

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ² Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

We've looked at the Jewish Christians who quarrelled and coveted; who preferred friendship with the world above love for God; who were proud and doubleminded; who slandered each other; who boasted, bragged and planned to make themselves a lot of money in chapter 4. All this was there in the church just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Over the next two thousand years it was repeated again and again in the church. Repenting, humbling, submitting, and seeking God's will have been low on the agendas of churches for centuries, while making money and lording it over others has been a lot higher up on agendas. James knows the converts from Judaism to Christianity who had to leave Jerusalem because of persecution and one wonders if they aren't exactly like the Pharisees, scribes and rulers in the Temple who spent three years seeking to avoid being exposed as sanctimonious self-seeking hypocrites by Jesus. What happened to them after being filled with the Holy Spirit that they sank back into their old ways so quickly? As we have seen, James letter is full of warnings of the consequences of sin. Most of the prophets warned the Israelites in the same way. Misery – even eternal misery – is the consequence of failing to turn away from sin and being blind to sin. How many of us rely more on the money we have than God? Most of us won't have got our wealth through cheating others and exploiting the poor, but James knew some who had done this in his community, both the Jews and Christians alike. Throughout the Old Testament God reminds the Israelites to look after the poor, the widows, the fatherless, because there was no Welfare State, and all of them were family – descendants of Jacob. Jesus goes so far to say that accumulating wealth won't cushion or insure any man against death and judgment. The parable of rich man in Luke 16:16-21 illustrates this point. *And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." ¹⁸ 'Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"²⁰ 'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"²¹ 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'* At least this rich fool made his wealth without oppressing the poor, but it was no use to him if all he was going to do with it was to be selfish and take it easy, eat drink and be merry. All that would do would be to increase the wrath of God against this man who had no works and probably very little faith, other than faith in his own fortune being able to sustain him for years to come.

James goes further to accuse the rich of short-changing their employees. *⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.* Look! Behold! Pay attention he says. Remember what the Law of Moses says Deuteronomy 24:14-15 *Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. ¹⁵ Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.* Sometimes the wages would be

paid, but late causing hardship. The Law says that the poor and needy should be paid daily. God listens to the poor who cry out to Him for justice, and the sinful master will be held to account.

James goes on ⁵ *You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.* ⁶ *You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.* For those who had spent their lives spending their riches on themselves, the day of judgment will be severe. But then do all rich people oppress the poor? Do the rich condemn and murder the innocent? Some would say not, but nonetheless they have not shared their wealth with the poor either.

Let's have quick look at English history. During the Civil War in the mid seventeenth century there were Puritan Christians called the Diggers. They wanted the vote for all men who served in the New Model Army against the king. At that time, only ratepayers who owned land could vote (which continued until the end of the nineteenth century and hardly any ratepayers were women because only single women could own land, which would become their husbands on marriage). The Diggers didn't want votes for women, servants or the poor dependent on charity. They wanted the land to be shared fairly as common land and common fields were increasingly being divided and taken by lords of the manor and richer men. As tenant farmers, they wanted to have ownership over their rented land and demanded that common land rights be preserved. The Bible was used as the source of their political philosophy. Many were in the army opposing the king, they wanted to be rewarded for their service with both pay and land. They were all persecuted by Cromwell as the Civil War was a war between the gentry and townsmen resenting the king's desire for absolute power and keeping the Church of England as the only church in the land, and those seeking to preserve the existing order. The gentry and townsmen had no interest in losing the rents from their tenants, nor allowing anyone who didn't own land to have a vote. No representation without taxation, and only landowners paid rates to the parish and borough councils. So we see among many Puritans a desire to keep any wealth they had because they had earned it or rightfully inherited it. The poor of the parish were financed by the ratepayers, so they had done their bit so far as they were concerned. Today with the Welfare State, many taxpayers will say they have done their bit helping the poor, and will also feel aggrieved that the underserving poor are getting handouts while many of the deserving poor are ignored.

Moving on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Christians joined political movements that sought to share the wealth of the country in a way they considered would be fairer by taxing the rich to provide help for the poor. They too sought to justify this from Scripture, but there is the same flaw in the Diggers argument, because it is based on coveting and taking what doesn't belong to you using the law.

I've probably told this story before. My grandfather's aunt married a man who became rich through hard work and a growing business. Family members could get jobs. But after the first world war there was a lot of unrest in Holland, as in the rest of Europe where Communism and Socialism became attractive to the poor in society. Confronted by those who found out he was a guilder millionaire; he always had some 25 cent coins in his pocket. There were about 6 million people in the country so if he gave everyone 16 cents, his million would be fairly divided amongst the population. But there weren't any 16 cent coins, so he upped it to 25 cents. "There" he would say pressing the 25c into the hands of the complainer "you now have more than your fair share of my wealth... do not ask me for more again." Having said that, his sons and grandsons were not good businessmen and having been

Holland's largest supplier of marble for headstones, shop counters, floors and other ornamental purposes, they went bust in the 1970s as the market shrank and too much was taken out by the management who lacked the founder of the company's ideas on diversification, reinvesting and thrift. He lived in a big house, but it was filled with relatives and others who could always count on a bed there or a free dinner when passing by.

When people use the Bible to justify actions which contradict its core teachings, they end up doing the opposite to what God wants us to do. All through Scripture it says that the love of money is evil, that depending on riches will get you nowhere, be content with what you have, it is more blessed to give than receive, that instead you should lay up treasure in heaven, for where your treasure is, there your heart also will be. You can look at what Jesus says about riches in Luke 12. Jesus said Luke 12:15 *'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.'*

So, what are we to do? Paul sums it up in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15: *⁶Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written:*

'They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures for ever.' (Psalm 112:9)

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

So sharing voluntarily from what we have is what Jesus expects from us rather than being forced to share. Death and taxes will always exist, so we cannot avoid them. The rich who don't share will have their day of reckoning, and we see many rich men at the end of their wealth creating careers give away large amounts of wealth because they realise they cannot take it with them, and their families have more than enough. However in rejecting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, their acts of philanthropy will count for nothing when they come before the throne of grace. See what happens to them: Luke 16:9-21. Jesus told this story to his listeners.

⁹'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." ²⁵But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted

here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” ²⁷ ‘He answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” ²⁹ ‘Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” ³⁰ “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” ³¹ ‘He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”’

It is an unusual story that has provoked a lot of debate over the centuries. Is it a literal story or a made-up story? The eternal truths revealed are that even a beggar is worthy being fed and treated with compassion. We don’t know why he was a beggar but being covered in sores indicates a skin condition like leprosy that would make him unemployable. The rich man got his reward on earth and lost it on dying, while Jesus said that even if someone rises from the dead, the Jewish brothers would still not believe. Today many rich people do not believe, reject the notion of an afterlife and convince themselves that they are good people. Even if someone rose from the dead or some other miracle occurred, they would still not believe. Yet the parable of the sower applies – much will be sown, and there is a harvest, even if many seeds do not produce a crop. So we must keep on sowing.