
Into Thy Word Bible Study in James

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James 5: 1-6: Do You Have an Oppressors Heart?

General idea: James again tells the rich in his congregation, as well as the rich Jewish oppressors who might be listening, to *listen up!* This denotes to *pay heed to my words* (1:9-11, 19, 26; 2:1-13; 3:1-12; 4:1-11) in the style of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the OT prophets (Deut. 32:35; Prov. 20:22). The point is, *this is imperative and if you do not listen, trouble will not only knock, it will barge in upon you!* If we live just to acquire material possessions, we will end up with nothing of real, intrinsic consequence. Our lives will be empty, lonely, and bitter because that which we are chasing gives us nothing in return. When we chase wealth, we end up robbing ourselves of the greater riches that God has to give us. James tells his people not to be fooled by listening to the nonsense that wealth is “the” sign of God’s blessings.

James is lecturing (as in scolding) people of wealth who had received their wealth from “serfs” or sharecroppers. (In the Middle Ages this was called *feudalism*.) In this period of time, over 90% of people in the Roman provinces lived on rural, family farms or were serfs, while less than 10% lived in urban cities. These people ran the farm and fields for the owner and did all the work; and, after all of their work, they were cheated by not getting paid. The owners rationalized that this was OK because other owners did it; thus, they were caving in to the worldly pressure of financial success over all else. James is also condemning the oppressing of the poor for which a strong reckoning by God awaited. Remember, both the poor and the oppressors were a part of James’ congregation.

Vs. 1-3: What we chase is temporary and will rot, so why would we place our trust in it? Even those things we think are important usually are not! People who place their trust in wealth, accomplishments, education, self, or... are headed for trouble as it takes them away from God just as chasing the devil does; both lead to the same end—separation from God both while on the earth and if Christ is never fully received also for eternity. Even if the person does become saved in Christ, he or she will live a life of waste and no return for that which is important. It will be the evidence to convict us of our sins and leave us earthly and the danger of being eternally dejected, void of hope or meaning. Not the loss of our salvation; rather the notification we never received it (Matt. 13)!

- *Come now* is an exhortation and a “wail.” To weep was a graphic way to present your case; here, it shows the veracity of the situation (Joel 1:8; Micah 1:8).

- *Rich*, in this passage, refers to a social class of aristocracy. Wealth, in and of itself, is not condemned here or any other place in the Bible. Wealth can be a blessing from God if we use it as a tool and not as a devotion (Prov. 10:22). The condemnation James gives it implies the abuse of money to oppress the poor. This is a manner of the heart, as our checkbook will show where our loyalty, commitment, and interest abound!
- *Garments*. Clothes were the most expensive possession then, sometimes greater than even a home. Clothes were also the primary symbols of being wealthy (Acts 20:33). Serfs often had only one homemade garment that was more like burlap, while the rich had fine cotton and silk.
- *Corrupted...rust* are general terms that refer to anything that can, and will corrode and decay by rust, mildew, bugs, weather, wood rot, or for anything destroyed by fire. All matter, no matter how valuable, is in a state of decay. In the end it is worthless and meaningless (Matt. 6:19-20). The devotion to wealth comes from selfish motivations, and this selfishness will be used to judge us (Acts 2:17; 1Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 1John 2:18).
- The Christians and Jewish aristocracy who were oppressing the poor were all heinously killed by the Romans after the revolt of 66 A.D. The judgment came for them—personally and totally! To seek wealth over God and His call is to rob one's self of His precious opportunities and the substance of Himself and of a great treasure in exchange for a miniscule lust (1 Tim. 6:6-10; 17-19).

Do you worry? Consider that we have a God who loves and provides. He fulfills us with Himself beyond our expectancy. He will meet our deepest needs. We can trust in Him! If you are a worrier, the call is to *worship* in place of that worry (Matt. 6:19-34)!

Vs. 4: The poor will not be ignored by God; their cries reach Him. Our responsibility to care for them must be heeded! There is never an excuse to cheat or take advantage of another person. For a Christian, it is diametrically in opposition to whom Christ is and what He has done for us! The cry and the fact of the evidence are testimony and evidence against such an evil person (Gen. 4:10).

- *Wages* refers to being paid. To not pay someone was considered evil and violated the law of God. People needed their daily wages to purchase food for that day for their families. Thus, with no money, they would go hungry after a hard days work, and have to live with a disappointed family (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15; Prov. 11:24; Jer, 22:13; Mal. 3:5)!
- *Fraud*. The earnings of the poor were a meager fraction of that of the owners. And, even when the workers were paid, it was not sufficient pay to provide

care for themselves and family. Sometimes, they were not even able to “glean” the land they just worked (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19).

- *Lord of the Sabaoth/The Lord Almighty*, a name of God, refers to “JEHOVAH-SABAOTH,” and means “The Lord of Hosts,” the commander of the angelic host and the armies of God (Gen. 17:1; Isa. 1:24, Psalm 46:7, 11; 1 Sam. 1:3; 2 Kings 3:9-12, Jer. 11:20, Rom. 9:29; Rev. 19: 11-16). The Jewish reasoning here is that it is a bad idea to offend a public official, much less the God of the universe! The point here is that our misdeeds greatly offend our God who is all powerful and all caring! This is the passage that so incensed and infuriated the rich high priest that he made James a martyr!

The theme in this verse is covetousness (Rom. 1:29). To make one prosperous by the manipulation of another may seem to be a good business model and make sense in the ways of the world, but it is evil in God’s eyes. Covetousness, in the Greek, signifies *taking advantage of a situation* as the motive, just for the sake of evil. It can be from going too far in bargaining at a market to having more than what is just in any dealings with others. This is common from rich to poor—taking advantage, not seeking to get a good deal. Taken too far, it hurts and takes advantage of the weaker, less fortunate person.

Vs. 5-6: Luxury and seeking satisfaction is an illusion that brings only temporary relief and no real substance. It may be fun for now, but the *fun now and pay later* plan is not worth it! Remember, the Christian life has liberty and grace, but we are never to forget our responsibility and call. If you store up treasure on earth, your heart will be besieged by disappointments, and the storms of life will overwhelm you. The real treasure is living in Christ, sharing Him with others, and with what awaits you in eternity (Matt. 7:24-27; 19: 16-26; Luke 12:33-34; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; 1 Tim. 6:9-10; Heb. 10:32-39)!

- *Pleasure and luxury* refer to self-indulgence (Luke 16:19-31), from eating a pound of chocolate at once to partying your way to oblivion. Too much excess will leave you empty and alone. It will cause you, at best, to gain a lot of weight or to lose your friends, and, at worst, cause you to lose your life and miss out on your heavenly reward! Self-indulgence seeks what is fleeting; Christians are made for eternity (Gen. 3:1-7; Num. 20:7-12; 2 Sam. 13:1-19; 1 Kings 21:1-7).
- *Fattened your hearts*. The image here is animals being slaughtered; the rich are the animals who are not aware or do not care. *Are we doing this to ourselves?* Our desires that are contrary to God’s call and precepts will lead us to destruction. It is not necessarily because God is there waiting with an ax; rather, He is there with His loving arms open. When we ignore Him, we destroy ourselves; He has warned us that it will happen. A god who does not warn is a god who does not love!

- *Day of slaughter* refers to a feast of eating meat that occurred after the sheep shearing season or harvest (1 Sam. 25:4, 36). This was a rare treat that the rich did daily. They used it to be condescending; they showed no benevolence to those who had none. The poor only ate meat at public feast days and festivals.
- Leading a lavish lifestyle while others who work for you starve, or who are the ones you are called to care for (Jesus says all Christians are to care for the poor: Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 7:22; 12:33; 14:13,21; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2; 21:3; Acts 9:36; 10:4; 10:31; 24:17; Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10; James 2:23-6). The theme here is that the rich, in their condescension, are just fattening themselves up for the slaughter of Judgment. Thus, they are fattening themselves up for their own slaughter, brought about by their own deeds and words (Jer. 12:3; Amos 4:1-3; 6:4-7)!
- *Condemned...murdered*, in this context, it is not actual murder, but the setting up of events that lead to it. The abuse of power will cause the loss of life. The rich were taking food away from the people, not providing wages so they starved while they worked, and taking their coats away in extortion so they would freeze to death, too! The image is the oppression of the poor, as the wicked were scheming against the righteous. In this context, James warns them to repent. This condemnation of judgment does not pertain to a Christian because we are saved by grace. It is condemnation to a non-Christian; a real Christian would never do this. The audience for this passage is the aristocratic Jews and pretenders who say they are Christians, but their lack of fruit clearly shows otherwise (Isa. 13-23; Jer. 46-51; Ezek. 25-32; Amos 1:3-2:16; Zeph. 2:4-15).

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 use and 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 (Prov. 11:24-25; 15:27; 16:8; 17:23; 20:17; 21:14; 22:2; 23:1-3; 30:7-9; Eccl. 5:10-20; Matt. 6:19-21; 25: 14-30; Luke 12:13-21; Acts 4:36-37; Eph. 5:10; 1 Tim. 6:10).

Remember, when we draw near to the world, God is pushed away! The warning is two-fold; one, we are not to oppress the poor and needy. There is

never a reason or call to do that; rather, we are to help and provide, educate and motivate. Second, by seeking wealth, we are the oppressors to ourselves; we are seeking what only God is to fulfill (Matt. 6: 33).

The question is, *do we “listen up” to what God is saying to us?* Do we ask ourselves (and, of course, God Himself), *what does God want from me?* Because if we do not, our focus in life becomes skewed! To focus upon what the world defines as success is to miss out on things that are much greater, both for the here-and-now and for eternity to come. For the person whose pursuit is in wealth, it becomes a weed that chokes off the soul from God and from others. One of the hardest things to do is be a Christian with worldly wealth because it most always leads to worldly interests that lead to worldly activities. Wealth can be done and be done for greatness, but most, if not all of the time, it only brings darkness to light and buries the Christian soul in the desires of the world. This leaves the person empty from lost opportunities, destitute of important relationships, and from Christ as Lord. If all we do is live for this world, then there may be nothing left for the next!

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me? How am I encouraged and strengthened?
4. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
5. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
6. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
7. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
8. What can I model and teach? What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. How do you see wealth: with favor, with suspicion, or...? Do you believe it is good or bad? Or, is there a balanced view? Is wealth “the” sign of God’s blessings? Why, or why not?

2. Have you seen in others or experienced for yourself the lesson that when we just live to acquire material positions we end up with nothing of real consequence? How so?
3. In your experience, what happens when all a person does is chase wealth?
4. Have you ever considered that when we just chase wealth, possessions, or power, all we end up doing is robbing ourselves of the greater riches that God has to give us? How and why are these worthless and meaningless?
5. People in James' time rationalized that it was OK to cheat others because others did this, too. They were caving in to the worldly pressure of financial success! How have things changed in two thousand years?
6. How does what we chase become temporary and rotten? Have you considered that the things we think are important usually are not, such as trust in wealth, accomplishments, education, self, or...? Why would we place our trust in this stuff and not in the One who loves us?
7. How does the abuse of money to oppress the poor dishonor our Lord? Do you believe that stewardship is a matter of the heart? Take a look at your checkbook; it will show where your loyalties, commitments, and interests abound!
8. To seek wealth over God and His call will rob you of His precious opportunities and the substance of Himself. How so? Why not?
9. How do our desires become contrary to God's call and precepts? Why will they lead us to destruction? What can you do about it?
10. Many people just see the condemnation and judgment in this passage. How can you see Christ there with His loving arms open?
11. Do you worry? What can meet your deepest needs? How can the worship of our Lord replace your worry? What can you do to get in a state of worship when worry comes your way?
12. Why will the poor not be ignored by God? Do you hear their cries? They reach Him, and our responsibility to care for them must be heeded! What can you do to be a better steward of caring for the poor?