

A Study in James
Part 15 – “The Coming of Christ and the Rich”
James 5:1-6

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:1-6 ESV).

The spirit of the world places great emphasis on wealth. The “stuff” we manage to amass is used as a standard for measuring success. This worldly emphasis upon riches has a way of slipping into the life of a believer. James now writes a warning against becoming the victim of this worldly approach to life.

This does not mean it is a sin to be rich, or to have possessions. Though this passage is addressed to “rich” men, it would not necessarily describe the plight of all rich men. It is possible to be rich and to be a genuine Christian at the same time. However, the teaching of Scripture in general, and Jesus in specific, is that it is most difficult. This is true because of the unique temptations that attend riches and because of the very nature of riches themselves.

The warning of this passage concerns the Second Coming of Christ. The coming of Christ to earth again is to begin a time of judgment for the world. The question James asks is: “How will a rich man fare in that day of judgment?” What difference will his money and possessions make in that awful day? When you consider the reality of that day, riches do not look nearly so important.

It must be noted at the outset that riches will not in themselves determine the outcome of our judgment. Too many of us have wrapped our lives with the false security of wealth and have forgotten the real values of life in Christ. It reminds me of the story of a wealthy woman who had contributed large sums of money to foreign missions as she decided to make a trip around the world to visit some of the mission stations her gifts had made possible. In country after country she was impressed by the modern facilities her financial gifts had purchased. She was imminently satisfied that the Missions board had wisely invested her sizeable donations. Her last stop however was different. She finally had come to a leper colony in a faraway land. In a small room in the dispensary she saw a young Christian nurse treating the festering sore on the body of an older woman. Revolted by the sight, she exclaimed in horror: “I couldn’t do that for a million dollars!” quickly the young woman replied, “Neither could I.”

All the money in the world could not have persuaded her to work day after day amid the difficulties and challenges of a leper colony, far from the comforts of home and the companionship of loved ones. And yet, she was there!

So we see some important principles emerge from the text for today.

First, the Coming of Christ Will Be a Day of Misery for the Rich (v. 1).

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you (v. 1).

This was a graphic way of getting the attention of the readers. The rich men addressed are simply rich men in general. These were not necessarily members of the Christian fellowship. In fact, those described were probably not a part of the fellowship of believers. The “miseries” are hardships. The Day of Judgment will be a particularly hard time for the rich.

The misery of hardships will be the result of the failure of their riches. Riches have a way of convincing a man that they can meet all of his needs. Whatever he needs or wants, they can purchase. While this may be true from a physical perspective, they cannot meet the deep spiritual needs of a man; nor can they purchase the favor of God. When a man stands before God he will discover quickly that his riches are worthless.

We should note that “riches” in James’ day were not the same as we might think today. In that day they usually consisted of food, garments, or perhaps precious metals or gems. The word translated “miseries” here is very interesting. James is saying that his foodstuffs will be corrupted, rotten, or spoiled. He is saying that his garments would be moth-eaten. He says his gold would become rusted. They would be absolutely worthless before the great King of the ages. Though he has billions in worth, those things would not be worth one thing in the currency of heaven!

This means that the misery will be rooted in the truth that he has lost everything that ever had any value to him.

Albert Pike said it best when he wrote: “What we have done for ourselves dies with us; what we have done for others remains and is immortal.”

Second, the Coming of Christ Will Be a Day of Retribution for the Rich (vv. 2-6).

Jesus is going to make all things right in that day. The rich will come in for a special condemnation for special sins. Four sins that are the sins of the rich are described. Jesus will deal with each of these specifically and harshly at his coming.

1. **First, Jesus will deal with the sin of hoarding.** This particular sin seems to be in the background of the verses. In the day of Christ, he will hold the rich accountable for the good their wealth could have done if they had not selfishly hoarded it. He will ask how many people went unfed, how many without clothing or shelter could have been clothed and given clean warm shelter. All of this will be a judgment against them. These will be a witness against them and their consciences will burn with a raging fire.
2. **Another part of the retribution will concern the unjust manner by which their riches were acquired.** In the ancient day a man was supposed to be paid for his days work at the end of the day. The rich were tempted to take advantage of those who worked for them. It is a rich landowner that James cites as an example. Hard working men had reaped the grain of his fields. His love for money had caused him to defraud them of a part of their wages. The

wages which are still in his bank account cry out. They voice an appeal to God for vengeance on the rich thief. Furthermore, the poor laborer also cries out to God. His cry finds its way into the ears of the Lord of the Sabbath, which is the title that refers to Christ as the almighty Lord of all. It means he is the Lord of the heavenly host. At his coming, Jesus will give attention to both of these cries. It will be a Day of Reckoning for all who have gained wealth by fraud of unjust means.

3. *The third sin with which the Lord will deal at His coming is the sin of misused riches (v. 5).* Those who are the object of James' warning have thought only of themselves in the use of their wealth. They have lived like kings. They have indulged their flesh fully. They have made pleasure and the pursuit of personal happiness the end of their lives. James uses a very sobering thought. They have been like the steer penned in the feed lot preparing for the day of slaughter. The steer eats away, getting fatter each day, thinking he must be in heaven, not realizing that just around the corner is the butcher with his knife! The self-indulgent forget that Jesus is coming. They are so involved in satisfying the cravings of their lower nature that they forget a day of reckoning is coming.
4. *The fourth sin of the rich is the misuse of the power of their wealth.* By the misuse of their money they obstruct justice. They go to court with their high priced attorneys, and a couple of well-placed bribes, and the poor man never has a chance at justice. Do you remember how Jezebel used such a gain of Naboth to take over his vineyard for Ahab? (cf. 1 Kings 21). God never forgets such a misuse of wealth. He will give just recompense for such when the Lord Jesus comes to earth again. At his coming he will right every wrong!

Our goal should not be toward riches of this world. Our hearts should be set on the deepening of our relationship with Christ. It will always be true that being something is more important than having something.

When I was in college one of the courses I took dealt with the qualities and characteristics of various types of woods; particularly their burning properties. I learned softwoods, such as pine, spruce, and fir ignite easily because of their resinous nature. Hardwoods, such as ash, maple, and oaks burned longer, but were harder to ignite. The hardwood coals lasted a long time and helped to ignite fresh wood added to the fire. Other hardwoods and softwoods, such as apple, cherry, cedar, and hickory had additional qualities. They all produced a pleasant aroma when burned.

There's an important spiritual lesson in this data. We live in a day when many people are seeking a new source of warmth and meaning in their lives. We can supply that need. We should be like soft pine, fir, and spruce igniting quickly. With the warmth of our zeal and enthusiasm we can cause others to grow with God's warmth. We should also, like the oak, maple, and ash burn with God's love slowly, with maturity, giving balance and stability to the witness of the church. And, of course, we need to burn like the cherry, apple, and cedar with aromatic lives of faith.

You can never do this if your heart is set on this world's riches.