

A Warning to the Rich – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James warns the rich that their materialism will come back to haunt them
2. aim – to cause us to seek a life of austerity and righteousness rather than greed and self-indulgence
3. passage – James 5:1-6

b. outline

1. The Audience of the Warning (James 5:1)
2. The Indictment in the Warning (James 5:2-6)
3. The Substance of the Warning

c. opening

1. the **return to normal**
 - a. we will return to our “normal” worship service format next week (since Mar. 15 – 25 wks. ago)
2. the **position** of this pericope – the theme of the second-half of the letter (**starting a new chapter**)
 - a. **chaps. 1-2** = the great problem – the **definition** of faith (**i.e.** what is genuine saving faith?)
 - b. **chaps. 3-5** = the resulting problems – the **transformation** of faith (**i.e.** what are the works of faith?)
 1. **language** – the work of faith being to speak **consistently** from our nature as those born-again by the Spirit – **faith = transformed language**
 2. **wisdom** – the work of faith in applying what has been **revealed** to us over against the way that the world thinks – **faith = transformed understanding**
 3. **desires** – the work of faith in which our **desires** in this world are conformed to the will of God in all things – **faith = transformed desires**
 - a. **4:1-12** = the **inappropriate desires** that we have in the world – the **cognitive dissonance** of thinking that we can claim to have faith in Christ yet desire the things of the world
 1. the work of faith = to come humbly before God and seek self-sacrifice like Christ
 - b. **4:13-17** = the **core problem**: our lives are short and tenuous (like a mist), and it is **foolish** to live as though we control our own destinies (and can have all our desires!)
 1. the work of faith = to take **the long view** – our temporal lives are only a prelude to eternity
 - c. **(now) 5:1-6** = the **dangers of desire** that we might have in this world – the **illusion** that we can simply continue in the **cultural** assumptions that drive our desires
 1. the work of faith = to truly live out our faith by abandoning our cultural assumptions regarding our temporal condition and to seek a life of sacrifice and good

I. The Audience of the Warning (James 5:1)

Content

a. the audience of the warning

1. “*come now*” (as seen in **4:13**) = approach me; listen to me; lit. pay attention
2. “*you rich*” = lit. the wealthy; the financially rich who are “known” to act in certain ways
 - a. the reader-response vs. historical-grammatical hermeneutical approach to Scripture
 1. **reader-response** = reading Scripture through our own contextual/cultural lenses – assuming that we (as the reader) are able to frame the **intent** as though the passage was written “to us”
 - a. **IOW**: treating this passage as a **cultural** “scolding” of the wealthy because **they** always act this way – because **our world** is filled with “economic injustice” we can read this as James’ way of telling rich people to “give up” their wealth for “justice” to apply
 2. **historical-grammatical** = reading Scripture through the **historical** lens of the original author and the context of **his** audience – assuming that the **intention** of a passage is based on the historical and grammatical realities of when the text was written **and to whom it was written**
 - a. **IOW**: treating this passage as a First Century entreaty to those in the congregation who may have been, **contrary to their actual financial status**, acting in sinful ways in regards to their material possessions (**i.e.** very few truly wealthy Jews in these early churches)
 - b. **IOW**: since the word “rich” is highly **subjective in nature**, it can be applied in very broad strokes regardless of the actual economic status of the reader

- b. **danger #1:** to assume that this passage speaks to some *cultural* sense of “injustice”
 - 1. **i.e.** the very-current idea that the wealthy are *inherently* evil, and (therefore) this passage is directed at them to abandon their wealth to the “poor” (or be forced to do so!)
 - 2. **IOW:** to assume that the audience of this is the “1%” and use it as a *bludgeon* to argue for a “Christianized” view of wealth in which economic “equality” is the goal
 - a. but, the various passages of Scripture that refer to wealth do not (and cannot!) condemn wealth *itself* as evil – only the *use* or *reaction* to wealth can be evil (or good!)
 - b. and, to restrict the biblical metanarrative to *economic* or *social justice* issues is to negate the *central justice* issue addressed within it: sin and death and judgment by a holy God
 - c. **danger #2:** to assume that this passage *does not apply* to us because we are not “rich”
 - 1. would James:
 - a. regard us as rich, from his perspective, *or even from our own* (**i.e.** we all are “wealthy”)?
 - b. apply the indictments to us *regardless* of our financial status (**i.e.** even the “poor” hoard)?
 - 2. **IOW:** the audience here is *probably not* limited to those who we would “deem” as rich, but is relevant to all of us as we approach the wealth we have been given (regardless of size)
 - d. **audience: all believers as we deal with the issue of material wealth in the face of living by faith – every person transformed in their desires as a regenerate follower of Christ**
 - 1. **i.e.** James writes to an audience *struggling* with the issues of temporal wealth – some of it induced by a new faith in Christ, and some of it induced by outside pressure
- b. the response from the warning**
- 1. “weep and howl” = synonymous words which mean mourning; loud wailing (see mourners; **Mk 5:38**)
 - a. **i.e.** a response to death or great loss – in this case, the loss of wealth *and the accompanying sense of comfort* that (typically) goes along with being financially well-off
 - 2. “miseries” = hardships; distress; wretchedness; lit. hard work
 - a. **note:** used only here and in **Romans 3:16** (**i.e.** within the quote of **Prov. 1:16** re: the nature of humanity in general – the Great Indictment leading to **Romans 3:21** [“*but now the righteousness of God has been manifested ...*”]) = the **miserable condition of living in a fallen world**
 - b. **question:** *under what circumstances* would “miseries” come upon James’ readers (and us!) which would result in the response of *mourning*? – when will this response come from the “rich”?
 - 1. **answer (probably):** at the judgment of Christ – when the wealthy stands before Jesus and answers for his greed, injustice, and self-indulgence (**see below**) as a person claiming “faith”
 - a. Jesus often spoke of the post-judgment reality for the materially unfaithful as a time of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (**e.g. Matt. 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30**)
 - b. the references to “last days” in **v. 3** and the “coming of the Lord” in **v. 8** foreshadow judgment
 - c. the statement of corrosion “eat your flesh like fire” as “evidence” in **v. 3** pictures judgment
 - d. the various indictments imply a strong sense of justice needing to be served (**note v. 4**)
 - e. James is *certainly* warning the Jewish believers that they will be judged by Christ for their use of material wealth (**1 Cor. 3:10-15**)
 - f. **but ...** if this is a *judgment passage*, why would James describe the *outcome* as one of mourning and misery – won’t believers experience eternal joy in being joined to Christ, even though they may *not have been* perfectly sanctified in this life?
 - 1. (**again**) James is writing to *believers* – those who are trusting Christ for eternity
 - 2. **answer (possibly):** at the loss of such things due to their *temporal* nature – when the wealthy loses his comforts simply because he must choose between them and his allegiance to Jesus
 - a. the connection of this passage to **4:13-17** = it is arrogant to assume that our temporal condition is permanent because our life is but a “mist”
 - b. and, the **original audience** would be experiencing opposition and persecution (from their Jewish brothers *and* from the secular culture), resulting in a *loss* of material things
 - c. the wealthy *assume* (within every culture) a life of collecting material things, treating others as “second-class” citizens, and living in self-indulgence and luxury – this is their “reality”
 - 1. and James will warn against that reality in the verses to follow ...
 - d. but, the person coming to faith in Christ will have to **choose** between a life of luxury (or middle-class comfort) and a life of following Christ – and, many things will *drive* that choice:
 - 1. pure allegiance itself, opposition and persecution, a change of “loves”, the providence of God in changing our circumstances or using us as an “example” to others, etc.
 - c. **response: all believers need to be prepared to accept the “suffering” that will attend making the choice to follow Christ – the denial of self, essential to being a Christian (Matt 16:24), may result in much economic misery in this life, and we must be prepared to accept it**