

Ill-Gotten Gain - Part 2

by Alistair Begg

The sermon warns against the dangers of ill-gotten gain and the consequences of covetousness, using the examples of Naboth's vineyard and the rich man in 1 Kings chapter 21.

Duration: 36:07

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14, Proverbs 14:31

Topics: "Falsehood"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the theme of injustice and greed in society. He uses vivid imagery to describe the consequences of employers withholding wages from their workers. The preacher also references a song called 'Mr. Businessman' that criticizes those who prioritize material wealth over more important things. He then goes on to talk about the Russian oligarchs and how their immense wealth has been acquired at the expense of the impoverished. The sermon concludes with a reminder that God, as the ultimate judge, will ultimately bring justice to all.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. In preparation for our study, I'd like to read from the Old Testament, from 1 Kings chapter 21. Some time later, there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth, the Jezreelite.

The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange, I will give you a better vineyard, or if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it's worth.

But Naboth replied, the Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers. So Ahab went home sullen and angry, because Naboth, the Jezreelite, had said, I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers. He lay on his bed, sulking, and refused to eat.

His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat? He answered her, because I said to Naboth, the Jezreelite, sell me your vineyard, or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place. But he said, I will not give you my vineyard. Jezebel, his wife, said, is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat.

Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed a seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him.

In those letters she wrote, Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.

So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people saying, Naboth has cursed both God and the king.

So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. Then they sent word to Jezebel, Naboth has been stoned and is dead. And as soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you.

He's no longer alive but dead. But when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite.

Go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He's now in Naboth's vineyard where he has gone to take possession of it. Say to him, This is what the Lord says.

Have you not murdered a man and seized his property? Then say to him, This is what the Lord says. In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, Dogs will lick up your blood. Yes, yours.

Ahab said to Elijah, So you have found me, my enemy. I have found you, he answered, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. I'm going to bring disaster on you.

I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel, slave or free. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam, son of Naboth, and that of Basha, son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. And also concerning Jezebel, the Lord says, Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.

Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country. There was never a man like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel, his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols like the Amorites.

The Lord drove out before Israel. When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite. Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son. Amen.

We thank God for his word. Now to page 857 in the Church Bibles. I think it is from memory.

Certainly to James chapter 5. And then just one further moment as we pause and ask for God to help us. Father, we turn now to this portion of the Bible that is not the easiest, certainly not to preach, and not particularly easy to respond to either. And we ask for clarity of expression and understanding, the right sense of conviction that you alone bring about, and for a sincere and genuine interest to have our lives

brought into line with the truth of the Bible.

For it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, this morning we began to look at the first six verses of James chapter 5. And this whole issue of ill-gotten gain, this stinging condemnation of the fraudulent and extortionary, extravagant people who were abusing those who were poor.

And we said that probably the best way to come to grips with the passage was to summarize the charges that are leveled against these individuals. And we only managed to deal with one of them. And that was to recognize, as it says at the end of verse 3, you have hoarded wealth in the last days.

These individuals discovered that that which represented wealth in grain and oil had rotted, their clothes were beginning to become moth-eaten, and the things that they had attached greatest value to were going to be the occasion only for moaning and for wailing. For those of you who were not present this morning, we noted that James was not issuing a blanket condemnation of the wealthy, nor of wealth in and of itself, but that he was directing his comments to this particular cluster of individuals represented by the idolatry of a self-serving life that loved money rather than loving God. And we noted in the words of J.C. Ryle, and I think helpfully, that it is possible to love money without having it, and it is possible to have it without loving it.

And in the context of this morning, we then continue. The second charge that is leveled is that these same individuals have failed to pay the wages to the workmen. That's in verse 4, the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

Now, once again, James is not just coming out of left field, as it were, with these charges and allegations. There has to be some foundation and substantiation for them and some basis upon which he makes them. And again, as we said this morning, James knew the Old Testament Scriptures.

So again, he would be familiar with the words of Proverbs 14, 31. He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Let me say that to you again.

It's Proverbs 14, 31. He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, namely God, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. And God, throughout the Old Testament, made special provision for the workmen.

And we could turn to many places, but we needn't go beyond perhaps just one or two quotes. Deuteronomy 24, 14 and 15. The Word of God says, Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy.

Do we just let that settle for a moment, all right? Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy. Contemporary thought in American business, British business, too. We were colonial empire builders, so we have our own problems.

Is that if that's what we can get away with, that's what we'll pay them. After all, what would they do if we gave them three times as much? Well, of course, we don't know what they would do, but they would do a little better than they're doing. And the Word of God to his people was very clear.

Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy. Pay him his wages each day before sunset because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise, he may cry to the Lord against you and you will be guilty of sin.

If you recall, when we studied in the book of Ruth, we saw how in the scenes of harvesting that Ruth engaged in that this kind of picture was apropos. And if you've been in certain countries in South America and in that in-between area between the North and South America, you will know that this kind of day working situation is not unusual at all. And if you've been, for example, in the vastness of Mexico City, you will have seen the day workers standing outside construction sites from the earliest hours in the morning.

And at a certain point, one of the foremen will come out and will be able to take in as many as they need for the day. And then they will work for an entire day. And at the end of the day, they ought to receive their pay for their depending upon it in order for their subsistence existence.

And it really would be quite ignoble for somebody to ask the individuals to come in to expend the energy and skill that they have for the hours of the day and in the heat of the sun and everything else, and then to tell them at the end of the way, well, I'm sorry, we'll be getting back to you with your wages later on. Says Calvin, what can be more base than that they who supply us with bread by their labor should be pined through want? And yet this monstrous thing is common. For there are many of such a tyrannical disposition that they think that the rest of mankind exists only for their benefit.

This is Calvin writing a long time ago. A reminder to us that man's inhumanity to man, which makes countless thousands mourn and worry, is a feature of life that transcends cultures and times. Hence the applicability of the Bible.

And this is the charge. The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. It's a graphic picture, isn't it? Of the wages retained by the employer.

The stingy employer, lining his own pockets, finds that his till, which he is now locked for the day, is making noises as he tries to get out of the office and on his way. And the money is shouting, you should give this away, you should pay this to your workmen, and so on. And the cries of the harvesters, verse 4b, are mingling with the cries that come from the bags of unpaid wages.

And the Lord Almighty is listening and will act in judgment. Now, the little asides that I make, you know are little asides. I often actually find myself walking away from my pulpit when I do this.

I think over time you've begun to detect that when he walks away, it's kind of like you don't really need to pay much attention to him when he walks away. But I've always thought about this in relationship to this whole idea of having 30 days to pay your bills. You know, when artisans and workmen have to lay out for the materials to do the work in your house, and they carry that, and they do the work, and the work is finished, and then they don't get paid.

Well, you say, well, I pay them. Well, I pay them. Okay, that's fine.

But the sort of general standard and pattern is, and people tell me that bad payments and bad debt and bad follow-through on the part of professing Christian people is not unusual. And that they have on their books the names of people for whom they have worked, fulfilled the responsibility, done their due, exactly what they were asked, and have not as yet received their pay. Well, I think James 5 has something to say to every one of us every time we're tempted to ever play that game.

Now I'm back behind the pulpit. Thirdly, you have lived in luxury. That's the third charge.

You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. That's what I said this morning. These charges are absolutely crystal clear.

Because the rich man's punishment didn't lie in what he did as much as in what he failed to do, as in Luke chapter 16 in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The problem for the rich man was not that he was intrinsically a rich man, but it was that his riches blinded him to the needs of the poor man, the one who lived at his gate and whom he would pass as he came in and out. And poor old Lazarus, even the dogs were there just to lick his sores, and that was the kind of comfort that he received, and he would have gladly eaten from the stuff that the rich man had his servants throw out after they'd had a big dinner party.

But the rich man was oblivious to all of that. His luxury had sort of deceived him as to what it means to live in the real world. Listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.

You've hoarded it, you didn't share it, you haven't paid the wages, and you've lived in luxury and self-indulgence. Now, the word that is used here for luxury is a word that would be, it's not just, you know, you bought yourself a cashmere sweater. The word that is used here for luxury is a word that would be used for you have lived delicately, or you have pampered yourself, or you have essentially set your life up in such a way as to give yourself over to the wanton indulgence of your senses, so that all the things that will make your life cozy, comfortable, and fine and dandy has become the pursuit of your existence.

And it is that which James, under God, is challenging. Now, again, we said that it has the sting of the Old Testament prophet, and I said that some of us would have Amos in the back of our minds. Let me just give to you Amos in relationship to this.

In chapter 6 of Amos, which in the NIV has a heading, Woe to the Complacent, this is how Amos speaks. Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation to whom the people of Israel come. Go to Chalnae and look at it.

Go from there to Great Hamath, and then go down to Gath and Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours? You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches.

You dine on choice lambs and fatted calves. You strum away on your hearts like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

Therefore, you will be among the first to go into exile. Your feasting and your lounging will end. There's really nowhere to hide from that kind of thing, is there? That's why, again, one of my favorite country western songs of all time, that you're so tired of hearing me quote, but the reason I quote it so often is because it just fits on so many occasions, doesn't it? No wonder they wouldn't play this in the 60s when it was done by Ray Stephens, because it was regarded as an offense to the capitalist system of America.

That Ray Stephens is in the McCarthy era. Ray Stephens must have been an insurrectionist. Maybe he was a communist.

Who knows what the Joker was? We're not going to have that playing on the radio. That'll get people upset. Itemize the things you covet as you squander through your life.

Bigger cars, better houses, term insurance on your wife. Choose the evenings with your harlot. And on Wednesdays, it's your charlatan.

Your analyst is high upon your list. And so it goes on. It's a devastating piece.

Remember what it was called? Mr. Businessman. Mr. Businessman. Spending counterfeit incentive.

Wasting precious time and health. Placing value on the worthless. Disregarding priceless wealth.

You can wheel and deal the best of them and steal it from the rest of them. You know the score. Their ethics are a bore.

You better take care of business, Mr. Businessman. Before it's too late. Now, you can go back and check and see whether what I tell you is right.

But the majority of radio stations refused outright to play that lyric. Why? Too close to the bone. Fourthly, charge number four.

It's worse. You have fattened yourselves. You have fattened yourselves in a day of slaughter.

What is this all about? I think it's fairly straightforward, isn't it? You've fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. Now, it may be that this is a contrast between what the rich are doing, i.e., living self-indulgent lives, while the lives of the poor are being snuffed out. In other words, you've fattened yourself while the poor people are being slaughtered.

That may be what it's saying. I don't think it is. I think it's the picture here of an unwitting beast eating away quite happily.

If you go across the back way here, wherever it is, I never know the road names, but there are famous Scottish cows over here called Galloway Belties or Belted Galloways. But they have the white wrap around their tummy and then the two black pieces on the outside. And they're really lovely and wonderful looking, and especially the wee ones.

And I pass them, you know, maybe five, four days out of a week. And they just munch away. Sometimes they're up in the high field, sometimes they're down in the low field.

And then my wife told me last year, she said, did you see the sign that was there? And I said, no. Yes, she said they were selling the beef. I said, what beef? She said, the Belties.

I said, oh, no. No, they're just there so I can talk to them every day when I'm coming back. No, she said.

No, they're munching away so that they can be slaughtered and so that they can be eaten. Like unwitting beasts, these acquisitive misers were fattening themselves quite happily, unaware of the fact that with every munching bite, they were making themselves more ready for a visit to the abattoir. Alec Matias suggests that James is in this issuing a warning to any who might be attempted to follow the example of these people and thereby imperil themselves on the day of judgment.

And in a classic Matiasism, he writes just one sentence and he says, Oh, to be a thin cow on the day the butcher comes. Oh, to be a thin cow on the day the butcher comes. In other words, better to have your ribs showing than your belly bulging.

And fifthly, and finally, you have condemned innocent men, murdered innocent men who were not opposing you. Now, remember who he's addressing here. He's spoken to the brothers and sisters in verse 11, urging those who follow Jesus not to be slanderous towards each other.

He comes back to the brothers and sisters in verse 7 of chapter 5. Be patient until the Lord comes back. And here in verse 13 of chapter 4, he says to the presumptuous who are living as though they can determine their own lifespan. I want you to listen up, those of you who have got all these great plans for yourself, leaving God out of your plans.

And then again, I want you rich people who have made money your idol to listen to what I'm saying to you. You've hoarded, you've withheld, you've lived in self-indulgent luxury. You've fattened yourselves without any thought of a day of judgment.

And your lust for wealth is covetousness. And when covetousness takes hold, men may be prepared to go to just about any length to secure their advantage. Yes, and their wives may be prepared to go to any length along with them to secure the advantage.

That's the reason for the long reading from 1 Kings chapter 21. And he went home and lay on his bed and sulked and said, I can't have what I want. And his wife said, Is that the way the king responds? Let me show you how to handle this.

And then the tragic murderous activities that emerged from the covetous heart of one who should know better, aided and abetted by his wife. I read in the last week or 10 days, one particular biographical record of the Russian oligarchs. These individuals who have become vastly wealthy within the time frame, essentially from the coming down of the Berlin Wall through the end of the millennium.

And even if you allow for poetic justice or even poetic injustice, even if you allow for inaccuracies in the details, it goes without saying that the vastness of the wealth consumed by these men is a wealth that has been secured on the backs of people whose lives were impoverished under communism and have been devastated under an oligarchical form of attempted capitalism. And it is a story of bribery and of corruption and of murder and of deceit and of the overwhelming impact of covetousness in the lives of people. And what we need to recognize, and with this we're going to close, what we need to recognize is what James was affirming for the people of Christ to whom he's writing.

As we said this morning, the vast majority of those who would be within the readership of James' letter in its initial span of influence would be poor people. Poor people, the artisans and the workers, the harvesters. The vast majority of those who were the early members of the Christian church were, as Paul said, not many of the mighty or the well-chosen or the powerful or the influential.

They were not in some kind of quasi-middle class. They knew exactly where they were, and their lives were hard, and their faces were often ground down, and they were aware on a daily basis of the injustices that were done to them by those who had the power to make a difference for them, and that for good. And what James is affirming as he goes through this, and he's already drawn attention to it, as he's warned them about becoming judges and the establishers of law, he has reminded them that there is a higher throne than that which adjudicates even on the affairs that are referenced here.

That there is a judge of all the earth who will do everything ultimately that is right, so that while injustice prevails, and while deeds are not settled, and while verdicts are rendered that are bogus and wrong, the

people of God need to know that God will fulfill his purposes, and that money and possessions will be no shield against the execution of God's righteous decrees. Money and possessions will not mean a rap before the bar of God's judgment. It is the one place, if no one has understood it before, where everything that becomes the vehicle for accommodation and exploitation is absolutely flushed, and that for good.

And on that day, appointed by God, all the injustices will be dealt with. On that day, unjust salaries and wages will be recompensed. On that day, those who think that they got away with it will have reason to bring to full focus the weeping and the wailing and the misery that James suggests they recognize now.

And that, you see, is what we must hold on to. Because in the execution of righteous living in an unrighteous world, even the systems of legality established by God for the punishment of those who do wrong and the well-being of those who do right, yes, they fail. Yes, they are subject to the chances and changes and sinful endeavors of those who are put in positions of authority.

Corruption abounds. So, what then is the Christian to do? Rail against the system? No, we must do what Peter tells us to do. We must uphold the law.

We must abide by the rule of law. Unless it absolutely tells us to run counter to God. We must be those who are known for our good deeds and for our law-abiding works.

But we have to keep in mind that there's coming a day when the judge of all the earth will do what's right. The story is told of a man who was brought before a judge, justly accused of a dreadful crime. And through some legal technicality, the judge was obliged to discharge him.

If you like legal matters, it must frustrate you as it frustrates me when you realize that a mistrial takes place because somebody offered into the proceedings that which was disallowed. And although it didn't have a whit to do with the absolute guilt or innocence of the accused, it was sufficient to shut the thing down and send everybody home for the rest of their lives. And through some legal technicality, in this case, the judge was obliged to discharge the man.

But as he did so, he chose to say what he thought of the matter. And this was the judge's final summation. He said to the man in dismissing the case, I believe you guilty.

And would wish to condemn you severely. But through a petty technicality, I am obliged to discharge you. I know you are guilty.

And so do you. And I wish you to remember that you will someday pass before a better and a wiser judge when you will be dealt with according to justice and not according to law. And that, you see, is the thing that is forgotten in our society.

In the most litigated society in the Western world that has become adept at fiddling the system and working it on the side of the oppressor or on the side of the guilty or whatever it might be. Unless we believe that and understand that, then I guess we would all want to become Che Guevara and rail against the system. And fight for our rights.

God will have the last word. And in light of that, we do well to turn again to the words of James' brother Jesus when he said, Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust creep in and destroy. But instead lay out for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy.

And where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Well, gracious God, we bow before your word and realize just how tremendously challenging it is.

The inherent warning that it contains nudging us away from self-indulgence and greed, from covetousness, from trying to line our own nest while failing to be equitable with others. We realize that in James addressing these people, he's not assuming for a moment that he's speaking to his own Christian people. This is a mark of those who love the world, because you can't love money and love God.

And so he addresses these people who just love money so much that they clearly don't love God. And yet we remind ourselves in the words of Bunyan, that there was a gate, a road to hell from the very gate of heaven. So, Lord, let us heed the warnings as they come.

Let us derive encouragement from reminding ourselves that you, the judge of all the earth, will do right. Let us affirm again that in knowing you, Jesus, we have everything. That all the things we once held dear and build our lives upon, that these things eventually crumble and go away.

But that you are our all in all. And may that be the hallmark of this week, as we deal with all the affairs of business as employers and employees. As we take our checkbooks and our credit cards, as we execute decisions and plans for savings and disbursements.

And as we try to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Let us heed every warning that your word brings. Let us rest in every encouragement that it contains.

And may we seek first the kingdom of God and your righteousness, so that all things may be added unto us. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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