

# Proud Heart, Humbling Word

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, please turn in your Bibles to James chapter 4, that's page 1013 in the Blue Bibles. James chapter 4, and I'm going to read from verse 11 to chapter 5 verse 6.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you're not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.

But who are you to judge your neighbor? Come now, you who say today or tomorrow will go into such and such town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you're a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we'll live and do this or that.

[ 1 : 05 ] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Come now, you rich. Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.

Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You've laid up treasure in the last days. Behold the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, a crying out against you.

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 self-indulgence. You've fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

You've condemned and murdered the righteous man. He does not resist you. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. We'll be looking at this passage in a little more detail in just a few moments' time.

[ 2 : 17 ] Just a moment of quiet as we turn to God's word to pray. Let's pray together. We thank you, gracious God, that you have spoken in words that we can understand.

And how we pray that this evening as we learn from the scriptures, these would be to us what they really are, the words of God.

Hear us, we pray. Deliver us from being merely hearers. People with divided beings whose ears hear one thing and do another.

Have mercy on us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to be dealing this evening with the most gripping of subjects, even after a large lunch, which I know many of you will have had on this celebratory day, and a warm afternoon.

I can almost guarantee that I will have your fullest attention. If anyone falls asleep, that will be showing extraordinary powers of whatever it is that you have extraordinary powers of, if you're good at falling asleep.

[ 3 : 35 ] Three areas we're looking at this evening, very close to the heart of every human being. They're not unusual. Let me list them for you. Talking about other people, planning your future and your career, and thinking about getting rich.

Those are things powerful enough to grab the attention of any audience for at least 20 minutes.

What would normal British life be like if you took away those three things?

Talking about other people, dreaming about the future, and thinking, what to do if I won the lottery?

It would be a different world altogether, wouldn't it? But James did not write this section of his letter just because it knew it would keep an evening congregation awake.

Turn back to chapter 1, verse 21, would you? If you've been with us so far in the book of James, you'll know that this is a letter written to combat a set of very bad behaviors between Christians.

And the headline idea of this letter is in chapter 1, verse 21. This is the response that James wants.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, that's the bad behavior that's going on,

and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

[ 4 : 53 ] He wants them to put away their behavior and receive the gospel word again which can save them. And he is aware that this is a very difficult thing to do. Is it not difficult when you've become embroiled in bad behavior?

Is it not difficult to put that away? To say, no, I won't be angry and bitter at that person anymore, and I'll stop fighting? It's much, much harder to do than one would think.

And he knows that it's hard to do. And he knows that receiving this word meekly involves not merely hearing it, but obeying it. And so he adds 122.

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, or you'll be deceiving yourself. It's harder to do than it might be.

Now, let me say that what we have in chapter 4, flip over to chapter 4. What we have in chapter 4, I think, is the equivalent of 122. It's, don't just listen to it, do it as well.

[ 6 : 02 ] Now, let's look at chapter 4 quickly in the bit that comes at the beginning. Here is the gospel word that he wants them to receive. It's nicely summarized in verse 6. Here is the gospel word.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And therefore, verse 7, well, submit yourselves to God. God is against proud human behavior, but he is generous towards those who turn to him for mercy, forgiveness, who are willing to treat him as though he's really God.

So, says James, humble yourselves. There's the demand of the gospel. And you see it again in verse 10. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

And verse 11 looks as though we're changing subjects. Don't speak evil against one another. But in fact, what I think is going on here is that James is not content just to leave his hearers with a general humble yourselves before the Lord.

He spells out, this means not doing this, and not doing this, and not doing this. He wants them not merely to be hearers of the gospel word.

[ 7 : 23 ] He wants them to do it. And I think what we have here are three examples in these three paragraphs. Three examples particular to their situation of what it will mean to humble themselves before the Lord.

Here James spells it out. Now, I want to suggest, therefore, that these three paragraphs, although they look rather different from one another, belong together. They belong together because of the structure of the letter.

When we get to 5-7, be patient, therefore, brothers. We enter a kind of concluding section from the letter. So, structurally, the bit between 4-10 and 5-7, well, you'd kind of think it ought to hang together.

But actually, it hangs together in content as well as in the place that it sits. Because in these three sections, there are things in common. There are a number of overlapping themes.

And perhaps the most significant thing they have in common is that they're all passages in which attitude to God and attitude to human beings are brought very close together.

[ 8 : 31 ] If you've been with us in James this far, you'll know that that's one of James' big things. He talks about attitude to God and attitude to human beings and brings them very close together.

He says, look, if you behave that way towards people, you need to know that that says something about how things are between you and God. It's not just a horizontal issue.

And so, when he gets to that part of the letter which is all to do with sorting themselves out in relation to God, 4-10, humble yourselves before the Lord. He says, look, if you're going to be back in right relationship with God, know that it is not the real thing unless it's changing your relationships with one another.

You have to sort the horizontal problem out as well as the vertical one. So, here are some examples, I think, of what it is going to be like for James' readers to respond in the right way to the gospel message, sorting out the horizontal as well as the vertical relationship.

Now, as I've said already, these examples are particular to their situation, though the things mentioned here, frankly, are significant enough to find application in any life, anywhere, anytime.

[ 9 : 57 ] With that in mind, let's look at these three examples. Command number one, stop speaking against one another. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

The one who speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you're not a doer of it, but a judge. There's only one

lawgiver and judge.

He's able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge your neighbor? Do not speak against one another. What he means here is speaking in such a way, either to someone else or about someone else, that you bring them down in their own eyes or in the eyes of others.

Now, this is very common behavior. It includes gossip about what people have done. It includes negative speculation about the motives of others. Oh, I always knew there was something going on there.

It includes the propagation of things we've heard that maybe others ought to know about. And it includes speaking the truth to people or about people.

[11:15] Our translation, the ESV, verse 11, has do not speak evil against one another. The NIV has do not slander one another. Both of those imply something that's untrue or lying.

But more literally, it's just don't speak against others. And speaking against people is a much broader issue than misrepresenting them or lying to them.

In fact, speaking the truth to somebody may be the most damaging sort of speech possible. You can say to other people true things about themselves in a profoundly destructive manner.

You can dress it up saying, I'm only doing this in love. You need to know this. You can say true things about people to others when really they'd be much better unsaid.

How many things do you know about other people that have made you think negatively about them? How many of those did you really need to know in order to function safely in life?

[12:27] Speaking against others, says James. This is not the humbling of self before God that I had in mind. No, this sort of speech comes from pride.

We speak against others to build ourselves up by bringing them down. It's a dynamic thing too. It's to do with the hearer as well as the speaker.

We only get away with speaking like that about other people because others want to listen. I wonder if you've ever been asked when saying something to somebody, hang on, is it really necessary for me to hear this?

It's not a question we ask very often, but maybe it ought to be asked more often. The hearer of negative speech gets a boost in pride as well as the speaker of negative speech.

James takes the clothes off this sort of behavior and reveals the naked pride underneath. Verse 11, the one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

[13:30] And if you judge the law, you're not a doer of it, but a judge. Now, James has already talked about the law. Flip back to chapter 2, verse 8, would you please? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing well.

But if you show partiality, you're committing sin. When James talks about law in this letter, he seems to have in mind particularly the great gospel demand that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Question. When you spoke that way, when you listened eagerly to what that person had to say, was that loving your neighbor as yourself?

Or was it something different? Says James, of course you weren't loving your neighbor as yourself. You were, 4.11, standing in judgment over God's way of doing things.

You were saying, I don't think God's rule about loving people is a very good rule. I think my rule about speaking against others is a much better one. And that's what I'm going to do. Into that situation, James speaks a humbling word.

[14:56] Each of these three examples has a humbling word. And in this one, it's verse 12. Well, there's only one lawgiver and judge. He who's able to save and to destroy.

Who are you to judge your neighbor? There's only one lawgiver and judge. Remind me of who you are. Oh, yeah, you're not him.

He's the one who can save and destroy. But you're not him. So why are you speaking destructively? The truth is that this kind of speaking against others despises God and his way of doing things.

How might God have spoken about us? He makes the rules. We break the rules. But he has chosen to save rather than to judge.

Think of all the things. Think of all the true things that God could have said about us. Out loud in public for everyone to hear if he'd wanted to.

[16:08] Imagine if in order to be a proper Christian, you had to endure God speaking the truth about you to other people.

The reality is that God does not speak against us in that destructive, humiliating sort of way. It's not that he doesn't correct us. Of course he does. And sometimes we do need correction from God and from one another. And sometimes in public for our good. But God's general way of operating is not to disclose our shortcomings to the wider world.

It's not the way he does things. So who are you exactly, says James, when you are so comfortable getting other people's negatives out in the wider world, majoring on one another's weaknesses and shortcomings, character defects, when that speaking brings no benefit to them or to the one hearing?

Who are you, says James, to big yourself up by knocking others down or dispensing information about them to a wider audience? God doesn't behave like that.

[17:26] Who are you exactly that you should? First example then of proud heart, speaking against others when God hasn't spoken against us.

Humbling word. Who are you exactly to do that? Second example. The second example is presumptuous planning. Verse 13.

Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we'll go into such and such a town. Spend a year there. Trade. Make a profit. Yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?

You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, one ought to say, if the Lord wills, we'll live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. Where is the proud heart? In this example. Well, what's being described here is a business plan.

[18:24] A plan for the next financial year. What's wrong with it? Well, what's wrong with it is it leaves God out. It assumes that everything will go predictably. Now, of course, much of the time in life things do go predictably.

Much of life is pretty predictable. But just because things are predictable much of the time doesn't mean that our life is in our hands. That we are masters of our own destiny.

Verse 16. There's a proud boastfulness in the attitude that says, oh, I'll do this for a couple of years and then this. And then I'll be ready for a bit of that.

Here's a person planning as though God isn't really there at all. The Bible, of course, is not anti-planning. There is nothing inherently spiritual about spontaneity.

But this is planning without God in the picture as verse 15 makes clear. Instead, you ought to say if the Lord wills. You ought to bring God into the picture.

[19:23] And by the way, that's not an excuse just for sticking if the Lord wills in front of every phrase to make it look pious. That's not what he means. He means really considering the Lord in the things we plan.

And one of the symptoms of godless planning, thinking that the future is ours to determine, is a carelessness about the good that needs to be done now.

And that, I think, is what verse 17 is about. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

It is possible for my plans for the future, so to dominate my thinking and activity in the present, that I am distracted and prevented from doing what I ought to be doing in the present.

Because I'm so busy trying to fix the future. The way it ought to be. Now that's a familiar enough idea. I guess we've all met people who always have in mind the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing.

[20:30] They're always thinking about tomorrow, and the day after, and the year after. Rather than the most important thing, which is the good that they ought to be doing now.

Back in chapter 2, there's an example a bit like that. A person who, faced with a fellow Christian who lacks food and clothing, says, God bless you, hope it works out well, and does nothing about that immediate need.

And actually, it's all too easy to imagine a person doing that who's just too preoccupied with the big deal that they have to do tomorrow to do anything about the smallish problem they need to do something about today.

Here, James is focusing in again on the horizontal dimensions of repentance. A proud, self-determining attitude often neglects immediate needs and responsibilities, which ought to be

getting attention.

Verse 14 is a strongly humbling word. You don't know what tomorrow will bring. Never mind next year. What is your life?

[ 21 : 44 ] You're a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. It's a strongly humbling word. Big planner, are you? Yeah, I haven't got a clue what's going to happen tomorrow.

And what's your life anyway? Here today, gone tomorrow. Who are you, oh ignorant and transient one, to be speaking so confidently about what you're going to do next year?

As though God isn't involved in that. Presumptuous planning. That's the second example. The third example. Chapter 5, verse 1. Hoarding riches in the last days.

Come now, you rich. Weep and howl. For the miseries that are coming upon you, your riches have rotted. Your garments are moth-eaten.

Your gold and silver have corroded. Their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You've laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you.

[ 22 : 49 ] And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You've lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You've fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

You've condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. It's a very striking set of statements. Let me make some observations about this.

First, the tone is very negative. Second, you'll notice that this example has no imperative. It doesn't have a do this, don't do that.

Instead, it speaks to certain rich people about what's coming down the line towards them. And that is not good. Third, as elsewhere in James, the language used here about the rich is much more ambiguous than that used of the poor.

And this may reflect two things. First, that in general, riches are a great snare spiritually. And second, there may be some particular rich persons within earshot who have been especially prominent in the bad behavior that James is writing against.

[ 24 : 05 ] I think that's almost certainly true from other things in this letter. At any rate, the rich are, James thinks, within earshot. And I take it that this section, though it is very severe and not brimming over with hope about these people, nevertheless constitutes instruction for repentance.

This is what's coming. Something ought to be done about that. Fifth, the wealthy are not always proud, though they can be, and not always exploitative.

Though riches does breed a carelessness sometimes of those who have less. Six, notice that everything that seems so solid and secure in this age will be no use whatever at the last day. These verses are the stuff of nightmares. You have a bad dream. A bad dream in which you open your drawer. And your best clothes are full of holes.

Totally useless. You go to your safe. That's if you have one. You have a safe. You go to your safe. You unlock it. The gold and silver piling up in your safe is rusting away.

[ 25 : 28 ] Gold doesn't rust, but it is. You reach out and grab it. And it eats its way through your fingers, destroying your skin. A loud voice is heard. You gathered all this in the last days.

Verse 3. This is not what last days are for. These are gospel days. What were you thinking of? Hoarding all this in the last days. You hear a noise from the window in your dream. You look out the window. Your hired workers working in your garden point at the window at the sight of you and cry to heaven.

Look! There he is, the fraud. The one who stole our things. The one who didn't pay us. We starved because of him. And you know that heaven hears their cries. The dream switches, as dreams do, to a wonderful banquet.

Verse 5. You're having a lovely time with friends. It's a great time. Fun. Friendship. Enjoyment. You go to the door to show them out. You thought it was the door to the outside world.

[ 26 : 35 ] But actually, it turns into the door of a slaughterhouse. And you are entering. You thought you were entertaining guests and enjoying the fruit of your labors. In fact, you were fattening yourself for a meat hook.

Why am I here, you scream? The answer, verse 6. You have condemned and murdered the righteous man.

He does not resist you. Almost certainly in verse 6. James is alluding to the Lord Jesus, the righteous man, himself condemned and murdered.

Going silent, unresisting to death. Like a sheep done before its shearers. The way you've treated the brothers is so like the way others treated the Lord himself.

It is a nightmare picture. With a nightmare verdict. Now here's an insight from a Cornhill student in class a few weeks ago.

[ 27 : 35 ] It's possible that this third one is a combination of the previous two. The first one, people who are dismissive of others and speak negatively about them.

The second one, people who are preoccupied with planning their own future. In the third one, welcome to the nightmare that leads to. If it remains unchecked.

Weep and howl, says James. For where that's going. This is a very, very strong warning.

It is not brimming over with hope. But it does belong in a section about repentance. And the last day has not yet arrived for James' readers.

And so maybe the door is still open for these people, whoever they were. Brothers and sisters, riches are a terrible snare. They dull our perceptions of what is really important.

[ 28 : 40 ] And of where true security is to be found. They make the present world seem solid and desirable. And the world to come dull, distant, uninteresting.

Wake up now, says James. Before it's too late. These are the last days. Days of great opportunity. Days of huge importance. Days of grace. Days for gospel advance. Not for the hoarding of riches. These are not days for behaving badly towards others.

So as to big yourself up. These are not days for planning obsessively about your future. And neglecting present needs. And these are not days for hoarding riches.

And fattening yourself as if for slaughter. Like a brute beast that doesn't know what tomorrow is going to bring. These last days are gospel days.

[ 29 : 45 ] For the benefit of humanity. For the benefit of humanity. And just as the Lord Jesus. Gave himself in these last days. For the salvation of the world.

That is what his people are supposed to do as well. Humble yourselves before the Lord, says James. Stop behaving like that towards your brothers and sisters.

Don't just be hearers of the gospel word. But doers as well. Let's pray together. Let's hear again the gospel word.

James chapter 4 verse 6. The scripture says.

God opposes the proud. But gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God.

[ 30 : 51 ] And don't speak evil against one another. And don't plan. Without God in mind.

And don't store up stuff. That will be useless at the end. In this age of opportunity. Just a few minutes to respond in the quiet.

To what God has said to us. And then I'll lead us in prayer. Amen.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted. Yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter. And a sheep that before its shearers is silent.

He opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Who considered that he was cut off.

[ 32 : 24 ] Of the land of the living. Stricken for the transgression of my people. Yet out of the anguish of his soul. He shall see.

And be satisfied. By his knowledge. Shall the righteous one. My servant. Make many. To be accounted righteous.

And he shall bear their iniquities. Gracious God. We acknowledge in front of you. That we spend so much of our time and energy.

Trying to make ourselves big in the eyes of others. And trying to secure for ourselves a solid future. And doing all the wrong things in this last age.

With the resources that you've given us. And we pray that you'd help us to repent of this. We pray especially where we've been dismissive towards our brothers and sisters.

[ 33 : 25 ] Ungracious. Ungracious. Malicious. You would please have mercy on us. And we pray that you would make us not merely hearers of the gospel word.

But doers of it as well. We thank you for the Lord Jesus. Who did not resist. The hostility towards him.

And did not seek to establish his own innocence. And did not defend his corner. For the sake of the salvation of others. Such a contrast.

To the energies of this present age. So self-promoting. And yet. We recognize.

That that is the pattern that you have honored. In raising him from the dead. And we pray that we might follow along with that pattern. And look forward as he did.  
[ 34 : 23 ] To a glorious resurrection. And final vindication. Hear us we pray in Jesus name. Amen.