



## 10. Rust and Moth (James 5:1-6)

As we have gone down through James we have seen that faith without works is useless. If your life does not show who you are, in effect James says “you’re a fraud!” And we have seen that as we examine our lives, we see that rather than showing that we are the children of God, we demonstrate our own sin and rebellion towards the ways of God.

The last bit we did in chapter 4 was examine how so often we think we have it made. We have our plans and aspirations and God has never been part of the equation. James turns and says: *James 4:15 .... you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

We are in a society that is stable and have personal situations that are secure too and we don’t look beyond ourselves. It’s the nature of our world. We don’t say “if it’s the Lord’s will” and when it comes to the good we ought to do, we pass on that and make excuses. We certainly don’t like people criticizing it. Take this diatribe for example:

*Listen now you arrogant fat cats that live in prosperous Britain: take some lessons in lament. You'll need buckets for the tears, when the crash comes upon you. Your money is corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life from within. You thought you were piling up wealth. What you've piled up is judgement.*

*All the people you exploit and cheat by tolerating corrupt governments to get cheap oil and cheap goods cry out for judgement. The groans of the workers you've used and abused to give you, cheap supermarket veg, cut-price coffee and designer trainers are a roar in the ears of the Master Avenger. You've looted the earth and lived it up, destroyed the environment and squandered natural resources. But all you'll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse. In fact, what you've done by your inaction is condemn and murder perfectly good people who stand there and take it. (The Message, altered)*

Who’s it written by? A militant Islamist, a communist, and eco-warrior? You’ve probably guessed that it’s James. Someone once read a similar version of James 5:1-6 to a group of Ministers but said it was written by a well-known foreign anarchist agitator who was living in their country. The Ministers were indignant and said that the anarchist should be deported at once for such inflammatory words! The problem is that these are words of scripture and these are aimed at us.

At a quick read, you may well want to switch off and say “I’m poor, so these words apply only to the well-off people in the church”! I suspect that none of us have enough money to believe we are really rich. I guess many here consider themselves “comfortable”.

But we are in the fourth richest country in the world. Even the poorest of us are better off than most people in the poorest countries. To two thirds of the world, we are a rich state where even the poorest people have access to good quality education, housing, wealth and health care.

But as members of this society we participate in what some call “structural sin” where in our society we tolerate something abhorrent to God because we somehow have disconnected ourselves from the sin and say it has nothing to do with us. “So what if people get blown up in Iraq – it’s got nothing to do with me.” “Shame about the Pakistan earthquake – but it’s nothing to do with me”. Pity about the AIDs epidemic in Africa.” “Shame about the Christians persecuted for their faith. Maybe they should emigrate”. “So people are paid a pittance to produce tea. At least they have a job”. “It’s not my fault that their countries are bankrupt – they should have been less corrupt.” “ At least that’s got nothing to do with me! Has it?” To a greater or lesser extent it has something to do with our nation because there is nothing in the modern world that isn’t somehow connected to something else.

Structural sin occurred in the OT. We have seen how the Northern kingdom of Israel was totally destroyed and the southern kingdom of Judah was sent into exile because of their injustice and idolatry as nations. Structural sin exists in the church. We have numerous examples in the NT of sin being tolerated in the church for example in Corinth and in the seven churches of Asia. There may have been God fearing individuals there, but the sin of the people as a group brought on God's judgement.

And we tolerate structural sin today, as members of our society and as members of the church of God. You all drink tea don't you? Most comes from Sri Lanka. Do you know how much a family in Sri Lanka earn a day on a tea plantation? I'd estimate it as about a pound. You know how much tea costs. So who makes the profit? The manufacturer does. And who manufactures it? Brooke Bond, Tetley and the like. And where are they based? Here in the UK. It's a simple case of exploitation and the US and the EEC do it for most tropical goods. In fact, we may have given up our colonies a long time ago, but we still influence their way of life by controlling their economy through trade. Each time we eat something, we have probably exploited someone. Each time we drink tea or coffee, someone gets exploited. That's why fair trade goods exist.

There's worse. To secure our supplies, we as a country often support the political institutions in the countries involved. In Sri Lanka it's a government that restricts the civil right of people being able to freely speak the gospel. In order to secure our oil supplies, we keep in power a corrupt royal family in Saudi Arabia. It's the same Saudi Arabia that executes people who convert to Jesus.

So when we read these words, they aren't for someone else, they speak to us, not just as citizens of a country that participates in a world system that creates poverty and exploitation somewhere else, but as a church because indirectly, we may be helping a system that oppresses believers. And for us as believers to hear of the plight of our fellow believers in other countries and do nothing when there is a lot we can do is a sin of omission. When we hear of injustice and exploitation in other lands; we can act. Their government may be oppressive, but our government isn't and it allows us to act and responds to what we have to say.

So we can do something – pray, buy fair products, send letters, lobby our MP and the like. To not act when we see injustice and oppression is a sin of omission. What are the consequences of being rich Christians in an age of hunger and exploitation? *You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.* It's back to familiar territory – indulge in sin and you bring death. You've heard about oppressed Christians today. You'll hear tomorrow. Do you care? Omitting to care may bring death to somebody – literally.

But let's look at this in a more conventional way. As individuals we see how wealth corrupts. We know what Paul said to Timothy: *1 Tim 6: 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. It's not the wealth itself that perverts, but the way in which wealth creates selfishness and draws people away from God. This is how one writer puts James 5:1-6:

*In this small section of the letter of James, the writer takes time to denounce the exploiting activities of the rich. He is not denouncing wealth as such, rather he is attacking wealth obtained by corruption. He attacks ill-gotten gains and the motivations that drive us to those ends. So, the passage is a further expose of unrighteous behavior, which is the product of a "useless" faith.*

The Bible always supports the responsible possession and use of wealth. But in our prosperous land of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are many shocking parallels with the 1<sup>st</sup>: we stand in danger of money luring us away from God and into sin, even on what we think are our modest incomes. How can we avoid the dangers and judgement of wealth?

- Understand the folly of materialism

*Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.*

It's nice to be comfortable isn't it? Swaffham is a materialist's paradise. It's a pretty town and a nice environment. It is easy to want to be comfortable with it. But every-

thing material rots. Even gold and silver become tarnished. And most of us like to hang on to what we have because it gives us security. In a worldly sense it does, but in eternal matters it counts for nothing. Why has God given us so much wealth. Look at the parable of the talents some time. God does not give us wealth to hoard it, but to use it to bring Him glory. We are involved in starting a local group for the Besom project where local Christians can help those in need in practical ways. If you want to come on Tuesday, then please see me. It's one way in which we can use the things we have, money, possessions and time to help others and it will become part of the ministry of this church, backed as part of a group with others.

- Understand legal theft

*4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.*

Legal theft? What's that? It's where the laws of our land allow us to act unjustly towards people. God says one thing, but we can legally do something else in our land. It's where we do something legal, but at the same time is immoral. This is what William Barclay says

*The day labourer in Palestine lived on the very verge of starvation. His wage was small; it was impossible for him to save anything; and if the wage was withheld from him, even for a day, he and his family simply could not eat. That is why the merciful laws of Scripture again and again insist on the prompt payment of his wages to the hired labourer. "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy. . . You shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it be sin in you" (Deut 24: 14,15). . . "Woe to him that builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages" (Jer. 22: 13). "Those that oppress the hireling in his wages" are under the judgment of God (Mal. 3: 5). . . 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 very part that the Lord of the universe is concerned for the rights of the labouring man."*

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But of course, we can legally do something else. Many of our very good labour laws in this country came in because exploitation meant that workers were being legally ripped off by their employers. But our society allows us to sail close to the wind. The Company says, "Greed is good", so it pays "what the market will bear." The Union says, "how much can we squeeze out of the bosses". The Government says, "what new tax can we get out of them before they throw us out of power".

Sadly, Christian organisations and companies can also be involved in legal theft. They use the excuse of the Lord's work to not recompense properly a labourer who is worthy of his hire. What they do is legal – they all make sure of that. But is it moral? It's easy to make a virtue out of "living on faith" but do we really expect God to bless us when we are not prepared to ensure our workers are cared for? There's a difference between fulfilling our legal obligations and doing what is morally right before God.

I suppose we can apply the "squeaky clean test". Something may be legally clean but is it morally clean? In our dealing with the world, in our dealing with other people is what we do both legal and moral. That may be in our financial dealings. It may be in just our "car boot" dealings. It may be in just not paying bills until someone sends us lots of reminders.

I've said this many times before. God calls us to be morally exemplary so our light shines out in this dark world. Being morally exemplary isn't being legally exemplary. You can be legal and immoral.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, The letters of James and Peter, rev. ed., *The Daily Study Bible Series*, Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1976, pp. 118-119.)

- **Understand the pursuit of pleasure**

*5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.*

The pursuit of pleasure for its own sake seems like a good idea at the time. What do we mean by pleasure here? We mean self-indulgence. As we've already seen, our excellent quality of lifestyle is bought at the expense of people in other parts of the world who live in poverty so that we can enjoy our wealth. Because we don't visit these places and others like me tell us about it, we usually don't believe it and try to disconnect and distance ourselves from it. "It's all their fault". Yes, people are responsible for their actions BUT there's enough evidence in this world to show that our personal and national greed contributes to the suffering of others. Look at the earthquake in Pakistan, religious oppression in Saudi Arabia, global warming.

James says we are fattening ourselves for the day of slaughter if we just sit around indulging ourselves. What can that mean? Let me suggest a few things. What about the situation where we live in excess where families or others around you have a demonstrated need which God has revealed to you. Or take heed to the fact that this not only has to do with money in our bank account but also our time, skills, energy used for others.

- **Understand exploitation as murder**

*6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.*

The last thing I want to leave you with this morning is to help you to understand that in our prosperity we sin because we have got it from the exploitation of others. That's even those of us with professed modest backgrounds. I'm not sure James is talking about straight murder here, but like speaking ill of someone, exploitation is doing ill to someone and that's as bad as murder too. And it's sin and we need to identify it and deal with it. You may not like to think about it in that way, but we have a real opportunity in this age and at this time to be a real influence in the world as the church of God is supposed to be. Yes we proclaim the gospel but we uphold justice too.

Brings us back to the start. We may not be super-rich but we are vulnerable to the sins of the rich which is why we have been warned. We hoard, we can steal from others, even when it's legal, we pursue pleasure when others go without and starve, even people we know. Our sins of omission mean that people are getting exploited and murdered in this world and we could have done something about it.

Repent for materialism  
Repent for taking from others even when the law allowed it  
Repent for the sin of pleasure at someone else's expense  
Repent for the sin of exploitation which we tolerate

We are going to do something about it.

