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Today we conclude our study into the letter of James, the younger brother of Jesus, writing to Jews who accepted Jesus as God's promised Messiah, a community scattered across the then known world. We don't know the exact nature of the persecution and hardship this community faced, but the authority with which James identifies and addresses their problems and tensions, lets us believe, he is more than just *aware* of the social and religious tensions they face, perhaps because he himself encountered similar mistreatment and intimidation.

Given the issues James addresses in his letter, he might as well have been writing to us in the 21st century. The world does not seem to have changed: we continue to think our deeds will please God, and our faith will grow the more we try please God; we have not learned to tame our tongue which continues to be problem the world over, and we continue to be plagued by the spirit of judgement, by rampant prejudice, and by an increasing level of self-confidence, that the progress we make, will solve our problems!

Last Sunday, judging from some of the remarks I heard and the discussions during our Bible Study on Thursday, the last sentence in Chapter 4 left us stunned: *Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do, and then not do it!* Wow! If ever there was an obvious Truth which hits us between the eyes, this sentence must be it!

Our passage today starts with the last of James' warnings. His tone is stern, as with a school head master, "**Now! Look here! ...**"

The first time he used this phrase, we read last week when he cautioned, ***Now, look here ... do not boast in your pretentious plans...¹***

¹ 4:13-17

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The second is in our passage today. **Now, look here you rich people...**

Here is another set of *Bible-bashing* verses used by Churches and individuals to shame anyone with a modicum of comfort and wealth, into feeling guilty.

James, like Paul and Peter and John and other writers of his time, addresses both the larger *congregation* as well as individuals, brought to their attention. Most of James' letter is addressed to the *congregation*, the larger group of people who are *scattered abroad*.²

But the first six verses of chapter 5 is addressed to specific people in that *congregation*. James is not laying out rules, nor is he setting out a theology for Christian living; James is reminding those whom God has blessed with wealth and monetary gifts, by pointing to, and drawing on the Law of God as given in the Old Testament³.

The Judeo-Christian model of society recognises the inequality caused by poverty and wealth, as a condition of the brokenness of this world.

When the woman poured an expensive perfume oil on Jesus head, the people around the dinner table muttered, *such good quality, expensive perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor!* Jesus reminded them, *The poor you shall always have among you...*⁴, a picture of this broken world in which we live.

The Older Testament set out the law for society's obligation to look after those who didn't have enough for their sustenance; James is drawing on these laws to remind those who had more than others, of their obligation,

² 1:1

³ Proverbs 11:4, 28; Isaiah 13:6; Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Psalm 18:6; Jeremiah 12:3 & 25:34;

⁴ Matthew 26:11 and Mark 14:7

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not to achieve unfair advantage in their dealings with those in their employ, and to be fair with those under contract with them.

Looking around the world at countries where this principle is seriously violated, I find verse 4 particularly poignant, both tragic and heartening, that *the cries of those who harvest your fields, whom you have cheated, have reached ears of the Lord of Heaven's Armies!*⁵, echoes of Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus, the poor beggar covered in skin boils, who spent his life eating scraps from the rich man's home, who when he died, was taken by angels and seated next to Abraham at the eternal banquet.

James' message to these people who felt they have been denied justice in this world, is that the reward of **true** justice awaits them, because God the Lord of Heaven's Armies has heard their cries.

These six verses are intended to remind this community of Jewish Christians, there are those among them who have broken God's laws through acts of injustice, thinking they have the power to do so. This is why the world continues to be a broken place, but God is not sitting by silently; *their cries, their sorrowful lament, has been heard by the Lord of Heaven's Armies!*

But this is but a small section of this chapter. The rest of this chapter is devoted to real encouragement, about living here and now.

First is his repeated encouragement to be patient, like farmers who wait for the rain in the autumn and in the spring. The rain will come, because God promised, *as long as the earth exists, there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.*⁶

⁵ 5:4

⁶ Genesis 8:22

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And to endure (be patient in suffering) as the prophets of old, like Job, a God-fearing man, who through no fault of his own, lost his **all** his wealth to marauders and thieves, and lost **all** his children in a freak natural calamity. Job's wife told him to *curse God and die*, and three friends tried to persuade him, his misfortune was the result of something he had done which displeased God. After this time of trial, Job learned to have a personal relationship with God through prayer. We read, *The Lord blessed Job (materially) in the second half of his life, even more than in the beginning, and with seven sons and three daughters, who in all the land, no women were as lovely as the daughters of Job!* Be patient and endure trials of all kinds; it strengthens your faith, and results in being perfect before God.

Which brings James to the second point of encouragement: ***Know the power of prayer!***

Three things make prayer effective:

1. Pray when you are suffering, sing praises when you are happy, and when you cannot pray, call those who are entrusted to pray for you.
2. Pray with faith in the person and character of God (15), and
3. Confess your sins, that which you have done wrong by God's standards and His expectations, ***to one another!***

This commitment to prayer makes us righteous before God, and ***the earnest prayer of a righteous person, has great power and produces wonderful results.***

James' closing sentence might seem like an abrupt ending, but it is a powerful statement of encouragement. In this one long sentence, James reminds his readers of:

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1. the possibility of failing, of slipping away from Truth, because of the intensity of a trial, of hardship and difficulty.
2. our individual and collective responsibility to help bring that person back on track.
3. being restored into God's kingdom, is a matter great joy and celebration, in heaven and on earth.

I am reading a book titled *Unspeakable - Facing up to the challenge of evil* by Os Guinness, in which he says, **"We may be in the dark about what God is doing, but we are not in the dark about God"** (p.151).

This is James' message to Jews who accepted Jesus as God's promised Messiah, and to each of us who accept Jesus as our Saviour, who are going through trials and difficulties of all kinds. We may be in the dark about what God is doing, we may think God is silent, or God does not care because He has not answered our prayer, but we should never be in the dark about God.

He waits for us to lift our head to see Him, and He will open His arms for us to run into; He waits for us to acknowledge, we cannot solve our own problems, and He opens the storehouse of His wisdom and knowledge; He longs to hear us calling Him **Father!**, and HE will come running to meet us where we are.

Don't ever be in the dark about God. *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God and He will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. **But when you ask Him, be sure your faith is in God and God alone. Do not waiver in your faith in Him.***

AMEN.