

September 26, 2021 – James 5:1-20

It is a commonly made assertion that Martin Luther did not like the Book of James. Do an internet search on the topic and you will find pages upon pages of theologians making that statement. “Luther hated the Book of James... Luther tried to have James removed from the Bible... Luther called James an epistle of straw.”

And yet, no matter how many times people try to repeat this slander, it's simply not true. Luther did not hate the Book of James and he did not try to have it removed from the Bible. On the contrary, he quotes from James in his Large Catechism. A verse from our Epistle reading this morning, in fact. And he quotes from James constantly in his sermons and commentaries. I've been told that if you add it up, Luther cites from James as often as he cites from Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

So where did this idea that Luther hated James come from? Well, two sources. First, Luther was frustrated by the way James was used. Particularly, the way that a single verse from James was so often taken out of context: “Faith without works is dead.” The Roman Catholic Church was constantly misusing this verse. Throwing it in Luther's face, as if this one sentence could contradict the entire doctrine of justification by grace through faith, apart from works. And Luther just got a little sick of it.

Second, Luther did put the Book of James in a special category. And he did, in fact, call it an “epistle of straw.” That is the one accurate accusation that can be made. But, even then, that's not such an insult as you might think.

You see, Luther saw in James a wonderful explanation of God's Law in the life of a believer. What does God's Law say and how does that play out in our daily lives? What can I do to live a more God pleasing life? How does the Church promote righteousness in the world?

These are good and important topics. And Luther recognized them as such. But they aren't the Gospel. They aren't that all important doctrine of justification by grace through faith, apart from works. They aren't the preaching of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

And so Luther considered them topics of straw compared to the topics of gold found in John's Gospel or the Paul's Epistles. Straw is good and useful, in its own way. But if someone offers you a pound of straw or a pound of gold, which are you going to take? You'll take the gold every time. And that was the comparison that Luther was trying to make.

Even then, though, I think Luther is being a bit too hard on this epistle. Because it's not all straw. No, there are some lovely nuggets of gold scattered throughout the Book of James. And we have a pretty sizable one in our text this morning.

It doesn't seem like it at the beginning. No, chapter 5 begins with James making a rather brutal rebuke of the wealthy citizens in their community. Honestly, this sounds like something that could have been written in the Old Testament prophets.

He absolutely eviscerates them for their greed and corruption. He says that their riches will rot and their garments will be eaten by moths. Their gold and silver will corrode and their flesh will be consumed by fire.

Why? Two reasons. First, because they have laid up treasure for themselves in this present age and ignored that this present age won't endure. These are the last days. They have been since Christ ascended into heaven. He could return at any moment. And then what will all your treasure bring you?

Second, he rebukes them for how they have gained this wealth. Because it's been through totally corrupt and unjust means. They have become rich by cheating their workers. By holding back the honest wages of those who mow their fields and harvest their crops. By making false-accusations against righteous men. All so that they can live in luxury and self-indulgence.

And in so doing they have “fattened their hearts.” I kinda love that image. As a big guy myself, I'm accustomed to obesity being equated with being rich and lazy. But James say, “No, it's not about your waistline. It's about your heart.”

"You have spent your life indulging in the desires of your flesh and your heart has become obese with greed. But the day of slaughter is coming. When your fatted heart, like a fatted calf of old, will be killed and its sinfulness laid bare. On that day, you will die, and others will feast in your place."

It's an incredibly vivid image. But James isn't done. He's got a purpose for attacking the rich. And it's more than just teaching the Law or venting his frustration. No, he directly ties what he's said to what he's about to say.

*"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord."* That word – therefore – is setting up a contrast between these two ideas. The opposite of the greed that the rich display is patience for the day of the Lord. How are greed and patience opposites of one another?

Well, we all know what greed is. It's the desire for stuff. For money. For possessions. For luxury and self-indulgence. But greed has another characteristic that I think we often miss: it's short sighted.

Greed wants stuff and it wants it NOW. Nobody spends their life hoarding wealth with the intention of never spending it. We may spend it at that moment, living paycheck to paycheck. We may save it up and then spend it on a big luxury item every few years. We may invest it so that we can spend it in retirement.

But, no matter what, we always have the moment that we can spend our wealth in the back of our mind. Whether it's cashing that paycheck right away or going on a vacation or retiring in comfort. There's something tangible, right around the corner, just waiting for us.

Waiting on the coming of the Lord isn't like that. It requires a level of patience that greed just can't tolerate. According to James, waiting on the Lord requires the patience of... well... a farmer.

That's the analogy he uses. And it's an appropriate one for us today. All around us, we see fields being harvested. Most of the corn is already in. The beans look like they're pretty close. All over Missouri, we see combines in the fields and trailers hauling grain.

The harvest is great... when it comes. But it takes time to get here. It takes patience. And a farmer plants his field knowing that there is nothing he can do to make the harvest come any faster. He plants his crop and he tends it and he waits. And at the right time, he'll have a harvest. But not a day before.

When you plant your treasure in heaven, you can't be greedy with the harvest. It will come in exactly the Lord's time. But it will come.

And that's the wonderful gospel nugget of gold buried in this passage. Christ is returning. He is coming again. And it will be a day of absolute joy when he does so. As joyful as a farmer bringing in a bumper crop. Knowing that all his hard work was not in vain. His patience is rewarded by the fruits of his labor. So also, our patience will be rewarded.

But this knowledge, this hope, this expectation also changes how we live in this life. Because there's no reason for greed. It's a short-sighted way of living. In fact, most of the sinful things we do are short-sighted.

Grumbling against one another is foolish when the one who judges our grumbling could return at any moment. Swearing by heaven or earth is stupid when the one with power over heaven and earth could show up and condemn our arrogance. We grow frustrated with suffering, and yet the prophets of the Old Testament were steadfast in suffering, and they had far longer to wait for the Messiah than we do.

In truth, this wonderful, Gospel outlook on life is a blessed invitation to live in a way that is utterly unlike the world. A life of prayer and praise and faith. In which we confess our sins to one another and forgive as we have been forgiven. In which we know that God is in control of all things.

A life in which our one and only concern is to save souls. To bring sinners back from their wandering. To bring their souls back from death. That's our only real worry for today.

Everything else? It'll work itself out. The sun will shine. The rain will fall. The crops will grow. And one day the harvest will arrive. Be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. For he is coming soon. Amen.