



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 3 – James 4:1-5:11

Day 1 - James 4:1-10

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You 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. 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. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Understanding the Passage:

James speaks with the fire of the old prophets and for good reason. People who live by God's wisdom are marked with gentleness and peace. Can we say we are truly living according to God's wisdom if we are at each other's throats? Of course not! To James, fighting and bickering with one another, especially within the church community, reveals the condition of our hearts: divided. If there is division in your relationship with God, then it will manifest in your human relationships. We say with our lips that we want God's will to be done, but in our hearts we want our own will to be done, and those two desires will always be in conflict.

What James wants for his people is a soul free from conflict: either give yourself to the world, or give yourself to God. Choose one. Be one. Then you will be free to give your life to one pursuit and one pursuit only. Jesus proclaimed a blessing on those who are pure of heart (Matt 5:8). To be pure of heart means there is nothing there that shouldn't be there. It's a heart undivided in love of God. There is simply nothing else.

James calls for a deep repentance. Repentance is a lifestyle of giving every part of our lives to God. It's not a one-time event. It's a habit of self-denial to make room for God. It's opening yourself up to God's gritty work of gutting out everything that divides your heart until you have storage space for only one thing: God's love for you. All of God loves all of you. Now, may all of you love all of God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What do your actions over the past 24 hours reveal about the condition of your heart?
- Where is your heart divided?
- What is your one most fervent prayer, and what does it say about state of your heart?

Day 2 - James 4:11-12

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, 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. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

Understanding the Passage:

James makes four giant leaps of logic here that must be unpacked if we are to understand him.

First, speaking evil about one another within the Christian community is exactly the same as placing yourself as judge over them. Some translations go so far as to translate “speaking evil” as “slander.” It’s an act of violence using words as the weapon. It is said, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” That’s rubbish. When have you been on the receiving end – or the giving end – of violence inflicted by words? Words do damage. Words harm much more efficiently than any firearm. James equates this kind of evil speech with judgment. It places the speaker above the receiver. It is fundamentally self-elevating and other-lowering. One person is the judge, and the other is the defendant.

Second, when James uses the word “law”, he’s not talking about every single commandment in the Jewish Torah. He means the heart of the law and, therefore, the heart of the Lawgiver. He has already told us in James 2:8 that the heart of the law is “love your neighbor as yourself.” Love is exactly what God was going for in authoring the law. Love is what is perfected in Jesus living out the law. Love is what should be achieved in following the law.

Third, when you speak evil against a brother or sister in the church, you place yourself as judge over the law, which is also the same as placing yourself as judge over love itself. Whoever disobeys one element of the law of love disobeys the entire law. To use words as a weapon in the Christian community is also to put yourself above love, to make love the defendant and yourself as the judge.

Fourth, to judge the law is to judge the Lawgiver. By placing yourself above love, you’re also trying to place yourself above God and put God in the defendant’s seat. But you are not the Judge or the Savior. Which leads us to ask the same question as James: Who are you to judge your neighbor?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- When is the last time you were wounded by someone else’s words?
- When is the last time you wounded someone else with your words?
- When have you seen judgment wreak havoc in the church?
- When have you seen God redeem someone who was caught in the act of judging?

Day 3 - James 4:13-16

Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

Understanding the Passage:

James sees it as the height of human arrogance that someone would be absolutely sure they could count on living until tomorrow to make a profit. James would prophesy against our entire economy, just like he’s speaking out against the basic assumptions of the economy of his day. People in first-century Palestine are not that different from people in 2018 America. We assume business will go on as usual tomorrow; not much will change from sundown to sun-up. We count on waking up tomorrow and circumstances generally being the same. We’ll still be breathing. There will be business to do. The clock will tick the same as it always has.

James wants us to assume nothing about tomorrow. Tomorrow may not come, and even if it does, we may not be there to see it. No, you may not be able to turn a profit tomorrow, not because the business won't be there, but because you won't be there. Life is fragile. Life is fleeting. All we are is dust in the wind, as Paul Simon said. To dust we will return, as Genesis said.

More than any other New Testament author, James is concerned about the human ego. To him, you're either submitting your ego to God, or you're submitting God to your ego. He sees certainty about tomorrow as evidence of a much deeper spiritual problem, where the believer assumes what only God can assume, that tomorrow will in fact come and we will live to see it. A healthier soul would not make assumptions about the future at all but instead live in the present, being grateful for today and planning for tomorrow, sure, but not betting today's happiness on tomorrow's uncertainties.

Live in the now, today. Prepare for tomorrow, today. But don't live for tomorrow, today. Today is a gift; tomorrow is a possibility. And above all, do God's will, today. Don't postpone it until tomorrow. You may not get a chance.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Think of the last funeral you attended. How did it reframe your perspective on mortality?
- When have you postponed doing the right thing until tomorrow, assuming tomorrow would be there?
- If James were your pastor today, what do you think he would say about the way you're living this one single life?

Day 4 - James 5:1-6

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

Understanding the Passage:

There is no sugar-coating today's passage. It's harsh. It's scary. It's painful. But, it's good news for the poor, and it's both bad and good news for the rich if they will accept the challenge James is offering them.

First, let's be clear: James doesn't hate the rich for being rich. Jesus doesn't either. When Jesus says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!" he's not attacking the rich, he's empathizing with the rich. The rich have a unique problem that the poor don't have, namely, that they are investing their lives in money and materials that will pass away, and usually unintentionally. Wealth is seductive like that. It fools us mere mortals into thinking that possessions are worthwhile investments of our souls. But they're not. Your life is worth more than your bank account. Your life is worth more than your clothes, your car, your phone. Where you put your life matters. Are you putting your life into relationships and community and the Kingdom of God, or into much more boring things like money?

The opening song of the musical *Rent* is called "Seasons of Love." It asks, "How do you measure a year? In daylight, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee? In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife? In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes [the number of minutes in a 365 days], how do you measure a year in the life?" The challenge James gives to the rich is: how do you measure your life? Do you measure your life in dollars or in love? Do you measure your life by the size of your IRA or by the size of your heart? What are the metrics you're using that would let you know you're living the good life? There is the good news.

But James offers a warning. Listen to the cries of the people who break their backs making the rich richer. Their cries, like the blood of Abel, have reached God's ears, and God is listening. This passage is bad news for all those who refuse to be responsible for the people they could not be rich without. But it is good news for all those who accept that responsibility.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- How has wealth seduced you?
- What are better ways you could be measuring your life?
- How will you live differently in response to today's passage?

Day 5 - James 5:7-11

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Understanding the Passage:

The Astros were losing. At the end of the fifth inning, they were behind 7-2. In the seventh inning, the Twins scored another run, and it was 8-2. I was frustrated, so I turned off the feed on my phone, irritated, and moved on to regular business. That evening, I saw the recap on the news. In the eighth inning, just after I gave up, Houston's incredible boys of summer scored 11 runs. They tacked on three more in the ninth and took the victory 16-8. You know, sometimes we just give up too soon.

The early church believed that Jesus was coming soon, that his return was imminent. The reign of Christ would be fulfilled. The oppressors would be brought down. The persecutors would get their due. Their work to bring in a day of justice and love, of health and wholeness, of peace and prosperity would be validated. But as the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, and the months into decades, the persecution just continued to grow, and it became more difficult to remain faithful. In the words of Tom Long, "one can stand on one's tiptoes only so long." So James, eager to deal with the challenges arising from this apparent delay of the fulfillment of the kingdom, looks for ways to encourage and challenge the suffering Christians to not give up too soon.

Most of us don't feel the return of Jesus is imminent. It is, for most of us, a "someday" occurrence, and for many it isn't a significant part of our Christian paradigm. The sad result is that we turn our focus inward, and simply believe that someday, we will get to heaven to be with the people we love. We tend to think less about heaven coming to earth, and righteousness fulfilled. But "the purpose of the Lord" is to put things right in creation once again, but God will do so in God's time. It is important that we don't give up too soon.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What do you think about when you hear "the coming of the Lord? Is it good or bad?
- Are there some things for which you have given up hope too soon?