

**Introduction:**

- A. Do you love *Les Mis*? *Les Miserables*. The miserable ones. Wow, those songs get me every time! “*Bring him home.*” “*One day more!*” All those downtrodden beggars and revolutionaries, all marching out into the streets of Paris, defiantly risking their lives for liberty and justice. Their voices start off in the distance...

*Do you hear the people sing?*

*Singing the song of angry men?*

*It is the music of the people*

*Who will not be slaves again! [ONE DAY MORE!]*

*When the beating of your heart*

*Echoes the beating of the drums*

*There is a life about to start*

*When tomorrow comes.*

- Whew! I get a little carried away. The red flag gets me!
- B. It’s just that it doesn’t work all that often. The rich and powerful almost always seem to win and the poor are still miserable. Even those of us who are comfortable groan sometimes under the corruption and power that controls our companies, government, entertainment and even families. In many places, Christians especially suffer terribly at the hands of rich and powerful people. And Christians have sometimes shipwrecked their faith over the love of money. **1 Tim 6:10** says, “*The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*” It is hard to think of anything more treacherous to the soul than wealth. Jesus said, “*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*”
- C. Turn to **James 5**. James wrote to Christians under pressure and no one puts more pressure on societies, institutions, and individuals—especially *godly* individuals—than those who are both *wealthy and wicked*. In chap. 5, James thunders God’s judgment like one of the Old Testament prophets. He is fiery with righteous indignation.

Illus.: Do you remember the scene in Charles Dickens' *The Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge is confronted by the ghost his old business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley, swathed in clanking chains and money boxes comes to warn Scrooge to change his miserly ways. Scrooge asks him about the chains and Marley says,

*"I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?"*

*Scrooge trembled more and more.*

*"Or would you know," pursued the Ghost, "the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and long as this seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it since. It is a ponderous chain"*

*"Speak comfort to me, Jacob," Scrooge pleads and Marley replies, "I have none to give."*

You think that's tough!? Listen to **James 5:1-6**...

## **I. THE RICH AND POWERFUL MUST SOON FACE GOD'S JUDGMENT (5:1-6)**

A. The very people who wrapped themselves in wealth will soon "weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on them". This is chilling to read and imagine. The language portrays the Judgment Seat of God. The first words could be translated, *"Come now, the rich man."* *Docket # 57328. Almighty God vs. the rich fool.* James' description is not hyperbole. Here stands a person on the threshold of hell. And as Dante said, *"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."* James tells us just why their misery is so terrible

B. **Vv.2-3a...** Their wealth rots and they rot with it. Even their gold and silver are no better than pig iron, rusting away. The rot and rust and moths are all called as witnesses that this arrogant person was wrapped in their corroding wealth. **Here were people who were nothing without their money, and when their money corrodes so do their lives.**

Illus.: I've been listening to the audiobook, *Crazy Rich: Power, Scandal, and Tragedy Inside the Johnson & Johnson Dynasty*. This is the family made unimaginably

wealthy by Band-Aids and baby powder. I've listened to the endless stories of at least four generations and there hasn't been one noble person in the lot. Extravagances I cannot fathom, the worst of family relationships, runaway addictions, brutally raw power. They were, and are, rotting in their wealth. When **Robert Wood Johnson Jr.** died, the book said he left an "immense fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars in Johnson and Johnson stock to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. His *"last words to one of his nurses before he died shortly after six P.M. on January 30, 1968, at the age of seventy-four, were: 'I have millions and I would give everything I have if someone could make me well.'"* [p.229]

- C. **V.3b...** They have hoarded their wealth at others' expense like there was no tomorrow. To hoard wealth at the expense of others has always been terrible, but to do it on eve of Jesus' second coming and the Judgment Day is playing with fire. *Look!* says James the prosecutor. *Look! I have evidence. Here are people who served you—worked for you—and you cheated them out of their wages. Do you think that goes without notice?! When they go home and pound their fists on the kitchen table in frustration, do you think no one is listening? Just because you don't listen doesn't mean God doesn't. All those little people with no recourse have been heard and now every one of them is pressing charges against you for fraud. You didn't pay for their work, it was entirely because you thought you could get away with it.*

*"I have further evidence, Your Honor. These are photos of the accused's house, their luxuries, their cars."*

*"But Your Honor,"* says the defense counsel, *"there's no crime in having nice things."*

*"True enough, but when that luxury and self-indulgence comes at the expense of others, it's a crime. **It wasn't their money!**"* Notice two little phrases.

1. **V.5,** *"You have lived **on earth** in luxury and self-indulgence."* Their residency is about to change. Right now we are all living in temporary housing.

2. Then there's the rather grim statement in **v.5**, "*You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.*" Instead of a pig gorging itself on corn while the butcher sharpens his knife, here's a rich and powerful man gorging himself on the food meant for his workers, never realizing he's hastening his own day of reckoning. **They are the fattened calf!**

D. **V.6**... James might mean that Jesus himself was the victim of these people, which was certainly true. Or he may simply mean, *Your self-indulgent greed condemns and kills innocent, righteous people.* This is the last straw.

**SUMMARY: Rev. 18** tells how part of the final judgment is God's destruction of Babylon the Great—the vast, worldwide confab of corrupting commerce, trading in everything from cinnamon to slaves. The perpetrators are a spider web of the world's rulers, the buyers and sellers, and the transportation tycoons who see it all suddenly go up in smoke. "*Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!*" [v.10] This is the verdict in **Rev. 18:23-24**, "*Your merchants were the world's important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth.*" [**Rev. 19:1-2**]

Well, here sit the rest of us, wide-eyed and silent as stones. We're like the disciples at the Last Supper after Jesus said one of them would betray him. "*Surely not I, Lord?*" After all, I'm no titan of industry. I don't have any employees. I try to tip 20%. I don't know what we should do about the minimum wage. I shop for free-trade coffee even though I don't actually know what it is. I know that we are far more prosperous and comfortable than most people in the world. Is God angry with me? Here is what must set us apart.

## **II. CHRISTIANS, RICH AND POOR, WEIGH WEALTH DIFFERENTLY**

- A. Our value to the church is in our pressure-tested faith, not our money or power. I came across this slide that says, "*A diamond is just a piece of charcoal that handled stress exceptionally well.*" That's what Christians are, and our value comes from the pressure we have handled through

our faith in Christ. There are both poor and rich Christians in many churches. **Jas. 1:9-10** turned the usual classes upside down...

Churches that put the rich and powerful into the places of honor and leadership forget that those who are richest in faith—which is the gold standard of the church—are those who have suffered faithfully. By that standard, rich people are often at a distinct disadvantage; the ones with the most to learn about trusting Jesus. In fact, the rich believers only real advantage is “*their humiliation*.” Only that which truly humbles you before God is praiseworthy and notable—your weaknesses and poverty. Your money and power in the world are liabilities here on God’s balance sheet.

- B. Only treasures stored in heaven keep their value. I think you remember what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:19-21): “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*”

In **Luke 16** Jesus told the intriguing story of a steward—let’s call him a CFO—who, facing the loss of his job, used his boss’s resources to secure his future. It’s the kind of story that had people raising their eyebrows! Jesus conclusion was this (16:9-11), “*I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?*” Invest God’s money in the lives of others. Your treasure in heaven will not be gold and silver. They use that stuff to pave highways in God’s kingdom. **The rich people in heaven will be those who used their wealth here to invest our future friends there.**

- C. It is clear from James' strong words that God expects us to use wealth justly and generously. You and I may not be rich by the standards of other people, especially in this community, but whatever prosperity we enjoy in this world is a trust given us by God. We cannot plead disinterest or ignorance. We *can* pray and ask God for wisdom in how to save, spend and give. We *can* ask for the help of wise fellow-believers. But we can't dodge the duty.
- D. In the very next verses James tells fellow believers how his diatribe against the rich is relevant to the rest of us. For one thing, we should be encouraged that God will set things right. **Justice against the worthless rich will come when God summons all to his judgment seat.**

But there's something even more heartening than that. We'll study the next verses next week but take a look now: **vv.7-9... Like farmers, Christians wait patiently for the rich harvest of our persevering faith**. As we've seen before, God can take even the dark and dirty pressures of the wicked rich and powerful and subvert them to the good of those who trust him. Be patient. Jesus is coming back and will set things right. Right now, all these pressures are our growing season. These dark clouds don't threaten what grows within us. In God's mighty hand, even the wickedness of others can be like spring and fall rain to nourish our faith in Jesus Christ. Never rest your hope in the economies of this world.

Illus.: There's a great museum in Deadwood, SD. The town is famous for the gold rush that centered there in the 1880s. The museum has this thin limestone rock, about 8 by 10 inches, called the Thoen Stone, after the man who found it. It was inscribed on both sides by Ezra Kind, the last of seven prospectors from Independence, Missouri, and is dated 1834. He lists their names and writes that the others were "*killed by Indians beyond the high hill.*" The other side of the stone says, "*Our ponies all got by the Indians. I have lost my gun and nothing to eat and Indians hunting me.*" But the first line is, "*Got all the gold we could carry.*" Beware the treasure of fools.