

James Lesson 9-1 Article

5:2 The truth about greed and selfish hoarding of wealth is presented in this verse. James earlier illustrated the perishability of wealth with the simile of the wildflower quickly scorched by the desert sun (1:10–11). Here James turned to the degrading influence wealth has for all who place their confidence in it rather than God. The wealth of these rich believers is vividly portrayed as having rotted and their clothing as having become moth-eaten. It was not so much that the treasures themselves were in this condition but that the manner in which believers were holding them already evidenced decay. In the world a characteristic value of treasures is their relative durability, but James warned his audience of the falsity of this notion. The end of each life and the final judgment show that the person and the possessions are not durable. Trusting in wealth because it supposedly “retains its value” is trusting in a charade. The rituals of amassing wealth and curating precious objects are really a dance of death. Trusting in wealth is then a damaging and degrading attitude. Speaking with the voice of a prophet, James proclaimed the nearness of judgment from the signs of corruption already in evidence.

The deceptiveness of riches is dangerous for the soul because it will endanger so many others. Is there a connection between the “fine clothes” of the rich in 2:2 and the moth-eaten clothes of this verse? All of the wealthy believers need to take heed from this verse and then to see how each of them have treated those who are in their employ or any to whom they owe just wages (cf. 5:4). All wealth is perishable; none of it will survive the judgment; when wealth is the result of withholding wages, its perishability is a warning of its hoarders’ destruction. James had already seen the connection and was warning rich believers in the harshest way.¹

Murdering the innocent (v. 5: 6) We are not to picture any of James’s readers going out with swords to hack people to death. James has something far more subtle in mind—but just as deadly! Kent Hughes explains: ‘James is referring to judicial “murder”—primarily referring to taking away the means of making a living. The landed gentry controlled the courts. The poor could not oppose them because they had no way to use the system, and thus were helpless.’¹ There is more than one way to murder!

James’s words about murdering the just who are not able to resist (v. 6) make us think about the Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was just in every way, he was murdered. And although he certainly had the power to resist, he did not do so. He willingly submitted to unjust treatment so he could provide eternal salvation for sinners.

All sinners are urged to come to Christ. The rich are urged to become poor, recognizing that their riches cannot save them. They are told to come to Christ, saying,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
(Augustus M. Toplady)

And the poor are given the assurance that there are riches in Christ Jesus that this world can never offer.

But all must come to Christ! And all who come to Christ will be truly changed, and that change will show up in how they use their money.²

Richardson, K. A. (1997). *Vol. 36: James*. The New American Commentary (). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹ Hughes, *James*, p. 218.

² Ellsworth, R. (2009). *Opening up James*. Opening Up Commentary (148–149). Leominster: Day One Publications.