

A WARNING TO MOVERS AND SHAKERS

James 4:13–5:6

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James 4:13–5:6 (NIV)

“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins. 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.”

I call this message today “A Warning to Movers and Shakers.” My first impulse was to simply call it “A Warning for Entrepreneurs and Aristocrats.” But that’s exactly what this text is dealing with. The last paragraph of chapter 4 is dealing with entrepreneurs or movers—the independent, middle class, businessman who is out to find a rich business for his product. He represents the new rich or the newly rich in quest of wealth. Then the first paragraph of chapter 5 deals with aristocrats, not new money, but old money. Landed wealth.

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In diving into a passage like this, it's important, I think, to recognize at the outset that what we do not deal with here is a blanket condemnation of wealth or the rich. We know that there were wealthy and middle-class people who followed Jesus and who were associated with the early church. Persons like Peter and Andrew and James and John appear not to have sold all, but had kept their fishing business, at least for a time. They had employees; we know that from reading the Gospels. We find that there was a woman named Joanna who followed Jesus, who was the wife of Cuza, who was Herod's number two man. She, along with Susanna and many others, gave to support Jesus' ministry out of their own pockets and wealth. We also read that he had a follower named Joseph of Arimathea, who was a wealthy man. In Acts, we find people like Cornelius and John Mark's mother, whose income was substantial enough to have a home in which the Jerusalem church met. And there were people like Lydia and Titius Justus, in whose homes the Corinthian church met. There were persons like Priscilla and Aquila who were middle class trades' people. There was Gaius, in whose home the church at Corinth also met. Erastus, who was city manager of the city of Corinth. Philemon, who was a wealthy landowner. That's to cite a few examples of persons of means, either middle class or above, in the New Testament. If James had intended a blanket condemnation of wealth as such, he would not have gone on to commend a person named Job which he does in 5:11. Job, a person of great means. We are reminded of his perseverance and how the Lord finally brought about a return in his life. The reason why I say this is not a blanket condemnation of wealth is that there are some who quote the Bible and appear to make it mean that, somehow, if we have any kind of means or assets, we're not spiritual or not living the Christian life. I heard a speaker recently say that he felt that if a person owned a BMW, they could not possibly be a Christian. How could you drive a thirty thousand dollar car in the light of such poverty that is in the world? I think, by the way,

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that we need to wrestle with how we are using things, and maybe for some, a BMW would be inappropriate.

But we do not have a blanket condemnation of wealth. We see, as in all of Scripture, a treatment of balance. Job is used by James as a model that says to us, in Job 31, “If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless...if I have seen any one perish for lack of clothing, or a needy person without a garment...then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint” (verses 16,17,19,22, NIV). Kind of stern words, but what Job is saying is that he had found a balance in life. He was a person of wealth, yet he was not a person who hoarded or kept things selfishly to himself.

James is not on an anti-rich kick. Nevertheless, he does—like the Lord—require accountability of us. To whom much is given, much shall be required. It’s obvious, as you read these verses with me today, that James is speaking to two groups of people. First, the merchant class who are in pursuit of wealth. And secondly, the farmers or the landowners who were in possession of wealth.

The first group is looking for money and how to make more of it. And the second group is trying to keep the money they have already made.

As we look at these two passages, therefore, it is easy to divide them up.

I. First, we have a warning to the movers. The people who are in the junior chamber of commerce and the Rotary, who are upwardly mobile and trying to move a community and gain capital and friends and all those kind of things, people with the entrepreneurial spirit.

These merchants—in those days trade routes were opening in many cities—would take a map and say, “My product isn’t in that city. That’s where I’m going to go. I’m going to spend time

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there. A year. And I'll make my fortune, and then I'll be fixed for life." What's wrong with this? Isn't that the genius of American capitalism? That we have this marvelous opportunity for freedom in our country; we can seize a deal and, if we can invent a Hula-Hoop or some gadget, then, go for it! Isn't that the whole idea? When you travel to other countries and see the lack of opportunities to invest capital and make something, you really come back with a new appreciation for this country. What's wrong with this "can-do" attitude which is at the very fabric of American life (and certainly Orange County)?

James says that the wrong is not in the venture itself per se. But the wrong is in the attitudes with which we may approach it. So he cites two things that need to take place in our searching for new capital or for financial benefit.

A. The two things we need to recognize are that, first of all, planning, all venture, from a Christian point of view, must be conditioned by God's will.

What does God want in my life? Does God want me to circle this city and "go for it." Does God want me to market this thing? Does what I am proposing to do, first of all, matter? Have I brought it to the Lord and submitted it to Him for His direction and for His guidance? And having done that, am I willing to place the whole venture in His hands and to accept success or failure? Is it in His will?

James is saying that it is impossible, with any certainty, to say that anything is going to happen, because we have no control of the future. This doesn't mean that the Bible condemns planning, because it doesn't condemn planning. But it is to say that, when we plan, we are to look first of all at what God wants. It's not sufficient that we boast about tomorrow, because we do not know what a day will bring about.

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Computer forecasting has gotten to be very big in many businesses. You do need to do market analysis and some kind of computer projection on the basis of market analysis where things are going to be a few years down the road. If you're putting up a new restaurant, you certainly want to look at the area and see if it is sufficient to sustain it or whether it's going to sit empty. But even computer forecasting, unless it has the right data going into it, isn't necessarily accurate at all.

For example, if the computer had been around in 1895, and they were projecting transportation needs for 1986, can you image what a mess of prognostication would have come out of that computer? In 1895 language, it was based on the number of horses they had today and the number of people there are going to be in 1986. How many horses will it take to move America? The computer would have spit out a figure. That figure would have been sufficient to have buried us all in 11 feet of manure. If your assumptions aren't right, you're not going to come out with the right kind of thing at the end.

James is saying that a fundamental assumption we need to fit in our projection is: What is God's will for our life?

There are some Christians today who run around and say, "When you pray, you should never say in a prayer, 'If You are willing,' or 'If God wills.' Because if you say, 'If the Lord wills,' then you don't have faith. Obviously, if you had faith, then you wouldn't need to say, 'If the Lord wills.' But because you're uncertain of it you're saying, 'If the Lord wills.'"

The thing that's wrong with that particular point of view is that it flies in the direct face of Scripture itself. James says we're to look at the future and say, "If God wills." Four times in the apostle Paul's prayer life, when he was making plans, he conditioned his plans specifically by the will of God. In 1 Corinthians 4:19, "But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing."

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In 1 Corinthians 16:7, “I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.” In Romans 1:10, “I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” And in Acts 18:21, as he leaves Ephesus, he promises, “I will come back, if it is God’s will.” Four times he prays for God’s will in regard to future plans. Three times God says yes. And he gets back. One time, the last time at Ephesus, he never does make it back. But he’s praying the will of the Lord.

And James is simply saying, “Let all of your ventures be conditioned by that ‘If God wills.’”

B. Then the second thing that James is telling us about the entrepreneurial spirit of going out and making plans is not only must they be conditioned by God’s will, but from a Christian point of view, we must recognize that we’re here on a very temporary basis.

Therefore, we’re to hold lightly all the plans that we’re making. We’re not eternal people. “Our life,” James says, “is but a mist.” A puff of smoke. A puff of cloud. A puff of vapor. That’s what we are. We’re just here for a very brief time. Nothing permanent. We were not here in the eighteenth century, and we will not be here in the twenty-second century. And not a whole lot of us in this group will necessarily be here midway through the twenty-first century, if Jesus tarries. We are a puff of smoke, a vapor, a mist. All of life is moving very quickly.

“Given the fact,” James is saying, “that all our plans are conditional and that we are temporary people ourselves, there is no room for bragging or boasting.” There’s no room for self-sufficiency. There’s only room for a complete dependence upon God. Recognizing that unless, as the psalmist puts it, the Lord builds life, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

II. James, after talking to the movers, turns to talk to the shakers. The pillars of the community, the people who are the power-brokers, who make the decisions.

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What we have in verses 1–6 is a picture, a slice of sociology, of the social life, that is distinctly non-American. It's really third world. It describes the Palestine of Biblical days. No middle class. A handful of people control 90 to 95 percent of the lands and the wealth in a country. James is addressing that landed, aristocratic group. In James' day, wealth was made up of three things—how much food you had in your granary, what kind of clothes you wore, and what sort of metals you had (silver and gold). James is reminding the landed aristocracy that food rots, that moths destroy clothes, and that metals corrode and diminish. If they're not diminishing within our lifetime or within a thousand years, someday the planet itself is going to go and metal isn't going to be worth anything.

As you travel to the third world and see the tremendous disparity between the poor and the rich, you have a new sense of what James is talking about here. You also have a new appreciation for what has happened in this country, where Christian people have had an impact upon the ethics of how you spend capital. That's not to suggest that in any way America is ideal and has everything together. But it's certainly a better society in terms of the care for the needy than some of the places I've been.

James is calling upon Christians to have a sense of social responsibility. The Christian solution to such injustice is not a gospel of liberation by the way. If you travel in third world countries today, you know there's a popularity and a theology called the "gospel of liberation," where so-called Christian theologians are saying the disparity between the rich and the poor is so great the poor Christian need to grab a gun in the name of Christ, chase out the landowner, and declare war on him. James doesn't advocate that as a solution. In fact, he doesn't really even present a solution except to say to the wealthy, "In that day, God is going to hold you responsible for how

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you treat the poor.” And He’s going to hold you accountable for what you have. He’s going to do that with every one of us in this room.

James does not condemn the wealthy for owning the land. What he condemns them for is three things:

A. One is: not paying the workers. He says, “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 [“Sabaoth,” the Lord of hosts]” (James 5:4, NIV). That is, the Lord who made the sun, the moon and the stars. That Lord. That Lord of hosts. The cry of the poor has reached God Almighty.

You can see the situation we have here in any Middle Eastern country you go to today—a whole sector where people gather everyday, hoping that somebody will come along and employ them. It’s a day worker, and they’re paid at the end of the day. You can see it with the illegals, where they wait for somebody to hire them to do a day’s yard work. At the end of the day, because the family’s financial needs are so pressing, they must be paid. They can’t wait for a paycheck fifteen days or a month down the road. They’ve got to have it today.

James, reflecting upon that kind of society, says that those who have everything, all the land and all the money in the banks, would deny the poor workers their pay at the end of the day. James says that cry has reached the Lord God Sabaoth.

I’ve never been in that position, except as a paperboy, when I was young. I needed money, our family was poor. What I earned went to pay my own food and my own clothes. I think I’ve earned my own way in life since I was ten years of age. Except my parents always provided housing and never charged me for that. But I felt the responsibility to be involved in family finances, so I’ve always been sort of self-reliant.

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It used to agitate me to no end to go, and obviously somebody had the money to pay me, and they'd say, "Come back. I don't have the money now." There is one thing I will not do and that is delay paying a paperboy. I think it is a mortal sin before God to tell that guy to come back.

James says that in that day those who do not use their wealth as God would have had them use it—their wealth will not be an asset to them in the judgment day but it will be evidence against them.

B. The second thing that James notes in his condemnation of the shakers is that they live "in luxury and self-indulgence" (James 5:5, NIV). "Luxury" comes from a root Greek word meaning "to break down." It is used to describe the soft living which in the end saps a person's moral fiber. Self-indulgence means to live in such a way as to totally satisfy oneself and forget all duty to fellowmen.

Such a lifestyle, James says, is the fattening of oneself in the day of slaughter (James 5:5). That's an agricultural term. Killing day. It's fattening yourself. It's saying, "This bull that's being killed—I'm going to eat it all, forget all those people out there." Fattening oneself in the day of slaughter.

C. The third thing that James condemns in the landed aristocracy is the oppression of the innocent. "You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you" (James 5:6, NIV). I talked to some Wycliffe Bible translators just a few weeks ago. They are serving the Lord by living in an Indian village, in a very inaccessible area. They were recounting the difficulties they were facing as guerrillas were probing that area and murdering people left and right. They said, "Everybody professes to have an interest in the Indian and that they've come to protect the native Indian in this particular country. But actually, nobody cares about the Indians at all. The government wants the land to prove it has the authority. The guerillas want the

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land to prove that they can run the thing. And the Indians are just in the way, so they're used as a pawn, a merchandising thing. But who cares about the Indians?"

That's what James is saying in verse 6. "You've condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing you." John Paul Getty—probably the richest man in America or maybe the world—his biographer tells some insights about him, including the fact that this oil magnate changed his will twenty-one times in the last years of his life, because he kept figuring out who he was going to include and who he was going to deal-out based upon whether he liked them or not. He was using his money as a lever with people. When his twelve-year-old son died, he didn't even go to his funeral. Instead, he simply wrote in his diary that day a notation that his little boy had died, and then he goes on to give a whole string of financial dealings that he had taken care of that particular day. "You have condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing you."

Murdering innocent people doesn't just apply to the wealthy. We live in a culture where people are disposable. James says, "You have condemned and murdered innocent people who were not opposing you." God doesn't think highly of a lifestyle that puts material comfort ahead of human beings.

It's a serious message. A message from God, that our times are really in His hands. And that all that we do is conditioned by His will. And whatever we have in life, we're answerable for and we're answerable for injustice as well, which we have a chance of correcting with our own hearts and lives.

When we grab the material things of life, the high cost might be the shattering of the more priceless gift of life in relationships with people. Jesus is judging between things and people. He'll always take His side on people. People and relationships are more important than materials

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and things. A happy home is more important than a big house. Joy in relationships is more important than a luxury automobile. Having peace with God and living an unencumbered lifestyle financially, that is, by needless debt, is more important than keeping up with the Joneses, so to speak. Sometimes we lose the more priceless things of life because we are holding on to the things that really don't matter.

As we approach the Christmas season, we are called upon to have the character of the God, who hears the cries of the poor and the needy, which is us, and who left His ivory palaces. I certainly have never seen anybody who lived in an ivory palace. That's used of heaven to describe the richness of God, who left the ivory palace and came among us. Why did he come? The Bible tells us that we are to "consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor that you through his poverty might be rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). He came to bless us with His presence, to give of His very self. Not to give us things. He didn't bring down the gold in the vaults of heaven. He brought down himself, which is the most priceless gift of all. He teaches us, through that, that the most important things in life are what we are with others. And what we do for others.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we come to the close of this time and maybe we're here today and we're not a mover or a shaker, as the world considers it. Maybe our income is limited and fixed. Or maybe we're just as poor as the proverbial church mouse. But Lord, all of us have had to deal with the inquisitive spirit, and all of us had to come to you with our lives and ask of You, "What's really important? What do You want to really accomplish in my life? What's Your will?" Today, Lord, we want to make ourselves valuable to You again. Not part of us, not some of us. But all of us. All of it, all that comprises our life—available to You. We know we're here for such a brief time.

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“Only one life will soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” Give us, heavenly Father, the wealth that does not erode or fade. The true riches of the gospel, the good news of Christ, who serves us, the true riches of joy and happiness and forgiveness and caring for other people. In loving and trying to imitate Your love as we love. Give us those kind of riches. This Christmas season, may our times together be times blessed by Your presence. May they be marked by healing and grace and loving. If we don't have anything to give this year, or any money to give it with, help us, Lord, to know that it is simply giving ourselves that is the most important thing we can ever do. Teach us creatively how to give ourselves to one another and how not to substitute the giving of ourselves with something that is simply external and material. Let even our gift-giving at this time of the year be sanctified. May it be pervaded by Your presence, so that our giving of gifts even arises from a purity of heart before You. Not to give because we feel guilty or because we feel pressed to it. Or we give, not because we have to. But that our gifts are as noble as the feelings we have toward the people who receive the gifts. Thank You for giving us Your own nature and character, and for the helpful warnings You give us in life, so that we may continue on Your path. Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.