

Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2011
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Woe to the Rich
James 5:1-6

1 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. 2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you. 7 Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

1. Woe to rich oppressors

The concerns of James 5 seem far removed from us. What does his word for rich oppressors, from long ago, have to do with us? First, James gives us reasons to obey that always apply. Second, oppression may not be so distant as we think.

One summer, I worked on a maintenance crew for a food processing company. The crew was young and naïve; we received the minimum wage. Our work was dangerous, but there was no training, no safety measures. Every member of the crew suffered an injury. The boss pressed us to hurry back to work, hinting that we might lose our jobs otherwise. We were too young and needy to see that our employer was exploiting us. We were at the mercy of the boss, and he knew it. The exploitation James describes was much worse - severe enough to destroy people. James begins with a rough summons to coming judgment, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (5:1).

For most of his letter, James spoke to fellow believers. He always addresses "my brothers, my dear brothers." Now he denounces "rich people"? Why? What makes him think they will listen? They aren't in his church, are they?

When James rebukes hoarding, oppression, indulgence, and financial violence, he condemns a sign of the worldly 'wisdom' he described in 3:13-4:3. Abuse of wealth is akin to envy, coveting, strife, and grasping. Oppression of the poor is the last sin in a series of offenses against gospel humility.

Remember: James presents the gospel by showing that no one passes the tests of true religion. "True religion" controls the tongue, looks after widows and orphans, and is unpolluted by the world (1:26-27). But we forget the needy, speak harshly and the materialism of the world pollutes us. So James calls us to humility: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" and "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:6, 10).

James names several sins of pride, acts that are contrary to gospel humility: We appoint ourselves as judge and malign our brothers (4:11-1). We make presumptuous plans: I'll go to that city and make money (4:13-17). And we use financial power to oppress the poor and indulge ourselves (5:1-6). Oppression of the poor is a serious offense. Many sins are thoughtless or a slip. But oppression is deliberate, a systematic perversion of justice. Wage fraud and condemnation of the innocent are legal abuses (5:4-6). Wealthy oppressors pervert both economic and legal systems.

We wonder who these people might be. Are they Christians? There are reasons to think so. First, who would hear James' letter but believers who assembled for worship or fellowship? Second, Christians are prone to the temptations of their day. It's all too easy to follow our peers. The poor tend to live like their poor friends and the rich tend to follow their rich friends. So often, we do what our peers do and forget the Bible. At that time, the rich put their wealth in three places: clothes, metals and land – and James mentions clothes, gold, and abuse of land. We do tend to act like our friends, don't we? So James warns wealthy believers about temptations they face.

But there are also reasons to doubt that James spoke to believers. First, he calls them "you rich" not "brothers" (5:1 vs. 5:7, 12). When he exposes their sin, he summons them to "howl," not to repent (cf. 4:6-10). And he anticipates their judgment, not their salvation. James can be pretty rough with his church. But he expects them to pray and repent when they sin (4:13-17).

James 5:1-6 sounds more like a blast from a prophet of old. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos blasted Egypt or Babylon even though no Egyptians or Babylonians heard them. They addressed people who were not there. Why? Today, speakers at political rallies address political leaders who aren't in attendance. They condemn absent foes in order to inform and motivate their allies who are there. The prophetic oracles against foreign oppressors did three things:

1. They promise that the oppression will not last forever. God defends the righteous and punishes the wicked who oppress them.
2. They comfort God's people. The Lord knows their suffering (Isa 40:1-2, Jer 31:10-14, Zech 1:14-17). He will wipe the tears from their eyes (Rev 21:4). Calvin: when the faithful hear the "miserable end of the rich," they see they should not envy their fortune, but trust God to avenge the wrongs they suffered and bore calmly.
3. They reveal God's standards. When James says that hoarding, oppression, and wage fraud lead to judgment, he teaches us to "keep a healthy distance from the seductive power exercised by wealth and the luxuries of civilization."

So James speaks to everyone - oppressors and believers. When prophets or apostles declare God's standards, all should listen. We want to know God's ways for they are loving, just and life-giving. But secular people should at least be curious. They may be attracted to a better life, to a God who protects the weak.

Even if we are not ripe for judgment, we need to know how God sees the life that leads to judgment. And no Christian is entirely immune to the sins James describes. Few of us are certifiably rich. Few have the social and legal power to defraud workers with impunity (5:1-4). But everyone is prone to use power to gain advantages. We are tempted to self-indulgence. So we need James' warnings.

2. Warnings about the abuse of riches (5:1)

James tells the rich to "weep and howl" (English Standard Version (ESV)), for judgment is coming. James doesn't condemn riches per se. God's family always had some rich believers (1:10). Many heroes of the faith were wealthy: Abraham, Joseph, Job, David, Solomon, Joseph of Arimathea. Riches are not evil.

Yet Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt 19:24). The desire for wealth can be insatiable. "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (Eccles 5:10).

If wealth and security are our gods, if we simply must have more, the pursuit of wealth becomes lawless. We can think we're justified in doing whatever it takes to acquire it. Revelation 18 explains why God judges cities like Babylon and Rome as they pursue wealth. First, John says the traders don't genuinely care about their partners. When the kings who traded with Babylon hear the city has fallen, they "stand far off" (18:9-10). They weep, but they don't come near to help or to comfort. They weep for themselves, for the loss of profit.

Second, merchants would sell anything to Babylon while the city still stood: "cargoes of gold, silver, fine linen, ivory, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of incense, wine and olive oil cattle and sheep and bodies and souls of men" (18:12-13). Everything is for sale in a world ruled by the desire for wealth – where money and power are the gods.

Every thing was for sale because nothing satisfied the craving for more (Eccles 1:8-18, 2:4-11). The thirst for wealth is insatiable because it's a false god and false gods never finally satisfy. It's like sea water – the longer we drink, the thirstier we get.

Some Christians have proposed an "economics of enough." There are two foundational principles. First, business leaders should determine the minimal income and resources one needs to live and, if we set wages, to pay everyone at least that.

Second, leaders consult and set a maximum level of consumption which they agree not to exceed. If they have more they will invest it or give it away. Everyone says, "That will never work. People in this culture won't voluntarily pay a living wage and deny themselves more." OK then, let's not worry about our culture, let's talk about us, here. Will we pay a living wage?

In 2000, a social critic said "malls are our cathedrals, utopias of consumption." Today, economists wish people would go to that cathedral more often, spend more money and stimulate the economy. What happens at the mall? We meet some needs. We also buy things to create a persona based on clothes, electronics, and décor. We buy things that meet needs, give pleasure and project an image.

Wealth only temporarily quenches the soul's longing for meaning. Acquiring wealth to find meaning is like drinking coffee to cure exhaustion. It masks the problem, it doesn't cure it. Riches can't bring happiness. Those who live for wealth think all would be well if they had more of the right things. So servants of wealth work harder and harder at the wrong thing.

The kitchen of the Vanderbilt's summer "cottage" in Newport, R. I. is bigger than an average house. It took a staff of forty to maintain the house and grounds. But what did it gain them?

But do possessions gain us lasting respect? In an achievement-based society, when performance falters, we lose our rank. But in God's society, respect is permanent. First, we have inalienable value because God created us in God's image. Second, by grace, God accepts us whatever our flaws.

James' warning to the rich is, properly speaking, irrelevant for believers. We live for God, not wealth. Yet we need these warnings because we forget the gospel in the tide of the world with its Bugatti sports cars – \$2,000,000, zero to sixty in 2.5 seconds, marble counters, and hyperbaric chambers – only \$60,000 used.

That's why God sent prophets like Amos to cry "woe." Israel claimed to belong to God, yet if they lie on lazy couches, eat and drink like gluttons, and never mourn their sins, the revelry ends with judgment (6:1-7). So too many say they belong to Christ, but is it real? So we may need James' warnings.

Hoarding riches (5:2-3)

Material wealth flies from our hands. It easily spoils, so hoarding is senseless. Yet if money is our God, we'll try to hoard. But money is a weak god, so it will fail. "Your wealth has rotted," says James. Moths eat fine clothes while they lie in storage. Gold and silver "corrode," literally "rust." This echoes Jesus (Matt 6:19, cf. Isa 50:9), who says rust and moth destroy our treasures.

James says gold and silver rust - although everyone knew they did not - to make a point. Diamonds, gold and silver do have intrinsic worth, but we have also agreed to ascribe worth to them. But their value can disappear. It's also spiritually dangerous to hoard treasures. They "testify against you" if you hoard.

Paul says we should use wealth in three ways: to meet basic needs for food and covering, to enjoy, and to be generous to others (1 Tim 6:8,17,18). Proverbs says that the wise save up for needs we can foresee. "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has" (Prov. 21:20).

Hoarding is different. Hoarders trust in wealth rather than God (Matt 6:19-21). They love wealth more than God or people. They brood over possible economic catastrophe, but ignore the certain catastrophe of facing God's judgment without faith. On the last day, their useless metals will "eat [their] flesh like fire."

This is especially serious since we are "in the last days:" The time of judgment (Jas 5:3, Isa 2:2) and the time of Jesus and salvation (Acts 2:17, Heb 1:2). It's folly to hoard wealth when salvation has come and judgment is near.

Fraud and oppression (5:4)

Some say the Bible teaching on the new creation blunts the believer's passion for justice in this world. But for James, the future doesn't blunt social criticism, it inspires it. James' emphasis on future retribution doesn't blind him to current social problems, it "strengthens his social conscience." Because judgment is coming, we must treat the poor well today. The poor cry out and their cries "have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (5:4). He will defend the oppressed.

James has a specific complaint against the rich: they have defrauded their field laborers of their wages: "The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you." (5:4). This could mean:

- They pay, but after unjust delay (Lev 19:13, Deut 24:14-15, Prov. 11:24).
- They pay less than they agreed, less than a living wage.
- They refuse to pay at all (Jer. 22:13). They make their countrymen "work for nothing."

God's law says masters should pay fair wages to day laborers lest he and his family go hungry. The godless rich think nothing can stop them. But the poor cry out to God and "the Lord hears the needy" and stands "at the right hand of the needy" (Ps 69:33, 109:31). This is a social principle and a gospel principle. Jesus blesses the poor and preaches the good news to them (Luke 6:20, 4:18; Matt 11:5).

We may think oppression happened long ago or far away. Are you sure? The Wall Street Journal raises doubts. American farmers still hire day laborers and migrant workers. Do they get a living wage? Health care? An education for their children? How do we treat our nannies? Do we pay them for eight hours, but expect help all day? What about corporate internships? Young adults work for free or for \$4 an hour in hope of getting a job later. What about companies that hire part-time workers to shed benefits?

What fills the sports news daily? Realignment of football and basketball conferences. A \$300 million TV contract between Texas and ESPN. What's the harm? Schools get money to promote education. But what about the players? They get an education. But do they graduate? Do they get a real degree that leads to a job? If they are seriously injured on the field, how long will the university stay with them? You may not like the answer. The question of fair wages remains.

You say, "I have no power." But some of us do have authority over wages and benefits. We have an obligation to pay fairly, so our employees don't live on the edge of poverty. And all of us have a voice, to speak for justice.

Self-indulgence (5:5)

James tells the rich, "you have lived... in luxury and self-indulgence" and "fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter." The original says "you luxuriate (*tryphao*) and "indulge" (*spatalao*). The word "**luxuriate**" does not always suggest wickedness. The same word can describe the abundance and peaceful ease God grants his people (Neh 9:25, Isa 66:11). But "indulge" describes those who live for pleasures, with no concern for others (1 Tim 5:6, Ezek 16:49).

They live this way "on earth" because they think nothing of God in heaven. They live for pleasure and forget the needy (Luke 12:13-21, 16:19-31). The Bible never censures the rich per se. But it does say that those who live for riches now will suffer sorrow later. James says they have fed themselves in "the day of slaughter."

This may mean they do nothing on "the day of slaughter" - when the poor are slaughtered. More likely he means that they fatten themselves up for the day of their slaughter. They are like animals, stuffing themselves with grass and grain, heedless that every bite moves them closer to the slaughterhouse.

Scientists have attached sensors to cattle as they walk to the slaughterhouse. The sensors show that the animals are calm. They don't suspect their fate. This will comfort tender-hearted steak lovers. The cattle don't know what lies at the end of the ramp. God has not written eternity into their hearts.

But we should know. God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Eccles 3:11). It's unsettling to watch people pile up wealth so they can buy more things, more stimulation. Eternity is coming. We will meet the Judge. We must be prepared.

Violence (5:6)

The rich indulge themselves. Further, "You have condemned, you have murdered the righteous person. He did not resist you." (5:6). "Condemn" suggests the law court. The rich used power and connections to manipulate the legal system to deprive the poor of wages or lands. And what is this murder? Direct killing? Or is it the wounds of hunger, even starvation?

Some notice that James mentions murder of the righteous person, adding, "He does not resist you" (ESV). Since "the righteous" is singular, we wonder if James means Jesus. Certainly, Jesus is the great case of a righteous man murdered. Judas sold, the priests condemned, and the Romans murdered the innocent man, who did not resist. Jesus, the innocent man, died in the greatest injustice of all history. Yet God vindicated him and honored him, by raising him from the dead and declaring him Lord, Savior, the author of life, for all who join him by faith.

Jesus is the righteous man and he was killed in the most tragic case of false condemnation. But I have to confess that I'm not sure that's what James means to say in 5:6. I am certain that James wants to point us to Christ as the final answer to the sin of oppression of the poor (1 Sam 19:5, Ps 64:4, Isa 5:23, Jer 19:23). Many laws protect poor widows, orphans, slaves, farmers. Jubilee laws return lands in the 50th year to prevent massive accumulation of land that impoverished common folk (Lev 25).

The disciple will respond to the sin of oppression in two ways. First, we will examine ourselves to see if we are hoarding wealth. James' warnings will help us keep a healthy distance from the seductive power exercised by wealth.¹ We will also ask, "Am I mistreating anyone? Even if it's legal?"

We know that we can't put an end to oppression in this life. We can work and protest and pray, but it may continue. So James says be patient: "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near... The Judge is standing at the door." He will do justice. While we work for justice now, He will set all things right.

That does not make lazy or indifferent today. No, if we know the future, it affects the present. The future informs the present. Take the value of gold. It currently sells for \$1600 per ounce, down from a high of \$1800. What if you owned 100 ounces of gold and you knew it will soon be worth 100 per ounce? Knowledge of the future will compel you to act. You will sell! Guess what? I know the future. I know that one day your gold will be worthless. So act like it. Don't hoard it. Use it. Give it away. Give to the poor and the oppressed. It's world wide communion day. Have a heart! Give to children in poor and corrupt lands. The adults may be culpable, but not the children.

At work, see commerce and wealth as God does. Wealth is good; God created this world's riches. But God warns: the desire for riches can lead to injustice, indulgence, hoarding. Enjoy some, save sensibly for the future, and give freely. This is true whether we're rich or poor.

The deep cure for misuse of wealth is to lift our eyes from material things. The Lord is coming. By faith, believers are prepared and stay prepared for that day, when we will see Jesus. When the woes and cries of this life will end and the peace of Jesus will reign. So, let us live what we believe: the pleasures of this age are good, but fleeting. Life with God lasts forever. Let's please him, serve the poor day by day.

¹ Schrage, 342