

“This Epistle of Straw: 4) The Peril of Privilege”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you”
(James 5:1).**

For a number of years now there has been a group of Third World Theologians, who are often referred to as “Liberation Theologians.” Originally, much of what is referred to by this name originated in Latin America, but today it has spread to many other developing nations in Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world.

Liberation Theology is an understanding of the gospel that is enunciated and practiced by people who live under oppression, in misery, and in want. The historical context of Liberation Theology is the growing gap between rich and poor in this country and throughout the world. The theological context of Liberation Theology is the Bible, which from first to last speaks of a God who delivers people from bondage. They cite the story of the slavery of the Hebrew people in Egypt and the deliverance of God in the exodus from bondage to freedom. They hear the prophets of the Old Testament who inveigh against corrupt judges, against exploiting the poor, against religious leaders siding with the rich, against the few living in “golden ghettos” while most live in squalor.

The human context of Liberation Theology is the state of our world today, where 20 percent of the people consume 80 percent of the world’s resources, where two thirds of the children of the world go to bed hungry every night, and the disparity between rich and poor grows greater every year.

I.

Over the last three weeks we have looked again at the Book of James, one of the least known books of the New Testament, yet one that we ignore at our own peril. To be sure, this book has had its detractors, including Martin Luther, who once referred to it as “an epistle of straw.” But, as we have seen, this book has something very important to say to the church today. It reminds us that “faith without works is dead.” It points us to the power of words to build up and to tear down. It warns against an arrogance that supposes it is we and not God who are in control of our lives.

This morning we look at the words of James directed against the rich. In many ways these words of James seem to reflect the great prophets of the Old Testament: Isaiah, Amos, and Ezekiel (cf. Isaiah 13:6; Amos 8:3,9; Ezekiel 7:19-2). In many ways this passage has an eschatological tone. It speaks of the “last days” and the coming of the Lord. With biting sarcasm, James condemns the wealthy with their moth-eaten garments and rusted gold. The wealthy have hoarded their money instead of giving it to the poor, and it has rotted.

But James levels another charge against the wealthy as well. They have violated the sacred law by withholding the wages of their laborers (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Job 31:38-40). Their wealth and luxury is at the expense of the poor. So, the subject of wealth and money is one that is very critical in understanding the Christian life.

II.

To begin, the Bible has a great deal to say about money and wealth. In the earliest parts of the Old Testament, we read about the ancient practice of the Jubilee year, a celebration every fifty years that allowed land to return to its original owners (Leviticus 25-27). Great care was taken to ensure that greed and oppression were not the order of the day.

In the same fashion, the prophets of the Old Testament called the people back to the original covenant between God and Israel, given at Mount Sinai. The prophets were spokespersons for the poor and the oppressed, particularly widows and orphans, those who had no legal rights in Israel’s judicial system. Isaiah condemned those who trampled the rights of the poor. Amos decried a society that was quick to worship God but disregarded the rights of the poor in the courts and in the marketplace.

Jesus had more to say about money and wealth than any other subject about which he spoke. He reminded his followers in the Sermon on the Mount that one cannot serve “God and Mammon” (Matthew 6:24). In that same sermon, he advised his followers to refrain from laying up treasures on earth, where moths consume, but to lay up treasures in heaven where there is neither rust and moth nor thieves.

The sayings of Jesus about money are some of the most startling in all the New Testament. He once commended an “unjust steward” who was “cooking the books” not for his dishonesty, but for his shrewdness and admonished his disciples to practice that same kind of

cunning (Luke 16:1-10). On another occasion, he told a parable about a landowner who paid the same wages to those who worked in the field for one hour as he did for those who had worked a whole day (Matthew 20:1-16).

There is no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus condemned wealth as such. Rather, Jesus understood the great temptations that surround wealth. It breeds a false sense of security and arrogance. It can produce a type of greed that is blind to the needs of others.

So there are two things that need to be said about the “peril of privilege.”

III.

The first is that wealth can be used in ways that are both destructive and constructive. Most of us are quite aware of the lavishness and corruption that are part of our society. The great scandals of Wall Street over the past few years, particularly surrounding companies such as Enron, World Com and other corporations, are a vivid reminder of what happens when greed and accountability are thrown out the window.

Moreover, there is an excessive misuse of money in our own city as we watch neighborhoods being destroyed by massive houses that overwhelm and detract from the neighborhoods in which they are built.

But, we are also familiar with the remarkable way that money can be used to honor religion, to uplift the human spirit, and to improve the quality of life for all citizens. Wealth used rightly is one of the greatest acts of stewardship imaginable.

Over the past few years I have come to appreciate the great stewardship of two individuals who have used their wealth and knowledge in remarkable ways. One of these individuals is John Templeton, a well known member of the financial community and who established the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion some years ago to recognize individuals who had made a great contribution in this arena of life. The Templeton Prize given each year is the largest of its kind, larger even than the Nobel Peace Prize. For his contribution to charity and to the common welfare, the Queen of England granted John Templeton knighthood.

In the 1960's John Templeton was a money manager who was an elder in a Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. He was invited to serve on the Board of Trustees at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he served on the investment committee. He agreed to manage the endowment portfolio of the Seminary on the condition that he would serve as a committee of one. According to Dr. Thomas Gillespie, the former president of the seminary, in 1982 the seminary endowment was a little over \$50 million dollars. By 1990, through additional gifts and the wise management of John Templeton, the endowment had grown to \$150 million dollars. Today, the endowment of the seminary is \$1.1 billion dollars, a tremendous growth attributed largely to efforts of John Templeton.

The second individual is James B. Duke, who was a successful North Carolina businessman, both in the tobacco industry and in the introduction of hydroelectric power in this

region. One of James B. Duke's great legacies is the University that bears his family's name. From all accounts I have read of his life, he was a brilliant and complicated human being. He once referred to himself as a "whiskey drinking, cigar smoking, divorced Methodist."

I do not know much about James B. Duke's religious faith, but there are two things that are obvious to me. The first is his vision of placing a Gothic chapel in the center of the campus that would be the dominant architectural structure of the entire university. If you drive to that campus, you may have a difficult time finding Cameron Indoor Stadium but you cannot miss the chapel that stands at the center of the campus. The second thing that impressed me was that in his will Mr. Duke stipulated that at graduation every graduate of the New Testament would receive a copy of the New Testament.

IV.

There is, however, another thing that must be said, and it is that part of the mission of the church is ministry to individuals and families who are struggling under the vicious cycle of urban poverty.

This church for over fifty years has a distinguished ministry to inner-city families in this city through the establishment of the Child Development Center in 1947 and the Community School of the Arts in 1969 and in more recent years the Charlotte Center for Urban Ministry and other such programs as Loaves and Fishes, Room at the Inn, and the Emergency Winter Shelter.

This past week our church began a new program, the Freedom School, which will bring to our church each weekday fifty children who are at risk and in great need of the ministry of this church. The Freedom School program is led by Veronica Cannon, a member of our staff, and is supported by a number of laypersons and interns who are part of the group that is behind this effort.

On Friday morning I met with two of the trainers of this school, both of whom are employees of the Children's Defense Fund. One of them shared with me some of the materials that the children of this school had written this week.

These are children from some of the poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods in Charlotte. They speak of what it is like to live in the midst of gangs, violence, and real hopelessness. One young girl wrote:

"We got friends, we got music, we got parents, we got school. But adults don't realize that that's all we got. We go through every day worrying deep inside how we will survive another day. We act all tough, like we think we need to, but really we're just kids. We don't need to know what we do know, growing up in the 'hood'. Children are abused, neglected, and murdered. Their minds stolen by the streets and turned around so that they are not children anymore."

Another child talked about her “hood,” where shots are fired and where her aunt died after being shot four times. This young girl wants out, but not in the fashion of her aunt.

The prophet Micah reminds us of what it is that the Lord requires of us; three things that are real and relevant for the world in which we live, “to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.”

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!