Session 10: James 5:1–6

OPEN

What was the first job, outside your home, you ever got paid for?

How much did you get paid?

How did you feel about that wage at the time?

READ

Read James 5:1–6.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 10: *James 5:1–6* (10 minutes).

DISCUSS

Leader: *This may be a challenging study, for several reasons. James addresses "rich people" directly and accuses them of exploitation and neglect. The people in your group will not want to think they're included in the "rich people" category, no matter how wealthy they are. If you press the point, applying the Scripture to them, as you would with any Scripture, they might get defensive or even angry. And in today's political climate, this might spark a debate about class warfare, taxation, welfare, and upcoming elections. You don't want that to happen. So you might want to be extra careful about where the discussion goes. What is the Lord telling all of you through this Scripture? Do all you can to help people listen to God's voice on this touchy matter.*

How would you describe the tone of this passage? Who is James addressing in this section?

What is he predicting for them?

Why will this happen?

Do you think this is written to all "rich" people ever, to rich people in that time and place, or just to the rich people who were guilty of exploitation?

The deeper question is: What are we going to do with this? James really lays into these people, and it makes us uncomfortable. If we can dodge this barrage, we want to. We want to say it's their problem, not ours. And most of us don't think of ourselves as rich, do we? We're always looking at someone else who has more, and we say, Go after them, James. *They're* the problem.

But whenever we come to Scripture, we want to see what's there for us. God wants to speak to us in these pages, and we need to be ready to listen, even if it's uncomfortable. So maybe James is speaking to people who use their wealth badly, but there's still a lesson here for us. How does God want us to use *our* resources? That's the question we want to zero in on today.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about God's view of wealth in the following Bible passages.
Proverbs 11:28; Jeremiah 22:13–17; Amos 6:1–7; Malachi 3:5

Jeremiah criticizes one king for his extravagant lifestyle and compares him with his father. **How would you describe the two different ways of life in this passage?**

As you look over all four texts, what corrections and warnings do you see?

What similarities do you see between these passages and James 5:1–6?

According to these passages, what sort of future does wealth lead to?

In James 5:1, what's the first thing James wants the "rich" people to do?

How do you think this compares with their current attitude? (Do they spend a lot of time "weeping and howling"?)

Why would this be important? What is there to weep about?

You might think James wants them to have some compassion, to weep for the plight of the needy. But this passage isn't about charity. He warns specifically about "the misery that is coming on you." This is not a rich-poor comparison as much as a present- future comparison. *Now* you are living in "luxury and self-indulgence," trusting in your wealth to shield you from the hard things in life, but you won't have that option in the future. You will have to face the consequences of your misdeeds.

We've seen earlier that James is connecting strongly with the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes it seems as if he is writing a commentary on that sermon. So let's take a look at a couple of things Jesus taught. The first comes from Luke's version of that same sermon.

Someone turn to Luke 6:22–26, and read it for us.

Who gets "blessed" here? Who has "woe" pronounced on them?

What comparison do you see here between the present and the future?

What connections do you see with James 5? Do you think James might have had this teaching in mind as he wrote his epistle?

Someone turn to Matthew 6:19–21, and read it for us.

What connections do you see here with James 5?

Why is it important to "lay up treasures in heaven"?

What does this look like in our lives?

When James asks them to "weep and howl," he might also be asking them to weep in repentance for their wrongdoing. There is specific mention of cheating workers out of their pay. General issues of hoarding and self-indulgence are also listed. But there's also this strange comment in verse 6.

Take another look at that. **What do you think James is talking about?**

PEEK AT THE GREEK

The ESV translation is a literal one: “You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.” The “righteous person” (*dikaion*) is singular, but it was a common literary device then (as now) for one person to stand for a whole class of people. A business leader today might say, “We want the employee to feel motivated,” meaning not just one, but all employees. And so some translations of James 5:6 put it in the plural. Righteous people are the victims, and that makes sense in context.

But there’s another tantalizing possibility. Could James be talking about Jesus? If any person could be called “the righteous one” (and other translations say “innocent one”), it would be Jesus. In fact, He is called exactly that in Acts 3:14. And Jesus did not resist his executioners, so that fits too. But why would James accuse his readers of killing Jesus?

Now we come back to the practical question of what we can do about this. We've been watching James tear apart these terrible rich people. Shame on them! But even if we might be richer than someone else, we really don't think of ourselves as rich. Besides that, we don't exploit people, and we certainly don't kill them. So does this have any connection to us?

There are some questions we can ask of ourselves even if we're not rich.

How can we use the resources we have, such as they are, to help the poor?

What can we do to make sure that poor workers are not exploited, that they get a fair wage for their work?

We know God loves justice and hates the exploitation of the poor. **So as we participate in our world economy, how can we advance the cause of justice?**

Where are we storing our treasure? How can we break free from the idolatry of money and all the things it buys? How can we seek first God's kingdom?

In the video, Francis Chan got us off on the right track when he said,

> Let's get to the heart of the matter. If I'm constantly just thinking about acquiring stuff for myself, I've got to wonder, Is my heart really changed? I don't genuinely really care about the needs of the world. If I really see myself as this mist, this vapor, that is here for a short time—man, is there something wrong with me and my heart if I'm not just content with knowing Jesus, knowing the Creator, and knowing someday he's going to return...but instead I'm busy defending all the stuff I'm acquiring for myself? Let's not argue about this object or that object and whether its right to get it. Let's instead look at our hearts and go, Why long for these things so much? And, Why am I acquiring more and more for myself and neglecting those who are in need?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about what to do with wealth in the following Bible passages.
1 Timothy 6:6–10; 1 Timothy 6:17–19

According to these passages, what attitudes should we have about wealth?

According to these passages, what actions should we take?

LAST WORD

Are the first six verses of James 5 written to us? Not exactly, but we can still learn some things here. We learn what God cares about, and we learn what makes Him mad. When rich people exploit poor people, that's a big problem. God will turn the tables in His coming kingdom.

And maybe we should "weep and howl" a little more about the injustice in our world. We should certainly do what we can to help the poor. James has been saying this all along.

But all of that starts in our hearts. We might find it hard to admit how important money really is in our lives. Is it more important to us than God is? How many of our decisions are based on the bottom line rather than our higher calling?

How can we break the mastery of money in our lives? How can we center our hearts on God rather than wealth? How can we store up treasures in heaven?

Leader: *Let that discussion roll, as long as time allows. (You might have some practical ideas ready to suggest, in order to get it rolling.)*

There's an interesting exchange in the gospels where Jesus announces it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. The disciples are flabbergasted. Rich people were the most religious people they knew. They ask, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus replies, "With God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:23–26).

You might think it's impossible to break the hold of money on your life, and maybe it is, for you. But with God, all things are possible.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Review: Think back through the group discussions today. Were there any ideas that you could try out in the coming weeks?

Read: Isaiah 58. This chapter bears a lot of similarities to the book of James. People were religious, proud of their frequent fasting. But God challenges them to a new kind of devotion—caring for the needy, treating workers fairly, etc. Then that will open up a whole new kind of relationship with God.

Prayer of Confession and Commitment: Talk with God honestly and humbly about the role of money and possessions in your life. Research: Find out more about exploitation in our world today. Share your findings with other believers. Pray together about what you could do to change things.

Budget: Examine your household budget. How do your expenditures reflect your spiritual priorities? What might need to change?