

## **Lifestyles of the Rich and Faithless from God's Perspective (James 5:1-6)**

*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on February 7, 2010*

[www.goldcountrybaptist.org](http://www.goldcountrybaptist.org)

James 4:14 says your life is just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. What drives your life and consumes your thinking? Who are what are you living for in this fleeting life? John Piper tells the following story in his book *Don't Waste Your Life*:

In April 2000, Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards were killed in Cameroon, West Africa. Ruby was over eighty. Single all her life, she poured it out for one great thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor, pushing eighty years old, and serving at Ruby's side in Cameroon. The brakes failed, the car went over a cliff, and they were both killed instantly ... [John Piper asked his church:]

Was that a tragedy? Two lives, driven by one great passion, namely, to be spent in unheralded service to the perishing poor for the glory of Jesus Christ—even two decades after most of their American counterparts had retired to throw away their lives on trifles. No, that is not a tragedy. That is a glory [from God's perspective when Christ is at the center of it]. These lives were not wasted. And these lives were not lost. [Christ said] "*Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it*" (Mark 8:35).

### **An American Tragedy: How Not to Finish Your One Life**

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. [2 years earlier there was] a story from the February 1998 edition of *Reader's Digest*, which tells about a couple who "took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells." At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life [the legacy of your final decades] before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells." *That* is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life

[it's ok to have an interest or hobby but don't pour your heart and soul into the earthly temporary, and transitory instead of true glory]

... Desire that your life count for something great! Long for your life to have eternal significance. Want this! Don't coast through life without a passion. ... [The glory of Christ] holds out to [all people] so much more than the emptiness of mere success ... Not just a desire for being liked or for playing softball or collecting shells. [You can instead have] a desire for something infinitely great and beautiful and valuable and satisfying—the name and the glory of God ... whatever you do, find the God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated [purpose you're here for with God's glory as the] passion of your life ... and live for it and die for it. And you will make a difference that lasts. You will not waste your life ... Oh, that God would help me waken in you a single passion for a single great reality that would unleash you, and set you free from small dreams, and send you, for the glory of Christ, into all the spheres of secular life and to all the peoples of the earth.' (p. 45-48)

James 5:1 begins with “come now,” or “come on!” – a phrase meant to awaken or arrest the attention of the spiritually lethargic or spiritual dead, that something of monumental importance is at stake. So awake and listen and open your eyes to spiritual realities that man’s practical atheism is blind to as they work and plan and live and move and have their being as if there’s no God too often.

James 4:13 *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.”*<sup>14</sup> *Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*<sup>15</sup> *Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”*<sup>16</sup> *But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.*<sup>17</sup> *Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

James 5:1 *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.*<sup>2</sup> *Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.*<sup>3</sup> *Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!*<sup>4</sup> *Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.*<sup>5</sup> *You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*<sup>6</sup> *You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.*

Historically these words were written originally to the 12 tribes of Israel who had been scattered outside Israel due to persecution and other factors, many of them poor and having to work at the mercy of wealthy unjust land-owners in the lands they had now settled in. But these words from God’s Word are always relevant and might as well be addressed directly to modern America. God’s people are not to envy the godless prosperous or to fret over why so many in the world seem to have it so good while so many in the church seem to struggle in this life (Psalm 37 and many Scriptures echo this theme and remind us not just to look at this life but to live in light of the next life, not just pursuing “your best life now”).

This passage is as timely and relevant as asking American TV show watchers “who wants to be a millionaire?” The words of James 5 are not just for those who *are* millionaires but for those *who want to be and who think that’s where life is best* and joy is fulfilled. This passage in our celebrity culture is not just for the superstars whose homes appear on *Cribs*, it’s also for the watchers and gawkers who idolize those externalized super-size possessions

I almost titled this message *Is the American Dream your American Idol?* I think it at least easily can be, or can become an idol, i.e., something we sacrifice for greatly on the altar of our own soul. Last week I read from Luke 12 where the Lord told the parable of the man who was all about bigger and better, more barns, more bling, more things, and he said to his soul, “*Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; **take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.***” There’s his liturgy and there’s his god right there. That’s his trinity: ease, entertainment, enjoyment. You say, “what’s wrong with food and fun and feeling comfortable? What, are you a killjoy, are you just trying to ruin my super-bowl party?”

No, but if you look back at James 1:17, God wants us to remember “*every good thing is from above, from the Father*” – it’s not wrong to relax, eat, drink, be merry *if your focus is on the Giver and not on the gift*. Good things in life should cause us to exalt and praise God in our thinking, but they must never *eclipse* God or replace God or become our God that we tell our soul will satisfy it or that our soul craves and seeks as its deliverer. It’s what we look to and long for, if we’re honest, above all else. God is not a kill-joy; He’s the Creator of joy, true joy, maximum joy, *in the riches of Christ*.

<sup>20</sup> “***But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’*** <sup>21</sup> “***So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.***”

That’s the type of rich person or materialistic mindset in James 5, not just the one who has money or goods, but the one for whom money is their god. American money has “In God We Trust on It,” and for some those very dollars are the god they trust in. Your idol or your god practically-speaking, functionally-speaking, is what drives you, what you think about the most and look to for hope and security and blessing. It may be a person or it may be possessions or relationships or happiness, or a combination or constellation of gods that orbit the idol of self at the center. If it is material things, that god, like any god, will require more and more of your time and service and devotion and affections supremely above all else.

It’s ok to have money, but does it have you? Do you hold it loosely or does it hold you tightly in its grip? Lest we assume this passage is not really directly applicable to us because we’re by American standards mostly lower-middle class and below, and so we think the sharp rebuke of this text is only for millionaires, celebrities, pro athletes and the rich and famous that Robin Leach used to profile ... let’s consider for a moment that in the original context of v. 1, some 70-80% of people lived just above the level of subsistence. To say it another way, some of the original readers of James had more than one garment or cloak, some didn’t, a massive portion of the workforce needed daily wages literally to buy their daily bread. Any of us in this room who haven’t had to miss a meal this month for lack of funds and any of us who have a warm place to lay our head at night and multiple changes of clothes in our closet are considered “rich” compared to the original readers of James and compared to maybe 1-2 billion or more people on the planet today.

So when v. 1 says “*come now, you rich*,” there is some debate as to how many of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish churchgoing readers this is directly intended to, or is it unbelievers outside the church? But for our day and age there should be no debate that this language can apply directly to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans whether outside or inside the church (99% of which can fit a 1<sup>st</sup> century definition of “rich”).

To any who view riches as the source of happiness (even if they have a lot less than the super-rich but think more would make them happy), v. 1 has a surprising command: *weep and howl for your miseries which are coming on you*. Ironically you think happiness is coming by that lifestyle, but instead miseries are coming on you. Judgment is coming upon the lifestyles of the rich and faithless, for those without Christ, eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth in hell.

Jesus said in Luke 6:24: *“But woe to you who are rich [i.e., rich only in things of this world], for you are receiving your comfort in full. “Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”*

So don't be envious of the sinful rich, and don't be like the sinful rich. This passage gives God's perspective on the lifestyles of the rich and faithless. Many believe James is speaking in OT prophet style that his Jewish readers would recognize, which can include rebuking the ungodly who may not be a part of the readers, but so that the readers will not think like or act like those being rebuked (ex: Isaiah 3:14-15, 5:8-10, 10:1-4; Amos 4:1-3, 8:4-10). Job (Job 24:2-4), Jeremiah (Jer. 5:27-29), Micah (Mic. 2:1-5), and Malachi (Mal. 3:5) also condemned the wicked rich similarly to James 5. What does God find wrong with the lifestyles of rich and faithless?

1. Unnecessary hoarding (v. 2)
2. Unjust practices (v. 3-4)
3. Unrestrained self-indulgence (v. 5)
4. Unconcerned for the innocent they destroy (v. 6)

### **1. Unnecessary Hoarding (v. 2)**

In that day, riches were often measured in crops/grain/produce like the parable Jesus told of the man who kept making bigger barns to store all his food. But the problem in v. 2 here is that there is far more than they need and can consume and now it's rotting in their barns while people living around them are starving. These rich people were hoarding resources unnecessarily and wastefully and like in many third world countries today, like the one I grew up in, there are people starving to death in filthy squatter communities while the filthy rich living on the same road throw out food that's gone bad or left on their plate, because they have way too much.

<sup>2b</sup> ... *and your garments have become moth-eaten.*

People in the same community don't have enough garments or clothing to stay warm, some literally freeze to death, while the rich that run things have so many clothes in their closet that they never wear, and literally the moths eat some of them and they don't even know it. When I was a little boy in the Philippines, Imelda Marcos was padding her wardrobe while her husband was stealing billions.

After they were taken out of the country by the US government, I remember touring their palace and seeing the hundreds of pairs of shoes she never wore, and the way you drive to get to their place goes through neighborhoods of poor and destitute who suffered as a result in large measure of many oppressive and corrupt Filipino rich. The irony is the sinful rich won't feed the mouths of the poor outside but their garments feed the moths inside their closets.

<sup>3</sup> *Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!*

These words sound a lot like what Jesus taught: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy ...*

One writer explains the difference between *saving moderately and wisely for the future* (as Joseph did in Egypt and as Proverbs commends we should learn from the ant who gathers for a future season) versus *storing in the sense of hoarding*: ‘Scripture never tells us that we should not save money. It urges us to be wise, and it is wise to give thought to the future and to plan prudently for it. Hoarding takes place when we continue to accumulate above and beyond that which is necessary. We have all heard stories about elderly people living in foul conditions while subsisting on dog food or cat food. They were assumed to be very poor, but were discovered to have great wealth when they passed away. Such people are [extreme] examples of hoarders.’<sup>1</sup>

But Christians can fall into this trap (remember Y2K “ministries” to help you hoard?). And any of us can easily have so much more than we need or will ever use, and it corrupts and corrodes even now. Gold and silver don’t rust, but v. 3 may refer to coins in that day that contained alloy that could become corroded. Or it could simply be a way to say even the most precious metals and things men prize so highly will quickly lose their value. To say it in simple terms to a materialist: “It’s all gonna burn.” Whether you have gold or not, or nice houses, things ... it’s all gonna burn! You can’t take it with you to the next life. No U-hauls behind hearses.

It’s not sinful to have gold, but beware of its ability to dazzle and distract and draw away (true even if you don’t have it but want it). It can easily become gold spelled without the “L” (instead of your g-o-l-d, it becomes your g-o-d that you bow down before).

Jews who knew their OT and read v. 3 about gold and fire might be reminded of the time Aaron took their gold and threw in the fire to mold and make a golden calf which they worshipped as their god instead of the true God. We still have hearts that tend to fashion other gods today, in the little idol factory inside each of us.

## **2. Unjust practices (v. 4)**

<sup>4</sup> *Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you ...*

If in v. 2 they were guilty of hoarding resources to drive up prices, then in v. 4 they were doubly guilty of withholding wages to line their own pockets. Many of these laborers were Jewish immigrants who had been dispersed abroad outside their homeland, but didn’t have the rights or resources legally to fight unjust powerful land-owners, perhaps in a similar way to an illegal immigrant in CA who an employer hires as a laborer agreeing to pay them a certain amount after a week, but the employer has no intention of paying and he knows the worker can’t afford to take him to court and won’t turn the boss in to authorities so he takes unfair advantage.

This verse basically says “You have far more than your necessities, and even having your fields mowed is not a necessity but is a luxury, but you won’t pay these workers so they can have the most basic necessities of life?!” I worked one summer in landscaping in Oregon where it’s not as dry and hot as it is in Palestine, but it’s hard work, even with modern equipment we had. In the Philippines and much of world, you know what lawnmowers look like? Crouch and clip by hand. In James 5, these workers toil in the sun all day, the owner kicks it in the shade back at the house sipping pomegranate juice. He may not hear the cries and groans of these workers he uses and abuses, because his foreman makes sure he never has to interact with them directly, but there is someone who always hears those cries ...

v. 4b ... *and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.*

That's not a misspelling of "Sabbath" – it's a different root word from Hebrew for "hosts" or "armies" ("Lord Sabaoth his name"). This word emphasizes the military might and warrior nature of the Lord, who as one writer said 'is greater than all the hosts of heaven [and therefore] is certainly great enough to mete out justice to the cruel fat cats who inflict such pain and misery on their workers!'<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate Lord of the harvest will come in judgment on those who harvest or work unjustly, they will reap what they sow. God's Law commanded that the field owners leave behind in harvesting for the poor, widows, and foreigners (ex: Ruth), but the sinful rich in the day of James were not only *not* providing for those people, they were using and abusing them as well as their hired help. God hears the cries of injustice, and He's coming as Judge soon (5:8-9).

Alec Motyer suggests the original Jewish readers would pick up on the language of Isaiah 5 and its context of man's injustice that will be judged by God's justice. In both James 5 and Isaiah 5, "the rich were using their 'muscle' to gain every piece of available land for their own aggrandizement and comfort...the poor were suffering loss of land and income. When the Lord came to his vineyard (Is. 5:1ff.) he looked for righteousness, but heard only a cry of outrage and pain (Is. 5:7). His ears are still sensitive to the sufferings of the oppressed. It may be that the unexpected description of... *the Lord of hosts* is intended to do no more than achieve this cross-reference to Isaiah 5 and thereby to bring an even deeper reassurance and comfort to the Lord's beleaguered people. He has always been on their side. The message through Isaiah all those years ago proved to be a word from the Lord. He did step in to judge the oppressor—and he will still do so today. But in its own right the title is worth pondering. In its Old Testament use it points to the Lord who has within himself and at his sovereign command every possible potency and resource: he is 'hosts.' No power, however great or solid to the earthly eye, is beyond his capacity; no need, however pressing, is beyond his means, or outside his attention. What can the powerless labourer do against the all-powerful employer? Nothing for himself, but he can be sure that his very situation has already registered an appeal in the highest court of all. Here the all-powerful Lord sits as judge of the oppressor and the all-sufficient God attends to the needs of his people."<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that James 5, like Isaiah 5 has a twofold purpose: encouraging the godly while rebuking the ungodly rich and faithless for sins of unnecessary hoarding, unjust practices, and ...

### **3. Unrestrained self-indulgence**

<sup>5</sup> *You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure ...* [some translations have "luxury and self-indulgence"]

There's the American dream! This afternoon you may see ads that run \$1 million for ½ minute to convince you to buy a James 5:5 life. Don't buy it, because there's more in the verse. There *is some* pleasure in living high on the hog, but as you keep reading v. 5 you see that the hog getting fattened up has something else coming ...

v. 5b ... *you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*

The lifestyles of the rich and faithless from man's perspective may be relaxing, even temporarily gladdening with all the pampering and fattening, but the tragic irony is they're in God's eyes like the farm animals they fatten up; unthinking beasts that have no idea they're just being made ready for the slaughter. These rich may have people under them that they can order at any time to kill and cook a fatted calf for them, but the God who owns a cattle on a thousand hills and has all authority and all things are under Him, He can order the execution of any man at any time. Time's up!

Jesus told the story of a man who lived the lifestyle of the rich and faithless, unrestrained comfort and luxury, eating and drinking the best of whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, but a poor man named Lazarus wasn't even allowed to eat the crumbs that fell from his table, his tongue and stomach unsatisfied. Lazarus died.

In eternity, the ungodly rich man was surprised to see their roles reversed, Lazarus in comforts of heaven but he a rich man now in Hades in torment, so he cries for the help he didn't give on earth: "*And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'*"<sup>25</sup> "*But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.*" (Luke 16:24-25)

I agree with the writer who said James agrees with that story and speaks of the same type of 'people living *on the earth* as if this life were all that is, without thought of a heaven to be gained or a hell to be avoided ... [James uses] the accusation that they *fattened their hearts in a day of slaughter*. The picture is fearfully vivid. They are like so many unthinking beasts, luxuriating in their rich pasture day after day, growing fat by the hour and careless of the fact that each day, each hour, brings the butcher ... nearer ... In such a way James saw the wealthy, blind alike to heaven and hell, living for this life, forgetting the day of slaughter.'<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Unconcerned for the innocent they destroy**

<sup>6</sup> *You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.*

The sin is not wealth in James 5, but the *way some gain* wealth (v. 4), the *way they misuse* wealth (v. 5), and *what their wealth does* to them and others (v. 6). Kent Hughes writes: 'Though this is a characterization of the world without Christ, we must never imagine ourselves to be immune. We must each ask ourselves: Do I hoard? Am I guilty of overaccumulation of wealth? Have I ever or am I now defrauding someone? Is there financial deception in my life? Have I succumbed to the culture's Siren song of self-indulgence? Are there sub-Christian excesses in my life? ... have I victimized someone because of a power advantage I possess?'<sup>5</sup>

We should also think of someone else in v. 6. Read it again. Can you think of a righteous man who was condemned and put to death and who did not resist? On the cross His cry reached all the way to heaven. And He hears the cries of all His children who are unjustly treated because He Himself was unjustly treated in Jesus Christ.

In the day of slaughter, He went silently, as a sheep going to the slaughter. He did not resist and did not even open His mouth. He was condemned in court in an unfair trial and effectively sentenced to death, and the One who had unlimited riches in heaven willingly became poor (not even having a place to lay his head) for us!

2 Corinthians 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.*

Jesus was executed by the wealthy and influential. He received no wages but was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver that is now rusted and gone. It was money that drove Judas to do that heinous crime just as money is the root of all sorts of other kinds of evil. But now all who are poor in spirit, all who know they cannot pay their way to heaven and can never earn or deserve God's grace, if they repent and trust in the death and resurrection of Christ for their sins, they are redeemed, not by perishable gold and silver, but imperishable, by the precious priceless lifeblood of Jesus Christ! Why did He do it? Not 'cause of us, no riches or resources here, only wretchedness

Ephesians 2:4 *But God, being **rich in mercy**, because of His great love with which He loved us,<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come He might show **the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.***

What a beautiful and wonderful Savior we have, Amen?

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger Ellsworth, *Opening Up James* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2009), 146–147.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James : The Tests of Faith*, *The Bible speaks today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 166–167.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James*, p. 219.