

Sunday, July 5, 2026 pm

## STUDIES IN JAMES (17)

### Come Now, You Rich

#### James 5:1-6

Tonight we continue our study through James. As we have noted all along, this letter is addressed to God's people scattered. Likely, his primary audience was Jewish converts who were in other parts of the Roman Empire. He has given much practical advice on Christian living. In our last lesson we focused on our need to keep God in our plans, including do what is right as we have opportunity. To neglect to do good is sin.

Continuing James now turns to the rich. There is a discussion about who he has in mind and that is where we want to start our study this evening.

#### I. Come now you rich (1)

- a. Wealth has been a considerable discussion in the book of James. Duane Warden in his commentary on James notes that of the 108 that comprise James, 27 of them are directed against those who oppressed Christians with wealth or our response to such. That is about 25% of this letter. So clearly, money is an important subject as we weigh our lives as Christians. But what has been said up to this point is NOTHING compared to the harshness of James' warning in these verses.
- b. Is it sinful to be rich? Absolutely not!
  - i. As I have noted on numerous occasions, money (like internet, television, etc.) is morally neutral. It is not about how much you have, but what you do with it (and how it was obtained).
  - ii. The Bible describes many individuals with wealth – Abraham, Job, Joseph, David, Nehemiah, Barnabas, etc. Others could have been wealthy – Nicodemus, Lydia, Zacchaeus, etc. But their wealth did not deter them from being faithful to God. In fact we have examples of them using their wealth in godly ways.
  - iii. Proverbs 13:22 notes *A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, But the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous.*
  - iv. However, the Bible is very strong in warnings about wealth. Matthew 19:23-26 – how hard it is for a rich man to go to heaven. 1 Timothy 6:6-10 warns about those who desire to be rich, BUT then in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 – instructions are given for those who are rich.
  - v. Other passages of warning – Matthew 6:21-24 – where is your treasure. Who is your master? Hebrews 13:5 – be content with what you have. Ecclesiastes 5:10, *He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.* And Proverbs 30:8-9, *Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches— Feed me with the food allotted to 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.*
  - vi. Having said this, wealth can be a blessing. In fact, we depend on some among us to possess wealth. With wealth among the godly, more work can be done for the cause of Christ, the needy can be helped, etc.
  - vii. And lest we forget, compared to so much of the world, we are considered among the wealthy – even our middle, and perhaps lower-middle class. To the degree we have wealth we are expected to be good stewards!
- c. Many sources believe that James is now addressing the wealthy who are unbelievers.
  - i. James does not use the word *brethren* to describe the wealthy in this text (it is used 15x throughout the book, including 4:11 before and 5:6 after; also vs. 17 implies brethren in the

last section). So he is possibly speaking of those with wealth in the world who rejected God, or worse, those who used their wealth against believers for selfish purposes or resisting God's will. Examples will follow in a few moments.

- ii. Very likely, the majority of James' audience were far from wealthy. During 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome, there was not much of the middle class. You were either wealthy or poor. MOST were poorer. James has given practical advice that applies to everyone throughout this letter – things – like a working faith, favoritism, controlling the tongue prayer, anger, wisdom, obedience, etc. Here in our text James will get specific.
  - iii. Furthermore, there is no call for repentance in these verses (though it would certainly be welcome), but rather a picture of harsh judgment.
  - iv. IF this be so, the intent of James is as encouragement to Christians suffering persecutions for their faith and exploitation because of their social status. As I read this I think of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. In life the rich man “had it all” and Lazarus suffered begging for scraps. They both die and face a reward for their lives.
- d. Regardless, if as a believer you are blessed with wealth, the principles certainly apply and ought to be heeded. There are professed believers who are greedy and selfish.
- e. *Weep and howl for your miseries that are coming* – what is the problem with material wealth – it is temporary!
- i. And you WILL be held accountable for your stewardship. Be reminded that we will all give an accounting for how we have live our lives – 2 Corinthians 5:10
  - ii. NOTE: Another observation by many sources is the belief that the wealthy primarily addressed here would have been corrupt, wealthy Jews who rejected Jesus. And they used their powers wherever to try and quash the Christian faith. James could be indirectly (or perhaps directly) addressing what Jerusalem was going to face in a few years because of their wickedness and rejection of God & Jesus. Descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem portray a terrible, impoverished picture and the city was sieged and destroyed. All the Jewish wealth, what good was it? But of course, wherever the rich oppressed the poor, the application is there.

## II. God's judgment upon the wealthy (2-6)

- a. *Your riches are corrupted...* (2-3) - while using literal terms of decay, more than likely this has to do with their ungodly procurement and use.
- i. However, a consideration is that in judgment, they will not help you. Imagine a wealthy man dying from disease (incurable), or perhaps war (like Rome destroying Jerusalem) – what good will that wealth be. If not taken by others, it will sit hidden and eventually corrode.
  - ii. Think of ancient treasures discovered – they are usually worn over LONG periods of time.
  - iii. Again, Matthew 6:19-20 – where is your treasure? You riches cannot buy your way into heaven!
  - iv. *The corrosion of their wealth would be witness against them.* This is God's judgment(s). Wealth unused because of defeat or final condemnation. What good will it be.
  - v. *They will eat your flesh like fire* – again, judgment. Consider 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 in this. God will “in flaming fire take vengeance...”
  - vi. *You have heaped up treasures in the last days* – at judgment, all will be made right. This was something they brought upon themselves.
- b. *Indeed, the wages of the laborers* (4) – James now describes greedy, godless individuals who take advantage of others to gain more – think of Matthew 23 – they devoured widows houses, etc.
- i. Those defrauded depended on their wages – to feed and shelter themselves and their families. It was typical in those time that day laborers be paid at the end of the day. Like the parable of the generous landowner – Matthew 20:1-16 – he paid each one what he promised, and some

extra generously. This goes back to the LOM for Jews – Leviticus 19:13, **Deuteronomy 24:14-15** - “*You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be sin to you.*” This also became a cause of judgment against Israel and Judah in the prophets (Jeremiah 22:13, Habakkuk 2:9, etc.)

- ii. **God hears their cries** – God is NOT impressed with the greedy and never has been. When the poor cry out to God, He hears and will judge accordingly – see previous point. The **Lord of Sabaoth** – a word that means armies (or hosts), and describes God as the all powerful warrior over all. IOW, you do NOT want His face against you!
- c. **On earth they had lived in luxury** (5-6) – likely forgetting about God and possibly at the expense of the poor. But when “the day of slaughter arises” it will do no good.
- d. **They had condemned and murdered the just.** Whether in actuality or not, they were guilty. Both are possible, as those with corrupt influence could take measures to remove anyone who stands in their way.
  - i. We live in a wicked world and society. Even (or perhaps even more) in prosperous places the poor and vulnerable are often exploited. The wealthy have the resources to get their way and often to buy further corruption.
  - ii. Even among persecutions against Christians today – what can the poor really do?
  - iii. On the other hand, the wealthy have the resources to do greater damage to the cause of Christ and righteous morality.
    1. In Bible times - It was the silversmiths in Ephesus who stirred up the riots – Acts 19:24ff; The poor widow seeking to be avenged – Luke 18:1-5; Wicked Jews paying Judas to betray Jesus – Matthew 26:15 (how much is uncertain, from as little as 5 days to 120 days. It was enough to buy a field for paupers); OT – Jezebel was able to steal Naboth’s vineyard, **James 2:6-7** – it is the wealthy who drag Christians into courts, etc.) The poor may join in (and often do), but they are often just pawns to aid the evil in accomplishing their will.
    2. Today – who is often behind the resistance of faith. Who legislates for laws to make preaching against homosexuality or other immorality illegal? Who wants to pass legislation keeping churches closed during a pandemic while allowing bars to open? Who advocates to keep Bibles out of schools and libraries and forbid prayers in public places? Who legislates to force business owners to go against their moral values to stay in business – bakeries, photographers, landlords, etc.? It takes money to advance these agendas (and to fight them).
  - iv. *He does not resist you* – likely this is not because he doesn’t want to resist, but he is powerless and does not have the resources.

As noted at the beginning of this lesson, wealth is not wrong, but James is clear that HOW we use our resources matters. And equally, there will be an accounting. Earlier in this letter James admonished that pure and undefiled religion involved “visiting” orphans and widows. God is watching! He always has and always will. And when this world comes to its end, there will be an accounting. As you look at your life, where will you stand on that day? Think about it!