



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## You Better Enjoy It Now

(James 5:1-6)

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### Introduction

1. James 4:13-5:6 reminds us how easily we can focus on temporary things in ways that ignore or even work against the eternal.
  - a. The world has always had some who lived for what they accumulate now without regard for eternity.
  - b. The world has always had some who trusted absolutely in their accumulated wealth, clinging to it with no regard for others or in a way that oppresses others.
2. Because “tak[ing] into account the reality of God and his will”<sup>1</sup> is so important, we need to study these verses in more detail and reflect on how they apply.
  - a. I’m convinced James uses “the rich” (οἱ πλούσιοι, *hoi plousioi*) here in a theological sense more than an exclusively economic sense (see below), pronouncing judgment on those guilty of “the sinful use of wealth”, not on all rich people (see Moo, 210, 212).
  - b. But, it would be naive to say that we who live “in the Western world, where amassing material wealth is not only condoned but admired” (Moo, 210) cannot benefit from this text’s warning.

### Body

#### I. The Condemned Rich.

- A. Verse 1 demands attention and commands the rich to “weep and wail. . .”
  1. “Weep” (Lam. 1:1-2; Isa. 15:2, 5; etc.) and “wail” (Isa. 15:2-3; Amos 8:3) are used often in the prophets to depict the reaction of the wicked when the day of the Lord arrives (“wail” is used only in the prophets, always in a judgment context – e.g., Isa. 13:6; 14:31; 16:7; 31:20; 48:31; Ezek. 21:17; Hos. 7:14; Zech. 11:2).
  2. This prophetic background, along with the entirety of James 5:1-11, show that the “miseries” coming upon them refer to condemnation on the day of judgment.
- B. But, just who are “the rich”?
  1. Verse 4 refers to wealthy landowners, a group “of people frequently criticized in the OT, Jewish literature, and the wider Greco-Roman world for their greedy

<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 209.

acquisition of land and their exploitation of those forced to work on the land for them" (Moo, 210). But, they are merely one example of a larger type.

2. The prophetic language gives a clue to the theological meaning James intended.
  - a) Because Israel often ignored the Mosaic covenant's expectation that the people would show concern for the poor (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:39-43), later OT and Jewish writings often denounced the rich, occasionally using the term as a synonym for "the unrighteous" (Prov. 10:15-16; 14:20).
  - b) Luke tells us that Jesus reflected this emphasis as he warned about the threat of riches to genuine discipleship (cf. Luke 6:24-25).
  - c) But, in the NT generally, it is the misuse of wealth that is condemned; even James allows for the presence of rich believers (1:10; 2:1-4).
3. Here, James is dealing with a particular group of "the rich" who were causing some of his readers' most difficult trials (cf. 5:7-11; 1:2-4).

C. His condemnation gives no hint of anything positive.

## II. Reasons for Their Condemnation.<sup>2</sup>

A. In "a rapid-fire series of short clauses and sentences," James condemns them because they were "us[ing] their wealth for selfish purposes" (vv. 2-3) (Moo, 212).

1. Using words that had come to be used in Scripture and Jewish writings to stand for anything temporary ("rotted", "moth-eaten") or decayed ("corroded"), James tells "the rich" that however much they thought their riches made them secure, they were nevertheless doomed because their riches wouldn't last (cf. Job 16:7; 19:20; Matt. 6:19; Job 13:28; Ezek. 24:6, 11, 12; also Sirach 14:19; 29:9-11).<sup>3</sup>
2. Ironically, the very things they counted on would "stand as evidence against" them (NLT) "in the last days," or, as the phrase is translated in the REB: "You have piled up wealth in an age that is near its close." James wanted them to know that judgment day was certainly coming (see Acts 17:30-31).<sup>4</sup>

B. They had "cheated their workers of their pay" (v. 4) (Moo, 215)

1. Those who laid claim to covenant promises were ignoring its commands about ethical behavior toward the poor (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15; cf. Mal. 3:5).
2. In their world, laborers expected their pay at the end of each day (cf. Matt. 20:1-16); "failure to pay workers promptly could jeopardize life itself" (Moo, 216).
3. The workers' cries might be ignored, or even unheard, by the rich, but "the Lord of hosts" had heard and would make things right (cf. Isa. 5:9; etc.).

C. They were pursuing a self-indulgent lifestyle (v. 5).

1. Again, James stands within the prophetic tradition (e.g., Ezek. 16:49).

<sup>2</sup> These four points are developed from Moo, 212-220.

<sup>3</sup> The verbs in vv. 2-3 are in the perfect tense, reflecting either a condition the rich would not admit or used in a prophetic sense that was so sure of an outcome that it is stated as if it had already occurred. See Moo, 213; also Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam Kamell, *James*, 220; and Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 175.

<sup>4</sup> Several NT passages show that "the last days" began at Pentecost is refers to the age in which we now live (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 2 Pet. 3:3). The background is the Jewish understanding of time developing according to God's plans. New Testament writers do not say how long "the last days" will last, but are consistently clear, as in James 5, that they will end in judgment.

2. Vital to understanding his point are the easily overlooked words, “on the earth.”
    - a) The words suggest a contrast between the lives of ease that the rich then enjoyed and the torment that awaited them.
    - b) They also point to the reversal of fortune that awaits both the rich and the poor they ignore and mistreat (cf. Luke 16:25).
  3. Significantly, James describes the coming judgment as “a day of slaughter.” Judgment day was coming and the goods that made them feel so secure were actually getting them ready for something very different than they expected.
- D. They were oppressing the righteous person (v. 6).
1. “The righteous one” (τὸν δίκαιον, *ton dikaion*) probably does not refer to any specific person,<sup>5</sup> but to the very personal effects of the landowners’ actions.
  2. The aorist verbs “condemned” and “murdered” declare what has occurred.
    - a) “Condemned” (καταδικάζω, *katadikazō*) “points to some kind of judicial verdict” (Moo, 219), again echoing OT and intertestamental writings where the rich are depicted as using their influence to bring about what amounted to legal robbery (cf. Psalms 10:8-9; Amos 2:6-8; Micah 2:2, 6-9).
    - b) “Murder” (φονεύω, *phoneuō*) may refer to actual cases or to practical outcomes where the poor are deprived of a way to live.<sup>6</sup>
  3. A contrast is implied in the last sentence, “He does not resist you” (present tense): the rich win now, and add that to the things they think guarantee their security; but, the time will come when they will learn better.

### III. Lessons from James’s Warning.

- A. 4:13-5:6 remind us of Jesus’ teaching that “it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:23, NASB), a point raising two issues.
  1. The rich can more easily become self-dependent, trusting in things that promise security and believing the illusion such things promise (cf. Luke 12:15, 18-20).
  2. The rich also find it easier to have their way, the very opposite of the submission needed to be part of the reign of God.
- B. James 4:13-5:6 also reminds us of the danger of “the slippery slope.” The sin in 4:13-17 was in not taking God into account in daily life. In 5:1-6, that attitude had led to active opposition to the ways of God.
- C. The context of James’s “doing good” statement in 4:17 is the use of wealth; 5:1-6 elaborates what he meant.
  1. James does condemn active oppression (5:4, 6).
  2. But, some of their sin was in simply *ignoring* the needs of the poor (a point made clearer when the OT and especially the prophetic emphasis is considered).
  3. The verses following the parable of the rich fool should be internalized.

<sup>5</sup> Some try to make Jesus the referent; others have argued for James himself (“James the Just”). The latter requires a corresponding belief that the writing was done by James’s followers after his death. See Moo, 218-219.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Sirach 34:25-27 – “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. To take away a neighbor’s living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood” (ESV).

- a) Luke 12:22-31 (par. Matt. 6:25-34) remind us that much of what we worry too much about are things that don't last anyway.
- b) But, Luke 12:32-34 teach us that it's permissible to have and enjoy material blessings, provided that we understand that they should be spent/invested in good deeds that benefit the poor about whom God cares so much.

### *Conclusion*

1. During the lead-up to the Christmas holiday, we routinely hear versions "A Christmas Carol," Charles Dickens's story of Ebenezer Scrooge's conversion from greed to philanthropy. It illustrates James's point in that Scrooge was dramatically reminded of what really matters and how futile it is to live for temporal wealth.
2. James's warning is more severe because it states directly what Dickens only hinted: the Lord of hosts is watching and will call us to account. Thankfully, we still have time to do what's right and good, even though we do not know how much or little time we have.

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