

Authentic Christianity
A Warning about Wealth
James 5:1-6

February 21, 2021 am

HDBC

Someone said, *It takes great intelligence and wisdom to accumulate great wealth. It takes more intelligence and wisdom to know how to handle it.* Many people have been corrupted by money.

There's an old Jack Benny joke in which a mugger accosts Benny and says, "Your money or your life!"

There's a brief silence, and the mugger says, "Well?"

Jack Benny says, "**Don't rush me. I'm thinking. I'm thinking!**"

Some people will do almost anything for money. In an attempt to collect 40,000 euros in insurance payments, **a 58-year-old German landscape gardener had a friend cut off his thumb and forefinger with a chainsaw.** According to authorities, the gardener held onto a cutting board while his accomplice, a 28-year-old trucker, sawed off his friend's fingers. The police arrested both men after one of them was overheard bragging about the ruse.

Many people have the mistaken belief that **the solution to their most pressing problem is more money.** If we could just have more money life would be easier. And interestingly enough this often grows more intense as a person's amount of money increases. As wealth increases so does the craving.

This is not a condemnation of money or of wealth. There are places where the Bible presents wealth as a blessing from God. This is a warning about the dangers of misusing wealth and the power the often comes with it. To put it directly, James warns against trusting money for your security and against using money and power to oppress others.

Note the opening statement (1). **JB Phillips creatively translates it, *And now, you plutocrats.*** A plutocracy is a government of the wealthy, and **Rome was. A plutocrat** is one whose wealth gives him control or power. They controlled everything and often **manipulated common people like pawns on a chess board.** James is talking to those who were using their wealth to oppress others.

Whether or not he was talking to some within the church is debatable. If there were any wealthy believers, they would have been rare. Likely referring to wealthy and powerful **unbelievers who were oppressing the poor believers.**

1. The Doom Predicted (1)

Weep and howl - not expressions of repentance, but of **anguish**.

Weep – Often used in OT prophetic writings and speaks of crying aloud.

Picture of the condemned prisoner who has heard his sentence and knows there is no more recourse. Here it refers to people who know they are under the judgment of God and hopelessly lost.

Howl is added to give **fullness and intensity** of thought. In the Bible this word is often used of cries of grief.

Miseries which are coming upon you.

Hardships, afflictions and wretchedness. Judgment will come.

These are people who assumed all was good. They had little thought for the future and were unconcerned about what tomorrow might hold. The problem was not their wealth but their attitude toward their wealth. That is the issue. Again, this is not a condemnation of wealth. God has used some incredibly wealthy people to do so great kingdom things. These people had a wrong perspective on their wealth. For them, it was corrupting.

2. The Sins Described (2-6)

A. Hoarding (2-3)

In the agrarian world in which James lived, there were three signs of wealth in that day: Money, Clothes, Metals. **James shows** the destructiveness of hoarding each one. Using word pictures to drive home this truth about judgment. He points out that

Wealth rots, garments become moth-eaten and precious metals rust.

By gold and silver James was probably referring to the coins of his day, which were not made of pure gold and silver. Mixture of metals and they would indeed rust.

Rotted – Used to describe rotten wood, decayed flesh and rotten fruit. This is what James says can happen to wealthy or riches.

The rust itself would be a witness against them in the day of judgment and is pictured as being a tool of destruction against them. Like rust eats away metal, so they would be eaten away. **Picture of total destruction.**

Bertha Adams was 71 years old. She died alone in West Palm Beach on Easter Sunday, 1976. Coroner's report indicated that the cause of death was malnutrition. After wasting away to 50 pounds she died.

When the authorities made their initial investigation of her place they found it to be a veritable pigpen. One investigator said it was the biggest mess he had ever seen. They discovered that she had begged for food from her neighbors and gotten clothes from the local Salvation Army. From all appearances she was a penniless recluse. But that was not the case.

They found two keys that went to lock boxes at two local banks when they were opened the authorities were astounded with what they found. In the first box they found 700 AT&T stock certificates, hundreds of other stocks and bonds and \$200,000 in cash. The second box contained \$600,000 in cash. All total it was **more than a million dollars.**

Bertha's hoarding was tragic and her death was a grim testimony to the worthlessness of great wealth if it is stored away and hoarded.

Not an indictment against saving, but against hoarding. There is a difference.

B. Oppression (4)

The O.T. repeatedly warns against defrauding workers. To have someone work for you and for you to refuse to pay them what is fair and agreed upon is sinful.

However, there clearly were some in James' day who were doing this. They were withholding wages from their workers. He pictures the wages

of the defrauded workers as crying out to God for vengeance. **Like the blood of Abel crying out from the ground.**

Cries out – Literally, *shrieks out to God for justice.*

Not only was the unpaid money crying out to God, but the cry of the workers had made its way to God also. On the earth the cry of the oppressed often is unheard. James assures them that **they are always heard in Heaven.**

Sabaoth is transliteration of Hebrew word meaning "hosts" or "armies." Thought by some to be the highest and most majestic title for God. It implies His boundless authority and resources. This is an indictment of those who maintain their wealth at the expense of the poor.

C. Self-Indulgence (5)

Picture of lazy, gluttoned men, like cattle fattened for the market. They were unaware that the judgment was just around the corner.

If you visit the **Palace of Nero in Rome** you will find that

Nero and his friends like to eat and fare sumptuously. In the middle of the main dining room was something that looked like a well. When asked what it was used for, the guide replied that Nero and his guest used to eat so much that they could not hold it any more. So they had to vomit the food they just ate, and this was the place where they did it. Then back they went to the tables. Such was the life of the notorious Nero. He was a man, but lived like a pig.

Such extravagant living is a violation of the will of God for His children. There is both a time and a place for such living. **The place is Heaven and the time is after we leave this life.**

D. Injustice (6)

James' indictment of the rich reaches its peak at this point.

Judicial actions seems to be implied here. The poor were unable to resist the legal accusations of the wealthy. No defense. The wealthy controlled the courts and were able to use the system to acquire greater

wealth and land by taking it from the poorer among them. Without land to work and grow crops it was a death sentence for the poor.

James is describing adults who act like children by accumulating, clutching, controlling and threatening others because they have the power to do so.

Kevin Harney tells the following story in his book, *Seismic Shifts*:

A little boy sat on the floor of the church nursery with a red rubber ball in each arm and three Nerf balls clenched on the floor between his pudgy little knees. He was trying to protect all five from the other children in the nursery. The problem was, he could not hold all five at once, and the ball nearest to his feet was particularly vulnerable to being stolen. So, whenever another child showed an interest in playing with one of the balls, he snarled to make it clear these toys were not for sharing.

I suppose I should have stepped in and made the little guy give up one or two of the balls, but I was too wrapped up in the drama of it all. For about five minutes, this little guy growled, postured, and kept the other children away from the balls. Like a hyena hunched over the last scraps of a carcass, this snarling little canine was not in the mood for sharing. The other kids circled like vultures around the kill, looking for a way to jump in and snatch a ball without being attacked and bitten. I honestly did not know whether to laugh or cry as I watched.

Then it struck me: This little boy was not having any fun at all. There was no cheer within ten yards of this kid. Not only was he unhappy, but all the other kids seemed sad as well. His selfishness created a black hole that sucked all of the joy out of that nursery.... When church was over and his parents came to pick him up, he left the balls behind. I guess the old saying is true, you can't take it with you.

We also must ask ourselves some hard questions:

Do I Hoard?

Have I defrauded anyone? Kept what belonged to them.

Am I self-indulgent through the over-accumulation of wealth?

Have I gathered an excessive amount of money or things for personal pleasure with no thought of how those might be used in the Kingdom of God?