

The Destructive Power of Riches (James 5:1-6)

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A sense of community is one of our deepest felt needs as human beings. No wonder so many organizations market themselves as a place where you too can find a sense of belonging. All kinds of groups offer connection with likeminded people and a purpose for living greater than ourselves. The question we're exploring over the course of 4 weeks is what make the community of the church different. Why is the community of a local church like KingsWay a community like no other?

We learned from Ephesians 2 last Sunday that the community of the church has a unique identity. Every other form of community we create for ourselves. The church is a community God creates for us by reconciling to himself and uniting us to one another through the person and work of Christ. In that sense, community isn't first something we do. It's who we are. It's our identity in Christ.

The second answer to our question comes from 1 Peter 2:4-12. The church doesn't just have a unique identity. It has a unique mission. It's the relationship between the two – our identity and our mission – that I want to focus on this morning. In this passage the Apostle Peter reminds us that the community we enjoy – the community of the church – isn't an end in and of itself. It's a gift in service of the mission of the gospel.

After several years of climbing ladders and strained neck muscles, I finally requested and received a 30' extension wand for my pressure washer that collapses down to about 7' for storage. Now imagine if I hung that wand in my garage and left it there – year after year. Whenever I walked by it on my way into the house I stopped and said, "Man, what a good-looking extension wand. I'm so glad I have that extension wand." But I never used it. Was it a gift? Yes. But it wasn't a gift designed to hang in my garage. It was a gift designed, built, and given to accomplish something – to blast the mold off my second-story vinyl siding.

The community of the church is no different. It's a gift designed to accomplish something. It's designed to advance the mission of the gospel. Peter helps us understand why that's the case by making several points about our identity and mission as the people of God in these verses.

1) THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE DEFINED BY THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS

Peter begins by reminding his readers that something extraordinary is happening in their life. They are "coming to him." From v. 3 we know the "him" in v. 4 is a reference to

none other than the Lord himself. They're drawing near to God. They're approaching God. They're enjoying the gift of relationship with God.

But notice it's not just any old god or some sort of mysterious spiritual power. It's not whatever god you want him to be. They are in relationship with the Lord who is "a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious." The living stone, the one his readers are drawing near to and following is Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, crucified and resurrected.

How do we know it's Jesus? First, because Jesus himself quotes one of the Old Testament passages Peter references in verses 6-8 when he describes his own ministry in Matthew 21:42, "Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" Second, because in Acts 4:11-12 Peter explicitly identifies Jesus as the rejected cornerstone— "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Comparing Jesus to a physical symbol – in this case a stone – helps us understand who he is. The book of 1 Peter is a letter written to Christians who were being persecuted, socially rejected, on account of their faith. So why does Peter describe Jesus as a "living stone rejected by men?" Because it reminds them they are not alone and shouldn't be surprised by their suffering. God himself was socially rejected and scorned when he walked the earth, but that wasn't his identity. In reality, in the sight of God, the one who's evaluation ultimately matters, Jesus was "chosen and precious."

But does that mean, Peter, that if I'm belittled and scorned by men on account of my faith, that I too am chosen and precious? Look at verse 6. Speaking of Jesus, Peter quotes Isaiah 28:16, "For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

When the prophet Isaiah wrote Isaiah 28, the leaders of Israel were being threatened by foreign armies. Destruction was imminent, but they remained convinced until the very end that everything was ok. "This annoying prophet keeps saying God is about to judge and destroy us because of our continual disobedience. Man, that guy's a religious nutcase. It's all good. Our military alliance with Egypt, a picture of human ingenuity and power, will bail us out in the end."



The Lord responds by declaring they are quite wrong. It's not those who trust in Egypt who will be delivered from the righteous judgment of God. It's those who trust in the Lord. And that honor is exclusively reserved for "whoever believes in him." The context of Isaiah 28 teaches us that although Jesus was rejected by men and is still rejected by men today, he is, in reality, the very cornerstone, the foundation of God's plan to save us from his righteous judgment against our sins.

You might feel shameful, you might feel rejected, you might feel backwards, weird, and wonder sometimes if you're the one who has it all wrong. We can feel like that today as Christians, can't we? But what does the Lord promise us. Those who believe in Jesus won't just avoid shame in the end, they will be honored. They will be vindicated. They will be upheld and delivered on the day Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. Christian, you might be shamed by men, but you will be honored by God, no less than Jesus.

For those who do not trust and follow Jesus, who try to save themselves just like Israel in Isaiah 28 and try to make their life work by breaking all the rules or keeping all the rules, listen to verse 7 where Peter quotes Psalm 118:22. "But for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'" In other words, it's not MY BELIEF as a Christian that makes Jesus real, that makes him the only one who can deliver you from the wrath of God by dying in our place for our sins. Whether you believe him or reject him, he IS the cornerstone of God's plan of salvation.

And if you reject his one and only Son, not through conscious personal animosity or hatred, but through passive dismissal of the extraordinary claim he makes on your life as your God and King, you will stumble, fall, and perish. Peter's quotation from Isaiah 8:14 confirms there are only two options for every human being who has ever lived: Believe Jesus and be saved or reject Jesus and be destroyed.

How you respond to him is the single most important decision you will ever make. No one is more divisive. No relationship is more determinative. Run to him as your only rock of refuge, or he will fall on you as the divine rock of judgment. Isaiah 8:13–15, "But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken."

And when, Christian, you feel the sting of the world's hatred, perhaps not through outright vitriol, but through the acute awareness that what you believe is written off in

the public square as foolish and dangerous in our modern age, take comfort in knowing the rejection of Jesus and his followers, the world's shameless disobedience of his word, that too falls under the good providence of God. The end of verse 8, "They disobey the word as they were destined to do," doesn't excuse our moral responsibility. It asserts the comfort of God's sovereignty.

In it all, Peter's main point is simple. The people of God are defined not by their good works, their political conservatism, their reformed theology or their understanding of spiritual gifts and baptism, as important as those issues are for the corporate life and membership of a local church. The people of God are defined by their belief and trust in Jesus. Coming to him, the living stone of God's salvation, is what distinguishes the people of God from the people of the world. The people of God are defined by their relationship to Jesus.

2) THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE BUILT TOGETHER BY JESUS

When you decide to follow Jesus, a profound change takes place in your identity as a human being. Look back at verses 4-5, "As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood..." In other words, Jesus isn't the only stone in the picture. As his people, we too are living stones. The "spiritual house" in v. 5 is the community of the saints, the community of the church. What Peter says about us here can change your entire perspective about a local church like KingsWay.

Are you ready for this? Jesus is building us together. The growth and health of our church isn't ultimately my work or your work. It's Jesus' work. And he's building us up into something particular – a "spiritual house." What's a house? A place where someone lives, right? So what's a spiritual house? It's a place where the Spirit of God lives, a place where God himself dwells. You know who the most important person in this room on Sunday morning is? It's not the preacher. It's God. In the Old Testament under the Old Covenant, God lived in the physical building of the temple. In the New Testament, under the New Covenant, God lives in the covenant community of his people, among the gathered members of the local church.

So what does the presence of God in our midst make us? Look at verse 9. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession..." You know what every one of those terms are? They're descriptions God used for the people of Israel in the Old Testament, specifically in Exodus 19, Isaiah 43, and Hosea 2. Who was the "chosen race" before Jesus, before Christ died and rose from the grave? The ethnic



people of Israel. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt so they could be his people and he could be their God. Who is the "chosen race" today? All who trust Jesus as the cornerstone of our salvation.

Who was the holy or royal priesthood before Jesus? A select group of men from the Israelite tribe of Levi. They were the only ones who enjoyed access to the presence of God in the temple and served him on behalf of the entire nation. Who are the priests of God today? ALL of God's people. Why? Because we have all been sanctified – not just some of us, ALL of us – set apart as holy – through our shared union with Christ. Now we all enjoy access to God's presence and have been consecrated to serve him with all we are and all we have.

Who was the "holy nation" before Jesus? Who were the people for God's "own possession" before Jesus? It was the ethnic people of Israel. Who is the "holy nation" and the people for God's "own possession" today? It's the church of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, if you're a covenant member of KingsWay you are not part of another religious organization or a spiritual affinity group. You have been set apart by God himself as part of his holy people. All of the blessings and privileges the Lord granted to Israel have been inherited by the church through the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

Remember I said earlier that community isn't something we create. It's something God creates for us through the person and work of Christ. That's gloriously true! But it's one thing to be given that corporate identity the moment you become a Christian. It's another thing to learn how to live that identity out – to become in our life what we already are in Christ by learning to live in community with other members of local church. That process – being "built up as a spiritual house" is a progressive, ongoing work of God in which we play a significant role.

What's that? We are being built together (verse 4) as you (as we) "come to him," as we come to Jesus. Brothers and sisters, if you want this church to be built up. If you want to strengthen the community of our church, the single best thing you can do is love Jesus with all your heart and mind and strength. Come to him as your Treasure. Come to him as your Wisdom. Come to him as your Master.

Sometimes people will ask, how can I serve the church, Matthew? Answer #1: Love Jesus and keep on loving Jesus more than anything or anyone else because THAT is what God will use to build us up as a spiritual house. When you trust and obey Jesus, our community is strengthened. When you don't trust or obey Jesus, our community suffers.



Every act of individual obedience and disobedience doesn't just have an individual effect on you and your family. It has a corporate effect on the health and unity of our church.

Friends, God is DEEPLY committed to distinguishing his people – the church of Jesus Christ – from the rest of the world. Sometimes people talk about God as if he was "in" to the whole having an exclusive people thing in the Old Testament, but now he's had a love make-over and opens his arms to all men and women. Such an idea is neither true nor loving, friends.

It's not true because God is JUST as concerned today with having "a people for his own possession" that are identifiably distinct from the world. And it's not loving because the most loving thing God can do for the world is to distinguish his people from the world so the world knows where to look in order to see character of God in the community of his people.

The people of God are built together by Jesus for the express purpose of distinguishing us from the world. Baptism and church membership – going public with your allegiance to King Jesus – matters because God's mission for his people is accomplished through the distinct and identifiable nature of his people.

3) THE PEOPLE OF GOD EXIST TO DECLARE THE GLORY OF JESUS

Look back at verse 5 again. Why is God building us into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood? He's building us together "TO offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." How do we offer spiritual sacrifices? I thought since Jesus died we don't need any more sacrifices for sins? Oh, maybe it means loving God used to be all about keeping his laws on the outside. Now it's just a heart thing, a spiritual thing! No, it's not.

To offer "spiritual sacrifices" means we devote our entire person – all that we are, think, say, have, feel, and do – to worshiping and serving King Jesus in the power of the Spirit in response to the Father's mercy toward us in the gospel. As Paul says in Romans 1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

What is it that make the imperfect offering of obedience to Jesus in every area of life acceptable to God? It's the cleansing blood of Christ. The spiritual sacrifice of our obedience is "acceptable to God" because all that is sinful, all that is unholy, all that is unrighteous and imperfect in our obedience is forgiven for the sake of Christ. God isn't waiting to delight in your obedience, Christian, until you get it all right. He delights in



your wholehearted, baby steps at obedience because all that is still unrighteous in them he forgives because of what Jesus has done for you.

Now here's the critical connection and what makes 1 Peter 2 so helpful. Few Christians would argue that we're supposed to glorify God through the obedience of our lives. What we tend to completely miss is that "proclaiming the excellencies" of Jesus, showing the world how beautiful and glorious Jesus is through the way we live, isn't something we can do in isolation from one another.

In fact, 1 Peter 2:9 goes even further. The whole reason the people of God are built together in Christ Jesus (point #2) is so THAT we may together, as a COMMUNITY, proclaim the excellencies of Christ. Notice Peter isn't just saying we having a unique identity – chosen race, royal priesthood, etc. He's saying we have a unique identity FOR THE PURPOSE of accomplishing a unique mission and that it is in fact our new identity as the united people of God that enables us to accomplish our unique mission.

Why do I labor on this point? Because we tend to view community as Christians as something that exist for our own sake. When we think of strong, biblical community, we think of a place where Christians are cared for, Christians are loved, and Christians are helped to follow Jesus. We decide which Community Group to join based on which group gives us the strongest sense of connection and belonging.

Are those things bad? Of course not. But the whole point of 1 Peter 2:9 is that God hasn't made us a community through the person and work of Christ so we can be comfortable, we can be cared for, and we can feel connected as good as those things are. He's made us a community SO THAT we can proclaim his excellencies AS A COMMUNITY to people who are not yet part of our community but perceive in our community a glimpse of the all-satisfying splendor of Jesus. Verse 9 isn't about individual Christians proclaiming the glory of God. It's about the community of the church proclaiming the glory of God together.

Through the way we serve one another, we confront the world with the love of God. Through the way we correct and admonish one another, we confront the world with the truthfulness of God. Through the way we resolve conflict with one another – even when it's hard – we confront the world the reconciling power of God. Through the way we pray for one another, we confront the world with the compassion of God. Proclaiming the glory of Jesus isn't something we in isolation. It's something we do together.

The whole point of the corporate call to holiness in verse 11 – saying "no" to the sinful passions of our flesh so that together we can say "yes" to God – is to practice the kind of



“good deeds” (verse 12) that cause even those who persecute us to have a change of heart, to go from disobeying the word (verse 8) to glorifying God (verse 12). What would cause them to do that? Seeing the excellencies of Jesus in the character of our community as a church. Seeing through the way we live – not in isolation, but in relationship with one another – that Jesus is better than anything this world has to offer.

There are significant implications here for our practice of community as a church. Imagine something with me for a moment. Imagine the guys in your Community Group go out for drinks one night and one of you brings along a non-Christian friend from work. Does that mean you are suddenly unable to talk about challenges in your marriage, confess your sin to one another, and ask for prayer? Of course not.

Might it require an extra measure of humility that’s probably good for our soul? Absolutely. It’s always easier to be vulnerable with people who are more like us and there are certainly circumstances where wisdom dictates sharing the fine china of your life with one or two Christian brothers or sisters before you share it with the world. But the whole point of the command in verse 12 is that the world needs to “see” our good deeds. They need to be close enough to our community as a church that they’re able to perceive the beauty of Christ in the character of our community.

Does that mean people need to “belong” before they “believe”? Should we treat someone as if they’re a Christian in hope that they eventually come to Christ? Of course not. You can’t truly belong in the community of the church unless you believe Jesus. Believing always comes before belonging.

Seeing our good deeds doesn’t mean belonging before believing. It means observing before you enter. It’s the difference between a shop with no windows where you have to walk through the door before you can see what’s inside and a shop with big bay windows where seeing what’s inside compels you to enter. That’s what our community as church should be like. That’s what the Community Groups in our church should be like.

Earlier this year I gave us an individual challenge to invite at least one non-Christian friend to study the Bible with you this year. Today, I have a challenge for your Community Group. The next couple times you get together, talk about how you can spend time TOGETHER with people who don’t know Jesus. Don’t limit yourself to church events. Be creative! Last year, one of the families in our church hosted a Christmas party where they invited their non-Christian friends AND a bunch of friends from KingsWay. We had a fantastic time and it seemed like God used the evening to break down some misconceptions of what “Christians” are really like.



If you're taking your kids to the park, invite someone from church and a non-Christian friend from the neighborhood to join you. It's not about relational matchmaking. It's about recognizing that the COMMUNITY of the church is our most powerful witness to the truth of the gospel. The whole point of 1 Peter 2:9 is that declaring the gospel to people who don't know Jesus isn't something we do in isolation. It's something we do together.

Maybe your CG needs to start simply by praying together for your friends who don't know Jesus. Pray for boldness. Pray for compassion. Then look for an opportunity to love or take an interest in your neighbors together. We don't pursue authentic community and then part ways to go love our neighbors. We love our neighbors as a community. The community of the church is a gift of God's mercy designed to advance the mission of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

The people of God are defined by their relationship to Jesus. The people of God are built together by Jesus. And the people of God exist to declare the glory of Jesus. I'm especially eager for us to grow in that last point this year, friends. To that end, all of our Community Groups are reading a small red book by Mac Stiles called *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*. It's available in both English and Spanish in the book shop as well as online.

If you're part of a CG at KingsWay, be sure to pick up a copy in the next few weeks. The book is all about how we show the world what Jesus is really like as a church family. Most books about sharing your faith are all about the individual. This book is all about the church and I couldn't be more excited to work through it with you.

We live in a culture that is increasingly hostile and resistant to the claims of Christianity, which leaves us with a choice. We can either pull away, circle the wagons, and have self-righteous conversations about how "bad" it is out there. Or we can be faithful ambassadors as "sojourners and exiles" in a foreign land and show the world through the way we do life as a community that Jesus is immeasurably better and more satisfying than they could ever imagine. By the grace of God, let's choose the latter, brothers and sisters. The community we enjoy is a gift designed to advance the mission of the gospel.