

What Are the Dangers of Being Rich?

[James 5:1-6](#)

James, Day 22

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.

- James 5:1-6, ESV

As a pastor, I am always a bit suspicious when someone's feedback on my sermon focuses on how much some other person needed to hear what I was saying:

"If only my husband had been here . . . "

"I'm going to get a copy of that for my sister."

"Let me know when that's available online. I'm going to send it to my son."

Now, most of the time, these kinds of comments are sincerely intended in appreciation and with love in mind for the other person. But I often want to respond, "And what was God saying to you through His word this morning?"

The danger of a passage addressed to "*you rich*" is that very few of us think of ourselves as being rich. Studies have shown that even many of those who fall in the Top 1% of household incomes in America (earning \$421,926 per year or more) do not think of themselves as being rich, because they still need to budget their income and spending. The fact is that, if we back out of the American framework to the wider world, if you earn \$32,400 per year, you're in the Top 1% of all income earners. That's most of us, isn't it?

One of the marks of how wealthy the American evangelical church is can be seen in how blind we are to our own wealth and its spiritual pitfalls. We may hear sermons on tithing and giving, but we don't hear very many messages like the opening verses of James 5, which probably strike us as being more than a bit extreme, if we're honest.

Yet having wealth does make us seriously blind to certain realities in our lives and the world, just as extreme poverty can also be blinding. In Proverbs 30, Agur senses the problems that come with poverty and riches, and so he prays a wise prayer:

Two things I ask of you;

deny them not to me before I die:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;

give me neither poverty nor riches;

feed me with the food that is needful for me,

lest I be full and deny you

and say, "Who is the Lord?"

or lest I be poor and steal

and profane the name of my God. (Prov. 30:7-9, ESV)

Riches can lead us to deny the Lord, and, according to James, that sometimes looks like denying the poor workers who are made in His image. We can become so focused on getting what we want - perhaps even what we think we need - that we don't think of the real cost of our wealth. We don't think of the poor who have been oppressed or denied justice to give us what we have.

It's harder in our world because we live so distant from the lives of those who supply us with our goods, and we don't know how they live. At one time in the not-so-distant past, many of the Christmas tree lights sold in America were being made by Chinese political prisoners who were not being paid anything for their labor. China has just recently opened massive prison labor compounds to "re-educate" Muslims and Christians through forced labor, and many of the goods they make will probably find their way to our store shelves.

What can we do? We're not directly oppressing these workers, and we have no real way of knowing who is being oppressed and who is not, do we? Well, we can still do some specific things:

1. We can seek to be less wasteful and also seek to give as much as we can to help relieve the suffering of the poor.
2. We can be more thankful for what we have and more mindful of how we're investing it for God's kingdom purposes.
3. We can stop being judgmental toward the poor and arrogant about our wealth, which we're all guilty of doing at times, if we're honest.
4. We can stop thinking that being rich is better than being poor and that having more money would solve our deepest problems. Wealth often creates more problems than it solves.

Our material possessions are blessings given by God. Like all blessings from God, they can be turned into idols by our sinful hearts. We need to remember who gave us our wealth and why He gave it to us: All of our God-given blessings are to be used for His glory and the good of others, with humility and thanksgiving.