

Weep and Howl!



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 5:1–6, Ps. 73:3–19, 1 Sam. 25:2–11, Lev. 19:13, Luke 16:19–31, Matt. 5:39.*

Memory Text: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (*Matthew 6:21*).

The worldwide popularity of the television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* suggests that many people vicariously enjoy the rags-to-riches fantasy and probably hope it could happen to them someday.

But wealth isn't all that many believe it to be. Studies suggest that increasing income follows the law of diminishing returns: beyond allowing people to live comfortably, more possessions do not buy more happiness. Meaningful relationships, job satisfaction, and a purposeful life usually make a greater contribution to one's happiness than does wealth. The best things are freely given, such as loving words, a smile, a listening ear, simple kindnesses, acceptance, respect, a sympathetic touch, and genuine friendship.

Even more precious are the gifts given by God: faith, hope, wisdom, patience, love, contentment, and many other blessings that come through His Spirit's presence in our lives. The irony is that, while many Christians would agree with these sentiments, their daily living suggests that selfishness often has the upper hand. As we'll see this week, greed is a big mistake, one fraught with horrendous consequences.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 6.

Justice Will Be Done!

Chapter 5 of James begins with a bang: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!” (*James 5:1, NKJV*). No doubt, that would have gotten his readers’ attention.

In James 1:10, 11, he reminded the rich of the impermanence of wealth. Here, in chapter 5, he urges those who stubbornly hold on to it to “weep and howl.” It is as if their impending judgment is even now being poured out. The vivid description continues throughout our passage for this week, bringing to mind the divine retribution for the wicked excess that characterizes the period just prior to Christ’s return (*see Luke 17:27–29; 2 Tim. 3:1, 2; Rev. 18:3, 7*). A similar attitude permeates God’s last-day church (*Rev. 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 in the world, especially economic injustice. Sometimes it is so hard to understand why some people get rich exploiting the poor and, worse, why they seem to get away with it! Read Psalm 73:3–19. What hope is found in these verses regarding this perennial problem?

Throughout the books of the Old Testament prophets, we find a concern for justice and the promise that God will act to set things right. But this persistent and settled sense of hope did not seem to make the uncomfortable and perplexing period of waiting for God’s intervention any easier. For instance, writing at a time of widespread apostasy among God’s people, when Babylon, swelling with pride, celebrated its power and prosperity, the prophet Habakkuk peppered God with pointed questions (*see Hab. 1:2–4, 13, 14*). God’s short answer was to trust in Him and wait a little longer (*Hab. 2:2–4*). And the prophet did just that (*see Hab. 3:17, 18*).

What injustices cause you to simmer and burn inside with anger and outrage? (And there is so much more going on that you don’t even know about!) Though, of course, we should do what we can to alleviate injustice, how can we learn to rest in the promise that, somehow, when it’s all over, God’s justice will be done?

When Wealth Becomes Worthless

Read James 5:2, 3. What warning is James giving here? Though his words are quite strong, what kind of wealth is he talking about? What’s the basic message?

Rotting wealth, moth-eaten clothing, and even silver and gold rusting—these are images for us to consider soberly as our planet spins blissfully on, faster and faster toward its demise.

The world’s economic 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 semblance of economic stability and tranquility that the global marketplace might offer is fleeting and largely imaginary. Discontent and instability grows as the disparity between rich and poor widens. Such was the situation when James wrote that the poor were growing increasingly desperate and the rich more intolerant of the plight of the destitute.

Consider the following individuals and describe the effect wealth (or the lack of it) had on them:

1. **Nabal** (*1 Sam. 25:2–11*) _____

2. **Hezekiah** (*2 Kings 20:12–19*) _____

3. **Peter** (*Acts 3:1–10*) _____

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

James says money will be “a witness against” those who misuse it (*James 5:3*). Though he gives this warning in an end-time context, the point should be clear: how we use our money matters. The image of flesh-consuming fire is meant to wake us up to the seriousness of the choices we are making with our money. Are we heaping up treasure that will ultimately be burned up, or are we saving for eternity? (*See Luke 12:33, 34.*)

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

Cries of the Poor

Reading through James, we may notice that several different categories of wealthy people are mentioned, including rich merchants who will be cut down in the midst of their pursuits (*James 1:11*), business people who sue to protect their investments (*James 2:6*), and agricultural landholders who have withheld wages from their laborers (*James 5:4*). These verses describe the rich negatively based on their past behavior, present attitude, and future punishment. These people have essentially “heaped up treasure” (*vs. 3, NKJV*) at the expense of the poor.

“Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out” (*vs. 4, NASB*). Compare *Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14, 15; Jer. 22:13*. **What important principle is seen here, not just in the immediate contexts but in general in regard to how we deal with others?**

In Israel in Bible times, as soon as wages were paid, many, if not most, of the workers used these earnings to buy food to feed their families. Withholding wages often meant the family had to go hungry. Thus, 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’s bad enough to defraud anyone of anything, but for someone already rich to hoard wealth by stealing from the poor is a sin, not just against the poor but a sin against heaven itself. And, as James writes, it will be dealt with in due time!

“Riches bring with them great responsibilities. To obtain wealth by unjust dealing, by overreaching in trade, by oppressing the widow and the fatherless, or by hoarding up riches and neglecting the wants of the needy, will eventually bring the just retribution described by the inspired apostle: ‘Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 682.

What are your dealings with others when it comes to money? What do those dealings say about your Christianity and about how much you reflect the character of Christ?

Fat and Happy (for Now)

“You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter” (*James 5:5, ESV; compare Ezek. 16:49, Amos 4:1*). **What do these passages link to luxurious indulgence?**

In the ancient world, the notion prevailed that there was a fixed amount of wealth, meaning that if the wealth of some people increased, the wealth of others had to decrease. In other words, the rich can get richer only by making the poor poorer. “Creating” wealth without adversely affecting the wealth of others, however, seems to be a relatively modern idea. Some even argue that, as the rich get richer, they can help make the poor richer too. On the other hand, considering the competition among developed and developing nations for increasingly scarcer resources, the limitations of wealth creation can seem more pressing. Hence, the issue of wealth inequality still rages today.

One of the most famous stories of Jesus dealing with issues of inequality is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (*see Luke 16:19–31*). At the time of Jesus, most people were lucky to have two garments instead of just one and happy if they feasted once a year. By contrast, the rich man in the story “was clothed in purple and fine linen” (the most expensive kind of garments) “and who feasted sumptuously every day” (*vs. 19, ESV*). Poor Lazarus, despite being carried to the gate of the rich man’s house, had to beg for the few crumbs he received.

Contrary to popular opinion, the real focus of the parable is this life, not the afterlife. In fact, the original Greek makes no mention of “heaven” and “hell” at all. Both the rich man and Lazarus are depicted in the same place (*vs. 23*)—the grave (*hadēs*). The chasm separating them symbolizes the fact that after a person dies, his or her eternal destiny is fixed. Therefore, how we treat people in this life (as described in “Moses and the prophets,” *vss. 29, 31, NKJV*) is extremely important. There is no future life in which we can make up for what we failed to do in this one: “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (*1 John 4:20, NKJV*).

What regretful things have you done that, though you might be able to “make up” for now, you won’t be able to make up for them later?

Blame the Victim

When someone has done wrong, the natural tendency is to try to escape responsibility. Often people try to do this by transferring the responsibility to someone else—including the person who has been wronged. Murderers excuse themselves by pleading self-defense or blaming their upbringing. By saying they were enticed, sexual abusers blame the victim. Husbands and wives who get divorced typically blame the other for the failed marriage. Those guilty of killing the martyrs of the Christian faith blamed the martyrs by accusing them of heresy. Indeed, Jesus warned His disciples that “ ‘the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service’ ” (*John 16:2, NKJV*). In fact, we believe that James, too, was killed for his faith.

In light of this, the words in James 5:6 carry even more weight:

“Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.” How many times have you condemned others only to realize later that you were really the one who was wrong? Think especially about the last phrase of this verse. Does this mean that we should just let people walk all over us? On the other hand, how many quarrels have you had that would never have happened if you had put up no resistance? What does Jesus mean by “turning the other cheek” (*Matt. 5:39*)? How are we on a practical level to do this (or is the problem that we want to be “practical” about something that, in and of itself, isn’t really supposed to be practical)?

As we have seen, James has quite a bit to say about the rich and the poor. It should be kept in mind, though, that James never condemns the rich simply because they are rich. It is their *attitudes and actions* that matter to God. Similarly, the bare fact of being economically poor does not in itself endear a person to God. It is the “poor *in spirit*” and “rich *in faith*” who will be “heirs of the kingdom” (*Matt. 5:3, James 2:5, NKJV*). These inner qualities may have no relation to our particular economic circumstances. But then again, they may. Those who are “rich, and increased with goods” (*Rev. 3:17*) may be more needy spiritually than they think. God warned Israel to beware lest after they entered the land and became prosperous they should forget that all the good things they enjoyed came from Him, including the “power to get wealth” (*Deut. 8:11–18*).

Further Study: “Money has great value, 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 oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.

“Hoarded wealth is not merely useless, it is a curse. In this life it is a snare to the soul, drawing the affections away from the heavenly treasure. . . .

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

Discussion Questions:

1 Consider the following statements: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender” (*Prov. 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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 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? See *Luke 16:10–13*.

3 Economic disparity is everywhere. Some people have two, three, even four or more luxurious homes while others are happy to scrounge up a few pieces of wood and cobble them into a shelter. And what about those who have become obese by stuffing themselves 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 lift the poor out of poverty. How do we work, as *Christians*, to help alleviate the problem of extreme poverty? What things should we do to help, and what things *shouldn’t* we do?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *James 5:1–6*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Know that a transformed life is the result of turning away from sin.

Feel: Grieve over his or her sins in heartfelt repentance.

Do: Demonstrate, through the unselfish distribution of means, his or her conviction that all wealth comes from God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: True Repentance

A Why does James ask the rich to grieve, and for what reasons?

B Define repentance and godly sorrow, according to Scripture.

II. Feel: Weep and Howl!

A How does godly sorrow lead to repentance?

B Why can there be no true change in life without experiencing sincere sorrow for sin and a subsequent turning away from it?

III. Do: Storing up Wealth in a Day of Slaughter

A How can we show, through the management of our resources, the belief that all we possess comes from God?

B What can you do to demonstrate to others the futility of trusting in riches?

► **Summary:** There can be no true reform without genuine repentance.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 5:1–6*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: **There can be no reform without genuine repentance.**

Just for Teachers: **Help learners to understand that a transformed life is the result of turning away from sin.**

Opening Activity: Look at, in as many translations as possible, James’s injunction to “weep aloud and lament” (*James 5:1, Amplified*). The New King James Version uses the word *howl*. These are all visual and audible—or public—displays of grief. Discuss the ways in which one mourns death in your society. How is grief enacted audibly and visually as a means of memorializing loss? Share your experiences of mourning and grieving, whether for a loved one or some other loss, including modes of mourning, both seen and heard.

Consider This: How do your experiences of grief help you to understand James’s injunction to grieve for sin? Why is grieving for sin necessary? Take time in silent prayer to grieve for the suffering your sins have caused to others and to Jesus. How does this mourning bring you closer to God?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: **Help learners to understand the necessity and meaning of true repentance and the futility of trusting in wealth.**

I. Weep Aloud and Lament (*Review James 5:1–6 with your class.*)

James invites the wealthy to “weep aloud and lament over the miseries (the woes) that are surely coming upon you” (*vs. 1, Amplified*). What is the purpose of James’s injunction to engage in such ostentatious displays of grief? Wouldn’t it have been more spiritually—not to mention materially and civically—beneficial for the whole of society if instead he had asked the rich to repay fourfold what they had taken by fraud, as the tax collector Zacchaeus voluntarily did after Jesus’ transformative visit to his home? Aren’t restoration and reform the necessary fruit of grace in the

transformed life and the ultimate outworking of its purpose?

To this question, James undoubtedly would answer, Yes. At the same time, he would equally acknowledge that just as reform is the outworking of grace, there can be no reform without repentance. The term “you rich” would seem to imply a spiritual designation as well as a material one—that is, one of being wealthy in material goods but impoverished spiritually. John alludes to this group of people in Revelation, in his message to the church of the Laodiceans: “For you say, I am rich; I have prospered and grown wealthy, and I am in need of nothing; and you do not realize and understand that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (*Rev. 3:17, Amplified*). Without the patient’s heeding James’s injunction to grieve, the panacea that John suggests cannot produce a cure: “Therefore I counsel you to purchase from Me gold refined and tested by fire, that you may be [truly] wealthy, and white clothes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nudity from being seen, and salve to put on your eyes, that you may see” (*vs. 18, Amplified*).

Grief, true sorrow for sin, is the requisite currency for this transaction. In Bible times laments were expressions of grief for those who died. James is asking the wealthy to lament their own deaths while they are still living; that is, while they still have the capacity to repent. James makes it clear that the literal garments of the rich “have become moth-eaten” (*James 5:2, Amplified*), suggesting that they are spiritually unfit to cover them and that their deeds of corruption are clearly seen by others. What they need is eye salve—the spiritual discernment given by the Holy Spirit—John speaks of to see themselves truly, and the living gold—faith—to reach out and purchase what is freely offered: the imperishable riches of God’s mercy so that they might be rich toward others and store up riches in heaven.

Consider This: Why does James ask the rich to “lament and howl”? What is the purpose of such grief? How does “godly sorrow,” as the Bible puts it (*2 Cor. 7:10, NKJV*), lead to repentance?

II. In a Day of Slaughter (*Review James 5:2–6 with your class.*)

James follows his injunction to grieve with two lists of judgment against the rich. The first list (*vss. 2, 3*) pronounces doom on the accumulated wealth itself, detailing exactly how it has become accursed. The second list (*vss. 4–6*) details the actual crimes the wealthy have committed that have brought these curses on what they have amassed.

Let's look at each list to understand more fully the spiritual implications for our own lives of the futility of trusting in riches and the terrible price not only the wealthy pay but also the cost to society for wealth gained at the expense of others.

Wealth is measured by what we own. The rich to whom James refers aren't simply wealthy—they possess “abundant wealth” (*vs. 2, Amplified*). They have more than enough while those whom they extort have nothing. Their abundant wealth manifests itself in three ways: (1) their “[many] garments” (*vs. 2, Amplified*), (2) in “gold and silver” and (3) what James refers to broadly as unspecified “treasure” (*vs. 3*)—what we would call valuables—houses, lands, art collections, jewelry, stocks and bonds, et cetera, today. These treasures—the expensive clothing, gold, silver, and other valuables—have been amassed or, as James puts it, “heaped together . . . for the last days” (*vs. 3*). A heap denotes a very large pile of anything. It suggests a surfeit, an overabundance, implying greed and avarice. Most disturbing of all is the phrase “for the last days,” suggesting an intention or action on the part of the wealthy to choose to pursue accumulating wealth in the last days of earth's history ahead of spiritual considerations. Implicit is a kind of reasoning used to justify their pursuit and practices—doing it for the cause of God.

But in his second list, James uncovers that what they are doing is not for God but in place of God. “[But] look!” he says in verse 4 of the Amplified version. In asking us to behold, James implies that the evidence of their treachery is clearly visible. “[Here are] the wages that you have withheld by fraud from the laborers who have reaped your fields, crying out [for vengeance]; and the cries of the harvesters have come to the ears of the Lord of hosts. [Here] on earth you have abandoned yourselves to soft (prodigal) living and to [the pleasures of] self-indulgence and self-gratification. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and have murdered the righteous (innocent man), [while] he offers no resistance to you” (*vss. 4–6, Amplified*).

James warns that the pursuit of riches for the sake of wealth alone leads to (1) extortion, (2) self-indulgence, (3) self-gratification, (4) material gluttony, (5) injustice, (6) and murder. Not only are these transgressions clearly visible; it is possible they are visible because the wealthy do them openly with no fear of reprisal. Their acts are not only seen by humanity; they are seen by God. What, Jesus once asked, does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul? “Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (*Matt. 16:26, NKJV*). The world shows too often how little it values the weight of a soul. James is pleading for the world to lament, to grieve “over the miseries (the woes)” (*James 5:1, Amplified*) with “godly sorrow that produces repentance” (*2 Cor. 7:10, NKJV*) to avert the judgments from the “day of slaughter” (*James 5:5, Amplified*) that “are surely coming upon you” (*vs. 1, Amplified*).

Consider This: Wealth is a gift from God; yet, why is the wealth accumulated here condemned? By what means have the wealthy accumulated their wealth? What does James warn will happen if the rich do not “weep and lament” or repent?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Encourage class members to apply James’s exhortation for repentance to their everyday life situations.

Application Questions:

How do you count yourself wealthy? Financial wealth is not the only way societies measure affluence and wealth, although it is one of the most obvious. Some people measure it by health or families. Others by recognition and fame. Still others by personal achievement. All these are good when we keep two things in perspective: (1) the wealth we value is a gift from God, given to bless others before ourselves, and (2) it is meant to be devoted to the service of God, to be used for the advancement of His cause and not for self-aggrandizement. What things has God honored us with? Why must we let God honor us instead of seeking honor?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This exercise is to be done outside of class to help learners personalize James’s message not to idolize anything that divides the heart.

Activity: James asks the rich to lament the miseries that sin leads to. What are the things we need to turn away from or forsake? What things, if we were to lament over them, would bring us closer to Jesus? Ask students to compose a lament, or prayer, addressed to God that is an expression of grief or sorrow for sin or the suffering it has wrought. Let the lament be in the form of their choice: poem, painting, singing a hymn, or composing their own music.