



Catalog No. 1061

James 5:1-6

Twelfth Message

John Hanneman

January 19, 1997

THE FOLLY OF THE RICH MAN

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

It's probably safe to say that at one time or another, all of us can relate to the song of Tevya, "If I Were A Rich Man," from *Fiddler on the Roof*:

I'd build a big tall house with rooms by the dozen
right in the middle of the town,
A fine tin roof with real wooden floors below.
There would be one long staircase just going up,
and one even longer coming down,
and one more leading nowhere just for show.

I'd fill my yard with chicks and turkeys and geese
and ducks for the town to see and hear,
squawking just as noisily as they can.
And each loud quack and cluck and gobble and honk
will land like a trumpet in the ear,
As if to say here lives a wealthy man....

Lord who made the lion and lamb;
You decreed I should be what I am.
Would it spoil some vast eternal plan,
If I were a wealthy man?

Oh to be rich! How wonderful life would be! When the plumbing broke down, we could call a repair man and not spend Saturday fixing it ourselves. We could get a new car every year. We would never have to set foot in the repair shop and cringe when we heard how much repairs were going to cost. We wouldn't have to stay at Uncle Fred's during summer vacation to save the expense of a couple of nights in a hotel. We could call a travel agent and book two weeks in the Caribbean. When we needed new furniture, we could redecorate the whole house at the same time. If we didn't feel like cooking, we wouldn't have to think twice about going out for dinner.

A popular television show pays homage to the wealthy. We are allowed to tour their houses—but only on the screen. How pleasant life would be if we didn't have to worry about making ends meet. Some fantasize about winning the lottery. Others dream about a start-up business or going public with the business they have. Yet others dream about collecting royalties from a new invention or a best-selling novel.

The desire for riches and the pursuit of wealth are very tempting indeed.

Money and possessions become even more desirable when we are in tough circumstances. When life knocks us down and we feel overwhelmed, we want protection and security from the storms that beat against us. That is when we are tempted to grow envious and resentful, to be sarcastic and cynical toward those who seem to have everything.

In our studies in the letter of James we have been learning how Christians should respond to the pressures of life. The brother of the Lord wrote this epistle to some very poor Christians to instruct them how to deal with the temptations they were facing because of

their oppressive circumstances. One temptation that we continually face is having to deal with the thought that if we acquired wealth we could somehow escape the problems that life brings. But James says that nothing could be further from the truth.

In our last study, James exposed the foolishness of the boastful man, the self-made individual who thinks he can control his own destiny. Today we will look at the folly of the rich man. Chapter 5, verse 1.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 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. 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. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. (James 5:1-6 NASB)

I do not think the individual being addressed here is a believer. Notice that he is introduced in the same way as the boastful man, in 4:13: "Come now, you rich." We have already encountered this person. He is the one who actually should be boasting in his humiliation, his low position, because, like the flowering grass that wilts in the summer sun, he, too, will fade away. This is the one whom the brethren were being tempted to treat favorably. When he came into their midst, they offered him the seat of honor, while the poor brother was sent to sit in a corner, on the floor. They were favoring the rich man even though he was the one who was causing much of their distress; and they looked upon him with envy.

But now James deals with this man in full. The first thing he says to him is the terse instruction: "weep and howl for the miseries coming upon him." Years ago, I took my children to the supermarket one evening. We had just eaten dinner, and they were rather energized. Soon they began running up and down the aisles, laughing and giggling. You can let your children do that on an airplane, because then the stewardess will serve you first, but not in a grocery store! I told them they had to settle down, but to no avail. They thought they were safe because we were out in public. Finally, I grabbed them and calmly said that when we got home, they would get a spanking. Suddenly, all their laughter turned to gloom. They began to "weep and howl for the misery coming upon them."

That is what James is saying to get the attention of the rich man. The man is laughing and enjoying life, thinking that he is secure and protected. He has life figured out. There is nothing left for him to do except eat, drink, and be merry. But James flattens this fat cat. The

jig is up. Dire consequences are coming. Instead of laughing and living it up, the rich man should be weeping.

What has this man done to suffer such consequences? James takes his readers into the courtroom to present the evidence that convicts him. He begins by calling upon four witnesses to share their testimony.

The first witness is the false treasure in which the rich man has placed his trust. James shows what happens in the future to all the beautiful things that filled the rich man's closet and his jewelry box. James take us, not to a Neiman Marcus store, but to a junkyard. The man's riches are decayed. His garments are moth-eaten; his gold and silver have rusted.

The word here for "rotted" refers to fruit that has rotted. Have you ever picked up a tomato that had been lying on the ground for days? The part you can see is a beautiful red, but when you pick it up, the bottom is all black and decayed and infested with bugs. The fruit is repulsive to the eyes; it is worthless.

And so is everything in which the rich man had placed his hope: it is all decayed and rotten. It isn't beautiful. It doesn't shine. It isn't permanent. It doesn't matter now whether his possessions were purchased at Bloomingdales or at the Five and Dime. It is all worthless junk. This witness testifies that everything in which the rich man has placed his confidence is just so much decayed and rusted junk.

In the future, there will be no benefit to the money and possessions we acquire on earth. We can't take it with us. If we put our hope in earthly treasures, we will be sadly disappointed.

The book of Proverbs agrees:

**Do not weary yourself to gain wealth,
Cease from your consideration of it.
When you set your eyes on it, it is gone.
For wealth certainly makes itself wings,
Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens. (Prov 23:4-5)**

The second witness is the wages that have been withheld from the laborers in the rich man's field, and the cry of the workers who plowed and harvested to provide him a life of pleasure. Not only does the Lord of Hosts hear the cry of the workers, the wages themselves are personified: they raise their voice to testify on behalf of the oppressed workers.

"Lord of Hosts" is an exalted title for God in the Old Testament. God is a glorious King who rules over the entire universe. The word "Hosts" also means armies. God is a great King who commands an enormous army that brings victory and salvation. This is the King who has heard the cry of the oppressed—not good news for the rich man.

The point here is the rich man has prospered unethically, immorally, illegally, and unjustly. His gains are ill-gotten. He has taken advantage of defenseless people, using them so that he may live in comfort. But God has heard the cries of the witness.

It is tempting to cheat on taxes or fudge on expense reports. Everyone does it, we are assured. It is tempting to figure out angles in order to get a little more money from the insurance company; to not pay people what they are worth; to take advantage of the illegal immigrant. But God is not fooled. We are the ones who are fooled if we think that we can get away with acquiring money and possessions through fraud, deceit, and unethical behavior. The very coins themselves will testify against us on the day of reckoning.

The third witness testifies as to the rich man's lifestyle. He has lived luxuriously—a life of wanton pleasure. These terms refer to animals which are well-fed and content from grazing in rich pasture. Indeed, the rich man is in "fat city." He lives very well; he has neither care nor need. Everything he wants he has, and he has the best.

Some of you may be asking, what is wrong with living luxuriously? The point is that the rich man lives only for himself. His life is characterized by gluttony and greed. He has acquired wealth merely to satisfy and please himself.

An enormously rich man complained to a psychiatrist once that despite his great wealth which enabled him to have whatever he wanted, he still felt miserable. The psychiatrist took the man to the window overlooking the street and asked, "What do you see?" The man replied, "I see men, women, and children." The psychiatrist then took the man to stand in front of a mirror and asked, "Now what do you see?" The man said, "I see only myself." The psychiatrist then said, "In the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass, and when you look through the glass in the window, you see others, but when you look into the glass of the mirror you see only yourself. The reason for this," said the psychiatrist, "is that behind the glass in the mirror is a layer of silver. When silver is added, you cease to see others. You only see yourself."

The fourth witness is a surprise. The rich man has condemned and murdered the righteous man, who does not resist. In other words, the greed of the rich man has caused the death, either directly or indirectly, of those whom he has oppressed. They were defenseless; they could not resist. James does not call this manslaughter; he calls it murder. The cost of the rich man's luxury is the lives of others.

This abstract phrase could well describe the death and crucifixion of Jesus. He was the righteous man who did not resist his own death. He did not speak out, but was led like a sheep to slaughter. The point may well be that the rich man is guilty of the same crime, the same capital offense as those who crucified our Lord.

The principle here is that if we set our hearts on wealth we will stop at nothing to attain it. We will oppress others, either directly or indirectly. We won't stop even if it costs them their livelihood or their lives. Stealing may well lead to murder, as people become objects to use and destroy.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that today is Sanctity of Life Sunday. Abortion is one of the great tragedies of our time. Oftentimes, it is greed and self-indulgence that lie behind the taking of the lives of the unborn. An untimely, unwanted child might well be deemed to inhibit the pursuit of wealth, success, and possessions. Some people will stop at nothing in their pursuit of ease and luxury, even if it means taking the life of one who cannot resist.

The witnesses have testified; the evidence has been labeled and presented. The judge has declared the rich man guilty, and sentenced him to death. James details the mode of execution. The end of the rich man is marked by two things that are entirely appropriate punishment for his crimes. Not only do his treasures witness against him, they end up destroying him. The rust that accumulates on his gold and silver becomes a poison that eats away his flesh. Like a fire, it consumes him. His possessions demand his life.

This man is described in Proverbs:

**But they lie in wait for their own blood;
They ambush their own lives.
So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;**

It takes away the life of its possessors. (Prov 1:18-19)

Setting our hearts on acquiring riches and possessions has a way of consuming and poisoning our lives. The more we have, the more time we must spend keeping everything running. Possessions demand all our energies. Our focus becomes earthly, separating us from eternal things. This is simply a foreshadowing of what will happen to the rich man in the future.

The second thing is this: The rich “fatten themselves for the day of slaughter.” We have already seen that the words for living luxuriously and living a life of wanton pleasure are used of animals that are well fed. The rich man has grazed in a lush pasture but, like a cow or a sheep, he has gorged himself for a day of slaughter.

In the 1950’s, Yussif the Turk, the European wrestling champion, came to the United States to fight Strangler Lewis for the world championship and \$5,000. Yussif won, and insisted that the \$5,000 be paid in gold, which he stuffed in his championship belt. The money meant so much to him that he refused to remove the belt until he reached home safely. Boarding the first available ship to Europe, he headed home. But halfway across the Atlantic, the ship floundered in a storm and began to sink. In a panic, Yussif tried to jump into a lifeboat, but he missed, and went straight to the bottom of the ocean. His golden belt had become a golden anchor.

Proverbs has dire warnings for those who oppress the poor:

**He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor
Will also cry himself and not be answered. (Prov 21:13)**

**He who oppresses the poor to make much for himself
Or who gives to the rich, will only come to poverty. (22:16)**

The end for the rich man is decidedly unpleasant. He has stored up his treasure for the last days. The wealth that he thought would save him and protect him has become the agent of his judgment. He reaps what he sows. Pay no attention to what the bumper sticker says; the one who “dies with the most toys” does not win, he loses. How appropriate that James commands the rich man to weep and howl for the misery coming upon him.

How can we apply this text for ourselves? The problem with the rich man is not his wealth, it is the way he acquires wealth and the manner in which he lives. There are not many among us who oppress people to gain riches. We are not running sweat shops; we are not involved in other kinds of illegal operations. Yet this text raises difficult questions. The fact is, most of us are wealthy compared with the rest of the world. We spend a great deal of time and energy thinking about money, planning our future, and deciding what things we should own.

It would be easy to rail against the rich and gloat because they are going to get what is coming to them. However, this text was written for brethren to give them hope and to help them endure suffering by knowing, first, the end of their oppressors; and second, that they might humble themselves before the Lord. The word for “miseries” here is the same term that James uses in chapter 4 to command the brethren to “be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom...Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” If we would avoid these future miseries, then we would be better served by humbling ourselves before the Lord. Rather than pointing a cynical finger at others, we would be wise to cleanse our own hearts and respond rightly regarding our wealth and our possessions.

There is no set formula here, and I certainly don’t want to motivate by guilt. However, in contrast to the rich man, I would have us reflect on these thoughts.

First, do not worry about the rich, either now or in the future. We should not waste time envying or resenting them. And we don’t have to worry about what will happen to them. God will take care of everything in due time. If all they have done is store up earthly treasures, then they will have nothing left for the future. There is no real reason to envy or resent them. We should feel sorry for them. Anyone who has to face the consequences laid out in this text deserves our sympathy. Who could not but feel sympathy for the rich man in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man? In the end, the rich man was forced to endure the torment, while Lazarus reposed in the bosom of the Lord.

James is saying that the rich man is a fool, and we too would be foolish if we spend our time envying, resenting or pampering him.

Second, let us put our trust and hope in eternal riches, “laying up treasures in heaven.” The rich man puts all his hope in what he gathers here on earth; the wise man realizes that none of these things will help him in the hereafter. Listen to the advice of Jesus:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matt 6:19-21)

**Riches do not profit in the day of wrath.
But righteousness delivers from death. (Prov 11:4)**

I am not saying that we should not have any material possessions or that we should not plan for the future. The wise man in Proverbs saves little by little. And some who deprive themselves of material things have such rotten attitudes that they become reverse snobs.

The real issue is, where is our treasure? In what do we place our hope? The problem, as Paul points out in 1 Timothy, is the love of money, the uncertainty of wealth and the priority we place on riches:

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil . . . Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. (1 Tim 6:9-10, 17)

If we love money, we won’t love God. Jesus himself said that: We cannot love God and Mammon. If we love the things of this earth, we will become separated from God. We will place our hope in all the wrong things. We will enjoy a moment of luxury in the present, but endless misery in the future. We must hold our possessions loosely, knowing that at some point we will lose all our money and all our possessions.

When we get to heaven, it will not matter whether we had a three-car garage here on earth. It won’t matter whether we traveled in Europe, swam in the tropics and or in New York. When we get to heaven, God’s glory will so overshadow all these things that they will seem like nothing in comparison. What will matter is whether we have invested in eternal things, heavenly treasures that do not rot or decay: acts of kindness, times of worship and prayer, listening to someone pour out his heart, working at the Crisis Pregnancy Center.

These activities may not bring earthly gain, but the investment for the future is unparalleled. “[F]or where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Third, let us regard our money and possessions as the means to bless others. As Christians, we are called to be generous. Generosity will keep us from hoarding, from loving money and being absorbed in self-luxury. And it would be wise to remember that we can be greedy, self-indulgent people whether we make a lot of money or very little. This is what Paul means when he tells Timothy to instruct the rich “to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they many take hold of that which is life indeed” (1 Tim 6:18-19).

Rather than regarding money as a means to bless ourselves, we must see it as a means to bless others. Rather than taking another’s life, we are to increase and enhance their life. Rather than oppressing others, we are to use our resources to encourage them and lift them up. Our future treasures are not just times spent in prayer, they are good works which God has prepared beforehand for us.

One of the ways we are called to bless others is to the give to the poor. James says that “pure and undefiled religion is to visit orphans and widows in their distress.” We must remember, as James said, that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith. Of course, we are confronted almost daily with opportunities to give to apparently worthy causes. Sometimes it is difficult to determine who are the poor. Is that person standing on the street corner who demands money from you really needy or is he merely trying to manipulate you by guilt? But, there are genuinely poor people all over this world. Let us prayerfully take time before the Lord to determine our response.

**He who gives to the poor will never want,
But he who shuts his eyes will have many curses. (Prov 28:27)**

Several years ago, a Texas gemologist spotted a egg-shaped violet-and-blue rock in a plastic bin at a gem and mineral bazaar. He bought it from an amateur for ten dollars. After months of appraisal, it was revealed that the treasure was a 1,905-carat star sapphire, with an estimated uncut value of \$2.28 million dollars. The man said, “I’m astounded that this one pebble out of God’s universe will take care of my children’s lives. That makes me feel very good.” But somewhere, a rock hound is crying.

We must learn the true value of our treasures. Many of the things we place such a high value on today will be worthless in the future, while some of the things we are tempted to neglect will be found to be absolutely priceless.

Let us learn from the folly of the rich man and store up “treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth destroy.”

I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I’d rather be His than have riches untold.

© 1997 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino