

James 5:1-6

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[0 : 00] So, we're pleased to be welcoming some new folks to Aberdeen and to Bon Accord this morning.

And so, I have a message for you and indeed a message for everybody who's gathered this morning. I want to talk to you about weeping and wailing, about flesh-eating fire.

I'm not making it up. It's in the passage. And about a day of slaughter. Nothing like a nice, cheery message to brighten your day and kick off your week and term.

Now, the language that James uses in the passage we read is pretty brutal. There's really no way of sugarcoating his words.

But then why would we want to sugarcoat a bitter pill? Bitter pills may be hard to swallow, but sometimes we need to swallow them. So, I want to tackle these verses in James chapter 5, these first six verses of the chapter.

[1 : 08] I want to tackle them by considering them from three distinct but complementary angles. First of all, I want to look at the verses as a chilling warning.

In some senses, that is the obvious way in which to consider them. That's what they are. So, we want to just notice them from that perspective or from that angle as a chilling warning.

But I also want to look at the verses from the angle of them being a revealing portrait. They're a revealing portrait of the one who is speaking.

They're a revealing portrait of what God is like. If God says these kinds of things, then we can from that deduce what God is like. And so, this passage can also be considered from that angle, from that perspective, as a revealing portrait of God.

But then thirdly, I want to think of the passage from the perspective of it being a timely call to us as believers. That from the words that we find, we can draw out challenges to ourselves.

[2 : 16] So, that's the manner in which we're going to consider the passage. And as we go through it, hopefully it will become clear the way in which we're trying to do this. So, let's begin by considering the passage from this perspective as a chilling warning.

So, this first angle, if you wish, is going to involve identifying what is said concerning those to whom the warning is addressed.

And so, what we want to do is establish, first of all, their identity, who they are, who is James speaking to, who is God speaking to through James. So, who they are. But we also want to notice what their sin is.

Why is it that such harsh language or brutal language is being employed towards them? So, their identity, their sin, but also their destiny.

And really, the most chilling language is reserved for a description of what awaits them. So, we're going to think about who the words are directed to and these three aspects of it.

[3 : 26] Their identity, their sin, and their destiny. So, their identity. Who are they? Well, James addresses them as, you rich people.

They're at the beginning of chapter 5. Now, listen, you rich people. But that doesn't take us very far because we immediately then pose the question, well, who are these rich people that he is speaking to?

This is a letter that was written to the churches at that time. And so, we might immediately imagine, well, perhaps this is being addressed to rich Christians who form part of the churches to which James is writing.

That might seem a reasonable conclusion. But I think we have reasons for concluding that that isn't the primary audience that James is addressing. James would seem to be addressing unbelievers.

Or he's speaking, if not to them, about them, maybe both, in this rhetorical fashion by means of an address.

[4 : 31] We might call them, if he wanted to give them a name, we might call them the wicked wealthy. And I think this conclusion as to the identity of those being addressed is justified on a number of grounds.

First of all, in the letter itself, the rich have already been spoken of where it's very clear that they are not believers. So, in chapter 2, for example, verses 6 and 7, James is speaking to believers and he is saying to them, but you have insulted the poor.

And then he says, is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

So, it's very evident there that the rich people that James is speaking about are not Christians. They're persecuting the Christians. They're dragging them to court. They're blaspheming the name of God.

So, clearly they're not believers. And so, when James again addresses you rich people, it seems reasonable to imagine he's speaking about the same rich people, the people we're calling the wicked wealthy.

[5 : 40] It's also true that in these verses, unlike in most of the letter, we see no reference to those being spoken to being addressed as brothers. If we went through the letter, time doesn't allow us to right now, but if we did so, we'd find time and time again that the letter is addressed to brothers, my brothers.

You know, behave as brothers and so on and so forth, brothers and sisters. And so, it's clear that the majority of the letter contemplates that what is being said is being addressed to fellow believers, brothers in the faith, brothers in Christ.

But this little section, you find none of that language. And so, again, I think that points to James having a different audience in view. Then, of course, another thing that we can notice is that the language of condemnation that we're going to be noting in a few moments, the condemnation that awaits those who are being addressed is, thank God, a condemnation that believers are spared. And so, again, that would lead us to the conclusion that the rich people being addressed are not rich Christians, but in this instance, unbelievers who are wealthy and who are behaving in a particular way that we're going to notice just now.

So, that's their identity. But we also want to think about their sin. What are they guilty of? What is the sin of these rich people? And I think the first thing we need to state very clearly is what their sin is not.

[7 : 08] It is not the fact of being wealthy. That is not the problem. There's nothing sinful about being wealthy. That by itself is not the problem.

And it's important to stress that because maybe a superficial reading of these verses might lead people to that conclusion that somehow there's a problem with being wealthy.

Now, that is not the issue. That's not the sin that they're guilty of. Wealth may bring its temptations, as we'll note, but in and of itself, it is not sinful to be wealthy, to be rich.

And just as well, because that would leave a lot of us in a bit of a pickle. So, if that's not their sin, what is their sin? Well, their sin has to do with, I think we can find in the passage three things.

It has to do with their attitude to their riches. It has to do with the manner that their wealth has been secured. And it has to do with the use that they give to their wealth.

[8 : 10] So, take a mental note of these three things. The sin of these people, these rich people, has to do with their attitude to wealth, the manner that it's been secured, and the use that is given to it.

And let's find that in the text now. First of all, their attitude. Let's read verses 2 and 3. What is said to them? Your wealth is rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you, and eat your flesh like fire. And then particularly, notice what it says. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. So, they're accused of hoarding wealth.

Now, I think we can draw from that the attitude that they have to wealth. If this is what they're doing, if they're hoarding wealth, if they're accumulating wealth, they're hoarding it, what does that say?

What does that reveal to us about their attitude to wealth? Well, I think their hoarding reveals to us that these are people who are trusting in their wealth.

[9 : 08] They derive from their wealth. They derive from their riches a sense of pleasure, a sense of well-being, a sense of self-worth, a sense of security. And maybe we could multiply the examples.

And all of those have to do with the attitude that they have to their wealth. You know, we think of just some of these things that I've mentioned, a sense of pleasure. And we'll come to the call for us in a moment.

But even at this point, let me just say, be careful if you derive too much pleasure from money. That's a red light. And the psalmist knows all about that danger.

And in Psalm 119 and verse 14, he says something very interesting. He says this, And it's quite a vivid picture that's painted of men and women deriving pleasure and delight from counting their money.

How much money I've got. How much I've got in my bank accounts, in my portfolio, or the properties I own. And deriving pleasure from the mere fact of possessing these things.

[10 : 17] Be very careful. This is the problem with these people. Not that they're wealthy, but that the attitude they have to their wealth. So they derive pleasure from their wealth. They consider that their own self-worth is determined by what they own.

And this is the sinful attitude that they have to wealth. And just as they consider that their own self-worth is a function of their riches, inevitably that will filter down to how they view other people. So if they consider themselves very important and very valuable because of their riches, then inevitably when they see others who are not so wealthy or who are poor, then they will come to the conclusion, well, these people are not of any great value.

It would be a logical way of reasoning. A very sinful way of reasoning, but a logical one. If you start from the premise that your value is a function of how wealthy you are.

And then another aspect of this sinful attitude is that they derive their security from their wealth. Why do they hoard wealth? Let's put the question that way.

[11 : 21] Why? Well, for many, the hoarding of wealth is a means of trying to secure some kind of security. Security against ill health. Security against problems of one kind or another.

Security against danger or pain. And there's this sense or this idea that if I hoard wealth, somehow that will shelter me and protect me from those bad things in life.

And so their security is in there or grounded in their wealth. So what is their sin? Well, it has to do with their attitude to wealth, reflected by this hoarding.

But also their sin is a function of the manner in which their wealth has been secured. Notice what it says in verse 4. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

And it's crystal clear. How have these people become wealthy? Or in any case, how has a significant measure of their wealth been secured? It has been secured by exploiting others, by cheating others, by underpaying others, by using the power that they have to abuse and take advantage of others.

[12 : 41] And so the problem isn't their wealth, but the manner in which their wealth has been secured. This is their sin. And it was an ugly reality in the days of the prophet Amos that we read of.

It was an ugly reality in the days of James when he writes this letter. And it remains an ugly reality in the 21st century world that we live in. Countless millions of our fellow world citizens are victims of exploitation and oppression, taken advantage of by men of wealth and power who use that power to exploit others.

These are the people that James is addressing. This is their sin. Not their wealth, but the manner in which they have secured it. But then also the passage speaks about the use that they have given to their wealth.

Notice in verse 5, You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. This wealth that they've secured by immoral means is used to live a life of luxury and self-indulgence.

They don't hoard all their wealth. Some they employ to fund, to bankroll this life of luxury and self-indulgence.

[13 : 59] And this is their sin. Not that they're wealthy, but the use that they give to it. If they'd used that wealth to help those who were in need, then that would have been a great blessing that they were wealthy.

But that's not what they do, largely. Rather, they spend it on themselves, on self-indulgence. This is their sin. The passage also identifies fairly, what could we say, quite scandalously or dramatically, it identifies murder as among the sins of these people.

Notice there in verse 6, You have condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing you. And we kind of wonder, well, how so? In what way were they guilty of murder?

Well, in some cases, it may be that their power was abused, even to this degree of having people killed who were in their way of making more money.

But it could be that this refers to deaths that are the result of the exploitation, of unpaid wages, of people so poor that they're not able to secure the medical treatment they need because they still haven't been paid for the month.

[15:08] Or, you know, those ways in which death results because of the sinful injustice of the wealthy wicked.

And so God comes to them and says, You're murderers. You're murderers. You're guilty of the death of these people. So their identity, their sin, but then also their destiny.

What is their destiny? And this is where we have the very chilling and dramatic language. Their destiny is judgment. They will be judged by God. Notice the language of witnesses testifying against them.

There's a whole parade of witnesses spoken of in the passage in verse 3a. It speaks about their gold and silver being corroded. And then it says their corrosion will testify against you.

So even the wealth that they've hoarded and accumulated as it begins to lose its value, that in itself will testify against them. But not only their corroded wealth, also the unpaid wages are spoken of.

[16:10] They're personified as crying out. Verse 4, look, the wages you fail to pay, the workmen are crying out against you. The wages cry out. The unpaid wages that remain in the bank account or in the pocket of the land owner are crying out to God.

We shouldn't be here. We should be with the people who have worked. They're witnesses against these wicked wealthy. But then the people themselves, those who are the victims, also cry out.

In verse 4, in the second half of the verse, the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. They too testify by their cries and by their groans.

They testify against those who are oppressing them. And so judgment is coming. The evidence is piled up.

The witnesses are being deployed. And judgment is being executed. Now in this life, many of the wealthy can oil the palms of corrupt authorities or judges or journalists and escape the consequences of their wrongdoing.

[17:18] But the evidence is piling up. And the voice of witnesses is being heard in heaven. And a day of reckoning is fast approaching. And so their destiny is judgment, but very much aligned with that or part and parcel of that.

Their destiny is condemnation. They will be judged and they will be condemned. The passage speaks of the last days. And that alerts us to that final dreadful day of judgment when all will be revealed and all will stand before the judge.

And the guilty will be condemned. This is their destiny. In this life, they seem to have it all. An easy life. Everything you could dream of.

But God is saying, no, there is a day coming when they will have to answer for their exploitation. And as they are condemned, so they will experience great misery. They will be weeping and wailing.

They will be victims in that awful day of slaughter. Unrelieved even by death. So you have a chilling warning to these wicked wealthy.

[18:26] But moving swiftly on, we can look at the passage from another angle. And that is as a revealing portrait. A portrait of the one who is speaking. The passage provides us with a revealing portrait of an awesome God.

Now, the word awesome has been somewhat devalued by overuse. I was just watching the golf last night. I don't know if any of you follow golf. But over in the States, there's the FedEx final tournaments.

And for those of you who are interested in it, it's quite exciting. And I was watching it for a wee while last night. And the commentator, who, shall we say, is similar to your preacher this morning in not being overly blessed with a full head of hair.

He was commenting about one of the caddies. And he said in rather covetous terms, what an awesome head of hair. He was like, wow, I'd love to have that awesome head of hair. Well, there you go. Even a head of hair can be awesome now. Well, the word has been somewhat devalued. But the way I'm using the word is I say that this passage reveals to us or paints to us a portrait of an awesome God is in the sense of a God who commands awe as we contemplate who He is and what He is like.

[19 : 43] He inspires awe by His very person. And this passage provides us with a portrait of an awesome God. We're given a glimpse of His awesome love, of His awesome justice, and of His awesome power.

Let's think of these things in turn, His awesome love. Let me pose this question as we reflect on the language directed to these wealthy wicked. Why is God so angry with the rich people?

Why is He so angry? Why this, to our ears, perhaps very extreme language, why does God even care about how the rich secure and spend their cash?

Has God not got better things to do with His time? Why is He so angry? Why does He care? Well, He cares because of His love for the oppressed and the downtrodden and the marginalized and the exploited.

That's why He's angry. That's why the language is so intense, because His love is so intense. The intensity of the language of condemnation is, in a sense, a mirror image of the intensity of His love.

[20 : 50] It's because He so loves that He so condemns those who inflict pain and distress on the poor. God loves those men and women and boys and girls who are ignored, oppressed, and even murdered by the rich, the wealthy, wicked.

He loves the child in the sweatshop and the sex slave in the brothel. He loves the undocumented day laborer and the exploited worker. He loves them.

Hence, the intensity of His condemnation of those who are guilty of exploiting them. He loves them so much. And this is something we don't have in the passage, but we can draw to consideration.

He loves them so much, as He loves all sinners so much, that He sent His one and only Son into the world to die at the hands of these very people, the wicked, the powerful, the wealthy.

He died in the place of the poor and the exploited and wonder of wonders, even in the place of the filthy rich, the wicked wealthy who repent and trust in Jesus.

[22 : 00] And so this passage reveals to us, gives us a glimpse, a portrait of God's awesome love, but also, very clearly, His awesome justice. In the language of James, we hear an echo of the Old Testament prophets who also spoke for God.

And in vivid language expressed God's passion for justice. We've read one of those passages in the book of Amos. God is a God who hears the cries.

Every cry, every whimper, every sob, every silent scream, God hears. And each cry resonates in His heart of justice. He hears and He acts on what He hears.

He may not act in the moment or in the timescale that we might imagine, but act He will. His awesome love, His awesome justice, His awesome power.

James here speaks of God as the Lord Almighty. Notice there in verse 4, the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. And here James uses a Hebrew word to speak of God.

[23 : 06] Lord, sabot. And that Hebrew word sabot means army. Sometimes translated, the Lord of hosts. The Lord of the heavenly armies. And the picture is of a God of awesome and frightening power.

And so you have these rich people, self-satisfied, untouchable, so they imagine. And James says, be careful. Because the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts, is against you.

And that is a bad place to be. And the God of all power will do justice. Remember that. The Lord Almighty, Lord sabot, will do what is right.

And so we're given this glimpse of His awesome power. And that power is seen even as we draw from the passage truths about that power.

His sovereign power is evident in at least two respects. He is the God who sovereignly and powerfully holds the future in His hands. You see, God can speak of the destiny of the wicked wealthy with prophetic certainty.

[24 : 12] When He says there in verse 5, weep and wail. It's in the present. And yet so many of the wealthy, they're not weeping and wailing at all. They're very contented with their wealth.

But in God's perspective, He can look to what will be as being happening in the now. There's a prophetic certainty to His words.

Why? Because He holds the future in His hands. There'll be no surprises. There'll be no way in which those who are guilty will escape. Because the future is held by God.

He holds the future in His hands. And of course, He holds every life in His hands. Be that for judgment or redemption. Be that for condemnation or vindication. He holds your life in His hands.

And so the passage gives us a glimpse, a portrait of this awesome God. Awesome in love.

Awesome in justice. Awesome in power. But let me just mention more briefly a third angle that we can look at the passage from.

[25 : 11] And I've described it as a timely call. Now, I've already suggested in the first part that the words here are directed in the first instance to those who are not believers.

So the question somewhat then arises, well, what does it have to say to us? What challenge is there for us if we are not identified with the wicked wealthy?

Can we sit back and say, well, I'm all right because I'm not one of them? Or is there a call to us as well? I think there is. And let me suggest what that call is or what part of that call can be.

Indeed, I think that when James writes these words, though he writes them in the manner of an address to the wicked wealthy, he does have in mind that in what he says, the believers who are reading the letter would be spoken to and would be challenged, indeed encouraged in some ways.

So what is the timely call for us as believers? I think we can look at it in terms of don'ts and do's. We sometimes hear about do's and don'ts. Well, let's do don'ts and do's. First of all, I think we are being told things that we ought not to do.

[26 : 23] And I think the first one is this. Don't envy the rich. I think one of the problems of the poor in the churches in James' day who were being exploited, who were being dragged to the courts, who were having their lands stolen from them, and they saw these other people who were wealthy and everything was fine and everything was wonderful.

There was that temptation to envy them and wish that they were like them. And James is saying don't envy them. Don't envy them. They seem to have it all together. But, you know, to be aware of their destiny, there's nothing to envy there.

So don't envy the wealthy wicked. But also, maybe more significantly, he's warning them, he's calling them, don't imitate the wealthy wicked.

If you are a Christian, you're not one of the wicked wealthy, but you may be guilty of imitating them in a measure. We all may be. And let me just ask the questions, the sins that these people were guilty of, and think about ourselves now.

Do you hoard? You know, is your attitude to money in even some measure reflected in what we've thought about this morning?

[27 : 35] Do you take great pleasure in the more money you can have, the better? Is your sense of self-worth the function of how much money you have and of how wealthy you are?

Is your security found in the pension that you have and the properties that you own and the shield that that gives you in your mind?

Do you secure your wealth? Or is some of your wealth secured by, at the expense of others? That may be less of an issue for many of us, though maybe not for some.

Do you live self-indulgently? Remember, that was the third aspect of their sin. The manner in which they used their wealth. So even if the wealth has been secured by legitimate means and by hard work and by wise decisions, and you're to be congratulated for that.

Now that you've got the wealth, how do you use it? You see, there there can be sinful attitudes. If it's self-indulgent, if it's all about yourself, then that's sinful.

[28 : 45] And so there's a timely call to us. Even if we are not, thank God, among the wicked wealthy, can we be guilty of some of the sins that they were guilty of?

So don't envy the rich. Don't imitate the rich. And take the opportunity to take a long, hard look at yourself. And if required, repent of sinful attitudes that you might have towards wealth and riches. So don't do that. But do share God's heart. God's heart of love for the poor. God's heart of justice for the oppressed.

Cry out on their behalf. You know, some people imagine that to be a Christian is to wash your hands of real world problems. It's all about pie in the sky when you die.

When we come into this building, we forget about the real world. And we get into our little bubble, and we just enjoy singing nice little songs. And we feel warm and fuzzy. And then we can go out, and what happens here really has nothing to do with what's happening out there.

[29 : 47] And this passage of James screams at us and says, no, that is not so. To be a Christian is to be passionately concerned for what's happening out in the big bad world.

To share God's concern for justice. God's concern for helping those who are oppressed and exploited. When we come into this place and to sit under God's Word, we come to be equipped to be agents of transformation in and of the big bad world.

And so if you're looking for a cause, I don't know if it's only young people who look for a cause. I suppose those of us who are a little bit older can also be looking for a cause. If you're looking for a cause, there is no better cause than the cause of Christ.

This is a cause that is profoundly radical and revolutionary and countercultural. So do share God's heart. But also let me say a final thing. Do share God's wealth entrusted to you.

Now you may think, well, I don't have much of it. But whatever you have of God's wealth entrusted to you, then use it for the good and the blessing and the benefit of others.

[31 : 02] By all means, be prudent in providing for future needs. The condemnation of hoarding isn't a condemnation of saving. It's not a condemnation of having a pension plan.

There is an appropriate and prudent and wise care of the resources you have to be able to meet future needs. And that is, of course, entirely good and legitimate.

But while we recognize that, we also have this call. In contrast to the behavior of the wicked rich, that in the measure that God has provided for us, then let us be generous in sharing of what we have received on behalf of others.

And remember that the God who is calling you to this life of sacrificial service on behalf of others is no armchair revolutionary directing you from on high, directing you from the safe distance of heaven.

He is the God who came in to this sin-sick world in the person of His Son, Jesus, and became poor for you.

[32 : 11] In the words of Paul as he speaks or writes to the church in Corinth, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You that You are indeed a God who is awesome in love, awesome in justice, awesome in power.

We thank You that You are a God who hears every cry. You are a God who is attentive to the cry of the weakest. You are the God who can hear even those silent cries of the weak and the oppressed and the poor.

We pray that we would share something of Your character, that we would share something of Your priorities and of Your values in our own lives.

We do thank You for wealth. We thank You for the material provision. We thank You for having more than we need for Your generous provision.

[33 : 23] But we do pray that our attitude to all that You have given us would be of humble thanksgiving and of delight in using that which we have, not only for ourselves, not to live lives of self-indulgence, but rather of generous service to others.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. That was amazing.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.