

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin  
December 15, 2019**

## **The Ghosts of Christmas Past: The Christmas Judge Exorcises the Resentment Ghost**

**James 5:7-11**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We all want a picture perfect Christmas like this. But we probably all have family members like this whom you would rather not see. You may wish a police SWAT call would rescue you from your family Christmas party or your work Christmas party just like on National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.



Granted, that is a little extreme, but many of us have reasons to dread Christmas because we are going to be interacting with people that we don't like, or if they are there, but a dark cloud covers our every interaction with them. Someone did something to someone and now they aren't talking.

The Resentment Ghost that separates families is present all year long, but at Christmas time, he becomes very active. My goal today is to look at James 5 and see how:

### **The Christmas Judge Exorcises the Resentment Ghost**

*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup> You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. <sup>9</sup> Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

*<sup>10</sup> Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

The Judge is standing that the door! Who is that Judge? The Bible regularly talks about Jesus as being given the responsibility as Judge of the world.

- Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (John 5:22).
- [The Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man (John 5:27).
- He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42).

The sinful nature in us may applaud that idea. Yes, Jesus! Come and judge the people who have offended me, the people who have mistreated me. But if there is going to be healing in any of our relationships, it has to start with us. Let us see what the Judge has to say to us.

### 1. The Christmas Judge Calls Us to Humility

First of all, when we grumble against someone, what are we doing? We are establishing ourselves as judge over that person. Do we really want to say to the Christmas Judge, “Excuse me, Jesus, but I need to sit on that judgment throne”?

Picture the sins the people commit against you like stones. Some of them are really big. I think especially of those of you whose lives have been dramatically changed by a horrible sin committed against you. All those sins are a heavy burden that you are carrying. It is easy for resentment to build up.

But the Judge has said, “Don’t grumble.” And it is interesting to me that the word “grumble” elsewhere is translated as “groan.” Think of how many times you have groaned because of the sins that have been committed against you. No one else may hear that groan, but the Judge does. For each sin against me, I probably have “groaned” 100 times.

Let me give you an example. Early in my ministry I was talking with my circuit pastor, grumbling about some member. Finally, he broke in and asked, “Pete, when was the last time you talked with her?”

“About 10 days ago.”

“So you are still this upset about something she said 10 days ago? Who has the problem?”

When we recognize that for every one offense against us, we multiply it by hundreds of groans ... what is that except a powerful call to repentance! The burden of my own sin is great! **The Christmas Judge calls us to humble repentance!** Who am I to stand in judgment on someone else?

But the Christmas Judge is not only interested in warning us. He has come to comfort us!

### 2. The Christmas Judge Invites Us to Trust Him

Our Old Testament lesson from last week mentions his judgment:

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;  
<sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth (Isaiah 11:3-4).

What is the Christmas Judge's righteous judgment? He did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. He came to carry the burden of sin that we are constantly adding to. Let's come and admit our spiritual poverty. He will make a judgment based on his death for us. Friends, when we come confessing our sinful groaning, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins. Bring the heavy load of your own sin and guilt. The Judge says, "I will carry that load." Trust his Christmas gospel judgment.

But there is more. We can also trust his timing.

*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup> You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*

In the Holy Land, about mid-October, the early or autumn rains come. The farmer wants to start planting. But the rains have to soften the soil. If he plants too soon, and the rains don't come, the seed may sprout and then the shoot just dries up. There is nothing he can do to make the rains come sooner. He just has to wait.

The main rains come in December, January and February. But the later rains or spring rains are vital for the crop to fully mature. Again, there is nothing the farmer can do to make the rains come sooner. All he can do is wait, and trust God's timing.

The same is true in our relationships. We can become frustrated that people seem to be getting away with bad mouthing us or harming us in some way. But often there is very little we can do to change it. So I hold the bucket of someone else's sins against me. It is getting heavy. It seems like they are hurting me with impunity. But the farmer trusts God's timing. I too need to trust the Judge's timing. If a person needs to be judged and punished for sins, the Judge will act when he knows best.

### **3. The Christmas Judge Calls for Patience**

But being patient is not easy! "Be patient" James writes. The very word patience implies that you will suffer. Don't be surprised that sinful human beings around you place a heavy burden on you.

But "be patient" also implies a need to change. One of our team mentioned that when he told his kids, "Be patient!" it was never a positive thing. They were showing impatience and it was almost a scolding. "Be patient!"

Isn't that true of us as well? "Be patient" our God says. "I hear your groaning in judgment." "Repent" is not just a call to be sorry for your sins, it is also a call to change.

This is the key. You cannot change the way others treat you. But with the Spirit's help, you can change the way you are react to the grievances you have against someone else.

Be patient! What do you need to change in your relationships so that you enjoy a better Christmas? Let's read Colossians 3:12-14 together.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord

forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Remember, you can't change how others act, but you can change how you react. So what do you have to "put on" as you step into your Christmas get togethers? I'm not saying it is easy. It is hard, because it means denying yourself, saying "no" to your anger and your desire for revenge. It means treating people with the kind of unconditional love that the Christmas Judge has shown toward you. It isn't just hard, it is impossible. But remember that the powerful God who raised Jesus from the dead is working in you. In fact, that is the last point I want to make:

#### **4. The Christmas Judge Produces Perseverance**

Look again at the last part of our text for today.

*<sup>10</sup> Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

"You have seen what the Lord finally brought about." That is such a key idea.

When Job was going through all his suffering, he didn't know what the Lord would finally bring about. When, in one day he lost all of his cattle and his children, he didn't know how his story would end. When a little later he lost his health and he suffered intense pain, he didn't know how his story would end.

But you and I know. We know that God restored Job's health and wealth. We know that God graciously gave him more children and God granted him a long, joy-filled life.

The point isn't that our story is always going to end in this way. The point is that God knows the end of the story. And we ultimately know how our story ends. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We know that God will work all things out for our good. We know that, no matter what happens, we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. And we know that ultimately, we will be safe before the Judge's throne in heaven.

It is this knowledge that God uses to give us "perseverance." That word means to "remain under" a heavy burden. There is a purpose for this burden. Jesus will give us the strength to endure. And the heavier the burden, the more we long for the eternal rest of heaven when we will put all our burdens down.

No one wants to carry a heavy load, but it is often through the heaviest loads that God puts on us that he can bless others.

I'd like to close with a modern Job story, a story of patience, a story of perseverance.

Yesterday, December 14, Pete Frates was buried. I never knew his name until this week, but I had seen his impact. In 2012, Pete Frates, an athletic 27-year-old man was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. I have a friend who died of ALS. It is a horrible disease. Your mind remains sharp and clear. But your body gradually loses its ability to function. You can't move,

pretty soon you can't breathe on your own. You become a prisoner in your own body. It is a horrible burden to bear for the patient and his family.

When Pete Frates was diagnosed with ALS, he did not give up. Instead, he decided to use his time left to raise awareness of the disease and raise funds to find a cure. In 2014, he started the Ice Bucket Challenge. Do you remember that? Millions of people posted on Facebook, showing how they dumped a bucket of ice over their head and committing gifts for ALS research. Over \$220 million has been raised since that time!

Pete and his family had reason to be filled with resentment. It wasn't easy. One article talked about how it took one and a half hours for Pete just to get out of his van to be present at an award ceremony.

But Pete saw an end. He saw a purpose. In humility he entrusted himself to the Christmas Judge. I am sure that often he had to put down his sinful nature that invited him to wallow in pity. He took up the burden and carried it, because he saw a purpose in this life for this burden and knew his Savior.

Now Pete's burden is set down. He is safely home with his Savior in heaven. It is time for us to take up our burdens. And often it is the burden of battling the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Resentment that threatens to destroy another Christmas, that threatens to destroy more relationships, that can ultimately destroy our relationship with the Savior.

Come Lord Jesus, into our hearts right now. Exorcise that Ghost of Resentment. Humble us with a knowledge of our own sinful groanings and complaints. Lift us with the promise of your forgiveness. Fill us with a trust in your timing and your purpose. Give us the strength to bear up under the frustrations and hurts that others cause. Give us perseverance that ultimately your name is hallowed, especially as we deal with those who have hurt us. Yes, come quickly to work in us, Lord Jesus. And come quickly to take us to our final home of rest. Amen.

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## Next Steps toward Christmas Healing

- **A Call to Humility:** Think of the last time you felt slighted by someone. How many times has the Judge heard you grumble/groan about that event since then?
- **A Call to Trust:** Read Psalm 73. What brought peace to the psalmist's heart when he saw arrogant, wicked people succeed?
- **A Call to Forgive:** Read Colossians 3:12-14. What is the Christmas outfit to put on before you go to family Christmas celebrations?

## GroupWork

1. Share your plans to celebrate Christmas.
2. Read James 5:7-11.
  - a. “The Lord’s coming is near.” Is that a reminder of good news or a warning of God’s law?
  - b. What helps you to wait patiently when standing in line at a checkout lane?
  - c. What helps you to wait patiently when suffering pain or disease or some great loss?
  - d. Compare and discuss the answers to 2.b. and 2.c. How are they the same? How are they different?
3. Read Psalm 73. The psalmist was angry because the wicked prosper.
  - a. What helped him gain a better perspective?
  - b. What lessons can you learn from this psalm to help you be patient?
4. Read Colossians 3:12-14.
  - a. Think of what Paul wrote as a Christmas outfit to put on before you go to family Christmas celebrations. What phrases do you especially want to remember?
  - b. What can you do to “clothe yourself” in this way?
5. Each person share one key idea learned from this evening’s conversation.
6. Close with each person praying a short prayer. Remember that a person can say “pass” if they do not feel comfortable praying out loud.