

What the Rich are doing wrong

You may look at my first point on the outline and think I've made a mistake. After all, why would we say that rich people are doing wrong? Aren't the headlines normally what you need to do to become rich, along with tips on how to save and invest wisely and how you can benefit from careful planning and how you should take opportunities presented to you.

But of course if it's about moral failure we have had many examples of the rich today being far from blameless. Whether it be dictators like Kim Jong-un, and how he takes much of his country's wealth while treating his people poorly, or organisations that set up sweat shops in dangerous conditions with little pay to make clothing for the rich west or even stores here in Australia who don't pay their workers a fair wage. Like the people in James's time, we can see the rich doing wrong things to become rich. Let's take a closer look at what James is criticising the rich people of his day for.

After providing a general warning in verse 1, James points out in verse 2-3 that the rich people are hoarding wealth. At first this may not seem like a sin, in fact it seems like a prudent and wise decision, after all shouldn't we save for our future. Well, yes, the bible does have various verses that encourage us to think about our future and to be wise in saving, but there is some context to this particular saving which shows it is wrong. The first clue is in the last words of verse 3, it says they have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Now if I said to you here's 2 million dollars but unfortunately you've only got a week to live would you sit there and try to hoard all your money. No, you'd either spend it, use it for good or maybe give it away to charities or relatives, but you wouldn't hoard it. It seems like a silly idea to hoard in the last days. Well James says that they are living in the last days, and they need to start using their wealth accordingly.

The second reason that the hoarding is wrong is seen in verse 4. Where we see it has led to them not paying their workers. These rich people have valued wealth for themselves over others and have unjustly treated their workers. To get a feeling of how seriously James takes this, see the phrases he uses. The fields are crying out, the

harvesters are crying out, this brings to mind the story of Cain and Abel where Abel's blood cries out to God after Cain murdered him. This is serious, and just as in Genesis these cries here are heard by the Lord Almighty. And given verse 6 it sounds like this unjust treatment of withholding wages even leads to murdering innocents.

Finally the third thing James points out that the rich are doing wrong is that they are living in self indulgence. These people are living just for themselves. It's about making themselves comfortable and James likens it to animals being fattened for the day of slaughter. When animals are fattened up for slaughter, they are not just fed the food they need to survive, they are fed excess. They are forced to eat more food than they need so that they will be fat and tasty. And James equates the way these rich people are living to that. So after all this rebuke you may be thinking, why is James having such a strong go at the rich people. Is the bible against being rich? Is wealth and money the source of all evil? No.

The bible actually has positive examples of rich people, the early years of Solomon, Job, Abraham, these are examples of rich people in the bible who did great things. And the line I said earlier of money being the source of all evil is actually an often misquoted line from 1 Timothy 6 verse 10 where it actually says the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. But having said that, as you look at this section it does seem different to the other verses in James so far. There's no call for repentance, there's no hope given to these people who James tells to weep and wail. So why has he written this?

Well I think it has a twofold purpose, he wants to both discourage and encourage people. He wants to discourage Christians of being jealous and wanting to be like the rich and he wants to encourage those who are being oppressed by rich people. Let me explain. One of the things that is clear through the book of James is that the people that he is writing to seem to have a fascination with rich people. And James wants to discourage this. He wants his readers to realise that some of these rich people are making their money through dishonest and evil ways, and he uses graphic language to emphasise what they're actually doing to themselves. I mean would you like to be compared to a fat animal?? But its not just to discourage, he also writes to encourage. I

won't go into much depth with this as I think Marty will touch on this next week. But I think James writes this to encourage people who are being mistreated by rich people, who are not getting paid, who are even being killed. He wants them to know that the Lord almighty hears them, that the rich people will not go unpunished for these sins. And in the verses following this section, James promises that this mistreatment will not go on forever. That the Lord is coming.

So what about us here today in Waitara. What relevance does all this have for us?

Well I think there are three broad areas from which we can learn.

Firstly, how we prioritise wealth over people. The rich in James's day focused on their own comfort, their own luxury their own self indulgence. They lived like they were the most important persons in the world. It actually doesn't sound too different to a lot of cultures today does it? I think it can be very easy, in a world which says we should look out for ourselves to fall into the sin of self indulgence. And that's what it is, a sin. If we are putting our own self indulgence above caring for others it's a sin. So what are some ways that we can fall into this trap and how can we avoid it.

How about, in how we do our job? The obvious connection is for anyone who is actually an employer or even a manager of people. Are you giving people their fair wage. Too often we hear in the news of employers who do not pay what the government has determined is minimum wage. As a manager are you treating your staff fairly? Are they getting their superannuation, are they getting the lunch breaks they are allowed. There is a big responsibility in being an employer or manager of people. But don't think that if you are just an employee that means this problem doesn't apply to you. Because at the heart of it the problem is prioritising wealth over people. And employees can do that as well. Are you bad mouthing others to get a promotion? Are you stealing the kudos from work that wasn't yours to get ahead? Are you not helping someone who doesn't understand how to do something because it makes you look better? Each of these things can be done because it puts you getting ahead over the well being of others.

As you work as an employer, manager or employee we should remember that just as much as at church, often even more so than at church, that we are being called to live Christian lives, reflecting God's love for others. We can't be Christian here at church on Sunday and then go into our work week and mistreat others.

It's not just about working either. I know some here may not be working for/or employing people at the moment, either because you are self employed, a student, retired, currently unemployed or because your work is looking after a household. But there are still challenges in here for you too. The first is being generous with what we have. As we are blessed by God with wealth and possessions are we generous to others with what we have. This could be giving to those less well off via organisations like Bible League or Compassion, it might mean lending or giving things to people in need in our community. I am always very encouraged to hear that this happens consistently at our church. Whether it is the large number of people who support children at Compassion or just this week where numerous people offered their car to be used by the youth group when they needed it for a weekend trip to Katoomba.

The final practical way I think we can prioritise others over wealth is taking time to consider where we spend our money. Let me explain. While you may not exploit people where you work, unfortunately there are businesses around the world that do and as in James's time these employers sometimes exploit people, even to death. Do you remember a news story that happened this week is the 5 year anniversary of when a garment workers factory collapsed in Bangladesh? Over a 1,000 people died when the 8 story building collapsed. Just a day before the collapse, the building was briefly evacuated when cracks appeared in the walls. However, workers were later allowed back in or told to return by the factory owners. You may ask what has that to do with us? Well, the factory made clothes for western retailers. Retailers where we buy products.

What we can do to help stop this happening is to let companies know that we want them to treat their workers fairly and safely. One way of doing this is by doing research about the places you shop and the products and services you buy. As someone who works in retail, I

definitely know the power of customers telling me what they want. And while writing to businesses can have an impact, the biggest impact you can have is by spending elsewhere.

There are a number of websites that can help us get more information about companies ethical practices. Sites like Oxfam even offer ethical alternatives you can buy. Another website, called shop ethical also has an app you can put on your phone. On this website it tries to collate information about retailers and products and give them a ranking based on how many negative reports they find on topics like how they treat their staff, environmental impact and more. It does take time and effort to research but if we don't, isn't that being self indulgent at the expense of others? Why not slowly educate yourself and just look at one type of product a week before you go shopping. One week look at Coffee, another Chocolate, another Laundry detergent. These little changes add up and can cause much bigger changes. It shows that we value others over our own self indulgence.

The second challenge for us is to consider how much priority we give our own comfort.

It's so tempting in our society to put comfort as a priority. It's not as nasty as saying we are self indulgent. But it can have the same effect. As we strive to avoid discomfort and inconvenience we can often fall into the trap of self indulgence. It may not be that you are ignoring the needs of others around you completely but you say I just need to get this for myself first so I can be comfortable, THEN i can do something and take the time to care for others, THEN I can give money, THEN I can take time to talk to that person. One of the big problems with that way of thinking is that the chief goal of life isn't our comfort, it's to honour God and serve him. It's to love as Jesus did. So when you are thinking about such things as "should I be spending in an ethical way but feel that this might be too much effort and you just want to get things done, then I encourage you to take the moment and think, are you giving yourself priority and valuing your comfort over the wellbeing of others?

So one question you may be thinking as I go through all this is why do we need to do all this stuff Mark? Your talk today seems more like a

guide (Ted talk) to ethical living than a sermon. I think the challenge is that if you only look at the 6 verses it doesn't really go into much detail as to why this is bad. Well, while it doesn't say much in these verses, James and certainly the rest of the bible gives reasons why we shouldn't treat people this way. James, back in chapter 2 says If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself ," you are doing right.

While in 1 John 4:19-21 it clearly tells us why we should love others[19] We love because he first loved us. [20] Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. [21] And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. ...

The reason we should be prioritising others over wealth, the reason we should be loving others is because God First loved us. Jesus didn't value comfort and self indulgence over us, if he did, he would never have come to earth to suffer and die for us. But he does love us, so he did come, and because of this we too should love our neighbours.

The final thing We can take away from this is encouragement. Just as James's readers would have been encouraged we can take hope as well. While it can be very depressing hearing the stories such as the one from Bangladesh and as you start researching on websites like Shop ethical you will read of more and more horrible examples of people being mistreated, this passage tells us that God hears the cries of those treated badly. If you are one of those people, know that God hears you. If you are one of the people treating others unjustly, know that you won't get away with it forever. We will see next week that James follows this section with one encouraging people to be patient because God is coming. So as we go into our weeks let's us not prioritise wealth, comfort and self indulgence instead let's us love our neighbour as ourselves. Amen.