

July 5, 2026
James 5:1-6
The House of Cain
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are getting into the final thoughts for James. We only have one chapter left, and only three more sermons. These next three weeks will round out the message of James for us. The first chapter was basically the whole book in seed form. Chapters two, three, and four were the content of the book. Now, chapter five rounds it out with one concluding thought, and a handful of quick application points.

James's big idea has been to lay out what godliness looks like in the key of wisdom. His letter can basically be boiled down to this: since you have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ, and, since you find yourself in a rather difficult situation, here is what you need to know and do to live a good and godly life, as individuals, but also as a community, as a church.

Remember, James isn't writing as an aloof scholar speculating about the good life. He is writing as an outlaw to refugees. James is based in Jerusalem. He's the Apostolic senior pastor of the remnant church in Jerusalem. And, he has recently lost a lot of his congregation – they were driven out of Jerusalem by the persecution of the Jews – their own brothers. It's to these people, and those they now associate with, that he writes this letter.

Social upheaval, economic upheaval, personal upheaval. They were going through it. James ends this letter with some hard words. These people were in hard times, and they needed to hear hard words. In today's section he gives a hard warning to the godless. And in next week's text he gives a hard encouragement.

Basically, he says, "remember the prophets, how they were persecuted and yet in the end, through suffering and death, they triumphed. And remember Job." When someone thinks it's appropriate to remind you of Job to encourage you, you're in a bad spot.

So, this isn't speculative, leisure wisdom. This is steel in your spine, "though they die, yet they conquer" wisdom.

This is wisdom from above. This is wisdom that comes down from above, not from the earth, not from deep within yourself. This is wisdom that sees the world for what it really is – beautiful and good and real and yet passing away. This is wisdom that fixes its eyes on things above. This is the wisdom that transforms this world by living for the next. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

Let's do a quick summary of where we've been so far.

Chapter one was the intro, the overture piece, everything that he had to say in the rest of the book was started or hinted at. Count it joy when you meet various trials, God is in control. Come to him for wisdom, he will abundantly give, he is not stingy, he is good, he is *happy*. Above the dark clouds of God's sovereign Providence, the immutable blazing sun of the happy God burns eternally bright.

Remember the difference between the passing and the permanent. Order your life and your affections rightly. The good things of this life will pass away. The hard things of this life will pass away. They matter. They are real. And yet, they are not permanent. In them, good or bad, live for the permanent. The same God who saved you through the gospel – the Word of truth – governs your life even still. Sin can offer you nothing good. All good comes only through God.

Then he applies this at the end of chapter one. What does godly wisdom look like practically. James gives two frameworks that complement one another.

Godly wisdom is quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Godly wisdom is self-control, sacrificial love for neighbor, and love for God that keeps you unstained from the world.

Then in chapters two through four he expands all that with examples and illustrations.

Chapter two, how to hear. Show no partiality, bear the fruit of works. True faith produces true works.

Chapter three, be slow to speak. Be merciful, be slow to judge or condemn others. Then here, he describes Wisdom from above – this was the pinnacle of the letter, the big central idea. **“Wisdom from above is first pure then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”**

Chapter four then gets into the struggle of wisdom, the war within for wisdom: be slow to anger. Wisdom will require constant struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And last week, a constant struggle to not sit on God’s chair. He is the judge, not you. He is in control, not you. There is a God, and I’m not him.

Then chapter five closes out the book. Verses 1-12 are a “two ways to live” scenario, verses 1-6 is the way of folly. Verses 7-12 is the way of wisdom. Then 13-20 is basically an appendix, or an epilogue. Here are a handful of implications and practical applications of what James has just taught.

Let’s pray, then we will jump into today’s text.

The Text

Sometimes nuance is helpful. Sometimes there is room for going on and on about exceptions and caveats and degrees. But often, the Bible will reduce life to a simple binary – life or death, wisdom or folly, Heaven or Hell. And we need this. In the flesh our temptation is to bury conviction in a mountain of qualifications and exceptions.

James puts two paths in front of us. There are two ways to live. Matthew 12:30, Jesus says, **“whoever is not with me is against me.”**

This is a common biblical theme. Deuteronomy 30:15-18 – **“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God... then you shall live and multiply... But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them... you shall surely perish.”**

Psalms 1 (1-2, 6) – **“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night... for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”**

Matthew 7:13-14 – **“The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many... The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”**

Romans 8:6 – **“For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”**

Today’s passage addresses the way of the fool, the way of the wicked, the way of destruction. And next week will address the way of life. James’s big point is this: there are two ways to respond to this. The way of wisdom will hear, believe, and live this out – in all likelihood, that could very well lead to difficulty and suffering in this life. But endure, it’s well worth it. And on the other hand, the way of folly will ignore all this and live only for this world. It might go well for you for a while, but in the end, it leads to wrath.

This is the big idea for the next two weeks: **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”**

Sometimes the path of life doesn’t feel like life. And the path of destruction doesn’t always feel like destruction.

Next week we’ll see an encouragement for those on the death-flavored path to life. And this week we see a warning for those on the life-flavored path to death. Fear the LORD.

If you are walking in a way that ignores the law of God, even if things are going well for you, there is an accounting coming. There is a temptation to see basic prosperity as God’s endorsement of your life. It’s not.

God's patience is giving you time to repent. Do not presume on his kindness.¹

Here in these six verses James gives a warning against a godless life – a life that doesn't fear the LORD – and he gives us a basic description of this life.

First, the warning. Verse 1, **“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.”** This is reversal – you have good things now but don't read too much into that. If you ignore the LORD there will be misery later.

This is the scoffer, the fool, the one who has no fear of God.

Now, a note. Wealth is not a bad thing. But there is a unique temptation to confuse wealth with God's blessing. It's easy to think that God doesn't hold our sin against us simply because things in life keep going well for us.

Verse 2 and 3, **“Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.”**

Basically, you've invested in all the wrong things. You've lived life only for the passing and ignored the permanent. You spent your life saving up for a mansion only to buy and move in the day that Noah went into his Ark. It was all for nothing. It's all a loss. It was all a waste.

Note the image he uses. Corroded treasure becomes corroded flesh. This is another important biblical theme. Matthew 6:21, **“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** You become like what you behold. What you love you become like. What you worship, you become like.

Psalms 115 (4, 5) – **“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”**

And on the other hand, 2 Corinthians 3:18, **“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

If you set your ultimate affections on corruptible and fading things, you become corrupt and faded and spiritually *thin*.

Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Those who fear the LORD, trust the LORD, behold the LORD become like him, and grow spiritually *thick*. Psalm 1:3, blessed is the man who delights himself in the law of the LORD. **“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers.”**

You become what you behold. Are you beholding things that are fading and destined for corruption?

Next, in verses four through six James gives us a *description* of the godless man. He gives us three characteristics. First, polite deception – a word wrangling injustice. Then, self-indulgence. Then last, bloodshed.

Verse 4, **“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”**

This is a skill in twisting words and finding loopholes to get out of what they owe. These are word-wranglers. They are the people who are skilled with words in a way that they can always find loopholes in what they said and can always trap you in what you said. They take advantage of other people's honesty by catching them in technicalities while wriggling out of their obligations on technicalities. They find a way to say something

¹ Romans 2:4-5. “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”

that can plausibly mean one thing while knowing that the person you are talking to will hear something else. Then, you can avoid responsibility for what they heard because of what you said.

This is not outright lying according to the words spoken. But it is Deceptive in intent. 'Yes, of course you can use my equipment to do the work.' 'Oh I thought you knew I charged \$100 a day for equipment rentals.' James calls this fraud. You owed them their wages, but you held it back by fraud, word-wrangling.

This is why James mentions oaths in the next section. Jesus confronts this in Matthew 23:18, **"And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.'"**

If you swear on the altar, you're not bound. If you swear on the offering, you're bound. What's the point of this? To trick simple people who can't track with that verbal sophistry. This is fraud. Man thinks this is clever. God sees through it.

This is godlessness – no fear of the LORD. They are not concerned about doing right from the heart in God's sight. Only concerned about being *technically* in the right to take advantage of others.

The problem is godlessness – no fear of God. The other guy hears what you said. God sees what you meant – he is not fooled. "But technically I said..." is not going to go very far with God.

Verse 5, **"You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter."**

Self-indulgence. Why are you here? Not, "here" here. But here on this earth. Why have you been given life? What is the meaning of all the good things in your life?

This is the same problem – godlessness. No fear of God. No sense that "I am not my own."

Self-indulgence says, "I belong to me, therefore everything I own is basically for my enjoyment and use as I see fit."

The fear of God says, "I am not my own, I don't belong to me. Therefore, everything I own, everything I have does not belong to me. My wealth, my things, my very life belongs to Christ, to be used for his purposes." **"To live is Christ, to die is gain."**

And again, James is not just talking about *abusing* good things. He's not just talking about the self-indulgence of drunkenness, sexual immorality, greed, and gluttony. Certainly that's included. But he's talking about the self-indulgence that lives a moderate, civil, and respectable life without any reference to God. Self-indulgence simply sees your life as having final reference to yourself, with no thought of your Creator.

Verse 6, **"You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you."**

Deception, self-indulgence, then bloodshed.

The way of destruction always leaves a wake of destruction.

James is not calling out specific murderers. He is pointing out the trajectory of the path of destruction to tend toward bloodshed. This is a NON-OBVIOUS point. We tend to not see this. We tend to studiously avoid seeing the interconnection of sin – in ourselves and others. We don't want to draw a line between our sin and the chaos in other people's lives. We want to pretend like our sin only affects us. That is simply not true.

James has been pointing to this throughout the book. James 1:15, **"then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."** This is not limited to spiritual death to the individual. Sin always tends toward death and bloodshed. James 4:2, **"you desire and do not have, so you murder."**

We tend to minimize our sin. James here is showing its final trajectory. Sin has a tendency to escalate. Then self-deception refuses to see the connection.

Turning away from the Lord always leaves a wake of destruction in your life and the lives of those closest to you.

This is the legacy of Cain. This is the house and lineage of Cain.

There are two ways – the way of Cain, and the way of Abel.

Not really any good choice here is there? I think that's a part of James's message.

Luke 9:23, Jesus says, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”** First Corinthians 15:31, when Paul is talking about the resurrection, and Christ’s ultimate triumph over the world, he says, **“I die every day.”**

There is the way of Cain, and the way of Abel.

Either you will take up your cross and follow Christ and go the way of Abel. Or you will refuse the cross and go the way of Cain.

Now, ever since Jesus defeated the grave, Abel’s ending looks a little different. The story of history is the story of Cain and Abel over and over and over.

Cain kills Abel – resurrection.

Cain kills Abel – resurrection

Cain kills Abel – resurrection

Godless Cain kills God-fearing Abel, yet somehow, Abel keeps triumphing.

Here’s James’s basic point. This is a warning to the Cain’s of the world. Self-indulgence, deception, and murder might get you a long way in this world. It won’t end well for you.

In the next section to the Abels of the world, consider the prophets. There have been many Abels before you, and there will be many Abels after you. And yet, the church will triumph, the kingdom of God will advance.

Matthew 5:10-12, **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

Now, one note, and this is really important. Warnings in the Bible, announcements of wrath in the Bible, are always implicit invitations to repentance.

This is the future for those who reject Christ. But it doesn’t have to be your future. Turn to Christ and be set free from your guilt and sin.

Romans 2:4, **“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”**

Ezekiel 33:11, **“Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”**

First Corinthians 6:9-11, **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”**

The worst of the worst can be washed and transformed. No one is righteous because they deserve it. But for the grace of God, all of us would be Cain, and not Abel.

Christ alone lived a righteous life. Christ alone pays the penalty of your sin. Christ didn’t die for us on the cross because we deserve it. Christ didn’t die for us because we were worthy or good.

Romans 5:6 - When Christ died for us we were weak and ungodly.

Romans 5:7 - Christ didn’t die for us because we were righteous or good.

Romans 5:8 - Christ died for us when we were sinners.

Romans 5:10 - Christ died for us when we were enemies of God.

Why then did he die for us? Why then did he save us? Romans 5:8, because he loved us, because he loves you.

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Godly wisdom is the life that you live when you know that 1) you have nothing to boast of in yourself. In yourself you have nothing but sin and shame. And godly wisdom knows, 2) that Christ loves you and gave himself up for you. Even in the face of your word-wrangling, self-indulgence, and wake of destruction, even still Christ holds out his hands to you. You too can be washed, sanctified, and justified. It is not too late to turn from your wicked ways and live.

Doctrine

The doctrine that I need to talk about today is more of a biblical theme than a doctrine. But it's still a helpful thing to know to understand this passage. The theme for this week is the antithesis between the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the Woman. Or the opposition between the seed of the Serpent and the seed of the Woman.

This idea first gets introduced in Genesis 3:15. In Genesis 3:15, God is in the middle of pronouncing his curse on the Serpent for his role in tempting Adam and Eve to fall. And he gives us this line, he says, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."**

We get basically two things from this verse. The big thing is what's called the proto-gospel. Basically, it's the first hint of the redemption accomplished through Christ. 'He' the great seed of Eve, will crush the head of the serpent, who will himself bruise this seed. Christ is wounded, but through resurrection he deals the death-blow to the kingdom of the Serpent.

But it also foreshadows the basic outline of history – enmity between the offspring of the serpent, the world, and the offspring of the woman, the church. We see this throughout the Old Testament, and we see it in the New as well. Paul, in Romans 16:20 applies this verse to the church, he says, **"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."** *Your feet, church.*

Then, the story of Cain and Abel becomes the basic outline for how this enmity plays out.

The Apostle John applies the story of Cain and Abel to the life of the church. He says in 1 John 3:12-13, **"We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brothers' righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you."**

Basically, don't be like Cain, who was of the seed of the Serpent. But also, don't be surprised that the seed of the Serpent even still hates the seed of the Woman. This is what God said would happen from the very beginning.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist called his godless audience a brood of vipers. In Matthew 23:33, right after saying that the Pharisees are the sons of those who killed the prophets (notice the theme here), he calls them "serpents" and "brood of vipers." What is a brood of vipers? It's a bunch of snake babies.

He's not just coming up with a colorful insult. He's making a theological point. The Pharisees are of the seed of the Serpent. This is why they kill him.

Then the Pharisees' killing Jesus is the ultimate climax of this conflict. They killed the righteous one, and he does not resist them. Hebrews 12:24 says that Jesus' blood **"speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."** Abel's blood spoke of the injustice of Cain and the temporary triumph of the Serpent. Christ's blood speaks of the justice of God and the final triumph of Christ.

In Christ, the seed of the Woman wins. There is the way of Cain and the way of Abel. But in Christ, Abel wins in the end. This is why the church is called to patience. We will look at this more next week.

And this isn't just a future, resurrection patience. This is a world history patience.

Egypt (proudly represented by a serpent) killed Abel, but God brought Israel out and crushed Egypt.

What happened to Assyria? What happened to Babylon? What happened to Persia?

Or even the Roman empire? What happened to them? They tried to persecute and kill the church - then they became Christian.

Or the invading barbarian hordes that sacked Rome - that's how the Germans became Christian.

Or the Marauding Vikings. They spent generations pillaging and murdering Christians, then all of a sudden they found themselves Christian.

Or the Nazis. What happened to their great pagan thousand-year Reich?

Or the Soviets, what happened to their great atheist empire?

Maybe not the best moment for a joke, but this actually makes the point really well. Have you ever heard that Chuck Norris joke about him getting bit by a snake? It goes like this. One time, a venomous snake bit Chuck Norris, and after days of agonizing pain, the snake died.

That kind of sums up the history of the church.

Egypt bit the church and died. Assyria bit the church and died. Rome bit the church and died but then was resurrected in Christ. The Soviets bit the church and died.

Whenever a group or a society sets itself to destroy the church one of two things happens - after a great deal of suffering for everyone involved.

Either they fall apart, or they become Christian.

The Cain's of the world are warned - opposing Christ and his church ends badly for you.

The Abels of the world are called to patience. A lot of those stories covered many generations. Many Abels did not live to see triumph in this life.

It was 400 years of slavery in Egypt. 300 years before Rome became Christian. Generations of Christians suffered and died under communism. But in the end, Cain loses, and Abel triumphs.

Application

How do we apply this? What do we do with this? This passage, and the next as well has the same basic point. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* What that means at a practical level is that wisdom begins with faith and repentance. Next week's passage is a call to enduring faith in light of the coming kingdom. And this week's passage is a call to mourning repentance in light of God's coming wrath. Both of these flow out of the fear of the LORD.

Those are the two application points; faith, and repentance.

First, faith. Godly wisdom, faith, is not a means to an end. The point of godly wisdom is not ultimately to have a pleasant and easy life here and now. Now, on the whole, godly wisdom results in good things. All things being equal, godly wisdom will make a bad situation better, and worldly foolishness will make a bad situation worse. Godly wisdom certainly has impacts in this life.

This is the basic riddle of the Old Testament wisdom literature. Proverbs lays out the norms. If you live this way, things will go well for you – fear the LORD, work hard, be honest, keep away from temptation – things will go well for you. And on the whole, that's exactly what happens.

And yet there's Job. Sometimes God allows evil into our lives, and he never really explains himself to us. He tells us he's working it all for our good. He tells us none of it is meaningless or random. And yet, he never promises to explain himself for us.

And there's Ecclesiastes. If we work hard, and acquire all the world's pleasures, but God doesn't bless us with the power to enjoy it, we'll still be miserable.

If the pursuit of wisdom is only about enjoying the good things in this life, even if you get them – money, and success, and comfort, and family – even if you get them, without peace with God it will be hollow. And, if you're pursuing godly wisdom, eventually some trials will come, and if you only care about godly wisdom insofar as it results in a pleasant and easy life, you will get sifted. Trials will come, and you will bail.

Godly wisdom first and foremost has to be faith in Jesus Christ in the fear of the Lord. Then, live to please him, no matter what comes. In the good times enjoy his blessing with gratitude. In the hard times enjoy his fellowship.

He walked the path you are on. The path of suffering is not a path of shame. The path of suffering has been sanctified by his holy feet. It is no shame to walk the path that the Lord of Glory once walked. He walked this path before you. And he walks this path with you now.

Only with this mindset will you be able to count it all joy when you face trials of various kinds.

So, first application, fear the LORD in faith.

Then second, to the Cains of the world: repent while you still can.

If things are going well for you but you know you are flagrantly disregarding Christ and his will for your life: he isn't fooled, he isn't ok with it, he hasn't changed his mind. He is giving you time to repent.

“Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.” But they don't have to. The wrath that is aimed at you has fallen on Christ. The miseries coming for you have already fallen on Christ. Turn from yourself to him. Repent, believe in him, surrender to him as your Lord. He will take your place on the cross, and he will give you his place as a child of God.

Conclusion

There are two ways to live. Wisdom or foolishness. Righteousness or wickedness. The way of the serpent, or the way of the Son. In Christ or against Christ. The way of Cain, or the Way of Abel. Godly wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Godly wisdom chooses the hard path to life, even when it passes through death.