



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

THE “POOR” RICH”: PART THREE– JAMES 5:4

COLORADO

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James 5:1-6 describes those who have great, earthly wealth but actually are poor because they have nothing more than the temporal, fleeting riches of this world. James condemns those who treasure earthly possessions over the true eternal riches found only in Jesus Christ. The miseries in James 5:1 that will come upon these will not be an earthly, temporal suffering, but rather the eternal, punishment given by Him on the coming day of judgment. These verses stand as a warning to any believer not to fall prey to those attitudes.

THE “POOR” RICH - JAMES 5:1-6

James 5:1-6 “(1) Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. (2) Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. (3) Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! (4) Behold, the pay of the laborers who moved your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. (5) You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (6) You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.”

Scripture exhorts that we are not to pile up a fortune for ourselves to spend or accumulate without regard for God and His purpose. Job 27:13-17, Psalm 39:6. God entrusts us with wealth for a purpose, His purpose. We are to use our riches for God’s glory, to help those in need and share the Gospel, win the lost and support His work! James described the first explanations for why “miseries” from James 5:1 are coming upon the wicked rich. First in James 5:2-3, he addresses wealth that is hoarded as if security for the future, but that security can only be found in Jesus Christ and wealth is meant to fulfill God’s work and accomplish His purpose. Now in James 5:4, he addresses the serious charges of the unjust gain of riches by oppressing the poor.

I. OPPRESSION OF THE POOR BY THE RICH-JAMES 5:4

James 5:4-“Behold, the pay of the laborers who moved your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.”

In these verses, James addresses the wealth that has been unjustly gained through dishonorable and unjust means. We are called to help and be generous to the poor, yet here James directly accuses these rich of actually robbing the poor and exploiting them. James 5:4 begins with “Behold”. That word is meant to get our attention for James is very direct with his accusation. His charge deserves our serious attention on the subject of unjustly gained wealth.

A. THE CRIES OF “PAY” - JAMES 5:4A

James 5:4a: “Behold, the pay of the laborers who moved your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you...”

James is not talking about how the rich deal shrewdly with each other...no, but rather the fraudulent failure of the rich to pay the poor for their work.¹ The “laborers” have harvested their landlord’s large estates and have been unjustly exploited. How? James says that you wicked rich have cheated your workers of their pay. Laborers were usually agricultural in that day and depended on their daily earnings to meet material needs. Often, they barely got by on minimal substance and needed a steady income to provide bread for their family. The “laborers” referred to the ones who cut and shocked the harvest of maybe wheat or barley, all done by hand in that day. In the Greek, “your fields” reveals and implies these were extensive and numerous fields of rich landlords. And the fact that James uses the aorist tense for “mowed your fields” shows that the work was completed and the “pay” was justly earned and due. And it is this “pay” to which James directs our attention with his charge.

This “pay” is the subject of the first part of this verse. This “pay of the laborers who moved your fields and which has been withheld by you,” has been what? It has been “withheld” from the laborers. “Withheld” in the Greek refers **not** to a payment that has been delayed, but that it has failed to be paid. It has been withheld and uncorrected. It is not a mistake by the employer but has been purposefully withheld; robbed, defrauded and cheated from the “laborer” who earned it. Of course Scripture speaks repeatedly to this injustice to the poor beginning with Malachi 3:5 where the issue of cheating workers of their pay is dealt with. Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24:14-15 also warns against such actions. So while the poor workers vastly increased the wealth of these rich landlords, they failed to pay their workers. The sentence structure clearly communicates no intention to pay the workers and make it right.

James charges the rich directly with this sin by saying that the pay of the laborers that you withheld “cries out against you.”

“cries out+Greek *%krazei*” present, active verb meaning to shout, to scream, shriek, loud screams and can be used of inanimate things crying out against injustice.

This verb dramatically portrays that the unjustly, withheld wages are continually crying out for vengeance against the wicked rich. These screams can be demonstrated by use of the word in Luke 9:39 and Mark 9:26. While “cries out” was used to portray the joyful cries of the crowd heralding Christ at His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, this was this same word used in Matthew 27:23 of hate filled cries

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demanding Christ’s execution. And clearly James indicts “*you rich*” in James 5:4 by declaring the “*cries out against you.*” But James doesn’t stop there.

B. THE CRIES OF “LABORERS” – JAMES 5:4B

James 5:4- “Behold, the pay of the laborers who moved your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.”

Not only is the pay withheld by the rich a charge of sin, but also James says that the “*outcry of the laborers of those who did the harvesting*” stands accusing the rich. James couples his first charge with one more indictment. These who have labored to harvest your fields remain unpaid. The laborers cry out against the rich. These laborers who are poor, whose lives and very sustenance depend on their wages for life itself, were robbed by those who are rich and wealthy. It makes no sense. These laborers increased the land owner’s wealth by harvesting their fields. And then the rich turned around and oppressed their workers by stealing their pay. They robbed and cheated them of their earned wages which they needed for food for their families and depended on.

C. THE CRIES HAVE REACHED HEAVEN– JAMES 5:4C

James 5:4- “Behold, the pay of the laborers who moved your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.”

The cries of the “*pay withheld*” and the cries of “*those who did the harvesting*” have reached the very ears of Heaven God assures us. The verb, “*have reached*” is a perfect tense verb placed at the end of this verse emphasizing and assuring that God has taken notice! God has heard them and what is happening has not escaped His attention. Even though the cries of the needy, oppressed and defrauded don’t gain the attention of their unjust employer, it does gain God’s ear for this is a crime against Heaven! This situation has registered an appeal to a higher court, the courts of Heaven!

In fact, James uses the name for God that defines Him as the powerful leader of a great army, the heavenly host that He will call to act on behalf of the poor in judgment of these wicked wealthy. James obviously refers to the Old Testament references of God as the Lord of Hosts, the Lord Almighty or “*Lord of Sabaoth*”. It is the Hebrew name for God that is one of His most majestic titles. It refers to the fact that God has every power and resource at His command. Nothing is beyond His ability, or His means, or His attention.² He is the Lord of all power and omnipotence and by use of this stresses that the poor and helpless have the Lord of Hosts on their side. James affirms that the wrong doings of the rich have become known to God and he makes clear that this God is holy, powerful and determined to judge those who infringe on His commandments.³

Indeed, the cries of the unjust pay and the cheated laborers have reached the ears of Heaven. What the rich think they can do in secret is never hidden from God.

Not only have the “*rich*” from James 5:1 hoarded wealth for themselves thinking it will provide them security for the future, but they have gained wealth unjustly by exploiting the poor.

To say James is direct here is an understatement. We are called to help the poor and be generous to the poor with whatever means God has entrusted us with. Deuteronomy 15:9-11 says, “*Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission is near’, and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’”*

Here in James we find the wealthy rich exploiting the poor instead of being generous to the poor as commanded by Scripture. We must always remember that our wealth no matter how great or small is to be enjoyed as a blessing from God and used to fulfill His will and meet the needs of our neighbor!

¹Hiebert, D. Edmond, *James*. Moody Bible Institute: Chicago, Illinois, 1992. Pg. 264.

²Motyer, J.A., *The Message of James*. InterVarsity: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985. Pg.167.

³Moo, Douglas J., *The Letter of James*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000. Pg.217.