

A Warning to the Rich

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm sure that, like me, many of you have heard people say more than one time, sin is sin.

! I'm sure you heard that statement at one time or another. And what is meant by it is all sins are equal.

And hopefully you know that that's not true. All sins are not equal. And a quick way to show that is, for example, we know that murder is a sin. We know that stealing is a sin.

If all sins are equal, then it shouldn't matter to a person if the sin of murder is committed against them or the sin of stealing is committed against them. But we know anybody in their right mind would rather have their property stolen than their life taken.

So sin is not sin. And I've had this conversation with people before, and so they would retreat and say, well, that's not what I really mean. I mean, in the eyes of God, sin is sin.

[1 : 10] God considers all sins equal. And even that is not true. And a quick, again, survey of Scripture would help us to see that that is just not true.

For example, when you read in the Old Testament, in the books of Exodus and Leviticus in particular, where the law is largely laid down, you would notice that God lays down different punishments and penalties for different sins.

He doesn't give the same punishment to every single sin. And hopefully you know that that's the way we get our legal system set up.

We set our legal system up pretty much on the biblical foundation that sins are not crimes and sins are not punished equally. And so the person who walks into a food store and steals a loaf of bread is not treated before the courts.

It's the same person who walks in with a gun and holds it on the cashier and takes money out of the cash register. Both are stealing, but the law recognizes them differently.

[2 : 24] When you read the—it's a very helpful thing to do. For example, when you read in the book of Leviticus, which could be a hard book to read, you would notice that for some sins, the Lord would require more animals to be sacrificed and bigger animals to be sacrificed than for other sins.

And what it does, it helps us to see how he feels about particular sins. And one of the things that we find when we read in the Old Testament in particular, is we see how God feels about certain sins through the prophets.

When we read prophets like Amos and Micah, we see how God feels about particular sins that he told them to go and cry out against. And we see this in the New Testament as well.

There are certain sins that are named in the New Testament that God especially hates. And any faithful reading of the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament will bring us face-to-face with those sins that God especially hates.

And this morning, as we continue our sermon series in the book of James, we come face-to-face with some particular sins that God especially hates.

[3 : 49] And they're repeated again and again in the pages of Scripture. And they're sins that are typically committed by some rich people against some poor people.

And so if you've not yet done so, please turn to James chapter 5. And this morning, as we continue, we will be considering verses 1 through 6.

James chapter 5. Beginning in verse 1. And concluding in verse 6. I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

James writes, 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 your silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

[5 : 01] 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 heirs 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. Would you pray with me? Father, we are grateful once again to have your word and to sit under its preaching.

Would you speak to our hearts this morning? Would you cause each of us to hear these words as we should?

[6 : 07] Lord, I ask that you would grant me grace to be faithful. Would you give me the burden that you gave to James when he penned these words?

Would you cause me, Lord, to be faithful to these words as written in your word? I pray above all that your name will be glorified in us and among us.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. In these words that we just read, James has a dual purpose of warning the rich who oppress the poor and comforting the poor who are oppressed by the rich.

And here's why James does that. James wanted both the rich who oppress the poor and the poor who were oppressed by the rich to understand a reality that is sometimes easily overlooked.

And that reality is this. Although God seems silent, He knows and will judge the injustices of the rich against the poor.

[7 : 36] Although God seems silent, He knows and He will judge the injustices of the rich against the poor.

That was the point that James made to his original audience and it is the point that he makes to us this morning. The oppression of the poor matters to God and God will judge the injustices against them.

Not in our way or time, but in His way and time, He will. If God were to overlook any injustice, it makes Him unjust.

And we know He is not unjust. One of the common mistakes that we can make when we come to a passage like this this morning that begins with these four words, Come now, you rich, is we think to ourselves, Well, He's not talking to me.

And I won't ask for a show of hands this morning, but I imagine if I were to ask for a show of hands, How many of you believe you're rich? I don't think a whole lot of hands will go up, present or even among those who are watching by live stream.

[9 : 13] But although you may not consider yourself rich, and I think that maybe because when we think of rich, we think of the people in life at key, or we think of the super rich like Bill Gates.

The truth is that you're rich. Not as rich as the super rich, but you are actually rich.

Some time ago, someone sent me an email that gave a list of reasons why people like us who don't think that we're rich are actually pretty rich.

And I want to mention two of that list that really are eye-opening when we think of this whole issue of who is rich and who is poor.

Two eye-opening statements. The first one, if you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of the world.

[10 : 25] And so right there, I can safely say that everyone in Kingdom Life Church is richer than 75% of the people in the world.

And sometimes we can lose sight of that. I tell you, if you saw any of the images coming out of India, the shared aspiration of people, the shutting of hospitals only because there's no more space, and to watch people with loved ones on any makeshift thing that they're able to put them on, and just to see the shared aspiration and shortage, we are reminded of just how rich we really are.

But here's the second one. If you have money in the bank or in your wallet or even spare change in a dish somewhere, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy people.

Again, I think that would be so many of us. It is amazing to me to walk in the parking lot of most shopping centers, places like that, and to see the number of small coins on the ground.

I guess the penny is gone now, so that doesn't matter so much now, but when the penny was in, I used to see them all over the place. As a matter of fact, my children will attest to this.

[12:08] One of the things that I did with them when we were younger was whenever we would walk together in a parking lot or where we used to live off of East Street, I would normally take my car to a place to be cleaned that was not too far from the house, and we would walk there, and on the way, we would pick up pennies.

It's just a fun thing that we did. But people left money all around. That is an indication of really how rich in some ways that we are. Now, I really, I don't know if the statistics I gave you are true. I have no way of proving them. But I think you get the point. The point is that being rich is relative. The point is being rich is relative to who you compare yourself to. And I think we know that with riches, the more of it that we have, the greater the potential to abuse the power and the privilege that are associated with having riches. And the reason I share this in this way this morning is to say to all of us, we need to listen. When James says, come now, you rich, we would be wrong if we tune out and say, well, James is not talking to me.

[13:41] We should also settle right up front that James is not rebuking all rich people. There's a whole lot of ink that's been spilled by theologians as to who are the rich people that James is talking about, whether these are believers or unbelievers.

And I really don't think it matters. James is talking to rich people who behave the way he is talking about them. That's the group of rich people that James is talking about.

So whether you are an unbeliever, whether you name the name of Christ, if you behave this way, well, James is talking to you. And we all know that not every unbelieving, rich person conducts him or herself the way James outlines here.

And we know that there would be some believers who conduct themselves in ways that would be captured in what James is saying. Now, we know that when James wrote, it was a very different time.

People were unprotected with laws. And so, even though the hearts of people are still the same, the hearts of people have not changed. We don't have worse sinners today than they had in those days.

[15:04] The heart today is as sinful as it was back then. But one of the things that has happened is laws have been put in place, especially in our part of the world, to restrain some of the evil.

So, a lot of it can't get full expression. But we should remember that the heart is really still the same. And the last thing I want to draw your attention to before we look at the text in detail, is I want to draw your attention to the fact, if you've not seen it yet, that these six verses in James, they stand out from the rest of James.

They stand out from what we have read so far. They stand out from what we will read later as we conclude this letter. James, in these six verses, is standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets.

prophets. The language that he uses is the prophetic language that we find in the Old Testament prophets like Amos, who, when he saw the injustices of his day, he cried out that righteousness and justice would roll down like waters on an ever-flowing stream.

And James is gripped with the same urgency, with the same sense of indignation about what was happening to the poor by the rich.

[16:49] James is in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and he is pronouncing the judgment that will come upon those who act in this way against people that the Lord himself has said, I am going to protect these weak and vulnerable people.

And so, what are the injustices that James identifies? Injustices by the rich against the poor.

Well, in these verses, I think you can summarize these injustices under three headings. And the first injustice is the injustice of hoarding wealth.

It's the injustice of hoarding wealth. In verses 2 and 3, James accuses the rich of hoarding wealth.

Notice again what he says. 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.

[18:08] Now, James uses strong figurative language to paint a picture of the extent of the hoarding of wealth that the rich were engaged in. He says, the riches have rotted.

No doubt pointing to agricultural products, the crop that they got out of their fields that they had so much of. Wasn't selling it, but it was just stored up and it was rotting.

Pointing to the amount of garments, clothing they had. And these aren't just your regular clothes. These are probably your special clothing that they wore for special occasions that were just sitting up and James says to them, your clothes, the clothes you don't wear that you just have there, the moth are eating them because you have so much.

And this is something to really think about because in those days it would not have been unusual to just have one set of clothing. The garments that they wore. Some people just own one.

James even tells them, he says, your silver and your gold has corroded. And this gives us a hint that James is speaking figuratively because silver and gold without any kind of adulteration or something to affect the metal, the metal is stable.

[19 : 29] It doesn't corrode. And so we know that James is speaking in a very figurative way and the whole idea is there is so much gold stored up, so much silver stored up, that if it could corrode, it would corrode.

So James is speaking in a very figurative way to them. But I think James is also making another point. He's not just showing them about the point of hoarding towards the poor, but I think James is also helping them to see how foolish it is to hoard because the wealth that you store up is uncertain. And no doubt James is thinking about the Lord's own teaching on this subject. And his point is, your wealth is not permanent. Your wealth will not last forever.

The Lord Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who thought that what he would do when he had a great harvest would be to build bigger barns.

And James is saying to them, your wealth is not as certain as you thought. even pointing again to the gold and the silver. It's corroding. It's not lasting for you.

[20 : 47] In verse 3, James says to them, he says, and look at the time that you're doing it. You are laying up treasure in the last days. You're laying up treasure in the last days.

He's saying you're hoarding and you are unmindful of the poor who you should help, but you're also unmindful of the fact that time is running out, the world is coming to an end, and you're busy hoarding.

And you know, when you really think about it, who really would want to die having an abundance of things that you did not get to enjoy in this life?

And James is essentially saying that to them. He says, you're hoarding all this stuff up, and time is closing in on you. You are hoarding in the last day.

And the last day would have been from the time of Pentecost up until the Lord returns. And I think for us, when we think about this today, anyone who was hoarding today, the indictment is even greater because we are closer to the end of the last days than these people were in James' day.

[22 : 11] If anyone should not be hoarding, it should be those who are living today as the age, the close of the age, is actually upon us.

Notice also in verse 5 where James says to them, he says, you have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

And here's the irony of it. James is saying to them, he says, you don't even realize what you're doing. As you gorge yourself, as you indulge yourself, you're like the animal that is being prepared and fattened for the slaughter.

One thing you know if you go on a farm where they would kill animals for food, you can pretty much tell the ones that are not going to be slaughtered.

All the lame ones, all the little emaciated ones, they're not going to be the ones to slaughter, but the ones they're fattening, the ones that they are just giving a whole lot of food and happy to take the food, those are the ones that are going to be on someone's plate very soon.

[23 : 15] And James is saying to them, he says, that's what you're doing. You are indulging yourself and fattening your heart in the day of slaughter, and you're so blind to the fact that you are on the brink of judgment.

Now, why is hoarding wrong? Why is it wrong? Now, it's clear that James is addressing the issue that the wealth they were hoarding in the first place was acquired unjustly.

It was acquired by exploitation. But we shouldn't miss the point that is to be heard about hoarding in general.

Hoarding is relative. You have a person who can hoard a lot of things, and then you have others who can hoard just a little bit. And so we should really think about this as well, and not be distracted by the fact that James is issuing an indictment on those who are hoarding ill-gotten gains.

We should listen to this as well. And certainly when I considered it for myself, my first thought went to something that I think maybe is relevant to all of us, and that is we hoard clothing.

[24 : 48] Some of us, we have clothes that we will never get in in this lifetime again. we have them. And why do we have them?

Some of us have clothes, we can get in, but we don't get in. We just have them. And moth is not a problem for us, but mildew is.

And mildew will come and be evidence against us that we are hoarding. We're holding on to things that we just do not need.

We hoard food. One of the ways we know we hoard food is when food is spoiling. And there are so many others who could benefit from that.

And this is what makes hoarding for us so bad, because there are those right around us who can benefit and use the things that we have. Now, I wasn't mindful that I would be preaching this text in a few weeks, but just a few weeks ago, I was in my closet, and the room in my closet was really getting tight, and I noticed I had some things that were mildewing in the closet.

[26 : 15] And Alexi will attest, so I pulled them out, and I said, you know, I'm going to take these, and I'm just going to give them away, because I haven't won them in years.

And I imagine you're the same. And I would encourage us, let us hear, one of the ways we can apply this message is we can think about to what extent am I hoarding, to what extent am I holding on to things that I don't have any need for, any use for, in the present or in the future.

And that's really the definition of hoarding. The definition of hoarding is to hold on to something that we do not need in the present, and will not need in the future.

And so I encourage us to consider that. But listen to this quote by Douglas Moo. And I think he makes it very clear that if there's anyone who should not hoard is those who belong to Christ.

Listen to what he says. He writes, as those who live in these last days, we too should recognize in the grace of God already displayed and the judgment of God yet to come, a powerful stimulus to share, not hoard, our wealth.

[27 : 41] What is he saying? He's saying that those of us who have received abundantly the grace of God in salvation, and continue to receive the abundance of God's goodness and provision in our lives, mindful of that, and mindful of coming judgment, we should be the last ones to hoard and to hold on to things.

Because we give out of a sense of generosity, we give out of a sense that this world is coming to an end, that's the stimulus for us not to hoard. The grace of God that has come to us and the judgment of God that is coming upon the world.

That's the first injustice that James cries out against, hoarding wealth. The second injustice that he cries out against is defrauding wages.

Look at verse 4. He writes, Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you held back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the heirs of the Lord of hosts.

Here again, James is using figurative language, very common in the Old Testament prophets. He gives personality to wages.

[29 : 12] He says, the wages are crying out. The wages that the rich held back from the poor, the poor laborers who worked their fields.

He says, those wages are crying out against you. And he says, not only are they crying out, but also the harvesters are crying out.

And notice what James is addressing. James is not addressing underpayment, although that might be in view as well. What James is addressing is pure, unqualified stealing.

The rich were withholding the wages of the laborers who were in their fields in the heat of the day, working long hours to reap their crops.

And they were guilty of holding back their wages. When James was writing, the norm was that people worked and were paid daily.

[30 : 18] That's how poor they were. And it was wrong to withhold the wages wages of a person at the end of the day because that's all they had to live off.

And they literally lived from hand to mouth. They literally lived getting it in their hands and putting it in their mouths. And this was the egregious exploitation of the rich, these who had stockpiles of wealth.

And they were yet withholding the daily wages that their laborers had worked for. Now James doesn't tell us exactly how they were able to get away with this fraud and obviously in an ongoing way. But one of the things we could really think about is they may have had these people captive.

There was nowhere else to go. Maybe in one area there was one big landowner and you worked for him or worked for nobody else. And so he had them.

[31 : 22] But James says both those wages that they defrauded and the people who they were defrauded from were crying out against them. And notice what he says.

He says they were crying out to the Lord of hosts. We shouldn't read over that quickly because James is saying something.

There are many different titles that James could have used for the Lord. To whom the wages were crying out, to whom the harvesters were crying out, he chose to use the Lord of hosts. It is God's name for the God of war. It is the Lord Sabaoth. It is the name that he uses to say that he fights on behalf of his people.

James says that's the one who is hearing their cries. That's the one that they are crying out to. The Lord of armies. And James point was very clear.

[32 : 28] His point was that God himself was going to deal with the injustice that was taking place by these uncaring, rich landowners people.

Who were slaving these individuals and not giving them the compensation that they had worked for. He says, God is going to bring judgment. God, the God of war is going to bring judgment against you.

And his point is clear to them. His point is, you don't need to do this. Why are you doing this? You have more than you need. It's rotting on you. these people have worked for what you're withholding from them.

And it's wrong to defraud them. It's wrong to defraud the poor. It's one thing to match up with somebody like yourself and, you know, sometimes in business arrangements, you have two equal persons and maybe one gets over the next one.

That's not what James is talking about. James is talking about a David and go live situation. He's talking about the mighty against the helpless. And he says, you're doubly wrong.

[33 : 43] You're doubly wrong because you don't need to do it. And doubly wrong because you're wrong to do it by withholding from these individuals.

Now, here again, it's easy for us to maybe not connect with this particular indictment because we may think, well, I never defrauded anyone from anything.

I don't have any employees beside. And maybe our minds will go to the places that have sweatshops and don't have laws to protect people.

But I think we should still try to consider what does this look like in our context, in the Bahamas, and what does it also look like for us personally? I think perhaps in the Bahamas we could see this in the context of employers who sometimes take advantage of employees who don't know their rights, who terminate them.

And I've literally seen people terminated unjustly and who literally do not have the time to go to the labor board because they need to go and find where the next meal is coming from.

[34 : 52] Or companies that put workers in harm's way, in hazardous jobs, and pay them little or nothing and offer them no hazard pay.

No thought for insurance, though they may be able to afford that. And I don't need to go on with examples, but there's so many different ways we can see a modern day version of some of these same things working out and the only thing that prevents them from expanding is really some semblance of laws that may be in place to restrain the evil that would take place.

But I think we should consider this also on a personal level as well. Perhaps you might have a helper, a handyman, somebody who cuts your grass, someone who works for you.

And you may want to think about that. Are you handling that person fairly? Are you compensating them justly? Or are you withholding from them?

And are their wages crying out to the Lord because of injustice? Maybe you're a business owner, maybe you're a supervisor, supervisor, and you're in a position where you make decisions about employees.

[36 : 26] If they get an increase in how much, when they are evaluated, whether it's fair or whether it's to achieve a particular end, we can think, are we being just with the individuals that we have to deal with?

And I do think we need to think about this in a very sober way, not in outlandish ways like what we see happening here, because I don't think any of us is guilty of that.

But to what extent we may be to some degree, nonetheless guilty, of having a position of influence and authority and power and not being just with those who desperately need us to be just with them.

I think we should think about this also on a national level. And I think if we are honest with ourselves as a nation, and I believe most of us are old enough to know, we as a nation have exploited many foreigners who have come to our shores.

This is especially true with regard to Haitian nationals. And the words of James, the defrauded wages of those whom we have defrauded cry out against us.

[38 : 02] and they are crying to the Lord. And one of the interesting things about people who are helpless, who are needy, they have nowhere else to turn and somehow they are able to cry out to God more effectively and fervently.

those of us who have other options and oftentimes even some who do not know the Lord, they are crying out to the Lord. And James doesn't give us the impression that it is only the believers whose cries the Lord hears.

The Lord doesn't say I'm going to watch over the believing widow, an orphan, an alien. He simply says he will watch over them and he will avenge injustices against them.

And some of us this morning we may even at this moment have in our employ, maybe it's a housekeeper, maybe it's a gardener, someone from another country, maybe from Haiti or Jamaica or the Dominican Republic.

and these are generally poor people. They are people who God has promised to watch over. And it matters not whether they are legal or illegal.

[39 : 41] We have to sort through those things. God doesn't deal with that in his justice. He watches over them all. And we must be mindful of that.

And so let us consider this morning in all of our dealings and all the different spheres that we may be dealing with others and in particular those who are needy and those who are poor.

And we want to be doing our very best to be just and fair and right with them. So James accuses the rich of hoarding wealth.

he accuses them of defrauding wages. And the third injustice that he identifies is in verse 6 where he says, you have condemned, you have murdered the righteous person.

He does not resist you. I've summarized this third injustice as crushing the helpless. helpless. And I use crushing the helpless because I don't think that James is saying that they have murdered literally people, although that was very possible, although that could have been possible.

[41 : 10] But I think if you murder all your workers, then you have nobody to work your fields. And so I think it's probably more representative of what he's saying to say that they were crushing the helpless.

Crushing the helpless. Think about that. Crushing the helpless. And you know, sometimes we see these exaggerated cartoons with a big foot just crushing someone.

That's kind of the image that we have here. These super wealthy people with wealth stored up that they could never use in their lifetime, crushing the person who need the daily wage to live off.

That was the kind of injustice that James was here addressing. They were crushing the helpless. Now James says that they were doing this to the righteous person. And this word for righteous could be seen in different ways.

[42 : 18] Righteous from a salvific point of view or just righteous in terms of being right and being on the right side of a particular issue.

And I think James is using it more in the latter. Not so much that all these people who they were taking advantage of were God's people, but really that all these people who they were taking advantage of, they were not in the wrong.

They were the ones who were on the right side of the equation. And even though they were right, the powerful, the wealthy were heartlessly just crushing them under their feet.

And perhaps what was in view here is some court situations where the wealthy would use their wealth, their power, their influence to take advantage of those who were helpless. And they couldn't resist them. And that's the point that James is making. James is saying, why are you doing this? They can't even resist you. They don't have the power to resist you and yet you're crushing them.

[43 : 32] You know, sometimes people don't resist because they can't resist. And sometimes people don't resist because they've really entrusted themselves to the Lord. And I'll tell you something.

I've lived long enough to know that the last person you want to pray to God for you is a very weak, helpless person who you have taken advantage of.

It's almost like them going and complaining to God about you. You don't want that. You don't want that. Because God has put his name on the line.

He says, I will avenge them. God tender and mindful and merciful towards them, our hearts being moved towards them or our hearts indifferent towards them.

And here again, thinking back to what Douglas Moore said in the quote I gave earlier, if there's anyone whose heart should be moved and affected should be those of us whose hearts have been touched by God and transformed by God.

[45 : 10] Those of us who receive mercy from God, though we deserve wrath from God, Scripture tells us that when we were helpless, God demonstrated his love towards us, that he would send Christ to die for us.

He didn't trample us, but he lifted us up. Now, this section of James ends in a somewhat unusual way.

It ends abruptly. It ends almost in suspense, but in two ways it doesn't. It doesn't end in suspense because James does go on and he now begins to address those who are brothers.

We'll see this in the next sermon. I'll be preached in this text. He tells them to be patient and to wait. Wait for the Lord's coming.

But even though this ends without calling the rich who are acting in these ways to repentance, here's what we know.

[46 : 26] James is standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. And when God sent the Old Testament prophets to pronounce coming judgment on those who are living contrary to his ways, that in itself was a mercy.

That in itself was a kindness. That in itself was a call to repentance, a call to change. And we know that because if God's sole plan was to bring judgment, he would have just brought judgment.

But again and again he doesn't do that. He sends his prophets as prosecuting attorneys and says this is where you went wrong. This is what you did wrong.

And the whole aim is to bring them to repentance. To cause them to have a change of heart. And it's no different here with James.

James doesn't need to say you need to repent. The mere fact that this message is coming. And your sins are being brought to you. In essence, what James is saying is you need to repent in these particular ways.

[47 : 39] So as strong as these words are, in these words is a kindness. In these words is mercy. In this warning is a call to repent.

And it's a call to consider your ways. And I pray that that effect is on all of our hearts this morning to whatever degree we need to hear these words.

In whatever context we need to hear these words. God knows. And so my prayer is that we would hear these strong words of James against those who would take advantage of wealth and power and use it against those for whom it should be used.

I want to close again by reading this quote from Douglas Moo because I think it reminds us of these two realities that should affect our hearts as we live today.

As those who live in these last days we too should recognize in the grace of God already displayed and the judgment of God yet to come a powerful stimulus to share not hoard our wealth.

[49 : 15] Brothers and sisters may that be a stimulus for every one of us. The grace of God already displayed the judgment of God that is yet to come.

Let's pray. Father would you continue to speak to our hearts this morning. Lord you know where each one of us is and you know what we need to hear and what we need to do.

I pray by the power of your spirit that you would work in our hearts. I ask Lord that you would help us to hear the invitation to turn and repent in these very strong words of James and by the grace of God turn and repent.
I pray each of us will. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.