

James 4.13 – 5.6


Your wealth: generous or greedy?



Amington Church

Sunday 1 July 2018

James: wholehearted devotion to Jesus (10)

Introduction

I wonder how many of you have ever felt like Homer Simpson does here... 

The boss of a large company  needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the computer servers. He dialled her home phone number  and was greeted with a child's whispered voice on the first ring, 'Hello?'

Feeling put out at the inconvenience of having to talk to a child the boss asked, 'Is your Mummy home?' 'Yes,' whispered the small voice. 'May I talk to her?' the man asked. To his surprise, the small voice whispered, 'No.'

Wanting to talk to an adult, the boss asked, 'Is your Daddy there?' 'Yes,' came the answer. 'May I talk to him?' Again the small voice whispered, 'No.'

Getting a little confused, the boss asked the child, 'Is there any one there besides you?'

'Yes,' whispered the child, § 'A police officer.'

Wondering what a copper would be doing at his employee's home, the boss asked, 'May I speak to the police officer?'

'No, she's busy,' whispered the child. 'Busy doing what?' asked the boss. 'Talking to Mummy and Daddy and § the Fireman,' came the whispered answer.

Growing more worried as he heard what sounded like a helicopter §, the boss asked, 'What is that noise?'

'A hello-copper,' answered the whispering voice. 'What is going on there?' asked the boss, now alarmed, 'What are all those people doing at your house?'

Still whispering, the young voice replied with a muffled giggle, 'They're looking for me!'

There was a vague tenuous connection between that joke and my sermon this morning. Something about missing or losing what's most precious to you.

Making plans

Who here likes to plan ahead, and who likes to leave things until the last minute? One of the challenges of getting married is the coming together of two different ways of doing things. I am used to having holidays booked and paid for in the calendar year before the holiday happens – my family-in-law... are not. **J**

We booked our summer holiday with Jess's family this year at the end of April – which for them was ridiculously early, and for me was so late I'd almost given up hope it would happen! I caused them stress by wanting to book a holiday far earlier than they would normally, and they caused me stress by... booking a holiday far later than I would like to!

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.

James 4.13-14 (NIV)

So we should never plan anything, then?

No! Making plans and being prepared is a sensible thing to do. The clue is in verse 16: **you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.**

The issue isn't making plans, it's our attitude; the need to plan every little detail of your life might suggest you have difficulty trusting God. It might suggest you think *you* know what's best for you, instead of God – especially when it leads to boasting, because that suggests we think success is down to *me*, not the gift of God.

James says **you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes** (4.14). This makes me think of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, where the Teacher proclaims,

¶ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 1.14 (NIV)

Let's be honest: it sounds a bit depressing, doesn't it?! **You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes** – it's the sort of thing we say at a funeral, and something like it crops up quite regularly in the Bible.

But actually it is one of the most beautiful truths in the whole of the Bible, because it teaches us what *real* worth is.

The value of wealth

I have a confession to make. One of my guilty pleasures is looking at the so-called ‘rich lists’ produced regularly by newspapers and magazines. They were the first thing that popped into my head when I read the first verses of chapter 5, and I thought to myself – **§** who *are* the ‘**rich people**’ James is talking to, today?

Maybe it’s the politicians like Jeremy Hunt, Jacob Rees-Mogg and George Osborn, worth tens of millions of pounds?

Perhaps it is TV stars? One of the shows Jess and I enjoy watching is called **§** *The Big Bang Theory*, about a bunch of scientists and their friendships. The main three characters are paid – wait for it – **§** \$1,000,000 per episode – and each series has 24 episodes in it! But even that pales by comparison to the tens of millions of dollars that movie stars get paid.

What about sports stars – the Brazilian football player **§** Neymar gets paid **§** £537,000 **§** a week – **§** *after* tax. That means it takes him just over one second to pocket £1.

Then there are the tycoons – **§** Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon, is worth **§** \$140bn. **§** Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, **§** has *given away* \$28bn and he is **§** *still* the second richest man in the world.

Why is money called dough? Because we all knead it.

§ Would you say someone was a member of ‘the rich’ if they earned in the top 1%? Well, the income of the *average* UK household puts them in the top 0.9% of earners in the world.

But, for all that – I did say it was a guilty pleasure – the numbers are a red herring. However much or however little you have – you can still have a bad attitude to wealth.

You see, when James condemns **rich people** (5.1) – **weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you** (!) – like much of the Bible he doesn’t condemn them *because* they are wealthy, he condemns them because of the *way they use* their wealth, and their *attitude towards* it.

§ Look in v3: **you have hoarded wealth.**

§ And in v4 he talks of **the wages you failed to pay the workers.**

§ How about v5: **you have lived in luxury and self-indulgence.**

§ And v6: **you have condemned and murdered the innocent.**

These **rich people** have taken their wealth, and instead of using it as a blessing to others, they have been selfish and self-centred, ripping people off, living off the enforced poverty of others.

One day there will be a reckoning, James says: **the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty** (5.4).

Like the blood of Abel cried out against Cain, so our actions have consequences – though we often live as if they don't.

How many of these describe your attitude towards wealth?

Do you love to see your bank balance grow, does it give you a sense of comfort and satisfaction to know that it's there? Or do you find yourself *longing* for such a bank balance, such 'security'?

Do you like bargains when you shop? Are you proud of finding and buying the cheapest clothes, the cheapest food – without considering where it comes from, or whether the people who grew, produced or made it were paid fairly? There's more to fairly traded products than coffee and chocolate.

Luxury and self-indulgence is when a treat becomes the norm – how good are you at resisting? This is probably the one I struggle with the most, I like nice things.

I hope none of you has murdered an innocent person – or *any* person for that matter! The word James uses is about perverting justice. Most of us are not in a position to afford expensive lawyers, but by our *inaction* do we help perpetuate injustice?

Do you see how close to the bone this stuff is from James? He's serious about being whole-hearted and not double-minded: following Jesus isn't just about Sunday it's about *every* day.

How do you use your money? What is your attitude towards it?

Friends, I said earlier that this teaching in James might sound challenging and even depressing – but it's some of the sweetest, most beautiful teaching in the Bible.

Why?



Because it *releases* us from the trap of wealth. In the same way that James puts us in our place by saying we are like **a mist** (4.14), so he tells the rich: **§ your wealth *has rotted*, § and moths *have eaten your clothes*. § Your gold and silver *are corroded*** (5.2-3).

They haven't literally rotted or corroded – *but they may as well have, for all the good they'll do you*, James says. The world is lying to you. The world tells you that wealth and clothes and gold and silver are what it's all about. The world tells you that the more of those you have, the better your life will be.

James says a big, resounding, NO!

That stuff is lovely, and it can – and should – be used for good.

But it will not bring happiness or meaning to your life. Being greedy will only bring misery – being generous, opening our hearts to God and to others, *that* is where true wealth lies.

Friends, how we treat wealth is a  barometer for our heart, like no other. There is a line – at one end is ‘God-centred’  *point left* and at the other end is ‘self-centred’ *point right*.

If our heart is at that end *point right*, we will be concerned mainly with ourselves or our immediate family, with accumulating wealth to provide for them, with worrying about having enough to provide for them, with worrying about what other people think about how much or how little we have.

If our heart is at that end *point left*, we will care not one jot about what other people think of us, and instead we will be generous with our wealth, giving it away instead of hoarding it. We will seek to bless others with it, instead of wanting ever more for ourselves.

Where do you come on that scale? It isn’t either/or – we are all somewhere along the line. Where are you?

Jesus said the health of our heart is shown by the fruit it bears – and nowhere is this more true than when it comes to wealth.

What is *your* attitude towards it? Greedy or generous?