



Digging Deeper

August 10, 2025

Oppression of Workers

Theology of Work Project

James returns to the principle that work must serve the needs of others. His words in the beginning of chapter 5 are scathing. He warns "the rich" to "weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (James 5:1). While the gold in their vaults and the robes in their closets may look as shiny as ever, James is so certain of their coming judgment that he can speak as if their riches were already decomposing: "Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted" (James 5:2-3). Their self-indulgence has succeeded only in "fattening" them "for the day of slaughter" (James 5:5). The day of slaughter seems to be a reference to the day in which God judges those whom he called to lead and care for his people, but who preyed on them instead (Zech. 11:4-7).

These rich people are doomed both for how they acquired their wealth and for what they did (or didn't do) with it once they had it. James echoes the Old Testament as he excoriates them for their unjust business practices: "Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (James 5:4; cf. Lev. 19:13).[1] Money that should be in the hands of laborers sits instead in the treasuries of the landowners. And there it stays—they hoard their wealth and ignore the needy around them (James 5:3).

Business leaders must be especially diligent about paying their workers fairly. An analysis of what constitutes fair pay is beyond the scope of this discussion,[2] but James's words "the wages you have kept back by fraud" (James 5:4) are an accusation of abuse of power on the part of these particular wealthy landowners. The workers were owed wages, but the rich and powerful found a way out of paying them without incurring punishment by the legal system. The rich and powerful often have means to subvert the judiciary, and it's astonishingly easy to exercise unfair power without even recognizing it. Abuses of power include misclassifying employees as independent contractors, inaccurately registering workers in a lower skill code, paying women or minorities less for doing the same job as others, and using children for jobs so dangerous that adults refuse to do them. Misuse of power can never be excused just because it is a so-called standard practice.

James also condemns those who "have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure" (James 5:5). The question of what constitutes living in luxury and in pleasure is also complex, but it confronts many Christians in one way or another. James's chief concern in this passage is the well-being of the poor, so the most relevant question may be, "Does the way I live enhance or

diminish the lives of poor people? Does what I do with money help lift people out of poverty or does it help keep people impoverished?"

Rich Oppressors

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That the original audience of the epistle of James must have developed an infatuation with the wealthy is clear from the many passages that offer warnings to the rich or criticize the church for giving deference to those with great means (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:13-17). In the face of great trials, it seems that many in this audience either placed great hope in their own wealth or had an inordinate longing to run in the same circles that the wealthy did.

In today's passage, James offers his harshest criticism of the rich. At first glance, 5:1-6 seems to be disconnected to the section before it. However, the warnings we read here are well-placed since earthly wisdom often calls for trust in one's money, and James warned his audience about following the wisdom of this world in chapter 4.

It is a bit uncertain as to whether the rich people James is condemning are believers. Many say that James is addressing unbelievers since this passage offers little hope of repentance and because its style is similar to passages from the Old Testament that are addressed to the pagan enemies of Israel (for example, Isa. 13). Even if this is the case, we as believers must also pay close attention to these warnings. This passage tells us that the success of the oppressive rich will be only temporary, but it gives us a stern warning as well. According to John Calvin, it warns us so that we "might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they [the poor] suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them."

James condemns the rich landowners in these verses for trusting in their wealth and for earning their money as a result of fraud and oppression. The wealth that they have stored up is wasting away and cannot be trusted to save them at the end (5:1-3). They have oppressed the poor by depriving them of the wages that they have earned (v. 4), and by their wealth they have fattened themselves for the day of judgment (v. 5). The earthly wisdom that looks to money for security will fail in the last day, for when Christ returns, all that is not of eternal value will be destroyed.

