

Chapter 5

5:1-6 James begins the final section of the book with a condemnation of the rich – again, not the rich who genuinely follow Christ, but the rich who walk in the ways of the world. We must carefully distinguish between those who genuinely follow Christ (and happen to be blessed with wealth) and those who simply pursue wealth over all else. James gives the obvious characteristics of those who shamelessly pursue riches, and we will herein explore the implications for those with wealth who wish to pursue Christ.

James starts with a warning to the rich who continually pursue wealth, that they should instead repent. Repentance is the only way to avoid the “miseries” that James predicts in 5:1. Unless the rich repent of the pursuit of riches above all else, then their end will be a painful one.

The condemnation of vv.2-3 are aimed specifically at demonstrating that the riches being pursued are meaningless, without eternal value. Jesus warns His followers in Matthew 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Once again, James echoes the teachings of Jesus Himself here. In fact, James’ examples of the corruption of worldly wealth exactly parallel those of Jesus in the aforementioned passage:

Matthew 6: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where...”		
Moth	Rust	Destroy
James 5:2: “...your garments are...”		
Moth		Eaten
James 5:3: “Your gold and silver have...”		
	Corroded	(implied: “been destroyed by corrosion”)

As James echoes Jesus’ words in Matthew 6, the implication for the rich is that their pursuit of worldly riches can be reversed and their passions used to pursue something worthwhile – the treasures of the kingdom of heaven. Interestingly, the word Jesus uses in Matthew 6 for “rust” is often used of food to describe something that is being eaten. With both moths and rust, Jesus is warning His listeners that the treasures of this world are eaten up and gone, whereas the treasures of heaven last eternally. For James, the problem of the rich is that they pursue what will pass away – fleeting, meaningless pleasures and vain attempts to satisfy – while those who pursue Christ long for that which will not fade.

It is even more likely, as a result of the parallels noted, that James is intending to reference this exact teaching of Jesus as he walks his audience through the dangers of pursuing riches. He even goes so far as to mention that the rich have “laid up treasure,” again drawing on what Jesus Himself said in Matthew. These parallels seem a bit too coincidental to be mere chance. Once again, the authorship of James is proven to be the apostle if for no other reason than the level to which the teachings of Jesus naturally permeate his own writings.

Having condemned the rich based on their accumulation of worldly riches, James now turns to the testimony of those who have suffered at their hands. Much like today, in the time of James' teaching there would have been workers waiting for someone to take them to fields so they could find a day's work. The rich landowners would sometimes choose to keep the wages rightfully owed to these workers to themselves. Given the difficulty in proving there was any wrongdoing, it was often virtually impossible for these workers to get what they were owed if the landowner chose to be fraudulent. In this way the wealthy would not only keep their money but get free labor as well. It is this willingness to wrong and defraud others that James condemns here. The Law as recorded in Leviticus would condemn this practice from the very start in Judaism: ""Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight" (Lev 19:13). According to the Law, workers were owed their wages promptly. The rich often found ways around this, such that the wages others were owed were eventually forgotten about. This is why James is so furious with the rich, as this is clearly not only against the OT Law of Israel, but is certainly against the law which Christ set in place to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 7:12 and Mt 22:39, respectively).

At the end of 5:5, James tells the rich that they have "fattened [their] hearts in a day of slaughter." While being fattened in a normal context would imply that one is of the greatest status, a day of slaughter implies that this is the WRONG day to be fattened! Fattening from an OT perspective, of course, means that the fattened creature will be sacrificed. For the rich, while they carry on without a care in the world, James says they are actually preparing themselves for a terrible fate. This is further aggravated by their assault on the righteous in 5:6 – while the rich trample all who stand in the way of their riches, the righteous do not resist. How can they, after all? They have no resources with which to fight off their oppressors!

With all of these problems caused by the pursuit of riches, the natural cure is to pursue Christ and His kingdom.

Problem for Rich	Antithesis/Solution for Christians
Pursuit of riches (5:1)	Pursuit of Christ (Is 55:6)
Riches/garments fade away (5:2)	Treasures of heaven eternal (Mt 6:20)
Gold/silver condemn the rich (5:3)	Christ frees from condemnation (Rom 8:1)
Store treasures on earth (5:3b)	Store treasures in heaven (Mt 6:20)
Defrauding others (5:4)	Treating others with love (Mt 22:39)
Love self-indulgence (5:5)	Love serving others (Gal 5:13)
Rich condemn the righteous (5:6)	We pursue righteousness (Prov 15:9)

5:7-12 Here we explore with our author the merits of patience. It is noteworthy that James would say we are to be patient "until the coming of the Lord" (5:7). Presumably, once the Lord has returned, we have nothing left for which to be patient! Why? In that day, God will bring to fruition all He has planned. No longer will we need to wait patiently on God, for we will be in His presence forevermore. No longer will we need to wonder when our trials will be over, or how much longer we will need to endure – no, in that day we will be without need for patience because our waiting is finally over. Some of the last words in all of Scripture are, "Amen. Come,

Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). We wait patiently until that day when Jesus returns in glory. James illustrates the need for patience by using a farmer as an example. Farmers will plant and then spend much of their time simply waiting for their crop, working in patience and faith, knowing that God will bring about a harvest in the appropriate time.

“Establish your hearts” is an interesting choice of words for James to use here in telling his readers to prepare for the coming of Christ. Paul will use the same phrase in 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13, also discussing the end times: “...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.” Paul’s usage may help us to better understand the meaning of the phrase here in James 5:8.

For Paul, the precursor to establishing one’s heart is love – abounding love for “one another and for all.” An established heart, therefore, is apparently one rooted and grounded in love. The established heart is, furthermore, one which is “blameless in holiness before our God,” indicating that our hearts, when they are truly “established,” are being made holy. An established heart, therefore, is one which is grounded in love, and from which flows forth blameless and holy thoughts, words, and actions. This is so closely tied with Christ’s return for both James and Paul most likely because they realize the importance of walking in holiness before God so that the Master returns to find us faithful, rather than catching us off guard – indeed, Paul himself will say later on in 1 Thessalonians 5 that Christ will come “like a thief in the night” (5:2). If this is the case, and our actions are as important as James has said they are, then it is ever more crucial that Christ establish our hearts – otherwise, we will be caught in sin when the Master returns!

James again warns against judging another, this time noting that our own judgment is near. This may seem random in context, but it actually fits quite well. In James’ thinking, grumbling against someone else and issuing judgment is in reality an issue of impatience. It is impatience with others which leads to our judgment and slander of them, in many cases. We see another doing something we do not like, and consequently, we pass judgment on them. It is even more important in those moments for us to hold our tongues so as not to grumble against another without sufficient justification for so doing.

The prophets (and indeed, Jesus Himself) serve as the exemplars in terms of their patience. Prophets of God are charged with the responsibility of carrying the message of His Word into the world, and yet those who hear their words are often unresponsive. Yet in their call, they continue to speak faithfully instead of giving up on the people. “We consider those blessed who remained steadfast,” says James. When Christ followers speak of those who persevered in the face of adversity, we cite the prophets, martyrs, and all those who refused to compromise on God’s Word. The purpose of this adversity we face is apparently so that God can be shown to the world as being “compassionate and merciful” (5:11). When we face trials, patience in the face thereof can lead those around us to see the mercy of God alive within us.

The prioritization of 5:12 seems not only surprising, given all that James has discussed up until this point, but also somewhat random. As the topic up until this point has been patience and what follows is a focus on prayer, the mention of swearing (meaning oaths, not using foul language) seems a strange and out of place moment here. We must therefore ask two

questions: first, how does this material fit in with the other exhortations in this section? Second, why does James say this is to be our top priority?

In some way, this seems to be linked to the material preceding it by James' emphasis on the prophetic word in 5:10-11. A prophet, in order for their words to be recognized as being divine in origin, must remain truthful in all they say and do; otherwise their reputation is so tarnished that their words cannot be considered credible. A lie about one topic calls into question every truth we've spoken. It is in talking about the people of God that James mentions the need for honesty, integrity, and true speech. The Christ follower is not to avoid swearing in the sense that they cannot, for instance, be sworn in for legal proceedings. Rather, the Christ follower cannot use profane oaths (GD, inappropriate use of the Name of Jesus Christ, and so on). These things should not be found on our lips, as they profane God's Name. In addition, James is also talking about lying in general. Our words should be reliable. When we say we will do something, we must follow through – otherwise we make ourselves guilty because of our lack of follow through.

5:13-20 The characteristics of the Christ follower are once again shown here at the end of James, with him stating that we are to pray in the midst of suffering, sing praise when we are cheerful, and anoint the sick that they may be healed. Prayer proves particularly important in the scriptures, but here it is noted just how powerful prayer truly is. It is apparently a source of peace for the suffering (5:13), healing for the sick (5:15), miracles for prophet and everyday person alike (5:16a), and a sign of the powerful work God has given to the righteous to perform (5:16b). Prayer is an active humbling of ourselves before a holy and loving God, wherein we intentionally place our lives in His hands and trust in His awesome power to work among us in whatever way is in line with His will. Yet James makes the point that even Elijah, the one we elevate above others and idolize for his powerful faith in God, was still just a human being. If that's the case, then even the miraculous work Elijah displayed in his time on earth is actually something possible for all by the Holy Spirit at work through us. We need only pray and watch God work.

Yet James is also careful to qualify this: it is not just any prayer which is powerful, but the prayers of the righteous which are particularly effective. Who is considered righteous? No one on their own merits, of course. Through Christ, however, we are considered righteous. Knowing this, our efforts in prayer are even more important to the world. Elijah prayed "fervently that it might not rain," and sure enough, there was no rain (5:17)! Our prayers must not only be borne of righteous lifestyles, but they must also be persistent. God rewards these types of prayers.

The ending of James' letter is particularly powerful, and in its power it raises many questions theologically. It would seem that James concludes here by providing the antithesis to his words in 3:1-2. Where there James spent his time discussing how teachers should be careful as "they will be judged with greater strictness," here he notes the reward for those who bring a brother in sin back into right relationship with God: "whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (5:20). It is the job of the teachers (not only those who teach Scripture professionally, but rather all those who know the scriptures and walk in the ways of Christ) to bring back those who have strayed. The most likely explanation of this closing verse is that the first segment refers to the one being saved, while the second portion refers to those doing the saving.

For those who save a brother from their sins, there is great reward in that they themselves will have their own sins covered in Christ. This is the tradeoff for those who teach God's Word – although they run a risk of greater judgment if they teach irresponsibly, they are also given greater reward in that those who teach in line with Scripture have the potential to see even greater grace because of their faithfulness in bringing others back from sin. It is a truly powerful reward for a truly meaningful responsibility.