

Homily, 30 September 2018
Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Numbers 11:25-29; Psalms 19:8,10,12-13,14; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48



Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. ... You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure ... You have stored up treasure for the last days.



A couple of years ago, my youngest son, who is now grown with a family of his own, said something that surprised me and that I have been thinking about ever since.

When he was young, probably in late elementary school, our family finances were pretty tight. We had a nice house, but it was small; we had good cars, but they were older and nothing fancy; and we couldn't buy the kids all the expensive stuff that their friends seem to have. After we paid all our bills, bought groceries and the like, there wasn't any money left over. Such things as cable t.v. or family dinners at restaurants just weren't in budget.

Well one Sunday he noticed the check that we put into our weekly Sunday envelope for church. I don't remember what we giving back then, but it wasn't much, at least in my opinion, but to him it seemed extravagant and it made him angry, though he never said anything ... for almost twenty years.

What he said made me think back to those days. Even though things were tight financially, I had a good job with good benefits. No illness, no injury, would push us into poverty. My wife had had started working again after staying home when the kids were little. She was a teacher so we had wonderful summers which included long camping trips all over the country. We were, simply put, very blest. And being blest, I felt we needed to give what we could to the church and to other charities. In fact, I always wondered if we should've given more than we did. But there was no way I was going get that across to my son.



Every Sunday this month we have heard a short excerpt from the Letter of James. We finished today. Next Sunday we'll move on to Paul's letter to the Phillipians and leave James behind.

The letter of James is an exhortation to moral and ethical living following the teachings of Christ. In fact, much of what James says can be found in the Sermon on the Mount. The parallels are strong and numerous.

Today's reading is blunt and challenging, especially if you are well off:

Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. ... You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure ... You have stored up treasure for the last days. Yet your wealth will rot away and be a testimony against you.

It's a truly harsh warning, but bear in mind that two-thousand years ago, in the world of the first Christians, there was no social safety net. If you lived in abject poverty, that was just too bad ... unless of course, those who were better off would practice charity ... and that is exactly what God expects of us.

In continuity with the Old Testament prophets, Jesus taught that we had an obligation to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sick, and the outcast. Since God hears the cry of the poor, then we too must hear it and respond, because all of us are children of God.

And so, James says in the opening paragraphs of his letter:

Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.

And that's something I always have to struggle with in my spiritual life: am I deluding myself? Should I do more?



My wife and I are no longer living on the edge financially. We are in good shape for retirement. At least, that's what my retirement advisor tells me.

And sometimes, that bothers me:

You have stored up treasure for the last days. Yet your wealth will rot away and be a testimony against you.

How do I figure out if I am doing enough for those in need?

In 1891, Pope Leo the XIII wrote that: *"No one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs and for those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up his condition in life."*

Then he continued: *"When what necessity demands has been supplied ... it becomes a duty to give to the indigent of what remains."*

So he reminds us that whoever receives an abundance of blessings from God, whether they are material blessings or gifts of the mind, is obligated to use them not just for himself, but for the benefit of others. We are stewards of God's gifts, not owners.



And so, I am back where I started.

Have I gone beyond what necessity demands in maintaining my standard of living? Am I generous enough or could I do more with my time, my talent, and my treasure?

My retirement advisor can help me figure out if I have enough money to retire, but he isn't likely to say whether or not I have too much. St James, all the Prophets, and the Church can warn me about my obligations to the poor. But the one person — the only person — who can truly help me discern if I am doing the right thing is God.

To quote from the Catechism:

"Deep within his conscience, man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

My point is simply this, I can't tell you that James' warning to the rich is something that you especially need to hear. All I can do is remind you — and myself — that we need to sit with God in prayer and talk him about it, asking *"am I a doer of your word, or am I just deluding myself."* Then, we have to listen for the quiet voice of God, deep within our hearts, for his answer.