



Lesson 12 May 20, 2010

Rich man, Poor Man, Part III A Testimony of Corruption or Character

James begins chapter five with a stinging denunciation of many of the practices of the rich who illegally acquired their wealth and misused it selfishly, only to have it lead to their ultimate demise. While James has obviously addressed the epistle to believers, it seems that he is referring to wealthy non believers in this text as a means to introduce his subject later in the chapter. Note that James' warning of their impending doom was literally fulfilled in a few short years when Jerusalem was destroyed and plundered by Rome in AD 70, and many were enslaved. Despite its fulfillment two thousand years ago, it is still a relevant message in today's materialistic world that we all should heed.

1. In verses 1-3, James warns the rich to lament over their soon coming miseries (v1) for their riches will rot and be corrupted, while their fine apparel will become moth-eaten (v2). Their gold and silver will corrode even as their flesh burns (v3), perhaps a reference to eternal judgment caused by their rusted and corrupted hearts. What further thoughts do these verses add to James' warning?

Psalms 37:35-36; 73:3-12, 17-20

Matthew 6:19-21, 24-33

1 Timothy 6:10, 17

2. In verses 4&6, James rebukes the rich who by fraud withheld wages from laborers, essentially stealing from them in clear violation of Mosaic law, and who apparently controlled and manipulated the court system to their advantage by condemning the just who were unable to resist (v6) or to prevail in the now perverted judicial system due to their poverty. How do these passages reinforce James' rebukes of such practices?

Deuteronomy 24:14-15



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Jeremiah 22:13

Amos 5:12, 15

Galatians 2:10

James 2:6-7

3. In verse 5, James continues his reproof of the rich who heaped up treasures for the last days (v3), hoarding their material abundance in order to live in selfish indulgence, pleasure, and luxury, completely oblivious to the fact that in reality they were only fattening themselves for the slaughter of earthly, as well as eternal judgment. How do these scriptures provide additional insight into James' thoughts?

Psalms 50:10, 15; 62:10

Proverbs 18:11; 22:1; 28:11

Luke 12:15-21



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Personal Application

Although James is probably referring to the Godless wealthy in this text, his rebukes and warnings about both the temporal and, more importantly, the eternal consequences of their selfish and evil life styles apply to all people at any period in time. The Bible makes it clear that it is not a sin to have material wealth as evidenced by notable saints throughout scripture such as Abraham, Job, or Philemon, and the acquisition of personal property is approved in Scripture. Indeed, the right to personal property and individual freedom are inseparable; however, the Bible makes many specific, pointed admonitions that wealth and riches can be a spiritual hindrance such as “they that will be rich fall into a temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Timothy 6:9). Furthermore, “he that makes haste to be rich shall not be innocent. He that hastens to be rich has an evil eye” (Proverbs 28:20, 22).

The simply profound truth is that riches can corrode and erode character, promoting selfishness and pride, as man disregards the fact that everything belongs to God, “for every beast of the forest is Mine... for the world is Mine and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 50:10,12). Even the ability to garner material success is a Divine gift – “remember the Lord your God, for it is He that gives you power to get wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18). James emphasizes that important point, albeit it subtly, when he literally declares in the original Greek in verse 3 that the rich men’s gold and silver is rusted out even though gold or silver do not rust. There seems to be little doubt that he is referring to the heart or character of these wicked men being rusted and corroded when he warns, again literally, that the poison of that rusted and gold will be a testimony against them and will eat their flesh like fire!

James has repeatedly denounced envy, greed and selfishness, and their root cause of covetousness throughout his epistle as the very embodiment of the ‘earthly, sensual, and demonic’ (James 3:15) characteristics of fallen man and his wisdom, and we must each wrestle with these three adversaries that we more commonly designate as the world, the flesh, and the devil. Accordingly, James calls us to resist the devil (4:10), and by extension, the world and the flesh as well, for if not held in check, covetousness will continuously feed upon itself growing ever more insatiable, never being satisfied. Fortunately, through the grace of God and the power of His Spirit within us, we can resist these enemies and the ensuing corruption of succumbing to their enticement and instead are enabled to draw near to God in yielded humility and maturing Christian character. May we heed James’ exhortation to do just that!