

## 26. Jesus' Defense of God's Children

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*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.*

*(James 5:1-6)*

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### Addressing the Rich Again

As we continue with the letter of James, it is good to recall the general theme of this letter. From 1:4, we understand the theme is that we must be mature and complete. The purpose of our life as Christians is to grow towards the maturity of faith, so that we can live and die in the joy of the Lord.

Prior to chapter 5, James has dealt with all kinds of matters that can impede or hinder our joy in life. He has already written about the matter of wealth (e.g. 1:11), but in chapter 5, he takes this subject up again. In this chapter, James addresses the rich with perhaps the strongest language ever recorded in the Bible with respect to the wealthy. His words remind us of the strong language the Lord Jesus also used when he spoke about a camel going through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man entering heaven.

“Now listen, you rich people.” Talk about a direct approach! And that which follows is a scathing indictment against the rich that some have tried to present as a basis for a communist manifesto: workers of the world, unite!

It is important that we understand why this section is placed where it is in the letter, and who the people are that James addresses.

Note that the conclusion of James' letter is not a call to arms and rebellion, but a call to patience and prayer. The hope of the worker does not lie in the labor union, nor does his allegiance. Instead, the hope of the worker lies in the Lord. Lest we take judgment into our own hands, James comforts the church of Christ that the Lord Jesus will defend God's children against their wealthy oppressors. We will see how the rich acquire their wealth and how the rich use their wealth.

### **Who Were These Rich People?**

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you” (5:1). It is remarkable that the rich people are not called to *repent*. When we read of them elsewhere in this letter, there is always some kind of admonition, a pastoral word, but here there is no such thing. James simply announces the judgment of the Lord.

Who exactly were these rich people that James was addressing? We must conclude that the NIV footnote is correct when it states they were not Christians. They were not members of the church who did not show proper compassion and were therefore told to be more caring. They were heathen people who practiced heathendom, also when it came to their treatment of the poor.

If they were not Christians, what then was their relation to the members of the congregation? The answer must be that they were masters and employers, also of members of the church. Many Christians were slaves who were treated more cruelly after turning to the Lord, or simple workers subject to the favor of their employers.

Most likely, these rich people were the owners of land where Christians, among others, lived and worked. In 5:4, James writes about the workmen who mowed the fields, and about the harvesters. They did such work for wages, but their rich employers found all kinds of ways to avoid paying the full amount.

Unfortunately, it is true that the way to wealth is often over the backs of others. In many places and times, the way to wealth is one of brutal exploitation. There are the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and there is the status quo that never seems to change. The poor get poorer and the rich get richer, and so people become violent and rebellious.

It is also true that in most places, the rich are wealthy because they own vast tracts of land where building takes place or where crops are harvested.

Those who live on that land have no rights and must pay excessive rent. To further complicate matters in James' time, there was no rent review board to determine if the rent was fair.

Now the Bible does not give us what is called "a social Gospel", that is, a program or plan for social improvement. Nor is the message of the Gospel political. The Gospel always has to do with Christ and the forgiveness of our sins for his sake. Nowhere in the Bible are God's people promised abundant riches. It is true that the Lord promises to bless obedience, and this is one of the wonderful promises in the covenant, but riches are never guaranteed.

A social Gospel preaches that the purpose of the church is to change the lot of the poor. This, however, is *not* the task of the church. The church must proclaim the Gospel of life in Christ. At the same time, however, we must understand that there is a very strong social aspect to this work because the Gospel is a life-changing message. It has very strong social connotations. Through Christ's love, the social situation will also change for the better wherever the Gospel is preached and accepted. We try to do that on the mission field and through various evangelism projects.

## **Examples From the Old Testament**

Scripture powerfully teaches us that the LORD protects the downtrodden. He is the defense of widows in distress, the father to the fatherless (Ps 68, *Book of Praise*). In the Old Testament, the prophets of the LORD spoke in no uncertain terms about the crooked ways of the rich, and how the LORD would deal with them.

Let us look at Amos 2:6-8, which shows how the LORD takes it very seriously when his children are exploited and impoverished. The rich were acquiring wealth by selling the poor into slavery. Sometimes, a slave was even considered worthless merchandise: "They sell...the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6). How much was a pair of sandals worth, especially in a land where everyone wore sandals and they were the most common commodity? Imagine the indignity! Where is a person's self-esteem after not only being sold as a slave, but for no more than a pair of sandals?

There was no consideration: "They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground" (Amos 2:7). The rich simply walked over everyone who got in their way. Who would stop them? Amos mentions the matter of justice in 2:7. There were so many areas where there was no justice for the poor. They did not have the right connections, financial backing, or knowledge

and skills. Many could not even read or write, so how would they ever climb out of the swamp of poverty?

Amos also notes that the rich were very immoral. He writes, “Father and son use the same girl” (Amos 2:7). The girl could be a slave or family servant, and while both father and son availed themselves of the opportunity, she could do nothing in her defense. Meanwhile, the LORD had strictly forbidden such things in his law. The Israelites in Amos’ days were acting like heathens, choosing and taking as they pleased.

If we now go back to the letter of James, we read in 5:6 that the rich would stop at nothing to get or keep what they wanted. “You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.” When people have wealth and connections, it is easy for them to pervert justice. Innocent people can be accused and set up. James writes, “men who do not oppose you,” and we may think of people who did not have the ability to offer resistance or who were in no way a threat. The rich just wanted to push them out of the way in order to get what they want.

The prime example of this, recorded in I Kings 21, is the story of how King Ahab had Naboth accused because he would not sell him his vineyard. False witnesses brought untrue charges of which Naboth was convicted and for which he was promptly executed. Jezebel had scorned Ahab, pointing out to him that he was the king of Israel and should not let a man like Naboth stop him from getting what he desired. Naboth even owned land and was not poor, so if he could fall so easily, what could happen to those who had nothing? We know from Scripture that there was a tremendous exploitation of widows and orphans in particular.

### **How Did We Acquire It?**

We must keep in mind, however, that the Lord God does not forbid wealth itself. Sects who demand poverty and abstinence are not in line with Scripture. If the Lord blesses our labor, we may certainly enjoy our wealth. The point is: how did we acquire it? How did we become what we are?

We do not preach a social Gospel, I wrote. There are differences in the financial status of the members of our churches. That was the case in James’ days, and it is still so today. In our current society, we are generally more wealthy than the people of the Roman empire, but there is still a difference between the wealth of the one and the other.

Why is it that one has more than another? Sometimes, a person who has wealth is mistrusted simply because of that wealth. People say, “He probably

got it by taking advantage of others.” We can also easily become envious of others who appear to have more blessings. Why do some people have no financial worries and others always have them?

Let us look at what James writes about these questions. In 5:9, he writes, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers.” It is so easy to grumble about one’s own pocketbook and property, especially when compared to those of another. “The other man’s grass is always greener,” says the world, and in the church we sometimes echo that. Then dissatisfaction and envy easily arise.

The important question is how we got to where we are. Can we say with a clear conscience, “This came through honest labor and the Lord’s blessing”? Can we say, “I never took advantage of another person’s poverty or low position. I never enriched myself at the cost of others. I was faithful and diligent always in my labor”? Those who gain their wealth in a godless manner are addressed in no uncertain terms. “Weep and wail,” writes James, like the loud clamoring that accompanies a funeral. There is great misery coming upon the godless and heartless rich.

Perhaps one of the greatest phobias of some rich people is the fear of losing it all. James writes, “Your wealth has rotted,” which could refer to stored grain that is not properly dry and thus begins to rot. James adds, “Moths have eaten your clothes.” One of the distinguishing features of the rich is that they can afford to wear expensive clothes. Usually —not always, but usually— we can tell by someone’s attire whether he has money or not. Further, James writes, “Your gold and silver are corroded.” Corrosion is a chemical process by which metal is slowly but surely broken down and destroyed. We do not generally associate this process with gold and silver. Our rings and our Lord’s Supper set may need polishing from time to time, but they do not corrode. Gold and silver are seen as safe investments, but the Lord says they are not. The value and price of precious metals will diminish steadily and will mean nothing in the end. Every earthly treasure is bound to fail us in the end.

## **Hoarding**

As we just learned, one aspect of the text is the manner in which the rich *acquire* their wealth. James deals also with another aspect: how they *use* their riches. Riches can be lawfully gained and used properly, as we will see, but there is often an abuse of God’s gifts for selfish purposes.

James comes with four main charges: hoarding, defrauding, self-indulgence, and coercion (with violence and murder). We will not deal with each

charge at length, but let us briefly touch on each for the sake of a good understanding.

Hoarding occurs when we accumulate and stow away our goods because we fear that there might be shortages some day. We may wonder why people who are already wealthy continue to do everything in their power to increase that wealth. It is never enough. In the process, they keep the poor from what they need. Imagine a rich man's house and storage that are filled to overflowing with all kinds of good things, while the shacks of the poor contain nothing. Is there then not a danger that the poor will say, "Why do we have nothing while the rich have everything?"

The line of the Bible is quite simple here. The hoarding of wealth leads to the *corrosion* of all things accumulated. In fact, let us look at 5:3: "Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire." Those who hoard riches for themselves will find that they cannot enjoy them, for the corrosion will also affect them personally. "Eating flesh like fire" can be descriptive of terrible illnesses. No one can testify against them? The corrosion will! Everyone will see that the wealth of the rich man rots away.

Notice also that James adds, "in the last days." What does this imply? Is it more serious to hoard wealth in the last days than in previous times? Yes, it is, for we are now much closer to the great Day of Judgment. Christ has risen and is seated at God's right hand. He will come to judge the living and the dead. The day has been appointed, and sin committed during the last age in which Christ is already coming will be severely punished

The kingdom of heaven has been proclaimed. The great day is drawing near, yet the love of many is growing cold. Woe to those who, in these last days, hoard their wealth for themselves and seek only to secure their place in a world that is passing away.

## **Defrauding**

The second element, mentioned in 5:4, is that of defrauding. James' language increases in intensity. "Look!" he writes, "The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you." We can almost picture James gesturing with his hand. "Look!" His readers thought they could get away with their fraud, but the Lord saw the evidence. It was clearly visible before him, for nobody can hide the evidence of fraud from God.

How was this fraud perpetrated? It was done with all kinds of smooth excuses. The crops were too meager. The harvest was a disappointment. The owner could not pay any more. The laborers were too slow. The weather did

not cooperate. Whatever the excuse may have been, the result was that the workers were defrauded and they did not get wages that were in accordance with their work.

Certainly these workers will have protested this fraud. They will have filed a complaint and shown that they were not paid enough. But who cared? The poor had no advocates. Nobody of any position or influence would bother to listen to them. Perhaps that is the most frustrating and infuriating element: no one cared or even listened to the outcry.

Nobody listened? James refutes that: “The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.” James here uses the Old Testament expression of “the *LORD SEBAOTH*”, which is often translated as “the Lord of hosts”. Indeed, the expression has the connotation of the Lord Almighty. It is the LORD who governs all things, the Lord of the hosts of angels, who has all power in heaven and on earth. He will take to heart the plight of the poor, especially when they are his children, his people who call to him in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Self-Indulgence**

All this becomes even more serious when we realize that defrauding is done only to increase the opportunity for self-indulgence. The rich do not defraud because they have to eat. Sometimes, a person may steal out of misery because his children are starving. That does not make stealing right, but it does explain his action. Mitigating circumstances are taken into account. But here there is no valid reason. The rich are out for one thing: self-indulgence.

James says, “You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence” (5:5). They did not spare time or money in order to give pleasure to themselves. They feasted, while others fasted. They celebrated, while others went hungry. They threw away more than the poor ever saw. James writes, “You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.” Little did they know it, but like cattle are fattened for the slaughter, so the rich were fattening themselves. They were setting themselves up for destruction.

Let us not think that the Lord God forbids us to have *any* luxury. Sometimes, we indulge ourselves a little. The Christian church has never been called to abstinence and asceticism, the teaching that one has to withhold himself from all earthly pleasures. The Bible does not say that earthly pleasures are wrong, but it does advocate moderation. The rich are called to share with the poor. This is impossible in the world, but in the church —the

new humanity, the new creation, the communion of saints— it must be a living reality that no one suffers want.

## Coercion

When someone is on the track of self-indulgence, there is nothing that will stop him. James writes, “You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you” (5:6). Whenever the poor sought justice, they were arrested, accused, and executed.

It is important to note that James writes about men “who were *not* opposing you.” The poor did not want to take over the government of the land. They did not seek to appropriate the property of the rich. They did not say that everything was of the people and for the people. We can understand that if it was a matter of open and public rebellion, a revolution, the government had to act. But if it was a matter of seeking justice, why then kill innocent men who were doing no wrong?

The rich often control the government. As an example, let us look at the country of Brazil. There are two sets of rules there, one for the rich and one for the rest of the people. If there are demonstrations that threaten the privileges of the rich, the army is called in, the poor are quickly labeled as communist insurgents, and trials and executions result. Many people simply disappear.

A similar situation deeply affected the church of the Lord in James’ time. Most of the members were poor and many of them were slaves. They had no rights, and becoming Christians only added to their trials. It is conceivable that they, too, would resort to violent means, to execute revenge, and to take what they needed. In this respect, we are greatly blessed in our place and time. We have no idea how many Christians suffered and are suffering today all over the world, even more so because of their faith.

But the church has also often become the oppressor, a bastion for the rich, a patron for the self-indulgent. It is ironic that the poverty of millions was sanctioned by the church throughout the centuries. Hence it can be understood that Christianity was called “opium for the people”.

These words of the Lord, recorded in James 5:1-6, are then also meant for the church of Christ today. Let us be deeply grateful for all the blessings of the Lord. Let us never seek only our own welfare with our blessings. Let us not be envious of others. Let us not covet what God has given to others. Instead, with our blessings and gifts, let us serve the Lord and build up his church. Let us



do this together. Let us never go the way of the revolution, but always hold to the way of the reformation: renewal from the inside out.

It is true that wherever the Gospel was preached and accepted by many, society changed. People began to care for each other. The Gospel is then a social Gospel in a very deep manner. Let us not forget that. Let us help those who have no helpers, some of whom may not even want help or trust those who would give it. Let us show the warmth of the love of Christ in a world where love is growing cold.