

5–6 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

James continues to show the self-centered, egotistical motivations of the rich who find their primary identity in their wealth, and who attribute their success to their own ingenuity, abilities, and acumen. They are self-centered egotists and thereby fail to give God any credit for their wealth and the power it brings, but rather take all of the credit for their own monetary prosperity.

It appears that the primary reason James is addressing such wealthy unbelievers is to emphasize to those within the believing community who are also wealthy in this world's money and goods, that they must always recognize that all they have and all they are able to accomplish is because of God's grace and the ability He has given to them. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of James' teaching in these verses in which he addresses wealthy unbelievers is to remind those who are wealthy within the believing community that they must bless God for their success and not be proud. This coincides with what James teaches us in the opening chapter of this epistle:

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)

This important emphasis is applicable to all believers, regardless of their station in life, for all that is good comes to us as a gift from our heavenly Father, and must therefore be used first and foremost to give Him the glory He deserves. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches:

What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God,^(a) and to enjoy Him for ever.^(b)

^(a)Ps 86:9; Is. 60:21; Rom 11:36; 1Cor 6:20; 10:31; Rev. 4:11

^(b)Ps 16:5-11; 144:15; Is 12:2; Lk 2:10; Phil 4:4; Rev 21:3-4

You have lived luxuriously on the earth – The Greek word translated here as “luxuriously” is *τρυφάω* (*truphaō*) and is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. It is in the aorist tense here, which is constative,

thus describing the life of these wealthy landowners as a whole.¹ That is, James is describing a primary and even overarching characteristic of their lives. Though this verb *truphaō*, “lived luxuriously” or “in self-indulgence” is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures, it is found in the Lxx in a positive usage. Note Neh 9:25 which describes victorious Israel as they entered the promised land, conquered their enemies, and possessed the Land as a gift from God.

They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled and grew fat, and reveled in Your great goodness. (Neh 9:25)

Likewise, the Lxx utilized the cognate noun (*τρυφή*, *truphē*) to translate the “garden of Eden.”

therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden (*τοῦ παραδείσου τῆς τρυφῆς*), to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. (Gen 3:23)

Interestingly, in both of these cases the Greek word group *truphaō/truphē* is used positively by the Lxx translators to describe the goodness of God in providing bountiful sustenance from the earth for mankind. In our text, however, James shows that the depraved heart will take credit for what is actually the gift of God and use what is good for self-indulgence.

...and led a life of wanton pleasure; – The NASB “wanton pleasure” translates the Greek *σπαταλάω* (*spatalaō*) which carries the sense of “to indulge oneself beyond the bounds of propriety.”² The emphasis here is, once again, self-centeredness without regard for God or for others. Instead of acknowledging God as the Giver of all good things, they used their bounty for sinful pleasures. This reminds us of Paul’s words in Romans.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil.... (Rom 1:28–29a)

1 Vlachos, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: James*, p. 163.

2 BDAG, “σπαταλάω,” p. 936.

... *you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* – To “fatten your hearts” is more literally “to feed your hearts” (ἐθρέψατε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν) where the verb τρέφω (*trephō*) carries the sense of “to care for by providing food or nourishment, feed, nourish, support.”¹ This points to the utter selfishness of the person who attributes his or her success entirely to themselves. Instead of loving God and loving one’s neighbor, their primary attention is upon themselves. This likewise describes the character of a depraved heart.

... *in a day of slaughter.* – There are several possible interpretations of this final phrase of our verse. Some take it to mean the time when the fattened cattle are slaughtered for a festival or some large celebration.² Taken in this way, the goal of these self-indulgent wealthy is simply for more pleasure and riotous engagements.

Another interpretation, and perhaps one that fits the context more closely, is that the phrase “day of slaughter” refers to the final judgment day when the wicked will be forever abrogated to the place of God’s holy justice and punishment.³ We hear Jeremiah using this same metaphor of “slaughter” to describe Divine punishment.

But You know me, O LORD; You see me; and You examine my heart’s attitude toward You. Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for a day of carnage! (Jer 12:3)

Wail, you shepherds, and cry; and wallow in ashes, you masters of the flock; For the days of your slaughter and your dispersions have come, and you will fall like a choice vessel. (Jer 25:34)

James is thus describing the self-indulgent, self-centered wealthy as being like the very cattle they own and fatten for slaughter. For they are themselves destined to a slaughter that they do not know, for they have considered themselves invincible.

In picturesque language James compares them to domestic animals that are daily gorging themselves without knowing their destined end. As cattle being fattened for the day of slaughter, so the rich are indulging themselves in luxury and licentiousness and are unaware of the impending day of judgment. Yet their doom is certain and their destruction swift.⁴

1 BDAB, “τρέφω,” p. 1014.

2 E.g., Manton, *James*, p. 414.

3 See Davids, *James* in NIGTC, p. 178.

4 Kistemaker, *James*, NTC, p. 161.

You have condemned and put to death the righteous man... – Here, once again, we see that James is addressing unbelievers who, though wealthy (and most likely land owners) have no significant regard for others. But even more than that, they stand against those whose own righteous lives condemn them.

Having put wealth as their primary purpose in life, the unregenerate wealthy, here singled out by James, have engaged in the sin of greed which gave birth to theft (cheating their hired help by not paying what was promised), which enabled their self-indulgence, ultimately condemning and even putting to death the righteous person.

A question of interpretation is whether the final “put to death” is to be taken literally or figuratively. Some take it literally in that the unrighteous wealthy may have a great influence upon judges and the legal system. Or that withholding wages by fraudulently disputing the work that a hired person has completed deprives the poor of necessary life-sustaining food.

The last in this graphic series of witnesses against the rich is their condemning to death innocent righteous people. This theme of the wealthy using their power unjustly to destroy the lives of the poor finds wide expression in both biblical and broader Jewish literature. A legal setting may be in view in which the rich buy the courts to have the poor taken out of the way, or perhaps the result of starvation resulting from unpaid wages is in mind...Justice is turned on its head. The innocent are condemned. The honest worker, who should have the basics by which to live, is murdered.¹

As we consider these verses it might be easy to relegate their application to others since we may never consider ourselves wealthy. But the reality is this: in terms of the history of our world, and even in our modern times, if we consider what constitutes “wealthy” from the vantage point of the various countries and populations which exist in our world, then we may have to conclude that the vast majority of Americans would be considered “wealthy” when compared especially to many people living in so-called “third world countries.” Thus, there is an application for all of us from these inspired words of James. We who name the Name of Yeshua and who profess to be His redeemed people, must show the reality of our faith by living righteously, using our resources for the glory of God and to be open hearted and thus having open hands to aid

1 Guthrie, *James in EBC*, p. 264.

those within the community of faith who are in need.

7-8 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

Having denounced the unbelieving, wealthy land owners who defraud their hired workers, James now addresses the believing community which doubtlessly consisted of people who represented a wide monetary spectrum. Yet many of the early believers may have been from the working-class, and may have been defrauded by the wealthy who employed them in their fields.

In viewing the larger context (vv. 7-11), it is clear that the admonitions and teachings of James in the previous verses could have led to some "pointing fingers" at fellow community members who had greater monetary wealth, charging them with being less than gracious and failing to help those who are in need. This, in turn, could cause those who were more wealthy to despise the accusations being leveled, even if by insinuation. Thus in the following verses James emphasizes the need for unity and not judging each other, but recognizing that Yeshua Himself is the Judge of the heart, and allow Him to bring about change where change is needed.

He then points to the prophets of the Tanach as examples of those who persevered under trials and in whose lives the compassion and mercy of the Lord was made known.

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. – The Greek word translated here by the English "be patient" is *μακροθυμέω* (*makrothumeō*) and is a compound word made up of the noun *μακρός* (*makros*), meaning "to take a relatively long time; long" and the noun *θυμός* (*thumos*), meaning "anger, intense displeasure." Our English phrase "long suffering" captures the sense of the word, and pictures remaining self-controlled when life's circumstances would cause one to immediately retaliate with anger. Such patience bespeaks spiritual growth and maturity, for the believer grows to trust that God is in control and will always give strength to endure trials resulting in spiritual victory.

Paul speaks to this in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation

will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. (1Cor 10:13)

In this text the Greek word translated as “temptation” (πειρασμός, *peiros-mos*) can also be understood as a “trial.” No trial comes into the believer’s life without God giving strength and ability to overcome it as His children trust in Him and claim the strength He has promised. James agrees, for he admonishes us to “be patient,” that is, to be strengthened by God’s promises and through the abiding Spirit, so as to patiently endure whatever trials may come upon us.

...until the coming of the Lord – The meaning of James here is that the sure promise of Yeshua’s return is the very thing upon which our eyes of faith are always to be focused. The Greek word translated “until” (ἕως, *heōs*) can have “the idea of a goal as well as a time period: “exercise patience as you wait for, and look for, the coming of the Lord.”¹ The point is not that one can calculate the coming of the Lord and thus see when the current trial one is enduring will be over. Rather, the point is that the coming of the Lord is a surety when all suffering and trials will vanish and we will forever be with the Lord in the world-to-come where sin is abolished. This is our sure hope and that from which we may derive renewed strength to endure.

Moreover, when Yeshua returns, He will bring the unjust to judgment. Thus, we never need fear that somehow injustice will go unnoticed and nothing will be done to avenge the righteous. God is the ultimate Judge and nothing escapes His notice. Even in the midst of trials and turmoil, we can lay hold of the truth that God will bring all things to light and will righteously judge all who bear their iniquities.

The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil... – James now utilizes the farmer as a fitting illustration of godly patience. The farmer has his eyes upon the planted seed, anticipating the harvest and the gathering in of that which will sustain him, his family, and enable him to profit from the harvest in order that his needs and the needs of his family will be met. However, he must be patient for the early and late rains, for apart from these, his crops will fail. He does not go out into the field and begin digging up the planted seed to see if it is growing. To do so would foil the harvest altogether. Rather, he waits for the rains and then prepares for the harvest.

1 Moo, James in *The Pillar Commentary*, p. 222.

You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. – Like the farmer who must depend upon the divinely ordained order of the seasons, and the rain that comes to sustain the crops, so the believer must depend upon the strength He has promised, strengthen oneself in the means of grace, and endure, i.e., “be patient,” always being spiritually strengthened by the sure promise of Yeshua’s return.

James states that “the coming of the Lord is near.” Some might question how this can still be true given that nearly 2000 years have occurred since he wrote this epistle, and Yeshua has yet to return. But it seems clear that the words of James here are emphasizing the imminent return of our Lord, not giving an indication of a “length of time.”

The immanency of the Lord’s return, therefore, referred to the necessity of constant readiness and persevering faith based upon the knowledge that he may return at any time. This larger passage tells what the nearness of the Lord signifies and how the knowledge of it strengthens the heart of the believer.¹

It is the reality that our Lord Yeshua may return at any time that urges us always to be prepared, to be ready for His appearing, and allow the inevitability of His coming to strengthen us and enable us to endure with patience.

1 Richardson, *James* in *The New American Commentary*, p. 221.