

Uncomfortable Reading

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Let's turn to James chapter 5. James chapter 5 and the topic of being rich in the last days.

Being rich in the last days. Early spring is the time when birds collect twigs and moss and other things from your garden which they'll use to insulate their nests.

They fly away with beaks filled and a few weeks later their chicks are born in snugly woven safely hidden nests.

The bushy bushes and tall trees behind our house are filled with birds nests. But spring is also the time when gardeners begin to tidy up their gardens.

They cut back the bushy bushes and trim the branches of the tall trees in their gardens and in so doing they disturb these birds nests. The birds thought they were building their nests in safety.

[1 : 04] But then an unthinking human being like me comes along with his hedge trimmer and his chainsaw and that's the end of their nests and that's the end of their chicks. Over the course of many years of my ministry here through the consecutive exposition of God's word I have stressed time and time again that our gratitude for what Jesus has done on the cross for us must translate into good works for him.

To use an old expression we've been saved to serve or the grace of Christ is expressed in good works for Christ. Paul highlights our response to the cross in this way by grace you have been saved but then we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And so Christian preachers rightly emphasize that our gratitude for what Jesus has done on the cross must translate into our good works for him. It's as we look back to the cross we find our motivation for Christ-like conduct and Christ-like character.

Without a doubt this is the truth and this is nothing but the truth. The Christian ethic is dominated by the cross. But the reason we turn away from sin and pursue holiness in our lives as Christians is the cross.

But though it's the truth and it's nothing but the truth it's not the whole truth. Yes we must live our lives in the shadow of the cross of Christ but we must also live our lives in the light of the coming of Christ.

[2 : 52] In other words our ethic isn't just driven by what's behind us the death of our Lord on the cross but by what's before us the triumph of our Lord in his return.

A bird is building its nest in the branches of a tree. The day is coming when the gardener will cut those branches down. If the bird knew the branch in which it was building its nest was going to be cut down it would not have built its nest there.

Somewhere else it would have chosen. Some were safe. Some were secure. I'm sure we would all as Christians talk about living our lives in the shadow of the cross.

That as Christians we engage in good works for Christ we love God we love others to express our gratitude for what Jesus has done for us. But perhaps we wouldn't all be living in the light of the coming of Christ.

But this is what it means to live as a Christian in what James calls in James 5 verse 3 the last days. The last days.

[4 : 05] One thing that would probably change about us is our attitude to wealth and possessions. We would hold them far lighter than we do recognizing that our gold and our silver will mean not a thing on the day Christ returns.

In fact depending upon our attitude toward them they may serve more as liabilities than as assets. More important as Jesus said we should lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

I wonder by our attitude to wealth and possessions among other things are we like birds building nests and trees which are set to be cut down. This is a passage which is uncomfortable reading. Challenges us to realize that we are in the last days. The days between the cross of Christ and the coming of Christ. Between his grief and his glory.

And that to put our faith to work in these days requires us to take note of the time we are in. I want to consider two things with you this evening.

[5 : 15] First of all this is not a time for. And secondly this is a time for. Now maybe you are not a wealthy person.

Don't switch off quite yet. For whether it is money talent or energy we all need to use whatever resources Christ has given us in the light of Christ's second coming.

First of all then according to James 5 verses 1 through 6 this is not a time for. As I said the Christian's ethic is driven by two factors.

What's behind us the cross of our Lord and what's before us the coming of our Lord. We live in what James calls the last days in verse 3. The days between Christ's cross and Christ's coming.

All the writers of the New Testament mirror the minor prophets of the Old Testament in speaking of these last days. Now I suppose if you were told that you were living your last days on earth it would devalue many of the things which you think of at present as being rather important.

[6 : 35] previously perhaps you'd live for money for wealth for possessions but now given you're in your last few days on earth they count for less than nothing.

You realize that these last few days are far too precious to waste by spending your time with these things. well in the light of the impending return of the Lord Jesus Christ and in view of these being the last days James tells us that this is not the time for three things.

Stacking stealing and slacking remember this is all about putting our faith to work which is after all the big theme of the book of James our ethic as Christians means that we dare not stack we dare not steal we dare not slack we dare not stack first of all when I when I use the word stacking I'm thinking of James's indictment of the rich in verse 3 you have laid up treasure for yourself in the last days stacked away their money their wealth and possessions some commentators talk of them hoarding what they have James talks of riches and garments of silver and of gold and of great treasures and that's what they're stacking up for themselves to the extent that they no longer know even how much they've got they can't even remember how much gold and silver they've got hidden away they can't even begin to count the number of fine and fancy garments they've got hanging in the wardrobe and the question for that stacker is this how much is enough for you how much is enough the great

American multi-billionaire Howard Hughes was once asked how much money is enough for you to which he answered just a little more advertisers play on this on this aspect of our fallen human natures they'll persuade you that no matter how much stuff you've already got it's not enough you need to buy what they are selling and then it will be enough we want to ask this stacker the question how much is enough like us not the kind of person James is critiquing in this passage will answer just like Howard Hughes and say just a little bit more and like that advertiser if I can just get my hands on that new piece of stuff on that new gizmo then that will be enough I want to tell you something my loft is full of stuff I thought would make my life complete but I got tired of it very shortly after buying it there are times when we just have to put our hands up and say enough is enough from a purely organizational and space perspective but surely as Christians in light of the imminent return of Christ

Jesus and the view of these days being the last days we can put up our hands and say enough I have enough and no more our attitude of accumulation needs to be replaced with a different attitude altogether no we get not in order to stack and hoard but we get in order to bless others more on this later stacking that's the first problem this isn't a time for stacking second it's not a time for stealing it's not a time for stealing one of the problems in this passage consists in understanding to whom James is speaking and especially who he is condemning is it wrong to be rich is it true that money is the root of all evil well no of course not it is the love of money which is the root of all evil likewise throughout the bible there are many rich people who are not denounced for their wealth but complimented for their use of their wealth

[10 : 46] I think what James is getting at in this passage are people who have become wealthy through questionable ventures especially ventures which involve getting rich at the expense of others so listen to what he says in verse 4 the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which

you've kept back by fraud are crying out against you and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the lord of hosts so these aren't people who became rich by hard work wise investment and devoted skill but people who became rich by stepping on other people's heads to get to where they wanted to go and by exploiting those who were weaker than them remember there were no trade unions or employment tribunals when James was writing and so these people these poor people they often worked very hard but they were outrageously cheated out of their wages by the rich and there was nothing they could do about it

Boaz Ruth's husband was a fantastically rich man and you get the impression as you read the book of Ruth that he was a very fair man indeed it's not the Boaz as James is thinking about it's those who get rich off the back of the poor men like Zacchaeus men who've got fantastically rich at the expense of the poverty of the poorest in society and the tragedy is that the church is so fickle that as you look back to James chapter two it's those kind of people we so often fawn after toadying up to them and giving them the finest seats in our gathering when all the time they are fleecing the poor well supposing we're not financially wealthy we can still be guilty of this sin by growing in our reputation our status and our control by stepping on the heads of others to get where we want to go by exploding their dreams so we can realize our dreams

I've been at the sharp end of this way too many times our ambition as gospel Christians must never be to exploit others but to empower others never to use them to serve us but for us to serve them in all Christlike humility now is not a time for stealing and then third now is not the time for slacking for slacking there comes a time of year in my village in the north where the lambs having been fattened up on the finest of grass and extra feeding from the farmer would be taken to the slaughterhouse for their short lives they had been fed royally and had the best possible life it was possible for a lamb to live if it's at all possible for a lamb to do this they lived in luxury and in self-indulgence for that for those few short months that's what makes them so succulently tasty and ready for the slaughterhouse now suppose a lamb is not fat at all suppose instead it's rather scrawny because the other lambs have eaten its portion of extra feeding and it's had to rely on eating dandelions instead of grass so compared to the other fat lambs it looks rather thin and unappealing the farmer gathers together all the lambs of the day that he has to take them to the slaughterhouse and he realizes when he sees that scrawny lamb that he cannot send that lamb to the slaughterhouse it's way too stringy it's way too scrawny you know if a lamb wants to live through that whole slaughterhouse selection thing its best move is to look scrawny not to overindulge for those few months but rather to control itself so those scrawny lambs next time you see a scrawny lamb think to yourself it's playing the long game while its fat friends are being served up as Sunday lunch with mint sauce they're still jumping around the field eating the green grass but those other lambs who were suckers for all that green grass and that lovely extra feeding the farmer put out they're only playing the short game fools just like those rich people to whom James is referring in verse five living in luxury and self-indulgence fattening themselves up just in time for the farmer to pick the plumpest lambs to send to the slaughterhouse these are the last days this is not the time for James's so called living in luxury and self-indulgence this is not a time to abandon self-control and to slack off when it comes to our discipleship in Christ in favor of pleasure luxury and self-indulgence after all who knows when Christ shall return

I'd like to think we all get the picture here right it's it's it's all too easy in the affluent west to apologize for James's tone in this passage after all all of us here are fantastically rich compared to the poorest in this world and even the poorest in our own society but we must make no apologies for the word of God James is confronting the rich he is challenging us we who accumulate far more than we can ever give away we who get rich off the back of the poverty of the poor we who live in self-indulgent luxury whilst others yes even Christians and perhaps even Christians in our own congregation here don't even have enough money for a bus fare to get to work in the light of the parousia the second coming of the Lord this is not a time for stacking for stealing or for slacking well then what is it a time for second of all what is this a time for our passage is entitled a warning to the rich it's a warning it's not a final judgment like one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament James warns in order that God's people might come to their senses his primary warning is motivated by the second coming of the Lord Jesus

[17 : 46] Christ that our ethic as Christians isn't just to be driven by the cross behind us but by his coming before us for these are as James says in verse 3 the last days rather than this being a time for stacking and stealing and slacking living in the full awareness of Christ's imminent return for the

genuine Christian this is a time for repentance for reflection for redress and for readiness it's a time first of all for repentance repentance as I said a moment ago without apologizing for James's language we must understand that he is speaking to the kind of rich person who was characterized not by hard work thrift and generosity but by stacking stealing and slacking in the society of

James's day the kind of upward mobility we have today was entirely unknown it didn't matter how hard you worked how skilled the craftsman you were the rich were in a class of their own a class which it was impossible for you to penetrate well as to these kinds of Christians James is speaking and he says to them weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you weep and howl he is commanding their repentance these rich people carry themselves as though they were a breed apart but they're entirely as sinful naked poor pitiful and blind before God as the next man it's not the mere fact that they're rich which draws James's condemnation it is the attitude they have toward their wealth how they got their wealth what they do with their wealth that's the discriminatory measure in the Jewish world of the day to be rich was seen as a sign of

God's blessing that God was happy with you and an evidence an evidence of that was that you were rich he blessed you with riches by contrast James following his brother Jesus turns that teaching on its head being rich isn't a cause for rejoicing being redeemed by the blood of Christ is a cause for rejoicing being wealthy isn't a cause for rejoicing being one for Christ is a cause for rejoicing we need to repent of any inclination of our hearts to stack to steal or to slack recognizing that these vices go deeper than at first may seem obvious this injunction to repent may apply not only to those who are wealthy but also to those who think that the answer to all of life's problems consists in getting wealthy James seems to be saying to us here the adornment of a godly man is sackcloth and ashes not splendid in jewelry

Jesus said blessed are those who mourn if we want to avoid being those birds who build their nests in bushes condemned to the cutting then repentance is the right path second it's a time for reflection it's a time for reflection a few months ago in a sermon I preached from the book of James here I was questioning the value of human wealth if you recall I was comparing the gold to which we so aspire to little more than monkey dung you may or not know that hardened whale vomit is gram for gram more valuable than diamonds but the question is who says who says well yes says James so you think that fine garments and riches are valuable well they are if you're a moth because moths love to eat fancy clothes and they are if you're oxygen because the oxidation of precious metals are a chemist's dream reflect on that next time you're stacking stuff away and accumulating it you're doing the banks a really good turn you're giving the moths a great banquet and then when Christ returns do you really suppose he'll be impressed with all those moth eaten clothes in your wardrobe or that gold and silver I think we're only too well aware of how financial markets in our world today can fluctuate to the extent that what we think of as a fortune today is worth little more than a penny tomorrow at the moment everyone is investing in the internet currency bitcoin but what happens when the bottom falls out of that market as it will one day what will happen when you get a ratners or a bhs and again though it may take millions of years gold and silver will eventually corrode do you really suppose that when Jesus returns he'll be that impressed with our painted dust he says do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth store up for yourselves treasures in heaven gospel treasures faith works heavenly treasures this is a time third for redress redress now James was Jesus brother and as such was intimately familiar with Jesus life at this stage when James wrote this book the gospels had not been written and so he's relying upon his own knowledge here of Jesus life he perhaps had remembered an episode where Jesus met a man whose life was filled with stacking stealing and slacking the man's name was Zacchaeus if ever it was true that a man had defrauded other people as James talks about in verse 4 it was him I think we all know the story well enough of how because Zacchaeus was so small he climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Jesus Jesus saw him called him down and went to his house for supper a supper to which Zacchaeus invited all his friends as a result in believing in Christ Zacchaeus became a changed man whereas before he had stacked and stolen and slacked he now made redress he he promised to pay all those he had defrauded four times what he had stolen from them Zacchaeus demonstrated that he was a changed man by making redress for all the money he had stolen previously he had grabbed and now he gave these last days are a time for living out the gospel by making redress to all we have stolen from money most certainly but perhaps even more applicable to us reputation I was thinking of applications for this reputation have you stolen anyone's reputation through gossip or slander now is the time for redress I'll leave you to figure out

for yourselves how you can live out the gospel in this particular way by making redress for stealing someone's reputation by slander or gossip repentance reflection redress and then lastly this is a time for readiness readiness look at verse six with me you have condemned and murdered the righteous person he does not resist you i wonder who it is those stackers and stealers slackers condemned who did they murder commentators are divided some view this righteous person as a description of poor christians made even poorer by the greed of the rich among them but there are a significant group of commentators who hold to an altogether more radical view but the righteous person to whom james is referring to in verse six is a particular person a person none other than jesus himself you have condemned and murdered jesus it is absolutely true that by and large it was the rich who condemned jesus to death those who were greedy for money power reputation status who murdered him he was popular among the common men common man james seems to be saying that same jesus is the gardener who's out with his pruning shears same gardener that you rich people condemned and murdered same gardener you condemned and murdered while you have grown rich and fat while god's people starved you have built your nests in bushes designed for cutting down by the gardener himself he seems to be saying to us this is a time for readiness because the lord of hosts who has heard the cries of the defrauded in verse four he is coming he is coming which brings us back all the way to the beginning if we really believe the truths that these are the last days and that our lord is coming soon one thing that would probably change about us is our attitude to wealth and possessions we'd hold on to them far lighter than we do recognizing that our gold and silver and fine garments will mean not a thing on the day christ returns in fact depending upon our attitude toward them they may well serve more as liabilities than assets more important by far as jesus reminds us it's time for us to lay up our treasures in heaven by our attitude to wealth and possessions

[29 : 07] are we like birds building nests in branches set for the gardener shears are we are you let us pray we recognize oh lord that all of us in the affluent west are incredibly rich compared to the poorest both in our society today and in the world today and uh our attitude so often is to grab to stack stuff away so much to the extent that we don't know how many pairs of shoes we have there's just so many we don't know how many suits we have there's so many we don't have don't know how much money we've got there's just so much we don't know how much stuff we have in our loft because we've accumulated over the years and much of what we've much of what we've had we've bought cheap really cheap and then oh lord we are the kind of people who love our pleasures we'll exuriate while so many of god's people struggle to pay the bus fare to work grant us oh lord repentance reflection redress and readiness and for many of us who already give far more than we grab there may be other aspects of our lives in which we step in other people's heads to get where we want to go it may not be money it may be our careers maybe our reputations it may be our relationships whatever it is oh lord help us to live in the light of your imminent return we ask these things in christ's name amen