

Right Steps in Changing Times
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What we are doing today is a pretty awesome and remarkable thing. Here we are, in open air, gathering together to praise the name of Jesus. We're lifting his name up in song; we're about to hear his word. And we're not confined in our little church facilities; we're in God's amphitheater we earthlings call the Medford City Park. We're not afraid of breaking any government laws against religious speech; there's no American version of the Taliban coming to break up our party by force; my biggest fear is we are annoying the neighbors too much (we want to be good neighbors). This is one of the many reasons why we thank God we live when we live and where we live and it makes it easier to be patriotic.

But Bob Dylan sang many years ago, "the times they are a changin'." We got the memo a little late, it seems. I say that because culture has been changing for many, many years; I just don't think we were paying very careful attention. But here we are in 2016 and many followers of Jesus are feeling like there's a crisis taking place in our country. A crisis of morality; a crisis over truth and values. And many Christians feel the tide turning against them. We don't feel like we're in the majority; we feel like we are in the minority. We feel we're losing influence in our culture. It seems like the movers and shakers in our country aren't for us so much. It's pretty easy to have a little fun at the expense of Christians now days. So, some of things we love, value and see as important feel threatened.

I'm not so interested in trying to determine how significant these changes are and to what extent they are currently happening. Some of you may believe the threat is imminent and strong; others of you may think the fear is over exaggerated and there's nothing to complain about. Here's the deal: whoever you may be and whatever your own personal thoughts are, Jesus makes clear that we need to expect and prepare for such threats and hostility; Jesus say the world will oppose his message and his people. The fact that we American Christians have largely avoided these threats is an anomaly; it's odd historically speaking. Christians pretty much everywhere else feel much more vulnerable than we have. Jesus is pretty blunt: buckle up, Christian! I't going to be a bumpy ride and you can expect resistance and hostility. But, what should we do about it? That's going to be our direction this morning friends. What should we do when we feel the pressure? What should we do when we experience the hostility, the poor treatment, the mockery and the opposition? Thankfully, God gives us an answer to that question. If you're interested to see, read our passage with me (READ James 5:7-11).

You can see at the beginning of our passage the word "therefore." That's an important connecting word. That word connects our passage to what came before it. In fact, you could say it this way: James gives the direction he does (and we'll talk about that in a minute) because of what he just said. So what did he just say?

In the beginning of chapter 5, James gives a broad, prophetic warning against those in positions of power and wealth. Listen to his charges against them in vs. 5-6, "You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you." James shows in this passage that the rich and powerful on the earth have used their influence and position to take advantage of others. James says in vs. 4, "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you." You're ripping people off! James 5 was written against the Enrons of the world, the Bernie Madoffs; companies and people who look to take advantage of people with little power. It would also be applicable to government workers and agencies using it's muscle to hurt people who are just trying to do the right thing. James is warning the managers who abuses her employees, the boss who cheats his workers out of wages they have earned. Of course, some of these people who are being mistreated are followers of Jesus.

Maybe you can see why I wanted to preach this passage then. Again, I don't want to spend time today analyzing to what degree Christians are being taken advantage of by those in power in our world today, how much are Christians being persecuted, to what degree is our culture, our government opposed and hostile to Christianity. If it's not happening to a great extent now, Jesus tells us to get ready for more.

So, what should we do? I know what we're tempted to do! We're tempted to rally the troops. We're tempted to enlarge our voting block. We're tempted to take legal action. In our efforts to make a difference, we might be tempted to grow impatient with each other; Christians we don't think are getting with the program. Do you see what I'm getting at? We're tempted to match the power and influence against us with equal, maybe even greater, power. Same strategies. Same tactics. Just an opposing force. You can see that happening, can't you? Get out the vote efforts; protests in the streets; maybe legal action. And honestly, there's a place for some of that; I don't want to suggest that's all wrong. But friends, that's not actually the first thing Jesus tells us to do. We might end up doing some of that, but there's something more important. Adopting the ways of the world as our own should not be our first step; we have a king to follow instead. And his kingdom is upside down. Jesus says the poor, the mourning, the persecuted are the blessed ones and the cursed ones are the rich, the happy and the ones at ease. We should expect that the path Jesus has for us is radically different than what we see everyone else doing. And that's given to us in James 5.

So, instead of trying to match power for power, scheme for scheme with worldly forces that are opposing the ways, wisdom and people of God, what does James say we should do? There are 4 commands in our passage; that means there are 4 things to do. Well, I should say 3 because James repeats the primary command. Let's look at that by starting in vs. 7, "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." The command is "be patient." Look again at vs. 8, "You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." So, two times within two verses James tells these Christians facing the hostility and oppression of a world in positions of power to be patient.

Now, if I know you well enough, FBC - and I think I know you pretty well - that might sound like the most anticlimactic or depressing action step you could imagine. Be patient? What do you mean? Like, wait around? Do nothing? Where's the call to take up arms for Jesus? I thought Jesus would want us to mobilize the faithful or to expand the voting block. Be patient; are you serious?

Well, to explain this James uses a farmer as his example. The earth produces precious fruit, James says. But the only way the farmer can receive that precious fruit is if he or she is patient, if he or she waits for the early rains and the late rains so that those plants can produce the absolute best fruit possible. Consider what God is implying through this example. First of all, God is requiring, he's demanding that you learn to be patient for him. If you don't wait, if you're not patient, like a farmer is patient for the early and the late rains, you'll miss what God is trying to do. A farmer can't get anxious in August and get the right yield of corn. You don't want to miss it, do you? No really. I'm wanting you to stop your mind right now and ask yourself, "Do I want to miss what God is trying to do in this season of suffering because I'm impatient?" Patience is required. Secondly, you're waiting for something very precious. Don't miss that from the analogy. The farmer waits for the precious fruit from the earth. It's precious; it's valuable. You don't want to miss out on this precious work of God that only comes by you being patient.

Well, what are we waiting for? Well, the verse tells us. Look again at vs. 7: "Be patient, therefore, brothers, *until the coming of the Lord.*" Again, there's repetition. Look at vs. 8. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, *for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" That's what we should be waiting for, the coming of the Lord.

Now, what does that mean? And why wait for that? What's going to happen then? Maybe that's new to some of you; you're thinking, "Jesus coming again? Why do you think that's going to happen?" After Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead (that's important to remember; Jesus was raised from the dead. He died so that our sins could be forgiven, but he was resurrected from the dead and is more alive today than you or me) the apostles were told that Jesus would return in the same way that he left. And then throughout the NT the writers of scripture refer to this promised coming because two very important things will happen when Jesus comes again. Those two things are explicitly referenced in 2 Thess. 1:5-10 (READ).

The first thing I want you to see is the *when*; the time these important events take place is the coming of the Lord. Look at the end of vs. 7; these things will happen "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven." That's a reference to when Jesus comes to earth again. Look also at vs. 10; "when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints." So, that's the *when*; when Jesus comes again. So, what will happen then? The first thing Paul says will happen in vs. 6 is that God will "repay with affliction those who afflict you." Wow. That's sobering. God will afflict people who hurt his children.

What do you think or feel when you hear that news? Are you surprised? Maybe you're thinking, "I thought God was good and loving; that doesn't sound all that loving to me." Maybe

you're horrified. Maybe instead you're thinking, "I don't want to believe in a god like that, thank you very much." Honestly, I hope you're glad to hear that news. Glad. Why would I say glad?

Friends, let me ask you: would you be glad if the evil of ISIS would be eradicated in the Middle East? Would you like to see the people killing and torturing men and women, boys and girls, brought to justice? Would you be glad to see every evil politician face the music? Would you like to see every person who abuses boys and girls perfectly prosecuted? Would you like to see corporate swindlers stopped from scamming the vulnerable and innocent? I'm guessing you would. And that's what God promises when he comes again. He will bring his judgment on all that have done wrong.

But here's the deal: that's you and me, too. We've done wrong, also. Don't compare yourself with others. Don't excuse your sins and the harm you've committed by saying things like, "But it wasn't as bad as her! I didn't do that!" No. We've done wrong, too. That's why we need Jesus. That's why we need forgiveness. Fear, friends, the wrath of God. Fear his flaming fire and vengeance. But more than fear his wrath, rejoice that God's love makes a way for our forgiveness. You can be forgiven; you can receive God's mercy. In spite of your sins, God has made provisions to adopt you as his son or his daughter. That happens as you get real with your sin; you stop excusing it and rationalizing it away. Also, God saves you when you embrace Jesus and his grace more than anything else in this world. When that happens, when you wrap your arms around the grace of Jesus for your sins, you will be forgiven.

Can you see, then friends, how the return of Jesus is good news to those suffering Christians? As the rich and powerful were abusing them and withholding their wages, I'm guessing (like you and me) everything in them was screaming, "Get even! Fight back! Make them pay!" But Jesus is saying, "No, no, no. I'll do that when I come again. And I'll get it right. You probably won't. Trust me."

The second thing Jesus will do when he comes back is comfort his people. Vs. 7 says that when Jesus comes back he will "grant relief to you who are afflicted." It will come, my brothers and sisters. God will comfort you. There's this beautiful scene in the book of Revelation where we're told of God's children hurt and afflicted; the trials they've gone through are significant. But God comes, it says, to comfort them. He tells them to rest; God has comfort to offer.

That's why we wait for the coming of the Lord; that's why we are patient. When he comes, he will right the wrongs. He will perfectly put a stop to all the aggression and hostility of ungodly people and systems. And he will comfort his own; we can count on his merciful rest.

There are two more commands in our passage from James; let's look at them, too. The next command is in vs. 8 and it's *establish your hearts*. Another translation might sound like *strengthen your hearts*. It's this idea of making something strong; making it stable. The other day the Wipf family went to Big Falls Park in Price County and me and my boys love hopping from rock to rock. Well, after 5-6 inches of rain this past week or two, the water was high and Judah, with his 6 year

old legs, couldn't quite make every jump. So, I'd establish both my feet on rocks as I straddled the flowing water and I'd grab Judah and help him get from rock to rock. But he's getting bigger; and the water was moving pretty fast. I needed to make sure that my feet were firmly established; I needed to make sure that I had a strong base.

Friends, to be able to wait patiently for the Lord as we bear with the possibility of increased hostility for the name of Jesus, we better establish our hearts like that; we better strengthen our resolve and soul. How do you do that? Well, I'm thinking there's a lot that goes into that, but it starts with waking up and getting ready. Don't nonchalantly think these things will never happen to you. Or maybe I should put it this way: maybe, since culture changes slowly, some of you will be spared, but your children won't be; neither will your grandkids. What example are you giving them? Is your heart firmly established? Are you pressing more and more into the rock, who is Christ, giving your children and grandchildren an example to follow? Or are you coasting? Are you sailing into the sunset with a retirement savings, with enough time on your hands to travel, and ignoring the work of the church, the coming tidal wave of temptation? And do you think your children and grandchildren will remain strong if they follow your example? I fear for some of you and I fear for your children and grandchildren because those who coast in their faith and in the work of Christ will absolutely stall when the opposition grows rather than finishing the race.

There's one more command. It's found in vs. 9; "Do not grumble against one another, brothers." What an interesting command. James didn't say, "Don't grumble about your employer; don't grumble about your mean neighbors" or about the difficulties you have (we shouldn't do any of those things). He says, "Don't grumble against each other." Don't grumble against your fellow brothers and sisters. What's that about? When you and I start feeling the urgency of life and ministry in our changing culture where we feel the pressure more and more, we might grow discouraged with one another. We might think things like, "Why doesn't she believe this as strongly as I do? How come he's not taking this need more seriously? Why won't my brother join me in this work?" When the pressure comes we are going to be tempted to grumble that our brothers and sisters aren't getting with the program.

Grumbling is always connected to self-righteousness. We grumble when we over-estimate our own ability and character and when we also uncharitably evaluate others. My insight, my motives, my efforts are noble and good; they are foolish, selfish or lazy. Grumbling is actually a lot uglier than we realize. What's the remedy? Seeing ourselves in light of the cross; remembering that we are sinners ourselves, that we need God's grace every day. That without God's mercy for me, God's patience for me, God's wisdom for me, I'd be lost. When we have that kind of memory, we're saved from self-righteousness and grumbling.

Can I motivate you to this kind of life and response? It might not feel very satisfying: wait, be patient, strength your heart for the coming tidal wave, don't grumble or be hard on your brothers and sisters. Here's the motivation: first, remember the promise. The Lord is coming. The Lord isn't slow like some count slowness. He's waiting for just the right time so we, like farmers waiting for the precious fruit of the harvest, need to wait for him. And secondly, this is the blessed life. That's what

James says in vs. 11, "Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast." Jeremiah. Job. Esther. James the Apostle. Peter. David. Ruth. All of these men and women faced pressure, hostility and opposition. They suffered patiently like we called to do. And God calls them blessed; we consider them blessed. Let's join this great company of witness and we can by God's grace.