

Wealth and Justice

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

¹³ Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ ¹⁴ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’ ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

⁵ ¹ Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. ² Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. ⁴ Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

1. False Judgements (4.11-17)

(11) Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. The previous passage has spoken about the gift of humility and James’ thoughts on humility culminate in this section on the way in which we make judgements. He has spoken already about listening and about being slow to speak, and in this verse warns against speaking evil against one another. He raises questions for us about the way we communicate with one another, particularly when people quarrel or where there is antagonism, slander or misrepresentation. His words perhaps cause us to reflect on the rather strident language that is often used in social media (and we have touched on this in previous sessions). The paradox is that James uses fairly strident language himself. Note the series of imperatives: ‘Do not speak... Come now...’ Admittedly, ‘brothers and sisters’ is a bit softer than his previous descriptions, but then given that he is saying ‘Do not speak evil against one another’, ‘you sinners’ might not be the most constructive way of getting his point across. James is making the point that to speak evil of someone is to judge them, and to adopt the role of ‘judge’ is to usurp God’s role as lawgiver and judge: **(12) There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?** The paradox is that the Law, particularly Leviticus requires and enjoins judging: ‘You will not render an unjust judgment... with justice you will judge your neighbour. You will not go around in deceit among your people... You will hate your brother in your mind; you will reprove with reproof your neighbour and so not incur sin on account of him. Your hand will not take vengeance, and you will not hate the sons of your people, and you will love your neighbour as yourself (Lev. 19.15-18). Note that the Law opposes vindictiveness. It demands love rather than hate and calls for justice in dealing with others. All of this is consistent with the things which James says elsewhere in his letter. Is it that he is objecting to those who fail to exercise mercy, humility and tolerance?

(13) Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ (14) Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (15) Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’ The mood changes abruptly. Note that the phrase ‘Come now’ is repeated in James 5.1. James is objecting to those who place the pursuit of wealth over the sovereignty of God. There are some intriguing parallels with Luke 12.15-20 and its insistence that we should ‘take care’ and be on our guard ‘against all kinds of greed’. Again perhaps we have an echo of the teaching of Jesus in this

passage. And yet people struggle with these hard sayings about wealth and riches. Christians have often either broadened and narrowed the scope of this passage's condemnation. Some have enlarged the scope to include everyone: so one early commentator (Mark the Hermit) says: 'A person can, even without wealth, be a rich person, whether in speech or understanding or any sort of attachment, if he greedily hangs on to those things which are freely granted in common to everyone else. One receives in order to share with someone else who has nothing' (cf. Allison, p 640). Others have narrowed the scope, insisting that the prophetic threats cannot extend to all who are well off. Surely God disapproves only of those who obtain their wealth unjustly or who are avaricious or ungenerous? The passage remarks on the fragility of our lives: 'you are a mist which appears for a little while and then vanishes' – James invites us to reflect on our mortality: 'If the Lord wishes' emphasises our dependence upon God. Note the rather uncompromising words about doing business and making money. What would James make of our economy? What would he make of the juxtaposition of health and welfare against economic recovery? **(16) As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. (17) Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.** Allison points out that there are some intriguing parallels between James 4.13-5.6 and the Book of Wisdom 2.2-4, 6-9. 12.-20. Is wealth an appropriate subject of boasting? Can the pursuit of wealth ever come before doing the right thing?

2. **Warnings to Rich Oppressors (5.1-6)**

(1) Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. (2) Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. (3) Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. (4) Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. (5) You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. (6) You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. Note the repetition of 'Come now...' The rebuke of merchants in the previous passage seems mild in comparison to this section. Whereas the previous section envisions a possibility of repentance and change, James 5.1-6 now addresses 'you rich people' and thoroughly condemns them: no glimmer of hope appears in these verses for greedy rich people. Do we see echoes in this passage of Matthew 6.19-20 ("store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth nor rust consumes). Everything the wealthy have, the security they imagine their riches will offer, is worthless. James suggests that their wealth is derived from injustice and not paying a fair wage: 'The wages of the labourers who mowed your field, which you kept back by fraud' cry out'. These words perhaps remind us why low pay and poverty is a proper concern of the church. Note the following organisations which subscribe to the Oxford Living Wage. Is this the list we would expect to read? How might we respond to the economic uncertainty we all face in the next few months?

Oxford City Council
Oxford Bus Company
My Life My Choice
Campion Hall
Blackfriars
Adaptix Imaging
Good Food Oxford
Oxford Direct Services
Oxford Quakers
Fusion Lifestyle
Community First Oxon
Citizens Advice Oxford
St Cross College
Oxford Community Foundation
Manor Surgery

Oxford & District Building Services Ltd
Righton Group Limited
Feltham Construction
Elmore Community Services
Oxford Students Union
The Oxford Trust
OxLEP
B4
The Community Action Groups Project
Oxfordshire
Emmaus Oxford
University Church of St Mary the Virgin
Oxford
Risinghurst and Sandhills Parish Council