

How Jesus Reconciles the Rich and the Poor

The Epistle of James

Where is Your Home?

James 4:13 – 5:11

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Introduction: La China Poblana

One of the deepest questions put to us by Jesus is the question, ‘Where is your home?’ In our heart, we have to make a choice. Is our home going to be here on this earth, or in our future home in Eternity with Christ? Now to illustrate how important this decision is, I want to tell you a story, the same story I told a little girl named Nora. When I first moved into East Palo Alto, my heart immediately went out to this girl who was nine years old named Nora Gonzales. Nora was very sensitive to spiritual things. She showed me a picture of Jesus and said, ‘That’s my God.’ So ever since then, I’ve tried to teach her things about Jesus Christ. One of the first things I did was to tell her a Mexican story I found that is over three hundred years old. It’s a story about a beautiful princess and how she found her way home. Here’s the story

In the year 1684, a ship sailed from China, through the Philippines, to Mexico. On board this ship was a princess named Mina. She and her entourage were bound for Mexico to do some trading, and then they were going to come back to China. She looked forward to coming home. But the Pacific Ocean at that time was infested with pirates, and the ship was taken over by English marauders. The pirates took everything on board, and when they got to Acapulco, they sold the princess as a slave. Eventually the princess Mina was bought by a gentleman named Captain Miguel Sosa who lived in the town of Puebla, just outside Mexico City. Mina pleaded with Captain Sosa that she was a princess. Sosa recognized that Mina’s bearing and mannerisms were very noble, so he believed her. The gentleman apologized to her on behalf of the Mexican people, and helped her. He set her free. Then he gave her fine clothes, pearls, and jewelry to help her make her home in Puebla. She began to rebuild her life at her new home. At a certain point, though, Mina attended a church school in Puebla and discovered Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. He came to live inside her. And Mina realized that once China had been her home, and once Mexico had been her home, but her true home was really yet to come when Jesus came back for her. After that, Mina sold her fine clothes, pearls, and jewelry, and gave the money to the poor people of Mexico. Instead of fine clothes, she wore a simple white blouse and a multicolored but mostly red skirt in the style of the Mongolian women in China. She became so well liked because of her beauty and kindness to both the rich and poor alike that Mexican girls wanted to dress like her, in the simple white blouse and red Mongolian skirt. That outfit is now known as La China Poblana, the Chinese woman from Puebla, and is one of the most popular national folk costumes for Mexican women today. In fact, a statue of a Chinese Christian woman stands in Puebla, Mexico with the inscription, ‘La China Poblana.’ How did she make such an impression? Because she knew where her home was. Not in China, not in Mexico, but in God’s kingdom, which was to come. That was her home even while she was here on earth.

Princess Mina stands out as a great inspiration to me, because today we live in a culture of unprecedented materialism, where we are constantly encouraged to ‘feather our nest’ and ‘secure

our home.’ And yet if we are in Christ, our home is not here. It is yet to come. How then will we live?

Context of James

This is not a new problem. Sometime during the years 45-49 AD, James the brother of Jesus and pastor of the church in Jerusalem also asked, ‘Where is our home?’ And he raised this question to address a very specific problem: the tension between rich and poor. As James walked through the city and the countryside in Israel, he saw huge income differentials. The poor folks were mostly small time farm hands barely eeking out a living working on land owned by the mega-rich. Many of the poor were also Samaritans and migrant Gentile workers. As you could imagine, there was probably a lot of tension in the air. We know from the Gospels and also from Josephus that there were occasional famines (see James 1:10 – 11 and the mention of Elijah praying for rain in 5:18), which probably hurt the poor a great deal.

This is the situation into which James writes. Now, you’ve probably heard of the book of James called the ‘wisdom literature of the New Testament,’ making James seem very general, as if he’s loosely tying a bunch of unrelated topics together. But I think that the tension between rich and poor permeates the entire letter from start to finish. And it culminates in the passage we’re about to study together.

Now, because this is probably a new way of looking at James for most of us, I’m going to highlight why I believe this to be true. Look at chapter 1, verse 2 and we find that people are suffering. ‘Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.’ These people need wisdom, which in this context means the power of God to persevere through suffering. But who are these people? Why are they suffering and needing the wisdom of perseverance? Because they’re poor. Look at 1:9: ‘But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position.’ Humble circumstances means being poor. Then James continues using a basic teaching pattern. He’s just dealt with the poor, so now he deals with the rich in 1:10: ‘And let the rich man glory in his humiliation because like flowering grass he will pass away.’ See the basic pattern? James addresses the poor, then the rich. It is a teaching style that Paul modeled for Timothy in 1 Timothy 6. Jesus himself used this style of teaching in Luke 6:20 – 26.

Then, we learn about another problem between rich and poor: favoritism in the worship service. James says: ‘If a man comes ... with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes...’ (2:2 – 3). In fact, the problems go way beyond the church. Look at chapter 2, verse 6, for example. ‘Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court?’ Thus, the section about ‘dead faith’ and ‘justification by works’ (2:13 – 26), which has been a bit controversial in its own right in Protestant circles, pertains to how we treat the poor!

Starting in 3:1, we come to the subject of speech. This continues until 5:12. What is happening with speech? For one thing, the poor and the rich are quarrelling. And here again we see James’ teaching pattern. In 3:13 – 4:12, James speaks to the poor folks, ‘You lust and do not have so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.’ Why does he say those challenging words? Because the poor folks were trying to make their home here. It’s not as though the poor are a sacred category where anything they want, they should get.

From 4:13, James challenges the way rich folks speak. And why are the rich singled out? The same reason: Because they want to make their home here. There is enormous conflict going on, and I think that James is writing into a situation that he thought would erupt into a riot any day.

Into this tense situation, James gives one central command in 5:7: ‘Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.’ That is to say, wait for Jesus’ second coming. Why? Because Jesus Christ will bring you a perfect future home. Don’t build your home here. Wait for it. He will come.

The Arrogant Speech of the Rich: 4:13 – 16

In chapter 4, verse 13 he says, ‘Come now, you who say.’ Notice that a few verses down in chapter 5, verse 1, James uses the same attention-getter, ‘Come now, you rich.’ I think he’s just addressing the same group of people twice: the rich. And how does he define who is rich?

Confident Mobility. Look in verse 13, he says, ‘Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’” The first time I read this, I knew I was in for big trouble, because I talk like that all the time! I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve said, ‘Sometime soon, I’ll set up an interview with such and such a company, live it up in the city, work for a year or two, and get rich...’ It sounds almost like James is quoting me verbatim!

As a group, I think we’ve got to think of ourselves as rich. Many of us – not all of us, but many – are children of very confident, mobile East Asian parents. In 1965, after the Hart-Cellar Act, the U.S. targeted educated, managerial, or skilled laborers from China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. These people, some of them being our parents, were sure to succeed. It’s easy if you take the elite from Asia, bring them into the most materialistic country in the world, at the right time in history so as to benefit from the Civil Rights gains by African Americans. That’s how we get the ‘model minority’ image. And sure, our parents worked hard. But plenty of people have worked just as hard and never ‘made it.’ We also have not recognized the enormous class differences in the Asian American community revolving around 1965. We have not acknowledged our debt to the African American community because we stand on their shoulders in their fight against racism. Instead we tend to think that all you need to do in this country is work hard to get ahead. And we ourselves tend to be somewhat materialistic ourselves as we’re driven by our parents to succeed. We, too, are confidently mobile.

Why does James take issue with this kind of lingo? Because the attitude lying behind it is a certain arrogance: the arrogance that they can make your home here and plant their roots in this world. You can tell because he argues precisely the opposite: ‘Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.’ The simple assumption that they are going to be here tomorrow is open for debate. Then specifically in verse 16, ‘You boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.’ What’s James doing? Is he just trying to change their lingo? No, he’s addressing our hearts. Where is your home?

The Pampered Lifestyle of the Rich: 5:1 – 6

Now in chapter 5, verse 1, James takes a detour from their arrogant speech and really scrutinizes the situation of the rich. He gets into their pampered lifestyle. Verse 1 is an introduction. ‘Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.’ Then he pulls aside a curtain to reveal some troubling truths in a poem. In verses 2-3, the word ‘your’ appears three times:

your riches
your clothing
your gold and silver

They all deal with material things that the rich try to build their home on. Verse 4 starts with the word ‘Behold’ and it is a central point. Then in verses 5-6, the phrase ‘you have’ appears three times. And James reminds them what they have done:

you have lived luxuriously
you have fattened your hearts
you have condemned the righteous man.
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Possessions: v.2 – 3

So, let’s deal first with verses 2-3. ‘Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!’

James describes the three forms of wealth in ancient times. Riches in that day probably meant abundant food in the barn like corn and grain; the word ‘rotted’ appears only here in the Bible, and it seems to refer to foodstuff. Then there’s the garments, which was the second form of wealth. Garments showed your rank, socially, like designer clothes, and you might also trade with clothes. But it’s these garments that have already been attacked by moths. Then there’s gold and silver, which of course was desired because they don’t lose their value. But this gold and silver have rusted. What James is saying must come as a big surprise, because the rich thought they had plenty to eat, plenty to wear, and a good investment tucked away; James says they have nothing to eat, nothing to wear, and their future hangs on nothing. Everything the rich thought they could build their home on is gone. I think if James were speaking to us today, he would say, ‘Your fridge is empty. Your closet is empty. Your degree and skill set are obsolete. The market just crashed and you’re deep in debt because you bought on margin. You’ve just filed chapter 11.’

It’s interesting that James uses the past tense in each case. Why? The rich would have been looking at each other thinking, ‘My clothes look fine.’ But James is already looking backward from Eternity, as he says in the latter half of v.3, ‘It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure.’ God has already said that all material wealth, your treasure, will be incinerated. These things are already history.

In fact, if you can’t let go of material wealth now, you won’t be able to *ever*, even when it burns your flesh. Look at v.3: ‘Their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire.’ What in the world does that mean? It sounds like hell, and I have to be honest with this text; I think it is. Why is James referring to hell? He’s probably warning people who say that they’re Christians and yet still make their home in this world and hoard their wealth. There’s the

cliche that goes, 'You can't take it with you when you die.' But James says to the rich, 'You won't be able to let go of it when you die. So when it bums, so will you.'

Why does James speak this way? It is SO HARSH. It's because there is a direct opposition between having the riches of Christ and the riches of your wallet. The riches of Christ is Christ in you, living and giving himself to others through you. That includes money. Christ loves to give, in so many ways, freely. So how can we hoard money or security? He will give those things through us and his life, made real by Spirit, is the TREASURE OF HEAVEN. That is why you can only hold on to one riches or the other. The riches of Jesus Christ giving himself through you, or the riches of your wallet that you can keep for yourself. We must not make our home here. We'll get locked in to the pursuit of money, which may take you where you don't want to go.

What comes to mind when I read this is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge has a choice between two forms of riches. At first, he pockets every penny saying, 'Bah Humbug!' But then, after he's visited by ghosts and he sees where his life is headed, he wakes up and he really wakes up! He gives a charity worker such a large amount of money, the charity worker is speechless. He goes out and buys the biggest turkey in all London and gives it to Bob Cratchit and his son Tiny Tim. He walks up and down the street patting children on the head, giving money to beggars, laughing, watching people, looking into their homes to see what they were doing. He had never dreamed in all his life that he would feel so rich. That's the kind of riches I want. I want to be free from money by having my home in the home that my Christ is preparing for me.

Ignoring and Betraying Relationships: v.4

Those are the three 'your' statements. James then comes to the most difficult verse in this section, verse 4. 'Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.' This seems to be James' central complaint, the central conflict between the rich and poor. There are at least two ways to read this. The first is to take it at its historical face value. The rich land owners were cheating the peasant laborers. They were being exploitative and heartless. That's the basic reading of this verse. But I think there's something more.

I think James uses a literary metaphor. He says that the pay of the laborers is crying out. It is as if their paychecks had a voice. That is a phrase which reminds us of Cain murdering Abel. God said, 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground' (Gen.4:10). I think there are three parallels being drawn between the blood and the pay. (1) Blood and pay define the relationships. Cain was related to Abel by blood. The rich are related to the poor by pay. (2) Both blood and pay also characterize the betrayal of the relationship. You can look at the blood of Abel and know there was betrayal. You can look at the pay of the poor and know there was betrayal. (3) Finally, both the blood and the pay cry out to God. This is a very powerful Jewish allusion, designed to tell the rich that they are guilty of murder.

Why does James allude to Cain and Abel? Because the two situations are very alike. Cain willfully betrayed his brother. And the rich also betray their brothers. They're not just

underpaying the poor, they're murdering them. They take advantage of them, turn their heads away so as not to see their suffering, and close their nice suburban doors, the kind with peepholes and heavy locks. All the rich want is to feel at home here, to make life easy for themselves, so they betray the poor.

The same basic pattern pops up everywhere. Every major society exploits a class of slave labor, even Silicon Valley. In the early half of the 1900's, the rich people associated with Stanford University and the city of Palo Alto wanted to keep property values high, and so they decided not to sell any real estate to black folks and other poor people. That would cause neighborhood property values to fall, wouldn't it? Where do you think those black folks settled? East Palo Alto. They became the gardeners, housecleaners, busboys, fast food workers, laborers of this area. And when the day was over, they were forgotten. It's slow murder.

There are all sorts of warnings James offers us right now. We are commanded to care for the poor. Michael Card says in a song, 'And we rob our brothers by all that we own, and that's not the love he has shown.' And yet we seem to think it's okay to live an affluent lifestyle. That it's okay to separate ourselves from the poor financially because they're a risk, they're not always grateful, or whatever. Or we separate ourselves from the poor relationally because they speak Spanish or Vietnamese or Ebonics, they're needy, and their kids are a little more difficult. Isn't that what we think? As soon as we kill the relationship in our minds, we become closed off, and we commit murder.

Now I know this is hard to hear because it is so opposite what most people tell us. Our parents may have wanted to leave poverty behind, either in another country or another neighborhood, and yet Jesus will go to the poor through us. Our parents may have come here to build a secure home and have lots of things, but Jesus will give that up through us. Our home is not here because Jesus' home is not here. Our home is yet to come.

Selfish Character: v.5 – 6

In verses 5 and 6, James presses his case with three more criminal charges all beginning with 'You have' And what he writes here makes Karl Marx sound like a featherweight. 'You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned the righteous man; he does not resist you.'

Look at how the rich live. Literally, it's, 'You have lived in selfish indulgence.' That was the lifestyle of the rich and famous in first century Jerusalem. Selfish indulgence, oriented on themselves and excessively so. And the result? Verse 5: They have fattened their hearts for slaughter. That's a shocker! Usually, you fatten calves for slaughter by feeding them all kinds of rich foods. But James says, 'You're eating all this rich food; you're really fattening yourselves for slaughter.' Ugh.

And then there's the third 'you have'. You have condemned and put to death the righteous one, he does not resist you. This has three possible interpretations. (1) The first possibility is that it is a Hebraism. (a Jewish phrase). The poor man in the Old Testament is symbolically righteous, because the poor man had to depend absolutely on God. The poor man wasn't automatically righteous in reality, but he was a symbol of righteousness. And these rich people have

condemned and killed the poor man. That would agree with James' point at the center of this poem in v.4. (2) The second possibility is that this refers to Judas Iscariot betraying Jesus. Judas condemned and put to death Jesus, the ultimately Righteous One. Jesus did not resist him. So James could be warning the rich: You're being like Judas, because you love money more than anything, even Jesus. (3) The third possibility is that this is referring to Cain killing Abel. In either case, it's a gruesome warning, but I favor the third possibility because it's consistent with the allusion in v.4.

This poem is serious, isn't it? While James speaks poetically, and probably not doctrinally, nevertheless we are to take this poetry seriously. By placing the rich into the place of Cain, James is saying, 'You are killing your brethren.' This is no joke.

A Home Built on Jesus Christ's Second Coming: v.7 – 8

James spells that out in v.7-8: 'Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the con-ting of the Lord.' Then he uses an analogy, 'Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.' Then he gets back to his main point, 'You too be patient.' Then he adds something that is often overlooked: 'strengthen your heart, for the coming of the Lord is near.' Then he uses the word patience one more time in verse 10. And then he uses the word endure twice in verse 11. So what is James saying? 'Strengthen your heart. Be patient and endure for your true home.'

For you, maybe your heart needs resolve, because you still want control and you're afraid of following Jesus. Or maybe your heart needs encouragement because you are following Jesus, but don't get a lot of support.

I cannot stress how important I think it is that James wants us to ask God to strengthen our hearts. He doesn't say to the rich, 'Tithe 40% of your income!' There are a lot of people who will just tell you to DO MORE THINGS. But James teaches on the level of the heart. Why? Because if the heart is right, then the life will follow. If our home is in the right place, then we'll have the right perspective on money and people and everything.

In addition, the second coming challenges both rich and poor. It challenges the rich because it calls rich people to give up what they have, give to others while they still can, and stop trying to build their security here in this life. The drive for financial security itself causes all kinds of injustice. And it challenges the poor because it calls poor people to wait, be patient, still be generous and sacrificial towards others, and call others to do the same.

Is It Worth the Wait?

Now if you're anything like me, you're asking yourself, 'Is this home really worth the wait? What will it be like?' The Old Testament prophets are a little hard to relate to because they wrote from an agricultural perspective. So let me explain to you how I understand it.

I think one of the people who best understood this was J.R.R. Tolkien, the great Christian man who wrote *The Hobbit*. The final episode in the series is called *The Return of the King*. It's about evil finally being defeated, of a great war ending, and the shadows lifting from the land. And finally, there is the crowning of a man named Aragorn as the long-awaited king who brings

peace. Here's how Tolkien describes it: 'But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Farandir cried: 'Behold the King!' ...In his time the City was made more fair than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory; and it was filled with trees and with fountains ... all was healed and made good, and the houses were filled with men and women and the laughter of children, and no window was blind nor any courtyard empty.' (*The Return of the King*, p.304)

That is the home we wait for. Strengthen your hearts by this. Be set free from materialism by this. There is a great home in Christ coming for us all. And in that home, Jesus will take his finger, and wipe away all our tears. That will be home. That is what gives my heart strength for the time being.

The Results of Understanding Our True Home

In v.9, James says that we'll be able to care about each other better. 'Do not complain, brethren, against one another [in other words, you rich against the poor, or you poor against the rich], that you yourselves may not be judged.'

And in v.10 - 11, know that you are not alone in waiting for your home. Many have waited before you. 'As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.'

Anytime you turn to the prophets or job for comfort, you know your life must be hard. I was curious about how the early church felt about this kind of teaching. So I found a document that dates back to the second or third century. It's called the *Epistle to Diognetus*, and many scholars believe it to be the most beautiful piece of Christian literature outside the New Testament. It describes Christians. Listen to this: 'For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric life-style. This teaching of theirs has not been discovered by the thought and reflection of ingenious men, nor do they promote any human doctrine, as some do. But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are 'in the flesh' but not 'according to the flesh'. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives, they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are

glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless. They are insulted, yet they offer respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life. By the Jews they are assaulted as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted, yet those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility.' (*Epistle to Diognetus*, chapter 5)

There is a statue of a Chinese Christian woman in Mexico. How did it get there? Because one woman decided not to make her home on this earth, but looked forward to her home with Christ. That set her free that the Spirit poured much kindness out through her. Maybe for little 11 year old Nora, something similar may happen. Even though she's not my daughter, I still want her to know happiness; I want her to be intelligent. But even more than those things, I also want her to know Jesus Christ. I want her to know his compassion and his courage. And if he ever wants her to be in tough neighborhoods with strangers, I pray that she would go. And if he ever wants a statue of a Mexican Christian woman in China, I pray that she would say, 'Lord, let me be the one. For my home is not here, but it's yet to come with Jesus who is my God.'