



James 5:1-6 Devastating Warnings to the Rich

February 28, 2016

Text: James 5:-1-6

Initial thoughts upon reading this text...

- Whoa! This is arguably the toughest language in this epistle!
- Yikes! Whatever these rich folks were doing, they were soundly and uncompromisingly rebuked!
- Hmmm! Relatively speaking, our entire nation is “rich.” How much of these warnings apply? How badly do we need to have a biblical view of wealth? I say, “**Badly!**”

One of my favorite commentators, writes:

In some of the most searching and piercing sections of his letter, James now launches into a denunciation of the sins of the rich. The words fall like hammer-blows, blunt and unsparring. In fact, the denunciation is so strong, that these verses are seldom preached on. James is here seen in the role of the prophet of social justice. He cries out again of the failure of the rich to use their money for the alleviation of human need. He condemns those who have become rich by exploiting their workers. He rebukes their use of wealth for self-indulgence and luxurious living. Finally, he pictures the rich as arrogant oppressors of the righteous. - William MacDonald

I agree. There is no way to sugarcoat this. The rich to whom he was speaking were oppressing the poor, and it frankly, stank in the nostrils of God.

A Biblical View of Wealth

Before we walk through the verses, being reminded of God’s view of wealth might be helpful:

1. First, **everything** belongs to God. We own nothing.
 - *Ps 24:1 - The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.*
2. We are simply stewards, or managers, of what belongs to another. Therefore, we must be found faithful. (Lk 12:42-48, 16:1-13; 1 Cor 4:2)
3. Wealth, like everything else, must be used for God’s glory! (Gen 1:26-28; Col 3:17)
 - *Prov 3:9-10 - Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.*
 - “Being a wise manager or steward is a part of taking dominion and advancing Christ’s rule. Therefore, money is to be used like every other tool: to establish, push forward, and promote his rule” *The Playbook pg 137.*
4. Money, like any other tool, is **amoral**. It is neither good nor evil. The love of it however...
 - *1 Tim 6:6-10 - But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.*
5. As we just read, those with or without much resources should still be categorized by **contentment**.
 - *Php 4:11-13 - Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every*

circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

- Contentment actually helps foster the next area of biblical wealth...
6. Those with means must be **generous**.
 - *1 Tim 6:17-19 - As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.*
 - **To whom much is given much is required** is a principle we find in Luke 12:48.
 - But saints, PLEASE understand that biblically, God commands generosity, not stealing. The rich must not steal from the poor and the poor must not steal from the rich. "You shall not steal! (Ex 20:15)
 7. We must never place our **trust** in money! (1 Tim 6:17) Money always competes with God for a place in our hearts..
 - *Lk 16:11-13 - If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*

So we are clear, being wealthy IS NOT a sin. But wealth, like any blessing or gift from God, carries certain responsibilities...

Rom 12:4-8 - For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

James 5:1-6

Verse 1 - "...Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming on you."

- First, whether James is talking to the rich who are claiming to be Christians or some other group isn't entirely clear. He's been talking to Jewish believers throughout, but some commentators believe he pivots here to the "religious" or pagan rich. In either case, the lessons of the language for all are unmistakable.
- It also isn't totally clear which "miseries" are in view: the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (20-30 years from this writing, viewed by many as "the last days" here) or the judgment all will face before God.
- **But the point is hard to miss: during the time of judgment, your wealth cannot save you!**
- James is essentially saying, "Those who dared use their temporary advantages to hurt and defraud others will, on that day, be filled with misery and pain, shame and remorse. You have done that! Therefore, weep and howl!"
- MacDonald writes that in that day, "They would see that they had been unfaithful stewards. They would wail over the opportunities they had missed. They would mourn over their covetousness and selfishness. They would be convicted about their unfair employment

practices. They would see the sin of seeking security in material things rather than in the Lord. They would shed hot tears over the way they had indulged themselves to the full.”

Verse 2 - “Riches have rotted; garments are moth-eaten..”

- Oh, friends, the **futility** of “blessings now!” thinking to which we are so acquainted and upon which we base so much preaching and ministry! Oh, Lord, help us see the temporal nature of worldly possessions about which we stress and fight!
- All money will rot and our wardrobe’s clothes will be moth-eaten! This is an issue of perspective! He condemns the sin of **hoarding**. Possessions will not survive this life!
- I say again, **this earth is not our home!** We should not become so comfortable here. Let us be good stewards out of love and obedience, but let us also guard against **idolatry!**

Verse 3 - “Gold and silver have corroded...” “Laid up treasure in the last days...”

- They ironically laid up treasure in what James called the “last days.” In other words, all their wealth, which they apparently did some sinning to get, will not only NOT save them, but will contribute to their condemnation! (“...evidence against you”)
- The image is of something as precious as gold and silver rusting. Although they do not rust under normal conditions, what is coming upon these people will be so awful that all that is beautiful will be destroyed. All that they trusted in will be tarnished and shown to be impotent to save. And it will be obvious that it is God’s **judgment!**
- “Eat your flesh like fire.” The eating of flesh and consuming with fire is almost always “judgment” language in Scripture. Again, observe the metaphoric irony. The very thing they trusted in (gold and silver) will contribute to the suffering. When they at last see what their selfishness did to others in the sight of God, “it would be a scalding, scorching experience.” -WM

Verse 4 - “Fraud...crying out against you...”

- Here is the condemnation more specifically. The rich to whom this is addressed took sinful advantage of those who worked for them.
- Although the workers cried out in distress, the rich did not repent. Their cries reached “**The Lord of Hosts!**”
- This title in the Old Testament, Jehovah Sabaoth, shows God as the **Lord of the Armies of Heaven**. It is a title that shows God as powerful and victorious over His enemies.

*Isa 9:6-7 - For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the **LORD of hosts** will do this.*

- The point is this: God will **fight** for the widow and orphan, the disaffected and poor, the righteous outcasts. Heaven sees this idolatry and isn’t pleased. They will be vindicated, if not in this life, in the life to come.

Verse 5 - “You have lived on earth in luxury...fattened your hearts in the day of slaughter...”

- James strongly rebukes the “religious rich” for living in luxury WHILE defrauding others. He calls out their sin of self-indulgence, made all the more egregious because many who would read this epistle claim to know God.

- And now, just as a farmer looks for the fattest, choicest lamb to kill and eat, likewise the rich, who are “fat in heart” with **pride** will be chosen for slaughter.

Verse 6 - “Condemned and murdered the righteous...He does not resist you.”

- The treatment of just, righteous people by these particular rich was as unto condemnation and murder, perhaps not just figuratively, but also literally.
- It’s hard not to see a parallel to Christ here, who was also condemned and murdered... and who also did not resist.

Applications:

1. Let us search our hearts, as “rich people,” for our attitudes concerning wealth. Are we saving or hoarding? Are we generous or stingy?
2. Let us consider those who we hire and have financial influence over. Are we treating them fairly and honorably?
3. Let us trust in the *Lord of Hosts* when we are mistreated by those with advantage. “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord. Therefore let us not wish evil upon anyone.
4. Let us ask the Lord this question: “Are we trusting in our wealth?” Let us listen closely for the answer.
5. Let us consider our standard of living, our luxuries and self-indulgences. Let us wrestle with the reality of the crushing poverty around the world. Many of the afflicted are our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Prayer:

Lord...relatively speaking, we in this nation are wealthy. We are also your children. Money is not our god. You alone are our LORD and King. Show us how to reflect your love and your gospel with money and resources. May the blood of your Son...His death, burial, and resurrection empower and direct our money decision and every other decision! Rebuke us when needed as you have called us to a life of generosity and integrity. Show us how to be content and how to serve others. Let us see applications within our own lives for these prophetic warnings.

In Jesus’ name, amen.