

James 5:1-6

Riches and power

Chapter 5¹ Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ² Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³ 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. ⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

Notes on the passage:

This passage takes the form of an OT prophetic declaration.

It's almost like these rich oppressors are in a court room, standing before God, with a list of the charges against them being read out, and a judgment for their actions declared.

You could actually structure your study like a courtroom drama (is this totally geeky??), and get people to work out what is the charge, what is the evidence, what is the judgment, what is the punishment.

The situation:

- Verse 1: 'weep and wail' = deeply anguished, howling.
- Verse 1: 'miseries' = calamity, ravaging, pillaging, devastation.

Possessions as witnesses against the rich oppressors:

- Verses 2 and 3: the descriptions of the products of their riches (clothes, gold and silver) emphasise their uselessness. Remember Jesus' warning, which is similar: Matthew 6:20 'store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy...'

'It is not that their riches will become useless in the future. Rather, from a spiritual perspective these riches hold no value now and thus condemn the rich who trust in them.' (page 262, 'The Expositor's Bible Commentary', Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland)

- Verse 3: 'their rust will be evidence against you': whereas in those days the rich could often buy their way out of court, in this instance, their riches only stand to further condemn them before God.
- Verse 3: 'will eat your flesh like fire' - not only has their *wealth* been destroyed, but the wealth destroys the *rich* also. 'The tragedy of hoarded wealth is not in the loss of the wealth alone but in the ultimate destruction of the person who has served it.' (page 262, 'The Expositor's Bible Commentary', Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland)

- Verse 3: this irony is underscored even more by the fact that the wealth that they had kept (presumably for future protection) has actually failed them in the 'last days'; the time that they imagined it would have helped them most.

People as witnesses against the rich oppressors:

- Verse 4a: The wages cry out
 - Verse 4 b: The labourers cry out
- See Deut. 24:14-15 'You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy... You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets he heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you.'

Lifestyle that condemns:

- Verse 5a 'in luxury and in pleasure' = extravagantly, with blatant disregard for the needs of others
- Verse 5b 'fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter' = I think this suggests that their behaviour has made them more liable to judgment.
- Verse 6 is a little unclear. It could describe literal murder, demonstrating the depths of their immorality, or it could be figurative, as withholding a labourer's wages could have the effect of killing him, as they were often dependent on being paid each day for their work. When it says 'he does not resist you' it probably means, 'he is completely vulnerable to you'.

Questions to consider:

Who does James have a problem with: all rich people, or just those who exploit workers?

What behaviour is being condemned here?

- Trusting in money (v 3b 'laid up treasure')
- How they got the money (v 4 exploiting workers)
- What they did with it once they had it (v 5 greedy living)

What is going to happen to the rich oppressors? Why?

- God is going to judge them
- Their wealth will fail them (because it is useless)
- Answering the 'why' question should involve some extended discussion.
 - o Why are these things so bad? Why is James so extreme on this? What does it show about God's concern for the poor and for justice?

What does this say about trusting in wealth?

- Could be helpful to consider whether or not this is condemning saving money per se

What does it say about our priorities?

- Do you live like this? Are you tempted to live like this?

In what ways might we be guilty of exploiting those who depend on us?

- I think it's fair to say that when we support businesses which exploit their workers, we are contributing to injustice.
- It would be worth having your group consider the lifestyle factors that might contribute to exploitation or minimise it. You could check out this online survey which assesses whether there has been slavery involved in the things you own. It's not perfect, but it's helpful nonetheless:

http://slaveryfootprint.org/survey/#where_do_you_live

See also pages 18-20 and pages 21-22 of this online magazine, for some information about fairer trade practices:

<http://www.tear.org.au/downloads/resources/resourceMagazineHarambee2009July.pdf>

What lifestyle changes could you make to minimise your contribution to injustice locally and globally?