

# A Guide For Non-Conformists

## WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

About a year ago, a significant Canadian Christian organization fired one of its senior executives after it was discovered he had been defrauding employees of their wages. A systematic plan had been in place where paycheques were consistently inconsistent, RRSPs were not properly paid out, and this individual had taken the money for his own personal benefit. Board members were shocked and employees were shaken. How could such a thing happen?

Money is a great temptation, but the love of money is a great evil. Money exposes our hearts to reveal what we value. Jesus said that where your treasure is, your heart will be there also. Which means that what we do with our money reveals our priorities and our loves.

James, in the style of an OT prophet, denounces the rich for their love of money. It isn't wrong to be wealthy, but our use of money shows if we trust the Master or we trust Money. But the question is, what group of rich is James denouncing? This is important for us to understand so that we rightly apply this passage.

James could be speaking to believers (he uses the phrase "Come now" in 4:13 and 5:1), in previous passages he was clearly calling believers to repentance (see 4:15), but here there is no mention of these people being brothers. Rather, they are told to weep and howl (5:1) instead of repent, and they are going to be judged and condemned rather than saved for their abuse of wealth and their persecution of believers.

Why does James talk to unbelievers who are not part of this congregation and who most likely won't hear his condemnation? Answering this question helps us apply this passage rightly. And there are three reasons. First, there is a comfort to persecuted Christians knowing that the Lord sees and hears their cries – as we will see in this passage. Like Isaiah before him, James denounces the unbelievers for their wickedness so that when faithful and struggling Christians hear that God will right every wrong, it enables believers to persevere and remain steadfast under trial (see 1:2-4). Second, James's words are against Jewish oppressors who are persecuting, giving Christians the reminder that judgment comes to those who are without mercy (2:13), regardless of your background and religious upbringing. Here were Jews who had received the blessings of God (see Gen. 12:3), yet now they were not living in light of the blessing of God but of condemnation. As a reminder, Christians are to live in light of the mercy of God. Third, it is a reminder that faith must be lived out with compassion and care for the vulnerable (1:26-27). These rich do not display faith but injustice and self-indulgence, and though they live with opulent wealth now, they should not be envied by believers. All throughout Scripture believers wrestle with the question, "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" (see Psalm 37:7; Psalm 73; Job 27:17-27; Jeremiah 12:1; Ecclesiastes 7:15). Just because wickedness looks successful now, James doesn't want our eyes to go there. Instead, he wants us to be steadfast and faithful. So what are the vices we are to avoid and the virtue James would commend?

### **Beware of The Vices that Destroy the Soul (vv. 2-6)**

First, James condemns the hoarding nature of the rich (vv. 2-3) What will happen to their wealth? The three sources of riches in James's day were grains, clothes, and precious metals. And what will happen to them? Grains will rot, clothes will be eaten by moths, and precious metals will corrode. James is simply making a point that trusting in wealth is an unreliable source of security. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21, these things will wear away, but we should store up for ourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy and thieves cannot break up and steal.

James is not condemning future planning and being wise by saving up for the future; rather he is condemning the act of putting trust in things rather than in the Lord. Hoarding is an act of unbelief. Accumulating stuff because you're afraid of the future shows a heart that does not trust God in the face of hardship. Contentment, Paul can say, can be had whether we are well fed or in want (Phil. 4:11-13) because when Christ is enough for us, we have a secure future.

The question is what are we storing up for the last days? The last days are not merely the end of our lives, but the end of eternity when judgment will happen (see Isa. 2:2; Heb. 1:2). Hoarding wealth is foolish because it is like the one who, in Luke 12:13-21, stored up more and more for himself only to lose it all before he could use it. What will your wealth do for you at the end of the age?

Second, James condemns fraud (v. 4). The law condemned mistreating those who worked because a labourer is worth their wages. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 would state this clearly, just as Leviticus 19:13 would put this in the category of loving your neighbour. When a wage is agreed upon, it should be paid out and nothing should be held back. The person paying out the wage is in a position of power and the person receiving the wage is generally in the position of need. This is why fraud is so serious – it is not only stealing but an abuse of power and authority, and James will have nothing of it.

In fact, James uses the language of the time of the exodus when God's people were oppressed by the Egyptians, and their cries against injustice was heard by the Lord (Exod. 2:23). God has compassion on those who suffer and who cry out to him.

Third, James condemns self-indulgence (v. 5). The use of wealth to just enjoy life, to have bigger homes and better vacations without sharing and considering the needs of others is just a fattening up like an animal being prepared for the slaughterhouse. James says that self-indulgence is only preparing you for the day of judgment. The picture is like a farm where the animals are fed good rich food to fatten them up for preparation for the slaughterhouse. This is what the day of judgment is like – indulgence here and now for self is only preparation for the day of judgment.

All of these words are condemnation against the Jewish persecutors of the Church. And here is the irony – the people who should have received the blessings of Abraham are now those who are under the just condemnation of God for their violence against the followers of Jesus (v. 6).

Those who had received the covenants of promise, the blessing of Abraham, were showing themselves not to be the children of the promise but those of condemnation. It is not one's religious background that matters, but how one responds to Jesus Christ.

If these are the things that bring condemnation, then we need to know how we should live...

### **Be Steadfast in the Virtues of Faith**

There are hints in this passage that point out what faith looks like. First, we are to lay up treasures for the last day (v.3), and the treasures we lay up for the last day are good works. These works are the works that show that our dependence is not upon wealth but upon God who provides for us. In particular, what are these good works that James would want us to consider?

The primary evidence of saving faith is generosity to those who are in need, even when we are in need. James is writing to persecuted Christians who have lost property, jobs, and status. They are to care for the widow and the orphan (1:27). They are not to cater to the rich but to do the good works of serving one another in love.

One of the ways we show that wealth does not control us by being generous. Generosity means that if we are in the position of employing others, that we pay them generously and with a living wage. We encourage people to work hard and we pay them well. We incentivize hard work. We want to be known as the kind of people who are good to work for, who care for those who are under our care.

Generosity also means that we use our wealth to help out those who are most vulnerable. It starts with our families – we care for the people who are in our care – children or aging parents. We ensure that they have their needs met. And then we expand that to other believers. We look out for one another and see if there are ways that people in our fellowship could be helped. If you aren't certain how you can help, we have a mercy ministry that aims to care for people within our own fellowship. And finally, we expand our circle of generosity to those around us as an opportunity to testify to the grace of the Lord. We consider the least fortunate among us. We work with ministries that are helping the disenfranchised. We don't aim for handouts but a hand to pull others up.

Our good works include prayers for those who have been treated unjustly. If God hears the cries of the poor (v. 4), then we should be praying for those who are suffering and oppressed. We pray for God to deliver them, to show us ways that we can care for their needs, and give us a vision for how we can serve them in love.

James sees that there is a day of judgment coming, and his language reminds us of Isaiah 50:9, where the Suffering Servant says that God will help him and that the enemies of God's people will be eaten up like a moth eats a garment and prepared for the day of destruction. And this is

a sober warning for those of us living in the wealthiest nation in the wealthiest period of human history.

Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead. He will judge us by our works. He will examine everyone and see how they have responded to him. One of the greatest pieces of evidence he will have will be our bank accounts. What have we spent our wealth on? Is there evidence of generosity?

Jesus has every right to come as judge for the reason that he who was rich became poor so that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). He left the wealth of heaven and took on poverty. He was born in a stable, placed in a feed trough, born into a family without wealth or means. He lived faithfully, obedient to his Father, accepting rejection and scorn. He was not a servant leader, but a suffering servant who bore our sins and was despised and rejected. He went to the cross to show us that true generosity doesn't require money but a life that pours itself out for others. He took on our sin and shame so that we might receive his righteousness. Our poverty became his so that his wealth might become ours.

And now, everyone who trusts in him is truly rich in faith. We can do much good regardless of earthly wealth or status or position because we have received the wealth and status and position of heaven.

Have you received the riches of heaven? We have a mission – to do much good no matter how much or how little we have because in Christ we have received more than we could ever imagine.