

The Book of James

Lesson 10: A Warning to the Rich -- James 5:1-6

There are passages in Scripture that comfort, and there are passages that thunder. This one thunders. James turns to the rich and tells them to weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon them. There is no gentle on-ramp, no softening preamble. He sounds for all the world like one of the old prophets, like Amos or Isaiah standing at the city gate, naming the sins of the powerful and announcing that God has heard the cries they thought no one noticed.

It is worth being honest about how uncomfortable this passage is, especially for those of us who, by the measure of most of human history, are the rich. James pictures rotted wealth, moth-eaten garments, and gold and silver corroded, their rust a witness against their owners. He is not condemning money itself, which Scripture elsewhere treats as a tool and a stewardship. He is exposing a particular way of relating to wealth: hoarding it, trusting it, and getting it by trampling other people.

The specific sin he names should make us listen closely. The wages of the laborers who mowed the fields, kept back by fraud, are crying out. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. These rich had built their comfort on the unpaid, underpaid backs of the vulnerable, and they assumed God did not see. James says God heard every cry. The poor had no advocate in the courts, but they had the Lord of hosts, and He was listening.

And then the final, chilling line: you have condemned and murdered the righteous person; he does not resist you. James indicts a self-indulgent luxury that fattens itself in a day of slaughter, careless of the harm it causes. This is a sobering passage, but it is not only for the obviously wicked rich. It is a mirror for all of us who have resources, asking what our wealth is doing to our hearts and to our neighbors. So we come to this passage to let God search how we get, hold, and use what we have, and to remember that the God who hears the cry of the oppressed is the God we will all answer to.

Group Discussion: Why is it so easy for those with resources to assume that how they earn and spend is a private matter that does not concern God or harm anyone? What does James help us see about God's attention to the way wealth is gained and used?

Personal Reflection: Where do you see your own heart in this passage, in the temptation to hoard, to trust in what you have, or to be inattentive to how your choices affect the vulnerable? What is God inviting you to examine honestly?

Read James 5:1-6

Study Questions

1. James cries, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (v. 1), echoing the Old Testament prophets. What does this opening reveal about God's attitude toward the misuse of wealth, and why does James speak with such severity?
2. Where are you tempted to find your security or identity in what you own or earn? How does James's warning confront the quiet confidence many of us place in wealth?
3. James describes riches that have "rotted," garments that are "moth-eaten," and gold and silver that have "corroded," their corrosion serving as "evidence against you" (vv. 2-3). What is James teaching about the true nature of hoarded wealth and the danger of laying up treasure for the last days?
4. Think about what you are storing up and trusting in. Where might you be laying up treasure that will not last, and what would it look like to be rich toward God instead?
5. James says, "the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out... the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (v. 4). What does this teach about God's concern for justice and His attention to the cries of those who are exploited?
6. Consider the people whose labor supports your comfort, those who serve, harvest, build, and clean, often unseen. How might God be calling you to greater justice, honesty, and care in the way you treat and regard them?
7. James charges the rich, "You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter" (v. 5). What does this teach about the spiritual danger of self-indulgent luxury, and how does comfortable excess deaden the heart?
8. Where has comfort or self-indulgence dulled your sensitivity to God and to the needs of others? What is one way you sense God calling you to simplicity, generosity, or greater awareness?
9. James concludes, "You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you" (v. 6). What does this reveal about how the unchecked love of wealth can lead to grave injustice against the innocent, and how does the non-resistance of the righteous point us toward Christ Himself?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James warns the rich and assures us that God hears the cries of the oppressed. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to examine and reorder your relationship to wealth and to the vulnerable this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Amos 5:11-24, the prophet's warning to those who trample the poor and God's call for justice to roll down; Luke 16:19-31, the rich man and Lazarus; Matthew 6:19-24, lay up treasure in heaven, for you cannot serve God and money; 1 Timothy 6:9-10, 17-19, the love of money and the charge to the rich to be generous; Deuteronomy 24:14-15, do not

oppress a hired worker or withhold his wages; Proverbs 14:31, whoever oppresses the poor insults his Maker.