

SINS OF THE RICH

James 5:1-6

It is worth mentioning here that our Lord Jesus had more to say about material possessions--their acquisition and use--than any other subject. Almost one half of His recorded sayings relate directly or indirectly to money. Surely this was not so because He felt that money was wrong. He did not condemn money, but He did recognize the danger of wealth. That is why He said, ".....How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Mark 10:23, 25.

Let us study the Apostle James as he adds his testimony on this vital subject. It would seem that unbelievers were the objects of his stinging address, for there was no reference whatever to "brethren." We can hardly believe that James was referring to those who were Christians because of the awfulness of their sins and the judgments he pronounces on them. We believe he addressed the godless rich Jews of his time who were guilty of robbing the poor and persecuting the Christians. The rich Jews had already oppressed the Christians and made the conditions of life difficult. The Christians were helpless so far as any immediate relief was concerned. They had little or no power in government and had to live in the social and economic atmosphere created by those hostile to them.

James did not condone that situation nor acquiesce in it. He used the common Greek expression, "Go to now" to get the attention and to show his contempt for the ones spoken to, who were the rich men. It is not wrong to be rich, but it is dangerous. There have been and are good rich men. The Bible calls two "good men" and both had plenty. One was Joseph of Arimathea. Many of the Old Testament saints, like Abraham and Job, were rich. They used their wealth for the Lord. They were not guilty of the things charged against the rich men in this passage.

For many, it would have been better if riches had never come their way. At one time they enjoyed the gatherings of the Lord's people, they delighted to study the Bible, they wanted to live for God, but their money drew them away. "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare." I Timothy 6:9. Riches keep many from trusting Christ.

In verse one James speaks of the "miseries" which are scheduled for the rich. Instead of referring to their millions he speaks of their miseries. He announces that they will "weep and howl" because of the miseries that would come upon them. These same miseries of which James speaks are applicable to the wicked rich of our time. Many of the rich who are living today will certainly see the time when they will "weep and howl."

Those rich Jews, to whom James was referring, were soon to go through a time of great trial. Most of them lost all that they had in the destruction of Jerusalem, and many lost their lives. The rich were robbed, tortured and killed. This persecution of the rich later spread to the far corners of the Roman empire, and many who were not at Jerusalem suffered a like fate. No doubt, many of them literally wept and howled.

In referring to money Christ used the term "the mammon of unrighteousness." He called it that because of the mischief and sin it so often produces. Money can be a great curse, or it can be a great blessing. You can be a slave of money, or it can be your servant.

In verses two and three the Apostle shows the real nature of their riches. They considered them "treasures," but he knew better--they were only trash.

Look at the goods! "Your riches are corrupted." As Moffatt said, "Your wealth lies rotting." The perfect tense presents the state of rottenness. All of you have had experience with corruption or rot. Food spoils. Farmers sometimes withhold things from the market with the expectation that the price will rise. Through this some have

lost everything. The price did not rise and shrinkage and rot took their toll. James compares the wicked rich of his time to a farmer with a barn full of produce which had already rotted. Ill-gotten gain will not keep. It is already putrid and smells to high heaven. There is such a thing as tainted money, blood money wrung from the oppressed toilers, money made out of the bodies and souls of men and women in the liquor and the white slave traffic. All such riches are gotten by corruption, and they corrupt those who get them.

Look at the garments! "Your garments are moth-eaten." We have the prophetic perfect here and James sees the outcome as a reality in a state of completion. It is a vivid picture of fine cloth eaten by moths and full of holes, ruined beyond repair. God will not bless riches stored up for no purpose. Idle riches always injure the owner. If riches are gotten by oppressing the poor and underpaying the help they will be corrupt and moth-eaten.

Look at the gold! "Your gold and your silver is cankered." God does not criticize them for having money pass through their hands, but for holding the money until it is cankered. The rusting of gold and silver are typical of God's wrath that will consume the owners.

Pure gold and silver do not rust, but they do tarnish. Perhaps the coins of that time were mixed with quite a large percentage of alloy, and it actually rusted. Rust is a symbol of disuse. Idle money is of no value. We are only stewards of that with which the Lord entrusts us. If He gives us money, we must use it for Him. Whatever He gives us, whether wealth or talent, we must not allow it to lie around unused.

Rust not only symbolizes disuse but also destruction. It eats away a bit at a time until finally it fully consumes it. James pictures the rust as speaking against them in the day of judgment. They might try to make excuses but the rust would be evidence that they had sinned.

God never withheld His good things from us. He crammed the earth with wealth and riches, but He did not "bank" His wealth. He did not enclose it where it could not be obtained. God has, but He does not hoard. He gives. He imparts.

In verse four James accuses the rich of obtaining their wealth by defrauding their help. The employers of Old Testament times were expected to pay the wages of those who worked for them every evening. "Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning." Leviticus 19:13. In the parable of the vineyard the Lord Jesus pictures the owner of the vineyard saying to his steward as evening comes, "Call the labourers, and give them their hire....." Matthew 20:8. As we read this lesson, we note that these rich Jews had not observed this at all. Because of their selfish lust for riches, these men held back the wages of their help, and often for some petty reason never paid part of it. As an excuse they would claim that the work was not done right, or accuse the workers of theft, or claim that they could not pay until the crop was sold. As Christians, we should always pay our bills, and on time if at all possible.

These rich men were extensive land owners, and so could afford to pay their help. This made their withholding wages all the greater sin. The labourers richly deserved their hire, because mowing and reaping without any laborsaving machinery is strenuous work. And they worked long hours, from sunrise to sunset. It is a very terrible sin to reduce to starvation those who by their labor supply us with food. Their pay perhaps was small enough at best, and then to defraud them of part of it made the sin all the worse. They should have relieved the poor instead of defrauding them.

The very wages that are held back by fraud cry out into the ears of the Lord. He not only hears but resents this fraud, and will bring speedy judgment on the guilty. He will hear a defrauded one who cries unto Him. The term "Lord of sabaoth" is equivalent to the "Lord of hosts." It literally means "Lord of armies." Let those who think the

defrauded have no helper beware. They not only have the Lord, but also the armies of the Lord. He can and will send destruction on the guilty. If the guilty do not receive their punishment in this life, they surely will hereafter.

After accusing these men of hoarding riches in verse three, and of obtaining those riches by defrauding their help in verse four, James charges them in verse five of using those riches wrongfully on themselves, living in luxury and self-indulgence. They were very careful that their employees got no more than they could possibly help, and to relieve the needy never entered their minds. But, for themselves nothing was too good. They never did any work but ate, drank and played all day.

For the most part the rich of today are very much like the ones we read about in verse five. They live in ease, luxury and pleasure. They are "wanton." Under this term can be placed every form of lewdness and immorality. Their whole aim in life is to please self. James pictures such rich men as animals feeding heavily and fattening themselves for the day of slaughter. Many of them were soon to be slaughtered at the destruction of Jerusalem. The poor and half starved were let go but the rich were tortured in order to compel them to reveal the place in which their wealth was hidden, then afterwards they were killed.

This has happened very often in history. Just when men are living in luxury and lust, the hand of judgment falls. It happened in the day of Noah. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, when suddenly the flood came and took them all away. It was so in connection with Sodom and Gomorrah. We see how they were living in lust and debauchery, when fire and brimstone came down from heaven and destroyed them and their cities. It happened when Belshazzar was having that drunken feast, and was drinking out of vessels stolen out of the temple in Jerusalem. He never lived to see the morning light.

In verse six we have the fourth charge against these wicked rich men. They had not only hoarded riches, obtained them by fraud, and used them wrongfully, but they had ruthlessly slain the righteous, who had not in any way resisted them. Christ Jesus was the "Just One" and they condemned and killed Him, but He did not resist them. Many of His righteous followers suffered a similar fate. Perhaps the defrauded laborers would appeal to the judge for righteousness. The rich would trump up some charge against them, bribe the judge, and the poor would be condemned and put to death. We know how it was with Naboth. Wicked Ahab coveted his vineyard, but Naboth would not sell it to him and this grieved him. Then his wife, wicked Jezebel, dragged Naboth before the judge, trumped up a charge, brought in false witnesses and had poor Naboth killed. We see something similar in the case of Stephen. They brought in false witnesses too, before they stoned him to death.

The Lord Jesus did not resist His persecutors. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." Isaiah 53:7. How they abused our blessed Lord! They spat on Him, they smote Him in the face, they plucked the hair from His cheeks, they lashed His back, they crowned Him with thorns, they drove nails through His hands and His feet. He said nothing and did nothing. He could have resisted, but He would not.

In teaching His disciples Christ said, "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Many of His followers did just what He taught. We can do likewise. There will be some who hate us and mistreat us, but the Lord says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." Those who hate, and condemn, and persecute the Lord's own will soon find themselves before the judgment bar of the Lord Jesus.

The story is told of a Christian native of South Africa, who was lost one night and accidentally caught on the property of a rich farmer. The farmer accused him of being there to steal, and, with the help of some of his men, he chopped off the right hand of

this native, and let him go. One night this farmer too got lost in the woods. He saw a light, and came to a native hut. He was treated kindly, permitted to stay overnight, and given his breakfast in the morning. As he was about to leave the native showed him the stump of his right hand. The farmer trembled and said, "I suppose now you will kill me." "No," said the man, "I told you the night when you cut off my hand that I was a Christian and would not steal. Now I tell you again, I am a Christian, and I will not take revenge." Could you do as much?