



Session 7 – James 4:11 - 5:6

AVOID ARROGANCE

Having ended the previous section by encouraging an attitude of humility, James now contrasts this with an attitude of arrogance. He has some stern warnings about the way we live.

Arrogance towards others (4:11-12)

In 3:1-12, James wrote about the way we use the tongue. This is an important theme for James, and here he highlights the danger of using our tongue to put others down.

James roundly condemns slander. He begins, “Brothers...” – indicating that slander was taking place within the Christian community. The word translated as *slander* and *speak against* is used to describe any way of speaking that denigrates others.

James condemns this use of the tongue because it involves judging the one we are speaking against; in doing this,

- we go against the law which says that we should love our neighbours, not slander them; in going against the law we are, in effect, saying that we know better than the law;
- we put ourselves in the position of judge, when rightly that is God’s position.

Arrogance towards the future (4:13-17)

James paints a picture of a businessman making plans – a merchant deciding where he’ll go and how he’ll make his money. James says that it is arrogant to claim that we can decide what the future will hold when we don’t even know what will happen tomorrow.

- *It is a self-centred attitude.* It makes my life the focus of everything when, in fact, life is transitory – little more than a puff of smoke.

- *It is a worldly attitude.* It thinks only of my will and does not bring God into the reckoning – it lacks the humility to acknowledge that the future and its outcomes are in God’s hands.

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) gives an example of how not to approach the future. The right way, says James, is to make plans (both in our personal lives and in business life) but to do so recognising that we depend completely on God; this is the way Paul saw the future (see eg 1Cor 4:19, 1Cor 16:7, Acts 18:21, Rom 1:10). And, in whatever planning we do, we can pray for God’s guidance.

In v.17, James urges his readers to look beyond themselves, and to think of the good they can do. He reminds them that failing to do the right thing is just as sinful as doing the wrong thing. The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that to have “left undone the things we ought to have done” is a sin that we should confess to God just as much as to have “done the things we ought not to have done”.

Arrogance towards the poor (5:1-6)

James has some very strong words for rich people who are arrogantly dismissive of those who are much poorer than they are. All that James says in this paragraph is strongly reminiscent of the language and the message of the OT prophets. He accuses the rich of three sinful attitudes.

Hoarding (v.2,3) People accumulate money and possessions just for the sake of having them and, perhaps, showing them off. This is sheer folly: in a direct echo of Jesus’ words in Mat 6:19f, James points out that the wealth and fine clothes which they have hoarded will be worthless on the day of judgement – “you can’t take it with you.” And James is probably implying (remembering 4:17) that they miss out on the opportunity to use their wealth for something good – for example by helping those in need.

Injustice (v.4,6) A rich landowner who can’t be bothered to pay labourers on time leaves them without any money, with the result that they and their families go hungry. (OT laws made it very clear that workers should be paid straight away – Deut 24:14f, compare Jer 22:13, Mal 3:5.)

v.6 reminds the rich that, directly or indirectly, they can cause the death of poor people. To give one 21st century example: our determination to buy the cheapest possible clothes can mean that workers in a far-away country are exploited and have to work in a factory where the fire-risk is a danger to their lives.

Self-indulgence (v.5) The farmer in the parable of the rich fool typifies this attitude: *I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'* (Luke 12:19). Such people are, to paraphrase James, like turkeys fattening themselves up for Christmas, oblivious of what will come next.

This paragraph does not begin, "Brothers . . ." James is probably addressing this to non-Christians. Why is it included in a letter to Christians? Perhaps

- so that Christians, hearing of the terrible judgement which these wealthy oppressors face, will not be envious of their wealth,

- and so that Christians, when they are oppressed in that way (2:6 suggests that James's readers were), may face their suffering calmly, knowing that God will judge the wrongs which are inflicted on them.

James is not saying that wealth is wrong. Nor is he saying that saving is wrong if it is for a purpose such as providing sensibly for ourselves – so that we are not a financial burden on others – or for others. We should seek to find a balance between prudent saving and sinful hoarding. And we must be sure that our security is not in our wealth but in God (see eg 1Tim 6:17-19).

In our attitude to others, to the future and to the poor, James is encouraging us to show humility and to avoid arrogance. If we can do that, then, instead of being self-centred, we will have an eternal perspective; we will be putting our trust not in ourselves, but in God.

For homegroups

- What forms of “speaking against” do we most commonly encounter?
- What effect does such behaviour have on the slanderer, the one slandered, and the community to which they belong?
- Does James’s condemnation of “speaking against” mean that we can’t offer constructive criticism? If not, how can we ensure that we are genuinely constructive in what we say?
- How would you summarise the two attitudes towards the future described in 4:13-17?
- If God is in control of the future, does that sound like good news or bad news?
- How in practice should we strike the balance between sensible planning and being open to God?
- The treasurer and churchwardens at St Agatha’s are planning a 5 year financial strategy. What advice would you give them?
- Read 1Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19. What does Paul add to what James says about wealth?
- If we spend money on luxury items, where do we draw the line between enjoying what God has given for our enjoyment (1Tim 6:17) and living in self-indulgence (James 5:5)?
- How can the church evangelise the wealthy?
- A church member works as a gardener. He is short of money because a wealthy local resident (whose garden he tends one day a week) has failed to pay him for the last three weeks. What would you, as his fellow Christian, do?
- Read Proverbs 30:8-9. Could you use that as a daily prayer?