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Sermon Notes

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## **God's Warning to Rich Oppressors**

**James 5:1-6**

***James 5:1-6 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. <sup>2</sup> Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Look! 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. <sup>5</sup> You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. <sup>6</sup> You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.***

### **I. Rich Oppressors Warned**

#### **A. The Most Dreadful Passage in James**

1. Words that should cause sheer terror
2. Words that offer no hope whatsoever
3. There is no call to repent, no salvation offered if these rich oppressors turn from their wicked ways
4. Just a cold sentence of eternal death awaiting them

#### **B. The Lord Almighty is Mobilized Against You**

1. The “cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the LORD OF HOSTS” ... the commander of the armies of heaven

## C. What Is Threatened: Nothing Less Than Eternity in the Fire of Hell

### 1. Weep and wail

- a. The words are extreme...
- b. “weep” describes the wailing that happens at a funeral; also connected with the reaction that occurs a person is publicly exposed as having done something extremely shameful and is truly guilty
- c. Weeping and howling picture a shrieking of terror and pain and agony that only rises and rises to a crescendo of cacophony that is unbearable to listen to
- d. Violent uncontrollable grief and agony
- e. Like Jesus’ description of those suffering the torments of hell

***Matthew 8:12* thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."**

***Matthew 13:42* They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

***Matthew 22:13* 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'**

### 2. Misery that is coming upon you

- a. The word “misery” is actually an understatement for the experience of those in hell’s fire
- b. The Book of Revelation speaks of the lake of fire; Jesus says the worm does not die and the fire is never quenched
- c. Revelation says

***Revelation 14:11* the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night**

3. Flesh eaten like fire... this is the effect of being thrown in the lake of fire... yet, the flesh is never consumed; the torments go on forever and ever
4. Jesus' account of the Rich Man and Lazarus

***Luke 16:19-25 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup> "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' <sup>25</sup> "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.***

5. Fattened in a day of slaughter

***James 5:5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter***

- a. Fattened in the day of slaughter = fed your flesh in such a way that the wrath of God will seek you out first
- b. Like a hog that shoved all the other pigs out from the trough so it could feed first
- c. It grew fatter and fatter, not realizing how its self-gorging would attract the attention of the slaughterer
- d. This speaks of the inevitable outcome for rich oppressors... slaughter... eternal slaughter

D. James Stands as a Prophet of Doom

1. As James speaks to these rich oppressors, he stands in a long lineage, a powerful heritage of Old Testament prophets
2. Specifically those who prophesied judgment on the wealthy who were exploiting the poor

***Isaiah 3:15*** *What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.*

***Isaiah 5:8-9*** *Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. <sup>9</sup> The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: "Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants.*

***Isaiah 10:1-4*** *Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, <sup>2</sup> to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. <sup>3</sup> What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? <sup>4</sup> Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.*

***Amos 2:6-7*** *This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. <sup>7</sup> They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.*

***Amos 5:11-12*** *You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. <sup>12</sup> For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.*

3. James stands on the shoulders of the great prophets of old who cried out against rich oppressors in every age

E. Jesus Also Warned About the Dangers of Wealth in this Present Age

***Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two 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 and Money.***

***Luke 6:24-25 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. <sup>25</sup> ¶ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.***

***Matthew 19:23-24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."***

1. These warnings stand in direct contradiction to the so-called wisdom of our present age
2. We are all about accumulation, wealth acquisition
3. Jesus said

***Luke 12:15 Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.***

We are constantly being lied to about that, effectively told that our lives DO consist in the abundance of our possessions

Jesus told the parable of the rich man whose land was unusually fruitful... who didn't know what to do with all his wealth; who tore down his barns to build bigger ones

***Luke 12:19-21 And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' <sup>21</sup> "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."***

## II. Rich Oppressors Described

### A. Nothing Intrinsically Wrong with Wealth Per Se

1. God gives wealth... he enables us to earn and produce

***Deuteronomy 8:17-18 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." <sup>18</sup> But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth***

2. It is essential for us to earn money to provide for our families and not be a burden to anyone else

***1 Timothy 5:8 If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.***

***1 Timothy 5:16 If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.***

3. It is wise to store up SOME money for future necessities

***Proverbs 6:6-8 Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! <sup>7</sup> It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, <sup>8</sup> yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.***

4. We should realize that God gives to some an abundance so they can share it with others

***2 Corinthians 8:15 "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."***

But these rich oppressors had no such view of their wealth

Their god was their money, and they did whatever they could possibly do to gain more and more, no matter what the human cost

B. They Hoarded their Wealth Until it Became Useless

1. Hoarding... accumulating so the pile of gold and silver and money gets bigger and bigger

***James 5:2-3 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. <sup>3</sup> 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.***

2. The image James uses is devastating and a bit ironic
3. The central image is of WEALTH GONE BAD...
  - a. Remember how God provided the manna every day, and commanded the people not to gather any more than they needed for that one day... DO NOT SAVE IT OVERNIGHT
  - b. But some of the Israelites disobeyed and faithlessly hoarded some manna for the next day
  - c. When they went to eat it, it was covered with maggots and it STANK
  - d. So also the image here... the clothing of the wealthy people have been destroyed by moths
  - e. Their precious metals have corroded... literally RUSTED
4. Gold and silver cannot RUST... they can last for centuries without changing at all... the gold is the same; the silver does get a black tarnish on the surface, but it does not CORRODE ALL THE WAY THROUGH, like James says is happening to the wealth of these wicked people
5. This definitely reminds us of the words of Jesus

***Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and***

***rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>  
For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

6. Basically, the gold and silver have a SHELF-LIFE... they have value in this present world; the only way they can shine for all eternity is if we use them to bless others, especially the poor and needy
7. But these rich oppressors missed the opportunity to exchange their earthly gold for heavenly treasure... and on judgment day, their gold and silver will be spiritually RUSTED STRAIGHT THROUGH
8. James says that corrosion will TESTIFY against them and eat their flesh like fire
9. They will have bitter regrets about not using their wealth to alleviate human suffering while they could
10. Hoarded wealth IN THE LAST DAYS
  - a. James does not say the last days are coming
  - b. They are already here!!
  - c. The time is coming quickly to an end... Judgment Day is coming!

#### C. The Rich Oppressors Gained Their Wealth by Injustice

***James 5:4 Look! 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.***

1. So, these wicked people not only HOARDED wealth, they gained it through injustice
2. They had the power enough to defraud their workers who brought in their harvest

3. Perhaps they held onto the wage for a week; or paid less than was promised; or paid nothing at all for the labor done
4. This is a basic matter of justice addressed again and again in the Law of Moses

***Leviticus 19:13 "Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.***

***Deuteronomy 24:14-15 Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. <sup>15</sup> Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.***

5. When you agree to a wage with a laborer, be sure to pay it IMMEDIATELY
6. I can't help but think of the injustice of chattel slavery and the wealthy plantations in which the slave owners got wealthy on the backs of their slaves, never paying them a cent for backbreaking labor in the fields

I was reading an article about the wealth of Charleston, South Carolina... called "Carolina's Gold Coast"... it was speaking of rice plantations. From the 1720s to the 1860s, the rice plantations shaped and reshaped the low country geography and economy, and it made Charleston one of the richest cities in the world. Indigo, cotton, forest products and even manufactured goods all contributed to the economy. But nothing came close to the lavish wealth brought in by RICE. But it was all predicated on slave labor. Slaves had used rough tools to clear immense wooded swamps. Then they constructed massive hydrological systems – dams, dikes, floodgates – used to properly irrigate the rice fields. Then, they had to plant the rice plants, with their backs bent over double. And when the plants stalks grew tall, they had to weed. Weeding rice fields in the blazing sun and overpowering humidity was torturous work. After weeks of soaking rain, the waist-high Carolina

Gold rice stalks are waist high, but tall weeds also grow up threatening to smother the harvest. The slaves pulled each of these weeds up by hand.

To make matters worse, these low-lying swampy areas were breeding grounds for malaria and yellow fever, and the mosquitoes that carried them. Thousands of slaves died of these diseases. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Carolina lowcountry was the deadliest disease region in the North American mainland.

Someone said Carolina in the spring is a paradise, the in the summer a hell, and in the autumn, a hospital.

After working brutally long days, the lowcountry slaves were still required to grow their own food and make their own clothing, because (of course) they were paid nothing for their labor. They lived in rags and suffered from near starvation, while the rice plantation owners became among the wealthiest people in America.

One contemporary observer wrote “The Carolina rice plantation masters live their lives in wanton luxury... spending their days only to make money – to dance, gamble, run horses; while the women only wanted to spend money, play piano, and contemplate their own beauty.” Many of them lived more or less permanently away from their own rice plantations, preferring elegant luxury homes along the battery in downtown Charleston.

To some degree the Charleston rice plantations led the way in relying on slave labor long before cotton was the main staple of southern wealth.

7. Hear again the words of James

***James 5:4-5 Look! 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. <sup>5</sup> You have lived on***

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

D. Their Wealthy Was Self-Indulgently Spent

1. James speaks of their life of luxury... of the best clothing and the most affluent life-style
2. They spared themselves no luxury, and felt they deserved the best of meats and the finest of wines; they enjoyed the life of leisure while others did their hard labor for them

***Amos 4:1-2 Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"<sup>2</sup> The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks.***

***Amos 6:4-7 You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves.<sup>5</sup> You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.<sup>6</sup> You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.<sup>7</sup> Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.***

3. The Day of Slaughter comes on people who live like this
4. Their self-indulgence just stored up wrath against themselves

***Romans 2:5-6 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.<sup>6</sup> God "will give to each person according to what he has done."***

E. Using Violence to Gain Wealth

***James 5:6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.***

1. Once people get addicted to this kind of life for themselves and their families, they will do whatever it takes to protect it
2. They can orchestrate and manipulate the entire legal system to their own advantage
3. Think of evil King Ahab and his wicked Queen Jezebel who coveted the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, and when he refused to sell it to them, they orchestrated his murder by having some worthless men accuse him of cursing both God and the king, using the justice system to kill an innocent man

Honore de Balzac: "Behind every great fortune there is a crime."

Mario Puzo began his novel, *The Godfather* with those words...  
speaking of the fictitious crime family, the Corleone family

This may be an overstatement, but in many cases it is absolutely true.

### III. How Christians Should Read this Warning

#### A. Who Is James Writing To?

1. Is it possible that someone who lives like this could even pretend to be a Christian?
2. Many commentators say that James must be addressing people in the church because he is writing directly to them, using the second person
3. It is quite possible that, all over the world and throughout twenty centuries of the history of the Christian church, there are many self-deceived people who attend church on Sundays and they practice all manner of these wicked actions throughout the week
4. In that case, though there is no hope given of forgiveness and no command toward repentance, yet someone might still be living this kind of life and yet repent and find forgiveness from God through genuine faith in Christ

5. Think of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, who was getting wealthy through injustice, and who found forgiveness

***Luke 19:8-9 Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.***

6. Think of Nebuchadnezzar, who build a worldwide empire by tyranny, oppression and military conquest

***Daniel 4:27 Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.***

Nebuchadnezzar was humbled to the ground, and then deeply repented and was saved from judgment.

7. If you look at your life and you realize that you have lived a life of luxury and self-indulgent ease, then repent! Turn away from money as your god and come to Christ!

B. However, in the Spirit of an Old Testament Prophet... James May Not Have Been Speaking to Church-goers at all

1. Jeremiah was a prophet to the nations, and spoke oracles directly against pagan kingdoms without any expectation that they would read his prophecies... so also Isaiah, Amos, and all the others
  - a. Amos was a shepherd in Tekoa in Israel, and he gave out oracles against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab... speaking of their specific sins... but not expecting they would send representatives to stand in his presence and hear his words
  - b. These words are TIMELESS, spoken to all humanity, by the power of the Holy Spirit
  - c. So also James's words to rich oppressors

2. It's just as likely James was seeking to encourage the poor Christians who were being economically dominated and legally oppressed by these wicked men that Judgment Day was coming... and those rich oppressors would not escape heaven's justice

***Luke 18:7-8 will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.***

3. Also, it keeps Christians on the straight and narrow, not enticed to join these wicked men in their wicked schemes for earthly wealth

### C. How Should Christians See Money and Luxury?

1. If you have any amount of money more than you and your family need to survive from day to day, biblically speaking you are rich
2. That means you are accountable for the money God gives you
3. As I said before, God gives you the power and ability to produce wealth... BE HUMBLE and THANKFUL

***Ecclesiastes 5:19 when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work-- this is a gift of God.***

***Deuteronomy 8:12-14 when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, <sup>13</sup> and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, <sup>14</sup> then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God ...***

***Deuteronomy 8:17-18 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." <sup>18</sup> But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth***

4. Ask how the Lord wants you to use the extra you have

***1 Timothy 6:17-19 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain,***

***but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. <sup>18</sup> Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. <sup>19</sup> In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.***

- a. Be generous toward the poor and needy
  - i) Don't assume the extra you have is just for yourself
  - ii) Ask God to give you fit subjects for benevolence, and give generously
- b. Be sacrificial and faith-filled toward the Great Commission!
  - i) Support the church with your tithes and offerings
  - ii) Support missionaries who are winning people to Christ
  - iii) Support other Christians who have ministries you admire
  - iv) Store up treasure in heaven!!

***Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

As Randy Alcorn said, "You can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead!"

"Could it be that God increases your wealth not to improve your standard of living but your standard of giving?"

As God to teach you more and more to live simply... to not seek the luxurious lifestyle sold to us constantly by the advertising experts who assault our minds with covetous desires every single moment.

This world and its desires will soon pass away... do not live for luxuries and sensual pleasures.