

James 5:1-6

I. Your punishment is coming (1)

A. Pay attention, now, you rich people! (1a)

James uses a term which serves to call for attention and emphasize what follows, cf. 4:13

James addresses the rich. Based on the context below, it is likely that James is not addressing all people with wealth, but a certain kind of rich person, as defined below.

The Biblical teaching about riches is varied and complicated:

In the Old Testament, riches were a sign of God's blessing.

But riches gained by unjust means were a cause for judgment.

In the New Testament, the idea is added that riches in this age will pass away, and should be used to store up treasure for the coming age.

In this passage, James seems to emphasize judgment against unjustly gained riches and the fleeting nature of riches in this world.

B. Weep because your miseries are coming (1b-c)

1. Weep (1b)

2. Crying out in your miseries, which are coming (1c)

They are to express mourning in anticipation of the wretched misery, which James predicts is imminent to them.

The direct message is the inevitability of their misery if they don't repent. But, the implied message is that they should repent and avoid this misery.

This entire passage is a prophetic pronouncement of judgment. But like all judgment oracles in the Old Testament, there is an implied promise that judgment will be turned aside if repentance happens.

II. Reason: You lost your reward, you gained your punishment (2-6)

A. Your riches will fail you (2-3)

1. The loss of your treasure is punishment against you (2a-3d)

a You are losing everything you treasure (2a-3a)

1) Your riches have rotted (2a)

The riches which they relied on and put their hope in have decayed. James speaks of this as if it has already happened. He is not speaking of a past occurrence, but of a future which is so certain that it can be spoken as a sure thing. Their wealth will rot or decay, because they will rot and decay in death, which is certain for everyone. Remember the Biblical theme that the things of this age will all pass away to nothing.

2) And your clothing has become moth-eaten (2b)

In the same way, their clothing will certainly rot away

3) Your gold and silver will corrode (3a)

"corrode" is a general term for any kind of metal being tarnished by oxidation. One form of this is "rust" on iron, which is the usual translation

All of these are referencing the saying of Jesus in Matt. 6:19-20 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal."

b The corrosion of your treasure will show your folly (3b-d)

1) And their corrosion will be a witness against you (3b)

The corrosion of the treasures in which you put your trust testify to their transitory and temporary nature. And therefore, it shows the stupidity of putting hope in something that is guaranteed eventually to disappoint. Earthly treasures are false gods, which will only leave their worshippers unsatisfied. And even worse, those who serve false gods will share in their punishment, which is the focus of the next proposition.

2) And it will devour you like fire (3c-d)

a) And it will devour your flesh (3c)

The corruption common to all of this world will eventually consume the reader as well as their treasure. Once again this is a reminder of the temporary nature of this age, and the foolishness of putting all hope in it.

But James seems to be saying even more here. There will be a double loss. Not only will they lose their treasure, they will suffer active punishment for idolatrously hoping in it.

b) As fire [consumes] (3d)

2. You are treasuring up in the last days (3e)

This statement is ambiguous. It could mean:

1) It is the last days, and you are storing up wealth (which is a stupid thing to do, considering the shortness of time).

2) You have stored up wealth (with emphasis on the hoarding) in the last days (which is stupid, considering how little benefit it will be in the last days).

3) Or it could possibly be intended ironically to refer to the judgment that they are “treasuring up”, which will come to pass in the last days.

B. The Reason you are being punished (4-6)

1. You defrauded your workers (4)

These two propositions should be taken together. They describe the readers acting selfishly and unrighteously in cheating their employees, for which they will be punished.

a The wages defrauded from the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you (4a)

The word “defrauded” means to take away by illicit means such as deception or trickery. It is to steal something that rightfully belongs to the workers. This verse does not address the issue of how much workers should be paid. It only addresses the issue of defrauding workers.

The main point of this proposition is that the crime testifies against the criminal in a way that cannot be ignored.

b And the cries of the harvesters have entered the ear of the Lord Almighty (4b)

This proposition is parallel to the previous. Therefore, the cries of the harvesters are about them being the victim of criminal fraud. “Cries” is an intensive word for shouting out, which elevates the sound beyond ordinary vocalization. And this proposition intensifies the previous one by emphasizing that the Lord is the one who takes notice of the cries of injustice. The clear implication is that God will do something about it. And the God Who intervenes is called “the Lord Almighty” – the Sovereign Lord over all the universe, with unlimited power is the One Who will exercise judgment. The unjust landowner is clearly warned that injustice will be punished.

2. You indulged yourself with luxury (5)

These three propositions should be taken together to describe a lifestyle of selfishness and lack of self-control, for which the readers will be punished.

a You lived in luxury on the earth (5a)

“luxury” has the connotation of self-indulgence, and living for pleasure as expressed in lack of self-control. The problem is not necessarily what we today would call luxury (although that can be a problem). The problem is most likely that their focus is on selfish pleasure in this world, which is causing them to ignore, not only righteousness and the needy people around them, but especially the pleasures of the world to come.

b And you’ve indulged yourself (5b)

“indulged yourself” means to indulge yourself beyond the limits of what is proper. It has the connotation of intemperance and excess. So not every cheat on a diet puts a person under the critique of this proposition. It builds on the previous proposition to speak of living solely for oneself in a selfish way.

c And you have nourished/fattened your heart in the day of slaughter (5c)

“nourished” means to provide food for over an extended period of time. It probably continues the idea of selfishly spoiling oneself from the previous propositions.

“day of slaughter” is a time of destructive judgment

This could mean that the readers were selfishly feeding themselves when those around were suffering under judgment. The picture is of someone feasting themselves during a famine, when those around are starving they might congratulate themselves on their ability to avoid hunger, but in reality they are only showing their selfishness, self-indulgence, and lack of care for others.

This could also be meant symbolically that the reader is “fattening” their heart for slaughter, drawing on the idea of fattening up an animal to prepare them to be eaten. In this case, this proposition is the ironic result of the previous two. The reader thought they were living large for their pleasures, but in reality, they were only digging their own metaphorical graves.

3. You killed the righteous, who did not fight back (6)

These three propositions should be taken together to describe one act of injustice, for which the readers will be punished. It is another example of using power and influence for selfish unrighteousness.

a You condemned (6a)

This word simply means to judge someone to be guilty. However, in the context of the next proposition, it likely has the meaning of illegitimately condemning a person who was actually innocent and undeserving of punishment. In this case, it is a tremendous miscarriage of justice, and an abuse of the authority to judge.

b You murdered the righteous (6b)

Taken with the previous proposition, this probably means that the readers used a position of legal authority to condemn an innocent person and have them executed. This is called murder, even though it may have happened through legal channels intended to uphold justice. The problem is not with the legal system, but with those twisting the system to the opposite of the justice the system was intended to serve.

c [Who] He is not resisting you (6c)

And the innocent person who was murdered did not show hostility toward the unjust readers, even in their unrighteous judgment. And he did not even fight back against their injustice, or was unable to stand against their injustice. cf. I Peter 2:18-25.