

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 14 The Opposite of Humility

James 4:11-17

Date: July 5, 2015

I. Slander and Judgment

James 4:11-12

Matthew 7:1 says, “Judge not, lest you be judged.” (read vv. 1-5). James, perhaps alluding to this Sermon on the Mount passage, as he often does, echoes this sentiment in vv. 11-12. As I read this in James, I also thought of gossip, which is really a form of judgment too isn’t it? As we run down someone to other people, listing their faults (both real and imagined) – something they said; something they did; something they are; are we not judging them and in doing so, attempting to elevate our own morality, ethics or self-righteousness? In Romans 2:1-5, Paul also condemns people who judge others, because the very things we judge about others, we practice ourselves. We just haven’t been caught yet! Notice the “Therefore” in v. 1, which harkens back to Romans 1:18-32. Apart from God’s grace and His intervention in our lives, that passage is describing us.

Notice who we are not to judge (James 4:11) – a ‘brother’, IOW, another child of God, a fellow believer. Yet, see I Cor. 5:9-13 & I Peter 4:17 [context vv. 12-19]. So, are we to judge our brothers and sisters or not? One more passage to look at: this quote is a command of Christ directed at Israel’s leaders (cf. JN 7:15) – note JN 7:24; “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with righteous judgment.” Read JN 7:15-24. At the end of the letter; James 5:19-20, we must judge to realise that someone is wandering away from the truth (se we must know what objective truth is), or we would not try to bring the person back.

So, a righteous judgment is OK, and in fact, even in MT 7:15-19, in order to determine if someone is a false prophet or not, we must judge them in order to protect our own souls! Paul’s point in I Corinthians 5 has to do with ensuring that the church is kept pure by not associating with people who claim to follow Christ, yet live like the wicked in the world. Paul’s 2nd point here is that those outside of the church will be judged by God. He will either leave them in their sins (reprobation) or save them. The church is filled with such judgmental sinners is it not? Cf. I Cor. 6:1-11.

Kent Hughes points the following out:

“Jesus does not forbid judgment. Rather, he forbids flagrant sinners from exercising it while refusing to deal with the sin in their own lives.” He adds, “What the Scriptures forbid is *judgmentalism*, a critical and censorious spirit that judges everyone and everything, seeking to run others down.”ⁱ This is akin to legalism.

Doug Moo also comments here:

“In light of the argument of these verses, therefore, we should note that 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 (I Corinthians 5 & 6).”ⁱⁱ

In I Peter 4, Peter’s point is found in v. 15, with the context in v. 16. When you suffer persecution, make sure it’s for the right reason – because you are being godly, not because you are involved in criminal activities or wrong-doing. Note vv. 13-14. This is judging yourself first, but there is an element of judgment within the church as well, per v. 17. If the church of Christ will not judge its own actions, motives and responses, then who will? The key verse in I Peter is 4:19. So this passage is a different sort of judgment from James, Matthew and Paul in I Corinthians. But the point I am making is that judgment is inevitable in our lives. James’ point is that our judgment of ‘speaking evil of a brother’ is sinful and usurps the place of God’s law, and in fact, judges that law. How?

“Defamation of our brothers involves other sins too. Slanderers do not love. They are not humble. Slanderers appoint themselves to a position of superiority. To judge a brother is to deny that he is your peer. The judge exalts himself and diminishes his neighbour, for only superiors judge their inferiors. This is what James has in mind when he says a slanderer speaks against the law and judges it.”ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Doriani

Doriani adds this:

“Worse, the judge thinks he enforces the law while he actually violates it. The critic ‘speaks against the law and judges it’ (James 4:11) in two ways. First, he violates the law of love. Second, he picks and chooses among its commands, deciding which to obey and which to disregard. When he disregards the law of love, he judges the law, saying, in essence, “I need not obey the laws that require love and that give all people roughly equal status before God.”^{iv}

Later on he says;

“God is the one judge. Without His mercy, we would all suffer condemnation. Because of Christ’s work, He is willing to save and not destroy. Since we have received mercy, not judgment, we should show mercy, not judgment.”^v

We must not think that we are better judges than God. We do not have insight into people’s hearts or motivations. While we see the results of their decisions and even – sometimes – an exposure of their hypocrisy, we really are in no position to be their judge; other than providing exhortation or perhaps some rebuke to them personally, and lovingly. We do not have the freedom to slander them or gossip about them to others.

According to Kent Hughes, “The argument here is meant to deliver us from mind games which tell us it’s okay to be judgmental because we are so spiritually sensitive and insightful, or because we have the Kingdom’s good as the motivation behind our judgments.”^{vi}

The Puritan writer, William Beveridge, has provided us with a poem that is a good reminder to us all;

“I cannot pray,
 except I sin;
 I cannot preach,
 but I sin;
 I cannot administer, nor
 receive the holy sacrament,
 but I sin.
 My very repentance needs
 to be repented of
 And the tears I shed
 need washing in
 the blood of Christ.”^{vii}

In v. 12, James reminds us that there is only 1 lawgiver and judge – God, and He is able to save us or destroy us. This sounds a lot like Matt. 10:28, then note vv. 29-33, speaking of God’s sovereignty and omniscience. Compared to that kind of knowledge, ability and power, indeed, “Who are you to judge your brother?”

II. Your Life is a Vapour

James 4:13-15

How many people who would identify themselves as believers live almost their entire lives without giving any thought to God’s power and control over all things, and who make major decisions without ever appearing before the throne of grace to seek out God’s will; and who ignore God’s disciplines in their lives, as He warns them away from bad situations – perhaps by premonitions or events he has designed to ‘get their attention’? Kent Hughes says it well in one sentence; “Our brave new pleasure-dominated, pleasure-seeking world is increasingly filled with people who live their lives with no reference to God.”^{viii}

The casual arrogance that seems to dominate modern life, especially in NA, where sudden, unexpected death or a horrible accident which paralyses, or a dreaded life-altering or life-threatening disease, are the farthest things from people’s lives and thoughts (ie. “that only happens to other people”). This confirms what Hughes said above. NA people tend not to worry about God, but trust in their own health, skills, education and ‘good luck’ to keep them “in the game”. That unfortunately can also be said about 75% of the people who call themselves Christians.

Notice the arrogance of those James addresses here in vv. 13-14. It is smart to plan, especially as a business person. This is what these people are doing here in these verses. They will travel to a specific place, spend a year trading and will make a profit. That’s their plan. But this is a plan that leaves God’s sovereignty &/or providence out (and the principles of these verses can apply to a lot of things other than business). The problem here is presumption. Faith says, “If the Lord wills, we will do this.” (4:13), but presumption says, “I am a skilled businessman. I can do this.” Doriani says that 3 things are being presumed with this sort of attitude:

“It presumes we will live as long as we please. It presumes we can make whatever plans we please: we can go today or tomorrow; the choice is ours. It presumes we have the capacity to execute whatever plan we conceive. We declare that we *will* make a profit.

This way of thinking forgets three things. 1.) It forgets our ignorance. We think we can plan a year in advance and come and go as we please, but we do not even know what tomorrow will bring. 2.) It forgets our frailty...3.) Presumptuous planning also forgets our dependence on God.”^{ix}

The problem is that we don’t have any control over anything! What if the weather won’t allow travel? Or a plane goes down or our car crashes or has a flat tire in the middle of nowhere? What if the market crashes or there is a terrorist attack that ruins the economy, or a competitor comes up with a better product for less money?

“Planning is proper as long as we confess that God is sovereign and that we are frail, ignorant, and dependent upon Him. The phrase, “Lord willing” is no magical incantation. It does not ensure our humility. But the suffix “If the Lord wills” is helpful. It reminds us that our plans, even our lives, are as frail as the mist. Thus we plan, hoping that God will use the process so that our aspirations match His purposes.”^x

Notice Psalm 127:1. It is God who sustains us. It is only His grace that stands in the way of utter disaster in any of our lives. Do we really believe this and if we do, do we apply it to our decision making and planning? Tim Keller, in his helpful book, “Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering”, lets a couple named Marsha and Mark tell their story at the end of a chapter. They had been married for 25 years with 4 children. He was active and hard-working but was struck down with ALS – Lou Gehrig’s disease – a death sentence. Here is a statement by Mark that is poignant and illustrative;

“MARK (*writing at a computer that captures eye movements*): I played sports in my younger years, and I always hated sitting on the bench. One day, just after my diagnosis, I cried out to God that I thought I was being pulled out of the game when I still had something to offer. His response was, “You have been on the sidelines for some time; you are just now going in the game.” Hanging on the truth that God is doing much that I can’t see and that in His economy it is worth suffering, but it is also a daily exercise of faith.”^{xi}

Do you notice the line, “you are just now going into the game”? Let’s discuss the implications of that for a few minutes. In what sense wasn’t Mark in the game before he got ALS? Hint: JN 9:1-3

Verse 14 picks up on the arrogance of v. 13 as a firm rebuke and reminder of the frailty of our corporeal bodies and minds...we don’t have any idea what tomorrow will bring. It might be the happiest day of our lives to date, or just a normal, mundane day, or we may wake up to a nightmare within our family or friends or to a tornado ripping the roof and top floor of our house off the foundation, with us in it. I saw a news report in January of this year where a sink hole had opened up directly under a house I Florida, and a man asleep in his bed plunged immediately into the rubble 60 feet down and could not be rescued. You never know what is going to transpire in your life to make it better...or worse. God alone knows the future.

By the same token, God can engineer events to prosper you and protect you when times look bleak. Listen to Astronaut Jim Lovell's report of his life being saved:
“Television Reporter: Is there a specific instance in an airplane emergency when you can recall fear?

Jim Lovell: Uh well, I'll tell ya, I remember this one time - I'm in a Banshee at night in combat conditions, so there's no running lights on the carrier. It was the Shrangri-La, and we were in the Sea of Japan and my radar had jammed, and my homing signal was gone... because somebody in Japan was actually using the same frequency. And so it was - it was leading me away from where I was supposed to be. And I'm lookin' down at a big, black ocean, so I flip on my map light, and then suddenly: zap. Everything shorts out right there in my cockpit. All my instruments are gone. My lights are gone. And I can't even tell now what my altitude is. I know I'm running out of fuel, so I'm thinking about ditching in the ocean. And I, I look down there, and then in the darkness there's this uh, there's this green trail. It's like a long carpet that's just laid out right beneath me. And it was the algae, right? It was that phosphorescent stuff that gets churned up in the wake of a big ship. And it was - it was - it was leading me home. You know? If my cockpit lights hadn't shorted out, there's no way I'd ever been able to see that. So uh, you, uh, never know... what... what events are to transpire to get you home.” - source – Internet website – Jim Lovell

James compares our lives – and some do live long lives – to a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. See [Psalm 102:3](#) & [Job 7:6-10](#) which convey that message.

God is eternal; we are mortal. Short of Christ's return (the Rapture), we will all die one day, and as Mark Dever once commented; “when that day arrives, it will not arrive with a sign that says, “this is the day!” On that day, we vanish from the earthly scene.

Here in v. 15, we find the key to humility in our planning. We need to allow for God to intervene. “DV” or “Deo volante”, or “Lord willing” was a phrase often used in 17th to 18th century media when announcing an upcoming event, such as, perhaps, a coronation. For example, a newspaper report might say, “King George will be crowned in a coronation ceremony this Saturday, DV.” Note: [Acts 18:21](#); [Prov. 16:9,18](#); [20:24](#); [21:1](#), etc. [[I Cor.4:19](#); [16:7](#); [Phil. 2:19,24](#); [Heb. 6:3](#); [Rom. 1:10](#)]. We have to plan – only a fool would never plan – but we must do so hopeful that God will allow our plans to match up with His purposes. If He does not, especially in the big disappointments, we draw comfort from such verses as [Rom. 8:28](#).

III. Arrogant Boasting is Evil

James 4:16-17

When we boast in our arrogance, we do evil. We may not say such things outwardly, but we might think it, and God knows our thoughts ([Ps. 139:1-4](#)). Consider a NT example of God's judgment on a boastful, arrogant man, in [Acts 12:20-24](#). This is the same Herod who had John's brother James killed by the sword ([Acts 12:1-3](#)) and would have executed Peter as well, but an angel helped Peter to escape from his prison cell ([Acts 12:6-19](#)).

Then, in the OT, there is the story of Nebuchadnezzar – [Daniel 4:29-33](#). He was in this state of insanity because God had judged his arrogance. He was like this for 7 years before God allowed his sanity to return to him – note [vv. 34-37](#).

There are plenty of sins of commission. These are things we know we are not supposed to do as believers, but we end up doing them anyway; but there are sins of omission too – things we know we should do, but we don't do them. They are just as much sin as the things we are not supposed to do.

As is every verse in God's Word, this verse – v. 17 – is not to be interpreted in isolation from the surrounding context. In vv. 13-16 (even all of chapter 4), we are being taught that we need to take God's will – really God Himself into our plans and to realise that our physical lives are like a mist or vapour, and we need to take heed of the eternal aspect of things. This means that our acts of arrogance and pride reveal an inner rebellion that says, "I will do this my way". [cf. Ezek. 28:12-19; [Isaiah 18:12-15](#)]. Concurrently, chapter 5 opens with a rebuke against the rich who were taking advantage of their poor workers for their own gain. Again – acts of arrogance without humility.

Although it is not easy to live a life [more to the point, it is impossible] that avoids even the obvious sins (cf. Romans 7) like lying, theft, breathing hatred, deceit, envy, covetousness – obedience to known commands; it at least is understandable to us and we recognise those sorts of sins, even if we rationalize them away when we commit them; it is much tougher to recognise sins of omission as we commit them daily.

The passage that identifies some major ones is found in [Matt. 25:31-46](#), but notice especially vv. 41-46. These are sins of omission found here. Now, although the focus & context of these verses has to do with people during the Tribulation, and their actions which identify who is a believer and who is not, thus access to the Kingdom is in sight here; the principle being revealed must not be ignored. This is in a real sense, a warning passage. I won't spend much time on this, but focus on [v. 45](#). Here is where we can forge a link to our passage in James 4.

When we begin to see our lives as God sees them, as a mist that disappears quickly off of the world stage, and realise that one of two fates awaits us – heaven or hell – and we are aware of how we get to either one, then we must walk in the way we know to be right. That means in faith, motivated by the idea that our service to others is really and truly, according to verses like Matt. 25:45, service to our Lord and Saviour. This means that there are people (notice Jesus' focus here) to feed, clothe, give a drink to, to visit and encourage; not TV shows to watch, sporting events to obsess about, be mindlessly entertained, etc. What we do must be calculated by us as believers to faithfully demonstrate our complete love, devotion to and worship of the One we claim to love and the only visible means left to us until He returns to do that is to see Him in the people that need us. He has placed us into their lives for that very reason. Even failing to pray for someone is a sin of omission. If we live our lives without any thought of how God fits into them, which sins of omission are an indicator of, then we deserve hell.

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- ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *James: faith That Works*, Crossway Books, 1991, p. 196
- ⁱⁱ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans, Pillar Commentary, 2000, p. 199
- ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Doriani, *James – reformed Expository Commentary*, P & R, 2007, p. 158
- ^{iv} IBID, p. 158
- ^v IBID, p. 159
- ^{vi} Op CIT, Hughes, p. 197
- ^{vii} IBID, William Beveridge, cited by Kent Hughes, p. 198
- ^{viii} Hughes, p. 202
- ^{ix} Doriani, p. 159-160
- ^x IBID, p. 161
- ^{xi} Cited in Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, Dutton, 2013, p. 203