

Introduction

I wonder if you think of yourself as rich. Certainly, if you think in terms of the spiritual realm, every Christian must acknowledge that God has lavished upon us the riches of his grace. Regan Martin reminded us of that a few weeks ago. But in terms of dollars and financial worth, are you rich? You might argue that you are not. After all many, many people in America have for more wealth than you and I. The lives they live and the spending power they possess sometimes tempts us to envy. But the fact is that even the least wealthy among us this morning is among the richest people in the world. James sounds an alarm for us so that we might enjoy the riches God has entrusted to us without regretting it. Let's look at what he has to say.

[Read Text and Pray]

Think for a moment with me about who stands out in the Bible as being rich. Who comes to your mind first? The rich in the Bible certainly include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph, Job, David, and Solomon. Besides these, in the New Testament you have Zacchaeus, Lydia, the rich young ruler, the rich man who built bigger barns, and the rich man in front of whose house lay the poor man Lazarus. Of these, a number belong to the kingdom of God while several clearly do not.

It is clear that not everyone who faithfully follows Jesus Christ lives in abject poverty. Some are quite wealthy, in fact. However, clear warnings in the scripture are set before people who are of significant financial standing. Paul warns that the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil. He also tells Timothy to charge the rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches. They are to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.

Jesus spoke clearly about earthly wealth. He said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." He also declared that "you cannot serve God and money."

So, on the one hand, it is not sinful to possess wealth. But on the other hand, it is very easy, given our sinful nature, to sin with our wealth or because of our wealth. God is the one who entrusts wealth to us and we are accountable to him for what we do with it. So while the world, by and large, seeks after wealth and sets its hopes on riches and what money can buy, the people of God are marked as those who set their hope on God and store up not earthly treasure but treasure in heaven through good works. Money must not be our idol, but it is a tool entrusted to us by God to do good in the name of Jesus Christ for his glory. So you could possess great riches but live to regret it. James directs his very strong words in this text to wealthy people who will live to regret their riches. They face future doom for very serious sins in regard to their wealth. What James tells Christ-followers in our text this morning instructs us how not to regret the riches that we have. In order to make his case, James provides us with four important considerations. We will see miseries that are coming, investments that are fading, cries that are rising, and sins that are fattening.

First, James points us to . . .

I. Miseries that are Coming.

He sounds the alarm: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that ARE COMING upon you."

It is unlikely that James has in view the believers in the churches. James sounds here like an Old Testament prophet calling out the enemies of God's people for their great sin. He is depicting the horror that will befall the enemies of God when he calls them to account at the great day of judgment. It will be a day of regret, a day on which false hopes are exposed, a day on which all the wicked will suddenly wish they had heeded the call of the prophets who warned of coming judgment. Weeping will replace laughter. Horror will replace presumption. Wailing will replace the sounds of pleasure-driven laughter.

Miseries are coming, says James. They are on their way. They advance every single day. God has established a day of judgment. The worlds of people will be gathered before him. No one will escape. The rich and powerful who have had all the earthly advantages over others will not escape. They too will stand before the Lord who will judge. He will separate his sheep from the goats. The sheep will be gathered unto him. They will enter into the joy of the Lord. But as for the goats, their place will be in everlasting torment. It is a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. There is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.

No more fearful place exists in all the universe than where you abide under the miseries appointed for the wicked. In Jesus's parable of the rich man who ignored poor old Lazarus outside his gate, this is the place to which the rich man went when he died. He was in Hades in such torment that he wanted someone to go and warn his brothers lest they make the same mistake as he and wind up in that dreadful place. These are the miseries that are coming upon the unredeemed. Jesus said, "whoever does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Those whose love is money, wealth, riches, are not lovers of God. They will face the judgment of God.

Listen, miseries are coming. Judgment is already on its way. No one can adequately describe its torments. But there is one thing you must know. You do not want to experience them. Nothing has ever been worse. The warning of hell should make you want to escape it whatever the cost. It should also move us to be urgent in warning people about the miseries that will fall not only on the wicked rich but also on everyone who has not believed in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is only one escape from these miseries. If you desire to avoid the judgment that is coming, you must take refuge in Jesus Christ by faith. In divine judgment, the miseries of God's just wrath fall righteously upon sinners. All have sinned and come short of God's glory. Each of us stands condemned and worthy of his just punishment. But God, being rich in mercy, offers forgiveness and deliverance from justice. He sent his own Son, Jesus, in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Through the cross of Christ and through his endurance of the miseries of God's wrath, God condemned sin in the flesh of Christ. By this means the righteous requirement of the law for judgment is fulfilled. Forgiveness is granted to all those who turn from sin and trust in God's Son. If you have not turned to him, I would lovingly urge you this day to flee from the miseries of God's judgment and follow Christ.

From the miseries that are coming, James turns to highlight . . .

II. Investments that are Fading

This is what James is talking about in verses 2-3. "Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will testify against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days."

Wealth and luxury were measured back then much the same as today—what you eat, how you dress, what you can buy, that is, how much gold and silver you own. The more you have the more you can spend. People measure their importance by delicacies, designer labels, and dollars. Their hope for recognition and status, their place in this world is determined by their wealth. But James wants us to see all of these things in light of eternity. Sooner or later all your goods in this world will be shown to be temporary and fading. Food rots. Clothes wear out. And even money diminishes over time. That great and mighty money-devourer known as inflation destroys the value of the money you and I possess. Gold and silver do not actually corrode, but in light of eternity their value fades just as surely as anything else. In light of eternity, even gold and silver are worthless. This is the corrosion of which James speaks.

James points us to the guilt of laying up earthly treasure and putting our hope in it. He is not saying that we should not save money for the future. Rather he is addressing the sin of hoarding our wealth. He says its corrosion will be evidence against us. The fact that you have invested your life in what is ultimately worthless will testify against you. It is as though God will call you to account to bring out that for which you have used your life. As portrayed by the parable of the talents, the master will summon his servants to see what they have done with what he entrusted to their management. If all you have to bring out to God is your corroded silver and gold and moth-eaten clothes, they themselves will cry out for your condemnation, because you have not honored God with what he has given. You have merely been a consumer and a hoarder.

Again James points us to the miseries of eternal judgment. He says that the corrosion of these temporal and fading investments will eat your flesh like fire. Not only do they testify against you, they also will turn on you and consume you.

What does this mean for the Christian who is seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? It means to remind us not to be deluded by the deceitfulness of riches. Do not envy the rich. Do not be drawn away from faithfully following Christ because of the attractiveness of the things of this world. They DO NOT SATISFY. But in fact, they do burn you. They destroy you. They take what is truly precious and replace it with judgment. So be warned to be steadfast in seeking first the kingdom of God. If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. When Christ appears, remember we will be with him in glory. That is what matters. That is what will never fade. Being with Christ in glory is wealth eternal and wealth beyond measure. Remember that when the allure of this world begins reaching out to you.

We turn next to . . .

III. Cries that are Rising

It is not just the fact that you love the world and the things of this world. When people love money and the things it can buy, they will often resort to deceit and dishonesty as well as abuse and fraud and tyranny and taking advantage of the weak in order to get what they want. This unrighteousness does not get past the Lord. Look now at verse 4. James says, "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."

When you sin with your wealth, others suffer, and their cries rise to the Lord. When the wealthy take advantage of those under their power, do not think that the Lord does not see, and know that he is not pleased. When the cry of the Israelites went up from Egypt under the oppressive tyranny of Pharaoh, the Lord heard from heaven and came down to bring deliverance. When Cain killed

Abel, the cry of Abel's blood went up to the Lord and he heard and called Cain to account and cursed him. God will do the same to the rich who take advantage of their laborers. Their cries ascend before the Lord; they reach his ears and they reach his heart. And the rich are like pharaoh to the Lord, they are his enemy.

When you take advantage of and cheat others, when you oppress those under your care, your evil deeds will rise to the hearing of the Lord. And he will not sit idle.

Again we have a cry for judgment, for God to respond to human evil. When Cain murdered Abel, the Lord said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." Every one of our sins cries out to God. They cry out for justice. They cry out for punishment. A statement from Hebrews gives comfort to my heart. Hebrews 12:24 says that the blood of Jesus "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Our sins cry out. The blood that we have shed—the evil we have done—cries from the ground. But the blood of Jesus speaks better. Our sins cry for justice, but the cry of the blood of Jesus is that justice has been satisfied. If you are in Christ, his blood declares that though your sins be as scarlet, they have been washed white. If you are in Christ, the blood shed on the cross says you are forgiven, justified, and delivered.

Finally, we turn to James' final consideration . . .

IV. Sins that are Fattening

When it comes to our bodies, fattening is one thing. When it comes to a calf to be prepared for the slaughter, it is another. Years ago my parents went in with another couple and purchased a bull. The purpose was to have him processed and fill our freezers with hamburgers, roast, and steak. I remember going to look at Prince. He was a huge black Angus. He was contained within a stall and we were feeding him a rich corn mix. He was being fattened. When he got to just the right size and weight, they came and loaded Prince up and took him to the slaughterhouse. We enjoyed quality beef for a long time.

The fatted calf is an important feature of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. When the father receives his repentant son back to his household, he celebrates. He calls for the best robe and a ring and shoes, and he says, "bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate." The fattened calf was set aside for a time of celebration. It was fattened. The increase of fat would increase the savory quality of the meat. Fat keeps beef moist and succulent.

James goes to this kind of image to communicate to us what the sins associated with the pursuit of worldly wealth are doing to rich. They are simply fattening them up for the day of slaughter. They are just priming themselves for greater judgment. And yet that day will be a day of joy for many as the fattened calf, so to speak, will be slaughtered. It will be a day of joy and celebration for the people of God, but for his enemies it will be a day of slaughter.

What are these sins—these sins that fatten rich calves? First, they live on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. Every extra dollar raises questions like this: what can I do with this for myself? How can I increase my comfort and pleasure? How can I boost my status in the world? It does not matter that a poor disabled beggar sits outside the door of their house. It does not matter that they make life unbearably difficult for their workers. It does not matter that their actions undercut the basic necessities of life from others. All that matters is more . . . more power, more influence, more money, more attention. Those who question them they in effect condemn and murder. Maybe they literally killed and maybe it is a metaphor for keeping from them the necessities of life. And they did not even actually stand in the way.

We certainly see this kind of thing in our day. The rich in money seek more and more money. The rich in power and influence seek more power and influence. They will compromise righteousness and destroy anyone who gets in the way. What we observe all around us is distressing and disturbing. But one of the reasons the Lord gave this text through James is so that followers of Jesus might be encouraged. God will not leave these guilty unpunished. They are being fattened for the slaughter.

And we who are the people of God should flee from self-focused, self-indulgent, luxuriant living. One test here is whether you build into your budget, into your spending, and into your intentions the effort to help others, particularly the poor who are truly poor and needy, as opposed to the poor and lazy. The neediest people in the world are those who starve for the word of God. Do we truly want to bless others and share our wealth in a godly way? See that they get the word of God. It takes wealth to get this done. Missions and discipleship around the world should be endeavors we determine and delight to support. Relieving persons in their distress is an opportunity to channel God's gracious provision to those who need it.

I think of the Macedonians. They did not have much at all, but they did have big hearts of generosity. As Paul was about to encourage the more affluent Corinthians to give generously, he pointed to the grace of God that had been given among the churches of Macedonia. He declared that "in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty ... overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." Paul made the point, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." You see the people James is talking about were not generous at all. They were selfish and self-serving, indulging themselves in the riches of their wealth and without a care for others except to eliminate anyone who might get in their way.

That is not the way it should be with the people of the Lord. We have been generously blessed and we should bless with generosity.

Conclusion

We who live in the United States are extremely wealthy in global standards. Consider this. Folks in the United States who make \$40,000/year are wealthier than 93% of the people in the world. A person who makes \$50,000 is wealthier than 95% of the people in the world. If you make \$100,000 a year, you are in the 99th percentile of worldly wealth. In other words if everyone in the world was divided into groups of 100 and situated by their wealth, the person who makes \$100,000 would be only one shy from the very top. These statistics reveal that we as Americans are among the very richest people in the world. As Christians living in the luxury of this nation, we should see ourselves in a position of great responsibility and great opportunity. We should use our bounty to provide bountiful relief of the destitute and vulnerable all over the world.

Jesus is the ultimate giver. About him Paul said, "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" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Let us follow his example and not that of those whose investments only return to bite and burn.