

SERIES ON JAMES

Condemnation for Hoarding Wealth

James 5:1-6; Jerry Truex; October 31, 2010

A. Introduction

Today, we continue our series on James. James has three major themes:

1. How to face trials or temptations,
2. How to respond to the poor and rich
3. How to be wise in our use of speech.

The passage we look at today is a warning to rich landowners who, because of their greed, refuse to pay their farm laborers. Their misuse of wealth, driven by a selfish lack of empathy for others, brings God's judgment. James warns them to repent.

B. Warning to the wealthy (v. 1)

In verse 1, James begins by calling the rich to repentance, because they are in serious trouble.

¹ Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. (NRSV)

¹ Ἄγε νῦν οἱ πλούσιοι, κλαύσατε ὀλολύζοντες ἐπὶ ταῖς ταλαιπωρίαις ὑμῶν ταῖς ἐπερχομέναις.

The oppressors are identified by their economic status in verse 4. These are not the merchants, mentions in 4:13. Rather, the "rich" refer to wealthy landowners (see v. 4), the upper 7 percent of the population. "During the time of Emperor Trajan only 7 percent of the population owned 40 percent of the various regions in Italy."¹

James tells the rich landowners to "weep and wail." Both are commands.² Both call for repentance.

James says they should "weep and wail." Why? Because misery or judgment is coming upon them. The word for "misery" (ταλαιπωρία) means "wretchedness, distress, trouble, misery."³ They probably viewed their wealth as a way to avoid suffering, but James declares that their wealth will not save them.

Jesus said, "It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 19:23)

¹ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 270, n. 5.

² "Weep" (κλαύσατε) is an imperative and "wail" (ὀλολύζοντες) is a imperative participle.

³ Bauer, W., F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, 1961) 988.

Last week, I suggested it was hard for “the rich” to enter the Kingdom because they tend to rely on their wealth, rather than God. This week, with this passage, it is hard for “the rich” to enter the Kingdom because their greed causes misery for others.

C. Warning not to hoard wealth (vv. 2-3)

² Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³ 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.

² ὁ πλοῦτος ὑμῶν σέσηπεν καὶ τὰ ἱμάτια ὑμῶν σητόβρωτα γέγονεν, ³ ὁ χρυσὸς ὑμῶν καὶ ὁ ἄργυρος κατίωται καὶ ὁ ἰὸς αὐτῶν εἰς μαρτύριον ὑμῖν ἔσται καὶ φάγεται τὰς σάρκας ὑμῶν ὡς πῦρ. ἔθησαυρίσατε ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις.

In verse 1, James pointed out that the wealthy landowners are condemned for their indifference; now, in verses 2-3, James points out the futility of relying on riches.

Your riches have rotted. In verse 2, James uses the terms “riches” (wealth), “clothes,” and “gold and silver.” These items “comprise a standard catalogue of riches in the ancient world, especially if ‘wealth’ [riches] refers to land and its produce.”⁴

Of the wealthy, James says

- The produce of their land has “rotted”
- Their clothing has been eaten by moths
- Their gold and silver have corroded or rusted

Even though the landowners still enjoy their wealth, James talks *as if* their wealth has already decayed. He uses the perfect tense for all three verbs—has rotted, has been eaten, have rusted—to highlight the result trusting in wealth. James is certain that riches will go bad, so he speaks of it already having occurred.

Their rust will be evidence against you. In verse 3, James goes on to say that “the rust or corrosion will be a witness against them.” Technically, gold does not rust, although impurities in gold might corrode.

In any case, James seems to be saying that the wealthy landowners cannot count on gold saving them. What’s more, the “rust” (ἰός) is evidence that they have been stockpiling their gold, rather than using it to help the needy. Their unused wealth does the Kingdom no good and condemns those who refuse to use it for God.

⁴ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 269.

Their “rusty” gold is a witness or testimony (μαρτύριον) against them. This is law-court language. Their own “rusty” gold incriminates them.

It will eat your flesh like fire. In the middle of verse 3, James says, “It [rust] will eat your flesh like fire.” The word for “rust” (ῥός) also means “poison” or “venom”. James switches from the image of “rust corroding metal” to “poison burning the flesh.”

5:3b: “The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire.” (NLT)

Just as the precious metals corrode, so will their flesh. James doesn’t explain this correlation. But we can guess that for James stockpiling wealth, without using it for the poor or to further the Kingdom, has a corrosive effect on a person’s life. It may also refer to the fiery/burning judgment they will face when they stand before God.

You have laid up treasure for the last days. Verse 3 concludes by saying, “You have laid up treasure for the last days.” We should take this sarcastically. The wealthy landowners “are saving up in order to provide security for themselves ‘in the last days,’ which they understand to be their retirement years.”⁵ However, if we read it read sarcastically, “the last days” don’t refer to their retirement years, but to the time of God’s Judgment (Mic. 4:1-3; Isa. 2:2-4; Jer. 23:20).

The wealthy have disregarded God’s judgment by treasuring up treasure for themselves and not being rich toward God (Lk. 12:21).

D. Outcries against greed and fraud (v. 4)

Next, in verses 4, James lists the behaviors that have contributed to the hoarding of wealth.

<p>⁴ 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.</p>	<p>⁴ ἴδου ὁ μισθὸς τῶν ἐργατῶν τῶν ἀμησάντων τὰς χώρας ὑμῶν ὁ ἀπεστερημένος ἀφ’ ὑμῶν κράζει, καὶ αἱ βοαὶ τῶν θερισάντων εἰς τὰ ὦτα κυρίου σαβαὼθ εἰσεληλύθασιν.</p>
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The wealthy landowners have not paid their hired laborers what they are owed. Not to pay what is owed is robbery. It is the rich robbing the poor. James identifies two outcries against the wealthy.

The wages of the laborers ... cry out. First, notice that the wages themselves cry out for justice. Verse 4 refers to “The wages which you kept back by fraud.” The word for “fraud” (ἀποστερέω) can mean “steal,” “rob,” or “defraud”. The stolen wages

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 300.

of laborers are in the pockets or the treasury of the rich owners and they cry out from that location.

There is an allusion here to the story of Cain and Able in Genesis 4. If you recall, Cain murdered his brother Able. It was the first murder. It was an archetypal sin for all other sin.

In Genesis 4:10, the LORD confronted Cain and said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (NRSV).

James seems to be comparing the present sin of withholding wages to the sin of murder. The landowners, in withholding wages, are murdering the laborers.

Sirach 34:26-27. ²⁶ To take away a neighbor's living is to commit murder; ²⁷ to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood. (NRSV)

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.
Second, there is another cry for justice. It is the voice of the harvesters themselves.

James says that both the cry of *the workers* and *the wages* have reached the ears of "the Lord of hosts," *kuriou sabaōth* (κυρίου σαβαώθ). *Sabaōth* (a Greek transliteration of צבאָה, *tseba'ah*) refers to "armies"—"the Lord of armies." *The harvesters are crying out for the "Lord of the heavenly armies."* In the OT, its an image of God going to war against the oppressors of Israel, but here it is God going to war against the wealthy landowners. Why is the Lord of hosts going to war against the wealthy landowners? There are two charges.

E. First Charge: Selfish disregard of others (v. 5)

The first charge concerns greed and fraud.

<p>⁵ You have lived on the earth [the land] in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.</p>	<p>⁵ ἐτρυφήσατε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐσπαταλήσατε, ἐθρέψατε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ σφαγῆς,</p>
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The first charge is clear: They have lived on the earth or land (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) in luxury and pleasure. Having wealth is not the problem; rather, the problem is the misuse of wealth. James is not condemning "capitalism," but the selfishness that can partner with any economic system.⁶

⁶ So Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 223.

James states that the landowners live for the very purpose of enriching themselves. They seek possessions and pleasure at all costs, even at the expense of their own workers and their families.

James says, “You have lived in luxury” (ἐτρυφήσατε) and “you have lived in pleasure” (ἐσπαταλήσατε). The verbs suggest that they pursue superabundant opulence without any empathy for others.⁷ By so doing, they deny God and common humanity.

The very last phrase of verse 5—“you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter”—expresses the sense of “complete self-interest and indulging all lusts” without shame.⁸

“In a day of slaughter” sounds like “in the day of judgment,” a reference to the final judgment of God. But the Greek does not have the definite article, “the” (ἐν ἡμέρᾳ σφαγῆς). It is not reference to the future judgment; rather, “in a day of slaughter” suggests that the “slaughter” was happening then-and-there in James’s day. The laborers and their families were being “slaughtered” or “murdered” in some way.

F. Second Charge: Murder (v. 6)

Not surprisingly, then, the second charge concerns murder.

<p>⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you [or “does he/God not resist you?”]. (NRSV)</p>	<p>⁶ κατεδικάσατε, ἐφονεύσατε τὸν δίκαιον, οὐκ ἀντιτάσσεται ὑμῖν.</p>
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Murder. Verse 6 accuses the landowners of playing the role of God. Because of their status, they feel they have the right to condemn whomever they choose. But these victims are innocent!⁹

What is meant by “murder”? We could take it literally or metaphorically. Literally, it could refer to laborers and/or their families who have died for lack of payment and lack of food.

More likely, we should take it metaphorically. If so, the murder probably refers to “wealthy landowners taking smaller, poorer indebted farmers to court, stripping them of their land and their income, and then hiring them back again to work their former property as sharecroppers.”¹⁰

⁷ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 271.

⁸ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 271.

⁹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 224.

¹⁰ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 224.

Sirach 34:26-27. ²⁶ To take away a neighbor's living is to commit murder; ²⁷ to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood. (NRSV)

The righteous one. The phrase, "the righteous/innocent one," might be a reference to Jesus, who is called "the righteous one" in other contexts (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 Jn 2:1).

However, in the context of James, "the righteous one" (τὸν δίκαιον) has a more general reference. It refers to "any laborer defrauded in this manner is 'innocent' with respect to the oppressive action of the rich."¹¹

Not resist you. Look at the very last phrase in verse 6. The NRSV has, "who does not resist you." Translated this way, the NRSV is saying that "the righteous person does not resist the evil landowners." Why does "the righteous one" not resist? Commentators say, "Because he or she is in no position to do so."¹²

However, the last phrase could be a question, "Does he not resist you?" The "he" could be a reference to the "righteous one" or it could refer to "God". We can supply the word "God" for "he" on the basis of what James said in 4:6.¹³

4:6 "God opposes/resists the proud"

θεὸς ὑπερηφάνοις ἀντιτάσσεται

5:6 "does he/God not resist you?"

οὐκ ἀντιτάσσεται ὑμῖν

In both instances, the verb is the same: *antitassō* (ἀντιτάσσω); mid. *oppose, offer resistance*.

G. Conclusions

1. James pronounces condemnation, or at least a stern warning, on the wealthy. He does not condemn wealth *per se*. Rather, he condemns an attitude toward possessions and pleasure that disregards or harms the welfare of others.
2. James believes that *the greed of some causes the suffering of others*. The pursuit of wealth has the potential to cause suffering. In the situation of James, wealthy landowners were greedy, they withheld pay from their laborers and, based on our knowledge of the first century, foreclosed on poor people's property and then made them sharecroppers.
3. Finally, the text reminds me of migrant workers in the U.S. who often face similar injustices.

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 304.

¹² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 225.

¹³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 305.