

WEALTH HAS DANGERS

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James 5:1-6

This Study Paper contains the following :-

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Introduction to the passage

These verses about the misuse of wealth follow from the warning to businessmen in the last section. There they did not refer to God in their planning. Here they ignore God in the use and abuse of their accumulated riches. There is a difference of opinion about whether or not those addressed here are Christians. Those who say they are not Christians argue that Christians could not possibly live like the people who are described here. They point to the threats of judgement here, and they think that, when James says in verse 7, “Be patient, then, brothers...”, this is in contrast to the rich ungodly people of verses 1-6. The other view is that sadly there have always been those who profess to be Christians who have allowed their wealth to lead them into the kind of attitudes and conduct that James condemns. This would be quite consistent with the purpose of this letter, as we have traced it through, to compel church members, professing Christians, to see if their lives match up to their profession. If they do not, then they must repent and reform, or they will prove that they are not true Christians, and they are on the road to judgement.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

Now listen, you rich people,

Although these verses are addressed to “you rich”, this does not mean they have nothing to say to other people. As we will see, the principle of relating our lives to God and eternity applies to both rich and poor. So does the requirement of honesty. Furthermore, if the greed of the rich is wrong, so is jealousy of the rich on the part of the poor (Prov. 30:7-9; Phil. 4:11). It would seem that many rich professing Christians known to James had the same faults, but this should not lead us to think that it is wrong for Christians to be rich. In the Old Testament, Solomon (2 Chron.1:11-12) and Job (Job 1:1-3) were very wealthy, while in the New Testament the Lord was helped by rich women (Luke 8:1-3) and was buried in a rich man’s tomb (Matt. 27:57-60). But, because of the dangers that wealth brings, Jesus himself said it was difficult to be both rich and a true Christian (Matt.19:23-26).

weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.

Weeping and wailing are the cries of mourning when the person is dead and life has finished. This is what the selfish rich ought to feel at the prospect of the just judgement of God. The misery that James warns about can take different forms. It may be a reference to the ease with which riches can lose their value, or even to the violence of robbery. The poor can be thankful that they do not have worries like that! Riches do not always bring happiness and they can be a source of dispute and discord, or they may no longer give pleasure or satisfaction to those who have them. But, in the absence of genuine repentance and submission to the Lord, the misery may be the final banishment from God’s presence at the judgement.

Verse 2

Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.

Surely James had in mind the words of Jesus (Matt.6:19-21). The rich spent their money on fine clothes (Luke 16:19). Some were so rich that their discarded garments were moth-eaten. What foolishness – feeding moths! James is reminding his readers that the rich will lose their wealth because all that they can purchase is of a temporary nature. Their riches cannot acquire for them the lasting things of eternity.

Verse 3

Your gold and silver are corroded.

Gold and silver do not rot, but their value can diminish. Or it may seem that they no longer give the enjoyment and satisfaction that once they did. Earthly treasures are in a state of irreversible decay from their beginning. Gold and silver are useless currencies in establishing a saving relationship

with Jesus Christ. Those for whom gold and silver are everything will have nothing except their sins when they stand before the judgement seat of God. Such precious metal will be of no value.

Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

The phrase “the last days” normally refers to the period between the resurrection of Jesus and his coming return to judge the world. Sometimes, as here, the focus is on the judgement towards which the whole world is moving. The exact meaning of James here is not clear, but he seems to be saying that the very rotting of the wealth that the rich are hoarding will be evidence of their greed and their abuse of God’s gifts. Such abuse will bring them into the fires of the judgement to come. We may wonder why God’s judgement comes down so heavily on hoarding. In the case of the rich being exposed by James, the sin is in the sheer greed of amassing more than they can use, and in the process of depriving others of a share. God hates all hoarding that is unfair to those less fortunate.

Verse 4

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

Here is another reason for God’s wrath. The wealth of the rich had been accumulated by dishonest means. God’s law required wages to be paid promptly (Deut. 24:14-15); this would be both honest and compassionate (see also Mal. 3:5 and Col. 4:1). Unpaid wages crying out is called “personification” – that is making things act as though they are human. This form of expression is often used in poetry, for example, in Psalm 65:13, the meadows are said to “shout for joy and sing”. James goes on to explain –

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

In order to emphasise the strength and ability of the one who hears the harvesters’ cries, James uses a title of the Lord that means “The Lord of hosts”¹ and tells us that he is sovereign over all things. This would give the utmost comfort to those who suffered, and should have struck terror into the hearts of those who had robbed them. The expression “ears of the Lord”, which is also used in Psalm 18:6, does not mean that God has a body with arms, eyes and ears. It is picture language, helping us to understand that God receives our prayers and understands our problems. We see here how important it is for us to gain our knowledge of what God is like from the way

¹ The usual word for Almighty (*pantokrator* – creator of all) is not used here but the Old Testament phrase *kurios Sabaoth*, which means “Lord of hosts”. The word host means an army and is used of God’s spiritual army – the angels in heaven and the heavenly bodies. The title of “Lord of hosts” shows the power of God and his authority as ruler over all the universe. (A Dictionary of Bible Symbols –Grace Publications).

he has told us about himself in the Bible. Some people think of God as so majestic and awesome that he cannot possibly be interested in individual people out of the millions on earth. For others God is a loving Father, but with no control over what happens in the world or over the future. The truth is expressed in one of our songs:-

He’s got the whole world in his hands,
He’s got the tiny little baby in his hands.

which means that God is very wonderful indeed! (see also Psalm 138:6).

Verse 5

You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.

The wealth of the rich made it possible for them to live with plenty all around them. Whatever they desired or whatever whim suddenly came to them, nothing was denied them. The danger in these circumstances is that they most often lead to self-indulgence, and this leads to a slackening of moral standards. The language could have been borrowed from Amos 6:4-6 or from our Lord’s parable in Luke 16:19-31.

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

The self-indulgent rich person here is likened to animals that are being fattened ready for the market and the butcher. On the very day they are due to be taken away, they will be feeding well, not realising that death is so near. This is unflattering language, but it reflects the truth that those who live without reference to God, and for whom physical pleasure is the main thing in life, are not better than the animals that have no fear of God. The big difference is that while for the animals death is the end, humans are “destined to die once, and after that to face judgement” (Heb.9:27), and death may come much sooner than they expect.

Verse 6

You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

The most probable meaning here is that robbing men of their wages had resulted in some cases in starvation and death because the victims had no means of defending themselves or of claiming their rightful dues. Wives and children may also have suffered and even died as a result. It is not an exaggeration, nor is it unjust to call this murder!



Summary

James has been writing to Christian believers on practical matters of life, to put right the mismatch of what people said they believed and how they lived. Our study of the opening six verses of chapter five deals with the practical matter of wealth.

The background could well have been the style of many Jewish businessmen, whilst the majority of readers of the letter would have been Jewish Christians. The lesson to all believers is clear. Accumulating useless wealth for selfish purposes will be judged by God as wicked. Behind what James says in these verses, is the fact that wealth or possessions are a trust from God. If we misuse them we bring misery on other people and, in the end, misery on ourselves. James cites examples of the wrong use of wealth - when workers are robbed of their wages, the rich live in luxury and people suffer and die as a result of selfish action.



Note on riches and wealth

Wealth and riches are big stumbling blocks for many Christians. The Bible does not condemn riches in themselves but constantly warns against their abuse. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Most Christian believers are unable to handle wealth without becoming affected by selfish desires. Money has ruined many a gospel work in recent years because the sudden influx of funds has caused greed, jealousies and suspicions amongst fellow-believers. There is unbiblical teaching going around, which says wealth and success are the marks of faithfulness to the Lord. The name given to this is the wealth and prosperity gospel. This is the very thing that James is warning against because we do not measure eternal things by temporal, earthly values.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Wealth – wrong and right attitudes to it

1. There is nothing wrong with the possession of wealth.

- a. Some Old Testament saints were rich such as Solomon (2 Chron. 1:11-12) and Job (Job 1:1-3; 42:12).

- b. In the New Testament, Jesus used the help of rich people (Luke 8:1-3) and was buried in a rich man's tomb (Matt.27:57-60).

2. We can have wrong attitudes to wealth.

- a. We can envy those who have possessions and even covet them. God's command is that we should not covet (Ex.20:17). We forget that those who are rich have heavy responsibilities we would not want; they often have fears and burdens we know nothing about. We also forget that riches can easily disappear.
- b. People can regard riches as something to be gained by any means. The means may be dishonest business transactions. The means may be robbing others of their just dues.

3. Wealth or lack of it can have a bad effect on us.

- a. Our Lord taught that riches can harden the heart so that it is difficult to come to repentance and to faith in him (Matt. 19:23-26).
- b. Poor people can allow their poverty to make them bitter against God.
- c. There is a pride in riches and pride in poverty – both are spiritually harmful.

4. There is a right attitude to what we have, much or little.

- a. What we have is God's gift to us – more than we deserve.
- b. What we have is God's trust to us, to be rightly used.
- c. Authorities and family (and employees, if any), have a moral claim upon us according to our ability.

The needs of our local church and of the spread of the gospel should be high in our priorities. We should show compassion on the needy (Gal.6:10).



Focus Point: Slavery

Slavery has always been a great evil and it is good that it has been condemned and banished from many parts of the world. But it still exists in societies where people are treated as no better than animals, and in such evils as child abuse in which the victims are robbed of their human dignity for the sake of sordid gain.

The Bible does not condemn slavery in direct language; rather it lays down principles which, if they are followed, make slavery impossible. One reason for this is that as history has unfolded slavery has taken different forms, so, by laying down principles, the Bible proves to be adequate for each generation and each new form of this evil.

The first and most basic principle is that all people are made by God and are made in his image. It follows that every human being is equal to every other human being in God's sight.

Flowing from this first principle comes the requirement of justice for all. There is not one person to whom justice should not be applied. Even the hardened criminal has the right to justice and so has anyone who is employed by another.

Then there is the principle of accountability of all people to God for the way we have used our lives and the way we have managed our relationships with other people. Here the requirements of love to God and love to others come into focus. We must all without exception answer to God for our dealings with our fellow-humans, and how far love and honesty have prevailed in our lives.



Over to you

What kind of impact on your society would be made by a church comprised of contented people?

Is the gaining of riches a problem in your society? Does it rub off on members of your congregation? How can this passage in James help?

Do you consider the work of the gospel suffers because of lack of funds? Is giving prominence to finance the right way of approaching gospel work?