
“Like Fat Cows In the Slaughter House”

JAMES 5:1-6

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

It’s not about how many possessions you have, but about how much your possessions have of you that matters.

The modern American dream is a lie. It promises fulfillment, purpose, and security by accumulating as much wealth as possible and living in as much luxury as possible. It fails to deliver, though. Those who live luxurious, self-indulgent lives with little to no concern for others or for how the Lord would have them invest His resources into His Kingdom work have a rude awakening coming. There’s going to be a great reversal of fortune in eternity. We need wisdom from above when it comes to walking that line of providing legitimate needs for ourselves and our families and living in self-indulgence.

INTRODUCTION

Turn in your bibles to James 5:1-6, page 1013 in the bible in the chair in front of you.

Before we jump in, a word of caution because I know my natural tendency when it comes to the subject of wealth is to exempt myself and listen for other people. I’m glad we covered the prohibition against judgmentalism last Sunday because what you might find yourself doing is immediately inserting your richer friends and family members into the category of the rich in this passage and by doing so, silence the voice of the Holy Spirit who is saying in reality, “you are the one I’m trying to speak to.” Let’s practice some spiritual integrity and approach this passage of scripture asking the Lord to reveal to us where we fall short and trust Him to deal with other people.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

James said in **verse 1, Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.** Is he speaking to Christians in the church? Unbelievers in the church? Unbelievers in the world? He did speak in second person, saying **you rich**, implying the audience would hear. Who else would hear the letter read to them? James knew there were false converts in his church. Perhaps this is another test of faith for those in the church.

SPIRITUAL THERMOMETER

How you handle your money is a pretty good thermometer of your spiritual temperature. Jesus uses money as the chief alternative to God in Matthew 6:24, *“No one 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.”*

I think Jesus knew wealth is so alluring because it promises to do what God does. It promises to fulfill, secure, provide, protect. Instead, it enslaves and disappoints. Perhaps he’s speaking to *unbelievers in the church* who say they serve God, but in reality they serve money.

Or maybe James is speaking of *unbelievers outside* the church. It was not uncommon for prophets to express condemnation on people that would never hear it. When James addressed them, he called them **you rich** as opposed to “brothers.” Plus, he summoned them to **weep and howl**, rather than repent; and he anticipated their judgment, rather than their salvation.

THREE LESSONS

No matter who James was addressing, Christians can benefit from it in a few ways. First of all, it is a poignant reminder that wicked oppressors will not oppress forever. Second, God knows and sees the plight of His people. Finally, this is a great reminder of God’s holy standard. Even if James wasn’t addressing Christians, he knew Christians would hear it. This should prevent God’s children from falling prey to the temptation of wealth and forgetting biblical principles.

A DISCLOSURE

Before we move any further, I want to state that this is not an indiscriminate attack on wealth. It’s not sinful to be successful. If you scroll through biblical history there were plenty of people who were extremely wealthy and honored the Lord. The issue is not having possessions, it is being possessed by what you have. It is not having money, but loving money that creates issues.

Paul told Timothy, *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils...” 1 Timothy 6:10* He went on to say a few verses later, *“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.” 1 Timothy 6:17*

Paul could have prohibited wealth, but he didn’t. Instead, he told the rich to not set their hope in their wealth, but on God. Then he acknowledged it is God who provides us everything to what? To enjoy! There’s nothing wrong with receiving what God has given you and enjoying it. So long as your hope and your heart belongs to God, not your wealth. *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Luke 12:34*

This may not be a direct rebuke of wealth, but James speaks pretty severely to **the rich**. Why in the world would **rich** people need to **weep and howl**? Why would people who have the world’s treasures need to lament?

THE GREAT REVERSAL COMETH

James says the rich should **weep and howl** because of the **miseries that are coming**. What they’ve put their trust in is going to disappoint them when it really matters. This is exactly the message of Jesus when He told the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16.

Jesus told a story of a rich man who had all he wanted and outside his home there was a poor beggar named Lazarus. They both died and Lazarus went to Heaven where he was comforted by Abraham. The rich man went to Hades where he was in torment. The rich man begged Abraham to give him some relief, but he could not because of a permanent chasm between them. Abraham replied to the

rich man that in this life he received his good things and Lazarus bad. “But now he is comforted and you are in anguish.” Abraham said. The great reversal cometh and woe to **the rich**.

James is so confident of **the miseries** that will come upon the rich that he speaks as if it has already taken place. It’s as good as done. He said in **verse 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.** ^{3a} **Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire...**

James identified three main sources of wealth – agricultural riches (land and produce), fine wardrobes, and precious metals. James predicts total destruction of all the things that mattered to them. Their harvested grains, stockpiled in big barns, have rotted. It stinks and is filled with worms. Their elaborate wardrobes are dinner for moths. Their **gold and silver** is corroded. It’s all useless. Gold doesn’t rust, but God’s judgment will rob it of its value.

Rather than secure them, the **corrosion** of their wealth is going to **be evidence against** them. It’s going to be a demonstrable illustration of the futility of riches. They hoarded up their treasure thinking that in it they have security to guard against the future.

Their corroded gold serves only to multiply the weight of judgment against them. It’s going to shout how unwise they were to trust in it. The fact that it corroded suggests it was not being put to any good use. Wealth invested in God’s kingdom is said to yield a great return; hoarded wealth doesn’t even hold its value.

Not only is wasted wealth going to witness against the rich, it’s going to **eat your flesh like fire**. What a vivid way of speaking, James! That’s judgment language. They will be consumed by their own wealth. It will do the exact opposite of what it was intended. The rich think they are securing their own well-being but are in fact securing their own destruction.

Usually, biblical rebukes to the rich are rebukes not on possession of wealth, but of misuse of it. It’s the hoarding up and the self-centeredness of wealth that gets the rich into so much trouble with God. While His children are suffering all around the rich, they’re so focused on themselves that they could not care less about meeting the needs of others and bringing glory to God. It creates a sort of spiritual rot in their soul.

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The bible doesn’t prohibit prudent financial planning or providing for the reasonable needs of your family. In fact, it condemns the man who fails to do so. But the bible is clear that when your primary orientation toward wealth is self-focused, you’re in for a world of hurt because the Lord gives us wealth in order to put it to use to advance His Kingdom.

In Matthew 6, Jesus told us to not be anxious about the necessities of life, but instead seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Then Jesus said “all these things will be added to you.” Prioritize God’s kingdom and seek His will, using everything you have for His glory and the good of others and watch Him to provide for you.

Jesus also warned, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* Matthew 6:19-21

The problem James rebukes is that the rich were not seeking God’s kingdom and they weren’t storing up treasure in Heaven. Instead, he says, **You have laid up treasure in the last days...living in luxury and in self-indulgence.** What follows in the rest of the passage is two sets of parallels, each with an indictment about *evil* attitudes toward themselves and evil *activity* toward others.

EVIL ATTITUDES AND EVIL ACTIVITY

I want to deal first with the evil activity and conclude with the evil attitudes. James says in **verses 4 & 6 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts...⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.**

A small group of wealthy landowners had accumulated much of the arable land. These landowners had **laborers** who maintained their properties – **mowing their fields** and **harvesting** their crops. They **defrauded** their laborers by refusing to pay them their **wages**. The poor laborers lived day by day, so to not be paid at the end of today likely meant their family didn't eat tomorrow.

The rich were doing exactly what God forbids in Deuteronomy 24:14-15, "*You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin.*"

To make matters worse, James suggests that this was happening at **harvest** time, a time when barns were full and overflowing. As the wealthy basked in their riches and had an abundance, the ones who brought in the harvest went hungry.

Listen to the tragically poetic language James used to rebuke these people. **Behold, the wages of the laborers...are crying out against you** which reminds me of Genesis 4:10, where God tells Cain that the blood of Abel cries out from the ground. Not only is their corroded gold and silver going to rise up as evidence that they were selfish hoarders, now we read that the wages they **kept back by fraud**, is crying out against them and is joined together with **the cries of the harvesters**. Like a pitiful duet, the two cries reach up **to the ears of the Lord of hosts**.

The rich may think no one can do anything to them, that they have the position and the power to get away with their fraud. But God is watching, and His ears are attentive to the cries of the poor. He is aware of the schemes of the rich, how they use their wealth only for their own pleasure without any concern for the people in need around them.

TWO TRUTHS

Two things we can glean here: First, sometimes we must settle for justice in God's timing, but we should take courage that God *is* a God of justice. When you are defrauded and the world is stacked against you, remember that God sees, and God's justice is far superior to ours. Trusting Him to be our vindication is not an empty pipedream. He *will* be our vindication. The great reversal is coming.

Which brings me to the second lesson. The great reversal is coming for the self-absorbed, too. They will regret it. God sees the suffering of his people and He sees who causes it. James calls God the **Lord of hosts** which is the same title David used as he faced down Goliath. He is the God of Heavenly armies and He's on the side of the underdog; you want to be, too!

James didn't mince words! He indicted the rich for having **Condemned and murdered the righteous person**. By depriving people who depended on their daily wage to live, they effectively served as judge, jury, and executioner. Relative to their work and their wages, the laborers were **righteous**. They were giving an honest day's work and deserved an honest day's pay.

I cannot help but see the parallel with Jesus, *THE righteous person*. Judas sold Jesus out for silver. The Jews handed him over to Rome, falsely condemning Him, the Romans murdered Him and did He

not resist them. So, take heart, child. If you've been abused, oppressed, defrauded, you are in company with Jesus. But woe to those who are on the other side of the equation.

While there may be some here who really need to hear how God feels about fraudulent oppressors, most of us probably resonate more with the laborers than with the independently wealthy. However, we can also find some common ground with the rich as well. Perhaps more than we would like. This is where the evil attitudes come in. Though we may never have the power to defraud laborers, we most certainly face temptation to adopt the self-focused attitude that plagued **the rich**.

CLOSER TO HOME THAN WE MAY THINK

James said to the rich in verses **3 and 5** **You have laid up treasure in the last days...⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.** Isn't this sort of the American dream, though? Save up a bunch of money. Retire as wealthy and as early as possible. Live in as much luxury as you can while ensuring you'll live in even more luxury in retirement. Fatten your hearts. Satisfy every whim you have! Pursue the bigger, better, nicer, newer everything? Isn't that sort of the heartbeat of our culture?

Be careful because an evil attitude always comes before evil activity. We should never presume that their self-absorbed attitude, which led to defrauding laborers is beyond us. We should never imagine we're immune to the spiritual rot of self-centered wealth hoarding.

Notice how James makes a subtle contrast here. **You have lived on the earth in luxury.** What do you expect James implies when he says **on the earth?** What's coming next for the rich who **lived in luxury on the earth?** The great reversal - the torment of hell. When James said they lived in luxury, he meant they lived soft, pampered lives. They bought whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it. They didn't have a care in the world that they didn't mask with wealth. But to live in luxury is not Christian because it's selfish, it's not meaningful, and it's actually quite deceptive.

You ever wonder why in the wealthiest nation in the world we have such unhappy people? Mental illness, depression, suicide, hopelessness are all endemic to our culture. We've been sold a bill of goods. The modern American dream is a lie. We're fattening out hearts like fat cows in the slaughterhouse! Not a pretty picture, is it?

That's the image James appeals to, though. When he says **the last days...in a day of slaughter** he's referring to judgment day. The bible frequently used the illustration of animals being fattened for the slaughter to refer to the coming judgment of God. What a foolish thing to waste your wealth on yourself, to completely disregard God's Kingdom and the needs of others. To be so self-centered with your wealth that you neglect God is a fool's paradise; it feels nice for a while, but a day of reckoning is coming.

A WORD TO DADS ON FATHER'S DAY

Fathers, I know this is a difficult message to hear on a day that some of you are going to be lavished with gifts and great meals. It's good to spoil our loved ones on special days, so enjoy it! But I'm actually grateful that this message fell on Father's Day because dads you have so much impact, for good or evil, when it comes to your family's finances and where you put your hope.

Dads, you have the opportunity to reshape generational attitudes about wealth and generosity and trusting the Lord. Your kids are watching to see what right looks like. We need wisdom from above, men, because the last thing you want to do is teach your kids to fatten their hearts for the slaughter. Some questions that deserve honest reflection...

Am I hoarding money rather than seeking God's kingdom first?

Am I prioritizing my plans over God's?

Am I concerned about reaching the lost the way others were who reached me?

Am I supporting the ministry that supports me and my family?

Is there anything I say "no" to in order to say "yes" to God's kingdom?

Or do I have the mindset that if there's something left over once I've met all my needs, I'll consider giving some to support the ministry of Wildwood and meet the needs of others?

Wherever you're leading, dads, there's a pretty good chance your kids are going to follow. Where will they end up? Hear John MacArthur's warning, "Blind to heaven, deaf to warnings of hell, insensitive to the impending day of slaughter and judgment, the unrepentant, selfish, indulgent hoarders stumble blindly to their doom. Unless they repent, James warns, they will experience eternal damnation."

I don't want that for you. And I know none of you fathers wants that for your kids. I want instead that you and your future generations be like the man Jesus described in Matthew 13:44 *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*

IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD THAT PRECIOUS TO YOU?

Does the Kingdom of God have your heart, dads? Is it the most precious and valuable thing in the whole world? Is it worth more than all your possessions combined? If not, brothers, ask the Lord to open your eyes and let you see it for what it is...because it is worth it!

By His grace and for His glory!

Pastor Brian

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