

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 7

WARNING AGAINST PRESUMPTION AND CALL TO TRUST IN GOD

I. Having called for humility regarding dealings with others and peace and control within the self, the letter then goes on to call for entrusting the future to God.

A. This passage, along with the next one on the wealthy, begins with the demanding phrase "Come now" and proceeds along the lines prophetic declaration to a people, which may or may not be the readers. See, e.g., Is. 1:18-31, 32:9-34:17; Jer. 30:10-24, 46:3-48:4; Micah 5:1-6:1; Zech. 9:9-17.

B. The letter criticizes absolute confidence that one will be able to accomplish one's goals, especially material ones.

1. The focus is on buying and selling, mercantile operations. Jesus earlier said that, in the last days, people will be buying and selling as ever. See Luke 17:28. St. James may be recalling that prophesy. The emphasis may also be on the temptation of the wealthy to assume that the future will be secure. See Luke 12:13-21

2. The letter reminds the reader that we do not know what the future will hold. It is building on a common wisdom theme regarding the uncertainty of the future. See, e.g., Prov. 27:1; Eccl. 9:11-12.

- The letter draws an analogy that life is like a puff or smoke. It builds upon a similar analogy in the Books of Job and Psalms that were used in the context of one who is suffering, and asking God for relief. See Job 7:7; Ps. 39:5-7, 102:4. The Book of Job and the Psalms end in notes of triumph in the presence of God. Likewise, the message is that one should fully trust only in God, which is difficult for those comfortable in the world.

- The Book of Wisdom also portrays people recognizing that life is but a puff of smoke blown by the winds of time. However, there the book describes the unjust who do not recognize God's judgments, but rather are simply determined to enjoy this life. See Wis. 2:1-6. Folly can come in putting too much confidence in one's plans, or in thinking that one's actions are meaningless.

- The Second Letter of Peter and the Letter of Jude compare those living in accord with their desires as blown

about like a cloud in the wind. See 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 12. The idea is that they are subject to the inconstancy of this world and of desire. Here, the letter of James is calling for a reliance, not on the inconstancy of our plans, but on the permanence of God's love.

3. There is a positive side to the message. For, if we cannot control the future, we should not worry about it, but rather focus on the present will of God. See, e.g., Matt. 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34. This message would be of particular comfort to the poor, knowing that all people in the end share their uncertain future.

C. The letter does not criticize planning in itself, but rather calls for all planning to be done in recognition that God in the end will determine its success. St. Paul often used phrases such as the one St. James recommends to indicate that even his good intentions may be God's will. See, e.g., Acts 18:21; Rom. 1:10; 1 Cor. 4:19, 16:7; Heb. 6:3. It may well have been a common Christian expression.

D. This advice ends with a contrast between boasting of one's accomplishments and plans, on the one hand, and doing the will of God on the other.

1. The passage condemns the boasting, which seems in this case to mean above all boasting of one's plans for the future. St. James may have been basing the connection between overconfidence in the future and boasting on a similar connection in Proverbs, where the author combines two verses on these subjects in the context of a series of proverbs on the advantages of humility and the folly of those who think too highly of themselves. See Prov. 27:1-2.

2. Both St. James and St. Paul condemn boasting in one's own accomplishments, talents, or in this case, ambitions. See, e.g., Rom. 3:27, 4:2; 1 Cor. 5:16; Eph. 2:9; James 3:14. One should only boast about unity with Jesus, especially in His sufferings. See, e.g., Rom. 5:3; James 1:9. St. Paul does boast of his authority from God, but only in the context of using that authority for the salvation of the people. See 2 Cor. 10:7-12:10. But even there he concludes that that his authority is based entirely on the grace of God, and in fact shows forth all the better in infirmities.

3. In contrast to boasting of the future and focusing on what good one will do then, the letter calls for doing good now, saying that the failure to do good that one is called to is sin.

- The letter thus indicates that sin is not simply doing what is forbidden, but also in failing to do what is right, often called sins of omission. See Matt. 25:14-45; Luke 12:47.

- There is an emphasis on responding to God today, and not thinking that one can get to it later. See, e.g., Ps. 95:7; Prov. 3:27-28; Matt. 24:45-51.

II. The letter then turns in its harshest terms yet to a condemnation of the complacent rich.

A. Again, the letter begins the section "Come now," indicating a prophetic call to repentance.

B. In both the Old Testament and the Gospels, there are regular warnings against those who rely on wealth. See, e.g., Ps. 52:8-9; Prov. 11:28; Is. 5:8-10; Amos 6:1-11; Mark 10:25; Luke 6:24.

- Here, the call is not only to a change in life, but also to mourning for upcoming miseries. The letter invokes similar language as that used in Isaiah in his condemnation of the pagan nations, see Is. 13:6, 14:31, 15:3, indicating that the punishments the prophets spoke of against the nations were not for them alone, but for all the unjust. The Book of Revelations likewise describes the mourning of the wealthy both when the world is shaken and when the second Babylon (representing the reign of worldly wealth and power) is overthrown. See Rev. 6:12-17, 18:11-20.

C. The letter describes the signs of wealth (riches, fancy clothes, gold and silver) as rotting.

1. The first two examples of wealth (or worldly goods) rotting and clothes being eaten by moths may have been inspired by Jesus' warnings in the Sermon on the Mount regarding placing treasures in heaven. See Matt. 6:19-20. The later ironic line about storing up treasure for the last day likewise draws the connection.

- There were also similar images in the Old Testament regarding the rotting away of worldly possessions. See, e.g., Sir. 14:19 (connecting two sections, one on the miser and the other on the wise man); Bar. 6:72 (against idols).

2. The image of gold and silver rusting is more dramatic, for those elements do not rust and thus were thought of as permanent. The idea is that even the things we think of as permanent on this earth are not so. The image may be taken from the image in Baruch of the idols corroding despite being made of gold and silver. See Bar. 6:11-12, 23. Here instead

the gold and silver are the idols.

3. St. James extends the image further to portray the rust now as the permanent witness against the wealthy who failed to use their wealth in the service of God. There is an irony here, for the word for witness (martyrion) elsewhere has the positive meaning of witness for Christ, and above all else the martyrs. See Matt. 8:4, 10:18, 24:14.

- The passage may also mean that the rusted gold will be a witness to the wealthy, possibly persuading them at last not to rely on riches.

- The letter adds the gruesome image of the rusted wealth eating away at the flesh like fire. There is a reference to the judgment by fire that both the prophets and Jesus spoke of. See, e.g., Is. 66:15, 24; Joel 3:3; Mal. 3:2; Luke 3:9,16; Matt. 18:18, 25:41; Luke 12:49; see also 1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:7, 2 Pet. 3:10.

4. The passage then ironically says that the complacent rich have stored up treasures for the last day.

- In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus spoke against storing up riches on earth. See Luke 12:21. The letter may be referring to this parable.

- The last day would be the day of judgment and the beginning of a new era, of reward for the righteous and punishment for the enemies of god. See, e.g., Hos. 3:5; John 6:39-40, 11:24.

D. The letter then proceeds on to three specific examples of the injustice of the wealthy, reflecting injustice by omission, self-indulgence, and injustice by commission.

1. First, the letter condemns the withholding of the wages of laborers, and says the withheld wages cry out in testimony.

- This condemnation directly reflects the instruction in Deuteronomy that wages must be paid as soon as earned, and that the cries of those not paid will rise to heaven. See Deut. 24:14-15; see also Lev. 19:13; Mal. 3:5.

- The image of the cries of the defrauded laborers rises to "the ears of the Lord of hosts" comes from the prophesy of Isaiah, condemning those who take the lands of others. See Is. 5:9-10, 17.

2. The second condemnation is for living sumptuously and in pleasure.

- The first verb (tryphao) has the connotation of living softly or delicately, an image of weakness based upon ease. See Neh. 9:25. The second verb (spatalao) has the connotation of satisfying desires beyond boundaries and even into perversity. The passage recalls the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. See Luke 16:19-31.

- The letter says that such living is like being an animal fattened for slaughter, recalling an image from Jeremiah about those who plot against them being like sheep for the slaughter. See Jer. 12:3; see also Prov. 7:22.

- There is perhaps an image here that one is either a sheep of God, who care for His people as a shepherd for his flock, indeed making us into His sons, see, e.g., Ps. 23:1-4, 95:7; John 10:1-18, or a sheep of the world headed for slaughter.

3. Finally, the passage concludes with the general condemnation of condemning and murdering the righteous one, who offers no resistance.

- The righteous one could be Jesus Himself. See Acts 3:14, 7:52, 22:14; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:1, 29, 3:7. In that case, the idea is that, in oppressing the poor, the rich are oppressing Jesus, and in fact crucifying Him again. See Matt. 25:40, 45.

- The righteous one could also be taken for the innocent in general. Sirach had said that to withhold the wages of the worker is to murder him, Sir. 34:22, and St. James is likely building on this tradition. The Book of Wisdom had described how the unrighteous plot against the righteous because his justice makes them feel guilty, a theme most of the prophets lived out as they were persecuted. See Wis. 2:5-20. The letter is saying that by denying justice to others, the wealthy and content are in the category of the unjust and those who condemned the prophets. See Matt. 23:34-36.