

Managing Our Blessings

James 5:1-6

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. 4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:1-6 (ESV))

Too often, as we study through these scriptures, we find words such as these, words that if left out of their context would sound exactly as if God were pronouncing final judgment upon eternally reprobate unbelievers. Verse 1,

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. (James 5:1)

Bible commentators do vary in their thoughts as to whom these words are directed, but I'm convinced that God is here addressing believing Christians, men who, at one time, had fully given their hearts over to Christ, but then, somehow drifted back into a kind of lifestyle and behavior that is part of that "broad path" that is so very destructive.

How do we know that God is here speaking to believers and not unbelievers? It is because, from the beginning words of this Book, and then over and over again throughout the chapters, God tells us so. Framed within the words "my brothers" and "brethren" is that familial expression that bespeaks "fellow believers in Christ". Listen again to the very first words given in chapter 1!

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:1-4 (ESV))

Clearly in these words, James is addressing fellow Jewish believers, men and women who had placed their faith in Christ, but then were so persecuted for their beliefs that they were forced to flee from Israel and settle in neighboring countries.

But what has taken place between those first joyous moments when these dear “brothers in the Lord” first humbly surrendered their lives to the mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus, and then here, only a few short years later, when God finds it necessary to give some of the sternest words of rebuke and correction to them? What has taken place within their wretched souls?

One very simple, but profound set of events has taken place. These people have prospered! They have prospered, and greatly so. Yes, they have suffered in their persecution. But God, being the loving Father that He is, was ever and always with them, wherever they went, making provision for them, pouring out blessing after blessing upon them!

That is what a good Father does, and that is what God has always done for His chosen children. And history testifies to it. As the Jewish people have been forced from one place to another around the world, most recently until 1948, having no homeland for 1500 years, without fail, God’s blessings and prosperity have followed them wherever they have gone.

And again yes, there have been many seasons of suffering for them, especially in those times when they would forget God and follow after other gods. But invariably, as they would turn back to Him, God would pour out His blessings upon them. And then, literally everything they would touch would become successful.

And even to this day, here in America and in Europe, blessings have been the absolute norm, God pouring out blessings without measure upon the Jewish people, especially in the financial marketplace. Untold numbers of the Jewish people have found financial success. So much so that for most all of my life I have heard unkind comments being made against them, people saying, “those Jews, they own and control everything”.

And that seems to have been the case with these fellow Jewish believers to whom James was directing these severe words of rebuke here in chapter 5. Again, in fear for their lives, these people had fled to neighboring countries, and there, with God’s hand of blessing on them, they had immediately found success.

But then, something went terribly wrong, which prompts the question “what did these people do with the “blessings” that God poured out upon them?” Did they “manage their blessings” well? And the answer from James’ words here in our text is a very strong “no!

Apparently, the sinful nature that is present within all people's hearts immediately began to do its demonic work, and these people began to succumb to the many temptations and sins that often follow along with riches and success.

And therein lies one of the most subtle of all the entanglements that Christians will ever encounter regarding their finances, the pitfalls that present themselves as we attempt to "manage our blessings".

And that might sound a little odd in the hearing of most people, because we always seem to think, "if I just had the money that those wealthy people over there have, my troubles would be over". But so very often, that is not the case. We Christians have a history of not "managing our blessings" well.

And that seems true from the poorest person to the very wealthiest. But may I observe, it does seem a somewhat easier chore for us lower income folks, than for those who have greater wealth. It seems an easier chore to manage little than it does to manage a lot. The more money we have, the more options that are available to us. And options seem often to be the stumbling block and the beginnings of trouble.

As for myself, for most of my adult years, our family having income near the poverty line, our lifestyle usually reflected our income level. Having little, our management of the blessings we received was not a very difficult chore. We usually just tried to keep our ship afloat and not go into debt.

But with that being said, as a family, we never seemed to lack the basics and then also to have some extras. God was providing! And I have observed that that is the way with most poorer folks. In the main, they are just poor and they learn to live on the little that they have.

I've also observed though, that regardless of our actual financial condition, in our weaker moments, most of us do seem to think ourselves to be poorer than we really are. I know that for myself, when I get tempted to compare my own provision, my house, my car, my paycheck, to some of my neighbors in the more upper-crust parts of town, I can usually find reason to "whine" a bit about being poor.

But listen, the real truth is, you and I are not at all poor! If we have those things that I just mentioned, a place to live, a car, food to eat, we are actually ranked in the top 5% of the people of the world. We are not poor!

And then, I have also observed that many of the very wealthy people of the world, have some of those same symptoms about their money as do you and I. They are wealthy, some very wealthy, but they don't seem to know they are wealthy. They seem never able to be comfortable with the amount of money that they have. They seem always to not only want, but to believe that they actually need more and more money.

A friend of mine who is fond of quoting sayings by his father, would tell the story of when his father would be asked how much money he made, not wanting to tell them, he would say, "not enough". And though his father's response might have been seen as lighthearted, it probably reflected the true feelings within his heart.

Our wealth, whatever its level seems never enough and never easy to deal with. The human soul has so many nooks and crevices within it. And when it come to this matter of "managing our blessings", all sorts of destructive attitudes and pitfalls can surface.

And that seems especially so when a person begins to accumulate a lot of money. As we mentioned earlier, that is when another factor within wealth can begin to rear its ugly head. Along with wealth and position usually comes a measure of power. "Power"! And power will often turn out to be the most difficult and most hurtful of all our management strategies, as we manage our blessings.

May we turn again to our scripture passage and we'll see how the combination of having great blessings and great power can bring very corrupting behavior into the life of an otherwise devout Christian soul.

James 5,

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. 4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:1-6 (ESV))

Remember again the context of these words. This rebuke was written to fellow believing Jews, who in their "dispersion" into foreign lands had been blessed by God with excellent financial success in their business ventures.

But then, look at what these words tell us took place. Their management of God's blessings took a corrupt turn. Verses 2 and 3 tell us that these people gained so much wealth that they could not use it all. They had so much wealth, that it just sat idle and unused, so much so that it began to rot and be eaten by moths. They had so much gold and silver that lay unused and untouched that it corroded.

Then in verse 4, we see the "management" problem and why the money kept accumulating, and being unused. Verse 4,

4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. (James 5:4)

A reminder, these owners are Christian businessmen, most likely dealing with other fellow Christian businessmen, here mowers and harvesters. But the owners found corrupt ways to cheat their fellow Christian brothers.

And their behavior is especially egregious, because it is not as if the owners were running short of money and unable to pay their workers. Not at all. These owners had so much excess gold and silver, that they never touched some of it. They were just crooked and corrupt!

Little did they realize it, but nothing gets past the all-knowing eyes and ears of God. Verse 4

4 . . . the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:4-6 (ESV))

Folks, yes, it's true, our loving Father is a "God of love". He proves it daily by making provision for each of us. But as we are warned here and especially in Ecclesiastes 12. We must "remember our creator in the days of our youth", in those days when we are acquiring and accumulating wealth, because there will surely come a day of accounting for our behavior. And as God warns us in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV))

Yes, God is a God of love, and He makes wonderful provisions for us. But God is also perfectly “Just”. And there will surely come a day of reckoning when our God of love will rain down wrath upon the sins that take control over us.

No, if we are truly saved, we will not lose our blessed salvation. But still, if we become guilty of mistreatment of our fellow men, if we want more and more money so badly that we will cheat others to get it, as these verses tell us, before we close our eyes in death, God will surely call us into account and we will surely suffer consequences we have never reckoned on.

So then, for you and for me, may I ask . . . how do we, how do you and I “manage our blessings”. Do we manage whatever we have in a Godly way? Are we fearful that we will not have enough? Are we thankful for what we do have, or are we always complaining? When we have an opportunity to cheat others so that we can gain more money, do we do that?

How do you manage your blessings? When you spend and when you save, do you ask God to guide your thoughts and behaviors?

31 . . . do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
(Matthew 6:31-33 (ESV))