

Warnings to the Rich (26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

James 5:1-6—Warnings to the Rich

¹ *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.* ² *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.* ³ *Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days.* ⁴ *Behold, 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.* ⁵ *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* ⁶ *You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.* (James 5:1-6)

1. **Rich:** “rich” or “wealthy” or “abounding” in possessions (Greek *plousious*) (5:1)
2. **Earthly Wealth:** transitory; money “rots” and clothing is “moth-eaten” (5:2)
3. **Final Judgment:** wealth counts as “evidence against you” (5:3-5:4)
4. **Unjust Wages:** withheld “wages” for laborers (5:4)

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; 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. (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

5. **Luxury:** earthly life focused on “luxury” and “pleasure” (5:5)
6. **Murder:** “you have killed the righteous man” (5:6)

The Living Tradition

Venerable Bede: *[A]void, he says, the future miseries of punishment by weeping and by giving alms...* Not only does the visible fire of hell torture the wicked and unmerciful rich in torments but also the very memory of decayed and worthless riches by which they might have been able to redeem their nefarious deeds will very easily burn up their souls no less before the judgment and after the resurrection of their flesh as well, when they begin to be seriously angry with themselves for having been unwilling *to cleanse their wicked deeds by alms...* It also happens rather often in this life that some persons lose the riches which they were putting to evil use and, having lost their resources, *they begin too late to regret that they held them without fruit and lament that they have not given their possessions to the poor...* [H]aving neglected the nakedness and hunger of the poor you rejoiced in accumulating treasures of money for yourselves, not foreseeing that you were yourselves heaping up wrath of internal judgment for yourselves (Bede, *Commentary on James 5:2-3*; trans. David Hurst)

Catechism: The catechetical tradition also recalls that there are “*sins that cry to heaven*”: the blood of Abel, the sin of the Sodomites, the cry of the people oppressed in Egypt, the cry of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan, *injustice to the wage earner* [cf. Deut 24:14-15; James 5:4]. (CCC 1867)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

1. Why is James’ warning to the rich so harsh? What is wrong with storing up earthly treasures in this life and seeking luxury and pleasure? How serious is cheating one’s employees or paying unjust wages?

For Further Reading

1. Bede the Venerable. *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*. Translated by Dom David Hurst, OSB. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1985.
2. Kelly Anderson and Daniel Keating. *James, First, Second, and Third John*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017.
3. Gerald Bray, ed. *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000.