

“Payday is Coming”
James 5:1-6

Payday! The word has a welcome sound, doesn't it? Most likely, every worker, in every culture and country around the world knows that word in their native language. The toil, the sweat, the exercise of brawn or brains, finally produces a reward. Now, you and I can provide for our needs and the needs of our families. Our labor has been rewarded, the necessities of life can be bought or bartered, and physical life will be sustained.

Just for a moment, suppose that you worked all week at your job, whatever that is, and at the end of the week you DID NOT receive the paycheck you were promised. How would you feel? How would you respond? At the very least you would feel cheated; all that labor and no reward. I find it interesting that many who would rise up in indignation at the withholding of a person's wages, and rightly so, somehow think they can live their entire lives in self-gratification and not expect a proportionate reward. We want to look at such a group in today's study.

Our text today is James 5:1-6. In this passage of Scripture James speaks about a group of people who have the problem I just mentioned a moment ago. Because of their position in life, and the way in which they're accustomed to having their own way, they are blissfully ignorant of the payday that's approaching. It will come on them unexpectedly.

In our text, James addresses employers: wealthy employers, unjust employers, employers who have benefitted at the expense of their employees. This text is a pronouncement of judgment on those unjust employers. It is also a warning to every employer to deal justly with his or her employees. And even if you are not an employer, there are principles here that you will do well to observe and obey.

Again, our text is James chapter five, verses one through six. Now I'm reading that portion from the Word of God.

James 5:1-6

In this text, James reveals the promised WAGES that will come to unjust employers.

The First Part of the Promised Wages;

Your Wealth Becomes a Curse

James begins chapter five with the same words he used in 4:13, “*Go to now.*” Perhaps the chapter division here is a bit arbitrary. There is definitely a connection between the last verses of chapter four and the beginning of chapter five. Regardless, as I said last week, the modern equivalent would be for us to say something like, “Oh, come on,” or, “Now wait a minute.” Both times it is in a context where the end result turns out to be different than what is generally expected.

The wealthy men (employers according to verse four) are told to weep and howl because misery is about to overtake them. Here are men who are accustomed to a life of ease, laughter, mirth, celebration. They dress in finery and boast in their accumulated possessions. James says they should lament and wail in their wretchedness because of the calamities that are coming their way. Hardship and trouble are just ahead, because, like those we talked about last week, they forgot the God factor.

There are many like them today, and sadly, some of them are in the church. This message probably came as a shock to them. They forgot the words in Ecclesiastes 5:13, “*There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.*”

The riches James speaks of in verse two are not monetary; those come later in verse three. Here, he speaks of things that spoil or rot. If you look down to verse four, you learn that their wealth was in their harvests, their agricultural produce. Now that makes sense. Produce from the soil, because it is organic matter, even if it is stored very carefully, will have a tendency to spoil or rot. Their grains would get infested with bugs or exposure to moisture. The wine would sour and become worthless and the olive oil would turn rancid. On top of all that, their many changes of fine clothing they had accumulated would become moth-eaten.

In verse three, the silver and gold of these wealthy men becomes a liability. Their gold and silver, whether in plate or coin, would become tarnished. I want you to see the connection

here between the agricultural produce, the clothing and the silver and gold. Why were all these things moving into a state of decay? Because these wealthy men were hoarding them!

And God said that those things they'd hoarded up would become the evidence that would convict them in His court of justice. Like the wealthy farmer of Luke chapter twelve, the actions of these men characterize them as fools because they failed to figure God into their lives and plans. They were not sharing with the poor because they didn't have the resources. No, it was because they were selfish and greedy!

They refused to honor God with the very wealth He had given them. The produce of their fields, if it had been used in an appropriate length of time, would not have had nearly as much opportunity for spoilage. Silver and gold, passed from hand to hand in the course of commerce would not have tarnished as quickly as when it is hoarded up in some secret account.

The very thing they had set their hearts on as a source of blessing, comfort, security and satisfaction would now become a curse to them. It will always be so. God never intended "things" to produce security. Here James becomes very graphic. He says that the rust, or corrosion, of their riches would "eat their flesh as fire." There is an obvious connection back to the word, cankered, that he used in describing what would happen to their riches. The modern term for canker is, gangrene! It is a dreaded word today, but imagine how much more dreaded at the time James is writing. It struck fear into the stoutest heart, much like the word, cancer, does for us today.

The last part of verse three is a bit of a challenge to decipher, but here's my understanding of it. When we began this study of the book of James I pointed out my belief that this book was one of the earliest writings of the New Testament. Keeping that point in mind makes me suggest that the fiery judgment that was coming was actually the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. If you read the Old Testament prophets and their messages of judgment, one of the issues for which God judged His people most harshly was the oppression of the poor. Obviously, that sin was taking place here in this text. And, I believe, according to Scripture, the sins of materialism and greed will characterize the final days of history also.

If you are a person of wealth, and especially an employer, I urge you to take these words to heart. Jesus and the apostles warn again and again in the New Testament about the danger of riches used selfishly. Neither you nor I want to receive the kind of wages spoken of here.

The Next Part of the Promised Wages,

Your Workers Cry for Justice

As a young man, I read the book titled, “The Jungle.” The novel was written by Upton Sinclair and detailed the horrible working conditions that existed in the meat packing plants in Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century. I certainly would not support the conclusion of the author, that socialism is the cure for these problems. But the book, as I said, gives a glimpse into the rampant abuses of the workers employed in the slaughterhouses. Those abuses were at least partly responsible for the establishment of labor unions as a means of offering some protection for the workers. But given the nature of unredeemed mankind, labor unions have given rise to their own abuses of both workers and business owners.

Verse four introduces this part of the wages. James accuses the wealthy landowners of withholding the wages of their laborers. God had given clear instruction to his people regarding the treatment of employees. Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15 contain this similar message. *“At his day you shall give him his hire; neither shall the sun go down upon it;—lest he cry against you unto the Lord and it be sin unto you.”* In addition, God promised little patience with those who ignored this command. *“I will come near to you in judgment, and will be a swift witness against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, Malachi 3:5.”* Those are Old Testament scriptures, that’s all James had; but there are plenty in the New Testament that address employer/employee relationships.

These landowners violated God’s clear commands and the cries of the laborers would become evidence against them in God’s court of justice. They assumed that because the laborers had no earthly court that would hear their case they could be oppressed with impunity. But once again, these wealthy men forgot God. He was watching, and He was keeping a record. They had forgotten the warning of Proverbs 21:13, *“Whoso stops his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, and shall not be heard.”*

The cries for justice had come into the ears of the Lord of the Sabbath. Lord of hosts, or Lord of armies, is a frequent appellation of God in the Old Testament; and signifies his uncontrollable power, and the infinitely numerous means he has for governing the world, and defending his followers, and punishing the wicked.

These verses give a warning to all employers, but especially those who call themselves Christians. There is no just cause for oppressing employees. Proverbs 14:31 warns, *“He that oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker: but he that honors him has mercy on the poor.”* And, Colossians 4:1 exhorts, *“Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”* I’ll never forget the kindness of a former employer who paid us out of his personal funds when there were no business funds to meet the payroll. Even though he made no profession of faith, his care for his employees would put many a Christian business owner to shame.

In today’s business world of international acquisitions and mergers, companies are often bought and sold by speculators who have no compassion for the employees of the companies involved. Their only goal is to enrich themselves through their wheeling and dealing. If the employees suffer or lose their employment as a result, these greedy and heartless men could care less. But they’ve made the same mistake as the wealthy men James wrote about; they’re forgetting the God factor. The cries of the disenfranchised workers will ultimately come into the ears of the Lord of hosts. And payday for them will bring a curse instead of a blessing.

The Final Part of the Promised Wages,

Your Wantonness Comes to an End

The descriptions given in the last two verses of our text are so contemporary. The things James mentions here outline a lifestyle based on consumption. Today, many wealthy church members live in luxury while church mission programs go begging. Many people pile up possessions, hoard their financial resources and have lavish wardrobes. While professing Christ their lifestyle choices show they’ve given themselves to wantonness, i.e. sensuality and gratification of their fleshly appetites. This is the very thing the Holy Spirit inspired James to strongly condemn.

Many Christians are addicted to entertainment and pleasure. Sporting events draw huge crowds, but prayer meetings are poorly attended. Often the largest crowds are found at the churches with the liveliest entertainment and little solid preaching of the Word. Many church parking lots look like the lot of a luxury car dealership. Anyone who suggests a need for followers of Christ to be self-controlled and disciplined in all areas of life is subjected to vicious slander or pushed aside as being legalistic.

Part of the indictment in these verses deals with uncontrolled eating. I remember as a young man driving past numerous fast-food places and restaurants in a short distance. My dad said, “People are digging their graves with their teeth.” If he was right back then, and he was, how much more true his words today? The rise of all-you-can-eat type restaurants, and the corresponding increase in obesity, heart disease and other ailments make these verses especially relevant today. People are literally killing themselves by their out-of-control appetites.

And do you know what happens to people who become controlled by their appetites? They become so accustomed to having what they want when they want it; they come to the place where they will brook no opposition. Anyone who gets in the way of them satisfying their appetites is history. Though they may once have embraced Christ and the principles of His Word, now the end justifies the means if it leads to their sensual satisfaction. It was so during the days in which James was writing and it is true today.

But James warns those who live controlled by their passions, God will not permit this to go on forever. A day of reckoning is near, the promised payday is coming. Each of us will need to give an account of ourselves before God and then receive the just wages we have earned.

I close with these words from the lips of Jesus in Luke 6:24-26; *“But woe unto you that are rich! For you have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For you shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For you shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets.”*

Heavenly Father these are sobering words from the Lord Jesus, and from the pen of the writer James. I thank you that your Holy Spirit inspired him to write this message. And I pray your Spirit will search my heart, and the heart of my listening friend and reveal any areas of self-indulgence that need to be removed. Father help us to bring all of our desires and appetites under

the control of your Spirit so that we can maximize our resources for your glory and the extension of your church here on this earth.

Give us eyes to see life from your perspective and to understand the value of living simply so that others may have an opportunity to hear the Gospel. May we have the wonderful privilege of meeting those in heaven who came to know you as a result of our investment in kingdom work. I ask this in the name of Jesus... Amen.