

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

HUMBLY DEPENDING ON GOD

Read James 4:11-17

Introduction

James 4:10 says *“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”* We know that most people want to be exalted. We all want to be glorified. Maybe we wouldn't say so. Maybe we don't feel it all of the time. But part of the motivation for living according to the world system is to get exaltation for ourselves. This comes in having the things we want, getting the respect we feel we deserve, or living in the comfort and pleasure we crave. God asks us to quit the world's way of pursuing those things. Instead, He calls us to trust Him to exalt us when the time is right without trying to get that glory for ourselves.

That requires real humility. We agree not to make our daily lives about ourselves, and our God promises to make it about us when and how He sees fit. That's how Jesus lived, after all. Paul described Jesus's life on earth in Philippians 2. Jesus, God Himself, refused to fight for His right to be glorified. He "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7) and became a servant, even to death. Then, when the time was right, the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:9).

God calls us to walk that same path: Humility today, God's glory forever.

We continue with our study of James and learn from this New Testament book of wisdom.

Critics and Pickers

“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?” (vv11-12)

"Brothers, do not slander one another (NIV)," says James. Why does he bring up slander? Because people in this church were slandering each other. Of course, they wouldn't want to call it slander. Perhaps "creative criticism."

Speak evil translates the ancient Greek word katalalia. “Katalalia means "speak ill of, speak degradingly of, speak evil of, defame, slander" and is the sin of those who meet in corners and gather in little groups and pass on confidential information which destroy the good name of those who are not there to defend themselves.”

This sin is wrong for two reasons. First, it breaks the royal law that we should love one another. Second, it takes a right of judgment that only God has.

Humbling ourselves and getting right with God must result in our getting right with other people. When we are right with other people, it will show in the way we talk about them. So, we must not speak evil of one another and not judge our brother.

How is speaking against a brother like speaking against the law? When we judge or speak against our brother, we put ourselves in the same place as the law, in effect judging the law. This is something that we have no authority to do, because there is one Lawgiver — so who are you to judge another? This is an extension of the same humility that James writes about in this chapter. When we have proper humility before God, it just isn't within us to arrogantly judge our brother.

The Presumption of Self-determination

“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.” (vv13-16)

We are presumptuous when we speak against our Christian brothers and sisters. We are also presumptuous when we flatly state what we're going to do in days to come, as if we could control the future. James rebuked the kind of heart that lives and makes its plans apart from a constant awareness of the hand of God, and with an underestimation of our own limitations (you do not know what will happen tomorrow).

Humility is the antithesis of boasting. We need to train ourselves to speak with this kind of humility when we project actions into the future. "The Lord willing, I plan to get a degree in law and become an attorney," shows a reliance on God. "With God's help, I hope to build the largest construction company in my country," may be ambitious, but it shows reliance on God, also. Humility is the key idea here.

I've heard people use the phrase, "The Lord willing", however, as a kind of spiritual "cop-out."

"Bill, can we count on you to be here next Saturday to help us repair the roof?"

"Oh, the Lord willing."

Do you think Bill will really come? We aren't to cover lack of commitment with spiritual jargon. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no (James 5:12). Humility about the future is what God desires in us, not fuzziness.

For what is your life?

James asked us to consider the fragility of human life, and the fact that we live and move only at the permission of God. This is quite a thought-provoking question – “what is your life?” James does not discourage us from planning and doing, only from planning and doing apart from reliance on God.

The idea that our life was a vapour or shadow was a frequent figure of speech in the Old Testament (Psalm 102:11; Job 8:9; 1 Chronicles 29:15). We also remember the story Jesus told about the rich man who made his great plans for the future, and foolishly lost it all when his soul was required of him (Luke 12:16-21).

Impatience with the Lord's Will

James' discussion of having patience really begins in the previous section where he admonishes us, "Submit yourselves, then, to God" (James 4:7). When we submit to God, we become willing to wait for God, rather than to try to produce instant results by our own actions.

Verse 15 says *“Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”* Who talks like that? The poor can't afford to travel on a whim, they are tied to their jobs -- and in the first century, they are tied to subsistence farming -- and aren't entrepreneurs. The rich are often arrogant enough to act as if they are master of their futures and their fortunes.

It is nothing but sheer arrogance that makes us think that we can live and move and have our being independent of God. This boastful arrogance is the essence of sin: a proud independence, the root of all sin, as was the case with Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15) and Adam (Genesis 3:5-7).

Paul knew and lived this principle: *“I will return again to you, God willing” (Acts 18:21)*. *“But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills” (1 Corinthians 4:19)*. *“I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits” (1 Corinthians 16:7)*.

We sometimes have the means to make bold plans for the future. Do we seek the Lord before making decisions? Do we wait on the Lord or just plunge headlong? God keep us from the arrogance of the rich fool!

The Good We Ought to Do

“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.” (v17)

James knows that it is far easier to think about and talk about humility and dependence on God than it is to live it. Yet he makes the mind of God plain: as we know these things, we are accountable to do them.

This final sentence of chapter 4 sums up James' emphasis on presumption and humility. He has reminded the readers of their duty to *“walk humbly with their God” (Micah 6:8)*. This is a divine requirement. To know of this requirement but ignore it in everyday life constitutes sin in and of itself.

But this concept in a wider context provides an important understanding of sin. The only specific definition of sin in the New Testament is 1 John 3:4: *“Sin is lawlessness” (NIV)* or *“Sin is the transgression of the law” (KJV)*. This definition focuses negatively on failure to observe the clear statement of the law.

But James introduces another definition: *“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17)*. This is the sin of omission, quite in keeping with much of Jesus' teaching about the failure to do right. Consider:

- The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), where the priest and Levite are condemned for their failure to help their wounded Jewish brother.
- The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 18:23-35), where one servant is condemned for inaction.
- The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), where the rich man is condemned for failing to share his wealth with the poor man.
- The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), where the *“goats”* are condemned and the *“sheep”* approved for the way they help the poor, thirsty, naked, and imprisoned.

In each of these, sins of omission are condemned while acts of positive right are applauded. Christianity does not consist in avoiding wrong -- a kind of negativism towards evil-- but in doing right. Christianity is about loving our neighbour with random acts of righteousness. We're not to live our lives in mortal fear of sinning and thus compulsively doing good in order to save ourselves from hell. That motive isn't healthy or loving, but essentially selfish.

This Royal Law of Love is much harder to define than the letter of the written law -- it is creative and freeing and positive. It is the law that liberates us. The Royal Law allows the Holy Spirit to lead us into the next hours and days with joy and expectation. This kind of living is what God designed us for. To fall short of this is to miss the essence of the Christian message. To fall short of this is tragic. To fall short of this is sin.

Conclusion

As we bring the teaching of James 4 to a conclusion, we will be wise to heed to Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:42-48

“And the Lord said, “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master’s will and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.” (Luke 12:42-48)

Will you be in the category of many stripes, few stripes or no stripes?