

Week 12: James: Our Proper Place Before God

Hook



Main Point: In all things we must remember that God is God, and we are not.

It's trivia time! Break your LifeGroup into smaller groups, ask them to appoint an "answer person" to stand up when the group knows the answer. Provide a question to the groups, the first "answer person" to stand earns the right to answer the question.

1. How many books are in the Old Testament? (39)
2. How many books are in the New Testament? (27)
3. Who were Noah's three sons? (Shem, Ham, Japheth)
4. Who was Bathsheba's first husband? (Uriah)
5. Which prophet rebuked David after he killed Uriah? (Nathan)
6. True or False: John the Baptist wore clothes made of goat hair. (False)
7. What was Matthew's job before he followed Jesus? (tax collector)
8. With what weapon did David flee Israel after Jonathan encouraged him to run? (Goliath's sword)
9. Over which disciple did Paul and Barnabas argue, leading to their separation in ministry? (John Mark)
10. What specific microprocessor technique allows simultaneous execution of multiple instructions by overlapping fetch, decode, and execute stages? (Instruction pipelining)¹

Q: Why was the last question so challenging to answer?

Transition: Unless you specialize in microprocessors, Question 10 was likely challenging to answer. Today's passage will challenge us to recognize how limited we are in our understanding and ability. We must humble ourselves, trust His judgment, and offer Him our days, knowing that His understanding is vastly greater than our own.

RECAP: So far, we have learned that James is wisdom literature, applied wisdom that gives practical advice for real, everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In

chapter 1, James touched on some main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the Word. In chapters 2–4, James returned to these topics, going into more detail about how to apply them to our lives:

- That showing partiality to the rich is a sin because it is not loving the poor as ourselves
- The difference between the law of works-righteousness and the “law of liberty” and why we should choose grace
- That faith without works is dead, using Abraham and Rahab as examples from the Old Testament to show us how faith is demonstrated through action
- How difficult it is to control our tongues and the damage it can cause when we don’t
- How godly wisdom is shown through action
- That friendship with the world is enmity with God

In this lesson, James focuses on ways we can show understanding of our proper place in relationship to God – that He is God, and we are not. James shows us how this plays out in the way we submit ourselves to His Lordship, how we trust Him rather than ourselves to judge others, and how we trust Him with our future plans.

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Book

Main Point: In all things we must remember that God is God, and we are not.

James 4:6–10 and Proverbs 3:31–35 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The humble submit to God as the Lord of their life.

Q: Why does God oppose the proud? Why is humility necessary for understanding grace?

Q: How can we cleanse our hands and purify our hearts?

In the first five verses of this chapter, James described a spiritual battle between two opposing kingdoms – the world and the kingdom of God. He had made it clear that you cannot have a foot in both kingdoms; you must choose on which side you want to be. Here James told the people what kind of heart attitude – humility – it takes to join God's side. Because understanding and accepting the Gospel takes a right understanding and acknowledgement of our proper place before God, which is submission to Him as Lord.

James quoted Proverbs when he said God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (v. 6; Proverbs 3:34). Remember James is the wisdom literature of the New Testament just as Proverbs is wisdom literature of the Old Testament. He wasn't talking about people who are proud of their own accomplishments or have a high sense of self-confidence. He meant the kind of pride that exalts self above God, that puts self on the throne of your own life instead of submitting to God as King. The Greek word here is *phaino* which means "to shine" but with the prefix *hyper*, which means above and beyond, like "hyper" in front of a word in English, e.g., *hyperactive* or *hyperextended*. In the ancient world, the imagery of shining was connected to glory. This is when someone gives himself or herself glory above and beyond what he or she truly deserves. These people put themselves on a higher level than they should.

Even if we don't do that with our words, we can do it with our actions without even realizing it. We may say we honor and worship God as Lord, but we live as if we are the ones on the thrones of our own lives. We do what we want; we don't submit to His authority in the way we live. We spend our lives building our own little kingdoms rather than serving in His. This is what James and Proverbs mean when they distinguish between the humble and the proud. The proud live as the kings of their own lives; the

humble submit to God as Lord of their lives. Wisdom literature makes a strong contrast between the humble and the proud, the wicked and the righteous.

God gives grace to the humble because it is the humble who understand their need for grace. The general worldview of our culture is that people are inherently good and that you're a generally "good" person if your good deeds outweigh your bad. This comes from secular humanism, but unfortunately, it is also the belief system of many people sitting in the pews of American churches this week who don't really understand the Gospel, believing instead in a distortion of Christianity that scholars have named "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."² But those who understand the Gospel understand we are all sinners in need of God's grace. They rightly see their position in relation to God. They realize and confess that He is God, and they are not. They submit to His authority and His Lordship over their lives.

It may seem strange that James told the people to turn their laughter to mourning and their joy to gloom (v. 9). Isn't a relationship with Jesus supposed to bring joy? But when we read it in this context, we see James was talking about mourning our sin. The verb translated "be wretched" means to be grieved. The proud "laugh" at sin. They don't take it seriously; they don't think it's a big deal. But the humble are grieved by their sin. They are wrecked by it; they are brought to their knees. It is only by being brought to our knees that we can be lifted up (v. 10).

Psalms tells us that the only people who can stand in the presence of God are those who have clean hands and a pure heart (Psalms 24:3–4), which means none of us can stand before Him in our own righteousness. But when we humble ourselves before God and confess that we are sinners in need of His grace, He cleanses our sins and puts a new heart in us (Psalm 51; Ezekiel 36:26). This is how we can draw near to God, how we can be in His presence and walk by His Spirit (v. 8).

Because God's kingdom and the world are diametrically opposed, when we draw near to God, we move *away* from the temptations of the Devil (v. 7). This is how we can resist the fleshly desires of the world, by drawing near to God. James called the people double-minded or literally "two selves." Loyalty divided between the world and God is like having two different selves, going back and forth between who you are. But submitting to God as Lord brings purity and oneness of heart. A pure heart isn't about doing everything right, it's about having a heart fully committed to God, not divided between a love of God and love of the world.

Q: In what areas of life do we try to do things our own way instead of submitting to God?

Q: How can you draw near to God in your daily life? What practices and habits can help you?

James 4:11–12 and Matthew 7:1–5 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Do not slander or condemn one another.

Q: How does being judgmental of others connect to humility before God?

Right on the heels of talking about humbling ourselves before God, recognizing that He is God and we are not, James moved into what that means when it comes to judging other people. When we humble ourselves and recognize that He is God and we are not, this also means recognizing that only God has the authority to sit as judge over humanity. This doesn't mean we shouldn't ever make judgments about what other people are doing. We have to make judgments about things to discern right from wrong. Jesus tells us to make judgments when He tells us to evaluate false teachers by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20), to confront someone when they sin against you (Matthew 18:15-20), and to remove the speck from our brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5). But there is a difference between making a judgment and being judgmental. There's a difference between judging and condemning. It's about the intention of your heart.

Making a judgment about a person's sin in order to help them grow or to repair a breach in your relationship or a conflict in the church are all focused on helping the situation and helping the person. The type of judging that James is talking about here is about hurting the other person to make you feel better about yourself. "Speaking evil against each other" is things like slander, gossip, and bullying. These are things people do to tear other people down. It's the opposite of "speaking the truth in love" which is done to build other people up (Ephesians 4:29).

When Jesus talked about the speck and the log, He didn't say *not* to remove the speck from your brother's eye. He said you have to remove the log from your own so that you can see clearly to take the speck out of their eye. Taking the speck out of someone's eye would be a helpful thing to do! Calling attention to someone's sin to help them remove it is helpful. If you had a friend struggling with sin, the most loving thing to do is to confront them about it, not just let it go because you "don't want to judge." That's not what either James or Jesus is talking about in these passages when they tell us not to judge others.

Jesus was talking about the hypocrisy of calling out someone else's "speck" when you have a huge log in your own eye. This passage is in the context of the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus had just given three other examples of hypocrisy – those who pray, fast,

and give alms in public to be praised by others instead of out of real devotion to the Lord (Matthew 6:1-16). The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek word for an actor playing a character on stage. The issue is people who are faking their faith – saying one thing and doing another. Saying they care about sin – other people’s sin – while they’re blatantly sinning themselves. They don’t really care about healing sin; they’re just pointing out someone else’s sin to make themselves look better. This doesn’t mean you have to stop sinning completely before helping someone else out by pointing out their sin; none of us will ever stop sinning completely! But it does mean you can’t point out someone else’s sin while completely ignoring your own.

James said those who speak evil against others are “judging the law,” referring to what James calls “the royal law” – love your neighbor as yourself (James 2:8). It all comes down to love; those who slander others and approach them with a haughty attitude place themselves above the law – there is no love in this attitude or behavior.

Bullies put other people down to make themselves feel better. Bullies gossip about other people instead of talking directly to them about their concerns. But loving friends sharpen each other like iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). They speak hard truths to each other in love (Ephesians 4:15). They care about both healing their own sin and their friend’s sin. Because they want to help each other grow to be more like Jesus.

Q: Why is it so tempting to tear other people down or gossip about them instead of practicing healthy conflict resolution and building each other up?

Q: What do the speck and the log teach us about judging others?

James 4:13–17 and Proverbs 16:1–9 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Only God knows what the future holds.

Q: What kind of attitude does it take to make plans, but only “if the Lord wills”?

Q: How will our plans be established? What kind of attitude does that require?

Like any passage of Scripture, it’s important to read this passage in context. When we read it in the context of the rest of this chapter, it makes much more sense. All three of these passages point us to remembering our proper place before God, that He is God and we are not. The first section references humbling ourselves before God because *only* God is Lord; the second reminds us *only* God can judge; and this one tells us *only* God knows the future. *Only* God is omnipotent. *Only* God is sovereign.

But this doesn't mean we shouldn't make plans for the future. Trusting God is sovereign doesn't mean we just sit around and wait for things to happen to us. James didn't tell the people not to make plans; he just said to do so with the caveat of "if the Lord wills." In the context of trusting the Lord. With the attitude of humility, submitting to the Lord's will in all things. When Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, He shared His desires for His future, yet He ended His prayer with submission to the Lord's will regardless. This is the attitude of humility, submission and obedience.

Like other wisdom literature, James reminds us that in the grand scheme of the universe, from God's perspective, our lives are like a vapor (Ecclesiastes 6:12). We have 100 years or less on this planet, which may seem like a lot to us, but in the view of eternity, it's just a moment. This keeps our lives in the proper perspective. So many things we worry about are fleeting. We must invest our time, energy, resources and lives into things that will last into eternity (Matthew 6:19–21).

It's not a bad thing to plan for our future; that's a wise thing to do. But we need to take care *how* we plan for the future. Our plans should always be made in the context of seeking the Lord's will. Just focusing on our own desires, "making a profit" (v. 13), keeping up with the Joneses, or doing what everyone else is doing is arrogance. Humility is seeking the Lord's will for your life and your future.

Proverbs tells us we can plan our paths, but it is the Lord who establishes our steps (Proverbs 16:9). A kid may want to be an NFL player and do everything in his power to follow that path, but then a career-ending injury happens. He could be angry at God or look at it as God closing that door to lead him to a different one. One day he will look back on that moment and see how God used it to direct his steps to a different path that was better for him.

As is typical for wisdom literature, this is very practical advice for every believer making decisions about his or her future – where to go to college, whom to marry, what career to pursue, etc. Make your plans *only* in the context of God's will. Put those things in His hands. Seek His will and His leading in all things, not just what seems good to you. When we delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our hearts because our desires will be His desires (Psalm 37:4). We will want what He wants.

Q: What future plans are you trying to make decisions about right now? How can you seek God's will in those decisions?

Q: When you hear that your life is just a vapor, how does that make you want to respond?

Week 12: James: Our Proper Place Before God

Took

Main Point: In all things we must remember that God is God, and we are not.

A recent study found that people gossip 52 minutes on average each day – with 15% of the gossip being expressly “negative.”³ Why spend so much time talking about others, even putting them down, knowing that our lives on earth are so short? May we choose to make a positive impact in the relationships that God has entrusted to us – not slandering and gossiping, but loving one another, sharpening each other like iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). Instead of talking about others, may we speak hard truths to each other in love (Ephesians 4:15). Because they want to help each other grow to be more like Jesus.

Q: Which of your friends is like iron that sharpens you? How can you help sharpen them?

Q: What damage can a person do when they choose to be harsh, judgmental, or a slanderer?

Q: What kind of language benefits or builds up other believers?

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on the ways you have judged, criticized, condemned, or torn down other people rather than helping them “take out the speck.” When you have a conflict with others, why is it easier to gossip about them or tear them down to others rather than going directly to them to talk through the issue? What is the difference between judging others and helping hold them accountable, spurring them on to good works, and sharpening them as iron sharpens iron? What are the differences in the attitude of the heart but also the way you do it? What difference does it make to “take the log out of your own eye first”?

PRAY for the attitude of your heart toward God, that you will submit to His Lordship over your life in all things. Lay your plans before Him and ask Him to direct your paths. Lay down your arrogance before Him and ask Him for humility. Lay down your desire to judge others and ask Him to give you a heart to help them instead. Ask Him to help you have a proper view of yourself before Him.

ACT: Lift someone up. Choose someone you may have judged, gossiped about, or condemned in the past and instead choose to lift up that person. Encourage him or her, do something nice, think of a way you can help that person grow. If you need to hold him or her accountable for something (taking out the speck), make sure you take out your own log first so you can see clearly. Pray for God's view of the situation, His words, His heart for the person, and His wisdom to know how to help, not tear down.

¹ Hennessy, J. L., & Patterson, D. A. (2017). *Computer Architecture: A Quantitative Approach* (6th ed.). Morgan Kaufmann.

² CRC Staff, "Counterfeit Christianity: 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' Most Popular Worldview in U.S. Culture," American Worldview Inventory, CRC - <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2021/04/27/counterfeit-christianity-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-most-popular-worldview-in-u-s-culture/>

³ <https://www.tlc.com/life---relationships/we-gossip-52-minutes-a-day-but-this-study-found-that-it-s-not-al>