

The Hazards Of Wealth

¹Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your 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. ⁴Behold, 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. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. (James 5:1-6)

We have mentioned on several occasions over the weeks that we have been studying this Book of James that, for the most part, these words are intended for the instruction of the “brethren in the faith”, fellow believers in Christ Jesus.

But these words today seem intended for, and appropriate to, the behaviors of not only fellow believers, but especially for unbelievers. I say that because, for the most part, these words seem to be speaking about men whose hearts are so callus and so uncaring that they really must be unregenerate, even reprobate. And they probably are!

And if that be so, we need to ask the question, “why does God do as He is doing here, why does God pour out His pearls before the swine”.

From these and from other scriptures like them, two reasons come to my mind. First, the “unbelieving soul” must always be warned about their sin, so that they will be without excuse on that great and terrible day when they stand in judgment for their deeds done in this life.

But the second reason and, I believe, the most important, is that some of the “unbelievers” who hear these words might soon, or sometime later, turn and surrender their hearts to Christ and become saved. And these words of warning

will have already been written upon their minds to guide them in their new salvation.

Folks, we must remember that none of God's words will ever "return void" but will always accomplish everything that He intends for them to accomplish. Praise be to God!

So then, we will make the assumption that yes, these words in today's text are intended for you and me who have given our hearts to Christ, but then also, these words are intended for those who are "unregenerate" and do not have Christ as their Savior.

First, for those of us who have Christ as our Savior, how can we who have the Holy Spirit abiding within our souls descend into such "pits of sin" as are spoken about here? How could that take place?

May I remind us that though, we are fully "saved", there is also a whole other realm of our relationship with Christ that must follow along after that first moment in time when we first believed and received the Spirit of Christ into our souls. God calls that step in our progress with Him, our "Sanctification". And He tells us clearly that it is His Will that we grow in our love for Him, and in our knowledge our understanding of Him. And as we do that, we are "sanctified". Those simple words in 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification. (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

And please understand that just as God freely provided our salvation to us, He will also freely provide the next step of "Sanctification". Those words in 1 Corinthians 1!

³⁰ (it is of God that we) are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:30)

Time after time, we read words such as these, and we falter in our understanding of them. The simple truth is, none of our relationship with God is

within your or my own personal human capacity to achieve. It is all of God, every step of our relationship with Him is of Him and through Him and for Him.

And praise be to God for that! But mysteriously, while all of this is taking place through Christ in us, we do also have a part that is required of us. We must join with Christ and surrender to Him as He works out our sanctification within us.

And may I also remind us of another truth that was given in an earlier message. It is that you and I do not come into our salvation already fully “cleansed” from our past habits and behaviors. Not at all! That is why the “sanctification” that the Spirit of Christ works into our souls is so vital to our daily walk in Him.

Again, yes, if we have received Christ as our Savior, we do come into our relationship with Him fully forgiven and fully justified from all of our past sins, but oh . . . our “flesh” still “wants what it wants” and still has all its memories and all of its affinities toward many of our old habits and behaviors and beliefs.

The circumstance spoken about here in our text is an excellent example for us to consider. Here, we have a “businessman” who had learned how to make money, probably for the most part from good management practices. But, as we are told here, he had also learned how to make money through very corrupt management practices. Listen again!

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Consider if you were this man or woman, when one day God decided to “draw your heart to Jesus” for salvation. And you do come to Him. It would really be

wonderful if during that same process of “drawing” you, that God the Father would also wash away all your old sinful habits and behaviors, wash away the “lust of your eyes”, the “lust of your flesh”, your “pride of life”.

And yes, God does do some of that, but not nearly all of it! Unfortunately, as we know, especially as we read such words as those in Romans chapter 7, the “flesh” still remains alive within us. And its lustful desires can return to plague our newly “reborn” soul.

And so then, you wake up the next day after you given your heart to Christ and you find that you are in a great dilemma. You have built a large and thriving business off not only the “broken backs” of your competitors, but also off the blood and sweat of your employees. And all your corrupt business practices are still in place. And if you back off from those corrupt practices, even for a moment, your entire enterprise might collapse.

And yes, because the blessed Holy Spirit is now living within you, you immediately begin to feel guilt. And then, day after day, as you live and work within your old sinful business habits and practices, your soul becomes more and more guilt-ridden.

What are you to do? The dilemma is really real because the truth is, your “flesh” still really does love all that wealth and especially your social position in your community. You love your spacious home and your well stocked pantry. And you love your cars and your trucks. And you especially love the fact that you are admired by all those other wealth seekers.

And in addition to that, the local “Arts Council” has booked you as the keynote speaker for their annual fund drive, at which time you will give a generous gift, a gift that you have been assured by your tax accountant is a “tax deductible” gift.

All these things are so very important to you and to your wife and to your children. So then, the question again, “what are you to do with this new-found salvation, and also, that gnawing guilt that keeps coming into your conscience

each time that you make that next self-centered and corrupt business decision?”

Fortunately, in this scripture, God does not “soften” His words. He is clear and plain and direct to the point. Listen again!

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As I look around our congregation, I am thankful that none of us fits into the category of the businessman that these words describe. And also, thankfully, we don't suffer with having some of the memories and habits and affinities that are given here.

But listen folks, within these words is something that God does often in these scriptures. Here, He presents an extreme circumstance so that we can clearly get the concept of exactly what He is telling us about. And He also wants us to know that from the viewpoint of His Righteous and Holy “omniscience”, He is able to detect attitudes and behaviors within us that we ourselves might not be able to see.

So then, before we pat ourselves on the back and say, “thank you Lord that I am not like these corrupt men that God is speaking about here in these words”, God quickly brings back to our mind the words of the pharisee who was standing in the synagogue saying to God, “thank you God that I am not like that tax collector”.

The infallible truth that God wants you and me to always remember about ourselves is that sin is an ever-present predator that seeks any and every opportunity to take control over our behaviors. And you and I must be ever vigilant against sin, no matter how "big" or how "small" it may seem to us to be, else it will surely "grab hold" of us and our behaviors.

Simply put, sin of all types and kinds is still sin. And God has said emphatically that He will not allow any sin, no matter how small or how great they may be, to go unpunished. He is Holy! And all of our behaviors will be judged according to His unchanging standards of holiness.

And also, to be sure, He will not allow any form of sin to enter into His presence in heaven. Every sin must be paid for in full. And remember the words we have said so often from this pulpit, that sin has only one acceptable payment, and that payment is the precious atoning "blood of Christ"!

And yes, on our side of this blessed equation, we have a responsibility to fulfill. We must respond to the conviction the Holy Spirit puts into our soul and "repent", "truly repent" of our sins.

And so it is with any form or measure or degree of these sins spoken about here in these words of our text.

Listen again to these words and let's consider how they might "fit" your or my circumstances.

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While none of us here is at the level of wealth and the level of authority over other people that these “rich people” spoken about here might have, may we accept the reality that this thing we call “wealth” is a relative condition of life.

When it comes to the manner in which we deal with our behaviors and the sin that so often rears its head, it really doesn't seem to matter the “amount” of wealth that we have, because no matter how much we have, be it a little or a lot, it never seems to be quite enough. We do seem always to want more.

And when our “want” for wealth is left unchecked, it surely almost always becomes what these scriptures call a “lust” for wealth. And “lust” can be a very powerful emotion, often taking control over our behaviors.

Again, considering this matter of wealth and our “want” of it, all of us are different. Some of us have little regard for the want of great wealth. And so, we can say with some truth, that we don't really care that much about being wealthy.

But may I give each of us a warning. God is telling us clearly, both here and in many other passages of scripture, that this desire for money and for the things that money represents is very subtly captivating for most all people.

One bible statistic that I heard stated was that well over 50% of Jesus' parables and analogies have to do with money and the effects that money has on you and me.

One of the familiar teachings that Jesus gave regarding money is in Matthew chapter 6. I like these words because they deal with this matter of money more at your and my level of wealth. You will recall that here, Jesus refers to money and wealth as “mammon”. We've heard these words on many occasions, but may I read them for us again to refresh our memories. Listen!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

²⁵ “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

²⁷ Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

²⁸ “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹ and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, *will He* not much more *clothe* you, O you of little faith?

³¹ “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Mathew 6:24-34)

As we consider these words and also the words that we have read here in James 4, may I ask us to allow these words to be a mirror through which we can begin to truly see the nature of our own soul.

The desires, the hopes, the dreams and the visions that you and I can have for money and for the things that money can buy, truly do have a mysterious power within them, a power that can cause us to do things that we should not do.

So then, no, we might not ever find ourselves in the same position as these “rich people” in this passage, misusing and hurting other people for our own gain. But we must understand that at least some version of this circumstance is very possible for each of us.

We might not be the one who is actually gaining from corrupt management within the business where we work. It might be our boss. But if we carry out his or her orders and mistreat other employees or cheat the customers through corrupt business practices, we will probably share in our boss's guilt and future accountability before God. And we might probably need to consider making some hard decisions about our employment.

Whatever our circumstance may be, may I strongly encourage you and me to always, always allow this word of God to be our guide as we carry out our duties in our workplace. Listen as we close!

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