

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF GREED

© 1997 by Mark Beard

Text: James 5:1-6

■ At a birthday party, it came time to serve the cake. A little boy named Brian blurted out, “I want the biggest piece!”

His mother quickly scolded him. “Brian, It’s not polite to ask for the biggest piece.”

The little guy looked confused and asked, “Well then, how do you get it?”

--Olive Freeman, The Christian Reader

As humorous as the story is, the sad truth is it seems to be the prevailing attitude of the world to, “get all that you can as fast as you can.” Although to get ahead in business one has to be aggressive and assertive and in life one must have goals, when this attitude gets out of hand it can be destructive.

The “get all you can” and “look out for number one” approach to life has caused many to become selfish and self absorbed, to withdraw and alinate friends and family and to live beyond their means to the point of being destroyed financially. The world even seems to have their own motto, “The one who dies with the most toys wins!”

One might think that greed is only a problem for the rich. And we excuse ourselves because none of us consider ourselves to be “rich.” But greed is the problem of all those who are worldly-minded—regardless of their income or bank account.

Many people have a very simple approach to the subject of money and spirituality—“the poor go to heaven and the rich go to hell.” However tempting it may be to think this way, we should not jump to conclusions concerning those who have or do not have money. Money does not make one righteous nor does it make one a sinner. One can be material minded to a fault and yet have very little.

■ Chuck Swindoll points out that “there are at least 4 general classifications of people and possessions that we can identify:

- 1) Those who are poor without and within
- 2) Those who are rich without and within
- 3) Those who are poor without and rich within
- 4) Those who are rich without and poor within.”

(Swindoll, 160)

The latter of the four is probably the type of people James was referring to when he warns of the coming judgment in verse 1 of our text. Not only does he warn these wealthy unbelievers, he commands them to weep and wail in repentance because of the crimes they have committed and the destruction they have brought to the lives of others.

I. THEY HAD COMMITTED CRIMES OF GREED (vv. 2-3).

A. They had so many material goods in storage that the things had begun to rot.

In the day in which James lived, wealth was not measured by bank accounts, CD's, or stocks and bonds. Wealth was measured by possessions such as grain, oils, wine, precious metals and fine clothing.

It was these possessions that had begun to rot and be eaten by moths. The words of Jesus are very appropriate here, "*Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth...*"

B. Their own corroded wealth testified against them.

■ James Burdick writes, "The idea that the corrosion will eat the flesh of the rich 'like fire' is a graphic way of declaring that their greed will result in their own destruction, as if the corrosion that ate their riches actually will eat their very flesh."

They thought that they were in control but it was their possessions that had taken them over.

■ Haddon Robinson writes, "For every verse in the Bible that tells us the benefits of wealth, there are ten that tell us the danger of wealth, for money has a way of binding us to what is physical and temporal, and blinding us to what is spiritual and eternal. It's a bit like the fly and the flypaper. The fly lands on the flypaper and says, "My flypaper." When the flypaper says, "My fly," the fly is dead. It is one thing to have money, another for money to have you. When it does, it will kill you."

-- Haddon Robinson, "A Good Lesson from a Bad Example," Preaching Today, Tape No. 56.

C. Their “hoarded wealth” exposed them for what they were—unlike Christ.

The day is coming when all that is done in secret will be exposed and all pretense and hypocrisy will be revealed. They had also hoarded wealth in the “last days.” The days between Christ's time here on earth and the time He will come again are the last days. This made their crime even worse.

This action testified of their unwillingness to listen to God, to fear God or to serve Him. They refused to believe there would be a day coming when all they had accumulated would be worthless.

James also reveals....

II. THEY HAD COMMITTED CRIMES AGAINST THE POOR (v.4).

A. These people had cheated their workmen out of their wages.

A chapter heading in Calvin Miller's book *A REQUIEM FOR LOVE* reads:

A beggar asked a millionaire,
"How many more dollars
Would it take to
Make you truly happy?"
The millionaire,
Reaching his gnarled hands
Into the beggar's cup replied,
"Only one more!"

(Larson, 103)

B. However, the cries of the oppressed had reached the ears of the Lord.

When one is oppressed by those driven by greed he/she needs only to call on the Lord.

■ “Here it is said that the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts! ... It is the teaching of the Bible in its every part that the Lord of the universe is concerned for the rights of the laboring man.” (Swindoll, 161-62)

In short, they were taking advantage of others less fortunate in order to get more for themselves. This is something God will not ignore.

James also points out that...

III. THEY HAD COMMITTED CRIMES OF SELF-INDULGENCE (v. 5).

A. They lived in luxury and self-indulgence.

These two words in the Greek (*etryphesate* and *espatalesate*) are synonyms, but there is a difference. "The first refers to a soft, enervating luxury that tends to demoralize. The second word describes extravagant and wasteful self-indulgence." (Burdick)

The scripture is not forbidding us the finer things in life. It is instead warning against living a totally selfish lifestyle. Once someone grows accustomed to it all being about them and their wants, they don't want it to change. It becomes an addiction. They want more and more.

■ The wealthy old man was very enthusiastic about his lovely young bride but sometimes wondered whether she might have just married him for his money. So he asked: "If I lost all my money, would you still love me?" She retorted, "Of course I would still love you. Don't be silly. But I would miss you!"
(Hewett, 341)

B. These people were like fattened cattle completely unaware of their impending judgment.

■ They were like the shortsighted swine.

A pig ate his fill of acorns under an oak tree and then started to root around the tree. A crow remarked, "You should not do this. If you lay bare the roots, the tree will wither and die." "Let it die," said the pig. "Who cares as long as there are acorns?"

The very thing they were enjoying was going to lead them to destruction.

C. Greed can cloud ones judgment.

■ The March 1988 Rotarian tells about a bounty of \$5,000 offered for each wolf captured alive. It turned Sam and Jed into fortune hunters. Day and night they scoured the mountains and forests looking for their valuable prey. Exhausted one night, they fell asleep dreaming of their potential fortune. Suddenly, Sam awoke to see that they were surrounded by about 50 wolves with flaming eyes and bared teeth. He nudged his friend and said, "Jed, wake up! We're rich!"

-- Gary C. Payne, Reidsville, North Carolina. Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 1.

IV. THEY HAD COMMITTED CRIMES OF MURDER (v. 6).

A. Innocent men had been condemned and murdered.

The “innocent men” or literally “righteous men” that are spoken of were believers, probably poor believers. These acts will not be forgotten—then or now!

Note: There's more than one way to kill a man in order to get what one wants. Those who mistreat others just to get a little more will pay one day.

B. They had murdered defenseless men or men who refused to fight back.

We must remember that just because justice is not done now does not mean it will not be done in the future. “The wheels of God's justice grind slow, but they grind mighty fine.”

CONCLUSION

These crimes of greed are the result of a greater problem of the heart. It is not wrong to have wealth. It is wrong to let wealth change us and our attitudes to the point we violate God's laws and bring destruction on ourselves and others.

■ Clovis Chappell writes in his book of sermons *FEMININE FACES*:

When Pompeii was being excavated, there was found a body that had been embalmed by the ashes of Vesuvius. It was that of a woman. Her feet were turned the city gate, but her face was turned backward toward something that lay just beyond her outstretched hands.

The prize for which those frozen fingers were reaching was a bag of pearls. Maybe she herself had dropped them as she was fleeing for her life. Maybe she had found them where they had been dropped by another. But, be that as it may, though death was hard at her heels, and life was beckoning to her beyond the city gates, she could not shake off their spell. She had turned to pick them up, with death as her reward. But it was not the eruption of Vesuvius that made her love pearls more than life. It only froze her in this attitude of greed. (Larson, 104)

It is not money that destroys us, but greed.

References

Larson, Craig B. (Ed.). (1993). *Illustrations for preaching and teaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
Swindoll, Charles R. (1991). *James: Practical and authentic living*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.