

Proud Hearts and Stubborn Wills Are Put to Flight

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[0 : 00] Good. Well, we turn now to our Bible reading this morning. And after a bit of a break over Christmas and New Year, Willie is returning to the book of James.

James chapter 4 and beginning at verse 11. 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, we all go into such and such a time 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 are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

[1 : 24] Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will 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. 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 have 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.

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 have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

[2 : 28] You have condemned. You have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you. Well, amen.

And may God bless his word to us this morning as we come back to it in our service. We'll do turn, if you would, to the passage that Ker read to us there, James chapter 4.

And we're looking at verses 11 to 17. As you're doing that, I would value your prayers for me. I'm going up this afternoon to Aberdeen. I'll be preaching there this evening at Gilcombeston.

I'm speaking tomorrow at an expository ministry conference for ministers up there in the Northeast. I'm feeling a bit confused today. I went to Kelvin Grove this morning by mistake. So perhaps you could pray I get on the right train.

That would be good. Don't end up in Manchester or somewhere like that. But there we are. Well, James chapter 4. We're coming back, as Ker said.

[3 : 27] We're coming back to James after a break over the Christmas period. So it would be good to remind ourselves what this letter is all about. James is, we've called him a spiritual physician.

He's greatly concerned with the health of churches that are scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, probably up the Syrian coast.

After the persecution of the church that you read about in Acts chapter 8, the churches, the believers, were scattered from Jerusalem. And so they formed many churches.

Churches of the dispersion, as James calls them in the first verse of the letter. If you read Acts chapter 11, it tells us that it was a difficult time.

There was economic pressure. There was famine in that part of the world. And so, as James acknowledges right at the beginning of the letter, the people he was writing to faced trials of many kinds.

[4 : 27] But trials don't always bring out the best in people. They don't always bring the spiritual growth, the maturity, the completeness that God intends that they should to complete, to perfect our faith.

Sadly, often, trials tend to bring out the worst in us. And I think we probably know that's true, don't we? If we're honest. And it was certainly so in these churches that James was writing to.

He sees a great deal of ill health in the symptoms of things that are not just ugly. Strife, quarrels, fights, anger.

But he says that they're deadly dangerous. Indeed, they're potentially spiritually fatal. The last two letters of the last two verses of the letter, if you look, they tell us starkly that he sees people already wandering away from the truth of God into a multitude of sin, which if unchecked, James says, will lead to death.

And by that he means spiritual death, eternal death, the opposite of eternal life. So he's determined to arrest the disease before it's too late, to bring people back, to bring churches back from the brink, to save people, to save churches.

[5 : 50] That's his mission. And by the way, if you wonder if that is still relevant today, just take a drive through our city, or indeed any city or town in Scotland.

Count all the buildings that once used to house churches, living churches. But are now closed, or have been turned into flats, or soft play centers, or are just sadly crumbling.

Somebody sent me today, sorry, just this week, an advert for a parish church in Glasgow, which once had an evangelical ministry, not that long ago. And it's now for sale, for about half the price of a small flat.

Spiritual death is real, but it isn't sudden, usually. James says there's a poison that works its way through the system. Flagged it up in chapter 1, verses 14 and 15.

Do you remember? Death, he says, is the full-grown manifestation of sin, which in turn is conceived and birthed by desire deep within the human heart.

[6 : 56] So James' diagnosis is a cardiac one. The root cause of all the dangerous symptoms he sees lies in our hearts.

And of course, in the Bible, the heart means the control center of our being. It means our mind, our affections, our will. And the critical danger, James says, is of a heart that is divided.

Divided between wholehearted desire for God and the desires and the passions and the ambitions for this world. And that division is expressed in lots of different ways throughout the letter.

But that's the fundamental contrast in view always. Whether he's talking about heaven and earth or things above, wisdom from above or below, wisdom against wandering, whether it's fellowship with God or fellowship with the world.

Always the same division. That's what he means in chapter 1, verse 8, where he speaks of the double-minded man who's unstable in all his ways.

[7 : 56] He's divided in his loyalties. Divided in his thinking. And he's dangerously deceiving his heart, as he says in verse 26 of chapter 1.

It's the same again in chapter 2, where he speaks in terms of the distinctions, the partiality he mentions in verse 4 there and in verse 9. Divided in dispute with yourselves.

Conflicting loyalties. It's the same in chapter 3, where it's betrayed by the tongue that speaks both ways. As if fresh water and bitter water could come out of the same spring.

And as we saw in chapter 4, it's exposed there, isn't it, in the very starkest terms of all. To have a heart divided in this way, he says, is nothing less than spiritual adultery.

Verse 4 of chapter 4. Friendship with the world puts you at enmity with God. Makes you God's enemy, not at all his friend. Just as to commit adultery shows that you don't love your spouse, you're hating them.

[9 : 02] And all in all, it's a pretty shocking picture. He's speaking about churches that are full of bitter jealousy. He says, selfish ambition. Fights and quarrels.

Disorder and strife. And James says very clearly, that's not just unspiritual. He calls it demonic in chapter 3, verse 15.

Chapter 4, verse 7, he's saying that the devil seems to be not being resisted, but actually running rampant. And what he's talking about is not just one unusual different church.

He's talking about something that is in many churches. He's saying already this seems to be an endemic disease. And if that can happen in apostolic churches, this is little more than a decade after the day of Pentecost.

It's extraordinary. If it can happen there, then surely no church in the world can be immune from the risks of this disease of a divided heart. Which, of course, is why James' letter is preserved in our Bibles for all churches today.

[10 : 11] Because if something is as high risk as that, and almost certainly fatal, then it has to be screened for. It can't be left unrecognized and therefore untreated, can it?

Now it's true today that a lot of medical screening is not warranted. It actually does a lot more harm than good. It mainly serves making a lot of money for the medical industrial complex. It makes people live in fear.

But not all screening is unwarranted. And certainly this spiritual disease must be recognized, must be dealt with. Because it's the only way, says James, to save from the consequences of spiritual death.

But here's the thing. Accepting that diagnosis is very, very difficult. Because no Christian, no church will easily accept that they have to submit themselves to very unpleasant medicine.

The kind of medicine that he talks about in chapter 4, verse 9. How would you feel if the call to worship this morning went like this? Good morning, everyone. Welcome to church. Now, be wretched and mourn and weep.

[11 : 21] Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. I wonder what you'd think. I think if James were a church leader today, he would be under investigation for so-called spiritual abuse.

Because we get outraged today, don't we? Should anybody tell us anything that might upset us? Even if it's manifested the obvious truth. Self-deception seems to almost become the very defining feature of our culture today.

And self-deception is certainly a cardinal feature of this spiritual disease that James is addressing. But it must be penetrated if the diagnosis is ever to be accepted.

If the only cure is going to be received. And so in his letter, James, as we've seen, sets about a rigorous diagnostic process for these churches.

Three diagnostic tests he summarizes. Do you remember in chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, he flags up the tongue and the way we talk to one another and about one another.

[12 : 27] And he speaks about our treatment of other people, especially those that we deem less important. And then he focuses on how tainted by the world we really are.

What we actually treasure in life. Is it God's kingdom? Or is it just this world? And the answer, you see, to these questions will tell us where our hearts really are, says James.

But the self-deception is so hard to penetrate. So he has to relentlessly prosecute his diagnostic probing. And that is what he does all the way through chapters 2 to 5.

First of all, in chapter 2, we saw he focuses on our treatment of others. And he shows these folks that they are not being quick to hear and do God's words. They're not showing divine wisdom, but they're showing worldly attitudes in the way they treat other people.

In terms of wealth, in terms of status, in terms of glory, and so on. And in chapter 3, he shows that they're not being slow to speak as they're commanded to be in chapter 1, verse 19.

[13 : 36] But in fact, they're being far too quick to speak. They're full of worldly ambition and in anger. And that is evident in the church leadership with all sorts of people wanting to be speaking. And therefore, inevitably, it's going to permeate church life.

And then James' devastating critique culminates, really, in the very stark language at the beginning of chapter 4, which we looked at last time, a bit before Christmas, where he names all that he sees as something very terrible.

They see it as nothing more than just living average Christian lives. Oh, this is just church life. This is what people are like. It's always going to be like this. But no, James names it, in fact, as spiritual adultery.

Being not friends, but enemies of God. Because, in fact, they want to remain friends with the world. And that is what puts them at enmity with God.

And we have to be very careful, friends. We have to be careful not to just dismiss James' words. Oh, that doesn't have any relevance for us. That's not us. Of course it's not us. It's not me. Are you sure, says James?

[14 : 50] Are you sure that your life really is characterized by heavenly wisdom? Or could it be that actually you're wandering away? Are you trying to serve two masters?

Are you trying to think that you can do what the Lord Jesus himself says is impossible to do? Are our desires, are our passions as pure and as undivided as we like to think they are?

Well, how easily and willingly do we embrace the gracious command of God that James sets before us there in chapter 4, verses 7 and 10? He tells us in verse 6 that God promises to give grace to the humble, to those who do what he describes real penitent faith as doing.

Returning to the Lord with undivided allegiance and affection. Reversing the dividedness of our actions and attitudes, verse 8, cleansing our hands and hearts.

And rejecting our approval and our applause even of the things that the world values. Showing real regret for our part, for our participation in things that God hates.

[16 : 03] True mourning. Weeping even. And we have to ask ourselves, as James asks us, is that us? Is that you and me in our lives? Does that picture us in our corporate life?

Are we living in submission to God? Humbling ourselves before the Lord so as to be exalted by him? His way, not ours. Well, you see, James is ever practical.

And that's why in verse 11 onwards of chapter 4, he goes on to show us what humility to God looks like actually in real everyday life. And what it doesn't look like.

It means banishing worldly attitudes and ambitions. And especially worldly arrogance in the way that we think about and talk about other people.

And about our own plans and purpose in life. And indeed about all our possessions. It's that worldly arrogance that features all through this whole section.

[17:04] Right through to chapter 5, verse 6. And it all belongs together. He deals first with pride condemnation of other people in verses 11 and 12. Then with presumptuous confidence about our own plans in life in verses 13 to 17.

And then he goes on to speak about predatory covetousness regarding our possessions. In the first six verses of chapter 5. But to be right with God, to truly love him with all our heart and soul and mind and our strength.

To be right with God like that, we must be right with others. Especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. James has told us, you see, that to love our neighbor as ourself is just the other side of that coin, isn't it?

He calls it the royal law in chapter 2, verse 8. That is the earthly evidence of a true heavenly relationship. In all these different areas of life.

There's too much in this whole passage for us today. So we're going to focus on verses 11 to 17. And these verses, when we look carefully at them, they teach us how not to be a kind of church that is described in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 4.

[18:17] Full of quarrels and fights and jealousies. To banish all such, we need to be those who truly humble ourselves before the Lord. And that means constantly repenting of all worldly arrogance in our talk about other people.

And about our plans for our life. To be the kind of church that God wants us to be, as we sang in the hymn earlier, all proud hearts and all stubborn wills must be put to flight.

So look first at verses 11 and 12, which focus on our talk and our treatment of people. James says, stop proudly condemning others.

Stop making arrogant pronouncements as if you were God. Verse 11, do not speak evil against one another, brothers. End of verse 12, who are you to judge your neighbor?

Now the word speak evil there is literally to speak against. It's translated literally like that in 1 Peter 2 verse 12, speaking about people speaking against Christians, calling them evildoers.

[19:29] And again in 1 Peter 3 verse 16, it's translated as slandered. And it means to defame, to denigrate with the intent of bringing somebody down, of causing harm.

And it needn't be false accusations, though it often is. It can be spreading gossip, undermining somebody's reputation. Even it can be passing on true things, which actually just would be far better left unsaid.

And there are things, aren't there, which are better left unsaid, don't need to be said. It's speaking that is designed to harm. And the thing is that they are doing this.

The form of the verb there, do not, it means they are doing it. It means stop doing it. They are proudly condemning other people in the church. And obviously that's one reason why there is jealousy and quarrels and warring passions that is evident in the life of the church.

Well, it's hardly uncommon, is it? It's often a manifestation of psychological insecurity, isn't it? You need to constantly criticize and find fault in others in order to feel superior yourself.

[20 : 41] You have to talk other people down in order to lift yourself up. It can surface in families, can't it? Among siblings, especially when they're grown up. One is jealous of one of the other's achievements or their educational advantage or their career, maybe, or their marriage or their family or whatever.

Sometimes among Christians, it's to do with their choice of church, especially if they themselves have made foolish choices about church life. They need to convince themselves that they haven't.

So they'll denigrate the other, always seek to find fault. It can surface in churches where somebody's jealous of another person's role or responsibility, something that they crave.

And so they'll carp and they'll criticize those who do have that role. Or just they'll criticize the role itself and denigrate it. I don't think eldership means anything anyway.

I wouldn't want to be one anyway. Or it can be a mother, perhaps, who's got deep insecurities about parenthood. So she's very critical of other mothers, critical of other children and their behavior, keeps herself aloof from others.

[21 : 49] So it's to bolster her own sense of superiority. Or it can be somebody who's deeply envious of another person's wide circle of friends and the fact that many people look to them for spiritual support and enjoy their hospitality.

So when that person puts on a barbecue or a party or whatever it is, well, they'll go, but, oh, they'll criticize the games, they'll criticize the guest list, they'll criticize the caterer, whatever it is.

We all know that kind of thing, don't we? We've heard it many times, I'm sure. And I think if we're honest, we'll probably admit that we've done it ourselves.

I expect we're all, in some way, psychologically insecure, aren't we? But here's the thing. James says this is more than just a psychological problem.

The bitter jealousy, the jealous ambition in the heart that's revealed by such arrogant pronouncements is what he shows us very clearly, isn't it? We saw it in chapter 3, verses 14 to 16.

[22 : 53] It is the antithesis, he says, of real Christian faith, the antithesis of real saving faith. It's not heavenly wisdom born of the Spirit of God.

He says it's earthly, unspiritual, it's demonic. And to even speak that way, he is saying, is a total denial of the gospel itself.

He tells us here in verse 12, we are all brothers, brothers and sisters. That means every one of us, well, as he says in chapter 1, was brought forth by the same word of truth, by the same Father, by the same sheer grace.

Of his own will, he brought us forth, he says. We're all children of the same heavenly Father. There's only one lawgiver and judge, he reminds us here in verse 12, who's able both to save and to destroy.

And he didn't destroy you, he didn't condemn you, he saved you. And he saved your brothers and sisters. And yet you, unlike God, are proudly condemning them.

[24 : 07] Don't you see that talking down to and about brothers and sisters like that shows that, well, you consider yourself above them. And that denies God's grace.

That inverts upside down completely the whole gospel. That's the very antithesis, isn't it, of what verse 10 says, humbling yourself before the Lord. It's just not Christian behavior at all.

It's not the fruit of the spirit of grace. Alec Mateer says, if you really are low before God, as verses 6 to 10 here suggest, then we have no altitude left to talk down to anyone.

That's right, isn't it? But this kind of talk isn't just even an arrogant denial of God's grace. Grace, it's an arrogant defiance of God himself, the only lawgiver.

And his sovereign right alone to be the one who commands our lives and judges them. Verse 11, the one who speaks against the brother and judges a brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

[25 : 15] And therefore, verse 12, the lawgiver, God himself. So to sin thus against a brother or sister is directly to sin shamelessly against God.

Now, as always throughout James, you see, he's telling us that the horizontal relationships can never be separated from the vertical, whether it's in our thought, in our words, or in our deeds.

And it begins in our hearts, doesn't it, with our thoughts. Back in chapter 2, verse 4, he said, you've become judges with evil thoughts in the way they treated others. But here now, their mouths are expressing their minds in these arrogant condemnations of others.

And it's destroyed the peace of the church. Led to an atmosphere of quarreling, of warfare. Well, is that something that was solely confined to the first century and ever been seen since in the church of Jesus Christ?

You tell me. James says, show me your faith by your works. Show me your love of God by your love of your brothers and sisters. But what he sees and what he hears is talking evil about brothers and sisters.

[26 : 34] And that betrays the unspoken truth, isn't it? Which is that your thoughts actually are evil against God. And he's just repeating consistent biblical teaching.

Apostle John says, if anyone says, I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

That's the reason. And he also says this, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. A murderer. A murderer. A murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

That's stark, isn't it? From John. And James is being just as stark. If you judge others like that, says James, you show that you are not a doer of the word.

That your faith does not save. That your faith is dead. And make no mistake, he says here in verse 12, the one lawgiver is the true judge and the only judge that counts.

[27 : 48] And he's the one who can save and destroy. And he will judge everyone, including you. That's the point.

But remember what James said back in chapter 2, verse 13. If you show no mercy towards your brothers and sisters, only proud judgment, only condemning them, then what judgment do you expect to await you?

Well, judgment without mercy is what he says there, isn't it? And James is warning us so starkly, you see, just because the stakes are so very high. Setting yourself up against your brothers and sisters like this isn't just denying the gospel.

It's putting yourself above God himself. It's defying his throne. Four times in these two verses, he says, you are judging. But then says, there is only one judge.

Who are you to judge your neighbor? Do you think you're God? Do you think you're above God? That you know better than God? That you're more righteous than God? That you're a better judge, a superior Lord?

[28 : 59] Let me quote you some words from William Still in these verses. It's God alone who makes the laws. And for any member of the Christian family to start legislating for the brother who displeases him is not only to find fault with him, but with the law which is not so hard on him as he would be.

What the criticizer is really saying is, now if I were God, we're setting ourselves up in the place of God. Let's see how shocking this is. What we're really saying is that I, a sinner, would be a better God than God whose law suffers so leniently this erring brother.

Yes, we would be a better God. That is to say, a harder God. Except, of course, on ourselves. The chief difference between a sinner God, us, and the sinless God is that the sinner God would exclude mercy and forgiveness.

Except for himself, of course, by special dispensation. From which we draw the conclusion that sinfulness is harder on sins than sinlessness.

How surprising the Christian faith is. So reacting and so rebounding indeed that we better leave it as it is and let God and his law be the law and learn to bear with our brother as God bears with us.

[30 : 25] besides, he has not only the superior knowledge, he also has the power. Alec Matier points out that the Old Testament denounces evil speaking both against God and against man oftener than any other offense.

Isn't that striking? And that means there must be few things that would do more to grieve away the Spirit of God than brother and sister speaking against brother and sister and his family.

Don't you think? Be careful though just to notice what James is not saying. Don't be confused. He's clearly not saying there is never to be any godly discrimination or any discipline within the church.

Of course there's to be good judgment and right judgment and sometimes action that flows from that. Just read 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 for one example of that. No, what he's forbidding is censorious talk against others.

It's the same thing Paul also forbids in, for example, Romans chapter 14 where some believers were condemning others because of what they ate or didn't eat or because of the way they kept certain holy days and so on.

[31 : 40] And no, Paul says, no, each must be convinced in his own mind in response to God and his law is what he says. We're not to be telling brothers and sisters I do this so you should do this or you must do this as well.

That's the superior spirit, isn't it? That's the arrogant pronouncement. Now, if perhaps you do think a brother or sister needs to understand something better, needs to change their behavior, well, it's far better to say, isn't it?

Well, look, this is what I do, this is how I see it and here's the reason and explain it from scripture. And say, but you must think it over. You must become convinced in your own mind.

You see, that means that you're both putting yourself under God and under his command. You're not becoming the law giver yourself, sitting in judgment above your brother.

And you're building up your brother or sister, aren't you? You're not tearing them down. And that's Paul's great concern in Romans chapter 14. You can read it. We shouldn't be passing judgment on one another.

[32 : 47] Rather, his great concern is we shouldn't be putting hindrances or stumbling blocks before one another. We're to build one another up, not pull one another down. That's what James is saying.

And James is also not saying, by the way, that we should never have any godly discernment. I mean, Jesus himself tells us, doesn't he, don't cast your pearls before swine. That implies making right and sensible discerning judgments about people.

But in the previous five verses to that verse in Matthew chapter 7, he very clearly forbids judging, doesn't he, the speck in your brother's eye until you've taken out the log from your own eye.

Who are you to judge in the state of blindness that you're in? That's James' point, isn't it? And it's a pointed question when he asks that.

Who are we to think we can judge? Look at verses 7 to 10. Does that describe us, that true humility?

[33 : 50] Or could our faith in God be shown to just be a sham by our condemnation of others? Are we doing what verse 11 says? That question, who are you?

It reminded me of that story in Acts chapter 19. Do you remember about the seven sons of Sceva who were invoking the name of Jesus, having seen what the apostles were doing to try and get power over evil spirits.

But they had no evidence of the spirit of Jesus in their lives at all. And the evil spirit confronted them and said, well, Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who on earth are you? And he beat the living daylights out of them.

And the seven sons of Sceva can have their counterparts today, can't they? There are people who invoke the names of the great ones to try and impress and coerce others into their particular form of what they think superior Christianity is.

Well, be careful if that's you. Maybe the Lord's saying, well, yes, John Calvin I know. Yes, Martin Luther I know. Yes, the Puritans I know. But who are you? To speak so proudly to your brother.

[34 : 57] Or maybe it's, yes, John Stott I know or Martin Lloyd-Jones I know or Alistair Begg I know or Sinclair Ferguson I know or whoever your hero is. But who are you to speak so to your brother or sister?

We need to be careful, don't we? If we're tempted to quote proudly, making arrogant pronouncements, condemning people that we feel superior to.

The truth is that those who are very quick to speak in judgment are often very slow themselves to listen both to God and to other people.

Very slow to look at themselves critically as they ought to as James tells us. Look at yourself in the mirror, he says in chapter 2, remember, and be quick to hear and do the word yourselves, never mind others.

Stop proudly condemning others but rather humble yourself before God. Seek to serve and to build up your brothers and sisters not to tear them down.

[36 : 07] And moreover, he goes on in verses 13 to 17 with another command, stop living with presumptuous confidence in yourselves, making arrogant plans as if you were God.

Saying, oh, today or tomorrow we'll go, we'll spend time, we'll trade, we'll make a profit. Yet you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? Bit of vanishing mist.

And the links are very clear, aren't they, with verses 11 and 12. It's the same arrogant, worldly spirit that's in evidence. leaving God totally out of the reckoning. In the business of life, just getting around, doing your normal things.

But despite knowing God's word, you ignore him. It's clearly Christian believers that he's talking to. He says in verse 17, they know what's right but they're not doing it. They're living like the rich fool.

You remember in Jesus' parable in Luke chapter 12 who put the nurture of his success in life before the nurture of his soul. Who put his earthly security before his eternal security.

[37 : 19] And that is just something that's very easy to do. Indeed, it seems almost characteristic, doesn't it, of all of our lives in the Christian church, even today, just as it was then.

Some of you here are students and you'll be planning your future, thinking about your career when you graduate perhaps, what you'll do, where you'll work, how you'll get on in your field, whatever it is.

And it'll be very, very easy, let me tell you, for all of these things to push your Christian commitment, your service of Christ and his kingdom into second place. Just for a while, of course, until after these exams, which are so important, or after that essay which is very critical to your degree, or after your graduation, or when you get that job, or just when you've got the promotion, and on and on and on, it goes in life.

And second place becomes third place, and then fourth place, and then fifth place, and then eventually there's no place any longer for Christ and his kingdom.

And you'll think I'm exaggerating, as I thought. People were exaggerating when I was a student like you decades ago, and people said and warned of these things.

[38 : 42] And we thought, that'll never be true of us and our friends and our cohort and our CU and our church. And I can look back now for four decades and more, and I can recall just how quickly that happened.

The people that served alongside me and others in Christian union committees and so on. I can look back over decades of ministry, and I've seen keen students serving here, getting married.

And often, by the way, that is a big spoke in the wheel of Christian service. And then having kids. And that's another stage where many men, men in particular, go spiritually soft.

I've married a wife and I cannot come, is what Jesus said in that parable. And my goodness, that's a true one. Married a wife and I can't come. I can't come to pray any longer.

Can't come to serve in that team any longer. Can't even come nearly as often to hear God's word on a Sunday. One big reason for that, of course, is the scourge of feminism, which has caused many men and women to collude in the demasculinizing of men, crippling them as leaders, making them capitulate their roles to the detriment both of themselves and their wives and their families.

[39 : 59] But it's also just the worldly desire that we all have, men and women, to drive for the same profit as everybody else in life. Whether it's money, whether it's prestige, whether it's academic kudos, whatever else it is.

It's so easy, isn't it, to say, I've got so much on just now. There'll be time later for me to be much more committed. But how often that later never comes.

Isn't that right? Your plans, your purposes, they just get bigger. They get more consuming as your life goes on. Of course, James isn't saying we should never plan.

Of course, he's not saying we shouldn't have any purpose or goals in life for worthy things. Jesus himself condemned sloth, didn't he? Think of the parable of the talents, the one talent man condemned for just burying his resources in the ground and not using them.

No, but what he's warning against is forgetting that it's not us, but God alone who controls the future. What tomorrow will bring, verse 15, and which we are totally ignorant of.

[41 : 13] You may work your socks off as a student to get the qualifications you need to be a teacher, to be a lawyer, to be a doctor, to be a physiotherapist, whatever it is. It can go really well and you can do really well and you come out at the end with your qualification and what happens?

Suddenly, there are no jobs at all because of government incompetence, which is never in short supply. You might save very hard for your pension, living thoughtfully and carefully and rightly to do so and plan to retire and then all of a sudden a market collapse decimates your pension fund and you have to work for another 15 years.

Well, that might be around the corner. Very likely, I should think. You may have got to the point where you've worked all your life, you've paid off your mortgage, at last you feel you have some sort of security and then you find that we are as a nation at war and the whole of your street is bombed and destroyed and your house is left in rubble.

And friends, that is not something we can confine to the past and is looking more and more likely as the months go on. What about all of our confident plans then?

And it's not just our substance, this future that we're ignorant of, but it's our very lives. We're not just ignorant, we're transient, James reminds us. Verse 14, Frail mortals, our whole life is but a mist, it's a puff of smoke blown away by the wind.

[42 : 51] I'll never forget when I was a medical registrar, I had a house officer at one point. He was an extremely able young man. He was handsome, he was athletic, he was ambitious, he was going to be a super doctor.

He went off to Australia to achieve great things and in less than a month I heard that he'd drowned swimming off a beach in Sydney. Gone.

A puff of wind. Oh, Stuart, you be very careful. We want you back. Keep off that beach in Sydney. But seriously, friends, we need to be real, don't we?

Our times are in his hand, not our hands, says the psalmist. Our whole life is Hevel, as the Ecclesiastes writer says, vapor.

We have to learn to live with mortality we cannot control. That's why the psalmist says, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart for wisdom. And yet, alas, often it's only, isn't it, it's only a sudden diagnosis of something like terminal cancer that will focus our mind to do just that.

[44 : 02] But even that is a merciful grace of God, isn't it? Because sometimes there's no warning. It's too late. Just like the rich fool facing sudden judgment.

And James is saying to us, friends, wake up. See where all of this begins in living life with presumptuous confidence. forgetting God.

I remember my father telling me about a sermon he once heard many years ago when the preacher put those three parables from Luke's gospel together. Beginning with the rich man and Lazarus, remember?

The man now in hell in torment because he was in his life like that rich fool not rich also towards God and his poverty was shown and his lack of care and concern for poor Lazarus.

And now his life was required of him. But it began in the story of that other parable of Jesus with the rich young man who wanted Jesus but he wanted his world's wealth more and that set the path of his life and eternity.

[45 : 15] eternity. If only we could know our time to plan time to get serious and write with God just in time for all of that.

that's the thinking of the fool isn't it? Far better to be like John Wesley who as the story goes somebody once said to him Mr. Wesley what if you knew that tomorrow was to be your last day of life on earth?

What would you do tomorrow? And Wesley took out his diary and looked in and said this is what I'll be doing. Have you got the confidence to say that?

because you know that you'll be delighted and thrilled for the Lord to find you doing tomorrow what you already have planned to do tomorrow?

We're ignorant and we're transient but also alas so often we're arrogant with it. Verse 16 boasting in arrogance in our self-sufficiency as we plan as we purposefully our lives just as we show our arrogance in our self-importance in proudly condemning others and all such says James verse 16 is evil.

[46 : 35] It's not just the manifestation of an overconfident personality it's sinful it's evil the same demonic influence that pervades all worldly thinking the ambition of the wisdom from above that chapter 3 verse 15 speaks of and chapter 4 15 here demonstrates is the antithesis of that isn't it?

Humble trust in the Lord what he wants what he wills for us and with us friends that is especially important for us to get our heads around and especially so if you are somebody that God has given great gifts and abilities to and great achievements to don't deceive yourself don't think that you can plan it all and that you can find time for God's priorities later on remember verse 14 your life is but a mist and repeat to yourself every day every morning verse 15 if the Lord wills not my will but thine of course we can deceive ourselves even using that phrase can't we we can use it with a sort of unctuous piosity just puts a pious veneer on the same world day ambition I'm determined to do great things for God this year DV Deo Volante God willing it's especially pious if you do it in Latin isn't it?

no God willing and not me willing is something that needs to be etched onto our heart not something spited from our lips all such arrogant plans as James are evil because they forget God and worse they scorn God and they divert us from what God really wants of us which is not speculation about tomorrow it's obedience today forget tomorrow look at verse 17 whoever knows the right thing to do that is today right now and fails to do it for him that is sin hearing and doing God's word today and every day that's what God wants from us and that's the evidence of real piety that's the evidence of real penitent faith real saving faith so many Christians especially young Christians are fixated aren't they on wanting guidance about their future plans and too often you see it's not really about wanting to submit to God's plans his way it's about wanting to shoehorn

God into our plans our way it's not that we're really saying in our hearts oh God willing it's we're trying to persuade ourselves that God is willing and he's on our side and he wants us to do this but God's focus is not about guidance for our future plans God's focus is on godliness for our daily lives right now today real wisdom from above real wisdom that saves says James is very simple listening to God and doing it knowing what is right and doing it that's his constant message isn't it not just hearing but doing being real I've often said to you haven't I that the bits of the Bible that I really find difficult they're not the parts I can't understand they're not the parts I don't know they're the parts I know and understand very clearly but I just don't want to do it's not guidance for tomorrow we need to feed our pride and our arrogant plans it's godliness today to fuel our humble prayers for the grace that we need for the grace God promises for the meekness of wisdom which alone conquers and dispels all the the bitter jealousies all the selfish ambition that fuels fights quarrels wars between

Christians wars within churches so if we want that friends and surely God does want that does he not we all of us need to read verse 6 submit ourselves to God verse 10 humble ourselves before God so that we'll be exalted by him his way and that means all proud hearts and all stubborn wills must be put to flight as we stop proudly condemning others in our minds and with our mouths stop living with presumptuous confidence in ourselves as if we were God and knew better than God and it means daily swallowing the divine medicine of his grace of which there is more more even than our sin chapter 1 verse 19 let every person be quick to hear slow to speak slow to anger for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God therefore put away filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls this is the word of God amen

[52 : 04] Lord we know the depths of the folly and the sin in these hearts of ours and what comes from our mouths so often just reveals the sad truth of what lies deep within forgive us Lord we pray put these proud hearts put our stubborn wills to flight and humble us together before your mighty hand renew us Lord fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit and banish all all that would lift us up in arrogance before you or before others for Christ's sake we pray amen as Thank you.