

Week 9: Sins of the Wealthy

The Place of the Passage

In this passage, James continues to unfold his main point that new life in Christ should result in a life of obedience to God's Word. Here he addresses particularly the sins of the wealthy. First he addresses the sin of pride in those who would forget that their lives are completely in the hand of the Lord. Then he turns to warn of the coming judgment against those who would use their wealth and power to oppress God's people. This is some of the most strident language in the book, and it underlines the sin and folly of human pride—especially when our pride sets us in opposition to God and his people.

The Big Picture

None of us finally controls the circumstances and outcomes of our lives; God does. Therefore we should not be prideful, but rather humble ourselves before God.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 4:13–5:6](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2397–2398, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Boasting about Tomorrow ([James 4:13–17](#))

[James 4:13–17](#) is a straightforward assault on human pride and presumptuousness. Describe the kind of person to whom this section seems to be addressed. What kind of enterprise do these people seem to be engaged in? Do they seem to be poor or fairly affluent?

Do you think the people addressed in these verses are professing Christians? What clues in the text lead you to that conclusion? (Hint: look carefully at [James 4:15](#).)

What mistake are these businesspeople making in their assumptions ([James 4:13–14](#))? What sins underlie these mistaken assumptions?

What does James say ought to be a Christian's frame of mind when thinking about the future? Is James saying that planning or investing for the future is wrong? If not, what then is he saying is wrong?

Do you think you should actually say the phrase "if the Lord wills" when you talk about the future? Even if it's not necessary to say it every time, how can you work to cultivate that kind of dependence on God in your own life and thinking?

Essentially, James is here taking aim at the human tendency to think we are in control. What kinds of bad effects does a godless sense of self-sovereignty have in our lives?

Warning to the Rich ([James 5:1–6](#))

If the paragraph in [James 4:13–17](#) is addressed to Christians, to whom is the paragraph in [James 5:1–6](#) addressed? What clues in the text help you describe these people?

This paragraph contains blistering language against wealthy landowners who are oppressing God's people. As in so much of his letter, James is here resonating deeply with the teaching of the Old Testament. Can you think of some places in the Old Testament that address similar warnings to powerful oppressors?

In what ways were these rich landowners oppressing the church? Give specific examples from the text.

James says that instead of being proud and reveling in their riches and power, they should be doing what? Why?

In what areas of your life do you have a certain degree of power? How do you use it? For example, how do you treat your employees? The family who rents your property? The person who cleans your office building or school? The person who makes your food at a restaurant? Do you treat them as means to the end of your own self-indulgence, or do you treat them as people whom God has put in your life for you to love and care for?

How can you rightly take comfort—as believers do throughout the Bible—at the thought of God's final judgment of evil, and yet not violate [Romans 12:19](#)?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS. One interesting pattern in James's letter is how he treats Christians and non-Christians differently. In these paragraphs, for example, notice the way James addresses his audience in [James 4:13–17](#). In [James 4:15](#), for example, he corrects their thinking in an effort to make them more Christian in the way they think and talk about their lives. That is not true of his audience in [James 5:1–6](#). In that passage, there is no exhortation to the oppressors to change. Rather, there is simply the promise of judgment—a judgment that for believers has already fallen on Christ at the cross.

FAITH IN JESUS OR FAITH IN RICHES. In [James 5:1–6](#), the author takes powerful oppressors to task for reveling in and relying on their power and material goods. His point is that those things in which they have put their faith—riches, garments, gold and silver, power—will be of no value at all in the last day. The only reality that is worthy to be relied on is Jesus.

A DAY OF JUDGMENT COMING. James has no doubt at all that a day of final judgment is coming, when God will set everything right. He warns the rich of this in [James 5:1–6](#), and he'll turn in [James 5:7](#) to tell believers to hope in the coming of that day. The great message of the gospel is that although we all deserve to be condemned on that day, through Jesus, God has "brought us forth" and given us new life ([James 1:18](#)). He has made us "a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." The day of judgment therefore holds no terror for us as Christians, because our faith is in Jesus and not in ourselves, our possessions, or our power.

Whole-Bible Connections

WISDOM ABOUT TOMORROW. As he does so often in his book, James draws in this passage on Old Testament wisdom. The Israelites knew that their God was sovereign over the events of their lives, and so they exhorted one another not to be prideful about what they would or would not do tomorrow. [Proverbs 27:1](#), for example, says, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”

THE BREVITY OF LIFE. In [James 4:14](#), the author reminds his readers of how brief and fragile their lives are, echoing what he had already said in [James 1:11](#). This is a common theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. [Psalm 39:5](#), for example, compares human life to a breath. (See also [Job 7:6–7](#); [Ps. 89:47](#); and other places.) Peter also points his readers to the brevity of life: “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass” ([1 Pet. 1:24](#)).

Theological Soundings

GOD’S METICULOUS SOVEREIGNTY. James’s exhortation that Christians should say “if the Lord wills” comes from his understanding that God is sovereign over all the details of our lives. We see this throughout the pages of the Bible. Even Joseph, when he reflected on the evil that his brothers had done to him in selling him into slavery in Egypt, said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” ([Gen. 50:20](#)). And in [Acts 4:27–28](#), the believers affirm, in prayer to God, that, when Pilate and Herod and the leaders of the Israelites put Jesus to death, they were doing “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” God is sovereign over all the details of our lives, and that is a source of great comfort to us as Christians.

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT. The language James uses in [James 5:1–6](#) points forward to a final day of judgment when God will fully and finally set everything right. At the close of history, Jesus the King will return and judge the living and the dead according to their deeds. Sin will be condemned, injustice set right, and oppression ended. For those who are outside of Christ, it is a day to be dreaded. For those whose faith is in Christ, however, it is a day to which we look forward with both joy and deep sobriety.

Sovereignty: Supreme and independent power and authority. Sovereignty over all things is a distinctive attribute of God ([1 Tim. 6:15–16](#)). He directs all things to carry out his purposes ([Rom. 8:28–29](#)).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 4:13–5:6](#) for your own life today. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 4:13–5:6](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.