

Faith That Works
“Riches: Blessing or Curse?”
James 5:1-6

Introduction- In chapter 3:13, James asked a question, “*Who is wise and understanding among you?*” “*Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*”

James is addressing the problems and dangers of following the wisdom of this world. Today in our text, James is warning us not to envy the passion, power, or privileges of the wicked wealthy.

He is speaking to the wicked wealthy. It’s for the benefit of the believers. James understands the temptation to envy the rich could lead many Christians astray. So it’s a timely message for us all that live under the lure of the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

James wanted his readers to learn two important lessons:

- Don’t envy the wealthy wicked.
- Remember God will right all wrongs! “*Nothing reveals the state of a persons heart more than his or her views of money and material possessions.*”

The first thing James does is call the rich man to listen (vs. 1). “*Go to now or listen here you rich people.*” Then James tells them what to do (vs. 1) “*weep and howl.*”

It’s not as an expression of repentance, but rather of anguish because of impending judgment. Note vs. 1, “*for your miseries that shall come upon you.*” The certainty of the judgment is indicated by the words “shall come” in Greek is in the present tense.

This is not the first time James has mentioned the rich in his letter.

See 1:9-11- The rich here, are believers.

See 2:5-7- The rich here, are unbelievers.

Back to 5:1- The rich here, are unsaved. But why is James announcing judgment upon them? It’s *not* because they are rich. James is *not* making an indiscriminate attack on the rich. It’s *not* a sin to have wealth.

Some great saints have been rich: Abraham, Job, David, Philemon, Joseph of Armathea, Lydia.....

The Bible doesn’t say “*money is the root of all evil,*” but “*the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,*” I Tim. 6:10.

James is announcing judgment of these rich because of how they got rich and what they did or didn't do with their riches. The focus in these verses is on those who gain their wealth in an ungodly manner and live selfishly and fail to use their wealth to bless and benefit others. The problem is not the possession of wealth, it's how we get it and what we do with it. Do we possess it or does it possess us? Wealth can be a spiritual handicap.

Jesus said (Matt. 6:24) , *"No man can serve two masters..."*

Jesus said (Luke 12:13), *"Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me..."*

Luke 12:15, *"Take heed, and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not..."*

James Boice, *"The problem is that, being sinful men and women, we take what we are given and use it for ourselves at the expense of other people, rather than receiving these things as a gift in trust from God to be used in his service and at his direction. We need to learn that we are merely stewards of what God has given and must use what he has given us rightly."*

James now brings four indictments against the wicked wealthy (vv. 2-6).

1. Indicted for hoarding (vv. 2-3). The wealth consisted of three things: Grain; Garments; and Gold.

Illus.: *"Bertha Adams was seventy-one years old. She died alone in West Palm Beach, Florida on Easter Sunday, 1976. The coroner's report read: Cause of death...malnutrition. After wasting away to fifty pounds she could no longer stay alive. When the state authorities made their preliminary investigation of her place, they found a veritable pigpen...the biggest mess you can imagine. One seasoned inspector declared he'd never seen a dwelling in greater disarray. The pitiable woman had begged food from neighbors and gotten what clothes she had from the Salvation Army. From all appearances she was a penniless recluse- a pitiful and forgotten widow. But such was not the case.*

Amid the jumble of her unclean, disheveled belongings, two keys were found which lead officials to safe-deposit boxes at two different local banks. The discovery was absolutely unbelievable. The first box contained over 700 AT&T stock certificates, plus hundreds of other valuable certificates, bonds and solid financial securities, not to mention a stack of cash amounting to nearly \$200,000. The second box had no certificates, only more currency- \$600,000 to be exact. Adding the net worth of both boxes, the woman had well over a million dollars."

Is it wrong to have savings? No! But the Bible does condemn the accumulation of wealth for self, to the disregard of God or others.

Jesus said, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your heart is, there your heart will also be,”* Matt. 6:19-21

Lesson from Jesus' words:

1. Earthly riches are not lasting. They are uncertain.
2. Possessions can control us rather than us controlling them. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart be also.” “You can t serve God and mammon.”*

How about you? God wants our lives to be like a conduit, not a reservoir. Building our empire, but God's kingdom! We are stewards, it's God's.

2. Indicted for fraud, vs. 4.

The word for laborer may denote any kind of worker, but in the New Testament it generally is used for agricultural workers. In these words, James shows that the greed of the rich had manifested itself with special cruelty, that is, in the withholding of wages from those who had worked for them. The Mosaic Law specifically condemned this: *“Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy... At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it: lest he cry against thee unto the Lord, and it be a sin unto thee”* (Deut. 24:14, 15). *“Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning”* (Leviticus 19:13). The reason for this stipulation was the extreme poverty of the worker. Any delay in payment brought added hardship to him. Calvin says, *“What can be more base than that they, who supply us with bread by their labour, should be pined through want? And yet this monstrous thing is common; for there are many of such a tyrannical disposition, that they think that the rest of mankind live only for their benefit.”*

3. Indicted for Self-Indulgence, vs. 5

“Ye have lived for pleasure”- translates a single Greek word suggesting life of luxury and self-indulgence.

“Been wanton” is literally “given yourselves to pleasure.”

In the last days, “lovers of pleasure, more than God.”

Illus.: Like the fatted calf.

Jesus' story "The Rich Man and Lazarus"

4. Indicted for Murder, vs. 6.

It's judicial murder by their wealth. They were controlling the courts.

The Golden Rule: "Whoever has the gold makes the rules." Remember "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

Illus.: I King's 21- Ahab & Naboth vineyard.

Material fixation spawns a miserable guarantee in ones life.

1. Hoarding
2. Fraud
3. Self-Indulgence
4. Murder

What's the message to believers?

1. Don't envy the wicked wealthy.
2. Remember God will get all things right.

To the poor, I Tim. 6:6-9
To the rich, I Tim. 6:17