

Ill-Gotten Gain - Part 1

by Alistair Begg

James warns against the dangers of loving money and the selfish acquisition of wealth, and commands those who are rich to not be arrogant, not to put their hope in wealth, and to put their hope in God.

Duration: 39:20

Scripture: James 5:1

Topics: "Falsehood"

Description

In this sermon on James 5:1-6, the preacher condemns the pursuit of ill-gotten wealth and the hoarding of material possessions. He warns against the temptation to misuse the resources that God has entrusted to us. The preacher describes the rich as fraudulent, cruel, and extravagant individuals who oppress the poor. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing that God is the ultimate judge and that we will be held accountable for our actions. The sermon also highlights the need to prioritize God's timing and not hoard wealth without paying attention to God's clock.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. I invite you to turn to the book of James in the New Testament and chapter 5. It's page 856, if you would like to use one of the church Bibles that you will find around you. Now, James chapter 5 and verse 1. We read the first six verses.

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

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. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing you. Gracious God, as we turn now to the Bible, we ask earnestly for your help so that we might understand it and that in learning what it says that we might believe it and obey it.

All of this we recognize is foreign and alien to us unless you come and meet with us in a way that transcends the ordinary, that is far beyond the voice of just a mere mortal. So come and bring your truth to bear upon our minds from the youngest person here to the oldest so that we might recognize that this is not an exercise in public speaking but that it is an earnest inquiry to you, the living God, for the truth of your word to be brought to bear upon our lives. That this, we humbly pray, might be our portion now and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, we return in our studies in James to these opening verses of chapter five where James issues what is nothing less than a stinging condemnation upon ill-gotten gain, a stinging condemnation on getting material wealth in a way that isn't right and in holding onto it in a way that is plainly wrong. In issuing such a condemnation, he also issues a warning and a clear warning to any and all who are tempted in the realm of the misuse of money and wealth.

Now, when we put our introduction in those terms, we realize how immediately applicable it is to each of our lives, not least of all the whole notion of being tempted to misuse what God has entrusted to us for his use. And when we put it in those terms, it's difficult for any of us to assume or to nudge someone else and say this is obviously going to be very helpful for you or for him or for her. What we have in the opening six verses, says Derek Prime, is a burst of righteous indignation reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets.

There is a bite and a sting to it. There is a clarity to it that is absolutely unmistakable and unavoidable. And in light of that, in light of the strength of James's words, it's important for us to understand exactly who it is that he is addressing.

And I want you to look back up to verse 13 of chapter 4, where you will notice that he begins 13 as he begins 1 of chapter 5 with the introductory phrase, now listen. And he addresses in verse 13 those who appear to be outside of the Christian community, those who are presuming upon the days that lie ahead, those who are completely self-oriented, who are thinking about what they're going to do, where they're going to go, and how they're going to achieve their objectives. Not that that is a distinctly non-Christian perspective, but it would just appear that that is where he's directing his remarks.

And especially in light of how he employs the same phraseology as he comes to the opening part of chapter 5. Now listen, he says again, and this time he is referring to these rich people. And a particular kind of rich person, as I'm about to show you. But you will notice the distinction if you go back up to the 11th verse of chapter 4, where you will notice he had begun, brothers, or we might equally translate it, brothers and sisters, don't slander anyone.

Then in verse 13, now listen you who say this. And then in verse 1, now listen you rich people. And then in verse 7, back to the internal community, as it were, where he begins again, be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.

Now I think this is important to understand, and we are helped in this by realizing the way in which he has already dealt with rich people in chapter 2. You remember he says in verse 5 of chapter 2, if you want to turn to it you'll see it there, listen my dear brothers, hasn't God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? We need to keep in mind when we study this, that first century life in the context of James' writing was marked by a vast divide between rich and poor. There was no middle class to be spoken of at all. Nobody could have got away with saying that they were peculiarly interested in the middle class in the presidential primaries and everything, because there'd be no middle class to be concerned about.

Either you were on the rich end or you were down on the bottom end, as is true in many countries in the world today. And it was obvious that in the vast majority of cases, those who were Christian believers did not come from the wealthy classes, were not marked by those who were rich and powerful. That's employed throughout all of the letters.

Paul says the same thing when he writes to the Corinthians, he says, remember not many of you were rich, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were from significant backgrounds. Most of you, he said, were just like the common folks of society. And it is that that you need to keep in mind, where when in verse 6 of chapter 2, James says, but you have insulted the poor.

And the reason they've insulted the poor is because they're acting in a way that is unbecoming to them. And then he makes the distinction. Isn't it the rich who are exploiting you? Aren't they the ones who are dragging you into court? Aren't they the ones who are slandering the name, the noble name, of him to whom you belong? You see his distinction.

You belong to the name of Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth. These individuals do not belong to that name. And they are the ones who are slandering and abusing you.

Now, if you keep that in mind and come back to chapter 5, you will realize that he's really picked up from where he'd been in that previous statement. And the readers will derive from this some encouragement from recognizing that although they may appear to be on the bottom end of the salary scale, although they may appear to be simply the indigenous workers and so on, although they may at times appear to be on the receiving end of abuse and disregard and discouragement, they need to know that their cries, the cries of the harvesters, have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty, that you will see there at the end of verse 4. And so, encouraged by that fact, they would also be warned by this stinging condemnation. The warning they receive, and we in turn receive in the reading of this letter, is the stupidity of setting too high a value on wealth, of envying those who have wealth, and of striving feverishly to obtain wealth.

Let me say that to you again, because I think you will immediately realize that we make the bridge from the 1st to the 21st century without any difficulty whatsoever. No one's about to say, now here's a word for people living in the 1st century. Well, it was, but it remains God's unerring word for us today.

They were encouraged to know that their cries reached God, but they were to be warned of the folly of setting too high a value on wealth, of envying those who have wealth, or of striving feverishly to obtain wealth. Now, what James is doing here is nothing other than confirming statements made by others of the writers of the New Testament. Probably most obvious of all, Paul, when he writes at the end of his first letter to Timothy, he addresses these very issues.

And you needn't turn to it, but let me quote it for you from 1 Timothy chapter 6 and verse 6. Paul writes to Timothy, Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. And then he says, listen, people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Notice, he doesn't say what is often misquoted. What you hear misquoted is, money is the root of all evil.

That's not the quote. The quote is, for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

We need to understand what is being said here. What Paul is saying is this, that when an individual or individuals have an insatiable love for money, it becomes a form of idolatry. That is where we worship, where our heart is.

That's where our treasure is, to quote Jesus. And the individual that he's addressing is the kind of individual who, if you spend any time with them at all, you will know that what makes them tick is money. And we have all met such individuals.

It's all about money. Show me the money. If you listen to their ideas, their hopes, their dreams, it's all directly addressed to acquisition and to the point where it does a disservice to themselves and pierces them and so on.

And so, he makes it clear that you have to be very, very, very careful in relationship to loving money. Now, before those of us who don't think we have enough money and are a little envious of the people who do have a lot of money, before we sort of wiggle our way out of this one, let me give you a quote from J.C. Ryle. It is possible to love money without having it, and it is possible to have it without loving it.

That's a good quote. It is possible to love money without having it, and it is possible to have it without loving it. So, first, in akin with James, he issues that great warning to those who are in love with money, the dangers that attach to it, and then--and I'm still with Paul to Timothy for a final moment--he gives Timothy the exhortation to make sure that those who have money also are very, very careful.

And he is to issue a command to those who are rich in this present world. In other words, folks have made it by any standards in any community. What are you to do with those people? Well, in the contemporary church, what you're supposed to do is be very, very nice to them.

In fact, sneak up to them and sidle up to them and say nice things to them and say, my, that's a beautiful, nice piece of material. Do all these kind of things. And the church throughout the years, every time it's done that in its leadership, has foundered and grounded and crashed and burned.

No, what you're supposed to do, Paul says, to those people is to issue a command. Where is the source of the command? The Bible. The apostolic authority.

Where do we have apostolic authority? In the pages of the Bible. That's why it is an unerring authority. That's why it is to the Bible we look for authority.

That is why we ask God to speak to us through his word. Because what does the word say to those who are rich in the present world? Here's the command. Part one, don't be arrogant.

That's pretty straightforward, isn't it? What is one of the great dangers of wealth? Arrogance. Secondly, don't put your hope in wealth because it's so uncertain. That makes sense.

As all the subprime mortgage boys know, having pursued their greedy gains to the point of stupidity, number one, don't be arrogant. Number two, don't put your hope in wealth because it's so uncertain. And number three, put your hope in God.

It's good, isn't it? Now, back to James chapter 5. And we have belabored this by way of introduction to make this clear. I'll give you one final quote from J. C. Ryle. J. C. Ryle was the bishop of Liverpool in an earlier generation.

Money in truth is one of the most unsatisfying of possessions. Money in truth is one of the most unsatisfying of possessions. It takes away some cares, no doubt, but it brings with it quite as many cares as it takes away.

And then he lists a few. There is the trouble in the getting of it. There is anxiety in the keeping of it.

There are temptations in the use of it. There is guilt in the abuse of it. There is sorrow in the losing of it.

There is perplexity in the disposing of it. Not bad for an old Anglican bishop, huh? I think he must have known something about that. None of us can gain, say, such obvious wisdom.

Now, when we come to this stinging condemnation, as we've put it, we will go immediately wrong if we fail to recognize that James is not issuing a blanket condemnation of the wealthy. He is not issuing a blanket condemnation of the wealthy. Now, you may have been in some circles where this material is pressed to that end.

It's an uncomfortable experience because it's so clearly wrong. But it doesn't stop people from doing it, taking the first six verses of James chapter 5 as some great sort of sociopolitical template that they can press down on all of us. Now, we must allow the Bible to be the Bible and not impregnate it with our own political and economic theories.

James knows his Bible well enough to understand that when Solomon wrote Proverbs 10, 22, he was very, very clear. The blessing of the Lord brings wealth and he adds no trouble to it. The blessing of the Lord brings wealth and he adds no trouble to it.

Solomon understands Deuteronomy, where Moses says, who gave you the ability to get money? Who gave the ability to get wealth? Obviously, God did. And when God gives in this way, he doesn't add trouble to it. We, because of our perverse human nature, add trouble to ourselves.

But God, in the giving of good things, in the giving of wealth and prosperity, does not bring it mixed in with a little trouble. James understood the Bible. And indeed, I'm sure that's why he quotes Job in verse 11 of chapter 5 here.

You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. Most of us only know what the Lord initially brought about. If you ask anybody about Job, they say boils.

Or you ask anybody about Job, he says everything. He lost everything. Yes, he did.

But James says, you perhaps will remember the end of Job's story. Most of us haven't. We need to go to Job chapter 42.

We get to Job chapter 42 and what do we discover? We discover that God gave him back many times over what he had taken from him in the first instance. So he ends up an exceptionally wealthy individual. And James is not about, on the one hand, to hold him up as an example of God's blessing and compassion, and then, on the other hand, to take others who've known such blessing and compassion and rub their noses in it just because they have riches.

Hence the importance of allowing the Bible to interpret itself. The rich here are, to quote Professor John Murray, the fraudulent, extortionary, cruel, sumptuous, voluptuous, and extravagant who grind the faces of the poor. And you will notice what a noisy passage this is.

There's a lot of weeping and wailing and shouting and this notion of wages shouting. The wages, in verse 4, you fail to pay the workmen who mould your fields are crying out against you. It's a picture almost from sort of contemporary filmmaking, isn't it? The people have a wonderful time with this.

As all of a sudden the bag starts to shout, and the bag's shouting, pay the wages, pay the wages, pay the wages, and they open it up and they find it's just the money in there that is being held and hoarded. The cries of the money bag mingle with the cries of the harvesters, verse 4b, and these cries of the harvesters reach the ears of God. And God cares, you see, because he's a father to the fatherless and a defender of the widows.

He's the God who loves the alien, who gives the alien food and clothing. He's the God who determined that his people, when they reap their harvest, would not reap to the edges of the fields or gather up the gleanings, and the reason being that he wanted them left for the poor and for the alien. In other words, he instituted within the fabric of Israel a system for dealing with the poor, and it was those who refused to obey God, who went to the very edges of the field, who gathered up all the stuff, who kept it all for themselves, that failed then to provide the opportunity for those who were impoverished to enjoy the blessings and benefits that accrued as a result of the investment and the capability of the individual who could do that which took place in the fields.

In other words, if you like, God put together his whole social system within the fabric of Israel, and it worked, provided those who were listening were not stingy, acquisitive misers, because actually that is who is addressed in this charge. So if you want to have it clear in your mind, we could call this, although I call this study ill-gotten gain, we could actually equally call it a word to acquisitive misers, a word to acquisitive misers, and I think we can get to the heart of it by understanding the charges that James levels against these individuals. Let me tell you what they are and then we'll begin them, although we'll only get so far and have to come back again this evening, at least I will.

Number one, you have hoarded wealth. Number two, you've failed to pay. Number three, you've lived in luxury.

Number four, you've fattened yourselves. And number five, you have condemned innocent men. Well, let's just go through them in turn.

First of all, you have hoarded wealth. You'll find that at the end of verse three, you have hoarded wealth in the last days. In other words, the picture here is not a picture of careful planning, but it is a picture of selfish acquisition.

It's very easy for us, those of us who don't make careful planning, to look at somebody who does do careful planning and dismiss it as selfish acquisition. But that's only because we're jealous and haven't done any careful planning. You don't need a lot of money to do careful planning.

You only need a dollar. And you can split that dollar up any way you choose, and I'm not trying to do the seminar on March the 8th or whenever else it is, but your grandmother told you a dollar of income and 10% saved, 10% given to the church, and the rest used wisely, will put you in a pretty solid position. A

dollar of income and a dollar 15 spent will put you in penury in no time at all.

And fascinatingly, in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times in the last few days, I saw at least one article describing the phenomenal new discovery in America, which is the discovery of actually using cash, of actually only spending what you have. And it was written up as, here is an amazing idea. The country was built on that idea, clown.

That is the whole point. That is why we're in the predicament in which we find ourselves. You have hoarded wealth.

It's not wealth that is being shared, it's wealth that's being stored. It's the same thing as Jesus said when the two brothers came to him, remember? And they said, I think it's in Luke chapter 13, maybe not. Doesn't matter where it is right now.

When the two guys come to Jesus and they say to him, the one fellow says, I want you to have my brother divide the inheritance with me. And Jesus says, well, I'm not here actually doing this kind of work at the end of the day. But now that you're asking, I will tell you a story and I'll tell you a story of an individual.

I think it's got to be in Luke. It's Luke 12, actually. And I'll tell you a story of a certain man, a rich man who produced a good crop.

And he thought to himself, what shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. That's a practical problem. It's understandable.

Then he said, this is what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods.

That's good as well, isn't it? It's a fairly practical plan. You've outgrown your capacity, therefore increase the capacity. And I'll say to myself, you have plenty of good things laid out for many years.

Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry. Now it started to go wrong a little bit, didn't it? He didn't say, this is fantastic. I have got such an abundance.

I'm going to have the opportunity to share this. Now he said, I'm pretty well set for the rest of my life. Let the good times roll.

But God said to him, you fool, this very night, your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for your... See, that's the key phrase. It's not a condemnation of the fact that the fellow was a successful businessman.

It was that God looks on him and says, you just prepared this for yourself. And then the sting in the tail. This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself, but is not rich towards God.

The whole prevailing emphasis of James is akin to that of his brother who said on a number of occasions, it is imperative that you do not invest ultimately where thieves break in and steal, and where moths eat it away, and when everything tarnishes and ruptures and explodes in your face. But make sure that ultimately your investment is in the best place. But these individuals, whom James now addresses, were nowhere in relationship to this.

And instead, they should begin their weeping and their wailing because everything was about to fall apart. Now, in James's day, the indication of wealth was the possession of grain and oil, clothes and precious metals. So it's no surprise in verse two that he writes as he does.

Look what he says. Your wealth has rotted. Your wealth has rotted.

The picture there of grain being stored away far more than is needed and stored in such a way that it is not being used and in some weird satisfaction, perhaps to affect the balance of trade. The individual decides, I would rather let it rot than reduce the futures on the market by letting it out at this level. Your wealth has rotted.

Your clothes are all eaten by moths and your gold and silver are all corroded. It's quite a picture, isn't it? It's a salutary picture. I immediately think of people I can apply this to.

I'm sure you do as well. Makes you feel so much better, doesn't it? If you can think of somebody that you can say, oh, look at that. Oh, yeah, there they go.

Because then you can say, no, I'm not doing that. No, but I'm doing something for sure. I mean, this is leveled against the acquisitive miser, but the warning inherent in it is you've got to make sure that you don't become an acquisitive miser, that you don't become an idolater, that you, the people of God, do not get so swallowed up by the world in which you live that you make their convictions, your convictions and their decisions about these things, your decisions.

And you baptize, as it were, something into a biblical orthodoxy that is actually challenged by the very Bible that we read. Now, I say this humorously and not with any condemnation, because I know that everything gets back to somebody eventually with this internet and CDs and everything. But I have some friends who feel sorry for me because I'm a pastor.

And they have, when they go shopping, the ability to buy not only one of what they're needing, but three or four of what they're needing. So they buy a sweater, but buy it in four colors. And when you go in their closet, then they have the one they have out, and then they have the others in the bags.

The same is true of trousers and different things and so on. And my friend, he likes to bring me in there and show me his stuff and then have me try it on. And then when I try it on, and if it looks good, he takes it back immediately.

If it looks bad, he says, you can have that. And he's got stuff in there that goes back probably, you know, three fashion cycles. I mean, he's got the possibility now that he might be coming right back around so that some of the stuff will be back in vogue.

But most of it is just all a complete, you know, uselessness. And I say to myself, how many of those things do you need? But then I say to myself, how many of those things do you need? How many pairs of shoes do I have in a world that goes barefoot? How many pens am I allowed to buy myself before it becomes a problem when people are learning even how to write in the world? Now, I find it very easy to point it out. It's much harder to face up to, isn't it? You see, the difference between storing it and sharing it, hoarding it so that we can look at it, missing the fact that we're selfish with it, displaying a lack of trust by holding on to it, suggesting somehow or another that the God who made it possible for us to have it in the first place has only been able to look after us up until this point.

I was thinking about that as we sang the last second to last hymn, I think it was, he will keep me till the end. I thought, no, I don't want him to keep me till the end. I want him to keep me beyond the end.

You know, I forget, keep me to the end. We're all coming to the end. We want to know what happens beyond the end.

He's going to keep me beyond the end. God managed to provide for me to today. So, I've got to hoard all of this and keep it because I don't know what will happen tomorrow.

Again, this hard distinction between careful planning and wrongful hoarding and acquisition. Lazarus, in the story that Jesus told you, remember, longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table, but the rich man didn't realize what fell from his table, and he was oblivious to the poor man at his gate. Says Calvin, God has not appointed gold for rust or garments for moth, but on the contrary, he has designed them as aids to human life.

Well, we need to move on, but notice the phrase that I've missed at the end of verse 3. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Why does he add a timeline there? And what is this timeline? Well, the way the New Testament uses the phrase the last days is to describe the period of time between the coming of Jesus and the return of Jesus. Hence, on the day of Pentecost, when the people hear the gospel proclaimed in their own language by those who are not normal speakers of that language, and some say they must be drunk, Peter stands up and he says, these men are not drunk as you suppose, but this is simply what was declared by the prophet Joel, in the last days I will pour out my spirit.

And he says, and this is exactly what has happened. The same thing as you find in Hebrews chapter 1 and verse 1. In the past, in various ways, God spoke of old by his prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son. And what is the danger with a rich person, especially if you combine this word to the rich with the word to the presumptuous back up in verse 13 of chapter 4? Well, I think it's probably this, that riches may deceive us into believing that the riches are permanent and then cause us to act as if we will live forever.

And James is adding a little note here, if you like, he is referencing God's clock. And he's saying, these individuals who have hoarded wealth have done so in the last days, they have lived without keeping an eye on God's clock. He's already said back in verse 12 of chapter 4, that there is a lawgiver and a judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy, and it is to this one that we will eventually give an answer.

But these individuals are continuing to hoard things and without paying attention to God's clock. And God in his grace and in his mercy chooses to remind us that we're on his clock and on his time. And that's one of the reasons that many of us disavow any interest in funerals.

I actually have a theory, it's one of the reasons that communities don't allow church bells anymore. Why clocks are uncommon, especially if they sound out the passage of time. Why cemeteries are no longer built within the orb of the church steeple.

Because everyone who came would walk past their gravesite on entry and on departure and would be reminded of God's clock, which would then make a difference to God's money given to them for a brief time to enjoy and to use. Well, that's just the first of the charges. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

If we come back this evening, we'll pick it up from you have failed to pay. You have failed to pay the workers. Maybe I'll make some comments, maybe I won't, about this whole idea of having people work in your house and not paying them after they've done the work, but stringing it out for as long as we can.

So that tradesmen have to go and buy the wood and the materials and do the outlay and come to our house and provide a service, which upon completion we immediately enjoy. And then decide to hold payment to the very last limit that we can of acceptable behavior and absorbable understanding on the part of the tradesmen. Read the passage.

Think about it. It may actually cut a little deeper than many of us have even given consideration to. Father, thank you that we're not here to listen to the meanderings of our minds.

We are here to study the Bible, grant that what is true and right and helpful may be written into our hearts and to our understanding. We pray, Lord, that where the cap fits, that we will wear it. Forgive us when we are tempted to become idolaters in this realm.

And instead of worshiping you, the living God, to worship that which you have made. Forgive our sins. Turn us again to your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, though he was rich, yet he became poor, in order that we might, through his poverty, become rich towards you, the living God.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God, our Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with us and keep us on track with you now and until Jesus comes or calls us to himself and then forevermore. Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg.

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