

No More Collateral Damage of the World at War Within

Week Five
July 26– July 30

A Daily Study of the Book of James
Summer 2021

*Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and he will lift you up.*

James 4.10

Cornerstone Assembly of God
10551 Chalkley Rd, N. Chesterfield, VA 23237

Monday, July 26.....James 4.1-2

Fisticuffs of Warring Passions

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You are zealous and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The Christian communities across the Roman Empire were wasting themselves with sideways energy.
 - a. How was self-centeredness stealing their focus?

 - b. What were unresolved sin issues producing in the local congregation (v. 1)?

 - c. How were bitter jealousies and mercenary ambitions rooted in personal passions crippling the churches?

2. Refusing to take off the burdens of this world, they were making themselves miserable and hurting those God was calling them to serve. Why would God rightly hold back his blessing from these people?

3. The Greek word for selfish ambition (3.14, 16) is a loaded word, and its weight reverberates into James' new unit of thought. According to Douglas Moo, "Aristotle uses it to describe and condemn the selfishly motivated party politics in the Athens of his day (Politics 5.3).
 - a. Where have you seen the party politics of the world disrupt the unity of God's people?

 - b. What are the consequences of allowing worldly selfish ambitions to infect the fellowship of believers?

 - c. What would God have you do to restore the unity of the Spirit in the Church? What will that require of you?

• PRAYER POINT •

EXCISING HEDONISTIC PASSIONS

- In the *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes that “envy dominates the whole of man’s mind and does not permit him to eat or drink or to do anything good. Rather, it keeps prodding him to destroy the one whom he envies. Whenever the one who is envied flourishes, the envious one languishes.”
- Don’t be stuck on an endless loop of envy and languishing. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you examine the dark places in your heart where jealousy against others is taking root. Be refreshed as you repent of your envy and ask Jesus to bless those people today.
- In the church, people may have a zealous hunger to do noble things and be mightily used of God; but where that is driven by a self-serving passion, it ensures the exact opposite (Oecumenius).
- Take the burden of self-seeking vanity off today, especially in the spaces God is calling you to serve Him and His Kingdom. Celebrate that the whole glory goes to God.

COMMENTARY

Having established that wisdom from God is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, full of good fruits, good, impartial and sincere, James challenges them to account for the discord and quarrels plaguing the church. Their infighting is not from God or a product of righteousness. They are at war with one another because they have been using the wisdom of this world, refusing to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger with one another. The worldly, demonic wisdom has been born from their selfish and envious hedonism.

v. 1: **What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?**...In the first century letter of Clement writing from Rome to the fractious church in Corinth, he tells them the quarrels and infighting in their community were driven by envy, jealousy and self-seeking (1 Clement 1.1). Clement argues that jealousy and envy trace to the first murder of Abel by Cain, throughout the Old Testament story of Israel and into the persecuted lives of Peter and Paul (1 Clement 4.7-6.3). Once known for their mercy, hospitality and impartiality—all things they surely took heed of from James' message—they were now greatly reviled of the fevered pitch of insanity sown by “a few reckless and arrogant persons” (1 Clement 1.1-3).

James, and subsequently Clement who followed a generation later, show a network of churches which sincerely loved God, but also struggled with the passions at war within them. The seeds of jealousy and ambition brought forth the fruit of conflicts and battles. And, if some scholars are correct that this section is a continuation of his previous one, then much of what James is denouncing is coming from the teachers and influencers in the local congregations asserting themselves on the church for their own vain glory. Instead of sowing peace, they violently scattered salt in the fertile soil.

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?...One source of conflict in the community of believers is the corrupted “pleasures they desire and allow to dictate their behavior” (Andria). The word for passions that are at war within is the root of the word hedonism. In it is the idea of enjoying oneself, to indulge oneself in the physical. These physical pleasures often become traps, like worldly worries, riches and pleasures of life that choke to death people's faith (Luke 8.14). These carnal cravings are motivating bitter jealousies and selfish ambitions ripping the body of Christ into tatters, leaving them entrenched and isolated.

Peter agrees with James. The spiritual battle within is spilling out and causing collateral damage in other people's lives. Like James, Peter reminds us that we have received mercy and are God's chosen people. Because of this we must keep our distance from sinful desires that wage war within us (1 Peter 2.11).

v. 2: **You desire and do not have, so you murder**...What a difference between what God wants for the Church and what James sees! Where the seeds of peace should

have been planted yielding fields of righteousness, degenerate desires have burned the fields to the ground like a war zone. The Christians hearing James' rebuke have more in common with Ahab than Elijah (1 Kings 21).

One spiritual reading of this accusation tells us that the believers are murdering one another, figuratively creating human sacrifices to their own passions and desires of their brothers and sisters in Christ! They would rather pursue their own desires rather than bringing their requests before God, and leave their fellow Christians as collateral damage in their wake.

In the immediate context, speaking of the spiritual leaders and teachers of local congregations, James is reproofing those who "desire to put their enemies and rivals away" assassinating them for personal advancement (McKnight).

A literal reading of the passage is also possible remembering the presence of Jewish zealots in the synagogues and early Church. It could be seen as a confrontation against their hatred for the Gentiles entering the young Church or a condemnation of their still committing violent acts hoping to drive out the Romans and pave the way for God's kingdom.

You are zealous and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel...The men and women in the churches were zealous, but their zeal was bent in the wrong direction. Where zeal toward God and service toward those made in His image, the Spirit will move and bless His people (1 Corinthians 12.31; 14.1; 2 Corinthians 11.2). Sincere and God-centered zeal can lead to repentance (Revelation 3.9), something James' audience needed to take to heart. Instead they resembled more their ancestors, the sons of Jacob who were zealous against their brother Joseph and sold him into slavery (Acts 7.9). The teachers who are sowing conflict and confusion in these churches are most likely the same false brothers who were trying to infect the Galatian believers with their adulterated zeal (Galatians 4.17-18).

You do not have, because you do not ask...Hear the grief in James' voice. How have the believers in the churches not met or understood the nature of God their Father or the Law of Gospel? God is ready, willing and able to bless His people. Truly every good and perfect gift is from Him. God is waiting to pour out His generous wisdom onto all those who sincerely ask.

Instead, the teachers and ladder-climbers were disrupting the church. They were causing conflicts as they jockeyed for positions of power. They sowed strife as they assassinated the character of their perceived rivals. They pushed the hurting and hungry further into the margins as they attempted to curry favor with the rich. So busy serving their own desires and passions, some never even stopped to ask God. They were stuck on a perpetual wheel of Christian hedonism unwilling to ask God for help.

Tuesday, July 27.....James 4.3-6

Spiritual Bankruptcy in Pride or a Humble Wealth of Grace

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.
⁴You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Some do not have because they do not ask, others ask but find their requests rejected by God. Why?
2. Why does James consider intimacy with the world to be adultery against the spiritual union of the Church with God?
3. What examples in the Bible can you think of God's grace generously given to the humble?
4. How is the pride of life a burden on the human soul that blocks us from experiencing God's grace?

• PRAYER POINT •

MORE GRACE

- As you read this passage of James again ask the Lord to show you where your prayers have become self-serving.
- Perhaps you can draw two overlapping circles (like a Venn diagram). One circle for those things that you want for your life; the second circle includes those things that God wants for your life. Write down the areas you pray about the most. Now ask the Spirit to show you where each concern is in those circles.
- Celebrate the prayer points that rest where the circles converge, where God's purpose is most alive in your life.
- Pray about how you can 1) bring more into alignment with God and 2) release more that is not producing growth in your life.

COMMENTARY

v. 3: **You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly...** James doubles down on his previous statement that some were lacking because they never asked God. Now he explains why others who were asking were still left empty-handed. The “corrupt motivations of the teachers” has undone the promise James made in 1.5-6.

All those in the community motivated by mercenary selfishness and bitter envy are coming away empty because they are serving themselves, not others, and certainly not God. In their vain grasping, they have come like people trying to hold a waterfall with their bare hands. They have trapped themselves in a vicious cycle, dragging them deeper into a self-idolizing drain.

to spend it on your passions... Their prayers are all self-centered. God refuses to respond to them because of how they want to “spend” His blessings. The word in Greek for spend is a fitting one considering the all-consuming nature of hedonism. It is used five times in the New Testament and each time it is extreme. The woman with the issue of blood for twelve years spent everything she had in a desperate pursuit for restoration (Mark 5.26). The prodigal son found himself destitute, hungry and alone after he spent everything he had and a famine struck the land (Luke 15.14). James himself, trying to appease the Jerusalem Jews’ law-consciousness requested Paul pay the full expenses of four devout men going through a purification rite at the Temple (Acts 21.24); this was something he was more than willing to do because he had already expressed his willingness to spend himself completely for the believers in Corinth (2 Corinthians 12.15).

Unlike Paul, these teachers and church disrupters were hungry to receive blessings, power and status in the church so that they could spend it all on their own hedonistic passions. In the words of Scot McKnight: “Wise church leaders know the fine line between wanting what God wants and wanting what they want; the teachers in James’s community had erased that line and were now well beyond it.”

v. 4: **You adulterous people!**...All the familial language James has invested throughout his message are cashed out in this single moment. James confronts their spiritual infidelity like the prophets raised against their ancestors with this visceral indictment (Isaiah 54.1-6; Jeremiah 2.2; Hosea 1.1-3.5). “James calls these people adulterers, not because they practiced physical adultery but because they corrupted the commands which were instituted by God and turned away to other loves.” (Oecumenius)

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?...Luke Timothy Johnson has argued that the Greco-Roman idea of friendship—the context from which James’ diaspora audience would have been well acquainted with—“was close to what

we today would say about a genuine marriage. Friendship involved sharing all things in a unity that involved both the spiritual and the physical,” (Witherington).

True friendship according to James “involves commitment to one another, fidelity, and the expectation of mutual instruction for mutual moral development,” (McKnight). Friendship, unity of spirit and soul, with the world is found then in the immediate context of James’ message. The world does things like show favoritism toward the rich. The world disenfranchises people on the margins of society. The world is known for self-seeking, trampling others as one climbs the ladders of success. The world is known for wars, back-biting and persecuting others. The world does not try to control its tongue. To have friendship like this, to look like and be like the world, is to stand against God.

It is important to stop here and wrestle with this painful truth in our own time. Too often Christians are known by the above descriptions of the world. Although people in the world rightly expect the world to act like this, it is wholly correct to decry Christians of hypocrisy when they act more like friends with the world than sons and daughters of God.

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God...James sounds the same alarm in a similar way as the Apostle John: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” (1 John 2.15-17). Friendship with the world is marked by the rebellious pursuit of “sinful cravings, greed and pride” (Samuel Ngewa). The world, operating out of the earthly, limited and demonically twisted wisdom, will always leave us at odds with God.

v. 5-6a: **Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace...**God will not tolerate an unrepentant double-mind to toss His beloved image bearers in and out of relationship. The friendship with the world—the spiritually blinded marriage of the world and its wisdom with the self-serving members of the church—cannot stand. God’s upright zealous will not allow the contamination of His beloved people to go on forever (Exodus 20.5; 34.14; Zechariah 8.2). But always recall the positively passionate character of God whose upright zealous calls His people to righteousness is merciful and gracious (Hebrews 4.16). When His people turn toward Him, He is faithful to hear their cry and restore them (Psalm 66.17-20; 34.17-18; Isaiah 59.2, 20-21).

v. 6b: **Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**...God is opposed to the self-centeredness that is leading his people to adulterous self-worship and adopting crippled worldly systems. They are more consumed with their status and comfort, pursuing the “benefits” of friendship with the

world with an earthly “wisdom.” God has more for His people than they can even ask or imagine but their pride and self-absorption leave them lost and hungry (Ephesians 3.20). But instead of turning their hearts toward God, asking with humble and redeemed motivations, they have become proud. James seals his warning with the wisdom of the Proverbs (3.34).

This resonates with Jesus’ warning against hypocrisy. Jesus does not call the proud to lead, the skilled to train or the worldly wise to instruct. No, He calls His followers to humble themselves, taking on His model of servanthood knowing that “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” (Matthew 23.12).

Wednesday, July 28.....James 4.7-10

Mid-message Altar Call

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 Lament 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.

STUDY QUESTIONS

James offers us restoration on the other side of repentance. Follow the Spirit through each step of this repentance path.

1. Willing Submission

a. Today the idea of submission has been maligned by abusive behavior which some have taken as a license to demean others with dictatorial oppression. How is the submission to God James is calling us to different?

b. Why should we submit to God?

c. How can we submit to God?

2. Resistance as Submission

a. How can we resist the pull of this world to demonize men and women made in the image of God?

b. What ways do you believe the enemy must be resisted in your city, your county and country?

3. Acceptance as Submission

a. For those burdened with the weight of their life and insecurity drawing near to God can be difficult. Why is hard for some to believe God would draw near to us?

b. In what ways is your heart resisting God's promise to draw near to you today?

4. Spiritual Washing as Submission

- a. How should Christians “wash their hands” of external expressions of sin that have derailed their faith?

- b. What are ways that followers of Jesus can submit their relationships with others before God?

- c. How should Christians “purify their hearts” of internal areas that negatively impact their faith?

5. Grieve as Submission

- a. Lament is an important piece of the healing process. What ways can the American church lament errors that have injured her witness and disrupted her ministry?

- b. How can mourning lead to true humility?

• PRAYER POINT •

AN INVITATION TO NEW

- Be refreshed in the words of Douglas Moo: “True Christian joy comes not with the ignoring of sin but with the experience of the forgiveness of sin; and we have to see the serious effects of our sin before we can truly turn from it and find forgiveness.”
- Take this special moment to walk in repentance with our spiritual ancestors, to walk the path of restorative submission made for us by Jesus. Humble yourself before God seeing resistance against the enemy of your soul, acceptance of God’s invitation, and the opportunities for purification and grief as acts of submission. Find a new depth of forgiveness today.

COMMENTARY

This moment in James' message should be given special attention. James knows the sin and division that are manifest among the Messianic communities established across the Roman Empire. He has built a solid foundation, repeatedly reminding them of their familial relationship and their historical legacy as a people. In the past two sections of his message, James has held nothing back by using strong and clear language. But he does not condemn them and walk away. At the height of his sermon, after his harshest criticism, he calls them to repentance, he opens the path to restoration. In our modern context, he has opened the altar area and invited the congregation to come for the spiritual mature elders to pray with them.

Additionally, our brother from Madagascar, Solomon Andria, plainly confronts where much of the division in the today's church has become entrenched. "In the church, conflicts between people are not necessarily settled through negotiation [or mediation], as would be the case in the political world. They are settled through repentance." The answer is not another round of "mediation" or misapplied passages from Matthew, but rather an earnest call to repentance where we are called to submit to God, take a stand against the devil, drawing near humbly as Jesus' purified people.

v. 7: **Submit yourselves therefore to God**...It is understandable that the enemy of our souls would aim to discolor our understanding of biblical submission. Many in the Western church also have allowed the term to be manipulated out of shape—particularly in the context of the home, *i.e.* husbands and wives, parents and children—misinterpreting it and creating unhealthy and unbiblical use of God's call to submission.

Peter Davids' comments on this passage saying that James begins and ends his appeal with synonymous terms. The first is submission, the second is humility. This is profound and broader reaching than this study. James in this passage is calling to the unruly and abusive members of the churches to once again submit themselves to God. Their ambitions have gotten in the way of their submitting to God. They are about their own business, not His. They are busy breaking people in their way, "lording over them," seeking to expand their influence at the expense of the marginalized as they pander to wealthy patrons. Their lack of submission is in fact a lack of humility. Their pride has disjointed their relationship with God Himself!

Jesus' words underpin this whole call to the altar. Jesus looks at us with our ambitions and says, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." and "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 9.35; 10.43-45).

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you...James reverses the battle lines with this command. For too long the battle lines were inside the church – factions and arrogant leaders dividing the body of Christ. By submitting to God, his listeners are commanded to turn around, stop infighting, and stand against the enemy outside the fellowship of Christ.

Resisting the evil one was a common theme in the early church, found in how Jesus taught His disciples to pray—seeking God’s deliverance—(Matthew 6.13b) and the writing of the Apostles—calling believers to stand against the opposition of the enemy (1 Peter 5.9; Ephesians 6.13). One easily imagines the aggressive taunts of the giant Goliath defaming the God of Israel by mocking His people. The young future King David resisted him, rejecting his message and his intimidation (1 Samuel 17).

James is not implying that all sin is rooted in the open assault of the devil in the lives of the believer. Remember, James has already established that the roots of sin are within. But there are moments in culture and societies where followers of Jesus must stand against the enemy. Nor is James talking about needlessly staying in a place of temptation, but, as Craig Blomberg states, to “simply living morally in the midst of immorality.”

v. 8: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you...This is a sweet promise in Scripture worthy of memorizing. Many Christians have taken solace and encouragement from these words in the midst of all kinds of trials and tribulations, good times and bad. Asaph the psalmist proclaims how good it is to draw near to God (Psalm 73.28). The prophets like Zechariah, Malachi and Azariah shouted the Lord’s promise over the people (Zechariah 1.3; Malachi 3.7; 2 Chronicles 15.1-4).

Cleanse your hands...purify your hearts...James is calling for a holistic cleaning, both external and internal. James’ “altar call” brings forward the ancient festival procession described in Psalm 24. King David asks, what are the purification requirements for those who want to draw near to God’s divine sanctuary? Our Congolese brother Nupanga Weanzana tells us that this section becomes like a call and response between the pilgrims asking and the priests guiding. They must have clean hands, innocent from harming others, and pure hearts that are faithful to the Lord (Psalm 24.3-4). Weanzana goes onto to say, much in agreement with James, that “Without righteous relationships with God and others, worship is meaningless.”

sinners...double-minded...The double-minded and sinners are seen as synonyms, joined together in this couplet. Their spiritual instability is revealing a deep lack of moral integrity (James 1.8). For those leading in the Messianic communities, their all-encompassing impurity (hands and hearts) is spreading. They are doing the reverse of Jesus’ ministry! Instead of touching the unclean and making them clean (*i.e.* Jesus healing lepers and unclean peoples; Mark 1.40-45), they are taking God’s purified people and defiling them!

v. 9: Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom... Much damage has been made misinterpreting verses like this. Immature believers and teachers in the historical church have sought to apply this to the whole Christian life, isolating verses that call for austerity without understanding their purpose or their biblical context. James is not calling the Christians to live lives devoid of joy, laughter or happiness. "James is not suggesting that the righteous should go about in a state of morbid depression over their sins," (Witherington). He is calling the morally corrupt members of the church to repent, grieving where they have failed to humble themselves before God, publicly repenting of their doublemindedness. It is not enough for these teachers and leaders to move on claiming they've changed. Because their failure was public, they must sincerely grieve in public, demonstrating a genuine repentance and spiritual transformation. They must regret their sin and the impact it has had on those around them.

v. 10: Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you... Those teachers and leaders who have abused the people of God in their congregations must humble themselves and entrust their restoration to the Lord. They cannot say they've changed and reassert their positional authority. They must humble themselves knowing that the Lord will exalt them in due time. Selfish ambition dislocated them in God's calling for their lives, only humbling themselves before God in genuine trust can restore them.

Looking at the writings of the Apostle Peter, we see the promise of how God exalts those who humble themselves before Him. As seen already in the wisdom of the Proverbs and the teachings of Jesus "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble," (Proverbs 3:34, Matthew 23:12). Peter, reflecting on this truth encourages his listeners to humble themselves, receive God's promised grace and rest in God's loving care as they make a stand against the enemy (1 Peter 5.5-11).

Thursday, July 29.....James 4.11-12

Loose Lips Sink Ships

¹¹ 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?

STUDY QUESTIONS

Jesus' fulfillment of the Law is seen in James' command to the Church. Observe and note the parallels here with Leviticus 19.15-18:

1. The overarching theme of Leviticus 19 is holiness: being holy as God is holy. Verse 15 states, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." Where have you seen this theme in James?
2. "Do not go about spreading slander among your people," (19.16a) How does refraining from slander keep one's mouth holy?
3. "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord." (19.16b) Jay Sklar comments that "In the intimate atmosphere of a local trial it would be particularly easy for neighbors to let their feuds and personal animosities distort the proceedings." How does slander endanger the life of one's neighbor?
4. In the original context of Leviticus 19.15-18, these were directions given to the local leaders who served in judging disputes and cases between people. How does the weight of this verse apply within the Church today?
5. "Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart." Hate in this context is "not simply a feeling, but a feeling put into action," (Sklar). Why are people inclined to react to attack with attack, slander with slander?
6. Moses calls us to "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt." How can this be done in holiness, seeking restoration of the offending party?

7. How does slanderous speech get in the way of restoration when a brother or sister must be challenged regarding their behavior?

8. "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." How is maintaining a hostile attitude toward other image bearers destructive to our holiness?

● PRAYER POINT ●

SPEAK LIFE, LIVE HOLY

- Today be challenged by the words of two African brothers, Solomon Andria and Felix Chingota:
- Andria tell us that “Slanderers enjoy spreading bad reports about other people so that everyone knows their faults and weaknesses.” Where have you attempted to build yourself up by tearing others down?
- First, ask the Spirit of God to gently direct your heart as you humbly consider the words you’ve spoken against others, searching for slander.
- Second, seek forgiveness before the Lord and from those whom your words have hurt.
- Third, pray how you can speak blessings over others today, praising them publicly.
- Chingota teaches us that “Holiness in regard to the horizontal relationships between human beings must show itself in the social, economic and political areas of life.” How is the Spirit leading you to bless and serve others this week?

COMMENTARY

v. 11: **Do not speak evil against one another, brothers...** After the close of his call for repentant response, James once again calls those listening to him brothers. Brothers and sisters should not slander one another. James is not speaking here about the critical words spoken within the family that can produce healthy growth or call a sibling to correction. He is specifically rebuking their speaking evil of one another. The word here is used in Scripture to “denote rebellion against God’s authority (Num. 21.5), slandering people in secret (Ps. 101.5), and bringing false accusations against people (1 Pet. 2.12; 3.16),” (Moo). Taken one at a time, all can be seen to fit within James’ rebuke of slander. Their slander is a sin against Jesus’ royal law because they are harboring fantasies of revenge and holding onto well-earned grudges against others (Leviticus 19.16, 18).

Speaking evil in James’ mind is “speaking accusingly, falsely, degradingly, dishonorably, and with libelous or slanderous intent in order to label a person as dangerous or unworthy” (McKnight). The presence of speaking evil in the Church should be shocking, but where bitter jealousy and selfish ambitions are present, slander becomes all too prevalent. Too often people use their slander within the church to elevate their status and position, choosing to use their victims as step stools rather than trusting God for their spiritual “advancement” in the leadership of the Church. Because of this, slander was decried by the apostles (Romans 1.30; 2 Corinthians 12.20; 1 Peter 2.1) and the first generation to follow (1 Clement 30-31; 35.5; Ignatius epistle to the Philippians 2.2; 4.3; et al).

The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law... Because of the widespread nature of slander among the Messianic congregations (perhaps even against James himself, just as the Judaizers slandered the Apostle Paul; see 2 Corinthians 12), James explains why slanderous speech is sin. By slandering one another, some are falsely accusing their brothers, secretly discrediting their sisters and rebelliously resisting God’s call to love. By not submitting to the Torah (the law), they are standing in judgment of the Torah. By standing in judgment of the law, they are standing in judgment of the lawgiver: God Himself! By not submitting to God, they are standing in judgment of God. It is impossible for these loose-lipped brothers and sisters to be in right relationship with God because they refuse to live according to Christ’s royal law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge... When these brothers and sisters in the local congregation took it on themselves to sit in pious judgment of their fellow Christians, they usurped Christ’s law to love one another and are seeking to dethrone God as Judge. Below God the Supreme Judge, we are doers of His Law, not makers of His law. We are doers, living by His law and aiding one another in our mutual pursuit of His law, not enforcers who establish circuit courts to take the mantle of judgment for ourselves against others.

v. 12: **There is only one lawgiver and judge, He who is able to save and to destroy...**This would sound very familiar to the Messianic Jewish congregations to whom James is preaching. They were intimately aware of their ancestral story. In this way, James' challenge to their current behavior is a reiteration of Moses' charge for the people of Israel to be holy as God is holy. They should remember all the while that God is the sole lawgiver and judge. All their positioning and posturing, their jealousy for titles and recognition driving them against their brothers and sisters has led them into the Supreme Court of God. All their jockeying for supremacy in the fellowship of believers, driven by their mercenary self-ambition, has deposited them before God's judgment bench. This is the extreme nature of their hubris. They are not asking for an audience before God the Judge; through their actions, they are demanding God make way for them to sit on his judgment throne! They want to consume His authority to save and destroy, to craft the law and judge others in their own power (Matthew 10.28)!

But who are you to judge your neighbor?...Hear the shock and dismay in James' words! James' emphatic use of the second person singular "you" is like a directed accusatory fist: "But you! Who do you think you are!?" Those in the churches who have abused others in their personal pursuit for status and power, but did not respond to James' call for repentance, should be trembling at this moment. Although they consider themselves the most qualified to do the work of God, they are in fact the least.

What a difference when God judges and when we attempt to usurp this role for ourselves. Where mercy triumphs over judgement when God is judge (James 2.13), others find only condemnation and slander before us.

Friday, July 30.....James 4.13-17

Hindenburgs of Tomorrow

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. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What parallels between the traveling merchants in the early church and the rich fool in Jesus' parable (Luke 12:16-21) do you find?

2. Scot McKnight emphasizes the four presumptions on the part of the traveling merchants in the local church. All four of these areas are excellent measures but, as James will demonstrate, are out of our control: time, location, duration and success.
 - a. How can we surrender control of our goals to God?

 - b. How can we submit our location-based goals to God?

 - d. How can we submit our time-based goals to God?

 - e. How can we submit how we understand success in our goals to God?

3. How does James distinguish between his well-thought-out plan and implementation submitted to God (Proverbs 16.9) and the arrogant attempt to bend time, space and success to one's own will (Jeremiah 10.23; Matthew 16.26)?

4. How is James calling us to take off the burden of the world's poor definition of success?

● PRAYER POINT ●

A LIFE BEYOND MEANINGLESS

- The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca discovered the meaninglessness of chasing success. In a letter, he shared the story of a wealthy Roman who was so busy pursuing his big business goals that he didn't see death sneaking up behind him. "How foolish it is to set out one's life, when one is not even owner of the morrow! O what madness it is to plot out far-reaching hopes! To say: 'I will buy and build, loan and call-in money, win titles of honor, and then, old and full of years, I will surrender to a life of ease...'"
- Where are your relationships and priorities out of God-honoring balance? Invite the Holy Spirit to show you where you are investing your time unwisely.
- Ask God to unburden you with a worldly definition of success. Instead take God's glory as the refreshing goal for your labors and industry.
- Rejoice in the relationships God has blessed you with and ask Him how you can celebrate each one today.

COMMENTARY

Now that James has invited the congregation to a time of reflective repentance and directed strong words toward those abusing their place in their community (through slanderous speech against others and sitting in judgment over their peers), James turns his attention to the wealthy merchants, those who have been pampered and favored in the church. By their outward success and strategic plans, they have been highly honored in the church. But James will take the wind out of their sails, showing his audience that the business world's best practices don't necessarily line up with God's "operating system" for His Church.

These business people presume too much. The two primary areas of errancy that James pinpoints in their business-driven worldview are 1) they usurp God in their plans and 2) they fail to consider their mortality. James will offer an alternative (4.15).

vv. 13-14: **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" – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring...** The phrase "come now" serves as an audible way to shift the focus of whom is being addressed now. It is like a street preacher in London whose been dressing down one group of people, while others standing by are smiling and chuckling at the public shaming, only to hear him say, "Oy, you! Now let's take about what you've been up to!" James will use this same verbal device in 5.1 to widen his comments to all the rich, not just the wealthy merchants.

Returning to his previous point before his mid-message altar call is to address the spiritual pride he condemned in James 4.6. It is not the detailed planning that James condemns, but the arrogance to make plans without submitting them to God. Like the teacher of Ecclesiastes, James reminds his audience that our lives are fleeting and beyond our control (Ecclesiastes 1.2-4; 12.8). We are not in the driver's seat of life, but passengers along for the ride (Psalm 39.5-6; 62.9).

As seen before, Jesus' parable of the rich fool underlies James' words (Luke 12:16-21). All of the rich fool's decisions are self-based and presumptuous. He never stopped to ask the Lord to direct his plans or decisions. On paper, his 5-year plans and action steps looked good, but he never submitted to the Spirit's editing and directing.

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes... James' words should serve as a warning reminiscent of the Proverbs and wisdom literature: beware a false reality or false sense of self-sufficiency (Proverbs 27.1; Ecclesiastes 1). The traveling merchants in the church have become consumed with amassing wealth and climbing a social ladder. In doing so, they have forgotten the wisdom of God's people and their new Jesus way of life to care for the marginalized. Their lives are short and they are squandering what little time they have with their self-centered plans.

v. 15: **Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”**.. This is not a platitude or idiom that excuses our plans. To say “if the Lord wills” is to verbalize the inclination of our heart toward the leading of the Holy Spirit. To say, “if the Lord wills” is a witness that our God is Sovereign, we are not.

v. 16: **As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil...**For James, this point is clear: presumption is sin. When the teachers presume to ascend to the judgment throne of God over their brothers and sisters, they are sinning against God. When merchants make their plans for wealth and success but do not submit them to the Lord, they are proclaiming their sovereignty over their time, space and success. This is not different than how Satan foolishly attempted to ascend to the throne of God’s divinity. These merchants should not be arrogantly presuming they are the lords of their own destiny.

v. 17: **So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin...**Once again, James caps everything he’s been saying by drawing a great circle around it all. In essence “Whoever knows the right thing to do, all the things I’ve been talking about, and fails to do it is sinning.” There is no excuse of ignorance anymore. He has openly addressed the wrong things and shown them the right things. As followers of Jesus, they must reorient their lives around Christ, putting into practice their faith and begin acting in mercy. For merchants, they cannot continue to make their business plans without submitting them to the Lord. The plans themselves are innocent; it is the spiritual arrogance that success is self-created, not dependent on the blessing of God. The teachers in the church and the members cannot continue to allow their fire tongues to serve as judge, jury and executioner anymore. They must not slander, but bless.

James is making an important distinction from how we usually think of sin. In a hedge-law Christian culture that puts up protective guards to avoid committing sins, the view of sin is doing things we shouldn’t. James flips this worldview. Sin is also *not* doing what we should. Therefore, if we have received mercy then we should show mercy. If we have been blessed, we should be a blessing. If we have been served by God’s people in our times of need, we should serve others in theirs. If we are making plans for economic growth, we should submit them to God.