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Better: World

James 4:11-5:6

¹¹Do 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 neighbor? ¹³Come 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." ¹⁴Yet 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. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

⁵Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. ²Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³Your 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. ⁴Listen! The wages of the laborers 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. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

(Slide 1: better world)

I was 9 years old in Catholic Catechism, when I encountered the Beatitudes -- the "blessed are the so and so's" statements from the Jesus' sermon on the mount:

Blessed are the poor...

Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

The one that caught my attention was:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Mat 5:6)

Hunger and thirst captured the feeling of deep longing that I had for a better world.

I wanted a world in which my mother hadn't died because of cancer.

I wanted a world in which my best friend didn't have to move away because her dad got laid off.

I wanted a world that didn't have nuclear weapons threatening to kill us all.

And I wanted a world where all the starving children on the “sponsor a child” TV specials got fed and cared for.

I was 9. This was my world and it kinda sucked!

I hungered and thirsted for a better world and kept wondering, when would God fulfill my longing for a better world?

For the past few weeks we've been doing a little overview of the book of James.

James' main theme is to point out the contrast between the ways of this world which are not good

And

God's way

(Slide2: it's not enough to disagree with the world and agree with God...)

And then James says, it's not enough to disagree with the world and agree with God

It's not enough to hunger and thirst for righteousness

It's not enough to *long for* a better world

James challenges us to *be* the better world we want to live in.

- If we want a better life then we need to be doers of the word and not just hearers (James 1:22)
- If we want a better community then we need to care for our brothers and sisters in need (James 2:14-26)
- If we want a better church then we need a better definition of better -- one not based on the values of the world, but instead grounded in God's Grace (James 4:4-6)
- If we want a better world then we need to do the "right thing" ourselves in our own everyday choices. (James 4:17)

And as James expands his theme he moves from personal behaviors like gossip to corporate behaviors like favoritism and into bigger picture, economic systemic issues that affect our whole world.

At first glance today's reading seems a little bit contradictory --

(Slide 3: picture of Bible page)

If you look at it in your pew bible on page 231 of the New Testament, the editors sectioned it out so that it looks like first James says don't judge then don't boast and then he goes right into judging the rich!

But those headings are not a part of the original writing by James. If you take the headings out, then it reads as all one topic --

I would like to propose that this whole section is about how people think about money.

(Slide 4:how we tend to judge the poor and assume God favors the rich)

How we tend to judge the poor and assume that the rich have done something right.

I think this, because this was a common idea in the first century. There are many stories in the gospels that show that people in the first century believed that bad things, including poverty happened to people because God was punishing them for their sin and wealth was perceived as a reward for righteousness.

I think James was challenging the idea that wealth is proof of God's favor and poverty is punishment for your sin.

James starts out saying don't judge others for the sins they supposedly committed -- because then you are basically judging the law!

Everybody makes plans to do well -- to work hard, to "go to town and do business and make money," but nobody knows "what tomorrow may bring." (James 4:13 -17)

James asserts that:

The poor aren't poor because they sinned, and you didn't.
The poor aren't poor because they're lazy, or immoral, or godless.
There's larger issues at hand.

And I think James still makes a good point for today because aren't some of the hardest working, most morally upright and faithful Christians in the world our poverty stricken brothers and sisters in Africa!

James says that sometimes the poor are poor because life is uncertain -- "like a mist that appears and then vanishes" (4:14)
So we shouldn't judge them for being poor.

Instead we should focus on doing the right thing in our own lives,
(James 4:17)

Then James, not so subtly, suggests that sometimes the poor are poor because the rich have sinned against them, by withholding fair wages.

James is calling out the sin of systemic economic injustice. --
James is calling out the rich who can afford to pay a living wage to their workers, who know that this is the right thing to do, and choose not to.

James asserts that:

(Slide 5:)

A better life, a better Community a better Church a better World begins with choosing to do the right thing.

James is not an easy read. He challenges us to not only believe, or know or feel the right things, but to do the right things.

As a child I waited for God to feed my hunger and thirst for righteousness.

I prayed and prayed and prayed for a better life, a better Community, a better world.

And God has answered my prayers...

By sending people who were willing to do right things, into my life.

And as I have grown in the faith, I have come to realize that God calls me to be someone else's answer to prayer.

God calls me to do the right thing for someone else who longs for a better world.

God calls me to do the right thing because I still hunger and thirst for righteousness.

May we never stop being hungry.

Children's message: Step towards the right

Our reading today tells us to do the right thing.

And not doing the right thing when we know what the right thing is is a sin.

It's boring to just talk about things so let's play a game.

When I say a right thing to do step towards me.

When I say a wrong thing to do step back.

1. A person falls down and hurts themselves and you go for help.
2. The person in front of you has their money drop out of their pocket and you pick it up and keep it.
3. A person to being teased at recess by your friends and is starting to cry and you ask your friends to stop.
4. Someone says something you don't like so you hit them.

5. Your friend doesn't have a lunch so you share yours.
Keep moving towards doing what's right and stepping back from sin!

Let's pray.

God, help us to, do what's right, in Jesus name. Amen.