

James: Warning to Rich Oppressors

James 5:1-6

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1 Introduction

1.1 James

The letter of James is something of an anomaly among New Testament literature. James isn't writing to a specific church to address a specific problem, but rather to the church as a whole throughout the whole world. Similarly, he doesn't give us a systematic theology lesson followed by the implications of that theology, but instead a collection of interrelated longform proverbs. It's sort of a mashup of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and the Sermon on the Mount. The big idea of all of these proverbs is best summarized in James' own words, James 4:8: "Purify your hearts, you double-minded." James wants his audience to be whole, to have singleminded devotion to God, to be undivided in their affection, and to have no internal contradiction between their words and their actions. He wants Christians to be like the God they serve, with whom, again in James' words, "there is no variation or shadow due to change."

1.2 Text

The beginning of James 5, however, is a radical departure from the pattern of the rest of the letter. First off, James' entire audience seems to have changed. He's been talking this whole time to Christians, who he calls "brothers" sixteen times over the course of the letter, but now he's talking to wealthy people who should "weep and howl for coming miseries." James does a complete one-eighty with his style, too. Instead of a longform proverb, James starts to sound much more like an Old Testament prophet calling Israel and its neighbors to account before God. The Greek word behind the English "wail" is *only* used in prophetic judgments, so even James' *vocabulary* is prophetic in nature. It sounds like Isaiah 13:6: "Wail, for the Day of the LORD is near; it will come as destruction from the Almighty." So in the final analysis, instead of a longform proverb for the building up of believers, we're looking at a prophetic judgment on unbelievers. James makes three major accusations, and I want to unpack each one together with you this morning.

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2 James' Charges to Rich Oppressors

2.1 "You trusted in something useless."

James' first charge is that the rich oppressors have trusted not in God, but in their wealth, and have thus trusted in something utterly useless. "Your riches have rotted," he writes. Since he uses the word "rotted," "riches" probably means "stores of grain," especially because he goes on to say "your garments are moth-eaten" and "your gold and silver have corroded." These aren't just random goods that James chose to illustrate his point, but rather the three most common stores of wealth in the ancient world. Today, he might say "Your house has fallen into rubble, your retirement account has been cleared out, and the stock market has crashed to zero." "You lost it all," James is saying, "and you're not going to get it back."

Every different sort of wealth that the wealthy trusted in has found its own way of becoming useless. You can't eat rotten food, and you can't wear clothes with huge moth-holes in it. This verb "corroded" would be better translated "rusted." And the Greek has it in an intensive, emphatic form, which we should translate "to rust completely through." You can't spend gold if your gold is just a pile of orange dust.

Now, if you're really sharp, you might have noticed something about James' three examples. Food can rot, clothing gets holes in it, but *gold doesn't rust*. It's one of the reasons that gold is so valuable. This word "rust" in Greek is almost only for iron. No ancient pagan writer uses that word to describe even silver tarnishing, let alone gold. Whenever they use the words "rust" and "gold" in the same sentence, it's talking about something that gold can *not* do. So it would make a lot of sense to trust gold not to rust. It's like trusting a fish to swim. Almighty Gold is the perfect store of value and the perfect thing to trust in. Right?F

But James isn't ignorant of basic metallurgy. He knows what he's writing, and he knows when he writes "your gold has rusted through" that he's describing something impossible. But the very impossibility of James' prophetic, poetic claim is the source of its strength. "You thought that you were being smart to trust in your riches," James writes, "but even Almighty Gold has failed you." What seemed like wisdom at the time now emerges as foolishness, even as stupidity.

2.2 "You have acted foolishly."

And that brings us to James' second charge: that the wealthy have acted without wisdom. Not only have they placed their ultimate trust in money instead of God, which is idolatry, but let's keep reading: "You have laid up treasure in the last days. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter."

Can we see the irony here? Why would you hoard money like this an hour before Jesus returns to make it worthless, and why would you hoard money an hour before He returns to judge you for it? On top of all that, the wealth that they had trusted in becomes worse than useless, it actually becomes a witness against them: "their corrosion will be evidence against you and will

eat your flesh like fire.” One commentator calls this an act of “cosmic betrayal.” It would have been better never to have that wealth at all.

James is wisdom literature, and this particular section of James is less about wisdom than about foolishness. It’s about antiwisdom. There is no wisdom in hoarding wealth. God does not think that it is wise or good to build bigger and bigger barns for ourselves or make greater and greater names for ourselves. It looks like wisdom to the world. It feels like wisdom to the flesh. But it is foolishness.

2.3 “You have exploited the most vulnerable.”

And the worst of the sins of James’ wealthy audience here is still to come. Because of the way that they overvalue stores of wealth, and because of the way that they trust in it despite it’s worthlessness, they’ve gone to all extents to accumulate more of it. They’ve even gone so far as to exploit the poor and vulnerable for their own gain: “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 condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”

Withholding workers’ wages was standard fare in the ancient world if you were a rich person who wanted to get richer. It’s a very easy thing to short their pay a little bit, or to hold their pay until it’s most convenient for you, leaving them literally without money to buy food in the meantime. Poor workers don’t have anyone to complain to anyway. This was so common that the Torah actually has passages that mandate paying your workers on time, like Deuteronomy 24: “You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy [...] You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is poor and counts on it.”

If this weren’t bad enough, James even goes so far to say that the wealthy are “condemning and murdering” the poor. That might just be a poetic description of withholding their wages, which could completely plausibly starve a person to death. But because “condemn” is a legal word, there’s a good possibility that there’s some misuse of the legal system going on here. And we also can’t rule out literal murder with impunity because those are the words that James uses.

In any case, James is condemning the rich because they’re using the power that their wealth affords them in the wrong way. Instead of using it to build others up, they use it to allow them to sin against the most vulnerable in cold blood. But James uses God’s military name, the Lord of armies, and he says “weep and wail, you rich, because your time is almost up. Jesus is coming back in vengeance, and everything you have overturned in your evil and your foolishness, He will set right in righteousness and in wisdom.”

3 Our Response

So what do we do with this? How do we react as Jesus people to this prophetic condemnation of unbelievers who probably wouldn’t have even read the letter? On one hand, money itself

isn't sinful, but only becomes evil when we get it or use it in sin. But on the other hand, this is still relevant for us because in the grand scheme of things, we are the wealthy. Most of us have computers and refrigerators and plenty of food, even in an era of pandemic. That's not the case for most of the church across time or across space. So what do we do?

If we claim to be believers that Jesus is Lord, there is no space for us to trust in our wealth (and we have wealth) so much that we sin against God. Instead, God is calling him to trust Him so much that we might sin against our wealth. We're not called to have such great finances that others suffer, but we're called to have such concern for others that our finances suffer. And if this is true of the physical capital God has given us, it's also true of our social capital. God is calling us into the plight of the downtrodden and the oppressed not only with our wealth but with our voices.

Living with radical care for others is always confusing, but especially so among the rugged individualism that we Americans hold so dear. That means that, if we live the way that God would have us live, people will call us foolish. They won't understand why we don't live in a bigger house or eat fancier food or have nicer things. They won't understand why we don't take more Saturdays off or salvage more of our reputation.

Americans will find us foolish, but our primary citizenship isn't from America. We serve a King who expressed His kingliness not in a glorious arrival, but by a birth in a manger. The wisest man to walk the earth didn't sit on a throne but laid Himself down and hung on a cross. And it is exactly *because of* Jesus' willingness to pour Himself out in a way that looked foolish to world that He has a name above every other. In God's Kingdom, the wisest and most honored person is the one who goes the furthest to pour himself out in serving others, especially those who have particularly great needs. And aren't we surrounded with particularly great needs? Ten percent of people in the world live on less than a dollar ninety per day. Twenty percent don't have access to the Bible in their first language. Even our own country has been fighting for racial equity for five hundred years. So let's listen to the ways that God will call us to serve our neighbors in their distress, whether those neighbors are across the street or across the ocean. If we are willing, I don't believe that He will leave us waiting. Will you join with me in prayer?

4 Prayer

Father, if we are in Christ and His Spirit is in us, we stand before you unafraid of the judgment that you pronounce here through James. Even so, we confess before that we have so often sought the American Dream instead of the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment. Forgive us, Father, and restore us. Form our hearts newly every day to love how You love and do what You would do, to truly be Your representatives in this world. We ask that you would send us to serve with joy and with boldness and be so radically different than these rich oppressors. We pray all of this in Jesus' name, to the glory and going forth of His Kingdom. Amen.