

Are we serious about God or not? (Proverbs 3:34, 4:23 and James 4:1-17)

16-Mar-23

Proverbs 3:34

When you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Proverbs 4:23

Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.

James 4:1-17

Submit Yourselves to God

⁴ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud
but shows favour to the humble."

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. 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. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

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

Boasting About Tomorrow

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.” 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. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.

Intro

Please have your **Bibles opened** to **James chapter 4**, starting at verse 1.

Let me **pray** first.

Let’s pray...

So far the whole point of James’ short book is to tell us that **having faith in Jesus should be obvious to people** by what we DO, what we SAY and how we BEHAVE.

So far James has talked about:

[Slide-Recap – 5 clicks]

- How we handle **trials** in our lives
- That we are to be **quick to listen**, **slow to speak** and **slow to become angry**
- That our **faith** should be accompanied by **actions**
- That we should **keep control of our tongues** – and **control what we say**
- And how we should **ask God for wisdom** and not **rely on our own wisdom** or the **world’s wisdom**

Now here in chapter 4...

He **says to his readers** (and to us)

It's time to **GET SERIOUS** and he is basically saying here – **are you serious about God or not?**

And James identifies **4 problems**:

Problem 1 – Human Desires/Pleasures (vv1-3)

The **first problem** he identifies is in v1 - that when there are **fight**s and quarrels with each other – whether inside the **church**, or in our **family**, or with our **friends** or with **work colleagues** – he says these fights and quarrels come from the **human desires or lusts for pleasure** [**hedonism**] that we might have **inside us** – which are **battling to come out**.

[Slide–Heading and Problem 1 – Human Desires/Pleasures]

And when they DO come out – they **cause problems in relationships**.

And they can even lead us to be so angry and **frustrated** in **not getting our own way** – that in v2 – we **want to kill**.

We might not have killed anyone physically – but perhaps we've **killed them emotionally with our words**.

The **Bible** is full of **examples** of people **wanting their own way** and being **prepared to kill** for it:

Cain killing **Abel**

Joseph's brothers wanting to do away with him

King **Saul** wanting to kill King **David**

The **religious leaders of Israel** – plotting to kill Jesus.

If we look around the **world today**.

All of the **countries** that are in **conflict** with each other are basically caused by peoples' **desires to have their own way**.

And this leads in v2 – to **coveting** (wanting something that someone else has) but when we cannot get what we want, we quarrel and fight.

The countries in the world who don't get their own way – they **fight and attack** – they resort to **murder and terrorism** etc.

But what about us?

How do we react when we don't get our own way?

Do we **attack** others?

Do we **scheme**?

Do we **blame God**?

Does it even cross our minds that maybe this desire of ours – is **not** what God wants for us?

(pause)

[Slide-Solution 1 – Pray with right motives – for God’s will]

According to James - the solution for human desire and lust for pleasure is there at the end of v2 – we need to **ask God** whether the desires of our heart are what He wants for our lives.

In other words, **PRAY** – take it to the Lord in prayer.

And in v3 – we need to be asking God **with the right motives.**

James’ **readers** (and perhaps **us**) were **praying with selfish motives** –

They were not saying in their prayers – “**Thy will be done**” – they were saying “**My will be done**”

What **format** do our prayers take?

Are our prayers just a **shopping list of our wants** – I know mine are sometimes?

God’s goal is not to give human beings what their impulses and desires want.

His goal is that human beings will **learn to love and want** – what God loves and wants.

How serious are we about **seeking God’s will for our life?**

(pause)

Problem 2 – Friendship with the World (vv4-10)

The second problem James sees is that his **readers** (and again that can include **us**) – are **too friendly with the world** in v4.

[Slide–Problem 2 - heading/too friendly with the world]

Being too friendly with the world James says **makes us adulterous** people.

Literally James is saying we are “**adulteresses**” (female) to God.

Being too friendly with the world is **cheating on God** –

Remember – as a bunch of Christians in a church – we are the **Bride of Christ**.

If we are more friendly to the world than we are to God – then **we are committing spiritual adultery** – our lover is the **world** – instead of God.

Jesus – himself – **warns** against this in **Matt 6:24** – He says

24 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

If we let the world use us and control us – rather than letting God rule our lives – then James says we will **end up as God’s enemy** in v4

Perhaps we’re too friendly with the world – that we put its pleasure before our quiet times with God – we watch TV too much neglecting our Bibles – we let other things get in the way of getting along to Bible study and Sunday worship.

James reminds us in v5 – that **God is a jealous God**.

Jealous, not in a bad sense but in a sense that he loves us so much and He wants the spirit he has put inside each one of us – **to love Him and be devoted to Him** – **and to not be in love with the world**.

But isn’t that too hard for us?

How can any person give God the devotion He demands?

James has the answer in v6 –

If God gives a great demand – he gives **more grace** to fulfil the demand.

And James is saying – we can't receive that grace until we **get rid of our pride**

Until we get rid of the pride that says – '***we don't need God in our lives***'

Until we get rid of the pride that says – '***we can manage quite well on our own thank you God***' - we can't have a proper relationship with God -

That's why James says still in v6 – that ***God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble***

The trouble with pride is that it **doesn't recognize it needs anything** – and **sees that the world supplies all it needs** – and **there is no need for God**

The trouble with pride is that it **treasures independence** and **sees no need to be beholdng to anyone including God**

The trouble with pride is that it **doesn't recognize its own sin** – and **the need for a saviour for that sin** – namely Jesus dying on the cross for our sin

So, there's the problem – **friendship with the world** – believing that it supplies all our needs and having pride in ourselves – that we can go it alone without God
(pause)

[Slide – Solution 2]

James' solution to this friendship with the world **is to be humble** – which is the opposite of being proud.

And verses 7 to 10 show what being **humble** looks like:

James uses a whole **bunch of imperatives** – they are commands – not suggestions:

First we - **submit to God** in verse 7

By **submit** – James means **yielding to God’s wishes for our lives** and **handing over control of our lives to him** – **putting God’s will before our will!**

Next we are to **resist the devil** in verse 7 also.

The **devil** is the great **tempter, slanderer, deceiver** and **liar**.

The **devil’s greatest weapon** is our own pride.

Because of our pride –

The devil can either convince us – **we can love this world and have no need for**

God – or – the devil **can convince us we can serve two masters** -

The devil can convince us – **we haven’t sinned at all** –

or he can convince us – that when we sin it doesn’t matter – **God will understand.**

That’s how the devil convinced **Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit** – he said

*“**Did God really say you can’t eat it?**”*

The devil can convince us that **we did nothing wrong –when we actually did** – and

that **we don’t need to say sorry**

The devil can convince us – **we don’t need Jesus as our Lord and Saviour** – **to take away our sin and to give us forgiveness and eternal life**

But this is all a lie

When Jesus wasn't tempted by the devil – **He resisted the devil!**

When the devil tried to use Peter to stop Jesus fulfilling God's plan – Jesus said
“Get behind me Satan”

We need to do the same – and James says - **when we resist the devil – he will clear off!**

Instead, James says in v8 – we must **come near to God** **and he will come near to us.**

How can we come near to God?

Well **God has made it easy** for us.

Back in the OT – **access to God was through the High Priest** who entered through the curtain in to the Holy of Holies part of the temple and made sacrifices to God – on behalf of the people

But in the NT – when Jesus died on the cross the curtain in the temple was torn in two – **making direct access to God possible - for all who come to Him!**

We can now come near to God – **by our faith in Jesus, by praying directly to God without any intermediary, and by reading God's will for us in His Word, the Bible.**

The more we do that – the **closer we get to God** – and the closer He gets to us

To get closer to God – in verse 8 we need to **wash our hands, purify our hearts** and **stop being double-minded.**

Washing our hands is a **picture** of us getting the **dirt of sin** washed down the **plug hole** by Jesus' death on the cross.

Purifying our hearts – means examining our hearts – examining our motives – examining our behaviour and asking ourselves – are we pleasing God?

And **we need to be single minded** [instead of double-minded]– that means - **our focus is on God** – not one eye on God and one eye on the world and what it offers.

And getting closer to God – **will be like digging a hole for our old sinful pride-filled lives and burying that old sinful body** – and that will look like verse 9 and 10 – doing a **complete U-Turn in our lives** – repenting and putting to death our sinful body – and having a funeral for it so to speak – **grieving, mourning and wailing and crying** in sorrow for how bad we've been and for how we have offended God by our selfish desires and friendship of the world.

It will look like us **stopping our partying and laughter with the world** – and **getting serious about a relationship with God.**

Before Jesus was raised to glory – **He was crucified.**

And it's the same for us – see v10 –

We need to humble ourselves before God – admit our sins – get our bodies crucified of our sin – **dying to our old self** – and then God will lift us up – **to be new creations** – **forgiven and ready to serve God in humility**

Here's how the apostle Paul puts it:

[Slide– Gal 5:24]

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:24)

Problem 3 – Slandering and judging people (vv11-12)

The **third problem** James identifies is in v11.

[Slide – Heading Problem 3 – slandering and judging]

James' readers are **slandering and judging people** them.

By slandering here – the **Greek** literally means **saying bad stuff about people.**

Our English word “**slander**” usually implies what's being said is untrue –

That's not the case here – whether the words are true or not – **James is saying don't say bad stuff about people**

Saying bad stuff about people **inevitably leads to gossip.**

And gossiping and being hyper-critical and saying bad stuff – **will hurt and divide communities including our church family**

And once we start down this track of gossip, criticism and saying bad stuff.

James says the next step is **judging people!**

When James talks about **judging** here, he is **referring to a critical and condemning attitude toward others, where someone speaks harshly, harmfully or unfairly about someone.**

James is addressing the problem of **tearing each other down rather than building each other up.**

For **example**, let's say you are the Bible reader this Sunday and someone says to you after the service ***"I wouldn't have read it that way – you need elocution lessons"*** –

Or let's say someone says to you ***"you need singing lessons; you're singing out of tune each week"*** – what's that going to do to the person's confidence?

And what if the person criticizing is a serial offender – **what's that going to do to the church?** People are going to **take their name of the Bible reading list** – they are going to **stop singing God's praises** – and they might even feel like not coming to worship anymore.

That sort of judging or criticism is not what we are about here at St. David's.

We are about encouraging people.

For example, last week young **Molly was the Bible reader** – not only did this encourage Molly – and her mum – and her grandparents – and us - **but it shows the younger people** – that they can be a Bible reader one day, too!

(pause)

And please note – when James speaks against judging people – **he is NOT saying we remain silent about people's sin**. Other parts of scripture encourage us to **lovingly point out and correct sin** (like Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1).

What James is warning about here **is a self-righteous and unloving attitude that assumes a superiority over others, as if they were above the law rather than under it.**

So what law is James talking about here?

Well, he's talking about the **royal law** – he mentioned this back in James 2:8 – the **royal law** that says – '*that we should love our neighbour as ourselves*'

We cannot love our neighbour as ourselves **if we slander them and say bad stuff about them!**

And James' argument is if we knowingly break the law of '*loving our neighbour*' **then we set ourselves above the law** – which means we have **made ourselves the judge of the law.**

[Slide– Solution 3 – God is the Judge]

But our duty is to **obey** the law – not judge the law.

James says – **only God** – the one who gave the law in the first place – **can judge whether the law has been broken.**

And **we have no right to make that judgment!**

But we do – don't we?

Perhaps we've said things like:

"I can't believe they did that – I'm glad I'm not like them?" – is that not pride and judging people?

Or perhaps we've said:

"They call themselves a Christian but look what they said or did" – but we don't know the full story of that person's circumstances?

Perhaps we've judged someone as being uneducated – **just by the way they dress or the way they speak?**

Perhaps we've judged someone who is old or has a disability or an illness - as meaning they have nothing to offer?

We put people in certain boxes and label them – without knowing – don't we?

(pause)

Given half a chance these people will crawl out of the boxes we've put them in and prove to us how wrong we were to judge them!

Problem 4 – Boasting about tomorrow (Mistaken Confidence) (vv13-17)

The **final problem** James identifies is in v13.

[Slide–Heading and Problem 4 boasting]

And that's **boasting about what WE will do tomorrow.**

We all make plans don't we?

- Which college or uni or job to apply for
- Who we will marry
- How many children we will have
- What house to buy
- Where to go on holiday
- When to retire
- Where to retire to

Making plans is not wrong in itself – in fact it's wise to do so

The apostle **Paul made plans on his mission trips** (Acts 15:36; 18:20-21; 1 Cor 16:5-9)

But there is a right way and a wrong way to make plans...

The **wrong way** is to say as in v13 – “tomorrow we will do this”

It's like we are in control of all things – not God

It's us taking the credit for what will happen – when that is God's credit

And **this boasting of ours** can lead to arrogant schemes in v16 – James says.

We can think we are so in control of our lives – that **we can promise things we cannot deliver** – things that only God can.

James says **such boasting is evil**.

Because it's clearly **displacing God** in our lives

And by arrogantly displacing God in our lives – James says in v17 –

It can lead us to the blatant sin of knowing what is good and right to do – and refusing to do it!

For example – **we might know of a need** [it could be a physical or financial need] **a need** - in our **family** or in our **church family** – a need that we could easily help fill – but we don't do it – because **we've forgotten or ignored the royal law** – **to love our neighbour as our self**. And we're operating on our own agenda – not God's agenda!

Another example – we might know we are good with children – **and we know there's a need in our schools to teach scripture** – but we don't volunteer

Another example – we know there are people in our church family who are sick or lonely – but we don't think to pray for them or call them or visit them!

(pause)

So, what's the **solution to this boasting and arrogance and failure to do the good that we ought to?**

[Slide–Solution 4]

Well - **we don't know what will happen tomorrow** – only God knows –

In the scheme of eternity – our **short life is frail and tenuous** – like a puff of smoke or a morning mist [v14]. We don't go on forever – let's remember God gives life and He decides when it is taken away – **He's in control.**

Instead, the **right way to make plans** – is to **bring our plans to God in prayer**

Seeking to say – as James says in v15 ***“If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.”***

By saying ***“God willing, I will do this or that”*** – we are **acknowledging that God has a plan for us - AND we are acknowledging that things will happen in God's providence and perfect timing.**

And let's not forget what the Apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:10 - ***we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.***

If we fail to do these good works that God has prepared for us, then James says –
v17 – **it is a sin!**

Conclusion

To finish up then

My challenge this morning which echoes James' words here, is that...

We stop **boasting about what we will do – and seek to know and do what God's will is for us to do!**

You see - there is really - **only one thing we can boast about** – and it's the one thing that also **fixes our sinful desires, stops our friendship with the world – and fixes the bad stuff we do and say**

The apostle Paul says it – and we can say it now and **take it home with us as our catch-cry...**

[Slide-Gal 6:14]

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. (Gal 6:14)

Friends - let's get **serious about God...**

Let's pray...

Father God, thank you for your word through James

Help us to remove any pride in our lives and humbly submit to your authority.

Heavenly Father, in all aspects of our lives.

Please remove any unhealthy desires and lusts for pleasure in us.

Help us not to befriend the world's values.

Help us not to slander and judge others.

And help us to boast only in what Jesus has done for us.

Help us to learn to depend on You for all of our needs.

In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.