
Prayers

To God

Lord Jesus Christ, flow over us with Your love, surround us with Your compassion, cover us with Your protection, and move us on each day in Your power, wisdom and strength. Take us forward through everything we encounter on the great journey of life, and together with all those who own Your name, lead us on to greater things. We look forward to Your Kingdom and Your rule, Lord Jesus Christ, and we love You. **AMEN**

For myself

Pray about any illness you may have recently endure. Ask the Lord to bless you with good health, sufficient to do His will throughout your life.

For others

Weekly theme: Travel

Pray for those who are forced to move their homes because of enforced movements of populations, because of war or natural disaster or because of economic pressure. Pray for those who make all such painful journeys and for the church, that it may be a place of sanctuary and source of great strength and succour for those in great need.

Meditation

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, such a quality of love
That forgives those who have hurt us
Overcomes all manner of anger and bitterness
Focuses us on what is good, not what is bad
And seeks to build bridges over troubled waters

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, such a quality of faith
That believes problems can indeed be solved
Displays love towards the most difficult of people
Trusts that God is in control of everything
And seeks to defeat the works of the evil one

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, such quality of hope
That sees beyond the troubles of the day
Longs for peace to be established between people
Is passionate about overcoming all odds, in Christ
And seeks the ultimate glory of the Father

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, such spiritual integrity
That the precious spiritual gifts of love, faith and hope
May increase amongst Your people across the world
So the Church of God may show the Gospel to the world

Bible Passage

James 5:1-6

¹ Listen now, you rich people, cry out aloud because of the dire troubles coming to you. ² Your wealth has evaporated, and your clothes are in rags. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded and will be evidence against you; it will eat you up like fire, for you have piled up treasure in the last days.

⁴ Listen to this complaint against you! You have fraudulently failed to pay wages to the labourers who mowed your fields, and the grievance of your crop-gatherers has been heard by the Lord of hosts. ⁵ You have lived an earthly life of luxury and pleasure, and you have fattened up your hearts for the day of slaughter! ⁶ You have condemned and murdered good people who pose no threat to you.

Review

These words of James are not often read in church, and I wonder why not! This is the climax of James' outburst against the rich, which began in chapter 2 and ends here at the beginning of chapter 5. Yesterday's passage contained some good advice to all Christians, but it ends with this stark warning, '*so then, everyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.*' (4:17) This sets the tone for what follows in today's passage, which is a harsh complaint against the rich for precisely this sin (5:1) and also the evils of unjust trade and unrighteous wealth (5:4,5).

There are two elements to this passage, each of which adds to the other to make the whole picture. Firstly, James warns the rich about what will happen to them in this world as the days draw closer to Christ's coming again (5:1-3). Secondly, he complains against the profoundly unjust and selfish practices of the rich landowners of first century Israel and Palestine (5:4-6).

But as we have seen throughout James' letters, especially in chapter 1, much of his teaching reads like an adaptation of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Here, the first two verses remind us of the well known verse, '*do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal*' (Matt 6:19). The sermon also contains the parable of the rich man, who stored up wealth for himself in order to '*eat, drink and be merry*' (Luke 12:19), only to hear the Lord's response, '*you fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you; who will then get what you have put aside for yourself?*' (Luke 12:20). James' words are strongly connected with Jesus' teaching here, and they reinforce the Scriptural theme of God's dire warnings against the rich.

Then, when James attacks the rich because of their failure to act justly towards their workers (5:4,5), we are reminded of Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16). This is a story in which God demonstrates His own supreme generosity to those who have worked in His vineyard, for however long they have worked. Also, the very last verse of our

passage (5:6) contains strong hints of Jesus' words of warning to the Pharisees, accusing them of *'murdering the prophets'* (Matt 23:31). Such connections between different Scriptures have always been evident to those who know their Bibles well, but we need to explain them to each other so that we best understand James' intent here.

James is not restricted to the teaching of Jesus, however. In particular, we should not interpret this passage without reference to the great moral teachings of Leviticus in the Old Testament. This book is probably the most impenetrable of Biblical books because of its lengthy and detailed descriptions of the sacrificial system, now superseded by Christ. Most will therefore quickly forget the majority of the book, but no one should ever forget its most important revelation as found in Leviticus 19. The important moral code found here was of great importance to the Israelites, for whom it stood alongside the great and unique '10 Commandments'. Leviticus 19 contains the famous teaching *'love you neighbour as yourself'* (Leviticus 19:18) and also the pertinent instructions like these below, and the connections between this verse and our passage today are obvious;

'You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning' (Lev 19:13).

Overall, James' message here is one of dire warning to the rich, to say that like everyone else, they are subject to God's judgement. As in Jesus' teaching, nothing gained in this life is of any worth in the next, not even *'gold and silver'* (5:3), and the picture of fire in the same verse is used by James to remind us that God's judgement is final. Such teaching challenges the reader to consider what is of greater value, life in this world with all its privileges and rewards, or life with God in eternity, with all its spiritual and eternal benefits? The Scriptures are clear about one thing, which is that there is absolutely no transference between the one world and the next, no physical object or wealth can pass between the two. So although this is no great threat to those who think life on earth will last for ever, it should be the starkest of warnings to those who are confident that Christ is coming again soon, and God's Judgement Day is near.

While this could be said to be a rather spiritual point, what James says next is more of a calculated judgement (5:4-6). He adds to wealth gathering the accusation that this has been done off the backs of poor workers. Therefore, the sin of the rich is that to gain their wealth they have exploited both their land and property to the detriment of others. People have been oppressed, workers have not been paid properly, and just grievances have been ignored and are thus heard by God (see 5:4). In truth, selfishness has ruled in the hearts of the rich, and thought they have *'lived an earthly life of luxury and pleasure'*, all they have done is to make themselves fat for a *'day of slaughter'* (5:5)!

On top of this, the consequences of the quest for wealth has ultimately caused loss of life to others, although the rich would want to distance themselves from it (5:6). This is a sharp accusation, but it remains a just accusation. Even in our own day, those of us in the Western world who benefit from international trade can never quite extract ourselves from the consequences of our lifestyle and its often devastating impact on the impoverished lives of third world farmers and traders.

In this passage we are offered no redemption for the rich, but James is not so blind as to leave them without hope. After this passage, James suddenly changes his theme to begin the last and final part of the letter, in which he begins to speak of hope and healing (5:7-20). Indeed, most Christians know the letter of James more for these last verses than any other part of the letter! We will study them from tomorrow.

Discipleship

Application

Problems for the rich

It is hard for us to read James' letter when we in the Western world have so much in comparison to others the world over. Our lifestyle exploits the poor of the world just as James describes here, but who is responsible? For example, who cares about the deaths of children in gangs who work in Western Africa to harvest coffee beans? Companies who keep prices low and oblige farmers to use child slave labour, or we who drink coffee and will not pay a higher price for it?

Then, by buying its products, are we responsible for the actions of a major food company (Nestle) which continues to distribute baby milk in impoverished countries against the guidelines of the World Health? Believe it or not, mothers who have been introduced to formula are left with the agonising decision whether to make it up with dirty water because nothing else is available, and their babies can no longer suckle the milk in their breasts! The company responsible formally declares no liability and carries on making chocolate for the rest of us at a price we can afford.

I, for one, feel that James words make me look carefully at what I buy in the supermarket from whom. I cannot know everything, but the internet is a wonderful means of getting the facts out of multinational companies, and how their riches dominate the world.

Blessings for the rich?

By the grace of God, we can never dismiss the possibility of people with means and wealth being used by the Lord in productive and remarkable ways. They are sometimes able to make wealth available for all manner of good and necessary work for God's Kingdom, especially within the church.

The key is to remember James' advice about the importance of being led by God in the use of all we possess. If we surrender all to Him, He will enable us to use our all for Him.

Ideas for what to do

- Make an assessment of your 'wealth'. It may be that in common with many people in Western counties, you have a good lifestyle, but little real 'wealth'. Pray about how you use your resources for the Lord.
- What does this passage say to you, or is it one of those passages you leave to one side as if it refers to others and not to you?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do these words of James teach us today, and are there any other passages of scripture that are reflected in this passage?
2. What sermons could be preached upon this passage of scripture?
3. What hope is given in scripture for those who are rich? Can you recall any text that describes hope for eternal life to the rich?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus,
For the wonder of love,
For happiness and friends,
For the joy of fellowship,
For overcoming trials,
For all that is past,
For hopes and for the future.
Thank You, Lord Jesus,
For our salvation in You.
AMEN