



Study Series

James: Week Eleven

Bible

James 5:1-6 (NIV)

Warning to Rich Oppressors [or us]

1 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. **2** Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. **3** Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the

last days. **4** Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. **5** You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. **6** You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

Sermon Summary

In our passage for this week James continues to address the wealthy in the church with a warning about what awaits them if they do not repent. The accusations James makes and

the language of judgment is so strong that many commentators struggle to believe that James is still addressing Christians. I believe, however, that this is the point. James wants to shake them out of any sense of complacency and jolt them into the recognition that how they are using wealth is so out of line with how God wants them to use it that it can no longer be called Christian.

It isn't the fact that these believers have wealth that is the problem for James, but how they are using the good things God had given them. Worth noting however, is how James reflects the biblical premise that the poor – with no one to turn to but God – are more likely to be righteous and that the wealthy – relying on their riches – are more likely to be wicked.

The doctrine of creation affirms that God created the material universe – rocks and trees, birds and bees – and the moral universe – where honesty is the best policy and hard work pays off. Wealth has also been conceived of in the mind of God at creation and it is to be gained in particular ways and used in particular ways. James' hearers are not using or gaining it in line with the manufacturers wishes and are liable to judgment. In particular, they have hoarded their wealth, they have used unjust business practices, and have lived in self-indulgent luxury. Each of these misuses bring judgment and will testify against them in the last days.

To begin with James presents three quick images of wealth ruined by misuse: wealth that has rotted, clothes that have been moth eaten, and rusted silver and gold. Forget for the moment that silver and gold do not rust and focus on what James is saying. The wealthy have stored up things and not used them with the result being the things they could have used for good have been ruined. These ruined goods will testify against them. You may have heard the adage that "You can't take it with you". This may be true, but James presents an image of our ruined wealth piled around us at the judgment. Wealth that did no one any good; not us and certainly not those in distress and need. Imagine as the poor and oppressed who died of hunger and illness, walking past us with all our ruined goods piled up around us!

James shifts gears to unjust business practices (with a nod to Leviticus 19 again – v. 13 this time) and the extensive Old Testament teaching against unjust or dishonest practices to gain wealth. Notice again that James references murder – can we still see this as only a metaphor? The wages that have not been paid to those who needed them are crying out to the Lord and the Lord has heard. In the Old Testament for the Lord to hear was synonymous with his action. The wealthy had acted as though the poor had no defender, but they underestimated the intervention of God.

Finally, there is a reference to luxury and self-indulgence. The language is reminiscent of Luke 16:19-35 and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The wealthy have lived in luxury while those in need were right outside their doorstep; part of their own community of faith! In doing so they have fattened themselves for the day of slaughter; essentially making sure that they catch the eye of the butcher as the fattest and choicest!

You can see why commentators feel that this group cannot be Christians? They are not acting like Christians. They are not using the good things God has given them in line with the gospel at all and James needs to warn them of what is coming if they don't repent.

Do we really need to draw out the implications of this teaching for us? We often get swept along by the current of our world that treats wealth and its acquisition as the only outcome worth pursuing. This ends up dividing our hearts; we want the kingdom of God but also our own. As the people of God we must continue to ask God to examine our hearts, to reveal where we have allowed ourselves to become polluted by the world.

There are at least two indicators that help to highlight this pollution. First, are you content? Our society and culture thrives on a lack of content and it is too easy to allow this to infiltrate our own lives. The best indicator of contentment is how thankful we are. If all we can focus on is what we don't have. If all we can do is complain about what we haven't experienced. If we cannot find much to be thankful for, we may have a polluted heart.

Second, if we are hesitant to part with our money. This hesitancy can take many forms: giving out of what's left over (often linked to a fear that there won't be enough), a "heartless" giving where our heart is disconnected from our wallet and any giving become a duty rather than an opportunity to give generously to something that has moved us, or a substitutionary system where we give of our time rather than our finances. A hesitancy to give our our finances suggests that we are holding too tightly to them and that we value them more than we should.

Using James' warning we could also profitably ask how much "ruined" wealth we have in our lives; stuff that we don't use but that no one else gets to use either, or how much of our wealth is used on our own luxury and indulgence. The list is probably endless, but the critical piece is to take James' warning seriously; how we use wealth is not morally neutral, but can be opposed to the kingdom of God. This is what we must grapple with as a people under God.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: How would you react if your group decided that you would each share and talk through your bank statements for the last month? Take time to notice the feelings that arise, what might they be indicating about our attitude towards money? Share some of your reflections with the group.
2. Read James chapter 5:1-6. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Share what you've been lead to.
3. James speaks of wealth being "ruined" by misuse. What can we begin to do to use the wealth that God has given us, so that it isn't ruined by stockpiling or misuse?
4. Our attitude towards money can easily become polluted by the world. What, apart from gratitude and a hesitancy to give, are other indicators of a lack of contentment, and a polluted attitude towards finances?
5. Last week we asked the question, "How much is too much?" Has your answer to this changed over the course of the last seven days? If so, how?
6. Money, like sex and power, has the powerful potential to control us if our attitude towards it is not released to flourish under God's control. What practical steps might Jesus be leading us to take, so that we might live a life serving only one Master?

Prayer

Take some time now to reflect on your answers to questions 6. Pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit would help you live a life free to follow Jesus, particularly in the area of finances and money. Ask God to give you courage to be honest and open about how we view and handle money, such that it isn't given the permission to gain control of us.