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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“YOU RICH PEOPLE”

James 5:1-6

If you have some cash on your person, please take out a bill or a coin. If you don't have any you could pull out your checkbook or debit card.

Let us say that the object you are holding in your hand is a symbol of all the material wealth you have owned, own now, or will own in the future: currency, real estate, precious metals, physical belongings, stocks, bonds, certificates of deposit, you name it. Take a good look at it. Turn it over, feel its weight. Smell it, if you wish. (If you were our puppy Scout, you would eat it.)

Consider your wealth. How have you acquired, tended, and spent it? What place does it have in your heart and in your mind?

Does it bring freedom to you and others, or bondage? Is it a force for internal peace or anxiety, for external harmony or conflict, for joy or grief, for purpose or futility, for service to God or service to self? Is it a force for life or a force for death?

Is your relationship with, and handling of, money and possessions the substance and evidence of a faith in Jesus that is alive and active and powerful to save? Or are they the substance and evidence of faithlessness?

■ Please onto your cash or checkbook or card for the duration of the sermon, and turn to James 5:1: **“Now**

listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.”

☑ **“You rich people.”** That lets us off the hook, doesn't it? Surveys show that very few Americans identify themselves as rich. We all {Catherine Rampell, *NY Times*} **“seem to think [we] are ‘middle class,’ even those in the top 5% of all earners”** in this country. Of course, most of us here *do* qualify as “middle class” *in the United States*, where the average per capita income in 2011 was \$41,560.

☑ Yet from a global perspective none of us are middle class. {Global Rich List} If your pre-tax income is \$25,000, you earn more than 90% of all human beings. If it is \$40,000, you are in the top 7% worldwide. And if your annual income is \$47,500, you are one of the 1% Compared to most people in most places we are rich, even super rich.

Surely, if James was present with us, he would call us **“rich people”**? How couldn't he?

But would James level these criticisms in chapter 5 at us? That depends. Simply possessing wealth is not immoral; nevertheless, some insidious sins are inextricably linked to the acquisition, tending, and use of wealth.

○ I am in no position either to condemn or acquit us of such iniquities. However, {Heb 4:12, TNIV} **“The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”**

I urge us to listen closely as the Holy Spirit speaks through the Word. May our hearts be softened to receive whatever {2 Ti 3:16} **“teaching, rebuking, correcting and training”** the LORD God has for us in this text.

James cautions these **“rich people”** that **“misery ... is coming upon”** them as a consequence of four particular economic sins: hoarding, self-indulgence, exploitation, and oppression. Each warning provides us with an opportunity for self-examination, commitment and, maybe repentance.

☠ The first sin is hoarding.

■ Verses 2-3: **“Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.”** Their wealth has not yet rotted, moths have not yet eaten their clothes, their gold has not yet corroded – but it is so certain to happen it is as good as done.

The problem is false trust. They cling to wealth as though it, rather than the living God, is the source of security, joy, hope, and worth.

○ They believe that their lives {Lk 12:15-20, TNIV} **“consist in an abundance of possessions.”** They are like the rich man {Lk 12:19-20} who said to himself, **“You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.’”**

Some of these **“rich people”** might be churchgoers who profess to be Christians. But the faith they have {Jas 2:26} **“is dead.”** Invest your trust in money and

possessions to provide security, joy, hope, or personal value and you will have none when your wealth is taken from you.

Are we that kind of rich people? If so, we had better **“weep and wail because of the misery that is coming.”**

☠ The second sin is self-indulgence.

■ Verse 5: **“You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.”**

The problem is false ownership and bad stewardship. They spend money and utilize possessions to please themselves rather than to please God.

○ They deny that it is the Creator who {Dt 8:18} **“gives [us] the ability to produce wealth,”** and that {24:1} **“The earth”** and **“everything in it”** belongs to him. They do not devote their wealth to serve God or neighbor or even their immortal soul, but physical comfort and bodily appetite.

Some of these **“rich people”** might be churchgoers who profess to be Christians. {Jas 2:14} Yet their faith has no power to save them. They are like livestock who greedily gobble up the slop that is dumped in their trough, hastening their own demise.

Devote yourself to material **“luxury and self-indulgence”** and you will probably get it; but that is all you will get.

Are we that kind of rich people? If so, we had better **“weep and wail because of the misery that is coming.”**

☠ The third sin is exploitation.

■ Verse 4: **“Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.”**

The problem is objectification. They treat their workers as tools for their gain, not as human beings with inherent dignity who deserve a decent wage.

Day laborers were among the most vulnerable people in the ancient world. Scripture warns land holders not to {Dt 24:14-15, TNIV} **“take advantage of a hired worker.”** It commands land owners to **“Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it.”**

Some of these **“rich people”** might be churchgoers who profess to be Christians. Yet they are disregarding the Law. Holy God will judge them and rescue {Ps 35:10} **“the poor and needy from those who rob them.”**

Much has changed over the last twenty centuries. Economic exploitation in our time and place tends to be institutional, impersonal, conducted from a distance, and legal. But Almighty God’s priority of economic justice has not changed.

Are we that kind of rich people? If so, we had better **“weep and wail because of the misery that is coming.”**

☠ The fourth sin is oppression.

■ Verse 6: **“You have condemned and murdered innocent men”** (the original Greek literally reads: **“the righteous one”**) **“who were not opposing you”** (who were not putting up violent resistance).

The problem is the depreciation of life. These **“rich people”** undervalue human beings and overvalue wealth, running rough-shod over the poor and, in some cases, violently oppressing them in order to build and protect their wealth.

During the first century the very rich began to acquire vast estates (sometimes by ethical means, often not), until most of the land was held by a tiny minority of the population. Most of the landless peasants were reduced to day labor, begging, or slavery. Many starved to death as a result of the seizure of their property.

Some of these **“rich people”** might have been churchgoers who professed to be Christians. Yet in the process of building their estates they destroyed lives.

I trust that none of us would willingly harm another person to acquire, maintain, or spend wealth. But do we support slavery by buying products made by modern slaves? Do we support economic policy that builds our wealth on the backs of the poor, here or in developing nations? This last summer we learned from Vivian Gentry how American corporations are getting rich on the backs of the poor in Guatemala.

Are we that kind of rich people? If so, we had better **“weep and wail because of the misery that is coming.”**

The economic sins of hoarding, self-indulgence, exploitation and oppression are contrary to a faith in Jesus that is alive and active and powerful to save.

On the other hand, holding on to wealth loosely; exercising self-control with it; acquiring it by moral and honest means; and devoting it to the service of God and neighbor – these are the substance and evidence of a faith in Christ Jesus that is alive and active and powerful to save.

In the global perspective we are, all of us, rich. Perhaps that is a blessing from God, for the purposes of God. Let us live like it!