

The words St. James levels against the rich this weekend are some of the most bitter in the bible. "You may think you've got it all," he says to the wealthy, "but you're gonna get what's coming to you. Weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away. Your clothes have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will devour your flesh like fire." That's for starters.

The underlying problem is not just that the rich have wealth. It's how they got their wealth. They withheld wages from their employees. Their workers literally could not live on what they earned. Because labor practices were unjust, James says the rich are guilty of murder. He writes, "The wages you withhold are crying aloud. You have murdered the righteous one." Then, just in case the rich haven't got the point yet, James compares their future to that of livestock: "You have fattened your own hearts for the day of slaughter."

Isn't this a cheery way to start our Sunday morning? If you've been comparing this reading to your own life, you probably have your loopholes figured out, right? James was talking to people two thousand years ago in another country and another culture. We're not that rich. We didn't earn our money by withholding wages. We haven't killed anybody. So, this doesn't apply to us, right?

Well, not so fast. Everything is relative. Every single person in this community including teenagers probably has more wealth and property than any single person in our sister parish, Comunidad Ita Maura. Actually, we don't have to go so far away. We get requests for food from our pantry right here almost every day. Employees may receive a living wage, but our appetite for possessions, both in number and quality, causes us to spend more on ourselves and less on charities. A lot of the clothes we wear, for example, are actually made by underpaid workers in other countries. Other underpaid workers pick beans for much of the coffee we drink so casually. Are we murdering them?

We're wealthy in other ways too. We're rich in freedom, but we purchase it through extravagant expenses on arms, while the poor in other countries go without food. We are rich in knowledge, but we let our scientists develop abortion pills to dispense more easily with unwanted children. If you are male and white in this country you are rich in opportunities that others do not have. You can hold jobs and salaries that others are not offered. You can drive a car without fear of being pulled over because of your skin color. You can shop in a mall without fear of raising suspicion. If another white male commits a crime, the newspaper may not mention his race. People have wealth and privilege in many ways.

I wish I had better news for you this morning, but we still have a long way to go to escape the accusations of James, and I include myself in this. If God has blessed us with resources, we have to share them. If merchants take advantage of poor foreign laborers, we have to boycott them. We have to check our investments, check our prejudices, and then maybe, maybe the bitter words of today's second reading won't apply to us.