

## “James and Justice”

### James 5:1-6

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I grew up with three brothers. Occasionally, we would all get in trouble at the same time, which meant we would all get a spanking. I was the youngest which proved to be a blessing and a curse. It was good because it meant my father would run low on energy by the time he got to me because he always started with the oldest. On the other hand, it meant that I had to watch the others receive their punishment.

By the time dad started spanking my second brother, I was crying. You would have thought I had already been spanked had you heard me screaming and howling. As you would expect, it worked to my advantage to be a little dramatic. When my dad got to me, he felt I had already agonized enough and went pretty easy on me.

Little did I know that my antics were biblical. James instructed his readers to begin crying before they received the punishment that was coming their way. His reasons were different from mine, though. He did not tell them to cry so that their punishment would be lighter, but because it was going to be so severe.

*“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver have corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen that mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourself in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing you”*  
James 5:1-6.

James sounds like the Old Testament prophet Amos or Isaiah, doesn't he? He doesn't mince words or leave any doubt about how he feels. He's upset. No, he's angry and lets the volcano erupt.

**Why was he so upset?** Why did he use such harsh words? I think he did so because people he loved and cared deeply about were being hurt and he wanted to be their advocate.

**What was happening?** The laborers whose survival depended upon being paid daily for their work were being cheated. After tending the fields all day, they were being sent home without any pay. This meant that they could not stop at the market on their way home and buy food for their family's evening meal and breakfast the next morning.

To make matters worse, the landowners were using the money that was suppose to be distributed to the laborers to buy more food and luxuries for themselves. Furthermore, it appeared as if they killed anyone that complained.

So James became a prophet and denounced their insatiable greed and violence. With righteous indignation he declared that God almighty heard the cries of hungry babies and their heartbroken parents and would hold these landowners accountable. Essentially, he told them that money talked, especially money that did not belong to them and that God was listening.

Let's put a positive spin on this. **What is James telling us that is important to God?** Honesty and generosity.

What did Micah say was at the top of God's list of expectations of His people and all people for that matter? “What does the Lord require of you? **To do justly**, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:8.

At the top of God's list is **honesty**. When you make a promise, keep it. When you make a commitment, follow through. Do not let greed talk you out of doing what is right.

I have a friend that knew J. C. Penny, the founder of the department store by that name. He believed him to be a man of integrity. He told me that Penny learned the value of honesty at an early age.

When Penny was a young boy growing up in Hannibal, Missouri, he worked at a general store. One day the owner had Penny mix both grades of coffee, put them in containers and sell them for the higher price. When Penny went home and bragged about the shrewdness of his employer, Penny's father instructed him to go the next morning and quit. "I would rather have you unemployed than working for a dishonest businessman," his father said. Penny never forgot that valuable lesson and vowed never to ask an employee to do anything unethical.

**Generosity** is also important to God. Value nothing you have more than anyone that needs it.

There is a portion of James' sermon that particularly indicts me. "*Your wealth has rotted,*" he wrote to these selfish and indulgent landowners.

It is one thing for something to wear out because of proper use. It is another for it to rot because of no use. This is a sin! If we are good stewards, nothing we have should rot. If we don't need it, we should share it with someone that does.

What do you have in your closet this morning that is rotting? What do you have in your refrigerator, freezer or basement that will be thrown out by you or someone else after you are gone? Who could have used it? How could it have changed the life of someone around you?

Do you know who advertisers are targeting these days? Seven year olds. That's right. Seven-year-old children are the newest advertising targets. Advertisers want to convince children that they must have things they were not even aware they needed. They know if they can capture their attention at this young age, they will have them as hearty consumers the rest of their lives.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not against advertising and a free market. What I am concerned about, though, is filling a child's closet with so many toys and clothes that he or she could not possibly appreciate their value or use them wisely. Wouldn't it be healthier to teach children to see another child's empty toy box and clothes closet and use some of the resources available to them to meet those needs? I think so and I believe James would agree. You don't have to be an adult or wealthy landowner to be guilty of self-indulgence.

My little friend Amy smiled broadly last Wednesday evening as she told me about filling two boxes for Operation Christmas Child, one at church and another at school. She told me everything she placed inside each box. We talked about what a difference those gifts would make in two children's lives in about a month. What we may talk about one day when she is older is what a difference it made in her life, too.

As a child, I learned the value of generosity from family members, especially my grandfather. He had a reputation for seeing others' needs and meeting them. Picking up hitchhikers was not uncommon for him. One day he picked up a hitchhiker and noticed that his shoes were falling apart. He took him to Taggarts' General Store and bought him a new pair of shoes along with some other supplies. He then transported him where he needed to go. When the stranger got out of the car, he looked at my grandfather and said, "When you picked me up, I intended to kill you and steal your car. Instead, you killed my evil desires with kindness. Thank you."

I have to believe that honesty and generosity make the world a better place. I also believe they make us better people. There is a Chinese proverb that says, "A bit of fragrance always clings to the hand that gives you roses."

I am also convinced that honesty and generosity can prevent a lot of tears in the future over misplaced priorities and misused resources. I agree with Peyton Conway March who said, "The three things we crave most in life, happiness, freedom and peace are all attained by giving them to someone else." So join me in cleaning out some cramped closets and getting rid of the faulty thinking that keeps filling them up.