

James 4:11-5:6      “Knowing and Doing”  
Isaiah 5:8-30  
Psalm 37

March 11, 2018

Isaiah warned Judah about their *economic* sins:  
those who join house to house and add field to field –  
    who seek their happiness by gaining wealth and power;  
or those who run after alcohol and drugs –  
    seeking their happiness by partying hard.

It’s interesting that nearly 3,000 years ago,  
people sought happiness through accumulating wealth  
or by using alcohol and music.

Whether the Wall Street banker – or the sex and drugs and rock’n’roll –  
not much has changed in 3,000 years.

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 37 –  
shows us that the challenge for the righteous is also still the same!

Do not fret on account of the wicked.  
Yes, the wicked often prosper –  
    they succeed in afflicting the poor –  
    but their day is coming.  
Because the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;  
    he is their stronghold in the time of trouble.

Sing Psalm 37, stanzas 1-5 [read 6-10], 11  
Read James 4:11-5:6

When Christians make plans, you often hear them add, “Lord willing” –  
as a way of acknowledging that God, in his providence, may have other plans.

And the English translations of James 4:15, would generally support that way of saying it.  
(And, let me hasten to add, that it’s a very good point!  
It is always prudent to acknowledge that God may have other plans –  
and so our plans must always be made with humility –  
recognizing as Proverbs says,  
    “many are the plans in the mind of a man,  
    but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand” (Prov 19:21) –  
or as Thomas a Kempis put it,  
    “man proposes, but God disposes.”)

But when it comes to James 4:15, it is a case of *right doctrine, wrong text!*  
After all, the *conclusion* of the paragraph is found in verse 17 –

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

If you take verse 15 as saying, “Lord willing, we will live and do this or that” –  
then you are admitting that you *don't know* the right thing –  
you are just doing the best you can,  
given the uncertainty of God's hidden will.

But when we talk about God's will, there is another option.  
There is not only his hidden will – by which he governs all things –  
there is also his declared will – namely,  
the things that God has *commanded* us to do!

What happens if you take James 4 in this way?  
Well, then James is not telling us to simply add “Lord willing” to our plans!  
Rather, James is telling us to *reconsider our plans!*  
The point is *not* that we will do what we want – Lord willing.  
The point is *rather* that we should *do the Lord's will!*

And if you know what that is – and you don't do it – *that's sin.*

### 1. “Do Not Speak Evil Against One Another” (4:11-12)

<sup>11</sup> *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.* <sup>[d]</sup> *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.* <sup>12</sup> *There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

James has been exhorting us about how we talk – how we use *words*.  
He has called us adulteresses (4:3), sinners (4:8), and double-minded (4:8) –  
warning us against following our desires –  
warning us against friendship with the world.

But now he returns to calling us “brothers.”  
He gives us some strong warnings – but they are brotherly warnings!

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.”  
What does it mean to speak “evil”?  
The Greek word simply means to “speak against” someone.  
It means to use words to harm or tear down.

James has already warned us that the tongue is a fire –  
no one can tame the tongue!  
Now he gives us a very specific application of this point.  
Do not speak against one another.

In one sense, this is very simple.

Don't speak against each other!  
Don't use your words to harm others.  
If what you say harms the reputation of another,  
then *you* have spoken against your brother or sister!

Oh, but what if it's true?  
Speaking truth in love is important!  
It may be true about so-and-so –  
but did you need to say it to *this person*?

What *good* does it accomplish?  
How are you showing *love* for God and for your brother in how you speak?

Now, let's be clear!

James is *not* talking about protecting wicked people!  
If there is a murderer, or a rapist, or a thief on the loose,  
you should *say something!!!*

How many child molesters have been “protected” by churches who say,  
“we don't want to hurt his reputation!”?

NO!!!

Those who have done such things do not deserve the name of *brother* –  
unless of course, they *repent* – and thereby *openly confess their sin* –  
in which case, *everyone knows about it!*

So let's be clear that James is not going to be all “hush-hush” about sin!  
(Did you hear what comes next?  
James is going to be “speaking against” all sorts of sin!)

Rather, James is talking about how we speak about each other in the body of Christ.  
He wants us to build each other up in our words –  
not tear each other down and destroy each other!

That's why he goes on to say,  
“The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother,  
speaks against the law and judges the law.  
But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge.”

The law says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”  
If you speak against your neighbor and destroy him by your words,  
then you are speaking against the law –  
you are saying that *you* are higher than the law –  
you know *better* than the law –  
and thus you are not a doer of the law, but a judge.

But as verse 12 says,  
    “There is only one lawgiver and judge,  
        He who is able to save and to destroy.  
    But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

What *should you do*?

Well, Jesus taught us that if you have something against your brother,  
    you should go to him and show him his fault.  
If you have a problem with someone in the church,  
    you need to deal with it face-to-face.

From time-to-time I have had people come to me  
    and express their objection to someone else in the church.  
I will generally encourage them to talk to that person.  
    Sometimes they say, “I thought it would come better from the pastor.”  
    No – I can help you think about how to do it – how to say it –  
        but Jesus calls *you* to deal with your brother.

And if you do not go and deal with your brother –  
    then you are sitting in judgment over Jesus!  
    You are saying that Jesus doesn’t know what he’s doing!

Who are *you* to judge your neighbor?

That same attitude makes its way into our second point as well:

## **2. Do What You Know Is Right – An Exhortation to Christians in Business (4:13-17)**

<sup>13</sup> *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”—* <sup>14</sup> *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.* <sup>15</sup> *Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”* <sup>16</sup> *As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.* <sup>17</sup> *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

I have titled this “an exhortation to Christians in business” –  
    because that is the image that James uses.  
Obviously, though, the image can be applied to all sorts of future planning.

How do you plan for the future?

As we said at the beginning,  
    James is *not* simply urging us to tack “Lord willing” to the end of all our plans!  
As though James has been encouraging us to pursue our own desires with all our heart –  
    so long as we think about God from time to time!!

So how do you conduct your business?  
How do you plan for the future?

What should be the guiding principles that direct your plans?

First, in verse 13, James points out the wrong way of doing it:  
“Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town  
and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.”

What’s wrong with that approach?  
It sounds like good business strategy!  
And 9 times out of 10 it is!  
But James says that “good business strategy” is *not* what should drive you!

“You do not know what tomorrow will bring.”  
If you invest your life – your money – your career – your parenting –  
based on what will *most likely* be the most profitable –  
then you are thinking wrong about your life.

“What is your life?  
For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

“James says this in order to indicate just how fleeting and empty our present life is.  
He wants to make us ashamed of the fact that we spend all our time engaged in its vanity,  
and in the evils of this age and in things which, as soon as they are accomplished,  
disappear, and all our labor vanishes with them.” (Oecumenius, 52)

If life is short and nothing is certain –  
then how should you plan?  
Plan based on the things that are certain! –  
the things that will endure!

“If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”  
It’s a perfectly good translation.  
And in Greek (as in English) it *could* mean either thing:  
it could refer to God’s *decretive will* –  
whereby he governs all things according to his decree;  
or it could refer to God’s *declared will* –  
whereby he commands what he *wants* us to do.

But if you take it in the sense of the decretive will –  
namely, that we should always make our plans  
with the recognition that things may not work the way we expect –  
then verse 17 makes no sense.

Because you cannot *know* God’s decretive will!

You cannot *know* what will happen tomorrow (that's James' whole point!!).  
But James seems to think that you *can* know God's will!  
Indeed, that is James' *whole point* about planning!

“Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills...”  
[in other words, the way that I know how to plan is by studying what *God has said*  
about how he *wants* us to live!]

This has been a big part of our discussions at MCPC over the last couple years,  
since Rolf Caylor died and left his estate to the church.

Many churches have established an endowment –  
they invest the endowment and use the proceeds to do ministry for generations.

I'm not going to say that such an approach is always wrong –  
but as we talked about what to do with the Church Fund,  
we tried to approach it with the challenge that James gives us.

What is the Lord's will?

“He has shown you O man, what is good – and what does the Lord require of you?  
But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Or to use how James said it earlier:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:  
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,  
and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (1:27)

The question is *not* how to plan for an indefinite future –  
but rather, how can we *invest* the Church Fund in the work of the gospel!

That's one of the chief impulses behind the Caylor House.

We close Tuesday on the first house –  
a house for single women.

It probably will not provide the sort of return we could expect from the stock market –  
but then again, we aren't just interested in *financial* returns!

We are interested in *doing* the Lord's will –  
what has *he commanded*?

How can we use the resources of the church to extend the ministry of the gospel  
in this region – and beyond?

We don't mind if the Church Fund gets spent –  
so long as it gets spent in *doing the Lord's will*.

In the same way,  
how do you set up your finances?  
How do you organize *your future planning*?

Do you take God's *will* seriously in how you plan?  
How do your priorities at work reflect God's will – his commands?

Justice – truth – mercy – faithfulness.  
Honoring those in authority over you?  
Providing for those under your care?

When a poor person owes you money – and they are in a rough spot –  
do you forgive their debt?  
Or do you insist on making them pay?

Or when you set up business travel,  
do you travel on Sunday? (because it's easier)  
and wind up missing worship because your flight times got in the way?

I fear that many people today confuse conservative business ethics with Christianity.  
I recently had a conversation with a friend who objected to bankruptcy laws  
on the ground that they interfere with contracts.  
If you owe money – so the argument goes –  
then it would be theft not to pay it back!

I asked him what he thought of the Jubilee principle in the OT –  
where all debts were to be forgiven every 50 years –  
and God even had to warn lenders not to be stingy  
just because the 50<sup>th</sup> year was approaching!  
He admitted that he was uncomfortable with the Jubilee principle.  
He couldn't see how it was just.

In other words, he was sitting in judgment on God's law.  
God provided a mechanism for debtors to get out from under their debt.  
Indeed, in the OT, the *land* reverted to its original owner in the 50<sup>th</sup> year.  
If you want the best system for preventing and alleviating poverty –  
take a look at the Mosaic Law!  
The rich (at least in theory) could not increase their landholdings –  
because every 50 years, the land reverts to the original owner.  
The poor could not be disinherited forever.

If you look at the history of bankruptcy laws,  
they are rooted in the attempt to apply some of these sorts of principles  
in the New Testament era.

Verse 17 then applies the point about business practices to the rest of life:

*<sup>17</sup> So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

If you know what God's will is –  
if you know what God has said is the right thing to do –  
and you fail to do it,  
that's sin.

We call it a “sin of omission.”

They’re harder to spot than sins of commission.

When you *commit* a sin, everyone can see you do it!

But when you *omit* something, *by definition* no one can see you do it –  
because the whole point is *you didn’t do it!!*

“In every dimension of life, to neglect doing what we know we should do,  
or to neglect to seek to know what God would have us do,  
is as much a sin as doing what we already know we should not.” (McCartney 229)

In other words, a faithful life is not just about *avoiding* doing bad things.  
A faithful life is characterized by *doing* the right thing.

And that’s why the next warning is so striking.

### **3. Or Else! – A Warning to Those Who Don’t Pay Attention to the Previous Exhortation (5:1-6)**

*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*

It’s pretty clear that the first “come now” was addressed to Christians.

But the second “come now” is clearly addressed to those who are headed for hell:

“the miseries that are coming upon you”

“eat your flesh like fire”

“the last days”

“a day of slaughter.”

I would suggest that James is saying, in effect, “If you do not heed the warning in verses 13-17,  
then you are heading to chapter 5:1-6.

Because, quite frankly, your business strategies may well work!

You might strike it rich!

You might make a whole lot of money!

You might become a big landowner!

But if you did it any other way than “as the Lord wills” –  
if you made your money – if you gained your happiness –  
at the expense of others –  
then you can expect verses 1-6 to be your future!

But the primary focus of verses 1-6 is not so much “this could be you” –  
as it is – “take heart.”

Notice verse 7 – “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.”

James does not think that any of his hearers will “self-identify”

as the “rich” who are oppressing the helpless!



(Think back to 2:6 – “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you,  
and the ones who drag you into court?  
Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?”)

I think sometimes we try to convince ourselves that the rich and famous are *actually* miserable.  
And undoubtedly many – if not most – *are* miserable.

But my observation is many – if not most – do *not think* of themselves as miserable.  
They think they are happy – they are living the good life.

James does not say that the rich and famous are *actually* miserable right now.  
No, he says that their miseries are *coming*.

Money *can* bring happiness.  
Drugs *can* bring happiness (ask anyone who has dealt with the opioid epidemic –  
they are *very* effective at eliminating pain and giving pleasure!).

But at a price!!  
Or to say it better – at a *double* price!  
Because the *first* to pay for your happiness  
are those whom you stepped on in order to get it.

“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields,  
which you kept back by fraud,  
are crying out against you,  
and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”

Those who pursue self-interest in the marketplace –  
those who put themselves first –  
and do not consider the needs and interests of others –  
bring harm to those around them.

How often have I heard people say,  
“We try to get an A+ in accounts receivable –  
and a D- in accounts payable!”  
After all, that means *we* keep the money a little longer –  
and we can make a little more interest!

Hey, it’s all legal – we’re just playing the game!

But remember James’ point:  
the Christian cannot operate simply by what’s “legal.”  
The Christian must follow the will of God.  
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.  
If you would have others pay their bills promptly –  
then *you* pay your bills promptly!

James uses striking language to describe what happens to ill-gotten wealth:

<sup>2</sup> *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.* <sup>3</sup> *Your gold and silver have corroded,* [it's usually translated "rust"]

Umm, wait a second, James...  
Gold does not corrode or rust!

Silver will get tarnished –  
but pretty much nothing changes the appearance of gold!!

That's James's point!  
After all, we are not talking about an earthly judgment here.  
We are talking about the final judgment!

*and their corrosion [their rust] will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.*

At the final judgment, even the *gold* obtained by fraud and deceit  
will rust – and its rust will be evidence against you –  
and will eat your flesh like fire.

The Greek word for "rust" is spelled exactly like the Greek word for "poison."  
(Used earlier in chapter 3, to refer to the poison of the tongue –  
which burns like a fire!)

So also here James speaks of riches – wealth – gold.

And just as the tongue can be used to bless our Lord and Father,  
so also our wealth can be used in love and service to God –  
but James is following his Lord in warning us how rare that is –  
as Jesus said, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,  
than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Why?  
Because where your treasure is, there will your heart be also! (Matt 6:21)  
And you are called to love the LORD your God with *all* your heart!  
If you have given *some of your heart* to your wealth –  
then, as James puts it:

*You have laid up treasure in the last days.*

Jesus calls us to store up treasure in heaven.

How?

By giving to the poor. (Matt 6:2-4)

As Proverbs 19:17 says,

"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD,

and he will repay him for his deed.”

It’s not a very good business strategy.

Giving to the poor will not get you into the ranks of the rich and famous.

But then again, the rich and famous have a day of reckoning ahead of them!

<sup>4</sup> *Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.*

So, the first to suffer for your quest for money and happiness  
are those whom you step on in order to get there!

But, like I said, there is a double payment for ill-gotten gains.  
Your turn will come!

<sup>5</sup> *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.*

Sure, luxury and self-indulgence are *tempting*!

But if that is what characterizes you –

if you don’t know how to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus –  
then:

*You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*

This is a powerful image!

Normally, you fatten a calf *for* the day of slaughter.

But James says that you have fattened your hearts *in* a day of slaughter.

This is the absurdity of what the rich are doing!

Jesus has already come in the flesh!

The last days have already arrived!

It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God (as Peter says).

If you are living in the last days –

and for all of the apostles,

*we are* living in the last days! –

but if you are living in the last days – where the *only thing* left to happen

is the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead –

then you would have to be *nuts* to ignore this!

And if that is how James is thinking,  
then verse 6 is all about Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> *You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

In one sense,

Jesus is the *righteous man* who did not resist Herod, Pontius Pilate, or the Jewish leaders.  
But of course, that would be past tense – he *did not* resist you.

But think of Stephen – the first martyr – who shared in the sufferings of Christ.

Think of how our Lord said to Paul –

“I am Jesus whom you *are persecuting*” – present tense!

Every time the rich and powerful seek to destroy Jesus’ people,  
they are condemning Jesus all over again!

When *you* suffer affliction for Christ’s sake –

you are conformed to the likeness of Christ!

as “they blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called” (2:7).

The cross is the shape – the pattern – into which you are being formed.