

## HOWLING RICH MEN

Scripture Lesson: James 5:1-5, RSV

“Since 1969 Brazil has achieved one of the world’s most spectacular rates of economic growth.” The middle class now thrives in many respects. In its “booming cities, flashy cars carry hordes of executives from comfortable apartment houses to offices in downtown skyscrapers. The white sands of...beaches teem with people enjoying the good life.” But, reports *Time* magazine in its September 11, 1978 issue,

*What mars this idyllic picture is a social scandal more massive in Brazil than anywhere else on the South American continent. Amid all the delights of Brazil live more than 2 million children who have been abandoned by their destitute parents and another 14 million who live in such poverty that abandonment almost seems preferable. These 16 million people—one-third of Brazil’s youth—are growing up in circumstances so deprived that they are unlikely ever to play a useful role in modern society. The outcasts among them have been called “nobody’s children,” and they range from infants to teenagers.*

The article goes on to say that most of these children spend their days hustling, committing petty crimes and doing anything they can just to eat.

*They rove in gypsy bands, sleep in construction pipes, in rat-infested cellars of abandoned buildings...Their beds are torn newspapers, their clothing mere scraps of cloth...The children who remain with their parents are similarly corrupted.*

Mothers are pushing their young girls into prostitution to get money for the family. It goes on to say that one young boy who appeared before a Rio de Janeiro magistrate explained his crimes in a very touching fashion: “What do you expect from me? I never even had a single birthday cake!”

*Only 11.8% of all Brazil’s cities and towns receive any aid at all for needy children. There is only one government or private-care agency for every 10,000 needy or abandoned children.*

Because of this terrible blight on Brazil, children by the millions are growing up mentally retarded because of malnourishment. They are being put into jails that are already overcrowded, where the conditions of rape and violence are unbelievable, even to the most hardened people. *Time* further reports that, “Some experts predict that within 20 years or so, Brazil will be burdened with millions of adults so undernourished, unskilled and uneducated that they will be impervious to any kind of civilizing process” and may cause the collapse of the whole social structure of the country. “At a Sao Paulo orphanage, the IQ of the youngsters ranges between 50 and 70 ...”

From 1968 to 1974 a military dictatorship in Brazil fostered economic growth at the rate of 10% a year. But in 1972 the minister of finance admitted that only 5% of the people benefited from this fantastic growth, and they were the wealthy landowners. In a 1974 study it was actually shown that the poorest two-thirds of the people in Brazil had their actual purchasing power decline by one-half during this period of unprecedented growth. Of the 110 million people in Brazil, 40% suffer from

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malnutrition.

(I use Brazil only as an example of the problems facing some of the nations in the world largely because we in the developed countries have been hardened to their pain.)

Other areas are no better, whether we are talking about Africa or some other places in the Third World. Between 1972 and 1973, when the oil prices in the world tripled, the poor were the most severely hit. Unable to buy gasoline to run their irrigation pumps, unable to pay for the increased costs of petroleum-based fertilizers to grow their crops, the poor starved. At the same time, the cost of grain also tripled so that to buy grain you couldn't afford to grow was out of the question. So for the tens of millions who spend 80% of their yearly budget on food, when the oil and the grain prices triple, they cannot take any more money to buy food. They starve to death.

What I am saying is not new. Economists and people concerned with world food and hunger questions have been talking about this for years. For example, read the reports from the United Nations or any report on this worldwide condition. Whether we like to face it or not, the world's resources are not justly divided—30% of the world's population is eating 75% of the world's protein. In 1975, one-third of the world's people—that is almost a billion people—had an annual income of \$100 or less. Of course, this amount in a poor country has a great deal more purchasing power than it would here in the United States. Nevertheless, it is an extremely low annual income.

Can anything be done? If we are willing to say that nothing can be done, we go on as we are. But if we do that, I would like to predict what might happen in the next two decades. At the moment, it is projected that by 1980, or by 1985 at the latest, 35 nations will have nuclear capability. In the underdeveloped world, India and some other nations already have that power. It is expected that Arab and African nations will have a nuclear capability. Professor Robert Heilbroner, who has written extensively on this subject, says this:

*There seems little doubt that some nuclear capability will be in the hands of the major underdeveloped nations certainly within the next few decades and perhaps much sooner...I will suggest that it may be used as an instrument of blackmail to force the developed world to undertake a massive transfer of wealth to the poverty-stricken world... "Wars of redistribution" may be the only way by which the poor nations can hope to remedy their condition.*

You can imagine what will happen if not just bombs are used by terrorists, but *nuclear* bombs are used.

Why have the affluent nations been so insensitive? There are many very complex reasons. This is not a simple problem. If you think that all we have to do is send a lot of money overseas and that solves the world food problem, you are sadly mistaken. That may be part of it, but there are economic factors, trade agreements, the question of purchasing power in terms of foreign products, the concern of American labor unions—all kinds of complex reasons. But it may be that the most fundamental reason we have been so content to ignore what is happening is that famine no longer affects people the way it used to. Quoting from one world specialist on hunger:

*One reason it is possible for the world's affluent to ignore such tragedies is that changes have occurred in the way that famine manifests itself. In earlier historical periods... whole nations...experienced widespread starvation and death. Today the advancement in both national and international distribution systems has concentrated the effects of food scarcity among the world's poor, wherever they are.*

That means that if you are in Brazil and have money, you can buy food. It means that if you are in a famine-stricken nation, you can purchase food from overseas; there is a way to get it. The point is that when food scarcity triples the price of grain imports, the wealthy can eat. Only the poor starve. No longer does a nation as a whole experience famine together, poor and rich. It concentrates its impact on the poor.

Stanley Mooneyham of World Vision, an evangelically based organization which deals with the hunger problem, tells of his visit to a poor couple which brings home to us the reality of what is happening to millions:

*My emotions could scarcely take in what I saw and heard. The three-year-old twins, lying naked and unmoving on a small cot, were in the last act of their personal dramas. Mercifully, the curtain was coming down on their brief appearance. Malnutrition was the villain. The two-year old played a silent role, his brain already vegetating marasmus, a severe form of malnourishment.*

*The father is without work. Both he and Maria are anguished over their existence, but they are too proud to beg. He tries to shine shoes. Maria cannot talk about their condition. She tries, but words just will not come. Her mother's love is deep and tender, and the daily deterioration of her children is more than she can bear. Tears must be the vocabulary of the anguished soul.*

In the Tuesday, September 26, issue of the *Washington Post* (the business and finance section), the headline read: "Rich Warned on Trade Bars by McNamara," and I quote:

*World Bank President Robert S. McNamara yesterday severely chastised the rich nations of the world for erecting new trade barriers against goods manufactured by the less-developed countries.*

The problem is not merely that we are individually well off; it is that there are structures in society, in politics, in economics, in trade agreements, in all the complex things that make international events, that inevitably penalize the poor for the sake of the rich. It is a corporate evil. What is so devilish and demonic about a corporate evil is that no one person ever feels responsible. If it is built into the structure, one person says, "I can't change the structure, so I am not responsible. A *personal* evil I can accept and do something about; a corporate evil, how do I deal with that?" So we can all participate in it and no one feels guilty. The problem with that attitude is dealt with in the book of Amos where the prophet attacks not only personal sins against the poor, but the fact that economic oppression had become legal in Israel. It is that systemic, structural evil that Amos is attacking, and he claims that God is opposed to it.

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In our Scripture reading, James (speaking for God) is talking not just to individuals but to a system in which wages are not being paid fairly. He says that God will make some kind of restitution in the future.

Quoting again from Mr. Mooneyham, who speaks of the

*stranglehold which the developed West has kept on the economic throats of the Third World...the heart of the problems of poverty and hunger are human systems which ignore, mistreat and exploit man...If the hungry are to be fed...some of the systems will require drastic adjustments while others will have to be scrapped altogether.*

His thoughts coincide with those of McNamara's. All the industrialized nations have cooperated in shaping international trade for their own economic advantage. Have you ever wondered why bananas are cheaper than apples when we don't even grow them in this country? Eighty percent of all the money that moves from the rich nations to the poor comes through trade. This means, as McNamara was arguing, that if we deny favorable patterns of trade to the poor nations, we are cutting off their life's blood. But the profit motive is too strong. It dulls our consciences. While it has done much good for people, it can be vicious when made more important than people or when soaked with dishonesty and fraud.

Even if we could get better trade patterns, however, some nations still would not be helped significantly. Why? Because in many Latin American countries, a tiny percentage of the elite own the bulk of the land that grows the coffee, sugar, etc. This means that as the trade agreements improve and more profits can flow to Latin America, instead of the money being passed on to the working class to eat better, the funds are pocketed primarily by the wealthy landowners who often pay the peasants barely enough to survive. Today, much of the anti-Americanism which exists in South America is due to the fact that the American government is supporting military dictatorships in these countries because they are pro-West[ern]. But in supporting them, we are in danger of cutting off the peasants, so the USA is in a bind. The peasants are struggling for more land and for a more just share of the wealth that is in the nation and in the world at large. The Biblical principle is that the land must be given to the people to allow them to support themselves, that human rights are more important and take precedence over property rights.

Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland has said that four times as much capital flows from Latin America into the United States [than from the United States into Latin America] and that, in effect, "The countries of Latin America...are actually giving foreign aid to the United States, the wealthiest country in the world."

What can we do? Shall we all sell our houses and cars and give the money to the poor? Shall we become a welfare society? (But our new paid social worker has just informed us that the answer is helping people to become self-sufficient.) Shall we stop building churches and installing organs?

My honest answer is that I really don't know. Recently, Pastor Charles Sandefur talked about mental health and healthy morals. The point of his talk was that most of the agonizing moral dilemmas we face that require some kind of definite, concrete action are not the kind of moral dilemmas that admit simple solutions. The answers are very difficult and very often we find that the answers, no matter

which way we go, create other problems and keep us in tension. It is apparent that we can't stop constructing all the buildings. It is apparent that we can't all sell our houses.

But we must do something! And what we are to do is something each of us has to find out on our knees. But to agonize, to care, to think, to pray--that at the very least is something a Christian can do. We can, for example, support with our votes and whatever political clout we have a more just distribution of the world's resources and food. Personally, I will no longer vote for anyone whose platform allows him to ignore the plight of the world's poor. I will find out what he or she stands for before I vote.

At the Lausanne Evangelism conference in 1974, one part of the declaration read:

*Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life-style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.*

This same theme is played repeatedly in the writings of Ellen White, who cautioned us that we must return to a simpler life-style, that while we are not to rule out the selling of our home, God has not at this time required that of everyone. Nevertheless, she says that living more simply and making our resources available to the needy and to the work of the gospel are required by God.

Many people cite the example of John Wesley. (Some examples are very extreme, but Wesley's life is something to consider.) He preached that, after paying for the "plain necessities of life" all income should be distributed for the sake of the gospel and for the poor. Even though he wrote many books and could have been wealthy in his own right just from his royalties, he died with \$50 in his possession.

There is nothing wrong with making money or being wealthy. That is clear from the scriptures, but those who make such money and have such wealth have enormous responsibilities. That money is not to be used simply for selfish advantage. It is to be used for the sake of other people. How that is to be applied in each person's life, every individual must wrestle with.

It means that not only individuals have to look at the way money is allocated but so does the corporate structure of the church. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is wealthy—poor perhaps when compared to some other churches—but wealthy in other perspectives. How do we allocate our resources as a church, the Sligo Church? Do we need to build the buildings? These are some of the questions we have to consider.

Do we as a church have a responsibility about the kind of governments we support around the world. We must be very careful that, while we try to keep all the rulers happy in all these countries so that we can preach the gospel, we fail to preach the gospel to the masses because our support of those rulers reinforces injustice against the poor.

Compared to most other churches, Adventists are very liberal. We have the highest or second highest per capita giving in the world. Many churches don't tithe. It has been estimated that \$5 billion is given to churches each year in freewill tithes and offerings. If every member in the Christian churches were to tithe, that figure would amount to almost \$20 billion a year. That is \$15 billion to do something

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positive for those who are on the brink of extinction.

I don't want to be morbid. I don't want everyone to feel guilty per se, although if the shoe fits we should wear it. I don't feel comfortable when I think about the implications of these things. I want us to be morally responsible. At the very least, if our resources can't go any further, Seventh-day Adventists around the world should make sure that no Adventist in Ethiopia, Brazil or anywhere else is ever starving. Just as the church in Jerusalem was saved by the church in Antioch, if the church in Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo needs help, we ought to be sure that they get it. We have the resources. And, if we have money beyond that, we ought to give it, as the early church did, to the "Gentiles." What kind of impact would that kind of sharing make? I think it would be almost unimaginable. If we really took seriously this problem as a Christian community, what a difference we could make. The Christian church at large is a dying organization. If you go to the Third World, it is very tough for the Christian faith to get a hearing. But if we were to do what the early church did and work hard and systematically at economic sharing, I think the evangelistic impact would be almost inconceivable.

In a non-SDA church, whose members are entirely for one another in the way I have just outlined, an alcoholic stopped one day to talk with one of the elders. The elder invited him to become a Christian. The alcoholic got uncomfortable and hastily insisted that all he wanted was money for a ticket to Cleveland.

"O.K.," the elder agreed, "we can give you that kind of help too, if that's all you really want.

He was quiet a moment, then he shook his head. "You know something?" he said, looking straight at the man. "You've just really let me off the hook. Because if you had chosen a new way of life in the kingdom of God, then as your brother I would have had to lay down my whole life for you. This house, my time, all my money, whatever you needed to meet your needs would have been totally at your disposal for the rest of your life. But all you want is some money for a ticket..." The man was so startled he stood up and shortly left, without remembering to take the money. The next Sunday he was sitting next to the elder in the worship service.

Such oneness in Christ gave power to the Jerusalem church. Notice in Acts 2:46-47 that it was because they ate together and broke bread in their homes, and shared what they had, they had favor with all the people. "And the Lord added to their number day by day." In Acts 4 it says they had all things together and in common, and the following verse adds, "And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33).

Nevertheless, we have to be careful. The church is not to be a welfare organization. The wealthy and middle class also have needs. There are other things besides food and drink, and we will consider those in my next sermon.

But the poor are a neglected part of our work. I will make a prediction and it is related to the one I made earlier. Keep in mind the ominous overtones for the United States which has been foretold by Ellen White. My prediction is this: Either the nations of wealth are persuaded to share their surplus with the poor, or we will enter a period of catastrophic conflict. Even the prime minister of India, as pacifistic as he might be, if he thinks a hundred million of his people are going to starve to death, may

be tempted to use the nuclear bomb to get food.

As James has worded it, unless we do something, those of us who are rich will weep and howl for the misery that has come upon us. And we will remember with horror the words of the mighty angel who swells the loud cry—the third angel’s message:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!  
It has become a dwelling place of demons,  
a haunt of every foul spirit,  
a haunt of every foul and hateful bird;  
for all nations have drunk the wine of her  
    impure passion,  
and the kings of the earth have committed  
    fornication with her,  
*and the merchants of the earth have grown rich  
with her wantonness.* [Emphasis supplied.]  
(Revelation 18:2-3, RSV)

Then it says,

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,  
“Come out of her, my people,  
lest you take part in her sins,  
lest you share in her plagues;  
for her sins are heaped high as heaven,  
and God has remembered her iniquities. (Revelation 18:4-5, RSV)