

“Humility and Hubris (Part 2)” – James 4:6-17

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Take your Bible and meet me in James 4...

It's good to see you all this morning and to have the opportunity to finish this chapter together. Last week I attempted to show that the paragraphs that close this chapter (and one could argue, begin the next chapter) relate to the themes of humility and hubris (or pride). After examining how the section unfolds structurally, last week I highlighted the first major lesson for us to take away from this section, namely,

Humble People Adopt a Posture of Repentance (4:6b-10)

We saw this in verses 6 through 10, where the author begins and ends a series of commands on the note of humility, which suggests to the reader that the intervening commands are actions characteristic of the humble. We also reflected on how those commands relate to repentance—the act of changing one's mind about sin, turning away from their transgressions and turning to God. Look again at those verses, beginning in the middle of verse 6...

“Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” (James 4:6b-10)

Clearly, humble people adopt a posture of repentance. That was the takeaway last week. This morning I would like to suggest a few more lessons we can take away from this section of God's Word. So here is the next lesson...

Proud People Are Presumptuous with Other People (4:11-12)

We can infer this truth from the illustration James gives in verses 11 and 12...

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11-12)

People today have an interesting relationship with verses like this. On the one hand, a great many people like to hold them up as a way of deflecting attention from their own sinful lifestyles. “The Bible says not to judge,” they say. But on the other hand, those of us who actually read the Bible will know that it also does call God's people to make judgments in certain situations and to make those judgments in a certain way.¹ Jesus, for example, told His disciples that when judgments were called for they were not to “*judge by mere appearances, and make a right judgment*” (John 7:24). Leaders in the church are sometimes required to put individuals out of

the church in situations involving unrepentant sin or false teaching, and this church discipline necessitates certain judgments (Matt. 18:15-18; Cf. Gal. 6:1). And even those times when Jesus said, “*Judge not, that you be not judged*” and attend to our own “*log*” instead of our neighbors “*speck*,” we sometimes forget that He gives those instructions so that “*then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye*” (Matthew 7:1-5). So Jesus’ approach was not, as is sometimes suggested, a “live and let live” approach when it comes to our Christian brothers and sisters. That’s not James approach either, as the closing verses of this epistle makes clear. And nothing that I will say in this sermon should be taken in this way.

“Obviously there are places where God says in His Word that it is right and good to confront one another in sin, which can be difficult, but this is done not out of selfish ambition or to hurt your brother, but to help him and to honor God.”² That’s not generally what is happening though when most people criticize others. Usually when we are speaking against someone, even when what we say is true, we are assuming a position of superiority. “Defamation is forbidden [here] not as a breach of truth, nor even as a breach of love, but as a breach of humility.”³ It’s not the behavior we would expect from those who are fulfilling those ten commands that come immediately before these verses.

Notice the equivalence James draws in the middle of verse 11—“*The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.*” Do you see the irony? This person sitting in judgment over others is actually, in so doing, violating the very law that he or she claims to be championing in their criticisms. The person who plays judge, “applying the law to others in judgmental accusation”, is actually breaking God’s law in so doing.

And why is speaking against and judging another believer tantamount to speaking against and judging the law? Because all of the commands of God in the Law about how we are to relate to one another are summed up in the one command: “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Lev. 19:18). When we are slandering and judging one another (usually to elevate our own selves and interests), we are violating that command. “When we do so,” as one author explains,

“...we exempt ourselves from God’s law. We say, in effect, that it doesn’t apply to our treatment of this person in this situation, that we are excused from its obligations, and that in this instance we know better than God does. We sit in judgment over it, deciding if and when and how it comes into effect for us...To put ourselves above his laws and his commands is to put ourselves above him—it is to repeat the first sin in Eden (Genesis 3:1-7).”⁴

When Adam and Eve partook of that forbidden fruit, they were essentially usurping God’s authority and right to determine what actions were and were not appropriate for them. That’s hubris. That’s the idolatry of self. And humankind was so tainted by that first sin that we’ve been doing it ever since. We do it every time we sin. We are saying with our actions that we know what is best and we have the right to do what we want independent of God’s authority. And while many may not be so bold as to deny God’s authority outright, the selective ways they apply God’s Word tells a different story.

When we selectively apply the Law, as in the manner that James describes—calling out others for their violations, without recognizing our own failure to love our neighbor—we are actually expressing a critical spirit toward God too, not just the person we are explicitly slandering. Why? Daniel Doriani answers like this:

“When we pick which commands to obey and which to ignore, we insult God’s person. For his commands are not arbitrary decrees. All of God’s commands express his nature, and all suit us perfectly. Each one tells us how to govern ourselves so that we become more like him. To reject God’s law is to reject him and to enthrone ourselves. But God is the one Lawgiver and Judge. He is the one who can save and destroy. We have no right to declare that another person is ripe for condemnation.”⁵

And if this selective application on God's standards is an offense to God, then we need to be careful. Especially those of us who like to try to be their brother's or sister's Holy Spirit. We are not the "judge and executioner of their reputations."⁶ We possess neither the purity of heart nor the omniscience of mind to assume that role. So we leave room for God's wrath. We don't return evil for evil. We pursue peace (Rom. 12:17-19). And we tend to err on the side of mercy, when possible, recognizing what James has taught us, that "*Mercy triumphs over judgment*" and warned us that "*judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy*" (James 2:13). What a contradiction it is to go the way of defamation and gossip and mean tweets!

Indeed, when we slander others we are slandering God's perfect law and "we cannot slander the law without slandering God."⁷ We cannot selectively apply God's instruction, without usurping God's place, His authority. And this is why James reminds us, in verse 12, "*There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.*" And James isn't talking about you. God is the true Lawgiver and, thus, He alone gets to determine what is ultimately right and good. And God is the true Judge, so He alone gets to determine the extent to which people conform to what is right and good.⁸

And what does that Lawgiver think about your slander?

"The Lord hates six things; in fact, seven are detestable to him: ¹⁷ arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, ¹⁹ a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers." (Proverbs 6:16-19)

If that's the way God feels, then I think it would be wise for us to heed James' instruction and not speak evil against our brothers and sisters. We must repent of the pride that stands behind such tendencies. And we must recognize that the "proper response to the law, James tells us, is not to seize from it the role of judicial accuser but rather to submit oneself to it in humble obedience."⁹ So James shows us that when we speak in evil ways we not only discourage our brothers and sisters, but we also dishonor our God. The kind of speech we are called to should be aimed at encouraging others and exalting God, which is to say, it's the kind of speech that is aimed at loving God and neighbor (cf. The Great Commandments, one of our three GCs).¹⁰

But James is not done exposing our proud tendencies. Look at his second illustration, beginning in verse 13...

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." (James 4:13-16)

From this description we learn that...

Proud People Are Presumptuous with Their Plans (4:13-16)

James is not being critical of business acumen. The Apostle Paul, for instance, encouraged church members to work hard, pursue an honest profit, and be willing to share it with those in need (Eph. 4:28). That would seem to presuppose a need to plan. Certainly, books like Proverbs suggest the same. And, indeed, sometimes a lack of planning can be a sign of sloth. But James has his eye on a different problem. Planning improperly. Planning proudly. Their planning, as James describes it, has its eyes on the physical world, but seems oblivious to the spiritual realities.

But, again, the issue is not planning itself. The issue is the *way* we plan. We tend to plan as if we were in control. We tend to plan as if we were the star of our plans.¹¹ And, if we're not careful, we can plan in ways that tend to leave God out of our plans.

“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” (Proverbs 27:1)

James is echoing this same idea. And this idea, you might remember, was the punchline of one of Jesus’ famous parables relating to a rich fool. The context involved an inheritance dispute between two siblings. One sibling sought for Jesus to mediate the dispute by requiring the other sibling to split the inheritance. Jesus refuses to play arbiter and instead warns the disgruntled family member, *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”* (Luke 12:15). Then He tells a parable.

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16-21)

So what was God’s reply to the man’s pride and presumption? He exposes him to be a fool. Only God knows what the future will hold. We don’t even know what the rest of the day will entail. We plan. But God is the One who governs.

“The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9)

Similarly, Thomas à Kempis once quipped, “Man proposes, but God disposes.”

The pride that leads to this presumptive planning is rooted in a false view of God—forgetting His sovereignty—and a false view of self—forgetting our frailty. James says that your life is like *“a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes”* (4:14). Here for a moment, then gone. If every ambition you had were realized, all your dreams in this life fulfilled, your biography could still appropriately be titled “Mist”.

Is that too harsh? No. Let me prove it to you. Be honest, raise your hand if you know your great, great grandmother’s name (i.e., your grandma’s grandma). Hardly a hand. What does that tell you? It tells you that within a hundred years not even your family is likely to remember who you are. Mist. Vapor. “Yet we plan as if everything we do is terribly significant.”¹² Then we’re gone. And like a mist evaporating into the cold air, the world quickly moves on. That’s not something that the world around us is quick to confess. That’s not a reality it likes to celebrate. David Platt hit the nail on the head, when he said,

“This world tells us to live like we’re going to be here forever, urging us to make our plans, acquire our possessions, and work to build our portfolio. But James tells us to submit to God. Don’t live like you’re going to be here forever. Instead, live and plan and work like your life is short and like you don’t want to waste it on worldly things. Live like you want to spend your life humbly before the sovereignty of God and ultimately for the glory of God.”¹³

If you do, your planning will have a different tone than what James describes in verse 13. You will be free from such presumption. You’ll rest in knowing that *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord”* (Prov. 16:33). But how often do we live like this is true? How often do our anxieties and schemes deny that this is true?

And notice that James says, in verse 16, that when we operate with the presumption implied in James’ second illustration, we are boasting in arrogance. Perhaps you’re thinking, “That’s not me, pastor. I don’t go around boasting to people that I don’t need God and that I am the master of my own destiny.” Well, friend, neither did they. That’s not what James described. He described a person who makes their plans without any apparent

acknowledgment of God's will and man's contingencies. That very well could describe the pattern of many of our lives. And if it does, then it's a sign of pride and James would say to us, "*As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil*" (4:16).

Todd Nettleton has hosted The Voice of the Martyrs Radio program for the past 20 years or so. If you don't know much about The Voice of the Martyrs, get to know them. They do a lot of great work at raising awareness on Christian persecution around the world. Recently I came across the journal entry that Nettleton wrote on October 19, 1998, shortly before he left for Sudan on his first trip on behalf of Voice of the Martyrs. This is what he wrote:

"One week from tomorrow, I will be leaving my nice, safe, comfortable life in Bartlesville to spend ten days distributing food and Bibles in Sudan...about ten thousand miles outside of my comfort zone.

It has been interesting, the ways I have thought about this trip and what might happen. First, I had to think about the possibility that I won't come back. Sudan is a dangerous place, and quite honestly the government soldiers there wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in my pale, American body.

Knowing I might not come back has given special urgency to my days here. I want to spend every moment with Char and the boys, being an exemplary husband and father. I want to be caring and compassionate. I want to turn off the TV and spend more time talking and listening. I want to hug a lot, and tell them each I love them about twenty-five times a day.

But then I felt guilty. Why don't I live like that all the time? Why does a trip to Sudan scare me into being the man I should be 365 days a year? Do I feel vulnerable in war-torn Africa but think I'm indestructible in America? Do I not know that a drunk driver or drive-by shooter or random act of violence or car wreck could end my life tomorrow, right here in America? Why don't I always live ready to die instead of only when I'm getting ready for an international trip?

Perhaps that is the lesson of this trip for me. Not to take tomorrow for granted, but to live each day ready to step off planet earth and into eternity."¹⁴

As one pastor counseled, "Since life is so brief, we cannot afford merely to 'spend our lives'; and we certainly do not want to 'waste our lives.' We must *invest our lives* in those things that are eternal."¹⁵ I think that's what James is getting at by implication. He would not simply want us to consider *how* we make our plans, but also *what we plan for*. What do our calendars and daily planners say about what we think about ourselves and what we think about God? Is there anything that distinguishes them from those of an atheist? Would they suggest that all our "planning revolves around us" as though "our self-important agendas are uppermost in our thinking"?¹⁶

If we are going to invest our lives in things that matter, then we have to get serious about what God's will is for our lives. That's not as mysterious as we like to make it out to be. We want to know all the particulars because we are proud and we want to feel like we are in control. But God doesn't usually give us such insight into the particulars as far in advance as we would like. What He does offer is very clear teaching in His Word about the kind of people He wants us to be. That's His will. You focus on this revealed—the revealed will of Christlikeness—and you never need to worry about passing by God's plan for your life inadvertently. You will be where God wants you to be tomorrow.¹⁷ Focus on being the person God wants you to be today. That is spelled out clearly already. To grasp it, you'll need to get in His Word.

And when we do we will find that God is sovereign and we need not be. We will find that we ought, as James instructs, make plans, but those plans should sound like, "*If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that*" (4:15). That's sometimes called the "Jacobean condition." That's the way the humble plan. They plan in full view of life's uncertainty, their frailty, and God's sovereignty. They submit their plans to God, as Jesus did before His Father, saying, "*not my will, but yours, be done*" (Luke 22:42).

The issue for James is not that we must attach such slogans to every statement related to the future. He is far more concerned that the thoughts and intentions of our hearts reflect that attitude. That said, I have found in my own life, that it's good for me to say such things out loud to remind myself often that God is Lord and He will

rule and overrule. But, again, this ought not be empty sloganeering. As Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell write: “[This] should be interpreted neither as a pious addendum to be repeated mindlessly nor as an expression of fatalism that excuses us from taking responsibility for our actions.”¹⁸

Rather what James is encouraging is a godly approach to planning. In other words, he wants us “to plan in a way that recognizes and remembers we are not in ultimate control, and that all we plan and conceive is subject to the will of God.”¹⁹ He wants us to grasp the reality of things. He wants us to have the mindset that says, “I need the grace of God, and I am dependent on the will of God in every facet of my life.”²⁰ So statements like “Lord willing” *can* be a way of acknowledging our weakness and, by extension, our reason for humility. And when they are, they are good for us and glorifying to Him.

There is one more lesson from this chapter that I’d like to draw your attention to and, this time, it relates to the humble...

Humble People Adopt a Posture of Obedience (4:17)

Here I’m thinking of the final verse in chapter 4...

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” (James 4:17)

Generally speaking, James is referring here of what we usually call “sins of omission.” A sin of “commission” is one that you commit. A sin of “omission” is one that involves some good action you should do, but “omit” doing. And while this verse certainly gives us a principle that applies broadly in this way, it has in this context probably more to do with the sin of pride. The “right thing” is acknowledging our weakness, frailty, uncertainty, and contingency. To deny these things in our actions and scheming by failing to acknowledge God’s sovereign hand is sin.

These sins of omission say something about the way we view our plans, don’t they? We are not called to every good endeavor, but so often we decline the ones that avail themselves to us because we claim, “Our schedule is too full.” Well, why is it full? What is it full with? If it’s too full to do “the right thing” that James speaks of, then it’s too full. And it’s sin. Sam Allberry describes what this can look like in practice.

“It might be that we’re becoming more and more irregular in our church attendance. We’re not making meeting with God’s people a priority. Things are just too busy, we say. ‘Life’s a bit manic at the moment.’ Or maybe we’re not spending time in daily prayer or Bible study, consciously enjoying the presence of God. ‘I’ve got too many other things going on at the moment. Maybe when things calm down a bit ...’ Or perhaps we know deep down that we’re not serving the people God has placed around us as we ought to be. Our spouse and kids are getting the bare scraps of our time. Whatever it is, it reflects sin in our planning. We’ve already made something else our priority and planned around that. We have not reflected on God’s will. We are not being driven by what matters most to him, but by what matters most to us. Once again, our worldly desires have exposed the shallowness of our faith. By the time we try to fit some ‘Christian stuff’ in, there’s no room for it. And so when we’re self-importantly talking about our next big business trip or holiday with the kids, all that’s coming out of our mouth is evil boasting about arrogant schemes. The good we ought to be doing is left undone. And that state of affairs is sin.”²¹

My question is: Is that not the state of affairs of our age? I think it is. May it not be the state of affairs in this church. God help us.

This passage is such a needed corrective for us. The lessons are such important diagnostics for us. Humble people adopt a posture of repentance. Is that your posture? Proud people are presumptuous with other people.

Does how you speak about others reflect such arrogance? Proud people are presumptuous with their plans. Does your approach to the future take God and His will into account as it ought? Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. Humble people adopt the posture of obedience.

So the application of this passage is really summed up with the command that introduced it all—“*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you*” (James 4:10). This is the way of Jesus. Literally. This is what Jesus did for us. He humbled Himself and was exalted. And more than that, He humbled Himself that we might be exalted. Remember what Paul told the Philippians?

“Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. ⁷ Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason God highly exalted him...” (Philippians 2:5-9; CSB)

That humble mindset of Christ, which led Him to Calvary to die for our sins, is the very mindset that leads us to follow our Lord, die to ourselves, pick up our cross, and love our neighbor. Therefore, when James commands, “*Humble yourselves before the Lord,*” he is bidding us to follow Christ. He invites us to come. Turn from sin and self-sufficiency. Humbly come with open hands and trust in Christ's work—His life, His death, His resurrection—to save you. He will save you. He does not despise the contrite who come before Him in faith.

And if you know His saving mercy already, then don't forget His rule and reign. Submit yourself and your future before Him. In view of His mercy, offer yourselves before Him as a living sacrifice. Like a blank check, surrender your life because you know it is His to spend. And don't forget, as I remind you often, you get one life. It could be coming to a close. One life. Only what's done for Christ will last.

Let's pray...

¹ “James is not prohibiting the proper, and necessary, discrimination that every Christian should exercise. Nor is he forbidding the right of the community to exclude from its fellowship those it deems to be in flagrant disobedience to the standards of the faith, or to determine right and wrong among its members (1 Corinthians 5 and 6). James rebukes jealous, censorious speech by which we condemn others as being wrong in the sight of God.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 199.

² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (CCE; Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 91.

³ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 157.

⁴ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 117.

⁵ Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 158-159.

⁶ Robert Plummer, “James” in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 272.

⁷ Allberry, 117.

⁸ “Indeed, to take the post of judge is to usurp a role that belongs to God himself.” Doriani, 154.

⁹ Plummer, 270.

¹⁰ Platt, 92.

¹¹ Allberry, 121.

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ Platt, 95.

¹⁴ Todd Nettleton, *When Faith Is Forbidden: 40 Days on the Frontlines with Persecuted Christians* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021), 14-15.

¹⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Mature: Growing Up in Christ* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1978, 2004), 132.

¹⁶ Allberry, 124.

¹⁷ “What are the benefits of doing the will of God? For one thing, you enjoy a deeper fellowship with Jesus Christ (Mark 3:35). You have the privilege of knowing God’s truth (John 7:17) and seeing your prayers answered (1 John 5:14-15). There is an eternal quality to the life and works of the one who does the will of God (1 John 2:15-17). Certainly, there is the expectation of reward at the return of Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:34).” Wiersbe, 139.

¹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 209. Along these lines, David Platt clarifies: “Now the intent here is not to create a passive fatalism in our minds that says, ‘Well, God has determined everything, so I’m just going to sit back and do nothing and see what He decides to do.’ No, remember that James gives plenty of commands to obey and actions to take.” Platt, 94.

¹⁹ Allberry, 123.

²⁰ Platt, 95.

²¹ Allberry, 124-125.