

Dangers of Wealth

James 5:1-6

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Today, we continue our series in the book of James. So if you want to turn in your Bibles or click on your tablets or your devices, we're looking at James 5:1-6. And as we've been looking at this book, it is God's wisdom to the church. And it's an opportunity for Christians to put faith into action, faith into practice. How do we live a life of what is true about the gospel to what is true about our lives? And this intersection is where we live our lives out of faith and also living in practice as we follow Jesus Christ.

Today's passage is very challenging. It shares the teachings of Jesus, many of what's been referenced, and I'll be mentioning a few more. But it also uses the language of the prophets. And so the question before us this morning is do you and I have ears to hear?

Reading from James 5:1-6.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Father, help us with this passage to understand it, to see how it might apply in our lives, where it touches our hearts, and how very tightly we grab hold of the deep roots of our hearts with our possessions and our wealth, the abundance we may have or the lack we may have. Help us to boast in you rather than in our riches. Help us, Jesus. In your name we pray. Amen.

A French philosopher in the 1920's and 1930's once wrote, "If you want to know what a man is really like, take notice of how he loses his money." I agree, and I think the Bible would agree with that as well. And I think the Bible goes one step further than that. I think the Bible teaches, also, that if you want to know what a man is really like, take notice of how he acts when he gains money. Whether it is in the losing or in the making of money, wealth can expose the heart of a person.

Wayne mentioned several examples where Jesus spoke on the topic of money. He did it quite often. Matthew 19, as was read in the scripture reading, Jesus said that "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And the disciples rightly asked a good question. "Who then can be saved?" And His response is, "With God all things are possible." Earlier in that same gospel, Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus says,

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also."

Very much the allusion of our very passage today.

Likewise, Jesus spoke to rich people in conversations. He inserted them in His stories and parables. And Luke in his gospel notes that the Pharisees were lovers of money and would ridicule Jesus for how He spoke about money, how He included the rich in His parables. The writer of Hebrews encouraged His readers to keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have. Paul in his letter to Timothy says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils."

Today's passage discusses the dangers of wealth. I need to start from the beginning by saying James is not speaking against wealth in and of itself. He's not speaking against all people who might be wealthy. But, here, we see James is condemning a particular group who he calls the rich. And as we look at this passage, we will see more about what condemns them which was due to how they unjustly accrued their wealth and how callously they misused their wealth. They failed to take into account God. Just as last week when Derek Pulliam preached on the previous verses in chapter 4 verses 13 through 17 where they were not taking God into account in their plans. And they were thinking about what they wanted to do. They were boasting in their presumptions. And here, the passage is how the rich are boasting in their wealth. They're failing to take into account the Lord God, and they're failing to love their neighbor. But the gospel, which frees us and gives us life in Christ Jesus, returns us to a right relationship with the Lord God and compels us to love, to love God rightly and to love one another rightly. And, therefore, we must avoid these dangers of wealth.

So with these verses, we're going to just briefly look at them in three ways. Starting at verse 1, we're going to look at James's warning. Then in verses 2 and 3, we'll look at how possessions spoil. And then in verses 4 through 6, we'll look at how power corrupts.

First, look with me at verse 1, and recognize how when we hear James's message that we must hear his warning. He says in verse 1, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you." As we look at this passage, it's challenging. It's uncomfortable. And I invite you to let it make you uncomfortable because that's his purpose in many ways. And so to understand this passage, we need to first ask who is James talking about? Well, we see immediately that he's talking about the rich. But who are the rich?

Last week, the previous paragraph, James is recognizing and describing traveling merchants. And in this passage, James is describing wealthy landowners. The word that James uses to describe this group of people implies that to be one of the rich is to have an abundance of earthly possessions. And in their first century context, this abundance would exceed the essentials, and it would go beyond subsistent living. Their wealth, whether it was inherited land or whether it was the produce grown on that land, allows them to be rich without them working their own land. So we have the "who."

But, second, it's important to determine whether James is further defining this group, this rich. And this is where there's a lot of discussion. And sometimes through the camera, it's probably not going to do its full justice. But some people have suggested that this passage is talking to Christians in the church. And they suggest this because of the context. The previous verses would suggest that he's carrying out different circumstances, different situations in the body of Christ, in the church, that are impacting the jealousies, the discord, how they might be speaking evil against one another, how they're presuming and boasting in their presumptions about where they might go in their travels and how they make money. And so many people just think this is a continuation, another group of people in the church who are unjustly accruing wealth and immorally using their wealth.

Others, however, and myself included, think James is actually referring to non-Christians here. He's referring to those people who are outside of Christianity, those people who may have relationships with a Christian, who may even be present at the reading of this letter. We see this earlier on in the letter when James also references the rich in chapter 2. There is a safe assumption, an inference, that there would be people who were listening, and watching, and wondering, and asking questions about what is this Christian religion? Who is this Jesus Christ?

But here, we see that the repetition that we see from chapter 4 verse 13, "Come now," is the same beginning to chapter 5 verse 1. So this repetition and the rhythm of this particular context does strongly suggest that these paragraphs are related. But the question is, how? How are they related? And I think the differences between them actually highlight that these are distinct groups.

Verses 13 through 17 in chapter 4 begins with James's critique of these traveling merchants and their presumption. Then he goes on to correct their boasting with an encouragement, an exhortation to see that their plan should be in light of the Lord's will. He implies, therefore, this group to include Christians. I'm sure it could be mixed, but it certainly implies that Christians are in view here.

However, in verse 1 of this paragraph, James is beginning with prophetic condemnation. He then goes on to explain the reasons for their guilt, and he does not imply a call to repentance. His language is in the tradition of the prophets such as Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos where weeping and wailing occurs in the face of experiencing the Lord's judgment rather than the cries that are showing contrition of the heart and calling upon the Lord for His kind mercy. These are loud howls of despair.

So as then here in the first century, the context of James's letter, and as it is now, it's still important for the church to hear James's warning. Then and now, non-Christians are likely present in the gathered assembly of Christians. We want and invite and welcome people who are interested or exploring Christianity. You may be watching this right now and would consider yourself such a person. You are welcome. And I invite you to continue to pursue and consider what a journey of following Jesus Christ would entail for you. It's a wonderful thing. And we hope as a body of Christ who represents Jesus that we would be welcoming and showing love to you.

And so for you, friend, it's to hear the good news of the gospel. For you, it's to find hope and satisfaction not in the riches of your wealth but in the riches that are found in Christ. For the Christian, it's important to here James's warning because anyone can be tempted to seek for ourselves, what might improve your lot in life, where you might find hope and security and earthly treasure. And we do it subtly. But ultimately, it's outside the care of God. It's how we seek to care and provide for ourselves. And this temptation is very great.

James's warning is an opportunity for the non-Christian because no one until God's final judgment, which is what he's referencing, this future day of experiencing God's judgment, no one is outside the reach of God's love. Although James speaks prophetically here, the invitation of the gospel is still for you. Jesus elsewhere says, "Today, your soul is required of you." Come and follow Jesus Christ. And for the Christian, it is a reminder that the riches of this world pale in comparison to the riches of God in Christ Jesus.

With this warning, it brings us to the next section in verses 2 through 3, which are highlighting the truth that our possessions spoil. Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Here, James is continuing his condemnation and showing forth where the Lord is righteous and just to show His judgment.

Here in verse 1, the imagery of riches, it could specifically refer to the produce from the land that is rotting, but it also could just be broadly referring to whatever makes up their riches which would include things like garments and valuable precious metals. But the point James is making is the undeniable reality that whatever objects on which we project value and worth, they are not lasting. Of course, you and I need food. We need clothing. We need shelter. We need to wisely steward our resources. Our different personalities come to bear in this. Some people might like other things, looking different ways. We all have a different sensibility of what beauty might be or what might be valuable to us. But here, Jesus is not concerned that we be rich in wealth per say but that we be rich toward God.

So the questions for you as we experience reading God's word taking this in for what it is, this prophetic declaration, this warning and caution of the dangers of our wealth, here are just some

questions for you to consider. Where are you laying up treasures for yourself? What do you place your trust in for your security? What do you look to in order to provide safety? What are you leaning on for your illusion of self-reliance? What façade do you build? What mask do you wear that seeks to project and define your status either of your own making or how you seek that status from someone or something else?

James is using prophetic speech because of the urgency. These things don't last. They decay. They fail. They show themselves to be counterfeits to what is lasting and glorious. And although our possessions spoil, Jesus Christ shows Himself again and again and forever how He is truly and surely glorious. The gospel is an invitation for you to place your faith, your hope, your love in Him, to find satisfaction in Him alone and coming to realize and experiencing the grace of Jesus Christ who is incorruptible, who never fails, who never sees decay, and is the epitome of what it means to see and experience glory.

Similar to how possessions spoil, James further unpacks their guilt in this passage by showing how power corrupts in verses 4 through 6. And James finds them guilty of three things, verse 4 fraud, verse 5 pleasures, and verse 6 murder. Let's look at verse 4 at fraud. "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." Here, James is alluding to God's laws about the social and economic wellbeing of a community.

Deuteronomy 24:15, "You shall give him his wages on the same day before the sun sets, for he is poor and counts on it, lest he cry against you to the Lord and you be guilty of sin." Leviticus 19:13, "You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning." What are these wealthy landowners guilty of? They're guilty of withholding wages which robs and deprives these workers of their livelihoods. The landowners require their labor in order for them to experience the profit for their gain, for their pleasures, for their livelihoods. But the labor that they require, they're not paying for it.

James further builds the emotional experience of their corruption by alluding to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4 where Cain kills his brother Abel, and Abel's blood from the ground is crying out to the Lord for justice. And the Lord hears. And this prophetic speech reaches this exclamation point by identifying that the Lord of hosts hears these cries. This is the Lord of the armies. This is the Lord who protects, who defends, who saves the oppressed, who destroys the oppressor.

If verse 4 lists how the rich deprive the workers, verse 5 lists how they reveled in their pleasures. It says, "You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." This is exactly what it sounds like. In their own pursuits at the expense of their workers, they profited themselves for their own luxuries, in those things that they found enjoyment and pleasure and satisfaction of their own making. And the tragedy of this is both to them because they're missing out on the riches that are in Christ. They're not being rich toward God but rather seeking riches in the very things that, as we just talked about, are not lasting. Their pursuit is in vain. But it also hurts their neighbor because that is who they're exploiting in order for them to consume and to experience the produce, the wealth of their labor and not their own.

And the phrase, "You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter," is a bit of irony because of this picture of them eating, gluttonous in enjoyment and kind of like a cow to pasture being prepared for slaughter, and this being a little bit of irony because who is being slaughtered? That reference of "in a day of slaughter" is used quite often in the prophets to talk about the future day of judgment. But it also carries undertones of what it means to experience the cost for enjoyment, to celebrate a feast, to have guests, and to enjoy a meal requires that you would sacrifice one of your riches, one of your cattle, one of your goats, one of your sheep. And James is calling them to account for how they're living their lives, callous, not with respect to the Lord, and certainly not with respect to their neighbor.

And this brings him to verse 4, the last charge of their guilt which is murder. James is connecting how their corrupt actions against the workers and their immoral indulgences for themselves reveal how it even touches the courts, the corruption that finds that the workers, the poor, the righteous person, the innocent person is being condemned. And the power is being corrupted in a way that is further depriving them not only of their wages but of them further depriving them of their livelihood, which in their context certainly would bring great risk to their lives. And, therefore, they're being complicit in the harm and destruction of their neighbor, the very murder of innocents. To be cut off from their livelihood is to prevent them from accessing what is needed for life. And all the more shame to them because these people don't resist. Their power, their corruption, their wealth, they are beholden in their weakness and are victims of their oppressors.

James is calling the church to a sudden opening of our eyes. Even in our context if we jump from the first century to today, we certainly don't have the same agricultural subsistence necessary to live. But how is wealth accrued in your life in our context? How is wealth misused? We bear a responsibility to understand that power. We bear a responsibility to understand how our wealth certainly does not bring glory to the Lord, and it can bring harm to one another.

I'll end with this. Lord Acton famously said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." James condemns the rich for the way they accumulated their materialistic wealth through their corruption by defrauding their workers, but indulging themselves, and being complicit in the death of innocent lives. Sometimes Christians can fall into a trap of thinking, I will pursue wealth for my family. I will pursue wealth for God's kingdom. And that is all well, because as we mentioned at the beginning, God is not condemning wealthy people. He's not condemning the existence of wealth. He's rightly calling out how it is obtained unrighteously, unjustly, and immorally.

And this temptation that Christians can sometimes fall into is not taking into account God. We might say it, but in our heart of hearts, we are pursuing that which satisfies our own desires. And the importance of this passage for us as Christians hearing James do this, this prophetic condemnation, is that if you don't take stock of your heart and your motivations for how you acquire wealth, then you are being blinded by these pitfalls. And the opportunity and the call is to hear the Lord's voice and to repent, to return to the Lord, find your riches and your satisfaction in Him and Him alone.

The Bible gives us categories for how we would live righteous lives seeking the welfare of our families, seeking the benefit of our neighbor and our communities. All of these things come from the provision of God, and such gifts are to be enjoyed, and they are to be used in ways that are beneficial to others. But the Bible also warns us against these trappings. The point of what James is doing by making the allusion to Jesus's own teaching, by reminding us of God's law, is to recognize what is our focus? And the thing that the Lord cares about is where is our love directed? Is our love directed to the Lord God who is our creator, who is our sustainer, who is our provider, who is likewise our defender, and is our protector, and is our redeemer? Is our love directed to our neighbor?

The call of the gospel is for you to lay down your life and follow Jesus Christ. This challenges us as Americans who want to be self-reliant, who want to be experiencing all that this life gives us and offers us, all of the entertainment, all of the provision of our economic systems. The gospel challenges us to a life of love. And where we find that love in Christ is where we find life. And we're renewed, and our love is redirected. This is the work of God in us, the work of God in you. And I pray that we would heed James's warning. I pray that we would experience the freedom of understanding and embracing the reality, the futility, of how our possessions, although they do give us pleasure and are to be enjoyed rightly in the right context, do not last. And for us to be very aware of how power corrupts. May we experience being rich toward God. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we pray these things because we cannot do it in and of ourselves. Apart from you, I am guilty of these things. Make me clean. Wash me. Cleanse me. Give me new life and new

loves that are pointed to you and extend to my neighbor. Help me to put faith in practice as I follow Jesus. May we, your church, do the same. In Christ's name. Amen.