

# Rich Oppressors

*“Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ... You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” (James 5:1–6).*

## Devotional

That the original audience of the epistle of James must have developed an infatuation with the wealthy is clear from the many passages that offer warnings to the rich or criticize the church for giving deference to those with great means (1:9–11; 2:1–13; 4:13–17). In the face of great trials, it seems that many in this audience either placed great hope in their own wealth or had an inordinate longing to run in the same circles that the wealthy did.

In today’s passage, James offers his harshest criticism of the rich. At first glance, 5:1–6 seems to be disconnected to the section before it. However, the warnings we read here are well-placed since earthly wisdom often calls for trust in one’s money, and James warned his audience about following the wisdom of this world in chapter 4.

It is a bit uncertain as to whether the rich people James is condemning are believers. Many say that James is addressing unbelievers since this passage offers little hope of repentance and because its style is similar to passages from the Old Testament that are addressed to the pagan enemies of Israel (for example, Isaiah 13). Even if this is the case, we as believers must also pay close attention to these warnings. This passage tells us that the success of the oppressive rich will be only temporary, but it gives us a stern warning as well. According to John Calvin, it warns us so that we “might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they [the poor] suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them.”

James condemns the rich landowners in these verses for trusting in their wealth and for earning their money as a result of fraud and oppression. The wealth that they have stored up is wasting away and cannot be trusted to save them at the end (5:1–3). They have oppressed the poor by depriving them of the wages that they have earned (v. 4), and by their wealth they have fattened themselves for the day of

judgment (v. 5). The earthly wisdom that looks to money for security will fail in the last day, for when Christ returns, all that is not of eternal value will be destroyed.

### **CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)**

Most wealthy Christians would probably not be guilty of withholding pay from their employees. However, there are many other ways in which wealth can be misused. For example, it is possible to sin by living to the full extent of one's means without helping to contribute to the spread of the Gospel. Whether or not you have great wealth, ask the Lord to show you how your resources can be used for His kingdom and begin taking steps to follow His direction.<sup>1</sup>

## Open it

1. Describe a time you won a prize or raffle. What did you do with the winnings?

## Read it

**JAMES 5:1-6**

## Explore it

2. What does James call “the rich” to do?
3. What was about to happen to them?
4. What had happened to their riches?
5. Who was crying against the rich?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/rich-oppressors/>



It's similar to when the Old Testament prophets pronounced woes on Israel's pagan enemies (see Isaiah 13-19). The warnings serve two main purposes. **First, they should encourage us who know God to be faithful and endure, knowing that in due time He will judge the wicked. Second, it should warn us not to fall into any of the sins that will bring judgment on the wicked.** In the case James is addressing, it is easy when you're poor and oppressed to think, "If I can just get rich, I will no longer have to deal with these problems!" So we can be tempted to pursue wealth, mistakenly thinking that happiness lies in getting rich. So to the church, James is saying, Because wealth can be a dangerous trap, we should be careful not to use it in an ungodly manner, but rather to be faithful.<sup>3</sup>

9. What problems can money alleviate? Which problems can it create? How can we use it to address certain issues without creating new ones?

#### **STOP HOARDING (5:2-3).**

These rich people had so much stuff that it was rotting in storage. What good are silos full of grain if, when you go to get a bag full, it's spoiled or full of mold? What good are ten changes of clothes if, when you go to get something out of the closet, it's moth-eaten? What good is a bank vault full of jewels if you're afraid to wear them for fear of being robbed?

As I said, the Bible commands us to provide for our families' and our own needs, but it condemns hoarding our money and possessions when it can be put to use to further the Lord's work or to help others. **Where that balance point is, I cannot tell you.** But I will say that not many of us here in America live on the lean side! Often behind our hoarding is either the sin of greed or a lack of trust in God to provide for our future needs. Don't spend your life collecting junk that you never need or use. Give it away!<sup>4</sup>

10. If James describes hoarding as possessions that rot or corrode while in storage, what possessions do you have right now that could be placed under the heading of hoarding?

11. How do we know if we have crossed the line from proper savings for the future to ungodly hoarding?

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<sup>3</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/091805M.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> ibid





17. What struggles are unique to the poorest among us? In what ways can the rich add to their difficulty without knowing it?
18. What are some modern-day examples of innocent people being marginalized by the rich who use them for profitable gain? What can Christians do to protect against this mistreatment?

### **HAVING THE PROPER FOCUS AND PLAN**

James is not saying wealth is wrong; rather, he denounces wealth when it gets in the way of our relationships and call from God and when we use it to bring harm to others. This comes down to our attitude concerning security, and priorities about money over spiritual and relational matters!

**Our focus needs to be on God and our trust in Him, not money, things, or power! It is not your bank account; it is your soul account! Our true riches are in Christ alone!** Wealth is not sinful, or even harmful, as long as it is seen as a tool. It does become a problem and a distraction when it becomes our focus and God is pushed out of the picture. We are also called to be responsible and accountable stewards with wealth; so, use it wisely, with honesty, and do not hoard it, misuse it, exploit it, steal it, or waste it. Give it away with generosity for godly influence to further His Kingdom (Proverbs 11:24-25; 15:27; 16:8; 17:23; 20:17; 21:14; 22:2; 23:1-3; 30:7-9; Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Matthew 6:19-21; 25:14-30; Luke 12:13-21; Acts 4:36-37; Ephesians 5:10; 1 Timothy 6:10).<sup>8</sup>

19. James clearly articulates that God will evaluate our use of the riches He gives to us. What can we do in order to have peace that God affirms our use of His money?
20. Where might God be leading you to use your riches for His kingdom instead of your own personal desires? What action steps must take place in the days to come in order to achieve this goal?

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<sup>8</sup> R. J. Krejcir Ph.D. *Into Thy Word Ministries* [www.intothyword.org](http://www.intothyword.org) found @ <http://70030.netministry.com/apps/articles/?articleid=33642&columnid=3803>