

James: IRL | Gospel vs Greed | James 5:1-6

November 19, 2023 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] Are any of you haunted by something? Almost twenty years ago I was driving in Maine and a snowstorm hit, the roads iced up, and I was still twenty minutes from home. I thought, I can make it. Well, I kinda did. I came over a hill and started easing my way down it. I thought I was going slow enough. At the bottom of the hill, this other guy lost control of his vehicle and crashed into the side rails. He was a couple hundred feet ahead of me. So, I started braking. Nothing. I'm slamming my foot on the brakes, pumping them, pulling the emergency brake, trying to turn, nothing worked. I just slowly slid down that road in a straight line into his car. It was a slow motion experience of complete powerlessness.

Now, when it snows, I drive Heather crazy with how cautious I am. That feeling of powerlessness still haunts me and comes back every time I'm driving in icy conditions. I don't like it.

Are any of you haunted by a scripture passage? Is that a strange question? I'll tell you what, there are some doozies in the Bible, but the one that filled me with guilt and anxiety for most of my life is James 4:17.

James 4:17 (NLT) Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

I went to a boarding school for missionary kids when I was in high school, a place just full of rules. And I vividly remember the staff quoting this verse at us, telling us if we see dirty dishes and don't wash them, it's a sin. If we see trash on the ground and don't pick it up, sin. If we see some way we could help them out and didn't, SIN – somewhat convenient for them, in hindsight. There isn't enough time in the day to do all the things we ought to do – it didn't matter how hard I tried, man I was sinning all the time. That verse still haunts me, coming back in all sorts of situations; could I have done more for that person, should I have said something different, should I have pushed back harder on something wrong, is there something I should be doing for my family?

Which is not quite what James was going for with this warning; the context, which starts in James 4:13, is critical.

James 4:13-16 (NLT) ¹³ Look here,

These two words carry a tone of correction, of a tone of frustration, a tone of condemnation.¹ James is shifting into a new topic in his letter and he wants to get the reader's attention.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), Kindle location 5993.

James 4:13-16 (NLT) ¹³ Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” ¹⁴ How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone.

¹⁵ What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil.

He’s not calling them out because they made money, he’s calling them out because they put all their plans and faith in their money. God was an afterthought. Their plans for the future, their security, all of that was tied up in *their* plans, not God’s plans. And then he gets to the crescendo, calling out the rich.

James 4:17-5:6 (NLT) ^{4:17} Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

^{5:1} Look here, you rich people:

Let’s pause for a moment; I want to point something out.

When James wrote this, it was a letter – centuries later someone else split it into chapters and added verse numbers to make it easier to navigate. The challenge is, sometimes we look at these chapter breaks and think it’s a completely new section or thought - and sometimes that is the case - but it’s not here. Every scholar I read said the same thing, that James 4:13-5:6 was one section, one thought, which we can tell because of the unified theme and the repeated language of “look here.” James is doubling down when he says, “look here, you rich people.” 4:13-16 was the introduction to the real point.

^{5:1} Look here, you rich people: Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. ² Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags.

³ Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment. ⁴ For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay.

The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. ⁵ You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter.

⁶ You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you.

According to Old Testament law, the wealthy taking advantage of the poor was a crime. In fact, simply failing to help the poor was a crime, a sin of omission one could say.² In other words, when James is saying, “*it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it,*” this is exactly what he is referring to. He’s saying, “look here, you rich people, you know what to do with your money and you’re not doing it – that’s a sin.”

Each of the commentaries I read made the same observation about the target of James words here: these rich were not Christians.³ While the letter was written to Christians, this portion of it was calling out the sin of the rich who were oppressing these early, poor, Christians. James isn’t railing against these unsaved rich because they were rich, he’s railing against their misuse of their wealth. And he identifies three ways they are misusing it:

James 5:2-3 (NLT) ² *Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This corroded treasure you have hoarded will testify against you on the day of judgment.*

They hoarded wealth. It’s such a massive waste; the clothes are rotting away before they can even be used – it’s like they have things they’ve bought, hanging in the closet unused, with the tags still on it, the money is corroding from lack of use. Over and over scripture reveals God’s heart for those in need, the hungry, the poor, those without a voice, and here are the resources that could help them being hoarded rather than being put to use for God’s kingdom.

⁴ For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

They cheated the poor. In desperation, the poor would work for these wealthy landowners hoping to be paid, yet they were frequently denied their wages. This was a problem that had gone on for centuries:

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (NLT) ¹⁴ *“Never take advantage of poor and destitute laborers, whether they are fellow Israelites or foreigners living in your towns. ¹⁵ You must pay them their wages each day before sunset because they are poor and are counting on it.*

If you don’t, they might cry out to the Lord against you, and it would be counted against you as sin.

² Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), Kindle location 1931.

³ Moo, *The Letter of James*, Kindle location 6028.

They cheated the poor. Why would the poor keep working for these people? They were trapped in their poverty, there were no other options, and so they did a hard day's work hoping to get paid, sweating and bleeding to fatten the wallets of the wealthy and then would end up going hungry when they weren't paid, when they were cheated of their wages.

⁵ You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every desire. You have fattened yourselves for the day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and killed innocent people, who do not resist you.

They lived in luxury. It's easy to focus on the killing innocent people, but the sin was that they lived in luxury, they lived self-indulgently. And their self-indulgent lifestyles killed the innocent. Death was the result of their luxury. How offensive is this to God? We often think of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of God's wrath and judgement, but do you know the reason behind their destruction? Ezekial reveals just that in a message from the Lord to Jerusalem – I love the way the Message translation brings life to this passage:

Ezekiel 16:49-50 (The Message) “The sin of your sister Sodom was this: She lived with her daughters in the lap of luxury—proud, gluttonous, and lazy. They ignored the oppressed and the poor. They put on airs and lived obscene lives. And you know what happened: I did away with them.

They lived in luxury. The lap of luxury, obscene lives. Exactly what James is talking about in our passage today. Their killing of the innocent was more subtle than you may think. We read “condemned and killed innocent people” and picture violent murders, but commentators give a different explanation⁴: what James is describing is the very real outcome of the wealthy's hoarding of wealth and resources and cheating the poor – people died; of starvation, of illness because they couldn't afford medical help, from the vulnerability that comes with poverty. The wealthy may not have plunged a knife into them, but they created the circumstances that led to the death of innocents.

Which brings us back to James' warning:

James 4:17-5:6 (NLT) ^{4:17} Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

They misused their wealth. And people died for it; sometimes because of something they did, sometimes because they knew what they ought to do and didn't do it.

But if James was talking about people who were not believers, what does that have to do with us? Sam Allberry points out in his commentary two reasons James writes this to believers, two reasons that directly apply to us as well: first, that we would know

⁴ Ibid, Kindle location 6255.

what God thinks of this kind of misuse of wealth, and secondly, that as we look at these sinful behaviors – hoarding wealth, cheating the poor, and living in luxury – that we would check ourselves against this list.⁵

The challenge is this word rich, isn't it? Our American culture drives us to accumulate, to build our net worth, to have expectations about what we're entitled to. We read headlines on what people are valued at, and the thing is, when we look around there's always someone with more, isn't there? We find ourselves saying, "I'm not rich ... so-and-so is the one who is wealthy."

Al Tizon's book, *Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor, and the Mission of the Church*, is a fascinating exploration of this topic. He does something interesting; he avoids the word "rich" and instead writes about the poor and the nonpoor. Why does he avoid "rich"? Partially because we're so good at giving that label to others, but struggle to see it as appropriate for ourselves – even though the United States, with only 4.23% of the world's population holds 31% of the world's wealth.⁶ We are literally the wealthiest nation in the world by a huge margin. And this is by design. **George Kennon**, a US foreign policy planner, said in 1948, "We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population ... Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity."⁷

It is ingrained in our culture maintain disparity, to look up to the wealthy and to vilify the poor; they just don't work hard enough, they're lazy – even though many who are low-income work far harder than the nonpoor would ever want to believe or acknowledge.

Al Tizon writes, "Jesus warned the rich; we tend to court them. Jesus was a friend of the poor; we tend to avoid them. Jesus taught that we cannot love God and money; we agree in principle but in practice we attempt to prove him wrong."⁸

We are the wealthy minority of the world; I don't know about you, but I start to get really uncomfortable when I consider the three sins of the rich God was no angry with in James 5: **Hoarding Wealth, Cheating the Poor, Living in Luxury**.

We as a nation hoard wealth; we know that our devices and foreign made toys and clothing are cheaper because of the horrible conditions and pay people receive in other parts of the world – but it works because in general we like getting lower prices so we can accumulate more. James writes of the rich killing the innocent; I've lived in South American nations where desperately hard working people saw family members die of

⁵ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2015), 126-127.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_total_wealth

⁷ Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 164.

⁸ Al Tizon, *Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor, and the Mission of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 15.

curable diseases because they didn't have the 50 cents it cost to take the bus to the city to get help. We eat the produce they die to harvest.

What we view as average lives, when we defend ourselves because we can see others around us with more, are luxurious to the rest of the world – luxurious to the poor in our own backyard.

James 4:17-5:6 (NLT) ^{4:17} Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

This is the context of James warning. The sin is not in being rich, it is in misusing wealth. When I was younger, this verse haunted me for the wrong reasons. Today, it haunts me more knowing the context of the warning. If James came and spoke to us today, what would he say? He was writing to the poor two thousand years ago; what would he write to us? Another way to put it would be to:

Do what you know to do.

The opposite of cheating the poor is seeing the image of God in them. When we purchase goods that have been produced by underpaid, abused workers, we aren't just cheating them, we're denying the image of God in them, their humanity, their worth. Take the time to know where the things you purchase come from and how they were obtained. We are called to use our voice and our influence for others, to advocate for livable wages and opportunities for those in need. Websites like Fair Trade Certified analyze how the workers are treated.

The opposite of hoarding wealth and living in luxury is living with contentment. There's a difference between having security for today and the future and having more than you need or could use. Our culture blinds us to how much we actually have, it fills us with discontentment, a constant desire to make more – "if I could just have that level of income, then I'll be content." God blesses some with more, us in comparison to the world around us, so that we can use those resources to help others. To not simply pray for those in need, but to meet their needs with God's resources He entrusted to us. To do what we know we ought to do with what God has blessed us with. Our church has partnered with organizations in our region that do just that; give financially and with service to them.

Let me close with this passage from Matthew, an example from Jesus of doing what we know we ought to do:

Matthew 25:37-40 (NLT) ³⁷ "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ "And the King will say, 'I tell you the

truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!