

James 5:1-6
Riches, Oppression, Judgment

1

Introduction

This passage continues the thought presented in the preceding verses. The problem was not in their planning, profit, or productivity. The problem was their sin of pride. These wealthy men did not include God in their planning.

2

Introduction

Jesus states in Luke 16:13 that, “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” We must not store up for ourselves treasures here on earth, but rather in heaven. The reason is simple, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21). A person’s view to material possessions reveals the treasure of their heart.

3

James 5:1-6

Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!* ² Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

4

Wealth

James 5:1

Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!*

The Bible does not teach that possessing wealth is sinful. What is wrong is to misuse one's wealth. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:10 that, "the love of money is the root of all evil". However he later wrote that it is God "who gives us richly all things to enjoy" (v. 17).

5

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Though James primarily addressed the rich pretenders in the church who professed allegiance to Christ but pursued riches by any means. His warning is relevant today. Believers must be wary of falling into the same sins that characterize unbelievers. James shows the sin of loving money to all so believers will not fall into it.

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Wealth

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James begins his denunciation with a forceful pronouncement of impending judgment. In light of the inescapable doom that is coming against the wicked wealthy. James commanded the wicked rich to weep and howl. "**Weep**" means "to sob out loud," or "to lament." It was used to describe the wailing that took place when someone died. It also depicted the outward reaction that accompanied intense shame and guilt (Matt. 26:75; Luke 7:38). James used it in 4:9 to describe the sorrow that accompanies repentance. "**Howl**" appears only here in the New Testament. It's meaning goes beyond mere lamenting and refers to shrieking or screaming. Taken together, weep and howl picture an intense outburst of despairing, violent, uncontrollable grief.

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Wealth

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James gives the reason the rich are to respond with such overwhelming grief. It is because their miseries that shall come upon them. "**Miseries**" describe "overwhelming hardship, trouble, suffering, or distress". Overwhelming trouble will be visited upon the wicked rich when they stand before the Lord in judgment. In Luke 6:24-25, Jesus warned them, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, For you shall mourn and weep."

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James notes four sins that result in the severe judgment pronounced on the wicked rich. They are condemned because their wealth was uselessly hoarded, unjustly gained, self-indulgently spent, and ruthlessly acquired.

9

Their Wealth was Uselessly Hoarded

James 5:2-3

Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.

Hoarding is one of the most widespread sins of our time. God entrusts believers with material goods so they may use them for His glory.

Obviously, Christians are to provide for their families (1 Tim. 5:8), and in our society one's retirement. Christians' resources are to be used to advance God's kingdom (cf. 1 Chron. 29:3; Mark 12:42-44; Luke 6:38; 1 Cor. 16:2-3; 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:6-7). Specifically, believers are to use their wealth to win the lost (Luke 16:9), care for those in need (Gal. 2:10; 1 John 3:16-18), and support those in ministry (1 Cor. 9:4-14; Gal. 6:6).

Those who name the name of Christ are not to amass a fortune that is uselessly stashed away without regard for God's will (cf. Job 27:13-17;

Ps. 39:6; Eccl. 5:10-11, 13).

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In his condemnation of hoarding, James described the three main ways wealth was valued in his day (apart from land and houses).

"Riches" may refer to wealth in general. But James's use of "corrupted" or rotted suggests a more narrow reference to foodstuffs. "Corrupted" is a word which was used to describe rotten wood, decayed flesh, and rotten fruit. James indicts the wicked rich for uselessly hoarding food (meat, grains, fruit, etc.) that would inevitably rot. Like the rich fool in our Lord's parable (Luke 12:16-21), they believed their hoarded food would allow them to "take [their] ease, eat, drink and be merry" (Luke 12:19) for years to come. But in the end, it would only rot and be of no use to anyone.

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Wealth in Bible times was also measured in terms of "garments" (Gen. 45:22; Josh. 7:21; Judges 14:12; 2 Kings 5:5, 22; Acts 20:33; 1 Tim. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:3). "Garments" referred to outer clothing, such as robes, mantles, or cloaks. These were often richly embroidered and embellished with jewels, such garments were frequently handed down as heirlooms. But hoarding them was as foolish and useless as hoarding food, since such garments were in danger of becoming motheaten. "James sees all this [hoarding] as senseless—what is the point of feeding moths?"

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Finally, wealth in James's day could be measured in precious metals, chiefly gold and silver. Even such seemingly indestructible commodities, James noted, can become "corroded" or rusted. The verb translated "corroded" means "to thoroughly and completely rust." James may have meant that the gold and silver could literally become rusted; some evidence suggests the coinage of his day was not pure but contained alloys and could rust under proper circumstances. Or James may have been speaking figuratively, declaring that in the day of God's judgment, gold and silver will be as useless as if they were rust. The inability of riches to deliver individuals from God's judgment is a frequent theme in Scripture (Proverbs. 11:4; Isaiah. 2:20–21; Ezek. 7:19; Zeph. 1:18; Matt. 16:26).

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Having exposed the futility of hoarding wealth, James goes on to described the judgment pronounced on these hoarders. James states that the "corrosion" or rust will be a witness against them. In the judgment the waste of their selfish greed will give testimony to the state of their hearts.

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Rust is not only a witness, but an executioner for it “shall eat your flesh like fire”. Fire is a symbol of judgment. For the unsaved it is a picture of hell. One of the most fearful realities in all of Scripture is the truth that hell is a place of conscious (Luke 16:23-24), bodily (Matt. 5:29; 10:28; 13:42, 50; Rev. 14:9-10; 19:20; 20:15), eternal (Matt. 3:12; 25:41; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:11) punishment. Those who are saved and spend their lives amassing this world’s goods, will see their life’s work tried and burned by fire in judgment (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

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These people “heaped up treasure in the last days”. James rebuked them for hoarding their wealth without regard for God’s timetable, the flow of redemptive history, or the reality of eternity. In doing so these stored up wrath for themselves in the day when Christ returns and will render to each person according to his deeds (Romans 2:5-6). Wealth is to be enjoyed as a blessing from God and used to fulfill His will in meeting needs and advancing the gospel. Those who fail to do that suffer judgment.

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Let's pause a moment...

In hording their wealth (or anything else) is a declaration that their trust is in their riches and possessions. It is to say that God is not able to meet their daily needs. It is a declaration of distrust that God will give them their desires, or that they know their desires are outside God's will.

If we know and trust God, one is able to hold their possessions with an open hand.

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Their Wealth was Uselessly Hoarded

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Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.

The questions you need to ask yourself is:

“Do I see my wealth as a means of power and prosperity, or are they tools to be used for God's Kingdom?”

“Do I control my wealth and possessions, or do they control me?”

18

Their Wealth was Unjustly Gained

James 5:4

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

The wicked rich were not only guilty of sinfully hoarding their wealth; they had also sinfully acquired it. Far from being generous to the poor as Scripture commands (Deut. 15:9-11; Matt. 6:2-4; Gal. 2:10), they exploited them. Specifically, they had withheld the pay of the laborers who reaped their fields.

This was a practice so shocking that James introduced the statement with the arresting word “Indeed”. The perfect tense of the verb translated “kept back” suggests that the wicked rich completely withheld at least part of their laborers’ pay; they did not merely delay payment.

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Their Wealth was Unjustly Gained

James 5:4

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

Day laborers were an essential part of Israel’s agrarian economy (cf. Matt. 20:1-16), and withholding their wages was strictly prohibited by the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Jer. 22:13; Mal. 3:5).

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Their Wealth was Unjustly Gained

James 5:4

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

That pay, James warned the wicked rich, cries out against you. "Cries" means "to shout" or "to scream". James then added the sobering warning that the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. The painful cries of the robbed, defrauded laborers reached the ears of God and He will act in righteous judgment. Sabaoth derives from the Hebrew word meaning "hosts," or "armies." The phrase the Lord of Sabaoth describes God as Commander of the armies of heaven (cf. 1 Sam. 17:45). He is the One who hears the cries of the defrauded poor and will call His angelic armies to act in judgment (cf. Matt. 13:41-42; 16:27; 25:31; Mark 8:38; 2 Thess. 1:7-8).

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Their Wealth was Unjustly Gained

James 5:4

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

A frightening judgment awaits those who unjustly hoard the wealth they rob from the poor. Their victims will cry out for justice to the Righteous Judge and He will not disappoint them.

22

Their Wealth was Self-Indulgently Spent

James 5:5

You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.

Having increased their wealth by robbery and hoarding, the wicked rich added to their sin by using their wealth for their own selfish indulgence. James described their self-indulgence by using three verbs.

"Lived in pleasure" has the basic meaning of "softness." James condemned the wicked rich for living in soft, extravagant luxury at the expense of others.

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Their Wealth was Self-Indulgently Spent

James 5:5

You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.

The phrase "**luxury**" has the connotation of "giving oneself to the pursuit of pleasure or plunging headlong into indulgence". Those who pursue pleasure and luxury often descend into other types of sin in the attempt to satisfy their insatiable desires. A life without self-denial soon goes out of control in every area. Those who live for money close their eyes to the needs of others and the work of God.

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Their Wealth was Self-Indulgently Spent

James 5:5

You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.

Finally, James accused the wicked rich of having **fattened** their hearts. The picture James paints is of self-indulgent robbers, who have stuffed themselves on the plunder taken from their victims. James warns that a “day of slaughter” is coming. This is a picture of judgment. Just as an animal is fattened for a day of slaughter, so these men have fattened their hearts for the day of God’s judgment.

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Their Wealth was Ruthlessly Acquired

James 5:6

You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

Having unjustly hoarded the money they robbed from their poor day laborers and spent it on their self-indulgent desires, they went even further and condemned and put to death the just or righteous man. They would literally kill to maintain their lavish lifestyle. “Condemned” means “to pass sentence upon,” or “to condemn.” The implication is that the wicked rich were using the courts to judicially murder some of the abused poor.

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God established courts to fairly, impartially dispense justice (Deut. 17:8–13). Judges were not to be greedy (Ex. 18:21–22), show partiality (Lev. 19:15), tolerate perjury (Deut. 19:16–20), or take bribes (Mic. 3:11; 7:3).

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Their Wealth was Ruthlessly Acquired

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The term “**just**” denotes someone morally upright as was James himself, as his nickname “the just” attests. James made it clear that the victims of the rich oppressors were innocent of any crime or wrongdoing. These victims of the rich did not resist. That seems to indicate that these victims were defrauded believers, committing themselves, as did the Lord Jesus Christ, into the care of God when falsely accused (1 Pet. 2:23). By not resisting their oppressors, they lived out the truths taught by our Lord in Matthew 5:39-42.

28

So What ...

Wealth may be a blessing, a gift from God bringing the opportunity to do good. But that can only be true of those who are also “rich in faith” (James 2:5) and “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

If wealth is to be a source of blessing and not condemnation, it must not be uselessly hoarded, unjustly gained, self-indulgently spent, or ruthlessly acquired.

29

So What ...

Paul’s charge to Timothy shows how God expects the wealthy to use their riches. It forms a fitting contrast to the abuse of wealth James condemned. “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸ *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, ¹⁹ storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”
(1 Timothy 6:17-19)

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