Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis greets the crowd during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 23. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Loving wealth destroys the soul, and cheating people of their just wages and benefits is a mortal sin, Pope Francis said.

Jesus did not mince words when he said, "Woe to you who are rich," after listing the Beatitudes as written according to St. Luke, the pope said in a morning homily.

If anyone today "were to preach like that, the newspapers the next day (would say), 'That priest is a communist!' But poverty is at the heart of the Gospel," Francis said.

Celebrating Mass in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae May 24, Francis focused his homily on the day's first reading from the Letter of James (5:1-6) in which the apostle scolds the rich. Not only has their wealth "rotted away," the decay and corrosion of their material possessions "will be a testimony against you" on judgment day, the passage says.

James criticized employers who withheld wages from their workers, the pope said, and those workers' cries reached the ears of the Lord.

People today mistakenly might think James is "a union representative," Francis said, but he is an apostle whose words were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Even in Italy, there are those who leave people out of work to protect their assets, but whoever does this, "Woe to you!" not according to the pope, but according to Jesus, he said.

Jesus, he said, is the one who says, "Woe to you who exploit people, who exploit labor, who pay under the table, who don't pay pension contributions, who don't offer vacation days. Woe to you!"

Wage theft, like "skimming" from people's paychecks, "is a sin; it is a sin," the pope said, even if the employer goes to Mass every day, belongs to Catholic associations and prays novenas.

When an employer doesn't pay what is due, he said, "this injustice is a mortal sin. You are not in God's grace. I'm not saying this, Jesus says it, the Apostle James says

it."

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The condemnation is severe because "wealth is idolatry" that seduces people, and Jesus knew people could not serve two masters -- they must choose either God or money, Francis said.

Wealth "grabs you and doesn't let you go, and it goes against the first commandment" to love God with all one's heart, he said.

It also goes against the second commandment to love one's neighbor, he said, because a love of wealth "destroys the harmonious relationship between us" and "makes us selfish," he said. It "ruins life, ruins the soul."

"Preaching about poverty is at the heart of Jesus' preaching. 'Blessed are the poor' is the first beatitude," he said, and poverty is central to how Jesus identifies himself when he returns to Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue: "The Spirit is upon me, I have been sent to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News, glad tidings to the poor."

"But throughout history we have always had this weakness of trying to remove this teaching about poverty, believing it to be a social (issue), politics. No! It is pure Gospel," the pope said.

Wealth can turn people into slaves, Francis said, therefore, "pray a bit more and do a bit more penance" for the rich.

"To be free before wealth you must step back and pray to the Lord," he said. "If the Lord gave you wealth, it is for giving it to others, to do many good things for others in his name."