

Judgment Against the Wicked

James 5: 1-6

The literary devices employed in James 5:1-6 make it an interesting passage to work through verse by verse. James' use of vivid imagery and metaphor draw attention to the depravity to which the wealthy descend in their vain pursuit of worldly wealth. As we work through these verses today, let us not fail to heed James' warning with sobriety lest we take his admonition too lightly. Our passage today contains James strongest denouncement of worldly behavior infiltrating the body of Christ. James launches an attack against those who are self-deceived by their wealth, seeking to increase their holdings at the expense of their own workers. They have made a fortress of wealth protecting and separating themselves from the world around them. They cannot see or do not care about the sufferings of others. They hold themselves above the poor and are indifferent to the needy showing no understanding or mercy. Their hearts are consumed by avarice as they embrace the ways of the world in building up treasures on earth. James illustrates the evil and judgment to come for those who know what they ought to do by fail to do it (4:17). James rebukes the wealthy who live in complete disregard of the royal law: *"love your neighbor as yourself"* (2:8).

It is not the wealth that is evil; it is the love and pursuit of wealth at the exclusion of God's call for mercy and compassion that leads to corruption, selfishness, avarice and oppression that is condemned. Money and wealth are necessary to life in this world. *"But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains"* (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Wealth in the 1st century was measured in food (agriculture or livestock), clothing, and precious metal.¹ These resources created wealth. Unfortunately most people didn't have enough of these resources and many earned their money by working for others barely making enough to cover their own rents and taxes leaving little for the purchase of food and clothing. What had once been a fairly self-sufficient agrarian economy where one bartered or traded for what was needed changed to a monetized economy under the Roman Empire. Taxes increased to support the infrastructure of Roman city life, the peasants and farmers felt the oppression of Roman taxes. They were forced to sell off land to pay taxes and either migrated to the cities and became day laborers or artisans. Or, they worked the land as tenant farmers for a wage and had to buy back the produce they themselves farmed in order to support their families.²

¹ NICNT

² Korb, Scott. Life in Year One, 2010. Pgs 36-37

James' condemnation of the wealthy in this passage is warning to wealthy Christians adopting worldly standards at the expense of their identity in Christ. This failure to recognize and act on the all too prevalent and apparent poverty within the body of Christ is blatant hypocrisy and an appalling denial of Christ. Paul makes a similar appeal to the Christians of Rome: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect"* (See Romans 12:1-2). Paul exhorts his audience to not embrace the worldly mode of Roman culture as it will surely corrupt their minds and bodies. Instead he calls them to be "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." As we've learned in our study of James, he too exhorts his hearers to embrace God's idea of religion "[which] is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, ... to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (1:27). Doing so is not only pleasing to God, but also transforms our way of thinking and behaving, it allows us to discern the will of God and to grow in spiritual maturity, it is the call to lifelong practical holiness.

James is so appalled by this lack of mercy and compassion that he unleashes some of his harshest words pointing out the judgment to come for the wealthy who know the good they ought to do and don't. Similar to the "woe judgments" pronounced by the prophets³, James is pronouncing an impending judgment upon the wealthy who refuse to have compassion upon the poor and needy, hoarding their wealth for their own purposes. Verse one is the promise of what will become of those who store up their treasures on earth: *Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you (5:1)*. James and the early church believed in the imminent return of Jesus and the impending judgment he would bring. Because of their avarice they have stored up treasure upon the earth to the oppression of those who do the back breaking work (v.4). They will weep and wail in misery for all the miseries they have brought upon those whom they oppressed. James tells us we all must heed this warning. Hoarding treasure in this life is short sighted. We know not when we will be called before the throne of God and should not put off until tomorrow what we know we should do today. In our previous homework lesson James reminds us *"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"* (4:14). The Day of Judgment is ever approaching. Each day we draw breath we are drawn closer to the day of our accounting. James warns that those who the Lord judges to have withheld help to those in need and have instead further oppressed them will weep and wail for the miseries awaiting them.

James' words in verse one echo those of the prophets lamenting the destruction of Israel because of their wicked ways. Repeatedly throughout Israel's history the people of Israel would dabble in the idolatry of the Canaanites who lived among them. They would turn away from the Lord and embrace the wickedness of Canaanite worship entering into a cycle of disobedience and judgment wherein the people of Israel would reap the consequences of their actions. In the midst of their disobedience the Lord would raise up prophets to call Israel from her wicked ways. James tells us the believers who place too much stock in their worldly possessions will weep and wail in the miseries to come.

³ Prophets of God pronounced judgment upon the nation of Israel and the surrounding nations for their continued disobedience, idolatry and wickedness. The pronouncement of judgment came upon the authority of God but voiced by the prophet.

The word wail is translated from the Greek word *ololyzō*, an “onomatopoeic verb (expressing its significance in its sound), meaning “to cry aloud”, howl with grief⁴. The same word James uses, *ololyzō*, is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) by the prophets warning that judgment against wickedness was imminent. “**Wail**, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty!” (Isaiah 13:6); and, “*Because of this put on sackcloth, lament and wail: The fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us.*” (Jeremiah 4:8).

The word weeping is translated from the Greek *klaiō* meaning “any loud expression of grief,” especially in mourning for the dead⁵. For example Matthew 2:18 gives us a clear picture of weeping in grief: “*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*” Luke 13:28 uses the same term to describe the weeping of those who claim belief but don’t live their faith. Jesus says, “*There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.*”

Let us take a closer look at the Luke 13:22-30 passage from which our previous quote of verse 28 is drawn. The Luke passage parallels James’ warning of impending judgment against these self-deceived believers who have put their faith in wealth rather than obeying God’s call to mercy and compassion. In Luke 12:22-30 Jesus’ words illustrate the hard truth that putting off for too long the careful and deliberate choice to obey God and do what is right may result in being refused entrance to Paradise. As James said in 2:24, “*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” Just hearing and believing Jesus isn’t enough. This passage tells us that those who fail to follow Jesus’ teachings, and thereby fail to prove their faith, will be turned away from paradise. For even the demons believe that Jesus is the Messiah and little good it does them. These hypocrites will be left outside the gates of paradise weeping and wailing.

Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. (v.2-3)

Gold and silver are the most prized metals for their rarity and durability. Long have they been considered the monetary standards for the world. While they do not rust, they become corroded, gold darkens and silver tarnishes. The clothes stored up and shut away are destroyed by moth from lack of use and air. Corrosion and moths destroy what can be put to use for good. As these treasures are destroyed over time, so is the heart of the owner. Perhaps the destruction of these treasures are more a picture of the heart of the one amassing these riches as the heart darkens and decays in avarice and false pride. While the world tells us to store up wealth, James reminds us that it is perishable and will not survive the judgment. What good will worldly wealth

⁴ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

⁵ Ibid.

do for us if it is hoarded away when we face eternity? James' images tell us that the corrosion and destroyed wealth stand as evidence against the owner. They testify his guilt against him. He has hoarded these things away until the last day, the day he stands in judgment before the Lord. James employs the graphic simile of corrosion consuming the owner like fire as the miserable judgment foretold in verse 1, "*weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you*".

*Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields,
which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the
ears of the Lord of hosts. (v.4)*

Not only do the corroded metals and decayed clothes testify against the callous owner, so do the wages belonging to the laborer's voice of injustice. The voice of held back wages cries out accusingly against the unjust behavior of the wealthy. The testimony provided by the wages reveals the depravity of the rich man. His holding back of hard and honestly earned wages oppresses the workers and their families who depend on their daily wage for daily bread. The field laborers of the 1st century had no savings to fall back on. They lived hand to mouth barely scraping up enough money to pay their rents, feed their family and pay their taxes to both Rome and the temple. Failure to pay wages could mean starvation, destitution, selling a family member into slavery, and begging for alms. Ignoring the Old Testament call to "act justly" the wealthy literally had stolen (*apostereō*, in Greek, but weakly translated as "kept back by fraud") from those who worked honestly for him. The voices of the harvesters now join in protest of the injustice.

The biblical view of holding back wages is clear:

- "Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight" (Leviticus 19:13)
- "You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt" (Deuteronomy 24:15).
- "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you." (Proverbs 3:27-28)
- Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. Malachi 3:5 (NRSV)

The Lord ranks the wickedness of holding back wages with the wickedness of sorcerers, adulterers, liars and the oppressors of widows and children. It is interesting that it is the Lord of Hosts, in Hebrew *Jehovah tsaba*, in the Malachi passage who brings judgment against the unjust. James tells us it is Lord Sabaoth. The word *sabaoth* originates from the Hebrew, *tsaba*. *Tsaba*

means a mass of persons (or figurative things), organized for war (an army).⁶ We have an image of the Lord standing battle ready with His army of the Heavenly host armed and ready for battle against the wicked. The Lord hears their cries of the laborers and harvesters. It is the sound of distress and suffering like that of the Israelites in Egypt who groaned and cried out in their oppression (Exodus 2:23) and like the cries of Abel's blood crying out from the ground for justice (Genesis 4:10). The Lord hears the groans and cries; his heart is moved with compassion to action.

*You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (v.5)*

James accuses the callous wealthy of indulging in self-centered pleasure, luxury, and indulgence at the expense of their laborers. The offense of their behavior comes not only from the self-indulgence, but from the indifference to the needs and suffering of those from whom they have mistreated and stolen. The self-indulgence reveals moral laxity and a blatant lack of ethics. Christians are called to resist the revelry of wanton luxury for a morally acceptable satiety and sober ethics which allows for excess wealth to help those in need to the glory of God. James sarcastically compares the self-indulgent wealthy to the fattened calf or oxen served up at their extravagant feasts. Whether the sheep was slaughter for a feast or a sacrifice, it was purchased and overfed in order that it be fattened for a "richer" meal or sacrifice, that much more pleasing to the Lord. James visually and graphically parallels the animal slaughtered for a meal with the slaughter of the wicked on the battlefield arrayed against the Lord of Hosts. The image of the day of judgment being like a slaughtering of animals is a common Old Testament image.⁷ Like sheep, the heartless rich will be led to the slaughter. Instead of making sure the laborer and his family were "well-fed" the rich fattened themselves for judgment, the day of slaughter.

The warning to many American Christians is that we live in a society that celebrates and strives for luxury and leisure! Americans spend inordinate amounts of wealth on pleasure – season tickets to ball games, expensive vacations, luxury cars and homes, an excess of clothing, electronics, and toys of every kind. How much of our budget goes towards entertainment compare with our donations to churches, charities and the needy? With sobriety we need to consider not only how we gain wealth but what we do with it. The blessings of wealth come from the hand of God. Do we use it to his glory and the good of others; or, are we blindly fattening ourselves for the day of slaughter? As one commentary points out, "These selfish tendencies in every culture must be fiercely assaulted with the Word of God in order to expose their gross sinfulness and harm to others."⁸

⁶ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary .

⁷ Isaiah 34:2; 65:12; Jeremiah 15:3; 19:6; 32:34; Zechariah 11:4

⁸ NAC

*You have condemned and murdered the righteous one,
who does not resist you. (v.6)*

James concludes his indictment of the callous rich declaring the grounds for punishment on the day of slaughter: *“they have condemned and murdered the innocent men”* (NIV). The “righteous” or “innocent” are the laborers, the Christian brethren of the callous rich. The wealthy of this passage are supposedly Christian. James’ letter is “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” addressing the prevalent evil that has invaded the body of Christ – the embracing of the ways of the world by those who follow Christ. These laborers are innocent of any crime, working an honest day’s work for an honest wage. But instead of receiving their wage they have been made to suffer in poverty. Such suffering is the reason God has *“chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom”* (2:5) in stark contrast against what the world glorifies. *“God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”* (1 Corinthians 1:28-29) God exalts the poor because of their humility, faith and obedience in a reversal of what the world glorifies: the arrogance of power and wealth.

James announces that the wealthy have not only condemned the innocent to a life of poverty, but they are also guilty of murder. The connection between envy (the active and zealous desire for what others have) becomes complete in murder. In 4:2 James pronounced “You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want”. The callous wealthy steal the wages from the laborer, coveting the money for themselves, driving the laborer (and his family) into poverty, eventually even death. The wealthy are the direct cause of the suffering and death of the poor by withholding their wages.

Bread is life to the destitute,
and to deprive them of it is murder.
To rob your neighbour of his livelihood is to kill him,
and he who defrauds a worker of his wages sheds blood.

Sirach 34:21-22⁹

The rich may have given thanks to God for the blessings of wealth, but their praises were proven empty if they failed to treat their workers with respect and integrity. Their praises are like the empty blessings of the well-wishers who encounter a brother or sister in need, and said, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet ... do not supply their bodily needs” (2:16). Their faith is proved empty. And worse, their depraved actions towards their laborers reveal they have chosen friendship with the world choosing enmity with God. In 4:6 James tells us “God opposes the proud”, and they are judged without mercy because they have failed to show mercy themselves (2:13), God’s judgment upon them is the same for all his enemies: destroying those who would destroy his people.

⁹ Revised English Bible