

James 4:11-17.

The structure of the Roman army endured for centuries. Legates commanded legions with each legion comprised of 10 cohort units of 480 soldiers each. Within the cohort units were groups of 80 men, each commanded by a centurion. Rather than lead from behind, the centurions were fierce as fire on the front lines. They tended to be the most violent, fearless fighters of the Roman army who inspired by example.

Now, you wouldn't expect a man so aggressive with a sword and dagger to show kindness to a dying slave. Yet, that's what we find. We read in the Gospels of a centurion stationed in Galilee who was moved with compassion to save the life of his servant. The account is striking on many levels (Luke 7:2-10).

If you read Luke's account, the centurion's servant was a slave. And according to Matthew, that slave was just a boy (Matt 8:6). He was property in a cruel empire, bought and sold, and here, he's on the verge of death. His centurion owner would've had little reason to care, and yet, he cared for this boy like a member of his own family.

The account takes place in Galilee where the centurion was stationed to keep order over the Jews. To Rome, they were a defeated people, and Roman officers tended to harass them. Something was different about this centurion though. He sought help for his servant, and a group of *Jewish* leaders stepped forward saying of him: "he loves our nation, and he is the one who built for us our synagogue" (Luke 7:5).

If it isn't bewildering enough, the centurion believed in Jesus. He had heard of Christ's power to heal, and humbly asked the Lord to give the order. What order? Just as he had commanded men to obey him, so he believed Jesus commanded life and death to obey Him.

So much humility is on display when we read this account. Though having the power to harm the Jews and end a boy's life, here's a centurion who helped. There wasn't an air of superiority about him. He saw himself as a man like any other and clearly knew the limit of his authority. What a blessing he was to his servant and so many.

It's the kind of humility that some of James' readers lacked. They wanted to be leaders in their church, coveted authority, and maligned others as they jockeyed after it (Jas 3:1; 4:2, 11).

So, James asks two questions (Jas 4:11-17): Who are you to judge others, and what is your life? Who are you, and what are you? Only God has the authority to judge, and He alone holds tomorrow.

JUDGING OTHERS

(JAMES 4:11-12)

James 4:11a—"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers."

Evil speak (*katalaléo*) literally means to down talk. James was saying to quit running others down with words, slandering, or defaming their character. It's malicious talk, the kind that arises from a critical eye or a proud heart: *He's such a fool! She's so useless!* Statements like these are harsh verdicts, judgements about another person.

The first-century Pharisees spoke this way (John 7:49, 9:34). They saw themselves as the standard by which everyone should live. When others couldn't live up, anger and condemnation followed. Having contempt in their heart, slander and insults followed on their tongue.

Like them, some of James' readers judged others on the basis of their own manmade standards. And that's the key here—manmade. God is Judge, has revealed His standard, and judgements about right and wrong can be made on this basis. Yet, in our pride, we want to elevate ourselves to Judge, setting our rules above God's Law.

**"WHEN A MAN IS WRAPPED UP IN HIMSELF, HE MAKES A
PRETTY SMALL PACKAGE" — JOHN RUSKIN.**

Evil speak is a judgment against a person *and* also God (Jas 4:11). It lowers His standard, which is why James asked his readers, "Who are you?" (Jas 4:12). *Who do you think you are?* Only God has the authority to judge a person. We mistakenly believe at times that we're God, have divine authority, and can condemn whom we please with our words. *Who do we think we are?*

A judgmental tongue is wrong. In fact, the apostle Paul wouldn't even judge himself—"it is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:3). Some of James' readers had lost that kind of humility as they spoke against one another for the sake of a position.

Who Are You?

All of this was happening within churches among Christians. That's particularly troublesome. What does God say about His people? He's said they are righteous (Rom 3:24). That's justification: to declare one righteous. It's a verdict. If God has said that someone in Christ is righteous, though I say he's a fool, what have I done? Raised myself above God to challenge His verdict. As James asked: Who am I?

PRESUMPTUOUS PLANNING (JAMES 4:13-16)

James 4:13—"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.'"

"We will go... spend a year... trade... make a profit." What's wrong with planning? Nothing, if we recognize our dependence upon God. James didn't call out businessmen for making plans or trying to make a profit—he condemned godless planning. We *will* travel. We *will* trade. We *will* make a profit. So self-sufficient and full of themselves, they hadn't any thought of God.

Jesus taught about a successful businessman whose land produced more than he could handle (Luke 12:16-21). Naturally, he made an investment to increase his storage capacity. Nothing wrong so far, but look at his attitude: "I *will*... I *will*... I *will*." Plans made without any thought of the Lord or eternity. He was perfectly at ease, eager to reap the fruit of his labors, and relax when eternity suddenly descended upon time, and he died: "This night your soul is required of you" (Luke 12:20). What then?

**"TIME IS PRECIOUS. WE ARE FRAGILE. LIFE IS SHORT.
ETERNITY IS LONG. EVERY MINUTES COUNTS"**

—JOHN PIPER.

So, James asked, "What is your life?" And then he answered: "you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (Jas 4:14). Life is precious, though transient. As breath hangs in the frigid air or morning mist rests upon a cool lake, each of us is here for a moment in time and then gone. How can we ever say, "I will..." to anything?

Rather than saying, "I will..." let us make plans humbly saying, "If the Lord wills..." Even our most certain plans in life are contingent. Pride forgets how little we know of the future, our frailty, and our dependence upon God. James called presumptuous planning an arrogant boast (Jas 4:16).

Most who read James' letter were poor, not rich businessmen able to make deals abroad. Yet, there remained some who were wealthy and had business acumen. Having already led in business, it seems these were the ones who wanted to lead in the church as well.

Should they? Chapters 3 and 4 tell us why not. Their speech was poor (Jas 3:1-12), their wisdom was ungodly (Jas 3:13-17), they fought other believers (Jas 4:1-10), looked down upon others (Jas 4:11-12), and showed such little dependence upon God (Jas 4:13-17). Rather than force their way into leadership with such wrong tactics, they should've trusted that it would happen, "If the Lord wills."

KNOWING AND DOING GOOD (JAMES 4:17)

James 4:14—"So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

James' letter was written to Jewish Christians. They knew the Law, and they loved being free from it. However, being free from the old Law doesn't mean you're free to do as you like. Judging others and boasting about tomorrow is still wrong, for instance. Sin isn't wrong because it violates the Ten Commandments. It's wrong because it offends God.

God is the Judge, and He judges impartially. James' readers knew this, and they understood that God is sovereign. Yet, they judged one another and presumed they could control tomorrow.

It's easy to affirm points of doctrine, but how does your life match up? Is there a gap between your beliefs and your life? James wrote to spur his readers onto faithfully walking with the Lord. Through each section of the letter, may we consider how it applies to our lives and then live out the things we know and believe in Christ.