



AFFLUENZA
James 5:1-6

A cartoon in the New Yorker magazine reveals two very well-dressed businessmen having an exotic lunch in an expensive eatery. One of the men has a look of horror on his face as he says to the other, "I had the most terrifying dream last night. I dreamed that the value of the dollar had slipped so low that it was no longer worth worshipping!"

This is exactly what James is addressing and correcting in his challenging words. Most of us here today know that money is a poor substitute for a living relationship with our Master - Jesus Christ. However, one of the greatest challenges to the American people is the consumer orientation and materialism that has gripped the soul of the American people. Thomas Merton, the insightful spiritual writer, has written, "**The true law of our day is the law of wealth and natural power.**" Simply put -- money is the real god of most! It dictates our schedules, organizes our time -- and uses a great deal of our energy. We may **TALK** about God -- but we **SERVE** another god who is green and cold-hearted.

My mentor, Eugene Peterson, writes, "We have been as successful as any nation in history in making money. But the fall out in greed, self-indulgence, exploitation, and dishonesty is appalling."¹ In the late 1980's a new word was coined to describe an illness that was destroying so many Americans -- affluenza. It is a deadly virus that not only destroys the body, but the soul as well.

Dr. Charles H. Spurgeon years ago wrote, "It is a very serious thing to grow rich. Of all the temptations to which God's children are exposed -- it is the worst -- because it is one that we do not dread. Therefore, it is the more subtle temptation." Where one person has been ruined by adversity, ten thousand men have been destroyed by prosperity." Perhaps this is why Andrew Carnegie shared, "Millionaires seldom smile."

Yes, we need the '**wisdom from on high or above**' to understand wealth in all of its implications for everyday life and eternity. Bishop Willimon believes one of the reasons we come to church, listen to sermons, and read sacred scripture is to "**wise up.**" The Bible tells us the truth and sets before us the difference between the ways of God and the ways of the world.

The Christian community where James works and labors was primarily an economically depressed area. They started out primarily as economically disadvantaged people. However, as the church grew, its membership became more representative of the community. The rich and poor began to worship in the same church. We know this is so --

because in **James 2:1-13** the rich were getting the better seats and attention at the church-house.

James writes these words to be sure that we don't confuse wealth and possessions with a sense of personal worth and a purpose for life. Our identity comes from Jesus Christ, not the cash register.

So let us dig in today and learn from our good friend, James -- that we do not become tightwads in our spiritual life and always looking for loopholes to tax money earmarked for the poor for athletic stadiums and other extravagant items.

LET US TURN OUR ATTENTION TO VERSE ONE

In this verse, James is testifying that wealth is never lasting. Wealth will not prevent you from experiencing many of the same adversities that others do. Ask the long line of Hollywood stars this year whose names filled the headlines if their wealth and fame prevented miseries and purposelessness from claiming parts of their lives.

Maya Angelou, the black author from Arkansas tells the revealing story of her Aunt Tee who worked as a maid for a wealthy family on a very large spread of land. They were the envy of everyone. They had more money than anybody around. On the surface they were wealthy. Let me share Maya's story to show how poor the rich really are:

"Aunt Tee said that what occurred during every Saturday's party startled her and her friends the first time it happened. They had been playing cards and Aunt Tee, who had just won the bid, held a handful of trumps. She felt a cool breeze on her back and sat upright and turned around. Her employers had cracked her door open and beckoned to her. Aunt Tee, a little peeved, laid down her cards and went to the door. The couple backed away and asked her to come into the hall, and there they both spoke and won Aunt Tee's sympathy forever. "

"Theresa, we don't mean to disturb you," the man whispered, "but you all seem to be having such a good time . . ."

The woman added, "We hear you and your friends laughing every Saturday night and we'd just like to watch you. We don't want to bother you. We'll be quiet and just watch."

The wealthy man said, "If you'll just leave your door ajar, your friends don't need to know. We'll never make a sound." Aunt Tee said she saw no harm in agreeing and she talked it over with her company. They said it was OK with them, but it was sad that the employers who owned the gracious house, the swimming pool, three cars and numberless palm trees but had no joy. Aunt Tee told me that laughter and relaxation had left the house; she agreed it was sad."

Yes, gold, silver, and other forms of wealth can never satisfy the deepest longings of

the human soul. Perhaps this is why Dr. Karl Menninger once shared, "Greed may be the one disease that does not get well. It is terminal -- unless we transfer our loyalty to the **real God** of the universe." This is where real joy and laughter come from.

LET US NOW EXAMINE VERSES TWO AND THREE

Once there was a popular comedian who got great laughs when he said, "**Money talks -- because all that it ever says to me is 'good-bye.'**" In a sense, that is exactly what James is warning everyone about in these verses.

Money and wealth, because they are temporal, always lose their value.

Many of us probably remember that week in August in which the stock market fell over 1000 points in a week's time. We are painfully aware that almost 2,000,000 American families will lose their homes through foreclosure in this next year. Wealth can be here today -- and gone tomorrow. If your life only has value because of a portfolio -- you are on sinking sand. This past year was the 10th anniversary of Princess Diana's tragic death. Wealth did not guarantee Prince Charles and Princess Diana a happy marriage.

Now James is not speaking against the proper place of financial planning and economic scrutiny in our lives. What James is speaking about is that many have no place for God -- because money has become their god. Don't be fools about the seductive power of wealth. The Quaker theologian, Richard Foster, is right on the money when he writes: "**We must recognize the seductive power of money. Money has power -- spiritual power to own -- and win our hearts. Behind our coins and our dollar bills and other forms of wealth we choose, are spiritual forces.**"

James knew unless we could discern the inherent evil and the basic seductive power of money -- we would be held captive by it. James knew that if left to ourselves -- money would destroy us. This is why we need the Word of God -- to be sure wealth is always held in the proper perspective. Gold, silver and other material resources just do not hold all the ingredients necessary for an authentic life. We know that **the Tempter** will try to trip us up with all sorts of sweet, seductive offers. However, we should not listen to his tongue -- but to every word that has been planted in us by the Holy Spirit.

I have a special word for the parents and grandparents here today. Albert Schweitzer said, "we teach our children and grandchildren in three ways;

By example! By example! By example! Are you raising your children to be capitalists or Christians? To whom do you express the greatest loyalty in your life?" The only hope I know for mastering the seductive power of money is the Word of God. Is a part-time job necessary for our youth when it forces them to miss church, youth group, and Bible study.

Many of you remember the name of Aristotle Onassis. He was one of the richest men of the world. When he died, a friend asked the priest who conducted his funeral "how

much did he leave behind.” The priest said, “Everything. He left everything behind.” So do we all.

We United Methodists had one of the greatest examples who ever lived in our founder, John Wesley. John Wesley knew that wealth could be a roadblock to the holiness of the heart. It could **decrease** our love of God and the care of our neighbor.

John Wesley taught this three-fold approach to money and wealth:

**Earn all you can.
Save all you can.
Give all you can.**

Now, many Methodists practice two-thirds of this formula.

John Wesley was not a poor man. It was reported that he earned 1,400 pounds annually. He kept 30 pounds for himself -- the rest he literally gave away.

The Methodist movement (it was not a church) and its class members began to experience what we call the redemption and lift factor in all areas of their lives. Did you know that over 200 years ago, John Wesley wrote a sermon using the same exact verses we are studying today? (You should see how long his sermons were.) With passion, he pleaded for the Methodist people not to become lovers of money.

The sermon was entitled, "The Danger of Riches." I am fairly certain he would still preach it today. He would not allow the Methodist people to be "tightwads" in any generation. He would not allow money to be worshipped at all.

NOW, I QUICKLY WANT TO LOOK AT VERSES 4, 5 & 6

In verses one, two and three, we saw the dangerous results that greed and misuse of wealth could do in an individual. In **verses 4, 5 & 6**, we see how wealth can rip apart the social fabric of a community. It can only be about blind justice. Real justice comes when we no longer value people by possessions -- but because of their position as a child of God. All of our possessions must be gained with honesty -- not fraudulently. Our financial life is a reflection of our inner life. Imagine if we all filled out tax returns honestly. We can be tightwads as well.

We already know that James has a special burden for the orphans of and widows in this community. These folks represent those who are the most vulnerable. Those who can be taken advantage of. James lets it be known in quite strong language that -- God will NOT tolerate this. God hears the cries of the laborer. Had not God heard the cries of Hebrews in the Egypt land? This is why God raised up Moses. This is why the Ten Commandments were given -- to govern the human conduct -- and set the tone for a responsible community of faith. When you love God -- it increases your capacity to love and treat others fairly.

To bring this sermon to a close and explain these verses in a memorable way -- I share this illustration. There was a tribe of Indians who lived a long time ago -- near the Delaware River. During certain times of the year, they camped next to this very swift and swollen river.

The current was so strong that if someone happened to fall in or stumble into it, they could be swept way down stream.

One day the tribe was attacked by a hostile group of settlers. They found themselves with their backs against the river. They were greatly outnumbered and their only chance for escape was to somehow cross the rushing river. They huddled together and **those who were physically strong** -- picked up the weak and wounded and put them on their shoulders. The little children, the sick, the old and infirmed, those who were ill or wounded, were carried on the backs of those **who were strongest**. By faith, they waded out into the river and much to their surprise, they discovered that the weight on their shoulders **actually helped them to keep their footing** and to make it safely across the river. Yes, by using our money and wealth to help those who are weak and needy -- allows us to keep our proper footing as well -- and not allow our wealth to testify against us on our way to hell.

That is in the spirit of the highest tradition of Christian compassion and concern. It is what our faith commitment is all about. We exist in order to reach out to anyone who needs shelter and a friend and a helping-hand. By being a **servant**, we save the lives of others -- and our own. Reach out and touch a life, the life you touch will be the King of Kings. Jesus took a towel and a basin.

James never forgot that story. He became a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. May we do so as well.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, page 318.