

Is James Addressing Believers or Unbelievers in 5:1-6?

Quite a few people would say that it's addressed to unbelievers, but that may not be the best conclusion.

Douglas Moo, who has a well-deserved reputation as one of the best contemporary interpreters of the New Testament, is among those who think that James 5:1-6 is addressed to unbelievers.¹ He points out that 5:1-6 is similar to 4:13-17 yet has some important differences. In particular, 4:13-17 uses a rhetorical style in which James sounds like he's having a conversation with specific people, asking questions, giving answers, and then encouraging them to repent. 5:1-6 doesn't have all this. It sounds more like the prophetic messages of God's judgment against disobedient nations recorded in the Old Testament. Moo thinks that New Testament writers wouldn't address God's people this way, so he concludes that 4:13-17 addresses believers and 5:1-6 must be addressing unbelievers.

The famous 16th-century reformer John Calvin also took 5:1-6 to be aimed at unbelievers. He thought that this "aside" to the unbelievers was a way to encourage the believers by showing them that the rich unbelievers who were oppressing them would someday get the punishment they deserved.

But before we assume that 5:1-6 doesn't address believers, there are more facts that should be considered.

We should start within the letter of James itself. 4:4-10 is recognized as a passage exhorting believers to spiritually healthy attitudes and behavior. Yet it includes language similar to that in 5:1 (and similar to the prophetic judgment messages in the Old Testament). In 4:9 the believers are told to "grieve, mourn and wail." They are to change their laughter to mourning and their joy to gloom. This is immediately followed in v. 10 with an exhortation to humble themselves before the Lord and reassurance that if they do so the Lord will lift them up. 5:1-6 comes only a few verses later. It also talks about weeping and wailing. Even though it doesn't give an explicit exhortation to repent, it's no stretch to see it still implied.

This becomes even clearer when we consider the teaching of the Old Testament prophets themselves, the ones who gave the original judgment messages. Passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 teach that whenever God announces judgment on a people or nation he will not carry out the threat if they turn from their evil. This seems to be part of every message of judgment, even if it isn't stated in so many words every time. For an example, look at what happens in Jonah 3. So this seems to be the case in James 5:1-6 also, especially since there is a clear call to repent (along with grieving, mourning and wailing) just a few verses earlier in 4:9-10.

Not only does James tell God's people to weep over sin in chapter 4, but on many occasions the Old Testament prophets also told Israel to weep over its sin. Isaiah 65:14 provides a striking example of God's people being told that those among them who turn away from the Lord will

¹ As can be seen in his commentary on James in the Pillar New Testament Commentary series, pages 209-211.

experience God's judgment and will weep and cry out. Hosea 7:13-16 and Amos 8:3 are places that speak of judgment for God's people for their unfaithful actions towards God, with no explicit statement about repentance or forgiveness. Yet when read as a whole, both Hosea and Amos are clearly calls for God's people to repent and be restored to fellowship with God. Against this background James 5:1-6 appears to be a strong warning for God's people (the people to whom the letter was written) about the dangers of misusing wealth.

All of this might lead us to ask whether James would really tell a group of baptized believers that they could be in danger of God's judgment if their lives don't match the gospel they say they believe. Read James 2:14-26 (notice especially vv. 14 and 26) and decide. Whatever we conclude about James 2 probably applies in James 5 also.