

EPISTLE: ST. JAMES

5



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PRACTICE QUIZ

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Holy Scripture is clear that wealth—particularly if it's earned by oppressing others—is not a thing in which to trust; instead, we should trust in God. For example, King Solomon warns, “He who trusts in riches, this man will fall, but he who helps the righteous, this man will rise” (Proverbs 11:27). Saint James continues this theme in James chapter five, where he begins by warning his wealthy readers against oppressing the poor.

“Getting ahead in life” by stepping on others has historically been the path to wealth and power, but the saint warns that the riches accrued in this way will ultimately condemn the person who holds them. On the Day of Judgment, not only will their wealth be worthless—St. James describes this wealth as “corrupted,” “moth-eaten” and “corroded” (5:2-3)—but these things will also be evidence against the person who abused others to gain them (5:3). St. John Chrysostom gives a similar warning about such people: “Will not their banquets and gluttony and self-satisfaction, not to mention their wealth, their possessions and their property all disappear? What reward have they got?”

Death. And what will their end be? Dust and ashes, urns and worms.”

Both the oppressors and the oppressed must remember one thing: God is aware of the problem (5:4). He hears the cries of the oppressed, and on the day of His coming will settle the situation (5:8). While knowing that Christ is coming gives consolation to those who are suffering, St. Cyril of Alexandria points out that it is also a blessing for the oppressors, because “if God delays the punishment of the sinners, waiting for them to repent, it is not because His character has changed, so that He loves sin. Rather, He is giving them time to repent.”

A key for those who suffer is to be patient; in fact, we can take the patient endurance of the holy prophets and martyrs—and notably Righteous Job the Long-Suffering—as examples of how we can wait patiently for the Lord's justice in our situation (5:10-11). St. James gives two examples of how we can live patiently: we should refrain from complaining about others, and we should keep our promises instead of giving false oaths (which for the saint's original audience meant falsely making promises in the name of God or under the witness of heaven) (5:12).

St. James then moves from the suffering caused by oppression to a more general form of suffering: the horrors of sickness. First-century Christians, when sick, would be anointed with oil and prayed over by the leaders of the sufferer's Christian

community (see 5:14-15). Notice that the saint does not restrict this sickness only to the physical: he also addresses spiritual sickness. Christians are exhorted to confess their sins and pray for one another for the forgiveness of these sins (5:15-16). The Church has always understood sin to be a sickness; this is why St. John Chrysostom calls the Church “a hospital for sinners.” This is also why St. Leo of Rome refers to “the medicine of penitence.”

Why confess in front of another person? Because, St. James responds, “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (5:16). St. Athanasius the Great adds a reason for confessing before a priest, “Just as a man is enlightened by the Holy Spirit when he is baptized by a priest, so he who confesses his sins with a repentant heart obtains remission from the priest.” Plus, of course, the Holy Fathers point out that priests have been given by God the authority to forgive and retain sins (John 20:23).

St. James concludes his epistle by stating that helping a person to return to a relationship with God is a blessing for both people (5:19-20).

LIFE TIP

St. Cosmas Aitolos explains what makes for true repentance: “If you want cure your soul, you need four things. The first is to forgive your enemies. The second is to confess thoroughly. The third is to blame yourself. The fourth is to resolve to sin no more. If we wish to be saved, we must always blame ourselves and not attribute our wrong acts to others. And God, Who is most compassionate, will forgive us.”

