

JAMES—WEEK 4

THE RIGHT TRUST



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is St James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640)
On display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain*

James continues to admonish his readers to move away from the competitive secular concept of living towards a Christ-centered one. Riches do not satisfy, and chasing them is a path to hell.

Instead, Christians should practice patience, prayer, and praise. Some things are important.

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1 James 4:11–12

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

Here James revisits a couple of previous topics to bring things together. The Greek word translated as “speak evil against” (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-leh-oh) means slander. It’s not about genuine criticism. James covered the evil we do with our tongues in chapter three.

The Greek word translated as “judges” (κρίνω, krin-oh) is about partiality. The first example in the 1979 BAGD lexicon is, “prefer someone to someone.” James ripped partiality back in chapter two.

So this passage is tying his earlier themes of partiality and the tongue to his recent point that being God is not our responsibility.

He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law.

Judging the law is way above our pay grade. It’s ridiculously inappropriate—and unproductive.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

And, of course, we’re not God.

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

The conclusion is a modern colloquialism.

“Give it a rest.”

And note that this is about “brethren”—other Christians. There is plenty of evil right now in our world and James is *not* saying that we should ignore that. Exercising judgement over issues of right and wrong is essential. One of the church’s main roles is to be the ethical standard. Jesus commanded that.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” — Matthew 5:13–16

For example, many churches in Germany failed miserably in the 1930s and 40s. They were silent, choosing to “not judge.”

If they did that based on their reading of James, they missed the point.

2 James 4:13–17

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Now James moves to one of the most obvious aspects of the fact that we’re not God—we don’t know the future. We all understand this truism, and are ready to recite it when called on, yet we act like we don’t believe it.

So, as James has been saying all along, if we act like we don’t believe it, then we don’t believe it. We have a *confidence* about the future that’s misplaced.

The point is that we should never disconnect from God. He is Lord, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”

“*But,*” James continues. This part is directly addressed to his first century readers. While it’s for everyone’s edification, the direct implication of “*you boast in your arrogance,*” doesn’t apply to all.

Of course, the next sentence does. *All such boasting is evil.*

The strength of this statement is easy for Americans to miss. We tend to wear out every superlative. We speak of “giving 110 percent.” People we disagree with are “idiots.” People we don’t like are “worse than Hitler.” Overuse has robbed strong words of their strength.

But this is supposed to be startling. The Greek for translated as evil (πονηρός, pon-ay-ross) means wicked or evil. It is damnable—a crime against holiness.

The last sentence introduces a difficult concept. *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* Can something be a sin for one person but not for another?

Yes. In this case, the rule, “Ignorance is no excuse,” doesn’t apply. If we’re careful to define what we mean, there are situations where ignorance is an excuse.

Now, ignorance of the law is never an excuse in court. We’re expected to know what the speed limit is, or the catch limit on a fishing license, or which species are protected, or whatever.

But with sin, knowledge matters. This is because sin is fundamentally rebellion against God. If you do something that’s wrong, or don’t do something you should, not knowing the rule means it’s not as bad.

But knowingly defying the Lord’s will is straight-up sin.

3 James 5:1–6

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

This gets back to what it means to be rich in the first century. Back then, the rich generally did not come by it honestly. So, James gives them an alarming warning.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!

This time, James details how their *riches are corrupted*. Their *gold and silver* came from the sweat of others. Even so, they weren't content to garner profits honestly—instead cheating their workers.

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

But justice is coming. The Greek word transliterated as Sabaoth (Σαβαώθ, Sab-a-oath) literally means armies. James is warning them of their ultimate fate at the hands of the heavenly host. This is what Jesus was talking about when he explained the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13.

“...*the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.*” — Matthew 13:39b

Then James wraps up this point with a grotesque forecast—“*you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.*” It's amazing that James would use such harsh language. He has to be talking to people that would read this letter.

His bold admonishment of them reflects authority—and an expectation that they would listen.

While this tongue lashing is only directed at a few of his readers, it's important for all to ponder. Every one of us is fantastically wealthy (and blessed) compared to even the richest people in the first century.

Just consider what their teeth must have looked like. The only dental treatment they had was extraction. And there was no modern toothpaste and nothing even approaching the cleaning power of a modern toothbrush. Soap had been invented, but was mainly used for washing things, not people. Yuck.

But modern blessings are not, in and of themselves, wrong—and this passage explains that.

What matters is attitude. You can have a bad attitude with little wealth or a good attitude with great wealth. James lights into the ones who “*have heaped up treasure in the last days.*”

That last one is direct lack of faith. It reflects trusting in stored treasure instead of in God.

4 James 5:7–11

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

Here James turns his attention to the *brethren*, who are, mostly, not rich. His message is simple but critically important—be patient.

James gives three examples of patience: the farmer, the prophets, and Job. Individually they are great examples of patience paying off.

But it's the common thread that is James's message here—impatience doesn't help. In fact, it's destructive. That's the point of verse nine.

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

Wait. What? James has rightly condemned the rich who have cheated their laborers and stored up wealth (and wrath!) for themselves.

But is James now saying that the victims of that cheating can also be condemned—for just grumbling? How can this be? Can that sin be just as bad as the cheating?

In a way, yes. Both sins are what you might call “sins of atheism.”

They display not trusting God.

Impatience is epidemic in America; it's part of our culture. We're marinated in it.

Lately, my prayer partners and I have noticed a distinctly slow style in how God answers our prayers. It feels like He's making a point of teaching us patience.

Sure, some prayers have been urgent, and we've seen some stop-your-heart miracles with those.

But a frustratingly slow pace has been a relentless theme with the rest. Some of the most glorious cases, with the most impressive answers, have been agonizingly slow. The Lord often held back until long after the intensity of our prayers had waned. Only when our prayers had settled into an enduring—even boring—style did God bring glorious results.

Methodists there's a point to that.

5 James 5:12–20

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

James begins his wrap-up with the superlative, “*But above all.*” This is strikingly strong. The Greek words translated as above all (πρό πάντων, pro pahn-tone) literally mean “before everything.”

In other words, this takes precedence. After all the things James has covered, it’s surprising for him to declare that this is more important than everything else.

But that’s what he does. Swearing oaths, which was a common practice back then, is not okay. Jesus strongly condemned it in Matthew 5:33–37. James’s condemnation is strong too, threatening, “*lest you fall into judgment.*”

But the condemnation isn’t directed simply at oath swearing. It’s reserved for people who lie. They’re the ones for whom “yes” wasn’t “yes” and “no” wasn’t “no.” The oaths magnify the sin.

Oaths are especially offensive as a part of a strategy of deception.

Lastly, James gives two examples of mature Christian behavior. First, he makes the case for constant prayer and praise, coupled with the advanced koinonia of confessing our sins to one another.

Christians should strive to get to this level of spiritual maturity.

Then James concludes with a curious instruction. Turning back someone who has wandered from the truth is a great victory. *It will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

But there’s a twist. James doesn’t just say this. Instead he says to his readers, “*let him know that*” all this good will result. In other words, rather than simply teaching this truth, James tells his readers to use it in shout-outs. This isn’t doctrine; it’s a special case of encouragement.

Someone *who turns a sinner from the error of his way* has done a mighty work, and we should say so.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Which ethical issues are most important for the church to weigh in on?
2. Have you ever learned, after the fact, that something you did was wrong?
3. Which modern blessings are too much?
4. Does God's timing ever seem slow to you?
5. What is the mark of a mature Christian?