

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Have you ever looked into a mirror and been surprised by what you see? Maybe you've gone all day through various events or meetings, only to come home and notice that the dinner roll you ate at supper had some little poppy seeds on the top and several got caught in your teeth. As you smile, you suddenly realize that they are so evident that it must have been a distraction to everyone. You recall every conversation, almost embarrassed at how confident you were, stating your plans, speaking so firmly about your ideas, giving little digs at others. And just in that moment, your pride comes crashing to the floor.

James knows how subtle pride can be in destroying the Christian community. In fact, of all of the dangers that Christians face, the one that can pose the biggest problem is often the most subtle of them all. James has just told us that God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble, and then he instructs us in the way of repentance. Now he does not shift topics, but works out this theme a little further.

The way that James confronts our pride is by placing us next to the sovereign Lord. And God's sovereignty means two things for Christians who feel that they have lost their status and standing. So what are two practical ways that God's sovereignty works in our lives?

Watch how you speak about fellow Christians (vv. 11-12)

If there is one way that James wants us to be aware of the sovereign Lord, it is in our speech, especially as it relates to our fellow believers. He begins v. 11 with these words: "Do not speak evil against one another." James speaks about the devilish ways that can destroy the church, and he begins with the most dangerous of them all – speaking down about someone else.

One of the most formative books for me on how Christians live together in community has been the German Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his classic work *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes, "talking about others in secret is not allowed even under the pretense of help and good will. For it is precisely in this guise that the spirit of hatred between believers always creeps in." James sees how danger pride is, and the first work of the devil in the Christian community is to cause us to look down upon one another. This sin will come out in subtle ways, but the most obvious is in how we talk about one another. There are two reasons James gives for us not to speak against one another.

First, James says that you're not above the law (v. 11b). We need to understand clearly what James is and isn't saying. These words are parallel with Matthew 7:1, and this verse is one of the most popular verses of Jesus' words. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." For many people, they interpret these words of Jesus to mean that you should never make any sort of criticism at all of others. But that isn't the point of Jesus' words. In the context, Jesus is saying that pride is a danger that blurs our vision like a log in the eye when we are trying to get the speck out of our brother's eye. Instead, we are to make right judgments. Jesus said, "Stop

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judging by mere appearances and make a right judgment” (Jn 7:24). What Jesus warns about is how our speech can be critical of others and cut them down.

This is James’ point in v. 11. The danger is that critical speech breaks the royal law of love.

But James goes further: it isn’t just breaking the law, but it is acting like we stand above the law. It is easy to think and justify our critical spirit. But when there is a hint of standing over others, moral superiority, or a critical attitude, we are acting like we are above the law, that we are the ones who decide what is right and wrong, as though we disdain what God has said and feel like we know what is best. But the problem goes further.

In v. 12, James says we are acting like we are superior. But you’re not above God. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy, and that is not you. Throughout the Bible, God is the One who can save or destroy (Deut. 32:39: “See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and bring to life.”). By speaking ill of others, we are placing ourselves in the position of lawgiver and judge. We behave in such a way that Leo Tolstoy’s words are like they are true: he said he was God’s older brother!

But God is the One who has the right to give the Law and Judge by that law because there is nothing higher than him. And James says that one of the worst sins that can be committed is speaking against a brother or sister in Christ. It is the way that destroys Christian fellowship. It is the devilish way. For this reason, Bonhoeffer would say in his book *Life Together* that it is the action of the accuser of the brethren. There is one who is called that, and that is not a role we want. God is the sovereign One because he is the Lawgiver and Judge, so we want to have every word come under the submission of King Jesus.

Live with a God-consciousness (vv. 13-17)

But there is another way that our pride can make us think that we are sovereign. James says it is through the sin of presumption (v. 13). We feel like we are free, like we can do what we want. We go to the grocery store and feel like we can choose whatever we want and we can go where we want and we can accomplish what we want. But this kind of thinking forgets several things.

You don’t know what will happen tomorrow (vv. 13-14). Our lives are frail. So James reminds us that our lives are like a mist or vapour. This picks up the idea of Ecclesiastes – life is a vapour. When we are young, the future lies ahead of us wide open and we feel confident about our future. As we age, we start to realize that we don’t have as much control over our lives as we think. Sickness comes. Circumstances change in the lives of others and it throws us off. We make our plans, as Proverbs 16:9 says, but God directs our steps. Wisdom realizes that God is the God of providence – the one who works out every circumstance for our good and his glory. So we shouldn’t presume we know what will happen tomorrow.

Not only are our lives frail, but we are dependent creatures. Therefore you should not boast (vv. 15-16). God is not condemning planning, nor is he against making a profit. Rather, he is

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challenging the pride that subtly comes into our lives and thinks that we can control everything. This is where we need to realize the dangers that anxiety is trying to tell us. Anxiety is that response that tells us we are trying to be in control but we aren't. Anxiety is telling us that we are not God. It is a reminder that we were made to be dependent upon God. We need him.

So James says we should make plans with open hands – if the Lord wills. When our plans don't work out and we get frustrated or angry or upset, what are we saying? Who is sovereign? James is not saying we shouldn't plan, but rather that planning can lead us to misplaced trust. This is evidenced when we brag or boast rather than prayerfully submit our ways to God.

As a result, James says you know what is right (v. 17). It is living with a God-consciousness. It is trusting him at all times. It is living our lives in dependency upon him. If we know what we should do but don't do it, that is sin, just as much as it is sin to do wrong.

So how should we proceed? I think James would have us consider three things:

First, we should dedicate our plans to the Lord. We give them to him. We make our plans not with tight fists that have no flexibility, but with open hands that say, "Lord, this is my life, use it as you desire." God has planned the good works for you. You can make your plans. You can work your plans. But before you act on your plans, give them to God.

Second, we should ask for God's favour. "If the Lord wills" isn't a magical saying. It is a reminder that we need God to work. We can buy property and the market can crash. We can get a job and the market changes suddenly or our employer may have a change in their needs. When we ask God to work, we are saying that we will be faithful to do good, to work hard, and to trust him.

Third, we should acknowledge God is the One who accomplishes all good. All the good that we do, where did you get the strength from? Where did you get the talents from? Where did you get the idea from? As Paul can say to the Corinthians, what do you have that you didn't receive? And if you received it as a gift, why do you boast (1 Cor. 4:7). Many classical musicians such as Bach would begin their work with the letters *D.V. – Deo Volente*. It was their way of saying that they were writing this if the Lord willed, while they would end their work with *S.D.G. – Soli Deo Gloria*: to God alone be the glory. This is one way to acknowledge that every breath, every gift, every word, and every work is from the Lord and we are merely returning it back to God.

There is nothing wrong with planning. But plans and processes are not ultimate. They must be submitted to the Lawgiver and Judge.

The path of God's ways is through humility. Humility isn't overconfident, cocky, and boastful. It is humble and gentle. It is patient and longsuffering. It recognizes that the greatest danger to God's people and to God's church is not from the outside, but from within, and that danger lurks in the heart of every one of us.

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When we remember that the Lawgiver and Judge sent his One and Only Son to be under the law and came and submitted himself fully to obey all the requirements of the Law, we see that the power and authority of God is displayed in the servant who suffered willingly so that we could be set free from the curse of pride and boasting.

For the Lord Jesus Christ, leaving his throne of glory above, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but humbled himself, made himself nothing, and took on the form of a servant to the point of death on a cross. He fully submitted himself to God's plan, and in so doing his plan set you and I free from the plan of sin and death that we were following.

As we see the grace of God in Jesus Christ, can't you trust him with your words and your plans? Can you give them to him and trust that he has prepared good words for you to say and good works for you to do? God has given you those good words and works to do. So let's go with his words and works that he has prepared in advance that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10)!