

Weep and Howl!



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 29

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 5:1–6; Psalm 73:3–19; 1 Samuel 25:2–11; Leviticus 19:13; Luke 16:19–31; Matthew 5:39.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Your heart will be where your riches are’ ” (Matthew 6:21, NIV).

THE POPULAR TELEVISION SHOW *WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?* SHOWS THAT MANY PEOPLE ENJOY THE RAGS-TO-RICHES DREAM. They probably hope it will happen to them someday.

But wealth (riches) is not all that many believe it to be. Studies show that when people get more money, they may live comfortably, but owning more things does not buy more happiness. Loyal friends, good jobs, and a positive life usually do better than wealth to make a person happy. The best things are given for free; for example, loving words, a smile, a listening ear, simple kindnesses, acceptance, respect, and true friendship.

Even more important are the gifts given by God: faith, hope, wisdom, patience, love, peace, and many other blessings that come through His Spirit in our lives. Many Christians would agree with these thoughts. But their daily living and actions show that they are very selfish. As we will learn this week, greed¹ is a big mistake. It often ends in terrible results.

DEFINITIONS

1. greed—a selfish desire to have more of something (especially money).

JUSTICE WILL BE DONE! (Psalm 73:3–19)

Chapter 5 of James begins with a bang. “You rich people, listen to me. Cry and sob, because you will soon be suffering” (James 5:1, NIV). No doubt, that gets his readers’ attention.

In James 1:10, 11, James reminded the rich that wealth does not last. In chapter 5, he urges those who stubbornly hold on to it to “weep and howl.” It is as if their upcoming judgment is even now being poured out. The clear description continues throughout our lesson for this week. This helps us remember God’s punishment for the wicked actions or ways of behaving that go beyond what is right or necessary. This is how it will be just before Christ’s return (read Luke 17:27–29; 2 Timothy 3:1, 2; Revelation 18:3, 7). Much the same attitude influences God’s last-day church (the church of Laodicea) (Revelation 3:17). Interestingly, the Greek word translated as “miseries” in James 5:1 comes from the same root used to describe Laodicea as “wretched” in Revelation 3:17.

There is so much injustice (unfairness) in the world, especially when it involves money. Sometimes it is so hard to understand why some people get rich by using the poor. And, worse, why do they seem to get away with it? Read Psalm 73:3–19. What hope is found in these verses about this long-standing problem?

Throughout the books of the Old Testament prophets (special messengers), we find a concern for justice and the promise that God will act to set things right. But this sense of hope did not seem to make it any easier to wait for God to step in and set things right. For example, the prophet Habakkuk was writing at a time of widespread backsliding² among God’s people. At this time, Babylon swelled with pride and celebrated its power and success. Habakkuk asked God many pointed (direct) questions (read Habakkuk 1:2–4, 13, 14). God’s short answer was to trust in Him and wait a little longer (Habakkuk 2:2–4). And the prophet did just that (read Habakkuk 3:17, 18).

DEFINITIONS

2. backsliding—separation from God; repeatedly doing things that do not please Him.

What injustices cause you to burn inside with anger? (And there is so much more going on that you do not even know about!) Yes, we should do what we can to lessen injustice. But how can we learn to rest in the promise that, somehow, when it is all over, God’s justice will be done?

WHEN WEALTH BECOMES WORTHLESS

(James 5:2, 3)

Read James 5:2, 3. What warning is James giving here? His words are quite strong. But what kind of wealth is he talking about? What is the important message?

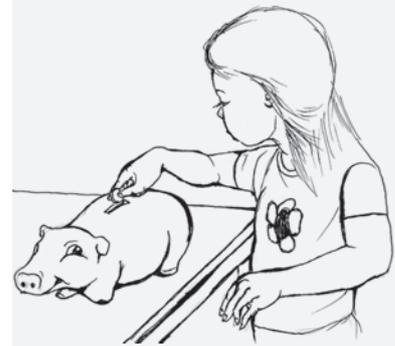
Rotting (spoiling) wealth, moth-eaten clothing, and even silver and gold rusting—these are pictures for us to think about seriously. Meanwhile, our planet spins on, faster and faster toward its end. The world’s economic (financial) situation always seems to be going from one crisis to another. Even the “good” times, when they come, rarely last and are always followed by a downturn. Any appearance of economic success and peace that the global marketplace might offer is short-lived. Unhappiness grows as the gap between the rich and the poor becomes wider. Such was the situation when James wrote that the poor were growing hopeless and the rich more uncaring for the poor.

Read 1 Samuel 25:2–11; 2 Kings 20:12–19; and Acts 3:1–10. How did wealth, or no wealth, affect the lives of Nabal, Hezekiah, and Peter?

Sooner or later, worldly wealth loses its shine for all of us. We learn its limits and maybe even its dark side. Money has its place. But the problem is when people put it in the *wrong* place.

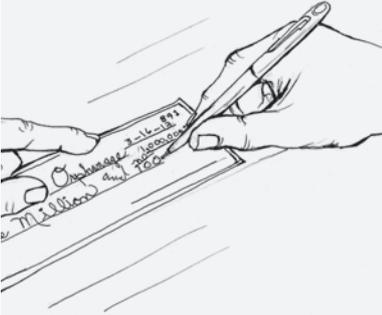
James says money will be “a witness against” those who use it wrongly (James 5:3). James gives this warning with the end of the world in mind. But one point should be clear: how we use our money matters. The picture of human-destroying fire is meant to wake us up to how serious are the choices we make in using our money. Are we heaping up treasure that will finally be burned up? Or are we saving for eternity? (Read Luke 12:33, 34.)

Think carefully about your attitude toward money and how it influences your relationships. What does this say about how you are using it?



Are we saving for eternity?

CRIES OF THE POOR (James 5:4)



Riches carry with them great responsibilities.

DEFINITIONS

3. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

4. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

Reading through James, we may notice that several different groups of wealthy people are listed. This includes rich merchants who will be cut down in the midst of their pursuits (James 1:11). The list also includes business people who sue to protect their investments (James 2:6). And farmland owners who have withheld wages from their workers (James 5:4). These verses describe the rich negatively based on their past behavior, present attitude, and future punishment. These people have “heaped [built] up treasure” (James 5:3, NKJV) by using the poor.

“You have even failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields. Their pay is crying out against you” (James 5:4, NIV). Compare³ Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14, 15; Jeremiah 22:13. What important principle (rule) is seen in how we deal with others?

In Israel in Bible times, as soon as wages were paid, many of the workers used these earnings to buy food to feed their families. But when the owners withheld wages, this often meant the family had to go hungry. So, it was a serious matter that James was addressing here.

No wonder, then, that James spoke so strongly against those who held back wages from those who worked for them. It is bad enough to cheat people. But for someone already rich to hold back income by stealing from the poor is a sin. It is a sin against the poor and also a sin against heaven itself. And, as James writes, God will deal with this problem in due time!

“Riches carry with them great responsibilities. People get wealth by unfair dealing, by being dishonest in trade, by oppressing the widow and the fatherless, or by holding back riches and ‘forgetting’ the poor. They will later have God’s fair punishment described by James. ‘Cry and sob, because you will soon be suffering.’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies⁴ for the Church*, volume 2, page 682.

What are your dealings with others when it comes to money? What do those dealings say about your Christianity? And what do they say about how much you reflect (show) the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of Christ?

FAT AND HAPPY—FOR NOW (James 5:5)

“You have lived an easy life on earth. You have given yourselves everything you wanted. You have made yourselves fat like cattle that will soon be butchered” (James 5:5, NlrV; compare Ezekiel 16:49; Amos 4:1). What do these verses say about an expensive and very comfortable lifestyle?

In Bible times, people thought that there was only a certain amount of wealth in the world. They believed that if the wealth of some people became greater, then the wealth of others had to become less. In other words, the rich can get richer only by making the poor poorer. On the other hand, “creating” wealth without lessening the wealth of others seems to be a rather modern idea. Some even argue that, as the rich get richer, they can help make the poor richer too. We know that developed and developing nations compete (fight) for more limited resources (things). The limitations of trying to gain wealth under these conditions can be more difficult. So, the battle over wealth still goes on today.

One of the most famous stories of Jesus dealing with the unfairness of wealth is the parable⁵ of the rich man and Lazarus (read Luke 16:19–31). At the time of Jesus, most people were lucky to have two robes instead of just one. They were happy if they feasted once a year. But the rich man in the story “was clothed in purple and fine linen” (the most expensive kind of robes) “and who feasted sumptuously [plentifully] every day” (verse 19, ESV). Poor Lazarus, who was carried to the gate of the rich man’s house, had to beg for the few crumbs he received.

Most people think that the parable speaks about life in heaven after death. But this is not true. The real point of the parable is *this life*, not the afterlife. The original Greek does not say anything about “heaven” and “hell” at all. Both the rich man and Lazarus are pictured in the *same* place (verse 23)—the grave (*hadēs*). The deep gap separating them shows the fact that after a person dies, his or her eternal future is fixed (already decided). So, how we treat people in this life (as described in “Moses and the prophets,” verses 29, 31, NKJV) is very important.

What things have you done that you are sorry about? Can feeling sorry help you to not make the same mistakes again and “love your brother”? Explain your answer.

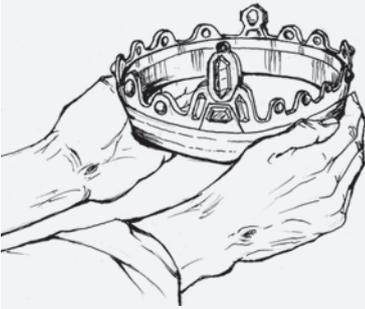


There is no future life where we can make up for what we failed to do in this life.

DEFINITIONS

5. parable—very short story that teaches a lesson or a truth.

BLAME THE VICTIM (James 5:6)



The “poor in spirit” and “rich in faith” will be heirs of God’s kingdom.

DEFINITIONS

6. traits—qualities that make one person or thing different from another.

When we have done wrong, it is natural for us to try to escape responsibility. Often people try to do this by putting the responsibility on someone else. This may be the person who has been wronged. Murderers excuse themselves by pleading self-defense or blaming their bad childhood. By saying they were tempted, sexual abusers blame their victims. Husbands and wives who get divorced usually blame the other for the failed marriage. Those guilty of killing Christians accuse them of false teachings. Jesus warned His disciples that “ ‘a time is coming when those who kill you will think they are doing God a favor’ ” (John 16:2, NlrV). In fact, we believe that James, too, was killed for his faith.

In light of this, the following words in James 5:6 become more meaningful:

“You have judged and murdered people who aren’t [are not] guilty. And they weren’t [were not] even opposing you” (James 5:6, NlrV). How many times have you judged others only to discover later that you were really the one who was wrong? Think about the last part of this verse. Does this mean that we should just let people walk all over us? But how many quarrels have you had that would never have happened if you had put up no fight or disagreement? So, what exactly does Jesus mean by “turning the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39)?

As we have seen, James has quite a bit to say about the rich and the poor. But we should remember that James never criticizes the rich simply because they are rich. It is their *attitudes and actions* that are important to God. In the same way, being poor does not in itself bring a person closer to God. It is the “poor *in spirit*” and the “rich *in faith*” who will be “heirs [receivers] of the kingdom” (Matthew 5:3; James 2:5, NKJV). These inner traits⁶ may have no connection to our financial situation. But then again, they may. Those who are “rich, and increased with goods” (Revelation 3:17) may be poorer spiritually than they think. God warned Israel to remember that when they entered the land and became successful they should not forget that all the good things they enjoyed came from Him, including the “power [ability] to get wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:11–18).

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “Money is important, because it can do great good. In the hands of God’s children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the abused, and a way of helping the sick. But money is as worthless as sand if it is not used for the needs of life, for helping others, and for pushing forward the gospel of Christ.

“Riches that are held back and not used for helping others are not just useless. They are a curse. In this life they are a trap for the soul, pulling people away from the heavenly treasure. . . .

“He who understands that his money is a talent from God will use it wisely. And he will feel it a duty to save that he may give.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 351, 352.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1 Think about these following sentences: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender” (Proverbs 22:7, ESV). “Many poor families are poor because they spend their money as soon as they receive it. . . .

“When one becomes involved in debt, he is in one of Satan’s nets, which he sets for souls.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, page 392. Is helping people to get out of debt or to avoid getting into debt a part of “preach[ing] the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18)? Why, or why not?

2 How do we really know whether money serves us or we serve it? Read Luke 16:10–13.

3 The rich and the poor are everywhere. Some people have two, three, even four or more homes while others are happy to collect up a few pieces of wood and build them into a shelter. And what about those who have become overweight from overeating while there are children all over the world going to bed hungry? Some argue that by taking from the rich we can give more to the poor. Others argue that as the rich get richer, they can help the poor. How do we work, as *Christians*, to help lessen the problem of the poor being very poor? What things should we do to help? And what things should we not do?