

A WARNING TO THE RICH

TEXT: JAMES 5:1-6

INTRODUCTION:

1. James 5:1-6 is a strong warning to the rich.
2. A preacher by the name of William MacDonald said: "In one of the most searching and piercing sections of his letter, James now launches into a denunciation of the sins of the rich. The words fall like hammer-blows, blunt and unsparing. In fact, the denunciation is so strong that these verses are seldom preached on."
3. The Bible does not say that it is a sin to be rich. There is nothing wrong with owning property, nothing wrong with making a profit, or investing money, and so on.
4. Genesis 13:2 says, "And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold."
5. Abraham is referred to 74 times in the New Testament as a great man of faith. Of all of the Old Testament heroes, only Moses is referred to more in the New Testament (80 times). And he "was very rich."
6. Joseph of Arimathaea was a rich man. Matthew 27:57-60 tells us he was Jesus' disciple, and that he took our Lord's body and laid it in his own new tomb.
7. Luke 8:1-3 refers to "certain women" who supported Jesus financially. Luke 8:3 says they "ministered unto him of their substance."
8. Other Biblical examples could be given. There is nothing wrong with wealth gained honestly and used properly. James condemns those who have gained wealth dishonestly and use it selfishly.
9. John Wesley used to say: "Make all you can, save all you can, invest all you can, and give away all you can."
10. John Wesley gave away most of his money. The problem with most rich people is that they give away very little of their money.
11. John Wesley taught that when a person received an increase in income, he should increase his giving.
12. "What should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving" -- John Wesley.
13. This is Biblical. Psalm 62:10 says, "If riches increase, set not your heart upon them."
14. James is not teaching a socialistic "soak the rich" message, like we hear from the politicians, OWS mob, and the left wing unions.

15. James is not advocating a "distribute the wealth--class-warfare" message, like we hear from the president and his allies in Congress.
16. James is preaching what the Old Testament prophets preached.
17. James is teaching what the Lord Jesus Christ (his half-brother) taught (cf. Luke 6:24-26; 12:16-21; 16:13, 14; 18:18-25).
18. There is some disagreement among Bible teachers as to who James is speaking to – are these rich people saved or unsaved? Personally, I believe that they are not saved.
19. Normally James addresses his readers as "brethren" (1:2; 2:1; 3:1). In 4:1 he says "among you," and the context indicates that they are saved (cf. 4:11).
20. However 5:1-6 seems different, and it is highly unlikely that Christians could live like this. It appears to me that these are wicked rich people who are oppressing God's people (cf. 5:6), and then James goes on to say to Christians: "Be patient therefore, brethren..." (5:7).
21. In this passage James refers to four specific sins of the rich.
 - HOARDING WEALTH (5:1-3)
 - FAILING TO PAY PROPER WAGES (5:4)
 - OVER-INDULGENCE (5:5)
 - CONDEMNING AND MURDERING THE JUST (5:6)
22. This message would seem to have little relevance to a middle-class church like ours. However, there is plenty of application for us. Also, most of the world would consider us rich by their standards.

I. IT IS A SIN WHAT THEY DO WITH THEIR MONEY (5:1-3)

1. James says: "Go to now" (5:1; cf. 4:13), an expression indicating disapproval. "Come now..." (NKJV).
2. James summons the rich to weep and howl because of the miseries which would come upon them. Soon they would meet God and their money will not do them any good.
3. Now the rich are smug and arrogant. Consider Donald Trump. It is sickening the way the presidential candidates bow and scrape before him in order to get his endorsement (and perhaps his money).
4. Now the rich have their great wealth, their fancy cars, their own private jets, their many mansions – one on the east coast, one on the west coast, one in Europe, etc. – but soon it will all be over for them, and then they will be filled with shame and remorse (5:1).
5. Now they are living like royalty, but soon they will be weeping and howling (5:1).

6. Revelation 6:15 and 16 says that during the coming tribulation, the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men will hide themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains, and they will say And say to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."
7. Judgment day will come for the rich man and he must stand before God like a dirty beggar. And God will judge him for his covetousness, for seeking security and comfort in material things rather than in God.
8. The rich will weep and howl in agony when they are reminded that they indulged themselves to the full while others had not even the bare necessities.
9. Most rich people waste their money on frivolous and worldly pleasures while missionaries are struggling to build churches, and millions of heathen have never even seen a Bible.
10. Having wealth is not necessarily evil, it is what you do with it that matters. People often misquote the Bible, and say, "Money is the root of all evil," but the Bible says, "For the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Timothy 6:10).
11. Hoarding wealth is definitely wrong and God judges the rich for that (cf. Matt. 6:19-21).
12. In James' day, wealth was generally in the form of grain, oil, clothing, gold, and silver (5:2, 3). If James were writing today, he might mention stocks and bonds and other investments.
13. Grain will rot – "Your riches are corrupted" (5:2) – perhaps there were worms in the grain; maybe the oil had become rancid.
14. "...and your garments are moth-eaten" (5:2b). Their grain and clothing had been hoarded to the point where they were spoiled.
15. Their food could have been used at one time to feed the hungry; now it was worthless. Their garments could have been given away to those in need, now they were moth-eaten.
16. I remember years ago when it came out in the newspapers that Imelda Marcos, the wife of the president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos had nearly three thousand pairs of shoes.
17. According to Scripture, it is wrong to have more than you need (5:2, 3).
18. Nothing material in this world will last forever. The seeds of death and decay are all about us. We need to remember: "'Tis only one life. `Twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

19. "Cankered" (5:3) means corroded, discolored, tarnished. The expression, "and shall eat your flesh as it were fire" means that their failure to use their riches for the good of others would cause them the keenest suffering and remorse.
20. When their eyes would at last be opened to see the cruelty of their selfishness and greed – costly jewelry, expensive clothing, extravagant parties, luxurious homes, high-priced limousines, traveling all over the world, etc. – when their eyes are finally opened to all of this, it will be a painful, scorching experience.
21. "Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days" (5:3b) indicates the folly of their hoarding in view of their impending judgment. James stressed that the coming of the Lord was near (5:8, 9). Saving is wise, but hoarding wealth is bad.

II. IT'S A SIN THE WAY THEY GOT THEIR MONEY (5:4-6)

1. First, James condemns them for what they do with their money. Next, he condemns them for the way they got their money.
2. The laborers who reaped down their fields were deprived of their rightful pay. The rich were guilty of fraud and the poor workers cried out in vain (5:4).
3. But God, "the Lord of sabaoth (hosts)" hears their cries (5:4b).
4. Here the Bible clearly teaches that some rich people got their wealth through dishonest means. Today many rich people not only cheat their workers, but they cheat on their taxes also.
5. Some use false weights and measures (like the butcher with his finger on the scale). Some bribe inspectors and other officials, falsify expense accounts and other reports, use false advertising, etc. None of this escapes God's attention.
6. While their employees are being cheated, the rich are living "in pleasure" (5:5), i.e. luxuriously, "high on the hog." James says they have "been wanton," i.e. they have indulged themselves.
7. These words remind us of our Lord's story about Lazarus and the rich man. Our Lord said in Luke 16:19, "There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day."

III. WHAT THEY COULD HAVE DONE WITH THEIR MONEY

1. They squandered their wealth while others starved to death.
2. In his commentary on the book of James, John Phillips writes of a rich Arab sheik, who built a huge multi-million dollar mansion.

- When the construction was finished, he didn't like it, so he bulldozed it to the ground and built another.
3. Dr. Phillips then adds that this kind of wastefulness "goes on in a part of the world where poverty abounds."
 4. While churches are trying to build Christian schools, and get out the Gospel over radio and television, the rich drive down the highway in their chauffeur-driven limousines with the tinted windows, drinking their booze, on their way to another party or fancy restaurant, oblivious to what is going on outside, concerned only with themselves.
 5. Wealth and luxury have a way of ruining character. For example, consider the wretched Kennedy family.
 6. Consider Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the very rich and very immoral politician from France.
 7. James compares these worldly, self-indulgent rich people to fat swine or cattle, stuffing themselves right up to their time of slaughter (5:5b).
 8. James says that they "have condemned and killed the just..." (5:6). This brings to mind the way Ahab and Jezebel killed Naboth (I Kings 21).
 9. James concludes this section of Scripture by saying, "Be patient therefore, brethren..." (5:7; cf. 5:8).

CONCLUSION:

A preacher preached a simple message one day from Pro. 19:17.

"He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again."

His sermon was brief and had only two points:

If you like the terms, then put down your money.

Money talks. What will it say to you at the last judgment?