



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Earthly Riches and Heavenly Wealth

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James 5: 1-6

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your 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. ⁴Look! 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. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Introduction

It can be difficult to speak about wealth, but Jesus often made it a subject of teaching and admonition.

No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money (Luke 16:13).

In our study passage James is speaking about the misuse of wealth and the impermanence of worldly treasure. The Bible does not say possessing wealth is sinful and in many places wealth is called a blessing (Deuteronomy 8:18, Proverbs 10:22).

The Study

Now listen... James begins with the same exhortation as found in the previous passage. Here is a command to “come now!” This is not to be ignored.

...you rich people... The Scripture often portrays the “rich” in a negative sense, but does this without condemning the wealthy—often there seems to be a distinction between those who are “rich” and those who have been blessed with material abundance.

Again I tell you, 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 (Matthew 19:24).

...weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. This is a reference by James about judgment before a perfectly just God. The next lines in James illustrate why God will judge a particular type of rich person, and the sins that may accompany wealth. Four things to note:

1. The sinful hoarding of wealth. *Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 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.*

The earth and all of its material treasure will pass, not to mention that all people will pass on even if their possessions last a little while.

The depreciation of wealth testifies against the hoarder saying, “You have not invested in the eternal, and all of your riches are momentary. You have been proven to be a fool.”

James probably has Hell in mind as he talks about riches eating their *flesh like fire*. The original language says, “eat your flesh (pl.)” which means James was writing to very specific people and not making an over-generalized statement. He is warning certain individuals that their destination is

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425, LIGHT DINNER FOLLOWING STUDY

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North Carolina

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Hell if they fail to repent. He is likely recalling the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16).

2. Sinful gaining of wealth. *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.*

There is nothing wrong with wealth unless it has been unjustly gained. The basic wrong expounded here is the violation of the eighth command, the sin of theft. An employer can cheat an employee. (James does not mention it, but an employee can also cheat an employer.)

James notes that the Lord is aware of our sinful ways, which is why the sinful rich should be wailing and not celebrating.

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

The idea behind luxury is “softness.” God does call us to be “soft” in the sense of a kind heart, but he does not want believers to seek soft lives—but to take on challenges and risks that could be hard and difficult. To live in a way that trusts Him.

Self-indulgence refers to seeking wanton pleasures. Paul says living this way is a kind of deadness. (1Timothy 5:6)

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

Self-indulgence is like a form of spiritual gluttony which makes us fit for judgment. The imagery of being fattened takes us to the image of the fattened calf ready for sacrifice. The animal may have “enjoyed” being fattened, but we all know the rest of the story.

4. Sinful ruthlessness. *You have condemned and murdered innocent men...*

Note: “innocent men” above is actually “the righteous one (singular) in the original language. This may harken back to Christ Himself.

From the perspective of the victim murder can be actual or figurative. Lack of wages and ill-treatment can kill the soul and starve the flesh.

From the perspective of the “rich” we have here the final destination of covetousness. James is not saying actual murder is the inevitable result of pursuing riches, but he is saying that once hooked on the desire to have more and more, extreme measures may be taken to satisfy the cravings.

...who were not opposing you.

Note: It is better translated “he (again singular) did not resist you.”

The victims are already described as innocent and were not opposing the “rich” even though they have been wronged by the “rich.” It is technical, but important, that the primary issue is not between rich and poor, but rather the unrighteous and the righteous. James words are not directly aimed at class distinctions based upon wealth. He is describing sin among the rich who may think they get a “free pass” because of their worldly status.

Think about it...

- What are true riches? Who are the truly rich?
- What is eternal and what is temporal?
- What is the best return on investment with our temporal wealth?