

There is a God, and I'm Not Him

James 4:11-17

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After reflecting on life, someone famously said: *"Two things I have learned: There is a God, and I'm not Him."* Wise words that we all should learn and be reminded of when we want total control of our lives.

James 4:11-17 reminds us of the truth of that statement. Think about it this way: It only requires very ordinary situations to reveal how we wrongly believe we are the sovereign rulers of our world. Often, we think it requires significant decisions and situations to reveal what's in our hearts, and certainly those times will reveal that, but actually it's common, everyday situations and decisions that reveal what's in our hearts.

Have you ever noticed that we have a remarkable ability to put ourselves in places where only God belongs? Think about it. We take pride in our accomplishments, demand control over our circumstances, and assume we know what is best for our lives. But James reveals two less obvious, and actually more common, ways we attempt to take God's place: We desire to become judges over people, and we also desire to be the sovereign masters of our future.

In James 4:11-17, the Holy Spirit exposes two expressions of the sin of pride:

1. The pride of pretending to sit on God's Judgment Seat
2. The pride of pretending to run God's world

When you initially read vv. 11-17, these sins may seem unrelated, but in reality, they are illustrations of a deeper heart issue – practical atheism. One sin occurs in our words, and the other in our calendars. So, while on the surface these seem unrelated, they are, in fact, from the same heart issue: *A heart that forgets God is the sovereign ruler of the universe.*

Think about it: The person who tears down a brother or sister says, *"I have the right to determine your worth."* Then the person who boasts about tomorrow says, *"I have the right to determine my future."* Both statements are situations where we pretend to be God.

And this is why James does not merely give moral advice. James is not simply telling us to *"Try to do more and try harder"* or *"Remember you need to say 'if God wills' after you make your plans."*

There is a deeper heart issue at work here. It is an issue of worship. Let me show you where this heart issue is found. Look at the preceding context of James 4. In vv. 1-2, James talks about our *passions* and *desires*. *Passions* and *desires* are heart issues. Then in v. 4, James calls the people in the church *"adulterous people"* because of their behavior. Remember the principle that we always talk about at Grand when it comes to the heart: *"We do what we do because we love what we love from our hearts."* What this means is that the heart, which is where our passions and desires reside, must change. It must change. Jesus must change our hearts.

However, before we get into the heart change we need, let's hear how James confronts these two sins in the church. First, we will work through these verses by unpacking these two sins. Then we will apply the gospel to help us fight these sins and see how our hearts are transformed by the gospel. Finally, I will conclude by showing how Jesus' atonement kills these two sins.

I. The sin of sitting in God's Judgment Seat (vv. 11-12)

Before we get into vv. 11-12, I want to look back at what he called the people in these churches. James had been very harsh and confrontational with the church in vv. 1-10. Previously in the letter, he had called them: *Murders, covetous, argumentative, hypocrites, sinners, double-minded, adulterers, and behaving like they were enemies with God.*

Man . . . I don't know how you hear what James is saying, but he was hard on them. Why? It was because they were in danger of making shipwreck of their faith and destroying their church.

Now, look at how he begins v. 11:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

His tone changes. Now he addresses them as *brothers*. His exhortation doesn't end, but it is as if he remembers that his exhortations are to his family.

Think about it: The church is not a gathering of perfect people. The church is a gathering of sinners who have received mercy. We all need exhortation, but we also all need to be reminded we belong to one another as a unified body of believers. So, James' indictment is to his brothers and sisters to beware of sinful speech that can quickly destroy unity. It doesn't just destroy the unity of a church; it can destroy a church.

In case you think I am overstating my case: Look at the phrase "*speak evil*" in v. 11. Circle or underline that phrase. This is a *deadly phrase* that carries the idea of *slander, malicious criticism, or tearing someone down with our words because we enjoy it*.

I want you to notice the connection between the word "*devil*" (*diabolos*) in v. 7 and the word *slander* in v. 11. The Greek word *diabolos* means *slanderer*, and then he uses the word *slander* in v. 11. Essentially, James says that we are never more like the devil than when we slander and speak evil of others. This is what the devil does, and the devil wants to get inside a church and tear it down.

Now, I want to be careful here because there is a difference between a confrontive, constructive conversation and condemning another person. James is not saying we should never identify sin, confront error, or exercise biblical discernment. After all, this is what James is doing. The issue James confronts is a *heart posture that delights* in condemning others. It is *sinful judgmentalism*.

Brothers and sisters, there is a difference between *discernment* and *sinful judgmentalism*. *Discernment* says: "*God's Word tells us what is right and wrong, and I want to help my brother follow Christ.*" *Judgmentalism* says: "*I place myself above my brother, and I find satisfaction in exposing his failures.*" *Discernment* seeks restoration. *Judgmentalism* seeks superiority. *Discernment* weeps over sin. *Judgmentalism* enjoys sitting in God's seat of Judgment; therefore, James warns against the second. Are you tracking with me?

Now, look at the rest of v. 11:

The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

When you read this sentence in v. 11, it can be startling and at the very least a bit confusing. So, what is James saying? He is saying we should not slander or malign our brothers and sisters in Christ because when we do, we are actually judging God's holy law.

How can this be? Stay with me here: It is because when we slander or condemn others, *pride has filled our hearts*. Listen, it's not that we are merely breaking God's command, but, and here's the bigger issue (sin), we are placing ourselves above the law as if we have the authority to wield it as the Ultimate Judge. What we are doing is taking on the role of judge and accuser. In essence, we are pretending to be God.

When we use our words to condemn another person, we are effectively saying: "*God's command to love does not apply to me, but it does apply to thee. My assessment matters more than God's command to love one another.*"

This is the great irony of the sin of pride, is it not? Think about it: The person who is most aware of another person's failures often becomes least aware of his own. Jesus illustrated the sin of pride and self-righteousness in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prayed: "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men.*" His prayer sounded religious, but beneath it was pride and self-righteousness. He did not come before God as a sinner in need of mercy. He came before God as a judge comparing himself with others. On the other hand, the tax collector simply cried: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*" Jesus said that man went home

justified. Why? Because God does not justify people who believe themselves better than others, and are self-righteous. He justifies people who confess that they are sinners and in deep need of grace.

Are you in deep need of grace today? The grace of the person and work of Christ is what changes you, not giving God the resumé of all of your righteousness. It is the gospel that humbles us when we see what Jesus did to save us from our sins. The humility of the person and work of Christ is what we need. John Calvin said it this way, *“The Christian life is three things: Number 1 – humility, Number 2 – humility, and Number 3 – humility.”* May the Lord grant us the gift of humility.

Finally, James drives his point home in v. 12. Look at v. 12:

There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Verse 12 is the heart of the passage. He is saying: There is only one Judge, and it's not you. It's not me. It's not the person sitting beside you. It's not even the person you disagree with. God alone possesses the authority to judge because God alone possesses perfect knowledge, perfect holiness, and perfect justice.

Human beings judge with incomplete information. We see actions, but we struggle to discern motives. God sees motives. He sees the heart. We hear words, but only God knows hearts. We observe moments in time, but only God knows the entire story. Only God can judge perfectly.

Friends, here is where the person and work of Jesus Christ help us, humbles us, and transforms us. Are you ready? Here it is: The Judge who has every right to condemn us – chose to save us (as v. 12 says, *“he who is able to save”*).

The Judge became our Redeemer. The One who had authority to destroy came to rescue sinners. The sinless Son of God was sinfully judged, mocked, accused, and condemned. Why? So that sinners like us could stand before God's judgment seat and hear: *“Not guilty.”*

On the cross, Jesus took the judgment we deserved for our sin of pride and slander so that we could receive the mercy we did not deserve. On the cross is where our judgmental hearts were crucified. On the cross is where we understand how much mercy we have received from Jesus. On the cross, Jesus died in our place for our sins, so that we may become people who extend mercy to those who do not deserve it.

This is how the gospel helps us fight the sin of slander, condemnation, and judgmentalism. Brothers and sisters, when we are tempted to slander and accuse, we look to our Savior who showed grace when He was slandered and accused. The grace that comes from the cross empowers you and me to kill the sin of slander. Only a person who truly knows grace will not *look down* on others but *look up* to the cross of Christ, where his Savior died for his sin of slander.

Here's what this looks like: The proud person judges and says: *“I am better than you.”* The person transformed by the gospel says: *“I am a sinner saved by grace, just like you.”* The proud person says: *“I deserve God's favor.”* The one covered in the grace of the gospel says: *“Everything I have received is because Christ gave Himself for me.”* The proud person says: *“I am the judge.”* The one who applies the transforming power of the gospel says: *“Jesus is the Judge who gave His life that I might be declared ‘not guilty,’ so how can I condemn?”*

II. The sin of sitting on God's Throne of Providence (vv. 13-17)

In vv. 13-17, the sin of practical atheism is even more clearly on display. James turns from our words to our calendars and plans.

Now, we have to think carefully here and keep things in perspective, just as we did when we unpacked the last sin. Because at first glance, this sounds like making plans is a sin, just as godly confrontation was.

Friends, there is nothing inherently wrong with making plans. Scripture does not condemn wisdom, preparation, diligence, or responsible decision-making. It is not sinful to think ahead and make plans. For example,

it is wise and good to set aside money to plan for retirement. Listen, the sin talked about in this text is not found in planning. The sin is that they made plans without reference to God. Look at v. 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"

The phrase "Come now" is an idiom that means "Now, listen to me here." So, when you think that I'm saying, "Now, listen to me," too much, you need to remember I'm simply being biblical.

Look at v. 13 again, and I want you to notice what is missing from their statement. They say: "Today or tomorrow..." "We will go..." "We will spend a year..." "We will trade..." "We will make a profit..." Five times they speak about themselves. What or who's absent? God is absent.

Their problem is not their desire to make money or make plans. Their problem is their theology. They are living as though their lives belong entirely to them. They are not denying God exists. They simply live as though He is irrelevant. And this is one of the most subtle forms of pride. It is practical atheism.

Think about it this way: Most people and even Christians do not consciously say, "I don't need God." Instead, we communicate it through our lives. We make our decisions without prayer. We pursue our goals without seeking God's wisdom. We strive to build our futures without considering God's purposes. We subtly communicate with our actions, "I can manage my life because I know what is best." James tells us that this attitude is arrogance.

Now, look at v. 14 and let's consider the illusion of our control over events in our lives:

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Think about it! The guy had made his plans: timing, location, how long he would be there, his business strategy, and set his goal to make a profit. The problem is he had no control over events in the world. He didn't even know what tomorrow would bring.

Friends, there's nothing wrong with planning or doing anything this guy did. We worship a God of purpose and planning, and we are created in His image. However, because of sin, our desire to imitate God has become a desire to replace God and exercise His authority.

Look at what James asks in v. 14. He says, "What is your life?" His question absolutely destroys our pride. James' question is a rhetorical question, so he doesn't give us an opportunity to answer it. Instead, he continues to destroy our pride when he says: "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

The image James uses is powerful from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. He reminds us that life is a vapor that appears in the morning and then vanishes. We are like a breath that appears on a cold morning and then is gone. That is the human life. So, compared with eternity, our lives are incredibly brief.

But here's the deal: This does not mean our lives are meaningless. The Bible never teaches that human existence is insignificant. God created humanity in His image. God formed us for relationship with Him. God gave us work, purpose, and responsibility. James' point is not that life is worthless. His point is that life is temporary, and because it is short, we must live it in dependence on God.

So, how do we live with dependence on God as we make our plans and look to the future? In v. 15, James offers practical advice. Look at v. 15:

Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Basically, the wisdom he gives is to preach to ourselves. It is to remind ourselves to depend on God and place our plans before His sovereign throne.

Listen, James is not giving us a phrase to add to our vocabulary. What he is doing is calling us to adopt a posture of the heart that is dependent on God. The issue is not whether we use the phrase, "If the Lord wills."

These words are not some kind of mystical incantation that makes all of our plans succeed. This phrase is a reminder that God is God and we are not.

The issue is whether we are placing our plans before the Lord and resting in His good purposes. The phrase, “*if the Lord wills,*” or “*Lord willing,*” means: “*My future belongs to God, and I am trusting in Him.*” It means our plans exist under His authority. It also means our desires are submitted to His wisdom. These words are not passive fatalism. They are active trust in Christ.

Listen to me: Friends as Christians we still work, still makes plans, and still have dreams. However, we do so with open hands, knowing only the Lord controls tomorrow.

Yet, as James draws his exhortation to a close, he knew there was the problem in that church. Look at v. 16:

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

James comes back and rebukes those who had ventured out and pretended to be God. They sinned the sin of pride by believing they could sit on God’s providential throne. Simon Kistemaker, in his commentary, said:

Pride closes man’s eyes to reality, so that he does not see the ridiculousness of his deeds. Man makes plans and talks as if he were the master of his life and God does not exist. Utter foolishness! James overheard this preposterous talk, records it, and shows his readers the senselessness of living a life of practical atheism.¹

Why is boasting foolish and even evil, as James says? Because boasting takes God’s gifts and turns them into reasons to glorify ourselves. We would do well to remember that every breath is a gift. Every ability is a gift. Every opportunity is a gift. Every success is a gift. Yet pride says: “*I accomplished this.*” “*I built this.*” “*I control this.*”

So, what is the answer to this problem? How do we fight this sin? The gospel remedy to boasting and pride. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:14,

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The cross of Christ through which the grace of God comes says, “*Everything I have received has come from the gracious hand of God, therefore I will boast in Him.*”

So, it doesn’t mean we don’t plan and work. What we do it put our plans and work under God’s providential care. We work because God gives strength. We plan because God gives wisdom. We serve because God gives grace. We succeed because God provides opportunity. Again, we remember what the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:10 after he told us that we are saved by faith through grace:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We carry out the good works that God has planned for us to do. We give Him the glory and we get the joy. Finally, James ends this section in v. 17 with one of the most searching statements in all of Scripture:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

This verse is often quoted, and rightly so. But we must understand it in its context. James is not introducing a random statement about sin. He is summarizing everything he has been teaching. It is also a restatement of something he said earlier in his letter in James 1:23-24,

¹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, 146.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

The person who knows the truth but refuses to live according to it has a heart problem because he examines his life and says,

“No, God, I don’t want to do what You want me to do. I want to do what I want to do.”

Here’s the scary thing about what was going on in this church. Friends, the people James addressed knew something about God. They knew there was a lawgiver. They knew God was sovereign. They knew life was fragile. They knew tomorrow belonged to the Lord. They knew humility was required. But knowledge alone does not produce obedience.

The great danger here is not merely ignorance. The great danger is knowing what is right and refusing to surrender. It is the difference between facts and faith.

Friends, there will be a lot of people who know all the facts of the gospel, but they do not live by faith in Jesus. They will not make it into heaven. They will miss heaven by twelve inches, the distance between their head and heart. Just knowing the facts about the gospel, knowing lots of doctrine and theology, is not enough. As important as these things are, unless they are united with faith that produces worship and obedience, they are worthless.

Conclusion: James 4:11–17 brings us face to face with two illusions: Number 1: The illusion that we can judge rightly without God. Number 2: The illusion that we can plan safely without God. Both illusions collapse when we see ourselves clearly. We are not the Judge. God is. We are not sovereign. God is. We are not eternal. God is. There is a God, and you and I are not Him.

But here’s the good news of the gospel. There is a God, and He came in Christ to reconcile us to Himself by dying on the cross for our sins of slander and pretending to be sovereign.

Here’s how Jesus’ atonement helps us fight these sins. Ready? In Jesus Christ, the sovereign Judge has come near. The One who had authority to condemn us for our sin came to save us from the penalty of our sin and break the power of sin over us. The One who controls tomorrow entered our yesterday to save us. The One who gives life laid down His own life to give you life everlasting.

Jesus Christ left heaven and humbled Himself, taking on the form of a servant and lived the life of faith that we couldn’t live and wouldn’t live. He trusted the Father perfectly. He obeyed completely. He submitted entirely. And through His death and resurrection, He purchased the forgiveness of our sins and new life for all who repent and believe in Him.

So, as we struggle to live vv. 11-17 out, we call on the One who lived it perfectly to help us. We remember He lived this and never sinned. We marvel at what He did and worship Him. We ask Him to change our hearts. Then when we fail to live out vv. 11-17, we thank God that we can find forgiveness, the ability to repent, and be renewed in Jesus.

Listen to me: Reading the Letter of James is like reading Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It is like getting punched in the gut and slapped repeatedly in the face and, you know what, we need it. We need to be reminded of what we are called to do as disciples and how we are to live. Yet, we also need to see the grace in James’ letter so that when we fail to live it out, we find grace and life in his words like James 4:6-10,

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.⁹

Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.