisdom which is fed on God’s truth and empowered by God’s Spirit is able to see any person both as the object of God’s saving and the Spirit’s empowering and transforming grace. Who could we possibly meet on the streets of Oroville this week that God would be incapable of saving, or having saved then empowering with His Spirit to become one of the great voices of truth in the next ten years? We don’t know. God is capable of doing that with any person. Therefore we ourselves should follow the counsel, should we not, of Paul who wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:16-17, *“From now on therefore we regard no one according to the flesh, even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.”* I just referred to people on the street, but now I would ask you think about the people of this congregation. Whom do you know in this congregation whom you consider to be hopeless, useless, not worth your time? Oh heaven forbid! Yet though we may not use words to express that sentiment, what do the patterns of our lives say? You see it comes back to this, does it not: where do we spend our resources and time? God asks questions. This is a choice and it is true of all such choices by which we direct the affections of our hearts and our desires that it requires discipline, the discipline of choosing wisely.

James knows the call to live the faith requires sacrifice and he cites an amazing example of that sacrifice. He cites Abraham. You recall the sacrifice that Abraham was asked to make: you might think first of all, well yes, God calls him when he is living one place and says, “I want you to uproot your life, leave your family, haul off and go to someplace that I have in mind and you don’t know. We are all pretty impressed with such a sacrifice. My goodness how many of us would be willing? That is exactly what Sheryl Jackson was saying [earlier in the service regarding our missionaries in Tanzania]. We should be willing if God says, “I want you to go,” we should be able to say, “I go,” even if it means we go to see the Zamoras in Tanzania.

But that is not the sacrifice that James references. What James references if you look [at the verses] he references the sacrifice that God asked Abraham to make, and that was the sacrifice of his only son who was the greatest gift had ever received from God. Now think about that. [The organizer of our Father-Son day yesterday when up on the platform] earlier made the accurate observation that the best thing that God has ever given to him aside from personal salvation are his kids. So are we prepared to say, “Father, these children are yours”? I believe that the readiness to make that decision will be written on the hearts and minds of our children and will render them more responsive to the calling of the Holy Spirit. For you see is it not the case that God needs many more workers if He is going to bring the gospel to every people and nation upon the face of the earth. Indeed as it is my passion not to go to the Zamora, but God has called me to preach the gospel here, to a dying nation. How many men and women will be needed to preach the gospel and to live the faith amidst a dying nation in order, by God’s grace to stop the rot and see a new day come? It is a matter of our submission.

James 2:14-17 James speaks of the difference between the kind of words we employ and the kind of purposeful action [that proves faith]: go in peace, be warmed and filled. Those are kind words. But giving nothing for the needs of the body: no action. Abraham demonstrated a faith which understood that if God calls you to give you cannot give away more that God will supply and will restore.

Communities are built through shared experiences, memories, traditions, purposes and beliefs. We use words to do this. In chapter 3 of James he brings our attention to words. Words are at the heart of community. Shared experiences then shared and enriched and remembered over the course of time build that sense of community. At the heart of the church is the Word of God, Jesus and the Bible. If you want to know why churches are dying in America today, it is because they cease to have the Word of God at the heart of their community. Do not ever be fooled by the rapid growth of an assembly calling itself a church. There are many reasons why people like to gather together in the same place. That reason does not need to be the Word of God, indeed, sometimes you might wonder if it isn't easier to gather people around things more pleasant than the word that penetrates our hearts and exposes our sin and calls us to submit to the Living God.

James says this in 3:8-10, *“No human being can tame the tongue, it is a restless evil full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing –* Then he makes the obvious statement, “we really ought not to do this,” though he puts it in these words – *My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”* James of course was especially concerned with those in official teaching positions, like me and what I am doing right now. But the hazard of the uncontrolled tongue is no less present for us all. I am sure we know that. I imagine that most in this room who look back over the last – I could make it two weeks for I have been here for [that length of time] – and there are things you wish you had never said! Too bad, they are said.

Here is a truth: many a gossip in a local church has ruined as much if not more than all that the preachers and teachers were able to build by the steady and careful exposition of God's Word. Sometime we wonder, don't we, why the Bible makes such a big deal out of gossip. I mean it is just something old ladies do when they sit together in the coffee shop! No, it is not something that old ladies do when they – well it is something that old ladies do when they sit in the coffee shop, but the trouble is it is the same thing men do when they are working out here. Whoever got the idea that women are gossips and men are not did not know many men. And whoever came up with the conclusion that gossip is a minor matter has no understanding of the actual realities of the words that shape our hearts and direct our minds. Deadly indeed is the tongue, and how deadly for the body of Christ! Because as that word comes filled with its mild poison, so trust is eroded and closeness is cancelled and we learn to guard ourselves and distance ourselves and the fellowship of the body is rendered thin, weak, occasional and insufficient for resisting the power of a culture which sends message constantly to pull us away from Christ and into the embrace of worldliness.

James follows on his exhortation regarding the tongue with a return to the topic of wisdom which he had introduced as the first necessity we have in responding to trials which compromise our steadfastness. Because we are saved sinners we unavoidably bring worldly wisdom into the life of the church. The key term there is “unavoidably.” [This is] one of the reasons why we need to listen to one another, pray for one another, bring one another before the Lord and say, “Father, are we tracking well with the Holy Spirit as we seek to live together for Your glory, or are we falling into toxic patterns of worldly manipulation and control so that we can “get the job done” according to our own timetable and specifications?” Our souls are affected if not actually shaped by the spirit of the age, and that spirit is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic”. Beloved I encourage you to take and write those three words down and memorize them and remember that they are a biblical description of worldly wisdom, the spirit that dominates our own age. Even when we are saved we are still subject to the passions, as James names them, of jealousy and selfish ambition. It is no stretch of the imagination to recognize that just these passions were

at work in prompting what James describes in the second chapter, the differing response by the church to the rich man and the poor: do we remember that? It is one of those dramatic descriptions given in James. So the church sees the rich man with the gold ring come in and what does the church do? [Sound of appetitive delight!] And they see the man coming in shabbily dressed and what do they do? [Sound of mild irritation and disgust!] And what kind of spirit is it that motivates that response? [It is] demonic.

It is, you see, in this contrast between earthly and heavenly wisdom that we first encounter something of James’ moral passion, helping us to see the attitudinal and behavioral particulars inside of James’ reference to the royal law and the law of liberty in James 2:8 and 2:12. Here James says in chapter 3:16-18, *“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist there will be disorder and every vice practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”* The law of love and forgiveness given by Jesus sets us free to live with heavenly wisdom on earth.

But do we practice peacemaking? Can we say of us that purity and peacefulness and gentleness and reasonableness and mercy, impartiality and sincerity: are those the characteristic qualities that describe the way we conduct the inner conversation of our hearts as well as the outer conversation of our lips. Those are the qualities that reflect the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and are the image of Christ.

The effect of these contrasting forms of wisdom is seen, James is telling us in chapter four, in our prayer lives. We have spent considerable time in past messages drawing out the substance of James teaching in chapter 4. This should not surprise us, for it is here that James draws our attention to the connection between the longings of our hearts manifested in our prayers and how this impacts the shared life that we live in the local congregation. How do our prayer lives affect the life we share together? Just as the prayers of God’s people in James’ day revealed the brokenness and flaws in their lives, so today our prayers cast light on who we are, specifically on the limitedness of the life we share together.

When you read Scripture it is necessary to appreciate at least two things: 1) the original setting in which the letter was written, and 2) you need to understand our setting and how the two do relate to each other. So I want to draw that contrast. The contrast between the church in James’ day and ours is that our security from hostility and our enjoyment of material affluence. In James’ day Christians were a widely despised and often persecuted minority. That is the condition of Christians in most places of the world today: a minority despised and often persecuted. We have a picture of this in Hebrews 10:32-35. This is what is written. *“Recall the former days when after you were enlightened you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”* Now think about that. Christians either themselves immediately suffered under persecution or they joyfully identified with those who suffered and accepted that when they identified with those who were suffering they too would become the object of the virulent hatred of those who were opposing Christ and they would lose their possessions as well, and they said, “Hallelujah because we know where we are going.” Under those circumstances it is no surprise to us to know that Christians were drawn together into communities of mutual support and emotional intensity. Quite literally they would die for one another: of course! Their pleasures were few and their dangers many.

Even so, it is apparent that the unity of the body in that day was threatened and at times riven, broken by the fracture lines of ambition, jealousy and the play of selfish desires putting people in competition with one another. Think about this: we have a lovely example of it in the New Testament in Acts 6. There we have a stunning and deeply troubling display of the competition amongst Christians for scarce resources, those available for widows. But

this is rarely the case in America. In American churches the generality of the congregation is that there is no such intensity of need. The only place that we see the competition for scarce resources in any serious manner is between ministries in the church, unfunded or insufficiently funded to meet their objectives. No, it is not scarcity of funds that challenges American churches. Rather the challenge that churches face in our day is the independence and I might say the relative remoteness of our lives from each other. We have more than enough to amuse ourselves. We are not in a condition of intense interdependence on any level. Yet God calls the church to be a living community. This is the challenge. We have plenty of resources to live well on our own, apart from those with whom we worship occasionally. Indeed consider this beloved: our ambitions, desires and dreams tend to draw us apart rather than close and so into competition with one another. The dreams and ambitions in the early church under the extreme adversities from which they suffered, their dreams and ambitions were to be accepted by and go to be home with the Lord. But our dreams and ambitions take us all over the place, and if we were to go to Zamora, that would be good.

This is why James says in 4:3, *“You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your pleasures and passions.”* So the question rightly arises, does it not, when we pray do we pray for things and opportunities which will draw us together as opposed to praying for things and opportunities which will draw us apart from the rest of the congregation? Beloved, it is too often the case that we assume moral issues simply have to do with personal vices, underestimating thereby the degree to which personal vices actually separate us from others in the body of Christ. But the matters that we might want to put under the headings of these opportunities and things may be perfectly legitimate in themselves. But this is a moral issue. It is a moral issue if we choose to entertain ourselves and occupy ourselves with a variety of activities and interests which have no particular bearing on our activity and life with others in the body of Christ. But we do not often recognize that as a moral issue, and so we go on our way, dancing to the tune of our culture, pursuing its pleasures, its interests and its activities and wondering why the church is so weak.

I hope I am not too harsh, but James wants us to wrestle – chapter 6 – with what it means to be or not be a friend of the world as opposed to a friend of God. All that James writes in chapter 4 is best seen under the division of earthly and heavenly wisdom. Which sort of wisdom guides our desires as well as our tongues? Heavenly wisdom he describes as being meek, and meekness is simply another way of saying humble, the opposite of proud. Sober reflection would help us to understand that humility is at the heart of that faith which draws near to God and seeks the grace which He freely gives to those who seek Him, and to draw near to God necessarily means that we draw near to one another.

James 4:13-17 and 5:1-6 you notice begin in the same way, with exactly the same phrase: “Come now, you...” This is a fairly clear indicator that James has the same sort of situation in mind in both of these passages. So in James 4:13-17 he is talking about those who pursue plans independently from their faith in God. (Just so you know, I am perfectly aware that you are looking at somebody who just went to Hawaii, and it might in some of you very carnal, worldly minded people speak as a kind of inner kind of contradiction [that I am cautioning against such “worldly” behavior]! But not at all: we went there with two very godly people; we prayed together; rejoiced in the beauty of what God had made together; worshiped on Sunday together.) The argument is not against enjoying the good things of the world. The argument has to do with whether or not we are knit together with others in the body of Christ. That is the issue.

So James in 4:13-17 talks about those who pursue plans independently from their faith in God. In James 5:1-6 he is talking about those who pursue riches or wealth independently from the faith in God. Hear it again – no, I changed the message and refer to this parable. Jesus told a parable that went like this, Luke 12:16-21. We looked at this in an earlier message.

*“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

Now, a close consideration: where did the rich man go wrong? He did not wrong as a farmer because he had an abundant crop. He did not go wrong in building bigger barns, that is just good stewardship to save what God had graciously allowed him to gain. Where he went wrong was in the dialogue that was hidden in his heart. How many references to God in that dialogue? Not one. How many references to anybody but himself in that dialogue? Not one! The farmer forgot where he was going and to Whom he would have to answer. Understand that it was not just a failure to think charitably, planting and planning with charity in mind; we mentioned that last time. Rather it was a failure to think as a Christian. Planning and planting with charity in mind indeed, but to think as a Christian as part of the body of Christ engaged in an act of love with other members of the body of Christ. Did he get on a cell phone and call up the deacons? Did he inquire as to what was needed in the life of the body? No, he did not.

Jesus told another parable of a rich man in Matthew 20:1-16.

*“For the kingdom of heaven I like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”*

This farmer was both just and compassionate. Further, rather than locking his wealth away for personal pleasure alone he put it to good use, both for productivity and for kindness. There is much to learn from that parable. For our purposes today it is enough to note that there is no criticism of wealth in here at all. On the contrary, Jesus honors such a man. Why does He honor him? Because he used his wealth both to fulfill his contractual obligations and to extend a helping hand to those who needed it’

Returning now to James 5:1-6, it is clear that James is addressing those who pursue wealth for themselves alone, caring neither for the needy of the world nor for the fellowship of faith.

*“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.”*

This is not an indictment of wealth; it is an indictment of the idolatry of wealth. These are people whose moral choices are controlled by the desire to increase their wealth at whatever cost to others and without reference to either God or fellow believers. James here is speaking of greed and avarice and the thing that is stunning is that he is talking to people in the church.

Do you believe people like that exist in the church? In Acts 5:1-11 we have another of those perfectly horrifying scenes. It is the story of Ananias and Sapphira, members of the first generation, the first generation of believers in the Jerusalem church. They had become members when the apostles were still guiding the life of the church and many others were there who had known Jesus personally, who had been personally present when Jesus taught, personally present when Jesus performed His miracles. The apostles themselves performed many miracles. It is a terrible story. Ananias and Sapphira did not only love money or wealth. Along with money and wealth they loved admiration and high standing. They loved the looks and words of others which meant to them that they were included in the inner circle: they were amongst the best!

They were willing to spend money to gain that admiration, but they loved money and they were willing to deceive others in order to both keep wealth and gain the reputation for having given it all at the same time. You see the thing about Ananias and Sapphira is that they were willing to live a lie in the middle of the church. The only really supernatural thing about this particular episode is that when they were confronted by Peter with what they had done, lying to the Holy Spirit, they died. *“Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that 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.”*

We take far too casually our pretenses. We excuse one another for wanting to appear better than we are. We should not take this matter lightly. James is not claiming that riches have rotted and garments have become moth eaten in a literal sense for all that it might be true that no material thing can outlast time. His point is that for those who feed their hearts on their wealth and social acclaim, finding security in these things, the illusion of success and personal satisfaction, there is a sure progression through time in which those things prove to be powerless to deliver them on the dream. Even more pointed is James comment that the corrosion of gold and silver will eat your flesh like fire. Both will prove nothing more than dust and that dust will be a mute and bitter accusation against those who sacrifice self and others to hoard it. What will it mean for the damned to look into the eyes of those they drove to misery for the sake of that which cannot save, but which only has the power to curse? There are passing pleasures: *“You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence...”* is what James writes.

Calvin wrote this in the sixteenth century. He said the defining sin of humanity: what do you think that is? What is the defining sin of humanity? Some know enough about Calvin so you probably have a bunch of perfectly wrong ideas, because this is what he said: The defining sin of humanity is forgetfulness. More fully stated, it is that dullness of heart and mind by which we forget God and almost everything else in our preoccupation either with present miseries and disappointments or present pleasures and satisfactions. We fail to notice God. We fail to notice the splendor and glory that God has built into the world. We build dark huts while living in the midst of golden palaces and imperial gardens. Preoccupied with sin and death, because we will not receive the grace of God, we fail to hear the songs of angels or to marvel at the ceaseless flow of miracles by which God orders all things. I could have you turn to any other person in this room, look at them and tell you, you are looking at the handiwork of God and you are probably in the presence of one of His great miracles. Let us not forget God in all things.

Please stand: May the grace of our God, His recreating power, His word of truth, may this be spoken into our hearts and minds; and may we, Father, be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, burning away the dross, perfecting the gold, even that, Father, which You are creating anew within us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.