

A Warning to the Rich – Part 2

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James warns the rich that their materialism will come back to haunt them
2. aim – to cause us to seek a life of austerity and righteousness rather than greed and self-indulgence
3. passage – James 5:1-6

b. outline

1. The Audience of the Warning (James 5:1)
2. The Indictment in the Warning (James 5:2-5)
3. The Substance of the Warning (James 5:6)

c. opening

1. the **opening** of this pericope – the audience being *all believers* dealing with material wealth
 - a. it is assumed (within every culture) that the wealthy:
 1. are able to collect an abundance of *better* material things
 2. are able to control the financial status of others by virtue of their *control* of wealth
 3. are able to live indulgent and luxurious lives of ease and comfort
 - b. but, it can be true (within *our* culture) that a middle class person:
 1. is able to collect many material things (**e.g.** mortgages used to purchase homes)
 2. is able to affect the financial status of others (**e.g.** by starting businesses)
 3. is able to live quite a comfortable life (**e.g.** the high standard of living for our poor)
 - c. therefore, since the word “*rich*” is highly subjective, and because we all enjoy a standard of living far greater than the vast majority of humanity, **this passage is relevant to all of us**
2. the **content** of this pericope – a **warning** to *all believers* about the path of luxury
 - a. **note:** the **strange** nature of these five (5) verses = although James brings a series of indictments regarding wealth and the practices of the wealthy, *he never offers any imperatives*
 1. **i.e.** nowhere here does he say, “therefore ...” (**e.g.** therefore, sell your gold and silver; **v. 3**)
 2. and, the *only* imperative comes in **v. 7** as “*be patient, therefore, brothers ...*”
 3. **IOW:** if these were *true indictments* of “literal” behavior that James felt needed to be addressed, why doesn’t he do so in each one – why only an imperative to “*be patient*” at the end?
 - b. **therefore (IMO):** these are not actually “indictments” *per se*, but **warnings** about what *might* happen if the believer **is not careful to keep his priorities straight**
 1. **i.e.** because life is but a “*mist*,” it is imperative that we do not fall into these “wealth traps”
 2. instead, believers are to:
 - a. choose a different set of priorities in this short life, by
 - b. being ready to accept the loss of temporal things, and
 - c. looking upward to the eternal things of the kingdom of Christ as the greater priority
 3. **remember (again):** most of those hearing Jesus’ warnings of wealth were not wealthy themselves – most of the audience of this letter would not have been wealthy, but persecuted

II. The Indictment in the Warning (James 5:2-5)

Content

a. the structure of the indictments

- a. each is based on the **perfect form** of the verb “*have*” = an action of the past which finds its *results* in the present; it is “perfect” because its results are *finally* (perfectly) experienced *now*
 1. **IOW:** James is condemning a series of actions taken in the past that now act as a *judgment* against those who took those actions – the *present* experience of the past action is where the pain lies
 2. **e.g.** the wealthy person hoarded, and now his hoard stands in judgment over him (**v. 3**)
- b. each is based on the use of **wealth** = all of the indictments have to do with how a person handled money *and the priority he or she set on that in the world*
 1. **i.e.** direct hoarding of money, withholding monies from others, and using money to indulge oneself
- c. each is formed as a set of **exemplar** actions = obviously, not *every* person in the audience would be guilty of *everything* in the list, but the actions are *examples* of the point being made
 1. **IOW:** James is building a *general* list of things that *may be* true for any individual person (**see above**) in order to make the larger point overall

2. **e.g.** gold doesn't "corrode" (or oxidize like iron or other ferrous metals), but it can tarnish, become stained, or lose its luster when left without care – **i.e.** a picture of someone more concerned about *hoarding* gold than considering its value *and using it well*
 - d. each is formed as a **double-helix** of a human action and an (implied) *reaction* on the part of God
 1. although James *does not explicitly say so*, the "judgment" in each indictment is clearly from the perspective of God himself
 2. **e.g.** the fraudulent withholding of wages has "*reached the ears of the Lord of hosts*" (**v. 4**) implying that *God* is dissatisfied with that action and now holds it against those who do such things
 3. however, James *doesn't actually* enunciate the judgment – he simply implies it in each indictment
 - a. **LOW:** James believes that his audience *inherently knows* what is wrong in each of these actions, so he doesn't have to *explicitly tell them* what is wrong
 - b. **LOW:** writing to a *regenerate* audience, James assumes they would *inherently* "get" why it is wrong to hoard wealth, etc. – *especially as those who should know better*
 - e. **principle: James gives three specific warnings (in the form of examples) regarding the continuing use of money (wealth) with the assumption in each that an improper use can easily destroy the believer by turning his attention away from faith to temporal things**
 1. **i.e.** given that life is so short, we need to be extraordinarily careful that we don't waste our faith by focusing on that which is fleeting and passing away
- b. the indictment of greed (vv. 2-3)**
1. **indictment #1:** the hoarding of wealth (**i.e.** from the rich having greater access to abundance)
 - a. "*riches have rotted*" = general possessions (**e.g.** houses, cars) that have decayed or rusted; "*garments are moth-eaten*" = clothing that has sat unused and has been attacked by natural forces; "*gold and silver have corroded*" = precious metals have tarnished or have lost value
 - b. **judgment:** you have focused so much on *collecting* "stuff" that you failed to use it or maintain it – it has lost value just by virtue of "sitting around" not being used (**e.g.** maintenance of a new car)
 1. the natural tendency is to always have "more" – a result of the Fall is for men to "master" the world (which is now lost) by hoarding – to see **ownership** as a form of mastery
 - c. **warning:** the collection of "stuff" becomes a *testimony* ("evidence") that your focus was only on this world, thus your "faith" in Christ is destroyed in *wrong priorities*
 1. "*eat your flesh like fire*" = to become physically "consumed" with the pursuit of "things" demonstrates that you are not trusting in Christ by faith, but walking as an unregenerate man
 2. "*laid up treasure in the last days*" = the oxymoronic thinking that you can collect stuff in this world *as this world is coming to end* (**i.e.** either eschatologically or personally in death)
 - d. **comparison:** this warning is virtually identical to Jesus' words in **Matt. 6:19-21**

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

 1. **prioritizing "things" always deprioritizes faith in Christ**
- c. the indictment of injustice (v. 4)**
1. **indictment #2:** the withholding of wages (**i.e.** from the rich having control over other's financial reality)
 - a. "*wages ... kept back by fraud*" = withholding what was properly owed others for their labors
 - b. **judgment:** you are so concerned with *how much wealth you have* that you fail to properly pay those who provided a service – you hoarded your monies by finding a "loophole" ("*by fraud*") to not pay, *and to keep the money for yourself*
 - c. **warning:** the failure to be fair towards others that are dependent upon your honesty becomes a "*crying out against you*" (a testimony) that you are selfish, petty, and cheap
 1. "*the cries ... have reached the ears ...*" = the *injustice* has reached the ears of God – you have *rejected* the God of grace and generosity *towards you* in favor of your own selfishness
 - d. **comparison:** this warning is similar to the point of Jesus' words in **Matt. 18:21-35**

"Then his master summoned [the unforgiving servant] and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt."

 1. **selfishness in "things" is deeply contrary to faith in the grace of God**
- d. the indictment of self-indulgence (v. 5)**
1. **indictment #3:** the excess of indulgence (**i.e.** from the rich having more luxurious lifestyles)
 - a. "*lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence*" = pursuing a life focused on creature comforts
 - b. **judgment:** you are so focused on a life of "ease" and indulgence (**i.e.** in every pleasure that life affords) that you become unaware of the danger all around you – you become utterly *self-focused*
 - c. **warning:** the self-indulgent lifestyle "numbs" you to real dangers that lurk, *especially those that turn your focus away from the true life of the believer* (**i.e.** sanctification, perseverance)

1. *“fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter”* = you are unprepared for when the enemy will strike; you have focused your heart on “pleasure,” all the while the enemy is lurking to slaughter you
2. **i.e.** you are the fatted calf that is fed and prepared to be led to the slaughter-house
- d. **comparison:** the picture is similar to Amos’ warning to Samaria before the exile (**Amos 4:1-3**)
“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead; and you shall be cast out into Harmon,” declares the LORD.”
 1. **indulgence in “pleasure” is fatally contrary to a life pursuing holiness in faith**

III. The Substance of the Warning (James 2:6)

Content

a. the substance of the warning

1. *“the righteous person”* = those *in contrast* to the person(s) mentioned in the previous indictments
 - a. **possibly:** the (O.T.) tendency of the rich to tread upon the poor; the rich person *“murdering”* the poor by taking his things, unjustly withholding his wages, and living in luxury while he starves (**i.e.** the poor cannot *“resist”* the rich because he doesn’t have the power to do so)
 1. **LOW:** the *final* indictment upon the “rich” in which James slams the use of wealth to keep the poor downtrodden (**i.e.** the “social justice” element of this passage)
 2. but ... the language of *“murder”* and *“resistance”* seems too strong to be *literal* ...
 - b. **possibly:** the nature of the wealthy person who *claims to follow Christ by faith*, yet finds himself overcome by the things of this world, thus *“murdering”* the *“righteous person”* that he is by virtue of a life *lived out in faith*
 1. **LOW:** the *necessary outcome* of a life focused on temporal matters – the eventual erosion of trust in Christ replaced by trust in things – being so enamored with “stuff” that (over time) the “pull” of those things “kills” the true nature of faith
 2. **i.e.** “he does not resist you” – the love of “things” is so powerful that it cannot be stopped – if there is no resistance to greed, injustice, and self-indulgence, then the heart of faith cannot resist it, since that heart is *not really centered on Christ*
2. **the warning: either *purposely and concretely* choose to follow Christ in a life of self-sacrifice, or the choice of indulging in a life of greed and luxury will be irresistible**