

KEY ISSUES (JAMES 5)

Context. One of the greatest challenges people face is the disparity of material resources. These resources can be a blessing or a curse, as can disparity between economic classes. It is good to live under a roof; it is bad to make 4 bedrooms and 3,000 sq ft one's *raison d'être*. It is good that the rich assist the poor; it is bad to enable the poor by fiscal largesse.

For believers, this disparity is particularly problematic. We know from where material gifts come, and we know to Whom they belong. We are the ranchers of "cattle on a thousand hills;" the cattle belong to Him. Yet, some have more to steward than others. And sometimes, it just doesn't seem "fair." So, within the body of Christ we easily catch a worldly disease: materialistic obsession. And it gets worse—viral side effects include counterfeit security and social status associated with said stuff.

And, for the record—materialistic obsession is not limited to the rich. Some of the most materially obsessed are those who are poor. In the Dominican Republic—as a missionary, I saw materialistic obsession *and* material peace—both within some of the poorest people on the planet.

But, the middle class in America has none of the advantages of the poor and all the disadvantages of the rich. Middle class folk have trouble truly understanding soul-aching hunger—we get distressed if we have to miss lunch. Middle class folk have just enough stuff to get a taste for more—if we could just get a bigger house, a better car, another car, newer computer. We freak out when we realize we will never be able to buy that 95 thousand 55 Chevy convertible.



James has some answers for all of us—whether materialistically rich or not. Holy Spirit guided him to address a big problem of the early church: rich people. In their culture, the rich were perceived to be either "blessed by God," or were in many cases their oppressors. Only the rich could afford to hire and fire. Only the rich could send someone to jail. Only the rich had political clout. Yet the rich were being given more status within the church—James was incensed:

You have insulted the poor. 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? (James 2:6-7)

James 5:1-6. *A Special Word to the "Rich."* Listen up! You rich people weep and wail because of what's going to happen to you. You *should* freak out. Your wealth has been eaten up by inflation—moths have made homes in your currency vaults. Neither your gold nor your Bitcoin nor your silver can be eaten, and their corrosion will be witnesses against you, eating your flesh like fire. Your wealth has helped no one; it's been hoarded in the last days.

Remember those wages you failed to pay the people who made you wealthy? Their cries are being heard, even by the Lord God Almighty Himself! You've lived in luxury and self-indulgence. Just like steers in an Iowa feed lot, you've fattened yourself for the day of slaughter. You've condemned and murdered innocent people who got in your way.

- Q Some assert these are not Christians to whom James is speaking; others argue the opposite. To what extent do you interpret these warnings to be for the rich unbeliever versus the rich believer?
- Q How does poorly used wealth become a witness against us on judgment day? During our day to day lives here on earth?
- Q What is the purpose of material resources? Why do some equally righteous people have such varied material resources?
- Q Why has the Lord God heard the cries of those who were treated unfairly by their employers?

JAMES 5:1-6

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



James 5:7-11. *A Word to the Workers*. Be patient in the midst of all this evil. Remember how a farmer waits for the land to yield its bounty of food. Remember how patient the farmer is for the growing rains of spring, and the completion rains of fall. You too must be patient—stand firm. The Lord God’s return is near. By the way, don’t grumble at each other, my friends, or you too will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

How can you be patient amidst all this chaos? Friends, consider the patience in the midst of suffering by the prophets who spoke by the authority of the Lord God Jehovah. As you know, we who have persevered are closer to God. Job persevered, and you know what the Lord God did for him. The Lord is full of compassionate mercy.

- Q Why does the farmer have to wait for the harvest time? (cf., Genesis 3:17-19)
- Q What lessons can we learn from the farmer who waits for the harvest, spring and fall rains? Remember, our God reigns.
- Q How could James say the “Lord’s coming is near” almost 2,000 years ago? How indeed is the Judge standing at the door? (cf., Revelation 3:20)
- Q James points to Job as a model of patience; what do we learn from Job in the midst of economic and spiritual chaos? See also Habakkuk 3:17-18 *though the fig tree has no buds...*
- Q James refers to the prophets and their patience; what do we learn from Isaiah, for example, about the value of doing religion *His way*?
- Q When we’ve done religion *His way*, who fights the enemies before us? And, who has our six?

JAMES 5:7-11

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

ISAIAH 58:6-9

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then the righteous One will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say:

Here am I.

It is good to note the additional gems of wisdom James articulates. To wit:

1. Above all, don't use the authority of the Lord God, or heaven, or earth or anything else. Let "Yes" mean "Yes," and "No" mean "No." To do otherwise, condemns you—"the Judge is standing at the door!"
 2. When you're in trouble, pray. When you're happy, sing songs of praise! When you're sick ask the elders of the church to anoint you with oil and pray over you. Remember, prayers which trust the Lord God will make the sick well—the Lord will heal the sick!
 3. If the sick person has sinned, he/she will be forgiven, so confess your sins to each other, pray for each other so you both may be healed. Remember, the prayer of righteous people is powerful and effective!
 4. Doubting prayer that trusts in the Lord God can do such things? Remember, Elijah was a human just like us. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain—and it didn't—for 3.5 years. Then he prayed again, and God gave rain, and the earth produced food. Our God reigns.
 5. Finally, friends, if one of you should wander away from the Truth and someone brings him back? Remember this: whoever helps a sinner turn from the error of his ways—that will save him from death and cover a bunch of sins. Make the Lord God smile by your caring for the wanderer.
- Q Why "above all ... do not swear?"
- Q Why do we "add" to our "yes's" and our "no's?" For example, what are we saying we tell someone "*We promise...*" to do something?
- Q What kind of oil should be used by the elders as they pray over the sick?
- Q Why are we to confess our sins to one another? Who do you trust?
- Q Why is the prayer of the righteous powerful and effective?
- Q What "error of his way" do you find most common; i.e., the error you find more frequently than others which deserves the kind of Jamesian treatment proffered here?

JAMES 5:12-20

Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.