

Reading: Matt 6:19-34 and Ps 73

Text James 5:1-6

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴ Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

Main Point

Condemnation when wealth used for Evil.

Introduction (300)

Hook

How much thought have you put into how you use your money?

Now, money can be awkward to talk about. It is awkward because it is a window to your heart. How you spend your money shows what you hold dear.

But God is not awkward in addressing money matters. God is concerned with how you use and acquire your money.

Link to passage

Here in this text, we are given instructions about money and wealth.

It is phrased in the negative. What not to do, and includes subsequent judgement.

In fact this passage begins with an incredibly strong condemnation of the wicked rich.

Verse 1.- The condemnation

Did you notice that in verse 1?

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

The final judgement

This is language that the prophets used in the OT to condemn the wicked. This is not a repentant weeping and howling. This is a weeping and howling because the judgment of the Lord has come to the wicked. Miseries refer to the ultimate condemnation of God.

So, the people James is addressing here are wealthy people who are not Christians and are oppressing vulnerable Christians.

We know from Chapter 2 that rich people were coming to the church and getting special treatment. Rich people who dragged the believers into court.

These rich-non believers could also be included in the ones who said they had faith, but had no works to show for it.

The Rich = Rich misusing their wealth

The condemnation James gives is against these wicked rich people. It is not the mere fact of having wealth that is condemned, but how it is used that brings this condemnation.

James is condemning the wicked rich.

Outline.

The four accusations against the wicked rich will form the outline of our study.

James condemns these wealthy people for their

1. Hoarding (2-3)
2. Defrauding (v4)
3. Indulging (v5)
4. Murdering (v6)

Relevant for all

Now you may be thinking at this point. “Well, I’m a Christian and am not wealthy, so this passage does not apply to me”. If you are thinking this let me just say that this **does** apply to you.

Because even if you are a Christian, you still struggle with sin. And when you sin you act like an unbeliever, so you need to hear these words meant for an unbeliever.

And also it is good to remember that wealth is relative. You may not feel wealthy, but if you have driven a car, or have had a hot shower this week James would consider you as rich.

We have all been given a measure of wealth, and God is concerned with how we use what we have been given.

So even if you do not feel wealthy, be sure to heed these words from James.

Part 1 – Accused of Hoarding (2-3)

Exposition

All wealth transitionary

With all of that said, let's begin with our first section: Accused of Hoarding.

We see this accusation in verse 2 and 3

² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded,

James lists off three common areas to accumulate wealth: general riches, garments and precious metals.

And for each one of these he points out that they will not last. Riches have been hoarded away, but they will not last.

End of material things sure

James talks about the outcome of this hoarded wealth as if it had already happened. The end is so sure.

Material things are so temporal. “ *² Your riches **have** rotted and your garments **are** moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver **have** corroded,*

Corroding?

Now we can imagine riches in the form of food, or organic items rotting away, and we can picture even the finest of clothes being eaten away by moths.

But gold and silver corroding? These are precious because they don't rust and they last.

But that is the point James is getting to. Gold and silver have no eternal value.

So Hoarding is foolish, regardless of what it is, because all material things will pass away.

But notice that hoarding is not just a lost potential.

Eat your flesh like fire - Hell

Hoarding is also a negative indictment.

Notice the middle of verse 3

and their corrosion [That is, the corrosion of the hoarded wealth] will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. [the decaying wealth will "eat your flesh like fire].

Those are some very graphic word pictures. The "*eat your flesh like fire*" is talking about God's judgement. God's final judgement of sinners in hell.

Jesus uses the same sort of language when talking of hell.

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' (Isa 66:48)

One of the most sobering truths revealed in the bible is that Hell is a real place of conscience, bodily and eternal torment.

Hell is what justice demands. Hell is the right punishment for crimes against the God the universe.

Jesus teaches that clearly in Matt 13:41-42

⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Gospel Plea

Hell is a real place. And because of our sinful actions, we all deserve to go there. We all deserve eternity in Hell. You may not realise the seriousness, but your sins are that bad. You may not think you are that bad, but God is the judge, not you!

Your sins are great, but we have a greater saviour. We have a saviour who chose to take the punishment in the place of sinners.

We deserve Hell, but he offers us joy and peace for eternity. All he asks of you is that you would believe in him. Believe that he has paid the punishment you deserve.

And then show that belief by turning away from your sins. Show your belief by choosing to follow him in all you do.

Believe in Him and he promises you eternal life.

Why does hoarding = Judgement?

So how does hoarding and the decaying of material wealth act as evidence against you? How does decaying wealth lead you to hell? Two things we can highlight at this point.

First is shows the state of your heart. It shows a trust in material things instead of a trust in God. It shows you are serving money/wealth instead of God.

In Matt 6:24 made this clear.

*²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You **cannot** serve God and money.”^[1]*

And secondly, decaying wealth shows a failing to love and help others.

God appointed wealth to help and aid. The accumulation and subsequent decay is evidence of lack of action. Evidence of a lack of love. Which show a lack of Faith.

1 John 3:16-17 makes this very clear.

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Application - Wealth is a way to love people

I hope you can see that James is not speaking against wise saving to take care of your needs and family. He is speaking against the way an unbeliever acts towards

money. Money is their security and money is for **their own use**.

Sinful hoarding can take many forms today, but the key is to think of what is hoarding showing? What is it giving evidence to in your life?

- Does your accumulated wealth show that you are trusting money instead of God?
- Does your accumulated wealth show that you have no regard for others in need?

The Last day refers to now

Christians must have a fundamentally different notion towards money. Because they have a fundamentally different notion of the world. Notice the last sentence of verse 3.

You have laid up treasure in the last days.

The days we are living in are the “last days”. This time period between the resurrection and return of Christ. What is the point of amassing wealth in material things when this world will pass away? When the day of judgement is near?

The point is that we should use our wealth to pursue His will and His kingdom. Not store it up for our will and our kingdom. Christ will return. Sooner or later.

Link

But that does not mean that we are to have no money. On the contrary we are to be good stewards of the wealth we do have.

Which brings us to our second accusation against the wicked rich.

Part 2 – Accused of Defrauding (v4)

Exposition

Scenario of not paying workers

Look at verse 4 where we find this second accusation. These rich have cheated their workers of pay.

⁴ Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

The Rich had employed people to work their land, but then they withheld the pay. And these vulnerable workers could do nothing about it.

Why the rich are often seen as evil

With money comes power. And when a sinner has power, and there are no laws to protect the vulnerable, the vulnerable will be oppressed.

This is the sad reality of human nature. This is why the “rich” are often the “wicked” ones. It is not that the unbelieving rich are any more evil than the unbelieving poor. It is that a rich sinner has the power to advance themselves, at the expense of others, if there is nothing to stop them.

But God cares for justice. He cares that the vulnerable receive justice. As our passage tells us, He hears. He hears the cries of the vulnerable. He hears the cries of the harvesters who have been defrauded.

Lord of host hears

The end of verse 4 tells us that

the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

Don't miss how God is designated here. The Lord of Hosts. This title brings to mind God at the head of a great army. The leader of a powerful heavenly force. An army who will obey God's will, and bring justice.

Justice will be served

There are many actions people do in this world that do not receive their due justice. Bullying, harassment, crass comments, violence, fraud, and the list could go on and on.

Some unjust acts are even legal, but no unjust act escapes God's knowledge.

God hears, and he is holy, powerful and he will judge the wicked.

2 Thess 1:6-9 gives us a vivid description of God's impending justice on those who afflict the vulnerable.

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from^[b] the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

Application – God knows

So let us not be distraught when justice is not served here on earth. God hears and he will repay.

- Yes, fraud happens.

- Yes, injustice happens.
- Yes, the vulnerable are oppressed.

And we are rightly angry at these things.

But we must not despair, or think that they have the last word. God knows the injustice far better than we do.

And let us also be sure that all of our own dealings are not only legal, but also just. This is particularly true for employers or landlords, but also any of us who ask a service of another. We cannot use our “legal” rights to exploit the more vulnerable.

Link

Now not only were these rich amassing their money in unjust ways, they were also spending their money on self-indulgence.

Which brings us to the third accusation to the rich:

Part 3 – Accused of Indulging (v5)

Exposition

Spending on self

Look at the accusation at the start of verse 5:

⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

It seems not much has changed over 2000 years. Prioritising the pursuit of pleasure as the highest goal. That is the accusation. Happiness as the highest Hope.

Money becomes a means to satisfy my every craving and desire. Instead of a means to love God and neighbour.

Application – We enjoy good gifts from God. They point to Him

Now I want to point out here that James is not against enjoying material things. God has created us with eyes, ears, and taste buds to appreciate his creation.

Wonderful sights and tasty food make us marvel at the great God who created these things and God uses material things to bless his people.

God promised Israel a land of milk and honey, with vineyards and wine presses.

The material world is good. And it is good to honour the giver of these gifts by enjoying them and letting the gifts point to Him.

Application – Pursuit of pleasure for it's own sake is futile

But the pursuit of pleasure for it's own sake is futile and sinful.

We must be doubly vigilant to hold to this truth.

Our sinful flesh wants to pursue pleasure. The society we live in glorifies this pursuit of pleasure.

But listen to the words of a wise man. Turn with me to Ecclesiastes 2:4-11.

Here we read the account of a wise man who pursued pleasure as his top priority for a time. Many of us may be tempted to pursue the same things he did, his list of pursuits are extensive and appealing, but we would be

wise to learn from his experience. Not to fall in that trap. Take careful note of his conclusion.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines,^[a] the delight of the sons of man.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

All was vanity, striving after wind, nothing gained. Let those words sink in.

Friends, if you make pleasure your top priority you will always be unsatisfied. Not only is it futile, but worst, it leads to the slaughter.

Like Cattle before slaughter

Look at the second part of verse 5.

You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

Like cattle happily eating the best of the grass, ignorant of their impending doom, so are the wicked rich pursuing pleasure as the top priority, oblivious of the impending doom. Oblivious of the coming judgement.

Link

The wicked rich have a lot to answer for, and their judgement is coming.

The fourth and final accusation James gives is an accusation of murdering the innocent.

This is our fourth and final section.

Part 4 – Accused of Murdering

Using legal means to harm the innocent

Look at verse 6.

⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person.

This could be blatant hatred against the Christians, leading to murder.

The fact that the oppressed ones are condemned indicates that the rich were using legal systems to get to this end. Either through corrupt courts or legal loopholes, the rich were murdering Christians.

Or it could be linking to holding back the wages of their workers. By holding back the pay of a worker,

these wicked men were effectively murdering them. A worker relied on his daily wage to feed himself and his family. If the wage was held back starvation was only around the corner.

So the rich were using “legal” means to murder the innocent.

Not resist you

And James concludes with: *He does not resist you.*

Just to let it sink in. The poor does not even resist the rich. Injustice is compounded on injustice.

The evil ones are wealthy, they oppress the poor, they spend on the pursuit of pleasure and they murder the innocent.

And the innocent does nothing.

Maybe unable to do anything, but maybe they also refuse to take matters into their own hands.

Application - Non-resistance is the Christian way

Maybe they were following the instructions of their Lord and Saviour:

Remember what Jesus said in Matt 5:39-42

³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic,^[a] let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Here we see a Radical love. Love for God and neighbour

Here we see a Radical humility. Humility before God and neighbour.

Here we see a Radical trust. Trust that God is in control.

God will bring justice.

It shows a trust that God will repay justice. We do not take matters into our own hands. We don't know his ways or his methods. But we know he is just. We know he is loving, and we know he is powerful.

Conclusion

Friends, in this passage we have seen a strong condemnation against the wicked rich. Those who use their money in evil ways.

We have seen a fourfold accusations. In each accusation we see a challenge on how we use our own money and wealth.

1. Do you hoard your wealth and give evidence of a lack of trust in God and a lack of concern for those in need?
2. Do you conduct your dealings in a just way, regardless of what the law may allow?
3. Do you pursue pleasure as a priority?
4. Do you use legal means to oppress the more vulnerable?

In a nutshell, do you use your wealth in an evil way or a God honouring way?

This passage forces us to ask these questions. God cares how you use your wealth.

But it also helps us not to envy the wicked rich. They may seem to be prospering today, but God hears and he will see justice done.

We must trust God to avenge.

- He sees all.
- He hears all.
- He knows all.
- He is the Lord of host.

He has the power to exercise full justice and one day, on the terrible day of slaughter, he will do just that.

But not yet, not yet.

He is patient.

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you,^[a] not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Let us pray.