

# **GOD & WEALTH**

## **James 5:1-6**

**Sermon for Peace Church**

**July 12, 2009**

**PURPOSE** – To name the uses of wealth that contribute to our relationship with God and call upon the congregation to practices these.

**MAIN IDEA** – The dangers of wealth are that it leads to self-indulgence, injustice, and condemnation on Judgment Day, so let's use our material wealth to cultivate our life with God and His Kingdom.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Let's open our Bibles to James 5:1 (p. 1884), as we continue our summer read and reflection upon this Bible book.

1. "THE TESTING OF OUR FAITH" – is its overarching theme.

And today's subject gives more occasion for that testing than perhaps any other: WEALTH Verse 1 begins – "Now listen, you rich people."

(i) Wealth tests our faith because Jesus said: *No one can serve 2 masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God & money.*

Wealth and God are in direct competition for the heart's love.

- Your security? Pleasure? Ambition? - will it be in wealth or God?

Wealth does not sour the heart's love for God. It empties it.

(ii) Wealth tests our faith also because we have a lot of it around, more than any other society in history!

Perhaps you excused yourself from the paragraph's opening address: *"Now listen, you rich people."* (Some of us may not put ourselves in that category.)

- But 56% of the world's population lives on an annual income of \$730 per year (less than \$2 / day). America's per capita average income is \$34,000 per year.

- Each day Americans, on average, spend \$9 / day on food; \$7 on vehicle; \$6 gambling; \$3 on clothing; \$3 on furniture; \$.50 on jewelry!

Most every American lives a lifestyle that is simply beyond imagination for over ½ of the world!

3. *Now listen, you rich people ...*      **Read James 5:1-6**

4. There is one way I do hope this paragraph is an exception for you.

Most commentators agree that it is written to WEALTHY UNBELIEVERS.

- James does not call on these people to repent (as he does for the sins of believers in the previous paragraph). Here there is only prophetic condemnation
- The next paragraph, he shifts to again address “brothers” – v. 7 – *Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming.*

Those here addressed are the UNGODLY RICH, outside the church – who are oppressing the poor, of whom the church of that day was largely populated.

(i) So why would James denounce those who would never read this warning anyway?

Let’s let Calvin answer that (it’s his day): *“James writes with a regard to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their fortune ... and also knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them.”*

TWO REASONS:

Patience – justice will be served (we’ll pick this teaching up next week)

Warning – don’t fall into the temptations that come with wealth.

Such sin will be JUDGED!

(ii) With that purpose in mind, let’s make our way back into the passage and pull out some specific temptations that come with wealth:

The temptation to:      SELF-INDULGENCE (v. 5)  
    SOCIAL OPPRESSION (v. 4)  
    HOARDING (v. 3)

## II. WEALTH & SELF-INDULGENCE

1. Now listen, you rich people, you have lived on earth in LUXURY & SELF-INDULGENCE.

*... You have fattened yourself, v. 5, for the day of slaughter!*

(i) What an image of the danger of wealth! Misuse of wealth FATTENS US UP like penned cattle waiting for their day of slaughter! ... Or like those PENNED CHICKEN unnaturally-fattened around the chest. (Only our enlargements tend to be more around the waistline.)

A. Americans eat 815 billion calories of food each day – which means nothing except to know that that’s roughly 200 billion more than needed (25% over) – enough to adequately feed an additional 80 million people each day.

Americans THROW OUT 200,000 tons of edible food each day.

B. On average, one American consumes as much as energy as:

- 6 Mexicans / 13 Chinese / 31 Indians / 128 Bangladeshis / / 370 Ethiopians

*“You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.”*

C. Not long ago, PBS did a documentary on the modern-day plague of materialism – titled “AFFLUENZA”. Among many things, the program claimed that recently more Americans declared bankruptcy – living beyond their means - than graduated from college.

*You’ve lived in luxury & self-indulgence ... beyond even your means.*

2. With regard to faith, here’s the test question: WHAT’S THE PLEASURE OF YOUR SOUL?

Wealth or God?

WHAT SATISFIES YOUR HEART? WHAT EXCITES YOUR SPIRIT?

Your I-Pod or the knowledge of God?

Your Party? Pontoon? Porch? or Perrier? ... or obedience to the living will of God.

(i) In contrast to fattening ourselves up for judgment, Romans 12 describes salvation as becoming a living sacrifice for God. No longer conforming to the patterns of this world, but by the “renewing of the mind”, a living sacrifice seeks to find & obey the “good, pleasing, perfect will of God.” THAT’S THE EXCITEMENT OF A CHRISTIAN’S SOUL.

A. When wealth is the satisfaction of your soul, inevitably it leads to luxury & self-indulgence.

B. When God is the pleasure of your soul, it inevitably leads to a hunger to know Him and His will.

(ii) In the saved soul grows a preoccupation with the glory of God in all of our life – even in the material blessings we receive.

Two weeks ago I shared a quote from Augustine that bears repeating:

*HE LOVES THEE TOO LITTLE WHO LOVES ANYTHING TOGETHER WITH THEE WHICH HE LOVES NOT FOR THY SAKE.*

- Do you love your food / vacation / vehicle for God's sake?
- Is that purchase / trip / membership for God's sake?

That quote can help us discern when we CROSS THE LINE with wealth into luxury & self-indulgence – because above all, a Christian finds his/her pleasure in the glory of God!

3. Love for God leads to a simpler life with wealth.

In his book, "The Celebration of Discipline", Richard Foster writes about the "freedom of simplicity" – refusing to be a slave to anything but God! Toward that life, he gives these 5 points of discipline:

(i) Buy things for their usefulness, not their prestige. – *Hang the fashions. Buy what you need. Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life.*

(ii) Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you. – *Watch for undisciplined compulsions.* He tells the story of a friend of his who went out to get his news paper one morning and found it missing! He panicked, wondering how he could possibly start the day without the newspaper. Then he noticed a morning paper in his neighbor's yard, and began to plot how he could sneak over and steal it. That's when he realized he had an addiction. So he rushed inside his home and immediately called the newspaper office to cancel his subscription. "Why?", the receptionist asked. "Cause I'm addicted!"

"Well, would you like to cancel the entire subscription or would you like to keep the Sunday edition?" ... to which he exclaimed: "No! I'm going cold turkey!"

A. For the love of God, reject those things that are producing addictions in you.

(iii) Develop a habit of giving things away.

(iv) Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.

(v) Learn to enjoy things without owning them – *Enjoy the beach without feeling that you have to buy a piece of it!*

4. The Rich Young Ruler was invited by Jesus into a life of pleasure in the will of God. To do so, he had to let go of his wealth. He rejected Jesus' invitation – because he was possessed by his possessions.

*“It's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle”,* commented Jesus.

### III. WEALTH & SOCIAL INJUSTICE

A second temptation James highlights is SOCIAL INJUSTICE.

Verse 4 – *“Now listen, you rich people ... the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.*

Verse 6 – *You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.*

1. Back in James' day, (according to my research) Palestine was witnessing an increasing concentration of land in the hands of a small group of very wealthy landowners. As a result, the smallholdings of many farmers were forced to earn their living by hiring themselves out to their rich landlords.

- Does this sound familiar ... now on a global scale?

These rich landowners were conducting their business according to the law of supply and demand without concern for a just wage. As long as they could find workers who will accept low wages, they wouldn't have to pay more. And if the workers didn't accept low pay, they didn't work. James condemns such reasoning as evil & perverse. The 'harvesters' have not been treated justly; instead of justice there is distress. The gap between the landowner and harvester was too great.

2. This evil is still with us.

(i) Some of us next month are heading down to the Dominican Republic on a short mission trip. That country's major export is sugar. Its major market is the USA.

Two years ago a documentary came out titled, “The Price of Sugar”. It featured the story of Father Christopher Hartley, himself of Spanish aristocracy, who discovered the plight of Haitians being illegally imported into the DR to work the sugar-fields. These Haitians are paid next to nothing, treated miserably, abused, and are essentially enslaved workers – today!

And there is a very wealthy family, the Vicinis – who own the fields and are behind this injustice, drawing upon the sympathies of Dominican “nationalism” and racial hatred toward Haitians. Father Hartley ministers to the Haitian cane-workers and is seeking to make their plight known in the First World.

Part and parcel of this injustice, however, is the marketplace - you and I, and especially the American companies in league with the Vicinis. Our quite inexpensive sugar comes at the expense of those Haitian workers – the harvesters - being exploited & treated unjustly.

(A comparable situation exists with bananas & Columbia & Chiquita, USA – Corporate headquarters, Cincinnati, Ohio. Recent charges have arisen of their support of corruption in that country in order to protect their profitable banana industry.)

(ii) With wealth comes the power to propagate social injustice. Uncompetitive, unchecked, godless wealth can readily exploit world conditions - the poor especially - in order to accumulate more profit! Systems get set up in which even we ourselves are partial benefactors! The social injustice James denounces continues in our day!

3. So how do we respond?

(i) These complex issues – but we need to speak to them, holding American enterprise to social responsibility. I’m glad that our denomination has an office of Social Justice. We support and should continue to support this work.

They’re involved with land-rights issues in the Honduras (Verbeek’s son). They’re involved in issues of fair-trade, economic justice, treatment refugees, creation care, global poverty.

1 ½ year ago, we went through a series on these parts of Christian responsibility – and had a number of denominational people and resources involved. We need to continue to support this work.

A. We do this with a vision (articulated by Calvin) of the glory of God in all creation. Social justice & well-being are part of that Kingdom Vision. To be aware of, to support, and to be involved in causes of social justice is part of our Christian calling.

- We’re not naïve to the power and dangers of wealth. And we don’t want to be oblivious or indifferent to it!

4. More fundamentally, we care for the poor & needy with all of the wisdom we can. It's not just "doling" out to them. It's calling them forth. It's relationship & respect. It's love.

THAT'S HOW WEALTH IS A TEST OF OUR FAITH!

(i) It was said of King Josiah – Jeremiah 22:16 – *"He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. 'Is that not what it means to know me?' declares the Lord!"*

The Lord cares for the cause of the poor & needy.

A. The temptation of wealth is to use it to perpetuate and enhance our comforts (see this in our local residential migration patterns), often at the cost of perpetuating and enhancing SOCIAL INJUSTICE.

The Bible calls us to use our wealth & strength to CARE for the poor & needy – like King Josiah, like Father Hartley – cause that's who God is!

#### IV. WEALTH & HOARDING

... which leads to the 3<sup>rd</sup> temptation: HOARDING WEALTH – instead of investing it.

1. James sounds like his half-brother, Jesus, in the opening lines of our paragraph:

*Now listen, you rich people – weep & wail because of the misery coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eats your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.*

JESUS SAID: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

2. The temptation of wealth is to HOARD IT!

There's a certain pleasure & security it brings – so we seek more of that pleasure & security, even at the expense of pleasures & security with God.

That's how HOARDING is different than stewardly saving. Hoarding puts a value on wealth above God and His Kingdom.

- (i) WHY HOARD? James & Jesus ask, when this life ends & judgment is coming?  
 YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU! ...You'll never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul.

A. A businessman once had an angel visit him, promising to grant one request. The man asked for a copy of the stock market page – one year in the future. As he was studying the numbers on the future exchange and gloating over how much he would make because of his knowledge of the future, his eye glanced across the page. His picture was in the obituary column.

Suddenly his potential wealth faded into insignificance!

- (ii) Not only that, James would add, such wealth – corroded & rotten - will testify against you on the Day of Judgment.

3. So, instead of hoarding, INVEST. You can't take it with you – but you can send it on ahead.  
*Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven*, Jesus said.

- (i) = Prepare for eternity.

Those treasures of heaven are the knowledge of God, joy in Him, our service to Him, the understanding of His will & ability / authority in it. There are DEGREES of this awaiting believers in the next age.

As we invest our temporal wealth in God & His glory, then we will be blessed with increased joy & power in the age to come! Your love and service for God THEN are increased by your investments NOW!

SO LET'S GIVE TO PLACES & PEOPLE whereby we can see God's reign GROW, His name glorified

- A. As Jim Elliot famously put it, *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*

## V. CONCLUSION

1. HOW?

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

= Jesus means that when you give to the things of God, your heart follows

A. For example - if you buy shares in IBM, what happens?

You develop an interest in IBM. You check the financial pages. You see an article about the future of computers and read every word, even though a month ago you'd have passed it right over.

Randy Alcorn writes,

*As surely as the compass needle follows north, your heart will follow your treasure. Money leads; hearts follow. I've heard people say, 'I want more of a heart for missions.' I always respond, "Jesus tells you how to get it. Put your money in missions – and in your church and the poor – and your heart will follow."*

*Do you wish you cared more about eternal things? Then reallocate some of your money, maybe most of your money, from temporal things to eternal things. Watch what happens.*

God wants you heart - WEALTH IS ITS TEST ... He wants people so filled with a vision for eternity that they wouldn't dream of NOT investing their money, time and prayers where they will matter most.

## 2. GOD WANTS YOUR HEART

Let's resist the temptations of wealth & use the opportunities of wealth for that sake.

AMEN!