

THE MIDAS TOUCH

James 5: 1-6

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I suspect that all of us are familiar with the story of King Midas. It's been around for a long time, dating all the way back to ancient times. According to the legend, King Midas ruled over a kingdom in what we would today call modern day Turkey. King Midas loved wealth, especially gold and was granted a special gift by the gods. Anything he touched would immediately be turned into gold. At first Midas was thrilled. He could surround himself with a world of golden pleasure. For example, his royal garden of roses was immediately transformed into a golden paradise by his touch. However, very soon this wonderful gift became a curse. He couldn't eat or drink anything for when he touched even a morsel of food it was immediately transformed into gold. Worst of all the embrace of his daughter resulted in her transformation as well. She was now no longer his beautiful daughter, but a golden statue. In utter desperation he cried out to be released from his Midas Touch.

As I studied the passage of Scripture that was read a few moments ago, I couldn't help but wonder if James was familiar with this story. For he begins this portion of his letter by saying, "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." In other words, your wealth is not something to celebrate. It will produce the opposite effect, instead of joy, there will be tears of remorse. In fact, in the Greek of the New Testament, the word "wail" possesses an even stronger meaning. The wailing is more like a shriek of despair. Like the golden touch of King Midas, the desire for wealth can produce some tragic consequences.

What are these consequences? In the verses which follow, James names three. Here is the first one. In spite of its seeming permanence, wealth doesn't last. In verses two and three of chapter five he states, "Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire." Those are strong words of condemnation and besides gold and silver do not corrode. What is James telling us? He's reminding us of what more than one previously wealthy individual has discovered. Even great wealth can vanish into thin air. For example, a recent story on the internet listed fourteen rich and famous people who lost everything. Without listing their names their numbers include entertainers, sports celebrities, movie stars and even one film producer. Another account described the plight of a business man in Germany worth billions before his companies collapsed under the weight of unpaid debt during the 2008 recession. Just as James warned, the financial corrosion which took place literally ate his flesh. He

took his own life. These two verses from the book of Proverbs should, therefore, be given careful consideration. "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:4-5).

And even if wealth doesn't fly away like an eagle, here's something else to consider. No one can take their possessions with them when they leave this world behind. Two penniless roustabouts were walking by a cemetery one day. They saw a large crane lifting a Cadillac into a huge gravesite at the cemetery. A lavished dressed woman was sitting in the Cadillac, obviously deceased, with what appeared to be bags of money surrounding her. One of the men turned to the other and said, "I can't believe it. She's found a way to take it with her!" No she hadn't. Psalm 49, verses 16 and 17 state, "Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies; for his splendor will not descend with him."

James has something else to say about wealth in verse four of chapter five. He declares, "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Almighty." What then is this second unforeseen consequence of wealth? It is the realization that wealth can become quite selfish. Just as James stated, sometimes people acquire wealth by taking advantage of those who work for them. It was a common business practice in the ancient world and it still takes place today. Sometimes the desire to get ahead financially can become so intense that the needs of others are cast aside. Take for, example, that holiday classic, A Christmas Carol. Ebenezer Scrooge is so devoted to the pursuit of his own financial well-being that he pays his employee, Bob Cratchit, a mere fraction of what he's due. He has even less regard for the poor. As far as Ebenezer is concerned, those unfortunate souls can take up residence in the poor house or die. Yes, let's be honest. Even in our modern day world, there are still plenty of Ebenezer Scrooges plying their trade.

However, throughout the Scriptures God's people are reminded over and over again that they should deal honestly with one another and should care for those who have fallen on hard times. There are many examples beginning in the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament and continuing right on through the book of Proverbs and the writings of the prophets. For instance, the prophet Amos warned the wealthy about their dishonest business practices, selling tainted grain and using false weights and measures. He said that the Lord would never forget what they had done and would bring judgement against them (Amos 8:4-14). In the New Testament, Paul issued a similar warning. Writing to Timothy he declared, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many

foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

So we should beware. Wealth, especially ill-gotten wealth, can make us selfish. In addition there is one final thing that it can do to us. It can make us lazy. This is what James says in verse five of chapter five, "You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter." James is thinking of the stock yard and what happens to cattle just before they are turned into steaks and hamburger. They are fattened up before their demise. It's a pretty graphic description of what happens to those who buy into a self-indulgent and decadent way of life. It can happen to individuals and even nations. Here's an example from history. Under Cyrus the Great, the Persians conquered all of the Middle East in 550 BC. They were able to accomplish that feat because they were a hardy and disciplined people. Their way of life, especially for those serving the king, was "one meal a day." That was all that was required or expected. However, having received great wealth and riches from the countries they now ruled, the Persians decided to enjoy what they possessed, even in terms of their eating habits. The law of one meal a day was reinterpreted over the next three centuries. It now meant one meal a day that lasted from breakfast to lunch to dinner, to a midnight snack. Guess what happened? When Alexander showed up with his Greek armies, he easily defeated the Persians, even though his forces were far fewer in number. The Persians and their leaders had grown so self-satisfied and lazy while enjoying their wealth that they were no longer able to defend themselves. Wasted resources and extravagant expenses have ruined more than one life and more than one nation. It is a truth that we as individuals and perhaps we as a nation, need to take to heart.

Remember King Midas? His desire for wealth turned into a curse. It cost him the dearest thing he possessed, the life of his daughter. James could have said the same thing about those rich acquaintances to whom he was writing. In fact, that is precisely what he did say. In verse seven he states, "You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you" (James 5:6). Who is he talking about? Strange as it may seem, the one whom he is talking about is the same one who uttered these words, "As you have done unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). James is talking about the Lord Jesus Christ and this is what he is saying. When the rich take advantage of others, especially the poor, they are actually standing at the foot of the cross, crucifying their Savior all over again. Like Midas they are destroying the very object of their affection. May we forever be spared of their company. Instead, let us embrace the presence of Christ as we reach out to those in need.