



James Chapter Four

VI James 3:1-4:12 - The Sin of Dissension in the Community (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

The previous chapter spoke of the envy and contention in church that becomes a springboard for strife and discontentment. Here, James turns his attention to the lusts of worldly power, pleasure and friendships, which carry the divisions in church to a shameful height.

James commences this chapter by addressing some quite distasteful aspects of human behaviour that was witnessed in the early church and is still apparently in evidence today. There are so many people who wish to use church as a place to build their own empire, or to impose their own stamp of authority in order to fulfil their own selfish ambitions, or just a place where they can manipulate well-intentioned people, and they do so in the basest, worldly manner, instead of submitting themselves to God and following his ways and his will.

James then shifts his focus on to wealthy businessmen, who go about their work without due regard to what God's will is for them. Their attitude is one of presumption and even arrogance. James is not speaking out against business or wealth creation, but the godless attitude of some of those engaged in such businesses, and their cavalier approach to life.

VI.c James 4:1-12 - Submit Yourselves to God

James' counsel for the church goes beyond superficialities and guides the church into holiness in its internal relationships. True spiritual direction not only challenges; it comforts, and this section of the epistle is a fine example. James is faithful to confront sinful motives and evil practices, and he is equally clear about the promise of God's grace.

This section is written in the rhetorical form of a diatribe against those who fracture the community due to selfish ambition: <<***But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth***>>

(James 3:14). Such people are God's enemies (v.4), and the devil's allies (v.7), and they must repent (vv.8-10). Finally, this all returns to the tongue, i.e. speaking evil against others in the community (vv.11-12).

James is an excellent book to use in teaching just how a church should grow and work together. Whether it is studied in a small group, taught in a class or preached to a congregation, this part of the Word of God has been properly used if it leads the particular group to repentance in personal relationships. This repentance will include several components:

1. Self-examination. James' word, properly applied, will move people to cut through self-justifying claims and accepted patterns to look beneath the surface. They will scrutinise their ways of relating. How are their relationships functioning? What are their underlying attitudes and motives toward each other?
2. Evaluation by God's standards. James' emphasis is on being doers of the royal law, and he identifies specifics of that law, including purity, peace, submissiveness, mercy, impartiality and sincerity. These will be taken seriously as the standards of holiness in application of this word.
3. Change. In repentance according to James' message, people will be growing. There should be an increasing measure of the specifics of the royal law in the way people treat each other.
4. Reliance of grace. It is woven throughout the passage that believers need to learn to rely on God. God's grace gives wisdom from above; their fights are unnecessary and evil because they express their self-reliance instead of reliance on grace; God gives grace to the humble. The trait of humility before God and before each other is therefore emphasised repeatedly. Reliance on grace is the most far-reaching, life-changing, radical stance a believer needs to learn.

¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

James 4:1

James is writing to mainly Jewish Christians. The Jewish people at that time had the reputation of being a seditious people, as their disastrous 1st Century war with the Romans will bear out. That war was an example where their fighting resources fractured into small splinter groups because their leaders could not agree as to how to conduct the fight against Rome, and thus weakening both their cause and their capability. That sounds familiar! The Jewish people were also well known for holding extremely heated debates and were seen to be quarrelsome, even with each other. It seems that some aspects of the worldwide church that has emanated from them have picked up this misguided and unseemly trait.

Unspiritual wisdom, selfish fighting and unkind judging, although not common, are still to be found within churches today. Christians' experience of this is disheartening and disillusioning, undermining the health and vision of those churches. The hypocrisy it displays is also off-putting to those who come into

churches in order to seek the faith for themselves. James helps believers to recognise the source of all this in their own sinfulness – not to leave them in deeper despair over it, but that they may humble themselves before the Lord and find grace for change. Contemporary teaching from this passage must not be timid about confronting the specific sins; the harm being done to the church is too great to avoid it. At the same time, teaching from this passage must not omit the promise of the generous grace of God; our need for that grace is too desperate. Overall, the future of the church is positive for those who apply the Word of God in all they do.

If any non-Christian reads this account, I would sincerely urge them not to be put off from seeking God through Christ and to do so by participating in a local church. There are many good churches around. Things to look for are sound doctrinal teaching from the bible and strong leadership that is willing to address the issues that James is here confronting in his generation.

In contrast to those who make peace, fights and quarrels are caused by the passions or self-centred desires, Greek *hēdonē* from which we get hedonism, or pursuit of pleasure, that are causing these people to make war against each other in the church. This is extremely violent language for dissension, and some even think it should be taken literally of people hurting or even killing each other (v.2), although it is best to view this as a metaphor for the devastating effect of unrestrained hostility.

James does not give examples of these desires, but most often they are either the self-interest of getting one's own way, seeking advancement within the church leadership hierarchy, or criticising others in order to make oneself appear to be superior to others in the church.

On occasions the fights and quarrels are with regard to doctrinal teaching. This may be on global issues, such as having women priests or gay bishop's that have caused dissension recently in the Anglican Church. In some instances, the dispute is local and causes an individual church to split into two or more small groups. However, one frequent cause of the disagreements comes when one member decides to judge others in the church. There are several instances of teaching against judging in James' text and elsewhere in Scripture, which refer to the act of setting oneself up as a judge and lawgiver, as if one had the authority to determine what is right or wrong about another person's life. It continues to happen in the church today with particular frequency in three areas: judging the motives behind the words and actions of other members with regard to church business or ministries; judging how others spend money, theirs or the church's; and judging how others are living their own lives. Judgmental attitudes and actions need to be confronted in specific areas such as these, so that the church can see how they are doing it. They make judgments about others before they have listened sufficiently to enable them to fully understand the person they are judging. James wrote earlier in the epistle: <<***My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry***>> (James 1:19).

Your desires that battle within you. This phrase is not so much a person's good and evil nature battling within them, but a battle for their very soul, as Peter

states: *<<Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul>>* (1 Peter 2:11). It is likely that this was the common apostolic concept and is James' own notion here. It means he is not sympathising with the readers' internal conflicts but warning that those who fight are cooperating in their own self-destruction. People have a tendency to do as they please. Sometimes this works out, but mostly it does not when it has to do with their dealings with God. Again, this is something that Israel had fallen foul of many years before: *<<In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit>>* (Judges 17:6).

² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

James 4:2

This verse consists of several short statements; there was no punctuation in ancient Greek, and various translations connect the statements in different ways. It is often best to view this verse to the attributes of bitter envy and selfish ambition seen in Chapter 3, which lead to the terrible wars and infighting in the church. It is a verse that shows an ugliness in the church that should never exist but sadly it does, even if it does not appear to be this stark on the surface.

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet. When the Israelites first entered the Promised Land they were given the city of Jericho by God. He had instructed them to destroy all that was in it but one man coveted the gold and silver. As a result God allowed the army to suffer defeat at the city of Ai. Joshua came before the Lord to ask why they had been defeated in this manner, so: *<<The Lord said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction>>* (Joshua 7:10-12). Throughout history God has consistently shown how he will treat those who disobey him and his disapproval is evident in the church today.

You cannot have what you want, but a believer is given all that he needs to fulfil God's plans for his life: *<<For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well>>* (Matthew 6:32-33).

You do not have, because you do not ask is a reminder that believers should ask God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with God's will, for what they seek rather than fighting each other. Prayerlessness results in failure to receive many of God's blessings. James does not imply that it is God's will to grant sinful, selfish desires (v.3), but bringing requests before God can have a purifying influence on one's desires.

³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

James 4:3

When you ask, you do not receive. Jesus had promised: *<<And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it>> (John 14:13-14), <<You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name>> (John 15:16), and: <<In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete>> (John 16:23-24).* People are often then disillusioned when their prayers do not seem to be answered. What many fail to realise is that when believers come before God in prayer they need to attune their spirit with the Holy Spirit and allow him to ask for what they need. It is not about a believer asking for what they want.

You ask, with wrong motives. Not all prayers are pleasing to God, only those consistent with his will as revealed in Scripture: *<<This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him>> (1 John 5:14-15).* Rather than seeking to honour God and advance his kingdom purposes, such prayers seek only to gratify self-centred passions or desires, as noted in v.1.

There are times when God answers prayers in the way we would have wanted them to be answered; sometimes he does so in way we did not expect. There are times when he just creates situations that allow us to experience life in a way that helps us to grow in a particular grace we may have asked for and at other times the answer to prayer is just to allow us to accept and be content with the situation we find ourselves in. It appears that God keeps all the prayers of believers in order to action them at an appropriate time and in an appropriate way according to his will: *<<Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand>> (Revelation 8:3-4).*

That you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James is not saying all pleasure is wrong, for all truly good things come from God: *<<God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day>> (Genesis 1:31), <<You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand>> (Psalm 16:11), <<How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young – a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you>> (Psalm 84:1-4),*

<<Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. O Lord Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you>> (Psalm 84:10-12), and: <<Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment>> (1 Timothy 6:17). It is only pleasure that does not have the glory of God as its goal that should be viewed as not good: <<So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God>> (1 Corinthians 10:31).

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

James 4:4

Adulterous people recalls the OT prophets who used this language to describe Israel's unfaithfulness to God: *<<Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, 'I will not serve you!' Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute>> (Jeremiah 2:20), <<The Lord said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house">> (Ezekiel 23:36-39), and: <<When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord">> (Hosea 1:2).*

Such people have chosen friendship with the world by imitating worldly ways of thinking and worldly activities, making them an enemy of God; therefore James is classifying these people as not being true Christians, i.e. they are actually unbelievers. It will always be impossible to satisfy the expectations of unbelievers, whose hearts are set on this world: *<<Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world>> (1 John 2:15-16), and: <<We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one>> (1 John 5:19), and at the same time please God: <<Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ>> (Galatians 1:10), <<In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted>> (2 Timothy 3:12), and: <<Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you>> (1 John 3:13). Jesus spelled this out quite specifically: <<No servant can serve*

two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money>> (Luke 16:13), and there were those who turned away from Jesus for this very reason: *<<Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God>>* (John 12:42-43). James often alludes to the teaching of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, which is not surprising as he believed he was Jesus' earthly brother. Refer to the supplementary material for an explanation of this statement.

Hatred toward God. These are harsh words and surely never to be said to a Christian. But James is clear in his thinking and writing. Those who align themselves with the world are not only moving away from God they are actually displaying some very unpleasant attitudes toward him as well: As King David once observed: *<<With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship>>* (Psalm 109:3-5), *<<He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool>>* (Proverbs 10:18), *<<They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless>>* (Romans 1:29-31), and: *<<The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God>>* (Galatians 5:19-21).

⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

James 4:5

Scripture says. It is not clear which Scripture James is referring to here as there is no similar verse in the OT.

The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely. God created mankind with a spirit, and he deeply desires that human spirits worship him: *<<Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth>>* (John 4:23-24).

Some interpreters believe the verse speaks of human envy, but the idea of divine jealousy fits the context best, since the surrounding verses 4, 6, 7 and 8, deal with man's relationship with God. God has identified himself as a jealous God in terms of his creation seeking other gods in their lives, instead of Him alone: *<<Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God>>* (Exodus 34:14), and: *<<The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his*

foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies>> (Nahum 1:2).

⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”

James 4:6

He gives us more grace. It is quite an amazing turn around given all that man strives for within himself that God’s Spirit within him should bestow on him even more grace. However, we should not be surprised for Jesus had said to us: <<*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him*>> (Mark 4:25), and his promises hold true - always.

God’s grace will be extended to those who are humble before him. Here, James is quoting from King Solomon: <<*He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble*>> (Proverbs 3:34), which is quoted by Peter: <<*Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”*>> (1 Peter 5:5), or as David laments: <<*You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty*>> (Psalm 18:27).

God opposes means he resists and sends judgment, for the proud have chosen the praise and the methods of the world and are acting as God’s enemies (v.4). The original Greek word used is *antitassetai*, which signifies that God sets himself out in battle array against the proud, giving us a much stronger image of just how God feels towards the pride of men. In their own understanding and will, the proud resist the truth of God’s word and in their passion they resist his providence. But God resists and opposes them and his will shall prevail!

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ^{8a} Come near to God and he will come near to you.

James 4:7-8_a

Peter too calls for his readers to submit themselves: <<*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right*>> (1 Peter 2:13-14), and: <<*Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh*>> (1 Peter 2:18), which identifies the way a believer should bring glory to God, but James calls them now to submit yourselves, then, to God. In v.10 he will enhance that call: <<*Humble yourselves before the Lord*>>.

James has outlined the problems that are plaguing the churches and now he proposes the solution to them all - repentance, i.e. submit yourselves, then, to God. It sounds simple and, in reality it is, providing a person is willing to accept the Lordship of Christ over all aspects of their lives!

Having given believers more grace, God now calls them to submission, for through

the grace he has given them, they can give themselves fully to God. The only way to resist the devil is by also submitting and drawing near to God: <<*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it*>> (1 Corinthians 10:13). Satan will be defeated and will have to flee, as indeed he did from Christ: <<*When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time*>> (Luke 4:13). Christ defeated the devil both in the wilderness and particularly on the Cross, but he has found a weakness through the church in those who do not fully submit to Christ.

He will come near to you. One of the most remarkable revelations about God is the way he desires to remain close to his creation. In fact, he chooses to dwell within them by his Holy Spirit and his living Word: <<*No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it*>> (Deuteronomy 30:14).

Resisting the devil, a call to believers to reject all that is evil, especially their own actions and thoughts, is achieved by putting on the full armour of God: <<*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes*>> (Ephesians 6:10-11).

^{8b} Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

James 4:8^b-9

Cleanse, i.e. wash your hands, and purify are OT terms for ritual purity, for example, the priests at the bronze basin: <<*Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it*>> (Exodus 30:18), and ethical purity: <<*Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin*>> (Psalm 51:2). This had been a reason for debate in Jesus' earthly ministry: <<*Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"*>> (Matthew 15:1-3). He then went on to tell them where they were going wrong. Pilate tried to absolve himself from responsibility for Jesus' death with a symbolic cleansing: <<*When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"*>> (Matthew 27:24). James' point here is to symbolise and emphasise the need for moral cleansing required by everyone who wishes to follow Christ.

Double-minded. James used this term elsewhere: <<*he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does*>> (James 1:8). See the comments made in Chapter One.

Laughter shows how casually James' readers were treating their sin. They are not

called to regret their sinful behaviour for the only proper reaction to God's impending judgment is for them to grieve, mourn and wail, as is seen often in the OT: <<Therefore I said, "Turn away from me; let me weep bitterly. Do not try to console me over the destruction of my people">> (Isaiah 22:4), <<O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us>> (Jeremiah 6:26), <<And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son>> (Zechariah 12:10). The language used by James shows that the seriousness of sin is unmistakable here, and Christians today who lack that sense of seriousness about sin are equally weakened and corrupted because of it. Again, this shows the need for repentance.

Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. This could either be seen as a prediction of suffering to come or a call to refrain from participating in the shallowness of the artificial joys of the world that is in moral decay. This does not mean of course that believers should not be happy, indeed there is a consistent call on believers to be joyful, simply because of the great reward they have been given: <<The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven">> (Luke 10:17-20).

¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:10

This verse reminds us of Daniel's divine revelation by the River Tigris, where he was rewarded for his humility: <<Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them">> (Daniel 10:12). James has been speaking of the Christian believers receiving this same wisdom and understanding from God if they ask in all humility, i.e. humble yourselves before the Lord.

Returning to the theme emphasised in v.6, it is the humble whom God will lift up and exalt: <<The lowly he sets on high, and those who mourn are lifted to safety>> (Job 5:11), <<For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted>> (Matthew 23:12), <<He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble>> (Luke 1:52), <<For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted>> (Luke 14:11), <<I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted>> (Luke 18:14), and: <<Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time>> (1 Peter 5:6). But as long as people exalt themselves, God will not exalt them. Ultimately, it is the Christ who must be exalted and with very good reason for all who would follow him, for: <<Just as Moses lifted up the

snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life>> (John 3:14-15).

The prophet and psalmist are in full agreement on how God lifts up and encourages the lowly: <<*For this is what the high and lofty One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite”*>> (Isaiah 57:15), and: <<*You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry*>> (Psalm 10:17).

One amazing aspect of this verse should not be missed given everything that has gone before. God is so gracious to those of us who least deserve it, for in the Gospel we have everything we need to live our lives for Christ, and yet our behaviour must be so disappointing to him. Yet he remains faithful to his promises and forgives those who finally have the common sense to come back in submission and humility before him, to ask for his forgiveness, and to request more grace in our lives to deal with these issues that we face.

¹¹ Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

James 4:11

Brothers. Despite all the issues that James has been charging the churches with, he still aligns himself with them, not wanting to give an impression of being superior to them in anyway. This is a good lesson for all believers who wish to journey together, knowing they have a long way to go in their striving to be more like Jesus.

The Greek word, katalaleite, translated as slander signifies speaking anything that may hurt or injure another; believers must not speak evil things of others, even though they may be true, unless it is genuinely for the benefit of the other person. On such occasions, it is often advisable to seek the guidance and wisdom of the leadership, unless sharing the information with them could cause further distress to the other person being discussed. What believers say should be guided by kindness, as well as truth and justice, if they are to emulate Jesus: <<*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*>> (John 1:14). King Lemuel speaks of the godly wife: <<*She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue*>> (Proverbs 31:26).

James restates the basic problem behind the issues discussed in James 3:1-4:10: the misuse of the tongue to speak evil or to slander others. Speaking ill of others is the result of all the arrogant boasting (James 3:5), jealousy (James 3:14 and 3:16), self-centred desires (v.1 and v.3), and pride (v.6), that James is warning against.

Such slanderous conduct is decried in both the OT: <<*Do not go about spreading*

slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord>> (Leviticus 19:16), <<You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son>> (Psalm 50:20), and: <<They are all hardened rebels, going about to slander. They are bronze and iron; they all act corruptly>> (Jeremiah 6:28); and in the NT: <<They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents>> (Romans 1:29-30), <<For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder>> (2 Corinthians 12:20), and: <<Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind>> (1 Peter 2:1).

Or judges him. By adding this, James is showing that he considers that anyone who speaks against his brother is in the same position as those who have previously been chastised for judging their brother, which is specifically taught against by Jesus: <<*Do not judge, or you too will be judged*>> (Matthew 7:1), showing that James is still alluding to the Sermon on the Mount for his admonishment of, as well as encouragement for, his readership. He also shifts the focus of these verses onto judging once again.

When you judge the law. James insists that disciples are to be doers under the law, which is contradicted when they try to be judges over the law. Although James has used the term to refer either to God's moral law, or the Royal Law to include the teachings of Christ; here, the law likely refers to these OT laws against slander, particularly Leviticus 19:16, which leads to 19:18, <<*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord*>>, which James calls <<*the royal law*>> (James 2:8a). Yet it also includes, in a broader sense, Jesus' kingdom laws regarding love of neighbour: <<*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'*>> (Matthew 22:39), and for one another: <<*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*>> (John 13:34-35), <<*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other*>> (John 15:12-17), <<*And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another*>> (2 John 5). Those who inappropriately judge each other: <<*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all*

the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye>> (Matthew 7:1-5), <<You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things>> (Romans 2:1), and: <<Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God>> (1 Corinthians 4:5), break God's law and show contempt for God.

You are not keeping it. James' point is that believers must accept God's mercy through Christ, and then place themselves under Christ's law, which commands mercy. If they then judge others instead of being merciful toward them and their perceived faults, they are rejecting that law and so setting themselves up as judges over the law. This contradicts their proper stance as recipients of grace – for they are to be doers under the law. They too are called to forgive any transgressions without keeping count: <<Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times>> (Matthew 18:21-22), nor should a record be kept for love: <<keeps no record of wrongs>> (1 Corinthians 13:5c).

Sitting in judgment on it. The Law reflects the law-giver and law-maker, who is perfect and therefore the Law he gave is also perfect. Therefore, anyone who chooses to judge the law is sitting in judgement on God!

¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge. When believers judge each other, they are contradicting that fact. This is a revealing insight into their hearts. In judging people, what they really want is to take God's place. This is what the serpent had told Eve, which led to the Fall of Man: <<"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil">> (Genesis 3:4-5). This is the sin that has been imputed to all who are in Adam and has to be resisted by those who wish to live their lives in obedience to God, otherwise they are denying the Cross of Christ: <<if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace>> (Hebrews 6:6).

When a person begins to: <<judge the law>> (v.11), he is usurping the place of the one Lawgiver and Judge. God alone gave the law, and he alone is judge of all: <<Arise, O Lord, let not man triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence>> (Psalm 9:19), <<He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore>> (Isaiah 2:4), and: <<Let the nations be

roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side>> (Joel 3:12).

To save and destroy. This is probably an implicit message to the divisive boasters, warning them of future judgment: *<<For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead>> (Acts 17:31).* Because he has this almighty power, Jesus insists all mankind should show the judge reverential fear: *<<But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him>> (Luke 12:5).*

Who are you to judge your neighbour? The Gospel is clear that believers will receive the same level of judgement they pass on others: *<<Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven>> (Matthew 6:37).* Paul wrote: *<<I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me>> (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).* However, believers are called to show good judgement in how they interact with the world and with each other.

In light of all that James has written so far about God's mercy toward believers, the issues he raises now came as reminders that the church's family bonds in God's mercy are violated when believers, who have received mercy, turn to judge each other; and God's goodness to them is treated with contempt when they show judgment instead of mercy to their neighbours.

When James instructs his readers not to judge, his meaning is not to make judgements about other people in the church. However, he is not speaking about making judgements between what is good and evil, for disciples need to be discerning. There is a clear difference between being judgemental and showing good judgement.

In summary, what James has been prescribing is a life of faith that has two facets: confidence in God's grace and passion for God's righteousness. The confidence and the passion are complementary responses to God's judgment and mercy. God's mercy triumphs over judgment on a believer's behalf; therefore he may be confident in relying on grace. However, those who have genuinely grasped grace will become all the more eager to grasp righteousness, realising that their lack of righteousness so nearly brought them to disaster in the fearful judgment of God. Once a believer has humbly sought grace in order to escape from judgment (v.10), it becomes unthinkable for him to set himself up as judge over a neighbour (v.11). It is part of a single stance before God to submit to him for his grace (v.7), and to submit to him for his law; no one can be both a judge over the law and a doer under the law (v.11). James has revealed a well-integrated faith in Christ as both a merciful Saviour to be trusted and a righteous Lord to be obeyed.

VII James 4:13-5:12 - The Sins of the Wealthy

James condemns the sins of the wealthy: their arrogant presumption, vv.13-17; and robbing the poor, (James 5:1-6). He then issues a call for patience in suffering (James 5:7-12).

VII.a James 4:13-17 - Boasting About Tomorrow

The continuity from the preceding passage is the theme of humility. Humility is characteristic of the truly wise (James 3:13), it is the stance for receiving God's grace (v.6), it is commanded in the description of repentance (v.10), the opposite of humility is implied in the question immediately preceding this new passage: <<**But you – who are you to judge your neighbour?**>> (v.12). It is natural for James now to confront directly the opposite of humility, which is arrogance.

James addresses businessmen, showing that the sovereignty of God precludes presumption and arrogance in making plans. This has similar application to the way anyone else would plan their life, especially if they do so without regard to God's will for them.

There is much debate among scholars and commentators as to whether James is addressing the wealthy in or outside of the church. Although a case can be made either way, the absence of the key phrase brothers when addressing this group would lend support to those who believe that non-Christian businessmen are in view in this passage. If they are Jewish businessmen as seems likely then they should still have sought God's will for them under the remit of their own faith!

¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

James 4:13

In the 1st Century, the apostles and disciples expected Christ to return within their own lifetime, which of course did not occur. It is an expectation that should be generational. I believe we are called to live our lives in a state of preparation for Christ's immediate return, but to plan it as if he will not return within our own lifetime. However, within our own plans, we need to leave room for God's providential plan and accept that our plans are always going to be subject to his will anyway.

Now listen is a short, sharp statement used to get the attention of those whom James is addressing.

Carry on business and make money. On the surface this sounds like good business sense, but it masks a secular worldview that ignores God. These people may be Christians as discussed but they certainly belong to the wealthy merchant class. Or they may not be believers in Christ, as was the case with the rich spoken of earlier in the letter: <<**But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?**>> (James 2:6-7). What James says applies equally as well to believers or non-believers, and whether they were conducting wealth creating business or

carrying out work on behalf of the church.

One common feature in many churches is that it is quite usual to see the same people taking on most of the tasks in the church, becoming over-stretched and often stressed. Sometimes this can lead to relationship problems and health issues. If the devil cannot force a believer to sin, he can make them too busy to be effective, which is just as bad, if not worse.

Scripture never teaches against being wealthy or carrying out business as such, providing it is conducted ethically, does not cheat anyone, and that honour and glory are given to God as a result. What grieves God is when people try to take the glory for themselves: <<*For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*>> (1 Corinthians 4:7).

¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

James 4:14

The Greek construction allows for a longer sentence than given in the NIV. Perhaps reading more like, 'who do not even know what your life will be like tomorrow'.

The early disciples believed that Jesus would return within their lifetime and so had the attitude that each day was their last. As the generations pass, believers seem to be drifting away from that idea and do not seem to expect him to return during their own lifetime and therefore carry on life regardless.

The other aspect of life is believers do not know when it will end and should not just make assumptions as these people did without reference to God. The Parable of the Rich Fool emphasises this: <<*Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."' "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God">> (Luke 12:13-21).*

You. These business people think they control events but fail to recognise God's providential control and the temporary nature of life, which is like a mist that can fade away or vanish at any moment: <<*As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more*>> (Psalm 103:15-16). We live in an era where the

rising and setting of the sun can be predicted to the precise minute but we still have no idea when the vapour of our life will be dispersed. Planning and investing are not wrong, but arrogant self-confidence and boasting are.

God had used the analogy of mist to describe the weak and failing love toward him by his chosen people: <<*What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears*>> (Hosea 6:4), and: <<*Therefore they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window*>> (Hosea 13:3), with chaff now being applied as well: <<*Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills, like tumbleweed before a gale*>> (Isaiah 17:13), with which David concurs: <<*Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away*>> (Psalm 1:4). John the Baptist had warned that Jesus would burn the chaff: <<*His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*>> (Luke 3:17).

James would impress upon his churches, and through his writing to all churches throughout the ages, this critical piece of knowledge: that God is the one who sustains everyone's life, that each day is not owned by anyone for God controls time and gives it as one of his good gifts, and that everyone would have already been blown away or burned up by God's judgment were it not for his love and mercy. The biblical worldview is that people receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God.

This knowledge helps to dispel self-sufficiency, replacing it with the freedom to rely on God's faithful generosity. Again, far from teaching self-reliance and works-orientation, James is leading all his readers into a life of reliance on and faith in God's grace alone.

¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

James 4:15

The key to vv.13-17 is if it is the Lord's will, with Lord referring to God the Father as the Creator, who sustains the universe and whose will controls all that happens. Every business decision must be based on submission to God's will. A believer is called to recognise and accept their total dependence on God for all things.

James is not trying to eliminate all planning from a believer's life, for that would show a lack of spiritual faith. Nor is he saying that a believer should not do anything without the OK from God or come before him with the trivia of day-to-day life, such as which pair of socks to wear, or what to have for breakfast. James is talking about the attitude that some have where Sunday is for God but Monday to Saturday are theirs to do with as they please.

The spirituality James wants for believers is a humble reliance on God which flows from knowing that they are, in reality, dependent totally on God for every moment of their lives. It is yet another example of how James would envision the manifestation of a reliance of God's grace in all aspects of life.

¹⁶ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

James 4:16

All such boasting is evil. The sin of self-sufficiency is an evil, human trait that has crept into the church. God does not accept wrongful boasting: <<*The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'*" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained>> (Judges 7:2-3), <<*Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings – boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do,*" declares the Sovereign Lord>> (Amos 4:5), and it is worth repeating the observations of Paul on this issue: <<*For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*>> (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Then there are things where God would accept the boast of believers: <<*But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord"*>> (2 Corinthians 10:17), <<*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*>> (Galatians 6:14), and: <<*Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

¹⁷ Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

James 4:17

Doesn't do it describes what are commonly called sins of omission. It is not only what people do that matters; the good that they fail to do is equally displeasing to God, as are the good things people do, but which they do for the wrong reason, i.e. to raise up their own profile in church.

James switches here from knowing God's will to doing God's will, or rather a believer falling into sin because he doesn't do it. This is not a sin of ignorance either for James is saying that the believer knows the good he ought to do, and therefore leaves himself without excuse.

Paul was a man who knew the good he ought to do but also knew how hard it was to do what was right without a total reliance on God. He wrote a powerful account to the church in Rome: <<*We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful*

nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin>> (Romans 7:14-25).

James had already written clearly on this issue but needs to remind his readers again: <<*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does>> (James 1:22-25). Also, the image of a believer who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, recalls the earlier picture of the one who finds a fellow believer in desperate need but does not do the good that ought to be done: <<*Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?>> (James 2:15-16).**

James fully expects that an attitude of humility will be manifest in humble actions, and an arrogant attitude will manifest itself in arrogant actions. Each time that a believer fails to do what they know to be God's will is the same arrogance that James has been describing in knowledge and attitude, now carried out in behaviour.

Indifference toward God's will is a common sin, both within and outside of the church today. James carries the issues of faith into the realm of active obedience, a proof that faith is genuine and that followers of Jesus have a heart to allow Christ to be Lord of their entire lives.