

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE DOLLAR

JAMES 5 v 1-6

And now, you rich people, listen to me! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches have rotted away and your clothes have been eaten by moths. Your gold and silver are covered with rust, and this rust will be a witness against you and will eat up your flesh like fire. You have piled up riches in these last days. You have not paid any wages to those who work in your fields. Listen to their complaints! The cries of those who gather in your crops have reached the ears of God, the Lord Almighty. Your life here on earth has been full of luxury and pleasure. You have made yourselves fat for the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent people, and they do not resist you.

We live in a very materialistic society. This is true generally in the western world and it is particularly true in Australia where I live. To listen to the average conversation that people engage in these days you would think that life is all about the dollar or the pound or the euro or equivalent currency. Money seems to dominate peoples' lives. Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that life for many people revolves more around the dollar than ever before. A wealthy man was once asked how much money he would need in order to be happy. He replied; "Just a little more". There are some very wealthy people in our society. Apparently in Australia where I live there are 33 billionaires. I am sure there are many more in other countries. I am going to stagger a guess which is that none of us reading this are one of them. But it may surprise you to realise that in terms of peoples' wealth it's highly likely that you are among the top 5% in the world. Perhaps you never thought of yourself as wealthy. Statistically you are. How much does the dollar or equivalent matter to you?

James reminds us that life is not all about the dollar; 5 v 1-6. When we quickly scan over these verses, we might be tempted to think that they don't apply to us. After all James is addressing very wealthy people and seeing as we don't regard ourselves as wealthy, at least not until today, we skip over this section of his letter. But wait a minute. If we are among the top 5% in the global league table of people's wealth, what James has to say does apply to us. We need to take note of what he has to say.

James certainly doesn't mince his words. He has another go at rich people. He has already criticised them earlier in the letter. Some commentators think James is addressing people who are not associated with the church i.e. outsiders who are not even Christians. Others think that he is addressing Christians who are members of the church. My own view is that James is addressing religious people who do not necessarily have an authentic faith. There is a clue in v 6. The English Standard Version puts it; "*You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you*". James has just condemned the rich people who are living in luxury, oppressing the poor by denying their workers

adequate wages. But there's more. The worst thing these people have done is that they have condemned the Righteous One and killed him. The way I read this is that the rich people have been responsible for the death of Jesus. By implication this indicates that the rich people are the Jerusalem elite who are the Sadducees and the chief priests who live in their fine houses and grow fat on the proceeds of pilgrimages and sacrifices brought by faithful Jews. However, their attitude to God and his law is purely pragmatic. Doing what is required in the temple, running the liturgy and the festivals is simply their way of staying in power. But in the end, they killed Jesus on a cross.

We are beginning to join the dots. Perhaps at this point we are beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable. We should because we are among the top 5% richest people in the world, and we would stake a claim to be religious people. We fit the category of the people James has in mind. James looks with the eye of the Old Testament prophet and sees the fine houses filled with silver, gold and lovely clothes, with larders full of food and cellars full of wine. He sees them as God sees them. They are full of rust and moth. In the form of a lament, James looks at how wealth can come at the expense of others and warns that there will be inevitable judgement. James condemns wealth that is made on the backs of others as well as wealth that is hoarded instead of shared. He is addressing the selfish rich who have gained their wealth by injustice and who are not interested in being generous to others. They have forgotten they have a moral duty and responsibility to other people in society.

Do we look for a bargain at all costs? In our desire for a bargain e.g. an item of clothing, do we deprive someone of what is due to them in pay? Think of the impact our consumption has on others; what about the coffee or tea that we drink. N T Wright wrote; **“But the church must keep James 5.1-6 at its elbow, and must continue to speak out against the wickedness, not only individual but also systemic, that colludes with such a situation. It was behaviour like that which hardened the hearts of the leaders, and made the killing of Jesus seem not only right but easy and natural. It is behaviour like that which will be shown up for what it is as the day dawns and God’s new age is complete”**. The important lesson for us is timely; life is not all about the dollar.