

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I picked up this voice message the other day: “Hey, this is Michael from the business health center. Today is Friday the 27th. We have an urgent issue with your business listing and need you to call us at your earliest convenience. We close at 5 PM Eastern standard time today, so please call us back before then. And if you think you’ve received this message in error, simply call us back and let us know. But again we have an urgent issue with your business listing and need you to call us at your earliest convenience. Thank you. Talk to you soon.”

Scammers find their way into voicemail almost every day. It’s annoying. I also wonder what happened to the person leaving the message that they want to make money by cheating other people out of theirs. Some scammers get rich.

Today’s passage from the Letter of James takes issue with his rich readers for two reasons: They spend too much on themselves, and they obtain their wealth by cheating.

James writes, “You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure.” Then, comparing the rich to the cattle they own and prepare for sumptuous meals, he writes about their upcoming day of judgment: “you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.” Judgment will come upon them harshly for spending on themselves, and not sharing their wealth.

Furthermore, they possess ill-gotten gains. They have cheated their employees. James writes, “the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” Not only is God hearing the prayers of the unpaid workers, but the money itself is crying aloud. These rich may think no one notices how they get their income, but the Lord hears it all.

Even though we have reasonable fears that someone is out to steal what we have earned, we all do well to hear these two charges and examine our own financial practices. How do we spend our money? How do we earn our money? Are we spending only on our own luxuries and pleasures? Or are we contributing to the needy and organizations that enhance our society? And how do we earn? Are we guilty of taking advantage of what others have? Have we swindled our employees?

To drive home his point, James has the rich examine their own situation. They may think they made all the right moves to ensure their personal happiness, but if they look around, things are not what they seem. He excoriates them: “Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire.” You think that savings and clothing will make you happy, but your flesh is going to rot. That’s why James opens this passage with the attention-grabbing invitation, “Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries.”

Not all telemarketers aim to cheat, but many do. They could find more honest work—not just for our benefit, but for their own. People who earn their money by swindling others are missing out on where true happiness lies. It’s not in luxury and cheating, but in supporting the common good and being honest.