

Scripture Reading: James 4:10-17 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹⁰Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

¹¹Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

¹⁷Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. I have been doing a series of messages through the Epistle of James, my favorite book of the New Testament. I love this book because it has many practical things to say about living the Christian life. In chapter 1 of James, we learned how important it is to live by faith despite the trials and temptations that face us, and also the importance of not only listening to and reading God's Word but also doing what it says. In chapters 2, 3, and 4 of James, we saw some ways in which these principles play themselves out in the circumstances of our lives, especially in our relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters. In chapter 3, we learned about the ways we often misuse our tongue, and in chapter 4 we looked at the quarrels and conflicts that we too often find in church.

More than once, James tells us that our basic problem begins with what is in our heart. These problems that we have in our church life and our personal lives is fundamentally a heart problem. If we fill our hearts with good things, then good things will come from our mouths and be manifest in our behavior. But James tells us in chapter 3, verse 16, that the jealousy and selfish ambition that inhabits our hearts can really spoil our relationships, and in chapter 4, verse 3, we read about how wrong motives and selfish pleasures are the root cause of quarrels and conflicts in church. In chapter 4, verse 5, James tells us that when we allow ourselves to be driven by our wrong motives and selfish pleasures, we are following the way of the world, not the Christian way ... and if we follow the ways of the world, we are making ourselves enemies of God. We must remind ourselves that Christians are people who have decided to be followers of Jesus Christ, and therefore it is inappropriate for Christians to be following the ways of the world.

I told you of the old saying that the three chief enemies of our Christian life are "the world, the flesh, and the devil." The world, the flesh, and the devil. We must guard against these three: we should not follow the world's ungodly habits and its reasonings ... and we must resist the various temptations of the flesh ... and we must not allow ourselves to be deceived by that ancient enemy, the devil, who enticed Adam and Eve to rebel against God, and who continues to entice human beings to sin and rebellion in our current day.

In my previous message, I focused on the exhortations found in James chapter 4, verses 7-9. Here, we are told: to submit to God ... to resist the devil ... to draw near to God ... to cleanse ourselves of sin ... and to purify our hearts.

[Unspoken in the sermon: James 4:7-9 – "⁷Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom."]

Both before and after that paragraph, James gives us another exhortation, which I would like to highlight right now. Verse 6 says, "But He [God] gives a greater grace. Therefore, it [the Old Testament scripture] says, 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble'."

Verse 10 says, “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

The exhortation is that we must be humble. “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Grace. It is through God’s power, God’s grace, that we are enabled to live this way: a life of humility before God. Not only do we have this gift of grace to be humble, but we are given a promise in verse 10: “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, *and He will exalt you.*” Today’s Scripture Reading began with this key verse. God wants His followers to humble themselves ... and then He promises to exalt those who do so. This is a key theme throughout the Bible: we are created by God and we are supposed to humbly obey Him. Too often, human beings have failed to do that, damaging our relationship with God, but God sent His Son Jesus Christ to this earth to restore our relationship with our Creator by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us. For those who have placed their faith in Jesus, we are forgiven and we now follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

The New Testament epistles contain much instruction on how we are to live as followers of Christ, with many exhortations to forsake our old sinful ways and to live clean and upright lives that honor God our Father and honor the Lord Jesus Christ. And the primary posture we must have before God is humility. Be humble. Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord. Be humble and obey Him. Don’t rebel and try to do things your own way – that’s what got Adam and Eve in trouble in the Garden of Eden. And don’t try to assert yourself above your fellow human beings, above your Christian brothers and sisters. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him exalt you in the time and in the manner that He chooses.

I am reminded of some exhortations that Jesus Christ gave His listeners during His earthly ministry. Some of the religious teachers of His day enjoyed their lofty positions, but they were rather too proud of themselves, too self-centered, too enamored of their rank in society.

Let’s read Luke 14:1, and continuing to verses 7-11 – “¹It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. ... ⁷And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, ⁸‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, ⁹and he who invited you both will come and say to you, “Give your place to this man,” and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’.”

Many of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day enjoyed sitting in the place of honor at important occasions, even sitting themselves there before all the guests had arrived. Jesus exhorted them not to seek out the place of honor, but to sit at a less exalted place at the beginning. The host may or may not decide to seat you at a higher place – let the host make that decision. If you exalt yourself at the start, you may well get humbled. It is better to start out humbling yourself.

In a related passage, Jesus has this to say in Matthew 23, beginning with verses 1-2 – “¹Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, ²saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them’.”

Verses 6-7 – “⁶They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.”

Verses 10-12 – “¹⁰Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. ¹¹But the greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Verse 11 again – *But the greatest among you shall be your servant.* The way to a high position among God’s people is by being a servant. In our present day in the Christian church, I hear a lot of talk about what is called “servant leadership.” A leader in the church is, first and foremost, a servant of the congregation, showing us the way to God – the leader does this by instruction and by his own example of living by Christian standards.

Let me read 1 Peter 5:5-6 – “⁵You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ ⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”

The way of humility. This is the first thing I want to highlight in today’s message, because much of what James says in his epistle has humility as a needed foundational posture in the life of every Christian, not just Christian leaders but for all of us. Please keep this in mind as we look at the rest of James chapter 4 today.

The title of my message today is “Judgement and Arrogance.” James 4:11-12 is about having an improper judgmental attitude toward your fellow Christians, while verses 13-16 are about an arrogant approach to life that disregards God.

Let’s read James 4:11-12 – “¹¹Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

Who are you who judge your neighbor? This issue of judging your fellow human beings or your fellow Christians can be a big problem. You, too, are an imperfect person, and we must be very careful when we criticize other people, especially our Christian brothers and sisters.

Actually, there are some circumstances under which you may need to admonish a fellow Christian who is in error, but James is not talking about those cases. His exhortation is not a complete, 100% argument against judging – it’s an argument against an attitude that is too quick to judge others and may actually go beyond what God’s law says, oftentimes judging others by one’s own self-righteous standards.

Related to James 4:11-12 is something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:1-2 – “¹Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” Many Christians have misused these verses in James 4 and Matthew 7 to claim that you shouldn’t ever judge another person. They will say things like, “Don’t judge me! Jesus says ‘Don’t judge!’” But actually, there are times when you need to inform your Christian brother or sister of something that is not right in his or her life.

For example, take a look at the last two verses of the Epistle of James. James 5:19-20 – “¹⁹My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” If your Christian brother or sister is in serious error, you need to point this out to them so that they can correct their wrong path and repent of the sin.

I am reminded of Colossians 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” *Teaching and admonishing one another*, using the Word of Christ, recorded here in Scripture and often contained in our psalms and hymns. There is a proper time to teach and admonish your fellow Christians. But, unfortunately, some people go too far in their judgments.

Let’s return to Matthew 7 and read the whole paragraph when Jesus is talking about judging. Matthew 7:1-5 – “¹Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

This passage is not saying that you should never judge a Christian brother or sister, or a non-Christian friend. It says, first of all, that you had better be careful if you judge, because you may find yourself getting judged by the same standard of measure that you are using to judge another person. Secondly, you had better take a good look at yourself, because you may have a huge flaw in yourself that you are not paying attention to. First, deal with that flaw in yourself before you try to approach another person to point out a problem in their life that needs correction. That is the heart of what this passage is saying. It doesn’t mean that you never judge somebody. It means you had better not be judging someone by your own standards, and you had better take a serious look at yourself first. Do you remember what I said a few minutes ago about humility? We need to have a posture of humility in our relationships, and I think that will help us as we deal with fellow Christians whom we think need some correction.

Let’s look at Matthew 18:15-17. Here, Jesus says, “¹⁵If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.’ ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” There is a proper manner in which to discuss with a sinning brother what needs correcting in his life. Sometimes, a judgment does need to be made, but notice that the goal in such a case is the correction of a sinning brother – the thing to avoid is making a severe criticism that goes beyond God’s own commands.

Let’s return to James 4:11-12 – “¹¹Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

I find it very striking here when James tells us that somebody speaking against a brother is said to be speaking against the law, even judging the law. It seems to me that such a person is going beyond what God’s commands actually say, developing his own standards, and is claiming the role of judge. That is really arrogant. God is the one Lawgiver and Judge. Let God judge. According to some of the verses I quoted a few minutes ago, we must be sure that we are using God’s actual laws when we notice a brother or sister who is in need of correction, not using our own standards to judge people. Again, let us remember the principle of humility that I mentioned at the beginning of today’s message.

Let’s now move on to the topic James addresses in the remaining part of James chapter 4. Here are verses 13-14 – “¹³Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city,

and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”

I’m an American, and in America we encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship, taking financial risks in business enterprises in the hope of gaining profit. Sometimes, the risks are rewarded with great gain, sometimes with modest gain, and sometimes with failure. This passage in James would seem to condemn this spirit of entrepreneurship, but that is not quite the right way to view these verses. What James is criticizing here is not the desire to do business but the attitude that the plans we make for our lives will surely lead to success, without regard to the fragility of life ... or the overarching rule of God in our lives. While it is fine to make plans for the future, we ought to do so while being mindful that life is uncertain and that our plans could face a variety of obstacles. In fact, life itself could end quite suddenly with an illness or an accident. We need to show some humility when making our plans for a new venture. And above all, we Christians ought to be living our lives centered on seeking to please our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ in all of our endeavors. The attitude expressed here in verse 13 is one that disregards God in our decision-making, and that is what we are told to avoid.

In the following verses, James gives his readers the proper stance we should take when making plans. Verses 15-16 – “¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’ ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.”

It is arrogant to say with certainty that you will go to such-and-such city and will make a profit after a year of engaging in business there. Not only is life short and uncertain, but we have a Creator who has something to say about how Christians live their lives. The stance that we ought to take is to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over our lives. We ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”

This stance is found throughout the New Testament, oftentimes with the same or similar verbal formula we see James using in verses 14 and 15. Let’s read some of these:

Proverbs 27:1 – “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”

Acts 18:21 says this about the Apostle Paul – “... but taking leave of them and saying, ‘I will return to you again if God wills,’ he set sail from Ephesus.”

In Romans 1:10, Paul writes: “... always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”

1 Corinthians 16:7b – “... I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits.”

Hebrews 6:3 – “And this we will do, if God permits.”

In my younger days, I enjoyed reading all kinds of Christian books, including biographies of Christian missionaries. In many of the books written one-hundred or two-hundred years ago, I often found statements like these: “We are planning an evangelistic journey to such-and-such region, if God wills,” or “Lord willing, we will travel back home next month to report on our ministry,” or “I plan visit you again soon, *Deo volente*.” This Latin phrase *Deo volente* means “God willing,” and I saw it used many times in the books I read, sometimes abbreviated with the letters *d.v.* – “We will journey there next week, *d.v.*” I see these phrases rarely nowadays, but I think it is an attitude that we should always have in the back of our minds in all our decision-making, even if we do not actually verbalize the words: we should always acknowledge that it is God who is in control of all things and He may decide to redirect our plans for His own purposes.

Let me move on to the last verse of today’s passage, James 4:17 – “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” This brings to mind a distinction we often make between what are called “sins of commission” and “sins of omission.” A “sin of commission”

occurs when we commit an overt sin, such as stealing something or lying about somebody. We commit a sin, so it's called a "sin of commission." The other type of sin is a "sin of omission," when we omit doing something we ought to do, when we fail to do something that we should be doing. Maybe you have a chance to share the gospel with somebody but you neglect to do that, or maybe you see a fellow Christian in need and have the resources to help them, but you don't do it, just like we read about in the first half of James chapter 2. These are sins of omission, and they grieve God's heart just as much as sins of commission do. Verse 17 again – "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

We often use James 4:17 with that kind of generalized application: don't fail to do the right thing when you know what you should do, because not doing the right thing is a sin, too. However, I would like to take a look at the verse in context: James has just finished a discussion on judging others wrongly and on having an arrogant attitude toward making future plans without being mindful of God and of the uncertainties of life. You have now learned that it is wrong to make judgements about other people using your own set of standards instead of God's, so now you are responsible for being careful not to talk against a brother or sister using your own value judgment. And you have learned that you need to consider God in all your decision-making. For today's lessons and for the lessons you have learned in previous sermons by me or by Pastor Bruce or by other speakers in the pulpit here or at Bible Study, you ought to be sure not to neglect doing what you know to be right.

I started today's message with a discussion on the importance of having a posture of humility in everything that we do. Be humble before God our Creator. And be humble toward your fellow Christians. Remember that you are imperfect, too, just like your brother or sister is. I think that if we were to maintain this posture of humility, it would greatly reduce the sins we have been discussing in James chapters 2, 3, and 4 – wrong use of our tongue, conflicts and quarrels at church, wrong judgments, and other misdeeds. Let us remember to maintain this spirit of humility toward God and toward our fellow Christians, and remember that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and that it is He that we serve and it is He whom we should emulate. Matthew 23:11 – "But the greatest among you shall be your servant." 1 Peter 5:5 – "... clothe yourselves with humility ..."