

“Walking in Humility”
James 4:11-5:6
August 27, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

We have already noted how the theme of James’ letter is stated in the passage just before this one. **“But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’”** (4:6). The dividing line between God opposing you and giving you grace and exalting you (4:10) is this virtue of humility. The problem is that the proud usually don’t think of themselves as having a problem in this area. The only thing worse than being full of pride is being full of pride and not knowing it.

Shortly after becoming a Christian as a college freshman, I remember sitting in my room with my roommate, who was also a Christian. I said to him, “You know, it’s too bad that all Christians aren’t as mature as we are. Think how much stronger the Church would be if they were.” Sadly, I was not joking. Much of my life since then has been unlearning what I thought I knew then. It’s been a journey into humility, for which I give thanks to God. That is because, as James points out, the only path that leads to God is the path of humility.

James’ letter is often appreciated because of its practical nature, and rightly so. It is often only when we apply God’s word to our lives that we really understand his word. But we need much help here, because applying God’s word in this area of humility is not the easiest thing to do. So James helps us by pointing out three common areas of life where pride often surfaces. All three of these areas involve gifts given by God that proud people take and use selfishly. James urges us instead to be humble in these areas.

I. Speech – 4:11-12

Sins of speech were a favorite target of James, and he returns to that once again in these two verses. He writes about the sin of “speaking evil” against others and that of judging others. We need to understand what he means by these two and why he cites these sins as examples of pride. Some translations say “slander” instead of “speaking evil.” The word can mean that, but I agree with the translators of our pew Bibles in thinking it’s intended to be a little broader. To slander someone is to spread a falsehood about them, and the evil speech James mentions refers to sharing a negative report about someone, whether true or false.

James also speaks against judging others. In the face of widespread misunderstanding about the sin of judging others, we need to make sure we grasp what the Bible means by this. The common misunderstanding defines judging as any occasion in which a person says something is morally wrong. So if we say a person is wrong to have sexual relations outside of marriage, we are accused of judging. Of course, the one making this accusation of judging conveniently ignores the fact that he too is doing the same thing in saying that we are doing something morally wrong in judging. The Bible actually commands that we make judgments. The classic passage that is often quoted by those who speak against making any moral judgment is Matthew 7:1. Jesus said, **“Judge not, that you be not judged.”** But it is clear that Jesus didn’t mean by that command that we are not to make moral judgments. He went on to command that we be involved in the removal of specks from the eyes of our brother, and it is clear that by specks he means sins. His main point is that we are to repent of our bigger sins, log-sized sins, before removing the smaller sins from others’ eyes. Then later in that same chapter he warns us to beware of false prophets, who can be spotted by their fruits (7:15-16).

So if James is not telling us never to make a moral judgment, what does he mean by this command not to judge others? A clue to his meaning in both of these commands against sinful speech is found in his statement that this person is speaking evil against the law and is judging the law. A judge puts himself above another person, and that is the key to this passage. It is not wrong to see what is wrong with another person. Many of you have a particular gift in that area, and that’s a good thing. The whole point is how you choose to use that gift of insight into people. Do you use it to feel superior to others or do you use it to love others? I believe the law James has in mind in verse 11 is the law of love. When we use our insight into others to feel superior to them, we are judging that law by saying that it is not a good law for us. We are also putting ourselves in the place of God. James says that the God we would replace is the only true lawgiver and judge, and then he adds that this true lawgiver and judge **“is able to save and to destroy.”** It is a reminder that the God who sees everything wrong with us uses that to save us, not to destroy us.

James is speaking against a critical spirit here. If you are guilty of that sin, it is because you have a pride problem. It is not that you simply have insight into what’s wrong with people and organizations. That insight is actually God’s gift to you. But pride takes God’s gifts and uses them to feel superior to others. Humility uses those gifts to love others.

II. Planning – 4:13-17

James turns his attention next to the area of planning. He lets us in on an internal conversation a planner is having with his business associates. **“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.” James condemns this as an example of pride. Why? It is important to note first that as a general rule the Bible commends rather than condemns planning. The book of Proverbs tells us to go to the ant to learn about good planning (6:6-8). The lowly ant anticipates future needs and makes plans to meet those needs by storing food in the summer for the coming winter. Another proverb says, **“The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty”** (Prov. 21:5). God makes plans and Jesus made plans during his earthly ministry. So it is good to make plans.

So what is it exactly that James condemns here? It is proud planning that leaves God out of the picture. Proud planning leaves out the humility that allows one to say **“If the Lord wills...”** James highlights two errors involved in the kind of proud planning that leaves God out. The first one is the confidence in the desired results. These planners are too confident in making a profit through their trading. They say “we will...make a profit.” They have forgotten or ignored the wisdom of Proverbs. **“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand”** (Prov. 19:21). The humble salesman makes his plans for contacting potential customers but knows that it is the Lord’s decision about how many of those contacts result in sales. Furthermore, he affirms the Lord’s wisdom in that decision. I have learned the same thing as a pastor. I don’t get to decide how large our church is. That is Jesus’ decision. I am to serve as God calls me, providing leadership and shepherding people through teaching and loving, but it is God who decides the results of that.

The second error made by these proud planners is to presume on life. They are making plans for a year out when they don’t even know if they will be alive tomorrow. As a matter of fact, James says, our lives are like the morning mist. I can think of at least three qualities of that mist that will humble us. First, it is thin and flimsy. From a distance, it might seem substantial, but get closer to it and it is insubstantial. Second, it is here only a little time. It might be seen for an hour or two when the sun first comes up, but is quickly burned off. Third, when it burns off, there is no trace of it left. This realization will lead to humble trust instead of proud planning. I have read that when Byzantine emperors were crowned in Constantinople, the royal mason would set before the new king a certain number of marble slabs. He was then asked to choose which one would be his tombstone.

Verse 17 seems not to belong in a paragraph talking about humility in our planning. He is talking about sins of omission when he writes, **“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”** Theologians recognize that the two types of sin are sins of transgression and those of omission. A sin of transgression happens when we do something God says not to do, and a sin of omission is when we fail to do something God says we are to do. Verse 17 is talking about the latter. But how does that fit with the

theme of planning? I think it is a statement against procrastination, which arrogantly presumes that there will always be another day to do something. To know the right thing to do but put it off to another day presumes that God will give you another day. But we are a mist, and the humble person recognizes that we have no guarantees about another day. The humble plans and acts as if each day may be his last.

III. Wealth – 5:1-6

You may notice a change of tone as James moves to talk about money. He seems to be addressing rich unbelievers with a word of judgment about their proud attitudes regarding money. It should be pointed out that the Bible doesn't teach that riches are inherently evil. There are those in the Bible who were both rich and godly. But it also needs to be said that the Bible teaches that riches are a spiritual handicap. An abundance of money is a great temptation to trust this alternate god, a trust that is inherently contradictory to trusting God. That's why Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

This passage is a word of judgment against the rich who don't enter heaven, the unbelieving rich. I say that because there is no call to repentance, only a word of judgment. James doesn't expect unbelievers to be reading his letter, but he does expect that his believing readers will learn the humility of not being ambitious for riches. So he pronounces this word of judgment, and it is a sobering word. He tells them to **“weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you”** (5:1). Verse 2 speaks of the ruin of the three forms of wealth in this day: land, clothing and precious metals. Land was used to grow grain, but James says that has rotted. The clothing that so much money was spent to acquire is now used to feed moths instead of the poor and needy. Their gold and silver have corroded. Someone might object and say, “But these precious metals don't corrode,” and that is certainly true. But this is speaking of God's judgment, and in judgment he is able and will make corruptible what was previously incorruptible. Not only have the rich been abandoned by their riches, but their riches have turned against them. They provide evidence for their judgment, and they eat their flesh like fire (5:3).

James outlines three sins of the unbelieving rich. The first is hoarding. **“You have laid up treasure in the last days”** (5:3). The last days refers to the entire time between the two comings of Christ, meaning that we have been the last days for two-thousand years now. The age is just around the corner when the true King will return and lift the curse upon the earth, thus restoring its abundance. Hoarders act as if this world is all there is, as if scarcity is permanent and as if collecting enough money will somehow deliver them from trouble. The Bible doesn't condemn all savings. It is prudent and wise to save,

but savings becomes hoarding when we place our trust in the money and stuff we accumulate.

The second sin is that of defrauding workers of their wages. These workers are poor, dependent on their wages to care for their basic needs. If they don't get paid, they don't eat. So they are desperate. What should they do? They can't lodge a complaint in court. The rich had all the power, and their power extended to the courts. A complaint would only put them in a worse condition. They are like the undocumented workers in our city, who are hired to do work and then not paid, under the employer's belief that they will not seek help from the authorities because of their undocumented status. That happens all the time right here in Birmingham. So in their desperation after being defrauded by their employer, they cry out to God. The result is the sobering warning at the end of verse 4. Their cry reaches **"the ears of the Lord of hosts."** That is a name for God's power. He is Lord over all the angels of heaven, and he loves to act to defend those who are powerless. What will he do? The fact that James leaves it unstated makes it more frightening. He leaves no doubt that God is on the side of the poor who have been defrauded and that God is fully able to do anything he wants.

The third sin of the unbelieving rich is living in luxury and self-indulgence. Their selfishness in enjoying excessive luxuries while others go hungry will be met, once more, by God's judgment. In a memorable image, James says that they have fattened their hearts in a day of slaughter (5:5). A man decides it's time to slaughter one of his cows, and looks them over to decide which one to take. He doesn't even give a second look to his thin cows, knowing that fat on the bones helps the meat taste better. Then he spots a particularly fat cow in his field and knows immediately that this is the one to take. The luxurious living of the rich has only served to fatten them up for the judgment. There is a word of application for us in this. In humility, we need to guard our hearts against seeking luxury when there are vast needs throughout the world. The Bible doesn't lay down precise rules and formulas for determining what constitutes luxury, so we don't want to do so either. But the Bible does invite us into the Christlikeness of self-denial for the sake of others.

CONCLUSION:

The concluding verse of the passage has a double meaning. The obvious meaning is that the rich, by their injustice to the poor, and using the courts as their tool, have been guilty of the murder of the righteous. But the curious thing here is that the "righteous person," as our translation accurately states, is singular. I believe it is a reference to Jesus, who did not resist when he was the victim of injustice. The death of Jesus came about because the Jewish leaders, in their pride, came to regard Jesus as a threat to their power. Jesus, in humility, did not resist and has become the source of all life.