

Sermon: 'Patient Farming',
James 5:1-12,
Kinross, Sunday 21st June 2026.

I don't know if you've seen those videos where they place a marshmallow in front of a child and tell them that if they can wait a minute without eating it, they'll be given another marshmallow. What unfolds is the cutest display of human behaviour, some cave immediately, taking the simplicity of an immediate treat; while some torture themselves as they hold, smell, and lick the marshmallow, everything but actually eat it; while others distract themselves, covering their eyes or singing to themselves. All of them beaming when that second marshmallow is placed in front of them.

The original experiment was published in 1970 by Mishel & Ebbesen (Walter Mishel & Ebbe B. Ebbesen, 'Attention in Delay of Gratification', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 16:2 (1970), 329-337) and sought to explore the impact of self-control on success. According to their study, the kids that were able to delay gratification the longest were frequently the most successful in life. It was those who were able to show restraint that did well in their exams, who went to university, and became CEOs. Naturally, as the discipline of Psychology continues to unpack the experiment, things are not as clear cut as that, Mishel & Ebbesen overlooked plenty of factors (Practical Psychology, *The Marshmallow Test (Stanford Experiment + Truth*, <https://youtu.be/2xMgHKxukr0?is=0HrFis1mKwflGbFl>). Yet, as an experiment it has resonated with people, such that it has shifted into popular discourse, into the world of Youtube videos and sermons. There is a sense that the ability to anticipate a future payoff for current restraint taps into something about *how we want the world to be*; that those who can be focussed and disciplined eventually reap the reward.

James wrote in chapter one that, "the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." (James 1:6b-7) While James' measure of success is radically different from Mishel & Ebbesen, for he says that "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position." (James 1:9), that "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27), and "the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). Yet, while James has a very different metric for what success might look like, he nonetheless is encouraging his readers to hold on through the challenges of life for the world that will be established by God. To put it irreverently, James is telling us to not be distracted by the marshmallow for the day of two marshmallows is coming.

It is worth remembering that based on the historical reconstruction of James' audience, the early Jewish-Christian movement connected to the church in

Jerusalem, this is a very pressing issue. I mentored this last time, but as a reminder, at this point in time, Christianity as a whole doesn't feel secure, and James' own brand of Jewish Christianity even less so. Their ethos stands in contrast to much of the dominant Roman culture around them and the religious authorities' conflict with Jesus that we read about in the Gospels is continuing beyond his death with his disciples. This leaves James' Jewish-Christian community increasingly alienated from their Jewish social circles. At the same time, their commitment to the Torah is being challenged by the amazing response to the mission to the Gentiles. On top of this, food shortages in Jerusalem make this a particularly stressful time, irrespective of any religious commitment.

So it is that James writes, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life" (James 1:12), and "be patient. Keep your hopes high, for the day of the Lord's coming is near." (James 5:8), for "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom" (James 2:5)

In this context, there is no point talking about a life of instant gratification, no point in proclaiming the merits of a quiet life in anonymity. There are no marshmallows to eat! So James encourages them to be like farmers, watching for the signs that life will flourish again. Lift up your heads and watch for the rains. It is this very longing that served the prophets of old. Next week, James will use Elijah as an example of the power of prayer, but this week it is the story of Elijah from 1 Kings 19 that perhaps most comes to mind; the story of a prophet sitting under a bush to pray, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4) It is the story of Job, sitting upon the ashes of his former life, stubborn in his belief that he does not deserve this fate (Job 2:8-9). Lift up your heads, says James, and wait for the rain. Watch for the coming of the Lord, who will show them to be in the right, as he did for the prophets, who were ever suspected and disliked, and yet, over time, have been recorded as the very mouthpieces of God.

I think it is difficult for us to fully get behind this kind of 'vindication theology', it sounds almost like longing for a cosmic 'I told you so' moment at the end of time. We view people who like to point out that they were right all along as smug, we all do it but we hate to receive it. What's more it is this kind of thinking that so annoyed Marx when he wrote that "Religious suffering is...the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. [It] is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." (Marx, *Critique of Hegel*). To Marx's mind, delayed gratification in this form, far from predicting future success, simply dulled people to the injustice of their lives.

However, I wonder if our lukewarm reception of this 'vindication theology' is simply because we aren't in need of it? Just like the Marshmallow Test failed to explore why there might be good reasons for eating the marshmallow straight away, in a

converse way, we fail to grasp the importance of vindication because, broadly speaking, we are not oppressed. We are not in need of a cosmic 'I told you so' moment because we are able to trivialise the conflict we receive as Christians within the context of the abundance of our rain soaked land and yet this same way of thinking that we can so easily brush off becomes good news for those who are hemmed in all sides, who find themselves sat beneath a bush, exhausted and despondent.

This is where I would like to bring in James' seemingly random interjections, because our reading today not only tasks its readers to wait for the day of the Lord, it also uses that same event to motivate a positive way of living together.

"Do not complain against one another, my friends, so that God will not judge you. The Judge is near, ready to appear" (James 5:9) and then, "Above all, my friends, do not use an oath when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Say only "Yes" when you mean yes, and "No" when you mean no, and then you will not come under God's judgment" (James 5:12). These appear with very little logic within this train of thought about patient farmers and steadfast prophets, and they may have been just that, random thoughts that came to mind, but it is interesting to see them as the deepening of this vindication theology. For they call people into community with one another. Do not spend your time quarrelling with one another. Live in simple honesty with each other, acting with integrity. Let your "Yes" be "Yes".

With this in mind, our reception of this vindication theology can be lukewarm, we can feel that we don't need this moment of justice. Yet, taught by this passage and others like it, when we live in community with one another we are ready with it. Ready to rail against oppression and injustice, our own lack of need for such a word does not inoculate us from the validity of such a need in others. In this way, our future hope for the recreation of the world becomes embedded within the life of this church. We are ready as bearers of the promises of God.

It may be that we encounter for ourselves a moment of injustice, a pain wrongly inflicted on us, from a bereavement or a diagnosis to a manipulation or abandonment. It may be that we see it on the news, when people are subject to violence or tragedy. We may encounter it when we meet people who have been given so little with which to build a life for themselves. We are attuned to the need for justice to water this earth, even as we ourselves are well irrigated. This theology, even if it doesn't resonate, still places a claim upon us.

And when there is stress in our lives, as there inevitably will be, we can draw upon these verses from James. For there is good news, if the circumstances of your existence make you say to yourself, "Life isn't fair", you'd be right. We say this not in a callous dismissal of your situation but a response of solidarity. To live in a community that understands this, I hope provides some comfort. To be amongst

people who are not inoculated to the suffering of others is a whole different place to live. Yet through the injustice inflicted upon Jesus we are being shown a way in which the world is being made new, through the valley of death we are being promised green pastures. In serving the grieving, the marginalised, and the abused, we are speaking the truth of James' claims, "Keep your hopes high, for the day of the Lord's coming is near." (James 5:8). In this way we share comfort with the grieving, peace for the marginalised, and freedom for the abused as has been promised in Jesus Christ our Lord. As we look up and watch for the rains, we see them fall on all those who wait for the Lord.

Amen.

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