When Faith Becomes a Way of Life

A Pastoral Journey Through the Epistle of James

Volume 4

Randy Nielsen

Dedication

To my loving wife, Marilyn,
who has always stood by me through good times and bad;
who is always seeking to know more about God and His Word;
and whose own desire to understand Scripture has encouraged me along the way.
I dedicate this book to her with love and gratitude,
and with the hope that this commentary may help her—and perhaps others as well—to better understand God's Word and to draw closer to the One who gave it to us.

About the Author

Randy Nielsen began life as a sickly child. His mother prayed that if God would allow her son to survive, she would see that he received a proper Christian education. She kept that promise, making certain that Randy was in church nearly every Sunday and, as he grew, encouraging him to remain close to God.

Later in life, Randy felt God calling him into ministry—a calling he initially resisted. But, as Randy has sometimes observed, God does not take "No" particularly well.

In 2007, Randy finally answered that call. He entered the United Methodist Church's Local Pastor licensing program and became a Licensed Local Pastor. Over the next fifteen years, he served several church appointments, sharing the Gospel, caring for congregations, and helping some of the churches he served experience renewed growth.

During his years in ministry, Randy pursued graduate theological education at Asbury Theological Seminary, completing 54 credit hours toward the 96-hour Master of Divinity degree through online study. Ultimately, he decided that the time and financial commitment required to complete the degree were no longer practical. Content to serve as a vessel for God's Word as a Licensed Local Pastor, Randy continued ministering to the churches entrusted to his care.

Randy retired from pastoral ministry in 2022, but not from his love of Scripture or his desire to understand God's Word more deeply. That continuing journey eventually became ***When Faith Becomes a Way of Life****: A Pastoral Journey Through the Epistle of James*.

Today, Randy and his family regularly attend a Southern Baptist church, where he continues his lifelong journey of faith, study, and discipleship.

A Note from the Author

This book grew out of a journey through the Epistle of James that began simply—with a desire to slow down and listen carefully to what James was saying.

Along the way, that study became something more.

In preparing *When Faith Becomes a Way of Life*, I made extensive use of ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence system developed by OpenAI, which I came to call "Atlas." Atlas served as a research, writing, and editorial partner throughout the project. Our work together included exploring the historical and literary context of James, examining Greek words and phrases, developing and testing interpretations, organizing the commentary, and refining the pastoral reflections found throughout these pages.

I believe it is important to acknowledge that contribution openly.

At the same time, the theological judgments, interpretations, editorial decisions, and final form of this work are my own. I reviewed, questioned, revised, accepted, or rejected the material developed through those conversations, just as I would material gathered through other research and study resources.

Artificial intelligence did not replace the study of Scripture. It became one of the tools used in that study.

Just as importantly, our purpose was never to turn these pages into an academic exercise or to give the reader the equivalent of a graduate degree in biblical studies. There are excellent scholarly works written for that purpose, and I am grateful for them.

Our purpose here is different.
We want to help people understand Scripture.
That is one reason these pages sometimes read more like a conversation than a traditional commentary. The shorter paragraphs, pauses, repeated phrases, and occasional sentences standing alone are intentional. They reflect the way we might talk

about a passage if we were sitting together with an open Bible, stopping occasionally to say:
“Look at this.”
“Did you notice that?”
“Why would James say it that way?”
“And what might that mean for us?”
The scholarship still matters. Historical context matters. Language matters. Theology matters. Interpretive differences matter. We have tried to take all of those things seriously.
But the scholarship should serve the reader rather than become an obstacle between the reader and the text.
Perhaps the best description of the process is simply this:
There were many occasions when it felt less like a person asking questions of a computer and more like two people standing at a whiteboard, opening the Scriptures together and asking:
“What is Scripture really trying to tell us here?”
That is the experience I hope these pages provide for you as well.
Not simply reading an explanation of Scripture.
But joining the conversation.
Opening the Bible with us.
Stopping where something deserves another look.
Asking questions when something is difficult.
And occasionally sitting quietly with a truth before moving on.
Because ultimately the purpose of studying Scripture is not simply to know more about the Bible.
It is to hear what God is saying through it—
and then to ask what we will do with what we have heard.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV).

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A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 4:1–10 — Friendship with the World

“From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”
— James 4:1, KJV

James has spent much of his letter describing what genuine faith looks like when it is lived. Faith perseveres through trials. Faith seeks wisdom. Faith refuses partiality. Faith cares for those in need. Faith expresses itself through works. Faith learns to control the tongue. And at the end of chapter 3, James described the wisdom that comes from above as “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.”
Chapter 4 begins almost as though James suddenly asks:
If heavenly wisdom produces peace, why is there so much conflict among you?
His answer is uncomfortable.
The problem is not merely *out there*.
It is **in here**.
James turns our attention from the arguments taking place around us to the battles taking place within us. Behind many of our conflicts are desires, ambitions, jealousies, disappointments, wounded pride, and cravings that have been allowed to become masters rather than servants.
James therefore begins chapter 4 not by asking who started the argument. He asks something much more searching:
What is happening inside you that made the argument possible?

Introduction

There is a natural temptation whenever conflict occurs to begin by identifying the other person's fault.
They said this.
They did that.
They misunderstood me.
They treated me unfairly.
If they had behaved differently, none of this would have happened.
Sometimes those observations may even be true.
But James is not particularly interested in allowing us to build a case against somebody else.
Instead, he turns the mirror around.
“From whence come wars and fightings among you?”
James's answer is that outward conflict often reveals an inward war.

There are desires within us competing for control. We want recognition. We want security. We want influence. We want possessions. We want respect. We want things to happen our way. We want other people to behave according to our expectations.
None of those desires is necessarily sinful in itself.
The problem begins when something we *want* becomes something we believe we *must have*.
Then desire becomes demand.
Demand becomes entitlement.
Entitlement produces resentment.
And resentment eventually finds someone to blame.
James traces the conflict backward until he reaches its source:
the human heart.
But James 4:1–10 is not merely an indictment of human selfishness.
It is ultimately an invitation to return to God.
At the center of this passage stands one of the most hopeful statements in the entire letter:
"But he giveth more grace."
That changes everything.
James exposes our divided hearts not so that we will despair, but so that we will surrender them.
The Movement of James
James 4:1–10 moves through a remarkably deliberate progression.
Conflict among us
James begins with quarrels and disputes within the community.
Something is wrong with relationships.
But instead of treating the quarrel itself as the disease, James treats it as a **symptom**.
Conflict within us
The external battle reflects an internal one.
Our "cravings" are "at war" within us.
James forces us to consider the possibility that the person standing opposite us may not be the entire problem.
Part of the battlefield lies within our own hearts.
Desire that demands satisfaction
"Ye lust, and have not."
"You covet something and cannot obtain it."
James describes desire that has ceased being merely desire.
It has begun to rule.
When our happiness, identity, or sense of worth becomes dependent upon obtaining something, we have given that thing enormous power over us.
Prayer distorted by selfishness
"Ye have not, because ye ask not."

But then James immediately adds:
“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.”
Even prayer can become another instrument for satisfying the self.
Instead of asking,
“Lord, what do you desire?”
we may effectively be asking,
“Lord, will you please bless what I have already decided I want?”
Prayer has then ceased to be surrender and has become an attempt at divine endorsement.
Divided loyalty
James suddenly cries:
“Ye adulterers and adulteresses”
The language is intentionally severe.
James is drawing upon the biblical picture of God's covenant relationship with His people. Throughout Scripture, turning from God toward competing loyalties is often portrayed as marital unfaithfulness.
James's concern is therefore deeper than bad behavior.
It is a question of **who possesses our allegiance**.
“Friendship with the world” does not mean enjoying creation, having unbelieving friends, participating in society, earning money, appreciating art, or enjoying ordinary pleasures.
James is speaking about embracing a system of values opposed to God—a world ordered around pride, selfish ambition, envy, status, possession, and self-rule.
We cannot surrender ourselves to those values while simultaneously claiming undivided allegiance to God.
The answer: greater grace
Then comes the turning point:
“But he giveth more grace.”
James has exposed some ugly things.
Conflict.
Coveting.
Selfish desire.
Misused prayer.
Spiritual infidelity.
Pride.
Double-mindedness.
Yet God's response to the repentant sinner is not:
“You have exhausted my patience.”
It is:
more grace.
Human sin is great.
God's grace is greater.

Submission
"Submit yourselves therefore to God."
That "therefore" matters.
Because God gives greater grace, surrender is possible.
Submission is not defeat before a cruel master.
It is the return of a wandering heart to the One to whom it belongs.
Resistance
"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."
Christian submission is not passivity.
We surrender to God precisely so that we may resist what opposes God.
There are therefore two movements:
Submit to God.
Resist the devil.
We cannot reverse them.
Our strength to resist comes from the One to whom we have surrendered.
Drawing near
Then James gives one of Scripture's great invitations:
"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."
Notice what James does not say.
He does not say:
Get your life completely straightened out and perhaps God will allow you to approach.
He says:
Draw near.
The God whom we have offended is still the God who invites us home.
Repentance
"Cleanse your hands."
"Purify your hearts."
"Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep."
James will not permit cheap repentance.
Grace is free, but grace is not trivial.
There are moments when recognizing what sin has done should break our hearts.
Repentance is more than regretting consequences.
It is seeing our sin as God sees it and longing to be changed.
Humility
Finally:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."
James began with people fighting to obtain what they wanted.
He ends with people surrendering themselves to God.
The world says:
Exalt yourself.
James says:

Humble yourself before God and allow God to determine your place.
That is the great reversal of James 4:1–10.

1. When Desire Becomes Our Master

Desire is part of being human.
We desire food, companionship, security, meaningful work, love, accomplishment, respect, and countless other good things.
James does not teach that wanting something is automatically sinful.
The danger comes when desire moves from:
“I would like this”
to:
“I must have this.”
At that moment, the object of our desire begins exercising authority over us.
If I must have recognition, anyone receiving recognition instead of me becomes a threat.
If I must have control, anyone challenging my decisions becomes an enemy.
If I must be right, disagreement becomes personal.
If I must possess something, anyone preventing me from obtaining it becomes an obstacle.
The object may even be good.
But a good thing can become spiritually destructive when we demand from it something only God can provide.
James therefore asks us to look beneath our conflicts.
Sometimes the question is not merely:
“Why am I angry?”
Perhaps the better question is:
“What am I afraid I will lose?”
Or:
“What am I demanding that I receive?”
Those questions can lead us surprisingly close to the real battlefield.

2. When Prayer Becomes About Us

James's treatment of prayer is particularly uncomfortable.
“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”
We sometimes imagine that asking God for something automatically makes the request spiritual.
James says otherwise.
Prayer can still be centered entirely upon ourselves.
There is an enormous difference between:
“God, give me what I want.”
and:

“God, teach me what to want.”
The first asks God to serve our desires.
The second places our desires before God for transformation.
Jesus demonstrated this most profoundly in Gethsemane:
“Yet not what I want but what you want.”
That is not weak prayer.
It may be the deepest prayer a human being can offer.

3. Friendship with the World

James's declaration that friendship with the world is hostility toward God can sound harsh unless we understand what he means by “world.”
James is not condemning God's creation.
Nor is he commanding Christians to withdraw from human relationships.
He is describing a **value system**.
The world's wisdom, as James has just described it, is characterized by:
bitter envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and wickedness.
The wisdom from above is:
peaceable, gentle, merciful, sincere, and filled with good fruit.
James therefore places two ways of living before us.
One asks:
“How can I advance myself?”
The other asks:
“How can I faithfully serve God?”
One seeks status.
The other seeks faithfulness.
One grasps.
The other receives.
One exalts itself.
The other humbles itself.
Eventually, James says, we must decide which friendship defines us.

4. But God Gives More Grace

Perhaps these six words should be written across the entire passage:
But God gives all the more grace.
Without them, James 4 could become crushing.
Who among us has never been selfish?
Who has never envied?
Who has never prayed with mixed motives?
Who has never allowed pride to enter a disagreement?
Who has never discovered that something other than God had begun occupying too much territory in the heart?
James knows what human beings are like.
And God knows even better.
Yet the answer is grace.

Not grace that pretends sin does not matter.
Grace that **calls us home from it**.
Grace does not say:
“Remain where you are.”
Grace says:
“Come back.”
And that leads directly to James's invitation:
“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

Pastoral Reflection

There are times in pastoral ministry when people come seeking help with a conflict.
A marriage is strained.
A friendship has fractured.
Church members are angry with one another.
Families have stopped speaking.
Coworkers cannot tolerate each other.
Our natural instinct is to ask:
“What happened?”
That is an important question.
But James teaches us that eventually another question must be asked:
“What is happening in your heart?”
That question is harder.
It is much easier to explain another person's sins than to examine our own desires.
Sometimes we discover that we were genuinely wronged.
James does not deny that reality.
But even when another person has wronged us, we remain responsible for what happens **inside us** in response.
Has hurt become bitterness?
Has disappointment become resentment?
Has disagreement become hatred?
Has our desire to be understood become a demand to be vindicated?
James invites us to bring even those things before God.
And when we do, we encounter not a God standing at a distance waiting for us to repair ourselves.
We encounter the God who says:
“Draw near to me.”
There may be no more important pastoral message in this passage.
You may have wandered.
You may have become divided in heart.
You may have allowed something to become more important than it should have been.

You may even recognize yourself painfully in James's words.
But the road home has not disappeared.
God gives more grace.
Draw near.

Something Worth Pondering

James begins this passage with people struggling to obtain what they want.
They desire.
They covet.
They quarrel.
They fight.
They even pray—but their prayers remain centered upon satisfying themselves.
By verse 10, everything has changed.
They are no longer grasping.
They are kneeling.
Perhaps that is one of the deepest movements in the Christian life:
from grasping to surrender.
We spend enormous amounts of energy trying to arrange life according to our desires.
James invites us to place those desires into God's hands.
That does not mean our desires cease to matter.
It means they cease to be **our god**.
And strangely enough, when we finally stop trying to exalt ourselves, James tells us that God Himself will do what we could never accomplish:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."

Ask Yourself This

What conflict in my life might look different if, before asking what is wrong with the other person, I honestly asked God what desires, fears, pride, or expectations are at war within me—and am I willing to surrender those things, draw near to God, and trust that His grace is greater than whatever He reveals?

Closer Look

James 4:1 — Where Conflicts Begin

“From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”
— James 4:1, KJV

James begins chapter 4 with a question.
But it is not really a request for information.
“From whence come wars and fightings among you?”
James already knows the answer.
And unfortunately, so do we.
His question forces us to look beneath the visible argument and ask what is producing it.
We usually begin somewhere else.
When conflict erupts, we begin with the other person.
What did they say?
What did they do?
Why are they acting this way?
Why won't they listen to me?
Why can't they see that I am right?
James interrupts that entire conversation.
Before discussing what is wrong with the person standing across from us, James asks:
What is happening inside the person standing in our shoes?
That changes everything.

1. “Those Conflicts and Disputes Among You…”

The Greek words James uses are unusually strong.
The word translated **“conflicts”** is *polemos* (πόλεμος), a word commonly associated with **war or warfare**.
The word translated **“disputes”** is *machē* (μάχη), meaning **fighting, quarrels, or battles**.
James is using the vocabulary of warfare to describe what is happening among believers.
That should disturb us.
These are people who confess the same Lord.
They worship the same God.
They have received the same grace.
And yet James describes their relationships using the language of a battlefield.
Something has gone terribly wrong.

But notice that James does not immediately prescribe better communication techniques.
He does not say:
"You people simply need to learn how to disagree more politely."
Nor does he merely tell everyone to stop fighting.
James goes deeper.
He wants to know **why the fighting exists in the first place.**

2. "Where Do They Come From?"

That may be one of the most important questions James asks in the entire letter.
Where did this come from?
James is interested in origins.
The argument is visible.
The source of the argument may not be.
We see angry words.
James looks for the desire beneath them.
We see resentment.
James asks what expectation was frustrated.
We see jealousy.
James asks what someone else possesses that we believe should belong to us.
We see bitterness.
James asks what wound we have allowed to remain untreated.
We see the explosion.
James wants us to find the **spark**.
This is remarkably consistent with the teaching of Jesus.
Jesus repeatedly moved beyond outward behavior to the condition of the heart.
Murder begins with anger.
Adultery begins with lust.
Words reveal what fills the heart.
The outward act matters, but the outward act usually has a history.
James asks us to investigate that history.

3. "Do They Not Come From Your Cravings…?"

James answers his own question.
The conflicts come from **"your cravings."**
The Greek word is *hēdonē* (ἡδονή), from which English eventually receives the word **hedonism**.
It refers to pleasures, desires, or cravings for personal satisfaction.
Again, James is not teaching that pleasure itself is evil.

God created human beings capable of experiencing pleasure.
Food can be enjoyed.
Friendship can be enjoyed.
Marriage can be enjoyed.
Work can be satisfying.
Beauty can delight us.
Rest is good.
Laughter is good.
The problem is not that human beings experience pleasure.
The problem comes when **our desire for satisfaction begins ruling us.**
Something we would like to have becomes something we believe we must have.
And once that happens, anyone standing between us and that desire can quickly become an enemy.

4. When a Desire Becomes a Demand

There is a subtle progression that can occur within the heart.
I would like this.
becomes
I really want this.
which becomes
I need this.
which eventually becomes
I deserve this.
And then:
You are preventing me from having what I deserve.
At that point, conflict is not far away.
Consider how ordinary this can be.
I want to be respected.
That is understandable.
But if respect becomes something I **must receive**, criticism becomes intolerable.
I want my opinion to be heard.
That is reasonable.
But if being heard becomes being **obeyed**, disagreement begins to feel like rebellion.
I want appreciation.
Nothing wrong with that.
But if appreciation becomes something I believe others **owe me**, being overlooked produces resentment.
I want security.
A natural human desire.

But if security becomes absolute, anything threatening my plans may produce fear, anger, or manipulation.
The object of the desire may not be sinful at all.
The problem is the authority we have given it.
A good desire can become a terrible master.

5. "…That Are at War Within You"

Here James returns to the language of warfare.
The conflict outside us originates in a conflict **inside us**.
Our cravings are "at war" within us.
The Greek verb carries the idea of **waging a military campaign**.
That is a striking picture.
James does not describe these desires as quietly sitting in the human heart.
They are fighting for territory.
They want control.
They compete with one another.
Part of us wants to follow God.
Another part wants our own way.
Part of us wants peace.
Another part wants vindication.
Part of us wants reconciliation.
Another part wants the satisfaction of proving that we were right.
Part of us wants to forgive.
Another part keeps replaying the offense.
The battlefield is not merely between two people.
The battlefield runs through the human heart.

6. The Argument Beneath the Argument

Most conflicts have a visible subject.
Money.
Politics.
Parenting.
Church decisions.
Work responsibilities.
Family obligations.
Something someone said.
Something someone failed to do.
But James teaches us to look for what might be called **the argument beneath the argument**.
Two people may appear to be arguing about money.
But underneath the argument one person may be afraid of losing security.
Two church members may be arguing about a ministry decision.
But underneath the disagreement someone may fear losing influence.

A husband and wife may be arguing about a household responsibility.
But underneath the immediate issue may be a deeper feeling:
“You don't value me.”
A coworker may react strongly to criticism.
The issue may not actually be the criticism.
The deeper fear may be:
“What if I'm not good enough?”
This does not mean every conflict is imaginary or that every disagreement is caused equally by both people.
Sometimes another person truly has behaved wrongly.
James does not deny injustice.
But he refuses to allow someone else's wrongdoing to excuse us from examining **our own heart**.

7. The Question We Usually Avoid

James's question is uncomfortable because it removes one of our favorite defenses:
blame.
Blame allows us to place the entire problem outside ourselves.
If the other person is the problem, then the solution is simple:
They need to change.
James asks us to consider another possibility.
What if God wants to change **me**, too?
That does not mean accepting abuse.
It does not mean pretending wrongdoing did not occur.
It does not mean surrendering truth simply to avoid disagreement.
There are times when Christians must confront wrongdoing.
James himself is hardly afraid of confrontation.
But even righteous confrontation requires examination of the heart.
Am I confronting this because it is right?
Or because I enjoy winning?
Am I defending truth?
Or defending my pride?
Am I seeking reconciliation?
Or revenge?
Am I trying to restore someone?
Or humiliate them?
Two people may speak the same words while being driven by entirely different hearts.
God sees the difference.

8. A Spiritual Diagnostic

James 4:1 gives us something remarkably useful: a spiritual diagnostic question.

When conflict arises, before asking:
“What is wrong with them?”
ask:
“What am I wanting right now?”
Then continue.
Why do I want it?
What happens inside me if I don't get it?
Have I turned a desire into a demand?
Have I made someone my enemy because they stand between me and something I want?
And perhaps the hardest question:
“What does my reaction reveal about what currently rules my heart?”
Those questions require courage.
But they can also lead toward freedom.
Because once we recognize what has taken control of the heart, we can finally surrender it to God.

Pastoral Reflection

One of the hardest things to do during conflict is to pray:
“Lord, show me where I am wrong.”
We would much rather pray:
“Lord, show them where they are wrong.”
We may even provide God with a remarkably detailed explanation of the other person's faults, just in case He has somehow overlooked them.
But James invites us into a different kind of prayer.
“Lord, what is happening in me?”
That prayer can be frightening.
God may reveal pride.
Fear.
Jealousy.
Insecurity.
A need for control.
An unwillingness to forgive.
A desire to be admired.
A determination to win.
But whatever God reveals, remember where James is taking us.
He is moving toward:
“But he giveth more grace.”
God does not expose the heart merely to condemn it.
He exposes what is sick so that it can be healed.
Sometimes the beginning of reconciliation is not finally convincing the other person that we were right.

Sometimes it begins when we become willing to say:
“Lord, before you deal with them, deal with me.”

Something Worth Pondering

James begins chapter 4 with wars among people.
But he quickly reveals that another war has been underway much longer.
The war within.
Perhaps some of the battles we fight with other people are outward expressions of battles we have never surrendered to God.
The person across from us may indeed need to change.
But James asks us not to become so preoccupied with their heart that we neglect our own.
Before asking God to change the person standing opposite us, perhaps we should first invite Him to examine the person standing in our shoes.

Ask Yourself This

When I think about the conflicts in my life, am I willing to stop asking for a moment what is wrong with the other person and honestly ask, “What am I wanting so badly that not getting it has become a war within me—and what might God be asking me to surrender?”

A Closer Look

James 4:2 — Desire and Conflict

“Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”
— James 4:2, KJV
James does not ease into verse 2.
He turns up the pressure.
In verse 1 he told us that conflicts among us originate in cravings that are at war within us.
Now he shows us where those cravings can lead.
“Ye lust, and have not…”
That sounds almost harmless.
Everyone wants things they do not have.
But James's concern is not merely that we desire something.
His concern is what happens when **desire is frustrated**.
What happens when I want something badly—and cannot have it?
What happens when someone else possesses what I want?
What happens when another person stands between me and what I believe will satisfy me?
That is when desire begins revealing who is really in control.

1. “Ye lust, and have not…”

There is nothing unusual about wanting.
Human beings live with desires every day.
We want companionship.
We want financial security.
We want meaningful work.
We want our children to succeed.
We want to be respected.
We want our efforts to be appreciated.
We want our churches to flourish.
We want our plans to succeed.
Many of those desires are perfectly good.
James's warning begins when a desire becomes so important that **not receiving it changes us**.
Yesterday I wanted it.
Today I believe I need it.
Tomorrow I may decide I deserve it.
And eventually I may begin resenting anyone who prevents me from obtaining it.
The object itself may not have changed.

I have.
The desire has moved from something I possess to something that possesses me.

2. "…So You Commit Murder"

And suddenly James uses an extraordinary word.
Murder.
Did members of James's churches actually begin killing one another because they could not get what they wanted?
That is possible in the abstract, but it is unlikely to be James's primary point here.
James is using startling language deliberately.
There are also textual and punctuation questions surrounding this part of the verse, and interpreters have proposed different ways of understanding the sequence of James's words. But the central point remains clear:
unchecked desire is destructive.
And James's language strongly recalls the teaching of Jesus.
In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refuses to restrict the command against murder merely to the physical act:
"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill … But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment."
— Matthew 5:21–22, KJV
Jesus traces murder backward.
Before there is a hand that kills, there can be a heart that hates.
Before violence appears outwardly, hostility may already have taken residence inwardly.
James does much the same thing.
We can destroy people without physically killing them.
We can assassinate reputations.
We can spread gossip.
We can humiliate.
We can exclude.
We can retaliate.
We can use words as weapons.
We can quietly rejoice when someone who frustrated us fails.
We can even reach the point where we would be perfectly content if that person simply disappeared from our lives.
The body remains alive.
But something murderous has been allowed to grow within the heart.

3. Desire Has a History

James's progression is important:
You desire.

You do not have.
Conflict follows.
Sin rarely arrives fully grown.
It develops.
A disappointment becomes resentment.
Resentment becomes bitterness.
Bitterness becomes hostility.
Hostility begins looking for expression.
That expression may come through words.
Or manipulation.
Or gossip.
Or retaliation.
Or withdrawal.
Or perhaps actual violence.
James wants us to interrupt the process much earlier.
Do not wait until the conflict explodes.
Ask what desire is feeding it.

4. "And You Covet Something and Cannot Obtain It…"

Now James uses another powerful idea:
coveting.
Coveting is more than appreciating something another person possesses.
It is desire corrupted by comparison.
It says:
"They have something I want."
Perhaps it is money.
Perhaps influence.
Perhaps recognition.
Perhaps a relationship.
Perhaps a position.
Perhaps success.
Perhaps respect.
Perhaps simply the attention of others.
Coveting rarely looks only at the thing.
It also looks at the person who possesses it.
And comparison begins its destructive work.
Why them?
Why not me?
What makes them so special?
Soon another person's blessing becomes our irritation.
That is a spiritually dangerous place to live.

5. When Another Person's Blessing Feels Like Our Loss

One of the clearest signs of envy is difficulty rejoicing when another person succeeds.
Someone receives the promotion.
Someone's ministry grows.
Someone receives recognition.
Someone buys the house.
Someone's child succeeds.
Someone receives the opportunity we wanted.
And instead of saying,
"Thank God for what He has done for them,"
something inside us whispers:
"Why wasn't that me?"
Nothing has actually been taken from us.
Yet another person's blessing somehow feels like our loss.
That is what comparison does.
It convinces us that God's goodness toward someone else must somehow mean less goodness remains for us.
But grace is not a limited resource.
God's blessing of another person does not impoverish Him.

6. "…So You Engage in Disputes and Conflicts"

Now James brings us back to where he began.
Conflict.
Verse 1 asked:
Where do your conflicts come from?
Verse 2 answers:
Look at what you want.
Look at what you cannot obtain.
Look at whom you envy.
Look at what you believe someone else has prevented you from receiving.
The outward quarrel may be only the visible portion of something much deeper.
James is tracing the smoke back to the fire.

7. "Ye have not, because ye ask not"

And then James takes an unexpected turn.
After all this wanting, striving, coveting, and fighting, he says:
"Ye have not, because ye ask not."
Ask whom?
God.
That is astonishing.

These people have expended enormous energy trying to obtain what they desire.
They have fought.
They have coveted.
They have competed.
They have struggled.
Yet apparently they have neglected the simplest response available to a child of God:
Ask your Father.
James has already told us this.
Back in chapter 1:
"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly…"
James has not changed his theology.
God is still generous.
The problem is that we often attempt to secure for ourselves what we should first place before God.

8. Asking Is an Act of Dependence

Why don't we ask?
Sometimes because asking requires admitting that **we are not in control**.
Striving says:
"I will make this happen."
Prayer says:
"Father, I need you."
Coveting looks sideways at what someone else possesses.
Prayer looks upward toward the One from whom every good gift comes.
Fighting attempts to take control of circumstances.
Prayer places circumstances into God's hands.
That does not mean prayer guarantees we will receive whatever we request.
Verse 3 will immediately prevent that misunderstanding.
But prayer changes the fundamental posture of the heart.
Instead of grasping, we open our hands.
Instead of demanding, we ask.
Instead of assuming we know what we need, we place our desires before the One who actually does.

9. What If God Says No?

There is another possibility hidden within James's words.
Perhaps we hesitate to ask because we know God might say:
No.
And sometimes we do not want God's answer.
We want God's approval of **our answer**.

Prayer requires surrendering not only the request but also the outcome.
“Lord, this is what I want.”
That is honest prayer.
But mature prayer eventually adds:
“Yet I trust You with what happens next.”
Sometimes God's answer is yes.
Sometimes it is no.
Sometimes it is wait.
And sometimes God's answer takes us somewhere we never would have chosen—and years later we look backward and realize that the closed door was itself an act of grace.

Pastoral Reflection

There is a tremendous difference between bringing our desires to God and allowing our desires to become our god.
One says:
“Father, this is what I want.”
The other says:
“I must have this regardless of what God wants.”
James invites us to examine the things for which we are presently fighting.
Perhaps there is something we desperately want.
A job.
A relationship.
Recognition.
Financial security.
Healing in a family.
An opportunity.
A particular outcome.
There is nothing wrong with bringing those desires honestly before God.
In fact, James says:
Ask.
But asking requires open hands.
We bring our desire to God and say:
“Father, this is what I hope for. But I trust You more than I trust my ability to know what is best.”
That kind of prayer can be difficult.
Especially when the thing we want is good.
But sometimes what appears to us as a closed door becomes the very thing God uses to redirect our lives.
We may not understand it while standing before the closed door.
Sometimes understanding comes only much later.
And sometimes it never comes completely.

Faith does not require that we understand every answer.
Faith requires that we trust the One who answers.

Something Worth Pondering

James presents an extraordinary contrast.
The person driven by desire **grasps**.
The person who trusts God **asks**.
One closes the fist.
The other opens the hand.
Perhaps much of spiritual maturity is learning the difference between those two postures.
There are things worth pursuing.
There are injustices worth confronting.
There are goals worth working toward.
James is not calling Christians to passivity.
He is asking something deeper:
Who ultimately controls the outcome?
If we cannot receive a "no" without becoming bitter, perhaps the thing we requested has become more important to us than the One from whom we requested it.

Ask Yourself This

Is there something I want so badly that I have begun grasping, comparing, resenting, or fighting to obtain it—and have I truly placed that desire before God with open hands, willing to trust Him even if His answer is different from mine?

A Closer Look

James 4:3 — Asking Amiss

“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”
— James 4:3, KJV
Verse 2 ended with what sounded almost like a simple solution:
“Ye have not, because ye ask not.”
Then perhaps the answer is obvious.
Ask.
After all, James has already encouraged his readers to do exactly that:
“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly…”
— James 1:5
But James immediately places an important qualification upon that invitation.
Sometimes we ask.
And God does not give us what we requested.
Why?
James identifies one possible reason:
“You ask wrongly.”
The problem is no longer the absence of prayer.
The problem is the **motive within the prayer**.
James has moved from examining what we desire, to whether we pray, and now finally to **why we are praying for what we desire**.
That is a much deeper examination.

1. “You Ask…”

These people are praying.
That is important.
They have apparently learned the lesson of verse 2.
They are bringing their requests before God.
From the outside, everything might appear spiritually healthy.
They pray.
They ask.
They believe God can provide.
But James refuses to evaluate prayer merely by the fact that it occurred.
Prayer itself can be distorted by the same cravings James identified in verse 1.
We can bring selfishness into the prayer closet.
We can kneel before God while still clinging tightly to our own agenda.

We can use religious language while essentially asking God to help us obtain what we have already decided we must have.
Prayer does not automatically purify a desire simply because we attach God's name to it.

2. "…And Do Not Receive…"

This raises a question Christians have wrestled with throughout the centuries:
Why doesn't God answer every prayer the way we ask?
James gives us one answer.
But we should be careful not to turn his answer into **the only answer**.
Not every unanswered prayer is the result of selfish motives.
Scripture will not allow us to say that.
Paul prayed repeatedly for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed.
God said no.
Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that, if possible, the cup might pass from Him.
The cup did not pass.
Faithful people have prayed for healing that did not come.
Parents have prayed for children.
Churches have prayed for loved ones.
People have prayed desperately for employment, reconciliation, deliverance, and countless other good things.
Sometimes the answer has not been what they hoped.
James is **not** giving us permission to look at someone whose prayer was unanswered and say:
"You must have prayed wrongly."
That would be both theologically careless and pastorally cruel.
James is asking us to examine **our own motives**, not providing us with a weapon for judging someone else's prayers.

3. "…Because You Ask Wrongly"

The word translated **"wrongly"** carries the sense of asking badly, improperly, or with wrong motives.
The issue is not necessarily the thing being requested.
The issue may be **why we want it**.
Two people can ask God for exactly the same thing for completely different reasons.
Two people might pray for professional success.
One might be asking:
"Lord, give me greater opportunities so that I can use the abilities You have given me, provide for my family, serve others, and honor You."
Another might effectively be praying:

“Lord, make me successful so everyone will finally see how important I am.”
Same request.
Different heart.
Someone may pray for wealth because they long for financial security and the ability to be generous.
Someone else may want wealth because possessions have become the measure of personal worth.
Someone may pray for a larger church because they genuinely want more people reached with the gospel.
Another pastor could pray for exactly the same growth because attendance has become a scoreboard.
Even good things can be requested for selfish reasons.
James therefore pushes us beyond:
“What am I asking God for?”
to:
“Why do I want it?”

4. “In Order to Spend What You Get…”

The word James uses for “spend” has the sense of **using up, consuming, or squandering** something.
James pictures people asking God to provide resources that will then be consumed upon themselves.
In other words, God has been reduced to the role of supplier.
“Give me what I need to finance the life I have decided I want.”
That is very different from biblical prayer.
Biblical prayer asks God not only to provide our needs but also to **shape our desires**.
Jesus taught His disciples to pray:
“Your kingdom come. Your will be done.”
Notice the order.
Before:
“Give us today our daily bread,”
comes:
“Your will be done.”
Christian prayer begins with surrender.

5. “…On Your Pleasures”

James returns to the same word family behind the “cravings” of verse 1.
That matters.
Verse 1 told us that our cravings are at war within us.
Verse 3 tells us that those same cravings can follow us **into prayer**.
The battlefield has entered the sanctuary.

We may believe we are asking God to satisfy a need when, in reality, we are asking Him to feed something that has already begun controlling us.
That is why James is so concerned with the heart.
The question is not simply whether we pray.
The question is whether prayer is transforming our desires—or whether we are attempting to use prayer to satisfy them.

6. God Is Not a Vending Machine

There is a version of prayer that can quietly become transactional.
I ask.
God provides.
I receive.
And if God does not provide what I requested, perhaps I did not have enough faith, did not use the correct words, or did not pray long enough.
But God is not a vending machine into which we insert sufficient faith and receive the product we selected.
Prayer is **relationship**.
We are speaking with our Father.
And a loving father does not give a child everything the child requests simply because the child asks sincerely.
Sometimes love says:
Yes.
Sometimes love says:
Wait.
Sometimes love says:
No.
And sometimes love says:
I have something else.
The child may not understand the difference.
The Father does.

7. "Lord, Bless My Plans"

There is a subtle temptation in prayer.
We make our plans.
We establish our goals.
We decide what outcome would be best.
Then, after everything has been arranged in our minds, we bring the completed plan to God and say:
"Please bless this."
But perhaps prayer should sometimes begin much earlier.
Before the plan.
Before the decision.
Before the commitment.
"Lord, what would You have me do?"

There is an enormous difference between inviting God to bless our agenda and inviting God to **write the agenda**.
James will return to precisely this problem later in the chapter when he confronts people confidently announcing:
"To day or to morrow we will go to such and such a city and spend a year there, doing business and making money."
Their problem is not planning.
Their problem is planning without reference to God.
Verse 3 prepares us for that later warning.

8. Prayer Can Change the Request

One of the remarkable things about genuine prayer is that sometimes the longer we pray, the more our prayer changes.
We begin:
"Lord, change this situation."
Later:
"Lord, show me what You are doing in this situation."
Eventually:
"Lord, change me through this situation."
The circumstances may not have changed at all.
But the person praying has.
That may be one of prayer's greatest works.
We often enter prayer hoping to move the hand of God.
Sometimes we leave discovering that **God has moved our heart**.

9. "Not My Will…"

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane.
Jesus did not hide His desire.
He prayed honestly.
He asked that the cup might pass from Him.
But His prayer did not end with His desire.
It ended with surrender:
"Yet not what I want but what you want."
That does not mean Christians must mechanically attach "if it is Your will" to every prayer as though those words were a spiritual disclaimer.
It means something much deeper.
The heart itself learns to say:
"Father, I can tell You honestly what I want while still trusting You enough to accept what You decide."
That is mature prayer.

Pastoral Reflection

There are prayers we remember because God answered them exactly as we hoped.
And there are other prayers we remember because He did not.
Those can be much harder.
Sometimes years pass before we begin to understand why a door remained closed.
A job we desperately wanted did not materialize.
A relationship ended.
A plan collapsed.
An opportunity disappeared.
At the time, it may have felt like God had ignored us.
Then life continued.
Another door opened.
A different relationship developed.
A move occurred.
A calling emerged.
And looking backward, we sometimes discover that the prayer God apparently refused was connected to something we could not possibly have seen at the time.
There are other unanswered prayers for which no satisfying explanation ever comes.
Faith must make room for those as well.
We should never pretend that every disappointment eventually ties itself into a neat theological bow.
Sometimes we simply trust.
James does not promise that God will explain every answer.
He teaches us to examine whether we trust the One answering.
Perhaps one of the most honest prayers we can ever offer is:
"Lord, this is what I want. You already know how badly I want it. But if what I want is not what You want for me, change my heart before You change Your will."
That prayer requires enormous trust.
But it also places God back where He belongs.
Not as the servant of our desires.
As Lord.

Something Worth Pondering

Perhaps the deepest purpose of prayer is not simply to bring God's will into agreement with ours.
Perhaps prayer gradually brings **our will into agreement with God's**.
We begin with requests.
God invites us into relationship.

We begin by asking Him to change circumstances.
Sometimes He changes us instead.
We begin with clenched hands holding tightly to what we want.
Prayer slowly opens them.
And eventually we may discover that surrender is not the failure of prayer.
Surrender may be where prayer was leading us all along.

Ask Yourself This

When I bring my desires before God, am I truly asking Him to guide and transform them—or have I already decided what the answer must be and simply asked God to approve it? And if His answer is different from mine, do I trust Him enough to open my hands and say, "Not my will, but Yours"?

A Closer Look

James 4:4 — Friendship with the World

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”
— James 4:4, KJV

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses”
James certainly knows how to get someone's attention.
There is no gentle transition.
No carefully worded introduction.
No attempt to soften what he is about to say.
After describing quarrels, cravings, coveting, and selfish prayer, James suddenly addresses his readers with one devastating word:
Adulterers.
We can almost imagine someone in the congregation looking around and thinking:
“Surely he isn't talking to us.”
He is.
But James is not suddenly accusing the entire church of sexual immorality.
His accusation is even deeper.
He is accusing them of **spiritual infidelity**.

1. A Word with a Long Biblical History

James did not invent this imagery.
His Jewish-Christian readers would have recognized it immediately.
Throughout the Old Testament, God's relationship with Israel is frequently described using the language of marriage and covenant.
God is the faithful husband.
Israel is His covenant people.
When Israel abandons God and gives its allegiance to idols, the prophets describe that betrayal as **adultery**.
Jeremiah uses the imagery.
Ezekiel develops it extensively.
Hosea's entire prophetic ministry becomes a living picture of it.
The issue is not simply that Israel broke a rule.
Israel broke a **relationship**.
That distinction matters.
Sin is not merely violating an abstract moral code.
Sin wounds a relationship with the God who loves us.
So when James cries:

“Ye adulterers and adulteresses”
he reaches back into Israel's prophetic vocabulary and brings it directly into the Christian community.
His readers may not be bowing before statues of Baal.
But something else has captured their loyalty.

2. James Sounds Like a Prophet

This is one of those moments when James sounds less like the writer of a pastoral letter and more like an Old Testament prophet standing at the city gate.
Or, as we might hear later from John the Baptist:
“You brood of vipers!”
Biblical prophets sometimes use shocking language because ordinary language is no longer sufficient to awaken people who have become comfortable with something spiritually dangerous.
James is not trying to insult his congregation.
He is trying to **wake them up**.
They have quarrels.
They have envy.
They have selfish ambition.
They have desires fighting for control.
They are even attempting to bring those desires into prayer.
James now tells them what all of that reveals:
Their hearts are divided.
And divided loyalty toward the covenant God is not a minor spiritual defect.
It is unfaithfulness.

3. “Do You Not Know…?”

James asks another question for which he expects his readers already to know the answer.
“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”
In other words:
You know better.
That makes the warning even sharper.
James is not revealing some obscure theological principle.
He is reminding God's people of something fundamental.
God does not ask for a small religious compartment within our lives.
He asks for **us**.
Our worship.
Our allegiance.
Our desires.
Our priorities.

Our relationships.
Our possessions.
Our ambitions.
Our hearts.
The problem James identifies is not that his readers have completely abandoned God.
It may actually be more subtle than that.
They apparently want **God and the world**.
And James says the two allegiances cannot peacefully occupy the throne together.

4. "Friendship with the World…"

This phrase can easily be misunderstood.
James is not saying Christians should refuse friendship with people who do not believe as we do.
Jesus Himself was criticized precisely because He associated with people considered sinners.
Nor does "the world" mean the physical creation.
God made the world and called His creation good.
James is speaking about something different.
"The world" here represents a **system of values organized without reference to God and often in opposition to Him**.
And James has already shown us what those values look like.
At the end of chapter 3 he described earthly wisdom as characterized by:
bitter envy and selfish ambition.
Now in chapter 4 we see the results:
craving,
coveting,
quarreling,
selfishness,
and pride.
The world's question is:
"What can I get?"
The kingdom's question is:
"How can I serve?"
The world says:
"Promote yourself."
Jesus says:
"Deny yourself."
The world says:
"Get even."
Jesus says:
"Forgive."

The world says:
“Blessed are the powerful.”
Jesus says:
“Blessed are the meek.”
The world says:
“Love those who love you.”
Jesus says:
“Love your enemies.”
James is describing two fundamentally different ways of ordering life.

5. Friendship Means Allegiance

Our modern use of the word *friend* can make James sound stronger than he intends—or weaker than he intends.
We may think of friendship as casual association.
James means much more.
In the ancient world, friendship carried ideas of **loyalty, shared values, mutual commitment, and identification**.
To become a friend of the world means more than living in society.
It means adopting the world's priorities as our own.
Its ambitions become our ambitions.
Its measurements of success become our measurements.
Its definition of importance becomes ours.
Its values begin shaping our decisions.
Eventually we can continue using Christian vocabulary while quietly allowing something else to determine how we actually live.
That is the danger James sees.

6. The Problem Is Not Having Things

James is not condemning possessions.
He is condemning **possession by possessions**.
There is nothing inherently sinful about money.
Or success.
Or influence.
Or accomplishment.
Or comfort.
Or recognition.
The question is whether those things have become the standard by which we measure our lives.
There is a profound difference between:
having something
and
needing that thing to tell us who we are.
Once something becomes necessary to our identity, we will become remarkably protective of it.

That brings us right back to the conflicts of verse 1.
Threaten what I possess and I may become concerned.
Threaten what I worship and I may become vicious.
James wants us to determine the difference.

7. The Most Dangerous Idols May Not Look Like Idols

James's readers probably would have recognized a pagan statue as an idol immediately.
Our idols are often considerably more respectable.
Career.
Reputation.
Political influence.
Financial security.
Comfort.
Approval.
Success.
Family.
Even ministry.
Any of these can be good.
That is precisely what makes them dangerous.
An idol does not have to be something evil.
Sometimes it is **something good that we have asked to do what only God can do**.
Career becomes identity.
Money becomes security.
Approval becomes worth.
Family becomes ultimate meaning.
Ministry becomes personal significance.
And slowly, perhaps without realizing it, we begin asking created things to provide what belongs to the Creator.

8. "…Is Enmity with God"

James refuses to soften the consequence.
Friendship with the world is **enmity with God**.
That word means hostility.
Opposition.
James is describing incompatible loyalties.
This echoes Jesus' warning:
"No one can serve two masters."
Eventually one master determines our decisions.
One loyalty receives priority.
One voice has the final word.

We may attempt to negotiate a compromise:
God can have Sunday.
I will control Monday through Saturday.
James will not accept the arrangement.
God is not interested in becoming one influence among many.
He is Lord.

9. Whoever Wishes to Be a Friend of the World…"

Notice something important.
James says:
"whoever wishes…"
There is intention involved.
Orientation.
Choice.
James is describing someone who increasingly chooses the world's system as the place where identity, security, significance, and satisfaction will be found.
This is not about occasionally being tempted by worldly values.
Every Christian experiences temptation.
James is concerned about something more settled:
Which direction is the heart facing?
We may stumble while walking toward God.
That is very different from deliberately walking away from Him.

10. "…Becomes an Enemy of God"

Those are frightening words.
James leaves no comfortable middle ground.
But we must read verse 4 together with what is coming in verse 6:
"But he giveth more grace."
That changes how we hear James's warning.
James is not standing at the door shouting:
"You have betrayed God, so stay away!"
He is shouting:
"You have betrayed God—come back!"
That is the voice of the prophets as well.
The prophetic accusation of spiritual adultery was never merely about condemnation.
It was a call to **return to covenant faithfulness**.
And James is going to say exactly that:
"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."
The offended God is still inviting the unfaithful home.
That is grace.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something particularly painful about betrayal because betrayal can occur only where relationship already exists.
A stranger cannot betray us in quite the same way a friend can.
And adultery is painful precisely because a covenant of love has been violated.
James chooses this image because our relationship with God is not merely contractual.
It is personal.
God does not simply want our obedience.
He wants our heart.
That makes James's question deeply personal.
What competes with God for my loyalty?
Not merely:
"What sins do I commit?"
but:
"What do I love so much that I would struggle to surrender it if God asked?"
That question may reveal considerably more.
And if we discover something uncomfortable, James has not led us to a dead end.
The next movement of his argument is already waiting:
God gives more grace.
The God whose covenant love we have wounded is the same God who calls us back.

Something Worth Pondering

Perhaps the greatest danger of friendship with the world is not that one morning we deliberately decide:
"I no longer want God."
It is far more likely that we slowly allow other things to become equally important.
Then slightly more important.
Until eventually God remains present in our vocabulary while something else occupies the center of our lives.
Spiritual adultery rarely begins with hatred of God.
It often begins with **loving something else too much**.
James's shocking word therefore becomes an act of mercy.
Sometimes love whispers.
Sometimes love encourages.
And sometimes love loves us enough to shout:
"Wake up!"

Ask Yourself This

If someone examined not merely what I say I believe, but how I spend my time, pursue success, handle money, respond when challenged, and decide what matters most, what would they conclude has my deepest loyalty—and is there anything in my life that has quietly begun asking for the devotion that belongs to God alone?

A Closer Look

James 4:5 — The Spirit That Dwelleth in Us

“Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?”
— James 4:5, KJV

James 4:5 is one of the more difficult verses in the letter.
And it is important to say that plainly.
The difficulty is not because the verse is meaningless. The difficulty is that the Greek wording can be understood in more than one way, and the translations reflect that uncertainty.
The KJV reads “The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy.” On a natural reading of that wording, James is speaking about the human spirit and its tendency toward envy.
Another reading takes God as the one who longs jealously for the spirit He has caused to dwell in us. It emphasizes His desire for the undivided devotion of His people.
Those are significantly different readings.
So rather than pretending the problem does not exist, we should ask:
What can we know with confidence?

1. “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain?”

James begins with a rhetorical question.
“Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain?”
In other words:
Scripture does not speak idly.
God's warnings about divided loyalty are not exaggerations.
James has just accused his readers of spiritual adultery.
That accusation rests upon a long biblical pattern: God calls His people into covenant relationship, and He takes their faithfulness seriously.
James therefore appeals to Scripture as a whole, even though the precise quotation that follows is difficult to identify.
That itself creates another interpretive question.
There is no obvious Old Testament verse that reads exactly like James 4:5.
James may be summarizing a broader scriptural theme rather than quoting one specific passage word for word.
That would not be unusual.
The idea appears throughout Scripture:
God desires the loyalty of His people.
Human beings are prone to envy, rivalry, and divided hearts.

And God does not treat that division lightly.

2. Why the Verse Is Difficult

The second half of the verse can be understood in more than one direction.

One possible sense is:

The human spirit within us tends strongly toward envy.

If that is James's meaning, then verse 5 continues the argument of verses 1–4.

James has already described cravings, coveting, quarrels, and friendship with the world.

The problem is inside us.

Our fallen desires pull us toward envy and rivalry.

That reading fits the immediate context very naturally.

Another possible sense is:

God jealously longs for the spirit He has caused to dwell in us.

If that is James's meaning, the focus shifts from human envy to God's covenant jealousy.

God wants His people wholly.

He will not casually share their deepest allegiance with the world.

That reading also fits verse 4 remarkably well, because James has just used the language of adultery.

A faithful husband rightly desires the faithfulness of his spouse.

In the same way, biblical language sometimes describes God's jealousy as the passionate covenant claim of One who loves His people and refuses to treat their infidelity as unimportant.

Both readings make sense in context.

That is why the verse has remained difficult.

3. Jealousy and Envy Are Not the Same Thing

This distinction matters.

Human jealousy often says:

“I want what belongs to someone else.”

That becomes envy.

God's jealousy, in biblical language, is different.

God does not covet something that belongs to another.

He claims the devotion of the people who already belong to Him by covenant.

That is not petty insecurity.

It is the seriousness of faithful love.

A husband who is completely indifferent to his wife's betrayal would hardly be expressing deep covenant love.

In the same way, God's jealousy communicates that our relationship with Him matters.

He does not shrug at divided loyalty.
He loves too deeply for indifference.

4. If James Means the Human Spirit

Suppose James is speaking about our human tendency toward envy.
That would fit everything he has said since the end of chapter 3.
He has already warned against:
bitter envy,
selfish ambition,
cravings,
coveting,
and
conflict.
The pattern is consistent.
The human heart reaches outward.
It compares.
It desires.
It resents.
It competes.
And when those impulses are not surrendered to God, they produce disorder.
That reading would make verse 5 another diagnosis of the same internal war James described in verse 1.
The world outside becomes chaotic because the heart inside is divided.

5. If James Means God's Spirit

Now suppose James is speaking about God's jealous longing for the spirit He has caused to dwell within us.
Then verse 5 becomes intensely relational.
James has just said:
“Ye adulterers and adulteresses”
Now he tells us why spiritual adultery matters.
God desires His people.
Not casually.
Not partially.
Not as one loyalty among many.
He wants the heart.
That reading would connect James closely with the covenant language of the Old Testament.
God repeatedly describes Himself as jealous for Israel's faithfulness.
Again, not because He is insecure.
Because covenant love matters.
The opposite of jealousy in that sense would not be maturity.
It would be indifference.

And God is not indifferent toward His people.

6. Perhaps James Intends Us to Feel Both Truths

Even if we cannot settle every grammatical question with absolute certainty, both truths are deeply biblical.

Human beings are prone to envy and divided desire.

And:

God desires the wholehearted devotion of His people.

Those two truths meet directly in James 4.

Our hearts wander.

God calls us back.

We become divided.

God calls us to wholeness.

We begin loving the world.

God reminds us that we belong to Him.

And that brings us directly to verse 6.

7. The Verse We Must Read Beside It

Whatever interpretive option we favor, James does not leave verse 5 alone.

Verse 6 begins:

“But he giveth more grace.”

That may be the key to hearing verse 5 correctly.

If verse 5 describes the envy of the human heart, verse 6 answers:

God's grace is greater than our corruption.

If verse 5 describes God's jealous longing for His people, verse 6 answers:

God does not merely demand our return; He gives the grace necessary for it.

Either way, the destination is the same.

We are not trapped.

We are not abandoned.

We are being called home.

Pastoral Reflection

There is a temptation when teaching Scripture to smooth over difficult passages because uncertainty feels uncomfortable.

But uncertainty about one detail does not mean uncertainty about everything.

We can say honestly:

“This verse is difficult.”

And then continue:

“But James's larger point is clear.”

That is not weakness.

It is responsible interpretation.
God's people are not helped when we pretend certainty where the text itself requires humility.
They are helped when we show them how to wrestle faithfully.
James 4:5 reminds us that Scripture sometimes asks us to slow down.
To compare translations.
To listen to context.
To avoid forcing a conclusion merely because we prefer clarity.
And sometimes the most faithful answer is:
"There are two strong possibilities here, and both lead us toward truths the rest of Scripture clearly teaches."
That kind of honesty can actually strengthen confidence in Scripture rather than weaken it.

Something Worth Pondering

Perhaps the deepest truth behind James 4:5 is this:
Our hearts wander, but God does not stop wanting us back.
Whether James is emphasizing our tendency toward envy or God's jealous desire for our devotion, the tension is the same.
We are divided.
God calls us to wholeness.
We are distracted.
God calls us home.
We reach for the world.
God gives more grace.
And that final movement matters most.
The difficulty of verse 5 does not obscure the mercy of verse 6.
It prepares us for it.

Ask Yourself This

Where is my heart most divided right now—and whether James is warning me about the envy within me or reminding me of God's desire for my undivided devotion, am I willing to let His grace call that divided heart home?

A Closer Look

James 4:6 — More Grace

“But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
— James 4:6, KJV

“But he giveth more grace.”

There may be no more important sentence in this entire section of James.

Consider what James has just exposed.

Conflicts.

Disputes.

Cravings.

Coveting.

Selfish prayer.

Friendship with the world.

Spiritual adultery.

Divided hearts.

If James stopped at verse 5, we might reasonably wonder:

What hope is left for us?

Then comes verse 6.

But God gives all the more grace.

James does not minimize what he has just said.

He does not retract the accusation of verse 4.

He does not suddenly announce that the conflicts and selfish desires really were not that serious after all.

The sin remains serious.

But grace is greater.

That is the turn.

1. “But…”

Sometimes one small word carries enormous theological weight.

But.

Something has changed.

James has spent five verses describing the human side of the problem.

But God…

Human beings crave.

But God gives grace.

Human beings covet.

But God gives grace.

Human beings quarrel.

But God gives grace.

Human beings pray selfishly.

But God gives grace.
Human beings become divided in loyalty.
But God gives grace.
The answer to the problem James has uncovered is not that human beings simply need to try harder.
The answer begins with what **God gives**.

2. "He Gives…"

That word matters too.
Gives.
Grace is not earned.
It is not achieved.
It is not purchased.
It is not a reward for finally becoming good enough.
God **gives** it.
This is important because James is sometimes misunderstood as though his emphasis upon works somehow diminishes grace.
Nothing could be further from the truth.
The James who says:
"Faith without works is dead"
is the same James who says:
"God gives all the more grace."
Works do not purchase grace.
Works reveal what grace has produced.
James has never taught that human effort earns God's favor.
He teaches that genuine faith, having received God's grace, becomes visible in the way we live.

3. "All the More Grace"

James could simply have written:
"God gives grace."
That would have been wonderful enough.
Instead:
"God gives all the more grace."
There is abundance in those words.
James has described powerful forces within the human heart.
But none of them exceeds the grace of God.
Our pride is real.
Grace is greater.
Our envy is real.
Grace is greater.
Our selfishness is real.
Grace is greater.
Our divided loyalty is real.

Grace is greater.
Our failures are real.
Grace is greater.
James does not tell us that sin is insignificant.
He tells us that sin does not have the final word.

4. Grace Is Not Permission to Remain Where We Are

There is an important distinction here.
Grace does not mean:
"It doesn't matter how you live."
James would reject that immediately.
Grace means that failure does not have to become our permanent address.
God's grace forgives.
But grace also transforms.
Grace welcomes us home.
But grace does not leave us wandering in the country from which we returned.
That becomes especially clear in the verses immediately following:
Submit yourselves to God.
Resist the devil.
Draw near to God.
Cleanse your hands.
Purify your hearts.
Humble yourselves before the Lord.
Grace is not God's permission to avoid repentance.
Grace is what makes repentance possible.

5. "Therefore It Says…"

Unlike the difficult scriptural reference in verse 5, James now gives us a statement we can identify clearly.
"God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble."
James is drawing from Proverbs 3:34.
That connection is particularly appropriate because James has been talking about wisdom throughout his letter.
Proverbs belongs to Israel's wisdom tradition.
James has just contrasted wisdom from below with wisdom from above.
Now he reaches into Proverbs to describe the posture in which God's grace is received:
humility.

6. "God Opposes the Proud"

Those are sobering words.

James does not merely say that God dislikes pride.
He says God **opposes** the proud.
The idea is one of resistance.
God sets Himself against pride.
Why?
Because pride places the self where God belongs.
Pride says:
I know best.
I determine what is right.
I will control my life.
I deserve what I want.
I do not need correction.
I do not need help.
And eventually:
I do not need God.
Now look back at the first five verses.
Why are people fighting?
They want something.
Why are they coveting?
They believe something should be theirs.
Why are their prayers distorted?
They want God to satisfy their desires.
Why are they friends with the world?
They have adopted a system centered upon self.
Underneath much of James 4:1–5 lies the same problem:
pride.

7. Pride Is More Subtle Than Arrogance

When we hear the word *pride*, we may imagine someone boasting loudly about personal accomplishments.
But pride can be much quieter.
Pride can say:
“I don't need anyone's help.”
Pride can refuse to apologize.
Pride can refuse to forgive.
Pride can insist upon having the last word.
Pride can become offended when overlooked.
Pride can resent another person's success.
Pride can refuse correction because admitting error feels unbearable.
Pride can even disguise itself as humility.
And perhaps most dangerously, pride can become religious.
“Thank God I am not like those people.”
Jesus told a parable about that one.

Pride is not merely thinking highly of ourselves.
At its deepest level, pride is arranging life with **ourselves at the center**.

8. "But Gives Grace to the Humble"

Here comes another contrast.
God opposes pride.
But He gives grace to the humble.
Humility does not mean thinking we are worthless.
It does not mean denying the abilities God has given us.
It does not mean allowing others to mistreat us.
It does not mean pretending we cannot do things we actually can.
Biblical humility is simply seeing ourselves truthfully before God.
We are creatures.
He is Creator.
We are dependent.
He is sufficient.
We are sinners.
He is holy.
We need grace.
And He gives it.
Humility is the willingness to say:
"I need God."
That is not weakness.
That is reality.

9. The Empty Hand Receives

There is a beautiful picture hidden within this verse.
Pride approaches God with clenched fists.
Humility approaches God with open hands.
Pride says:
"Look what I have accomplished."
Humility says:
"Everything I have ultimately came from You."
Pride says:
"I can handle this."
Humility says:
"Lord, I need You."
Pride says:
"I deserve."
Humility says:
"I receive."
Grace is a gift.
And gifts are received with open hands.

10. Grace Greater Than Our Failure

There are Christians who understand intellectually that God forgives sin but who still live as though some particular failure has placed them beyond useful grace.

They may believe:

“God forgives people.”

But quietly add:

“People who haven't done what I've done.”

James will not allow that conclusion here.

God gives all the more grace.

That does not erase consequences.

Grace does not magically undo every wound we have caused.

Some things must be repaired.

Some apologies must be made.

Some relationships may require time.

Some consequences remain.

But none of those things means God has exhausted His grace.

There is no shortage in Him.

11. More Grace Does Not Mean Cheap Grace

We must hold two truths together.

James takes sin seriously.

And James takes grace seriously.

If we emphasize sin without grace, we produce despair.

If we emphasize grace without repentance, we produce presumption.

James allows neither.

He says:

You have been unfaithful.

And then:

God gives more grace.

He says:

Humble yourself.

And then:

God will exalt you.

He says:

Draw near to God.

And promises:

God will draw near to you.

That is not cheap grace.

That is **restoring grace**.

Pastoral Reflection

There are moments in ministry when someone finally admits what has been hidden for years.
A failure.
A broken relationship.
An addiction.
A betrayal.
A season of wandering.
A decision they deeply regret.
Sometimes the hardest thing for that person to believe is not that they have sinned.
They already know that.
The hardest thing to believe is that **God still wants them**.
James has something to say to that person.
"But he giveth more grace."
Not because the failure was insignificant.
Not because repentance is unnecessary.
Not because consequences disappear.
But because God's grace is not measured according to the size of our failure.
We should never use grace to make sin small.
We should use grace to remember that **God is greater**.
Perhaps someone has wandered farther than they ever imagined they would.
James's answer is not:
"Then stay there."
It is:
Come home.
The road back begins with humility.
Not excuses.
Not justification.
Not comparison with someone else's failures.
Simply:
"Lord, I was wrong. I need Your grace."
And James tells us what God gives to the humble.
Grace.
Not reluctantly.
Not sparingly.
All the more grace.

Something Worth Pondering

James has spent five verses showing us how badly the human heart can become tangled.

Then he gives us five words capable of changing everything:
God gives all the more grace.
Perhaps we sometimes imagine grace as though God keeps a limited supply.
We have used too much.
Failed too often.
Wandered too far.
Asked forgiveness one time too many.
James gives us no picture of a nearly empty reservoir.
He points instead toward a God whose grace is greater than the need that brought us to Him.
But there is one place where grace cannot be received:
the clenched fist of pride.
So James tells us to open our hands.
Humble ourselves.
Stop pretending.
Stop defending.
Stop hiding.
And receive what God has been willing to give all along.
More grace.

Ask Yourself This

Is there something in my life that pride keeps me from placing honestly before God—and can I humble myself enough to stop defending, hiding, or excusing it and simply open my hands to the "all the more grace" He is already willing to give?

A Closer Look

James 4:7 — Submit to God

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”
— James 4:7, KJV
There are two commands in this verse.
Submit.
Resist.
One sounds passive.
The other sounds active.
But James intends them to work together.
We submit ourselves to God.
We resist the devil.
And the order matters.
James does not begin:
“Resist the devil.”
He begins:
“Submit yourselves therefore to God.”
Before James tells us what to stand against, he tells us **whom to stand under**.
That is where spiritual resistance begins.

1. “Therefore…”

That little word connects verse 7 directly to everything James has just said.
“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
Therefore…
submit yourselves to God.
Submission is what humility looks like when it becomes action.
It is one thing to say:
“God is Lord.”
It is another to live as though He actually has the right to direct our lives.
James has exposed people who have been ruled by cravings, coveting, selfish ambition, pride, and friendship with the world.
Now he tells them what must change.
Someone else must occupy the throne.

2. “Submit Yourselves…”

The Greek verb James uses is *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω).
It carries the idea of **placing oneself under authority, arranging oneself under, or becoming subject to another**.

The word can be used in contexts involving ordered relationships and authority.
Here the meaning is unmistakable.
James is telling believers:
Place yourselves under God's authority.
That means relinquishing the illusion that we are ultimately in charge.
And that may be particularly difficult for people who have spent the first part of this chapter fighting to get what they want.
The cravings of verse 1 say:
"I want."
Coveting says:
"I must have."
Pride says:
"I know best."
Submission says:
"God, You are Lord."
That is a profound change in posture.

3. Submission Is Not Defeat

Our culture often hears the word *submission* negatively.
Submission sounds like losing.
Giving up.
Becoming powerless.
Being dominated by someone stronger.
But Christian submission to God is not surrender to a tyrant.
It is surrender to the One who created us, loves us, knows us completely, and gives "all the more grace."
That context matters.
James does not say:
"God opposes everyone, therefore submit before He destroys you."
He says:
"God gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit yourselves to God."
We are surrendering to **grace**.
Submission to God is not stepping into bondage.
It is stepping out of the bondage of trying to be our own god.

4. The Exhaustion of Being in Control

There is something exhausting about trying to control everything.
We attempt to control circumstances.
Other people.
Outcomes.
Our future.
Our reputation.

Our security.
Sometimes even God's response to our prayers.
James has spent several verses describing what happens when human desire attempts to control life.
Conflict follows.
Submission releases that grip.
It says:
"Lord, I will do what You have given me to do, but I will trust You with what I cannot control."
That does not mean we stop planning.
It does not mean we stop working.
It does not mean we become indifferent.
It means we recognize the boundary between **faithful responsibility** and **the illusion of control**.
There are things God has given us responsibility to do.
And there are things that belong only to God.
Wisdom is learning the difference.

5. "To God"

Submission always raises the question:
To whom?
James's answer is wonderfully clear.
To God.
Not to our cravings.
Not to cultural pressure.
Not to public opinion.
Not to fear.
Not to ambition.
Not to money.
Not to another person's expectations.
Not even ultimately to ourselves.
To God.
This is the answer to the spiritual adultery of verse 4.
The divided heart becomes whole again when its allegiance returns to God.
Submission is therefore not merely obedience.
It is **restored loyalty**.
The wandering spouse comes home.
The divided heart chooses its Lord.

6. "Resist the Devil…"

Now comes the second command.
The Greek word translated **"resist"** is *anthistēmi* (ἀνθίστημι).
It means to **stand against, oppose, or withstand**.

Notice the contrast.
Before God:
Submit.
Before the devil:
Stand your ground.
Those postures must never be reversed.
Yet human beings frequently reverse them.
We resist God.
We argue with His commands.
We negotiate with His Word.
We rationalize disobedience.
And then we casually entertain temptation.
James says:
Reverse the posture.
Stop resisting God.
Start resisting the devil.

7. Who Is the Devil?

James does not introduce the devil as a metaphor for human cravings.
He speaks of the devil as a real spiritual adversary.
The Greek word *diabolos* carries the idea of **slanderer or accuser**.
Scripture consistently presents Satan as opposing God's purposes, deceiving, accusing, tempting, and seeking to draw human beings away from faithful obedience.
But James does something important here.
He does not encourage fascination with the devil.
There is no elaborate discussion of demons.
No speculation.
No complicated spiritual technique.
No secret formula.
James's instruction is remarkably straightforward:
Submit to God.
Resist the devil.
That is enough.
Biblical spiritual warfare is far less sensational than we sometimes make it.
It is often the ordinary, daily decision to remain faithful to God when another voice says:
"Do it your way."

8. How Do We Resist?

Resistance begins by recognizing temptation for what it is.
The devil rarely needs to make evil appear evil.
That would make resistance easier.

Temptation often makes disobedience appear reasonable.
“You deserve this.”
“Nobody will know.”
“Just this once.”
“You have every right to be angry.”
“They hurt you first.”
“Everyone else does it.”
“God surely doesn't expect that.”
Some temptations arrive dressed as common sense.
Resistance means allowing God's truth to have greater authority than the voice of temptation.
Sometimes resisting the devil is surprisingly ordinary.
Tell the truth.
Forgive.
Walk away.
Close the browser.
Refuse the gossip.
Control the tongue.
Do not retaliate.
Ask forgiveness.
Keep the promise.
Pray.
Open Scripture.
Call someone you trust.
Do the next faithful thing.
Spiritual warfare often looks much less dramatic than we imagine.
But it is warfare nonetheless.

9. Temptation Is Not Sin

There is another important pastoral distinction.
Being tempted does not mean we have already failed.
Jesus Himself was tempted.
The presence of temptation is not evidence that God has abandoned us or that our faith is defective.
The question is what we do when temptation comes.
James says:
Resist.
We do not need to feel guilty because the enemy knocked on the door.
We need to be careful about **inviting him inside**.
Resistance may sometimes need to happen repeatedly.
Some temptations do not disappear after one prayer.
Some battles require perseverance.
But James gives us a remarkable promise.

10. "…And He Will Flee from You"

James does not say:
"Resist the devil, and perhaps he will leave you alone."
He says:
"He will flee from you."
That is strong language.
But it must be understood within the verse as a whole.
The promise belongs to the person who is **submitted to God and resisting the devil**.
The power does not originate in us.
James is not teaching that Christians become spiritually intimidating through personal strength.
The devil flees because the believer stands under the authority of God.
Our confidence is not:
"Look how strong I am."
It is:
"Look whose I am."
That is an entirely different kind of confidence.

11. Jesus Shows Us What Resistance Looks Like

The temptation of Jesus gives us a powerful picture.
When Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, Jesus did not engage in elaborate argument.
Again and again:
"It is written…"
Jesus stood upon the revealed will of God.
Satan offered shortcuts.
Jesus remained submitted to the Father.
Satan offered kingdoms.
Jesus refused divided worship.
Satan distorted Scripture.
Jesus answered with Scripture rightly understood.
And eventually:
the devil departed.
Submission and resistance.
Exactly the pattern James gives us.

12. The Order Matters

Perhaps the most important lesson of verse 7 is simply this:
We cannot effectively resist what opposes God while simultaneously resisting God Himself.

If I refuse God's authority but expect God's strength against temptation, I have misunderstood spiritual warfare.
The first battle is surrender.
Before asking:
"How do I defeat this temptation?"
perhaps we should ask:
"What part of my life have I not yet submitted to God?"
Sometimes the place where temptation repeatedly gains ground is the very place we have been reluctant to surrender.
James tells us where to begin.
Submit yourselves therefore to God.
Then stand.

Pastoral Reflection

There are times when Christians become frightened by spiritual warfare.
They worry about whether Satan is attacking them.
They wonder whether every difficulty is demonic.
They become preoccupied with identifying spiritual forces behind every circumstance.
James gives us a remarkably calming response.
He does not tell us to become experts on the devil.
He tells us to become **submitted to God**.
There is wisdom in that.
Our attention belongs primarily upon Christ, not upon the enemy.
The Christian life is not lived constantly looking over our shoulder wondering what Satan might do next.
It is lived looking toward God and asking:
"What does faithfulness require of me here?"
Then when temptation comes:
Stand.
When the lie comes:
Remember the truth.
When resentment whispers:
Forgive.
When pride rises:
Humble yourself.
When desire demands control:
Submit.
And when you fail?
Return to verse 6.
God gives all the more grace.
Then get back up.
Submit again.

Resist again.
Keep walking.

Something Worth Pondering

James gives us two postures in one verse:
On our knees before God.
On our feet before the devil.
Perhaps we sometimes reverse them.
We stand defiantly before God:
“I want my way.”
Then collapse before temptation:
“I couldn't help myself.”
James says:
Reverse the posture.
Surrender where surrender belongs.
Stand where standing belongs.
And notice the promise.
James does not say that the devil has the final word.
He does not even say that the believer must chase him away.
Resist him.
And he will flee.
The Christian's strength does not come from being stronger than the enemy.
It comes from belonging to the One before whom the enemy cannot stand.

Ask Yourself This

Where in my life might I have reversed James's command—resisting God while surrendering too easily to temptation—and what would change if I finally placed that part of my life under God's authority, stood firmly in His truth, and trusted Him with the battle?

A Closer Look

James 4:8 — Draw Nigh to God

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.”
— James 4:8, KJV

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

After the severity of the previous verses, those words are almost breathtaking.

Remember whom James has been addressing.

People fighting with one another.

People driven by cravings.

People coveting what they cannot obtain.

People praying selfishly.

People whom James has called **“adulterers.”**

People whose loyalty has become divided between God and the world.

Yet James does not tell them:

“God wants nothing more to do with you.”

Instead, he gives them an invitation.

Draw near.

The God against whom they have sinned is still the God who invites them home.

That may be one of the clearest pictures of grace in the entire letter.

1. “Draw Near to God…”

The expression **“draw near”** has deep biblical roots.

In the Old Testament, drawing near to God often describes approaching Him in worship.

Priests drew near.

Worshipers approached.

Sacrifices were offered.

The language carried a sense of coming into the presence of the Holy One.

James takes that language and makes it intensely personal.

Draw near to God.

Not merely:

Attend worship.

Perform a ritual.

Say the correct prayer.

Appear religious.

But:

Come to God.

The goal of repentance is not merely improved behavior.
The goal is **restored relationship**.
That distinction matters.
Christianity is not ultimately a program for producing better-behaved people.
It is reconciliation between human beings and God that then transforms how those reconciled people live.
James wants the wandering heart to come home.

2. We Often Move in the Opposite Direction

Sin has a strange effect upon us.
When we most need to approach God, we often feel least worthy to do so.
We fail.
Then we hide.
We wander.
Then we become ashamed.
We become ashamed.
Then we withdraw farther.
It is an ancient pattern.
Adam and Eve sinned in the garden.
And when they heard God approaching, they **hid**.
Human beings have been hiding ever since.
We hide behind excuses.
We hide behind religion.
We hide behind busyness.
We hide behind accomplishments.
We hide behind the carefully constructed version of ourselves we allow other people to see.
Sometimes we even hide from God while knowing perfectly well that hiding from God is impossible.
James says:
Stop running away.
Turn around.
Draw near.

3. "…And He will draw nigh to you"

Here is the promise.
"He will draw nigh to you."
James does not portray God as reluctantly tolerating the returning sinner.
He does not picture us crawling toward God while God stands at a distance deciding whether we have suffered enough.
We move toward Him.
He moves toward us.

There is something here that sounds remarkably like the heart of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.
The son finally turns toward home.
But while he is still far away, the father sees him.
And runs.
The son has prepared his confession.
The father has already prepared the embrace.
That does not eliminate repentance.
The son still says:
"Father, I have sinned."
But repentance occurs in the presence of a father who wanted his child home.
That is the God toward whom James tells us to draw near.

4. God Was Never the One Who Wandered

There is another truth hidden in this invitation.
When our relationship with God becomes distant, **God is not the one who wandered away**.
James has spent the chapter describing human movement away from God.
We followed cravings.
We coveted.
We fought.
We became friends with the world's values.
Our hearts became divided.
God remained faithful.
So "draw near" is really an invitation to return.
We do not need to persuade God to become faithful again.
He never stopped.

5. "Cleanse Your Hands…"

Now James moves from invitation to repentance.
"Cleanse your hands, you sinners."
Hands represent what we **do**.
Our actions.
Our behavior.
The things our desires have produced.
James has never been interested in a faith that exists only internally.
This is the man who told us:
"Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."
So drawing near to God must eventually affect what our hands are doing.
If I have been dishonest, repentance involves honesty.
If I have harmed someone, repentance may involve restitution.
If I have been spreading gossip, repentance means stopping.
If I have wronged someone, repentance may require an apology.

If I have been participating in something sinful, repentance means turning away from it.
Grace welcomes us as we are.
But grace loves us too much to insist that we remain exactly as we were.

6. "…And Purify Your Hearts"

Now James moves inward.
Hands.
Then:
Hearts.
That is important.
James will not allow us to choose between outward obedience and inward transformation.
We need both.
Clean hands without a changed heart can become mere religion.
A supposedly changed heart without changed behavior can become self-deception.
James addresses both.
Cleanse what you do.
Purify what you desire.
Once again, James sounds very much like Jesus.
Jesus consistently moved beneath outward behavior to the heart from which behavior arises.
James does the same.
God does not merely want better actions.
He wants the heart that produces them.

7. "You Double-Minded"

And suddenly James brings us back to a word we have encountered before.
Double-minded.
In James 1:8, the doubter was described as:
"double-minded and unstable in every way."
Now the idea returns.
The Greek word is *dipsychos* (δίψυχος).
Literally, it carries the striking idea of being **two-souled**.
Two loyalties.
Two directions.
Two competing centers of allegiance.
Part of me wants God.
Part of me wants the world.
Part of me wants obedience.
Part of me wants control.
Part of me says:

“Your will be done.”
Another part quietly adds:
“As long as Your will agrees with mine.”
James has finally given a name to the condition he has been describing throughout this passage.
A divided heart.

8. The Opposite of Double-Mindedness

What is the opposite of being double-minded?
Not perfection.
Wholeness.
An undivided heart.
A life increasingly oriented toward one Lord.
That does not mean Christians never struggle.
It does not mean temptation disappears.
It does not mean we never question, wrestle, or fail.
It means that beneath all those struggles there is one fundamental direction:
Toward God.
We may stumble while walking toward Him.
We may even wander temporarily.
But the deepest desire becomes:
“Lord, I want to belong wholly to You.”
That is what James is calling for.

9. Clean Hands and a Pure Heart

There is an unmistakable echo here of the language of worship found elsewhere in Scripture:
“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts…”
James's readers, steeped in Israel's Scriptures, would likely have heard the resonance.
Clean hands.
Pure heart.
Approaching God.
James is describing repentance as preparation for renewed fellowship with God.
But remember the order.
God's grace came first.
“He gives all the more grace.”
Then:
Submit.
Resist.
Draw near.

Cleanse.
Purify.
We do not cleanse ourselves in order to persuade God to become gracious.
We repent because grace has already opened the door home.

10. Repentance Is More Than Feeling Sorry

James's language also helps us distinguish regret from repentance.
Regret says:
"I wish that hadn't happened."
Repentance says:
"I need to change direction."
Regret may focus primarily upon consequences.
"Look what this cost me."
Repentance focuses upon relationship.
"Look what this has done between God and me—and perhaps between me and others."
True repentance therefore involves both heart and hands.
Something changes inside.
Something changes outside.
Not perfectly.
Not instantly in every case.
But genuinely.

11. The Door Is Open

Perhaps someone reading James 4:8 feels far from God.
Maybe the distance developed slowly.
There was no dramatic rejection of faith.
Prayer simply became less frequent.
Scripture became less important.
Worship became routine.
Other priorities crowded in.
One compromise led to another.
Eventually God seemed far away.
James does not prescribe an elaborate journey back.
He simply says:
Draw near.
Start there.
Pray again.
Open Scripture again.
Confess honestly.
Return to worship.
Make the apology.
Abandon the thing you know is pulling you away.

Take one faithful step toward God.
And trust the promise:
He will draw near to you.

Pastoral Reflection

There are people who remain distant from God because they believe they must first make themselves worthy to return.
They think:
“Once I get this straightened out, I'll come back.”
“Once I've overcome this habit, I'll pray again.”
“Once I become the person I should have been, perhaps God will receive me.”
James reverses that thinking.
Draw near.
Come now.
Not because the sin does not matter.
James has already called these people **sinners** and **double-minded**.
It matters enormously.
But the place where cleansing begins is not somewhere away from God.
It is **near Him**.
We sometimes imagine repentance as cleaning ourselves up so that we may approach God.
The gospel tells us to approach God so that He may begin making us clean.
The physician does not tell the sick person:
“Get well, then come see me.”
The sick come precisely because they need the physician.
So do we.

Something Worth Pondering

There is something beautiful about the direction of movement in this verse.
James does not say:
“Find God.”
God is not lost.
He does not say:
“Convince God to return.”
God has not wandered.
He says:
“Draw near.”
The distance may feel enormous.
But the first step home is still simply a step toward God.
And then comes the promise:
“He will draw nigh to you.”

Perhaps we imagine ourselves making the long journey back alone.
James gives us another picture.
We turn toward home—
and discover that God is already coming toward us.

Ask Yourself This

Is there an area of my life where I have been hiding from God because I believe I must first clean myself up—and what would happen if I stopped running, turned toward Him exactly where I am, and trusted His promise: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you"?

A Closer Look

James 4:9 — Mourning and Repentance

“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.”
— James 4:9, KJV

At first hearing, James 4:9 sounds almost startlingly severe.

“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep.”

Then James goes even further:

“Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection.”

What are we supposed to do with that?

Is James teaching that faithful Christians should be gloomy?

Is laughter somehow spiritually suspect?

Is joy inappropriate?

Surely not.

James began his letter with:

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy.”

The larger witness of Scripture repeatedly presents joy as part of life with God.

So James cannot suddenly be declaring war on happiness.

The question is not whether Christians should laugh.

The question is:

What are James's readers laughing about when they ought to be grieving?

Verse 9 is about the seriousness of repentance.

1. “Lament…”

James has spent eight verses steadily removing the excuses his readers might use to avoid confronting their spiritual condition.

They have conflicts.

They have cravings.

They covet.

They pray selfishly.

They have become friends with the world's values.

James calls them spiritually unfaithful.

Their hearts are divided.

Then grace enters:

“But he giveth more grace.”

They are invited to submit.

Resist.

Draw near.
Cleanse their hands.
Purify their hearts.
Now James says:
Take seriously what you have discovered.
Lament.
The word carries the idea of experiencing distress or sorrow over one's condition.
This is the moment when we stop explaining our sin and begin grieving it.

2. There Is a Difference Between Being Caught and Being Sorry

Human beings can feel badly about wrongdoing for many reasons.
We may regret getting caught.
We may regret the consequences.
We may regret embarrassment.
We may regret losing someone's trust.
We may regret what our actions cost us.
But none of those things necessarily equals repentance.
There is a deeper sorrow that says:
"What I did was wrong."
Not merely:
"I wish this hadn't happened."
But:
"I wish I had not done this because it was contrary to the person God calls me to be."
That is much closer to what James is describing.

3. "And Mourn…"

Mourning is normally associated with loss.
We mourn because something valuable has been damaged or taken away.
That makes James's choice of language especially meaningful.
Sin always costs something.
Sometimes it costs trust.
Sometimes relationships.
Sometimes integrity.
Sometimes opportunities.
Sometimes peace.
Sometimes years.
And sin damages fellowship with God.
That does not mean God stops loving us.
It means sin matters precisely because the relationship matters.
We do not mourn because God has stopped loving us.

We mourn because we have acted contrary to the love we have received.

4. “And Weep”

There are moments when words become inadequate.
Tears say what language cannot.
Scripture never treats tears as evidence of weak faith.
David wept.
Jeremiah wept.
Peter wept.
Paul wrote of tears.
Jesus Himself wept.
There are tears of grief.
Tears of compassion.
Tears of disappointment.
And there are tears of repentance.
Peter provides one of Scripture's most powerful examples.
He had insisted:
“Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.”
Then he denied Jesus three times.
When Peter realized what he had done, he went out and **wept bitterly**.
Those tears did not earn his forgiveness.
But they revealed something important.
Peter understood that something precious had been wounded.
And yet Peter's story did not end with tears.
Jesus restored him.
That matters enormously for understanding James.
Repentance may pass through mourning.
It does not have to live there forever.

5. “Let Your Laughter Be Turned into Mourning…”

This is perhaps the easiest portion of the verse to misunderstand.
James is not saying:
“Christians should stop laughing.”
He is confronting laughter that has become inappropriate because people refuse to recognize the seriousness of their spiritual condition.
There is a kind of laughter that comes from joy.
That is good.
There is laughter that comes from friendship.
Good.
There is laughter born of gratitude and delight.
Good.
And there is laughter that **trivializes what should trouble us**.

We sometimes use humor to avoid uncomfortable truth.
We laugh something off.
We minimize it.
We say:
“Everybody does it.”
“It's really not that serious.”
“That's just how I am.”
“No harm done.”
Sometimes laughter becomes another hiding place.
James says there are moments when we need to stop laughing long enough to allow God to show us what is really happening.

6. When Sin Stops Bothering Us

Perhaps the spiritually dangerous condition is not that we sin.
All of us do.
The dangerous condition is when sin **no longer troubles us**.
The first time we cross a line, conscience may protest loudly.
The next time, perhaps a little less.
Repeated often enough, what once disturbed us can become ordinary.
We learn to explain it.
Then excuse it.
Eventually we may even defend it.
James wants to interrupt that process.
He wants the heart to become tender again.
Not terrified.
Not hopeless.
Tender.
Able once again to say:
“Lord, this is wrong, and I don't want to become comfortable with it.”

7. “…And Your Joy into Dejection”

Again, context is everything.
James is not commanding the permanent elimination of joy.
He is describing the temporary sobriety appropriate when we finally recognize what sin has done.
There is a time for celebration.
There is also a time for confession.
There is a time to laugh.
There is a time to weep.
There is a time to rejoice in God's goodness.
And there is a time to sit quietly before Him and say:
“Lord, I have been wrong.”
We lose something important when worship leaves no room for lament.

The Christian life contains celebration, certainly.
But it also contains confession.
Sometimes the path back to genuine joy passes through honest sorrow.

8. Godly Sorrow Has a Destination

Paul provides helpful language when he distinguishes between a sorrow that produces repentance and a sorrow that produces death.
Not all sorrow is spiritually healthy.
There is a sorrow that simply says:
“I am terrible. I am hopeless. Nothing can change.”
That is not where James is taking us.
Remember verse 6:
“But he giveth more grace.”
Remember verse 8:
“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”
James's mourning occurs **inside the promise of grace**.
That changes everything.
Christian repentance is not standing before a locked door crying because God refuses to let us inside.
It is standing before an **open door**, finally admitting why we wandered away.

9. Conviction and Condemnation Are Not the Same Thing

This distinction is pastorally important.
Conviction says:
“This thing you have done is wrong. Bring it to God.”
Condemnation says:
“You are beyond hope. Stay away from God.”
James says:
Draw near.
Therefore whatever sorrow James calls for cannot be the kind that drives us away from God.
It must be the kind that drives us **toward Him**.
Conviction identifies the wound so that healing can begin.
Condemnation convinces us that healing is impossible.
James has already told us which one reflects God's heart:
He gives more grace.

10. Repentance Without Despair

There are two mistakes Christians can make when dealing with sin.
One is to make sin too small.
“It doesn't really matter.”
The other is to make grace too small.

“God could never forgive this.”
James permits neither.
Sin matters enough to mourn.
Grace is great enough to hope.
Those truths belong together.
If we speak of grace without repentance, grace becomes cheap.
If we speak of repentance without grace, repentance becomes despair.
James gives us both.
Mourn honestly.
Draw near confidently.

Pastoral Reflection

There are moments in ministry when someone finally stops defending what they have done.
The explanations disappear.
The excuses run out.
The blame stops shifting.
And sometimes there are simply tears.
Those can be holy moments.
Not because God delights in seeing people miserable.
But because honesty has finally arrived.
Something changes when a person can say:
“I was wrong.”
No *but*.
No explanation of what the other person did first.
No carefully constructed defense.
Just truth.
“Lord, I was wrong.”
That may sound like defeat.
James sees it as the beginning of restoration.
Because the person who can finally say that is very close to the humility of verse 10.
And the humble person is precisely the one to whom God gives grace.
There may be tears on the road home.
But tears are not the destination.
God is.

Something Worth Pondering

We sometimes imagine repentance as God standing over us demanding that we feel sufficiently miserable before He will forgive us.
James gives us a different picture.
Grace has already appeared in verse 6.
God has already invited us near in verse 8.
So the tears of verse 9 are not an attempt to persuade God to love us.

They are the response of a heart finally realizing how much His love matters.
Perhaps that is why genuine repentance can contain both sorrow and hope.
We grieve because sin matters.
We hope because **grace matters more**.
And eventually the God who calls us to mourn will restore our joy—not the shallow laughter that ignored the problem, but the deeper joy of someone who has come home.

Ask Yourself This

Is there something in my life that I have been explaining, minimizing, laughing off, or excusing when I really need to become quiet before God and simply say, "Lord, I was wrong"—trusting that the grace which calls me to repentance is the same grace that will lead me home?

A Closer Look

James 4:10 — Humble Yourselves

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”
— James 4:10, KJV
James ends this section with a remarkable reversal.
At the beginning of chapter 4, people are grasping.
They want.
They covet.
They fight.
They quarrel.
They ask God for things in order to satisfy their own desires.
They pursue friendship with the world.
Everything points toward one fundamental impulse:
I want to determine what I receive and where I stand.
Then grace interrupts.
“But he giveth more grace.”
From that point forward, the direction changes.
Submit to God.
Resist the devil.
Draw near to God.
Cleanse your hands.
Purify your hearts.
Lament.
Mourn.
Weep.
And finally:
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord.”
James has taken us from **grasping to kneeling**.
And then comes the promise:
“He shall lift you up.”

1. “Humble Yourselves…”

James returns to the theme of verse 6:
“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
Now humility becomes a command.
Humble yourselves.
That is interesting because we sometimes think of humility as a personality trait.
Some people seem naturally quiet or modest.
Others are outgoing and confident.
But biblical humility is not temperament.

A quiet person can be enormously proud.
A confident person can be genuinely humble.
Humility is not how loudly we speak.
It is how accurately we understand **who we are before God**.
James therefore treats humility as a posture we can intentionally take.
We stop defending ourselves.
We stop pretending.
We stop demanding our own way.
We stop insisting that God conform to our plans.
We acknowledge:
"You are God. I am not."
That may be the simplest definition of humility in the entire Christian life.

2. Humility Is Not Thinking Less of Our Worth

There is a false humility that says:
"I am worthless."
That is not what James means.
Human beings bear the image of God.
We are loved by God.
We have gifts.
Abilities.
Responsibilities.
Callings.
Humility does not require denying any of that.
It simply refuses to turn those gifts into grounds for self-exaltation.
Humility can say:
"God has given me an ability to do this well."
Pride says:
"Therefore I am better than you."
Humility can acknowledge accomplishment.
Pride needs accomplishment to establish worth.
Humility receives gifts gratefully.
Pride treats gifts as personal achievements detached from the Giver.
Humility is not pretending we have nothing.
It is remembering **where everything ultimately came from**.

3. "Before the Lord…"

Those three words change everything.
Before the Lord.
James does not tell us to spend our lives making ourselves small before everyone around us.
He tells us to humble ourselves **before God**.
That gives humility its proper perspective.
Human beings constantly compare themselves with other human beings.

Am I more successful?
More intelligent?
More respected?
More spiritual?
More accomplished?
More financially secure?
Comparison produces either pride or envy.
If I believe I am ahead, I become proud.
If I believe I am behind, I become envious.
James removes the scoreboard.
Stand before God.
Suddenly comparison becomes rather meaningless.
Before His holiness, none of us has grounds for boasting.
Before His grace, none of us has grounds for despair.
We are all recipients.

4. The Audience of One

There is freedom in learning to live **before the Lord**.
Much of human behavior is shaped by an invisible audience.
What will people think?
Will they approve?
Will they notice?
Will they respect me?
Will they recognize what I accomplished?
Will they understand that I was right?
Those questions can become exhausting.
James gives us another audience.
The Lord.
What if faithfulness before God mattered more than recognition before people?
What if doing the right thing were enough even when nobody applauded?
What if serving quietly were enough?
What if someone else received the credit?
What if God saw something nobody else noticed?
Jesus repeatedly taught this same principle.
Give without performing for an audience.
Pray without performing for an audience.
Fast without performing for an audience.
Your Father sees.
Perhaps one of humility's greatest freedoms is discovering that **God's notice is enough**.

5. “And He shall lift you up”

Here is the promise.

James does not say:
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and remain insignificant forever.”
He says:
“He shall lift you up.”
Notice who performs the exaltation.
God.
That is the difference.
The people of verses 1–3 were attempting to secure things for themselves.
Verse 10 says:
Stop trying to exalt yourself. Trust God with your place.
That is not passivity.
We still work.
We still use our gifts.
We still pursue opportunities.
We still accept responsibility.
We still strive to do things well.
But we no longer need to manipulate people, compete destructively, diminish others, or demand recognition in order to secure our importance.
We can faithfully do what God has placed before us and leave the outcome with Him.

6. The Great Kingdom Reversal

James's words echo a theme Jesus taught repeatedly:
Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.
That is one of the great reversals of the kingdom of God.
The world says:
Climb.
Jesus says:
Serve.
The world says:
Make yourself important.
Jesus says:
Become the servant of all.
The world says:
Protect your status.
Jesus washes feet.
The world says:
Demand recognition.
Jesus says:
Your Father sees in secret.

The kingdom of God operates according to a different measure of greatness.
And nowhere is that more visible than in Christ Himself.

7. Jesus Shows Us Humility

The ultimate picture of humility is not weakness.
It is Jesus.
Paul describes Christ as the One who did not exploit His equality with God but emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, humbled Himself, and became obedient even to death on a cross.
And then:
God highly exalted Him.
Humiliation followed by exaltation.
Service followed by glory.
The cross followed by resurrection.
That pattern stands at the center of Christian faith.
So when James says:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up,"
he is not describing some obscure spiritual principle.
He is describing the pattern embodied by Christ Himself.

8. Exaltation May Not Look Like We Expect

There is an important caution.
James is not promising that humble Christians will eventually become rich, famous, influential, or publicly admired.
That would simply turn humility into another strategy for worldly advancement.
"If I humble myself long enough, eventually God will make me important."
That would miss James's point entirely.
God determines what exaltation means.
Sometimes He entrusts greater responsibility.
Sometimes He restores someone who has fallen.
Sometimes He gives influence.
Sometimes He gives peace.
Sometimes the faithful servant remains largely unknown in this life.
And ultimately Christian hope looks beyond this life altogether.
The important thing is not **how** God exalts.
The important thing is **who determines our place**.
James says:
Trust God with that.

9. We Do Not Need to Climb Over One Another

Now we can finally see how perfectly verse 10 answers verse 1.

Why were there conflicts and disputes?
People wanted something.
They competed.
They coveted.
They fought.
They tried to secure what they believed they needed.
But if we truly believe verse 10, much of that becomes unnecessary.
If God is responsible for our ultimate place, then I do not need to climb over you to reach mine.
Your success does not threaten me.
Your recognition does not diminish me.
Your gifts do not invalidate mine.
Your opportunity does not prove that God has forgotten me.
I can celebrate what God does in your life because I trust Him with mine.
That is freedom.
And it is the exact opposite of the envy and selfish ambition James condemned at the end of chapter 3.

10. From Grasping to Open Hands

There is a beautiful progression across these ten verses.
At first, the hands are grasping.
I want.
I covet.
I must have.
Then James says:
Submit.
The fist begins to open.
Draw near.
The distance begins to close.
Cleanse your hands.
The life begins to change.
Purify your hearts.
The inner person begins to change.
Humble yourselves.
Finally, the hands are empty.
Not because nothing matters.
But because everything has been entrusted to God.
And empty hands are finally able to receive grace.

Pastoral Reflection

There is enormous freedom in no longer having to prove that we matter.
We spend much of life building things.
Careers.
Families.

Ministries.
Reputations.
Homes.
Relationships.
Accomplishments.
Some of those things are wonderful.
But eventually we discover how little of life we actually control.
Jobs disappear.
Plans change.
People disappoint us.
Doors close.
Health changes.
Careers end.
Circumstances move us somewhere we never expected to go.
Sometimes what seemed like a devastating loss becomes, years later, the road that carried us somewhere we never would have chosen for ourselves.
Humility allows us to say:
"Lord, I cannot see where this leads, but I trust You with where I stand."
That is not resignation.
It is faith.
We still knock on doors.
We still work.
We still network.
We still help one another.
We still use every ability God has entrusted to us.
But we stop believing that everything depends upon our ability to control the outcome.
Sometimes God opens the door.
Sometimes He closes it.
Sometimes He sends someone alongside us who simply says:
"Let me see if I can help."
And sometimes only much later do we begin to recognize how grace was working through circumstances we could not understand at the time.
Humility does not require knowing what God is doing.
It requires trusting God while He does it.

Something Worth Pondering

James began this passage with people trying desperately to elevate themselves.
They wanted.
They coveted.

They competed.
They fought.
By verse 10, James has brought them to their knees.
And strangely enough, that is where he tells them they will finally rise.
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”
The world tells us that the way upward is to climb.
James tells us that the way upward begins by kneeling.
Perhaps that is because when we kneel before God, we finally stop trying to occupy His place.
We no longer have to control everything.
We no longer have to win every argument.
We no longer have to receive every recognition.
We no longer have to force every door open.
We can simply be faithful.
And leave the lifting to God.

Ask Yourself This

Where am I still trying to secure my own position, recognition, importance, or future—and what would change if I stopped trying to exalt myself, humbled myself before the Lord, faithfully did what He has placed before me, and trusted Him completely with where the road leads?

A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 4:11–12 — Warning Against Judging Another

“Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?”
— James 4:11–12, KJV
James has just told his readers:
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord.”
Now he gives them an immediate opportunity to practice that humility.
Stop speaking evil against one another.
The connection is stronger than it may first appear.
Pride does not only affect the way we see ourselves.
It affects the way we see **other people**.
When I elevate myself, it becomes much easier to diminish you.
When I assume that my judgment is unquestionably correct, I can begin treating another person's character, motives, and even standing before God as though they were mine to determine.
James says:
That position is already occupied.
There is one Lawgiver.
There is one Judge.
And it is not us.

The Movement of James

James continues the pastoral pattern we have seen throughout his letter.
He presents the problem:
“Speak not evil one of another.”
He explains the reasoning:
When we condemn another person, we place ourselves above the law rather than under it.
Then he brings us to the theological reality underneath the problem:
“There is one lawgiver.”
Finally, he leaves us with a question that forces personal examination:
“So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?”
The movement is:

Speaking against another → judging another → judging the law → assuming God's position → remembering the one true Judge → humility toward our neighbor.
Once again, James does not merely say:
"Don't do that."
He tells us **why**.

1. "Speak not evil one of another"

James begins with speech.
That should sound familiar.
Chapter 3 has not disappeared.
The tongue that James compared to a fire can now be turned against another believer.
The expression translated **"speak evil against"** carries the idea of speaking against someone in a way that tears down, slanders, or disparages.
This is more than simply disagreeing with someone.
Christians will disagree.
Sometimes disagreement is necessary.
Sometimes wrongdoing must be confronted.
Sometimes false teaching must be identified.
Sometimes an injustice must be named.
James himself has hardly been reluctant to confront wrongdoing.
He just called his readers:
"Ye adulterers and adulteresses"
So James cannot mean:
"Never say that someone is wrong."
The issue is something deeper.
There is a difference between identifying wrong behavior and **destroying the person who committed it**.
There is a difference between correction and condemnation.
There is a difference between speaking truth about someone and speaking against someone in order to diminish them.

2. "Brothers and Sisters"

Once again James uses family language.
That matters.
These are not strangers attacking strangers.
These are members of the Christian community speaking against one another.
James repeatedly reminds them:
You belong to one another.
The person you are talking about is your brother.
The person whose reputation you are damaging is your sister.

The person you have reduced to a mistake, weakness, disagreement, or failure is someone for whom Christ died.
Family relationships do not eliminate correction.
Healthy families sometimes require very difficult conversations.
But family changes the purpose of correction.
The goal should be **restoration**, not destruction.

3. Speaking About Someone Who Is Not in the Room

There is a practical dimension to James's warning that reaches directly into ordinary church life.
Some of the most damaging conversations happen when the person being discussed is not present.
We tell the story.
We explain what they did.
We describe their motives.
We collect agreement.
And with each retelling, something can subtly happen.
We stop talking about what someone **did** and begin declaring who that person **is**.
There is a significant difference between:
"What he did was wrong."
and:
"That's just the kind of person he is."
The first evaluates an action.
The second claims knowledge of the person.
And sometimes we go even further:
"I know why she did it."
Now we are claiming knowledge of motives.
But motives belong to territory we cannot always see.
God can see the heart.
We usually cannot.

4. When Concern Becomes Gossip

Gossip can be remarkably skilled at disguising itself.
Sometimes it even wears religious clothing.
"I'm only telling you so you'll know how to pray."
There may indeed be legitimate reasons to share someone's situation with another person.
But James invites us to examine why we are speaking.
Am I trying to help?
Am I seeking wise counsel?
Am I protecting someone from genuine harm?

Am I attempting to restore a brother or sister?
Or do I simply enjoy possessing information about someone else's failure?
That is a much more uncomfortable question.
A useful test might be:
Would I say this the same way if the person were sitting beside me?
If the answer is no, perhaps James has given us something worth considering.

5. "Whoever…Judges Another"

James now moves from speech to judgment.
The words are related because destructive speech often begins with an internal verdict.
We have already decided what the person is.
Guilty.
Hypocritical.
Selfish.
Worthless.
Untrustworthy.
Beyond hope.
And then our words simply announce the verdict.
But once again, we must be careful.
James is not forbidding moral discernment.
Scripture repeatedly calls believers to distinguish truth from error, righteousness from sin, wisdom from foolishness.
James himself has been doing exactly that throughout this letter.
The problem is not recognizing that something is wrong.
The problem is **assuming the position of the final Judge**.

6. Discernment and Judgment Are Not the Same Thing

This distinction is essential.
Discernment says:
"This action is wrong."
Condemnatory judgment says:
"Therefore I know everything necessary to determine this person's worth and standing before God."
Discernment may require confrontation.
Judgment enjoys condemnation.
Discernment seeks restoration.
Judgment seeks a verdict.
Discernment remembers:
"I too stand under God's grace."

Judgment forgets.
That last difference may be the most important.
The humble Christian can confront sin precisely because he or she knows:
“I am not standing above you. I am standing beside you under the same Lord.”

7. “Speaks Evil Against the Law and Judges the Law”

Now James's reasoning takes an unexpected turn.
He says that when we speak against and judge our brother or sister, we are somehow speaking against and judging **the law**.
What does he mean?
We should remember what James has already called:
“the royal law.”
In chapter 2 he quoted:
“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
That law is directly relevant here.
If God's law commands me to love my neighbor, but I decide that my neighbor is unworthy of the mercy, dignity, patience, or love that God's law requires, I have done something extraordinary.
I have effectively said:
“The law does not apply here.”
I am no longer merely breaking the law.
I have placed myself above it.
I have begun deciding when God's command is worthy of obedience.
James says that makes me not merely a violator of the law but someone attempting to **judge the law itself**.

8. “Not a Doer of the Law but a Judge”

There is another phrase we have heard before.
Doer.
James told us in chapter 1:
“Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”
Now the theme returns.
There are only two positions available.
I can stand **under God's Word as a doer**.
Or I can attempt to stand **over God's Word as its judge**.
The moment I begin deciding that God's command to love my neighbor does not apply to *this particular neighbor*, I have changed positions.
Instead of asking:
“How should I obey God's law here?”
I begin asking:
“Does God's law deserve to govern me here?”

James will not permit that move.

9. “There is one lawgiver”

Verse 12 brings us to the heart of the matter.

One.

There is one Lawgiver.

There is one Judge.

God alone has both the authority to establish the standard and the perfect knowledge required to judge according to it.

That second point is particularly important.

Our judgments are limited.

We know fragments.

God knows the whole story.

We see actions.

God sees motives.

We know what happened today.

God knows what happened twenty years ago that helped shape the person standing before us.

We see the failure.

God sees every battle that preceded it.

We see what someone has become.

God knows what grace may yet make of them.

That does not make wrong behavior right.

It means we should approach another person's life with considerable humility.

10. “Who Is Able to Save and to Destroy”

James reminds us that ultimate judgment belongs to God because ultimate authority belongs to God.

He alone is able to save.

He alone possesses the authority of final judgment.

That means we must be careful about pronouncing final sentences over people whom God may not be finished with.

Peter denied Jesus.

Paul persecuted Christians.

David committed terrible sins.

The stories could have ended there.

God knew otherwise.

Whenever we reduce someone entirely to the worst thing they have done, we risk forgetting something James has already taught us:

God gives all the more grace.

The grace that can restore us can also restore the person we are tempted to condemn.

11. “So Who, Then, Are You…?”

And here comes James the preacher again.
He has presented his case.
Now he asks the question.
“So who, then, are you…?”
It is difficult to read that question without hearing James's challenge.
Who appointed you?
Who gave you complete knowledge?
Who gave you authority over another person's soul?
Who gave you the ability to see the heart?
Who gave you the right to occupy God's chair?
The implied answer is:
No one.

12. “…To Judge Your Neighbor?”

And James chooses one final word carefully.
Neighbor.
Not enemy.
Not opponent.
Not problem.
Not hypocrite.
Not fool.
Neighbor.
That word brings us directly back to the royal law:
“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
Perhaps James deliberately ends here because the person we are tempted to judge is the very person God has commanded us to love.
We may need to correct them.
We may need to disagree with them.
We may need to establish boundaries.
There may even be circumstances in which we must report wrongdoing or protect someone from harm.
But none of those responsibilities requires us to stop seeing the other person as a human being made in God's image.
We can confront without hatred.
Correct without humiliation.
Disagree without contempt.
Protect without vengeance.
And when judgment is necessary, we can remember that **final judgment belongs to God**.

Pastoral Reflection

Churches can survive disagreement.

What they struggle to survive is contempt.
Two faithful Christians may read a situation differently.
They may disagree over methods.
Leadership.
Music.
Money.
Programs.
Theology.
Politics.
Decisions about the future.
Disagreement itself does not necessarily destroy fellowship.
But something changes when we stop saying:
"I believe my brother is wrong."
and begin saying:
"There is something wrong with my brother."
Then perhaps:
"I know what kind of person he really is."
And before long:
"I don't know how anyone like that could possibly be a faithful Christian."
Notice how quickly we moved.
We began by evaluating an idea.
We ended by attempting to evaluate a soul.
James says:
That chair belongs to Someone Else.
Perhaps humility means learning that I can be convinced I am right about an issue while still remembering that I am not qualified to pronounce the final verdict upon the person who disagrees with me.
After all, the person standing across from me and the person standing inside my skin share one very important thing:
We both need grace.

Something Worth Pondering

James has just said:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord."
Perhaps one of the first tests of whether we have actually done that is **how we talk about people when they are not in the room**.
It is easy to kneel before God on Sunday.
The harder question may be what happens to our humility on Monday when someone's name enters the conversation.
Do I need to tell this story?
Do I know that person's motives?
Am I seeking restoration—or agreement with my verdict?

Would I say this if they were sitting beside me?
And perhaps most importantly:
Have I forgotten whose chair I am sitting in?
There is one Lawgiver.
There is one Judge.
The rest of us are neighbors.

Ask Yourself This

When I speak about someone who has disappointed, hurt, angered, or disagreed with me, am I honestly seeking truth, protection, correction, and restoration—or have I quietly moved from discerning what they did to deciding who they are, forgetting that there is only one Judge and that God has called me first to be a doer of the royal law: "Love your neighbor as yourself"?

A Closer Look

James 4:11 — Speaking Evil of One Another

"Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge."
— James 4:11, KJV
James has just said:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord."
Then, almost immediately:
"Speak not evil one of another."
That connection should not be missed.
James has spent the first ten verses of this chapter dealing with pride, selfish desire, divided loyalty, repentance, submission, and humility.
Now he turns to speech.
Why?
Because one of the quickest ways to discover whether humility has actually reached the heart is to listen to **how we talk about other people**.
Especially people with whom we disagree.
Especially people who have disappointed us.
Especially people who are not in the room.

1. "Speak not evil one of another…"

The Greek verb behind "speak evil against" is *katalaleō* (καταλαλέω).
It carries the idea of **speaking against someone, speaking disparagingly of them, or slandering them**.
The emphasis is not simply upon saying something unpleasant.
It is speech directed **against** another person.
Speech intended—or at least functioning—to tear down.
That can include outright lies.
But it does not have to.
This is where the command becomes uncomfortable.
Something can be factually true and still be spoken sinfully.
We sometimes defend ourselves by saying:
"But everything I said was true."
James might ask a different question:
"Why did you say it?"
Truth matters.
But so do motive, purpose, audience, and love.

2. Truth Can Be Used as a Weapon

Suppose someone has genuinely failed.

We know what happened.
We know something embarrassing.
Perhaps we even know something that reveals poor judgment.
Now we have a choice.
That information can be used for restoration.
Or it can be used for destruction.
We can take it to the person involved.
We can seek appropriate help.
We can protect someone who may be harmed.
We can pursue reconciliation.
Or—
we can tell the story.
And then tell it again.
Perhaps with just enough additional interpretation to make certain everyone understands exactly what kind of person we believe this individual to be.
Nothing we say may technically be false.
But truth has become ammunition.
James is concerned not merely with whether our words are accurate.
He is concerned with **what our words are doing to our neighbor**.

3. "Brothers and Sisters"

James deliberately reminds them who they are talking about.
Brothers and sisters.
Family.
That makes destructive speech especially tragic.
Throughout this letter James has repeatedly addressed his readers with affection:
"My brothers and sisters…"
Now he essentially says:
Remember that the person whose reputation you are discussing belongs to the same family.
This does not mean wrongdoing should be covered up.
Family loyalty must never become an excuse for secrecy where abuse, exploitation, criminal conduct, or genuine danger is involved.
Protecting someone's reputation is not more important than protecting someone from harm.
But neither should legitimate concern become an excuse for gossip.
The question is:
What am I trying to accomplish with these words?
Protection?
Correction?
Restoration?

Or simply the satisfaction of telling the story?

4. The Person Who Is Not in the Room

Perhaps one of the simplest tests of our speech is this:

Would I say this the same way if the person were sitting beside me?

Not every conversation about another person is wrong.

Pastors sometimes need counsel about difficult situations.

Leaders must discuss personnel matters.

Parents discuss children.

Friends seek advice.

Church leaders sometimes must address serious misconduct.

There are countless legitimate circumstances in which we must discuss someone who is absent.

But James asks us to examine the spirit of the conversation.

Are we discussing a problem because we are trying to solve it?

Or are we discussing a person because we enjoy discussing them?

There is a difference.

And most of us know the difference when we are willing to admit it.

5. Gossip Can Wear Church Clothes

Perhaps nowhere is this more subtle than within a Christian community.

Gossip rarely introduces itself by saying:

"I have some gossip."

It sounds much more respectable.

"I'm concerned about…"

"You didn't hear this from me, but…"

"I probably shouldn't say anything…"

"We really need to pray for…"

Sometimes those statements introduce genuine concern.

Sometimes they do not.

A prayer request can become gossip with God's name attached to it.

The test is not the religious language surrounding the information.

The test is love.

Does this conversation serve the person being discussed?

Does it protect someone?

Does it seek wisdom necessary for action?

Does it move toward reconciliation?

Or does it simply distribute information that was never ours to distribute?

James forces us to ask.

6. "…Or Judges Another"

Now James moves beneath speech to something deeper.

Judgment.

Destructive speech often begins with an internal verdict.

We have decided what someone is.
Not merely:
“He did something wrong.”
But:
“He is a terrible person.”
Not merely:
“She handled that badly.”
But:
“That's just who she is.”
Not merely:
“I disagree with his decision.”
But:
“I know why he did it.”
Notice what has happened.
We have moved from evaluating behavior to claiming knowledge of **character and motive**.
That is dangerous territory.

7. But Aren't Christians Supposed to Judge Right from Wrong?

Here we need to slow down.
James cannot possibly mean that Christians should abandon moral discernment.
James himself has spent nearly four chapters making moral judgments.
Partiality is wrong.
A faith without works is dead.
The uncontrolled tongue is destructive.
Bitter envy and selfish ambition are earthly and unspiritual.
Friendship with the world is hostility toward God.
James clearly believes some things are right and some things are wrong.
Jesus likewise instructed His followers to recognize false prophets by their fruits.
Paul repeatedly instructed churches to discern truth from error and address serious wrongdoing.
So Scripture cannot mean:
“Never evaluate anything.”
That would make faithful Christian living impossible.
The important distinction is between **discernment** and **condemnation**.

8. Discernment Says, “This Is Wrong”

Discernment evaluates something according to God's revealed standard.
It asks:
Is this true?

Is this right?
Is this wise?
Is this consistent with God's Word?
Sometimes discernment requires us to say:
"This behavior is wrong."
Sometimes love requires confrontation.
Sometimes silence would actually be irresponsible.
If someone is being harmed, we do not say:
"Well, I don't want to judge."
If someone is teaching something destructive, we do not abandon discernment in the name of tolerance.
If a brother or sister is walking toward disaster, love may require us to speak.
But Christian discernment always remembers something:
I am also standing under judgment.
I am not the lawgiver.
I am not the final judge.
I am one sinner trying faithfully to help another sinner walk toward God.

9. Condemnation Says, "I Know Who You Are"

Condemnatory judgment goes farther.
It takes the place of God.
It assumes knowledge we do not possess.
It assigns motives.
It determines worth.
It pronounces final verdicts.
It says:
"I know what kind of person you are."
"I know why you did that."
"People like you never change."
"God could never use someone like you."
Now we are no longer simply discerning behavior.
We are attempting to write the conclusion of someone else's story.
And we do not know the ending.

10. We Rarely Know the Whole Story

This may be one of the greatest reasons humility is necessary when judging another person.
We know so little.
We see the moment.
God sees the lifetime.
We see the reaction.
God knows the wound behind it.
We see the failure.

God knows the battle that preceded it.
We see what was said.
God knows what was intended.
We see where someone is today.
God knows where grace may take that person tomorrow.
Again, this does not excuse wrongdoing.
Understanding is not the same as approval.
But it should make us cautious about believing that our limited knowledge qualifies us to issue unlimited verdicts.

11. Think of Peter

Imagine judging Peter only from the courtyard.
A man who promised Jesus:
"I will never deny you."
Then, when pressure came, he denied even knowing Him.
Three times.
Suppose Peter's story had been frozen at that moment.
What verdict might we have pronounced?
Coward.
Hypocrite.
Failure.
Unworthy.
Perhaps all of those descriptions would have seemed reasonable.
But God had not finished writing Peter's story.
The man who denied Christ would later stand publicly and proclaim Him.
The frightened disciple would become a leader in the early church.
If we had issued the final verdict in the courtyard, **we would have been wrong about the ending**.
God knew what grace was still going to do.

12. Or Think of Paul

What if the church had been allowed to pronounce Paul's final verdict while he was still Saul?
He persecuted Christians.
He approved Stephen's death.
He entered homes and dragged believers away.
Surely there were Christians who would have considered Saul an enemy beyond hope.
Then came Damascus.
And grace rewrote the story.
That should make every Christian very cautious about saying:
"God could never…"
We simply do not know what God may yet do with another human life.

13. “Speaks Evil Against the Law”

James now makes an extraordinary argument.
When we speak evil against our brother or sister and assume the role of judge, James says we are speaking against **the law**.
Which law?
James has already told us.
In chapter 2 he called it the:
“royal law.”
“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
Now think about what happens when I decide that a particular neighbor does not deserve that love.
God says:
Love your neighbor.
I say:
Not this one.
God says:
Show mercy.
I say:
Not after what she did.
God says:
Forgive.
I say:
He doesn't deserve it.
At that moment I have done more than disobey the law.
I have effectively placed myself above it.
I have decided that **I am qualified to determine when God's command applies**.
James calls that judging the law.

14. “You Are Not a Doer of the Law…”

And there is our old friend again.
Doer.
James introduced this theme back in chapter 1:
“Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”
The entire letter keeps returning to that principle.
Faith must become action.
Wisdom must become conduct.
Love must become mercy.
Humility must become behavior.
Now James says:
If I place myself above God's command, I have stopped being a **doer**.
I have become a **judge**.
That is a dangerous exchange.

The proper Christian posture before God's Word is not:
“Do I agree with this?”
It is:
“How do I faithfully live this?”

15. The Law Is Supposed to Judge Me

Perhaps that is the deepest irony in this verse.
God's law is supposed to examine **us**.
Instead, we can use it as a tool for examining everybody else.
We read Scripture and immediately think:
“I know someone who needs to hear this.”
Perhaps we do.
But before sending them the verse, James might suggest we sit with it ourselves for a while.
The Word of God is not primarily a window through which we inspect our neighbor.
It is first a **mirror in which we see ourselves**.
James has already used that image in chapter 1.
The person who hears the Word but does not obey it is like someone who looks into a mirror and immediately forgets what was seen.
Perhaps one way of forgetting the mirror is to turn it toward everyone else.

Pastoral Reflection

Pastors learn fairly quickly that conflict has more than one story.
Someone comes into the office and explains what happened.
The story sounds convincing.
Then the other person tells the story.
And suddenly the situation looks different.
Not necessarily because the first person lied.
They told the story as they experienced it.
The second person did the same.
And somewhere between those perspectives lies a fuller truth that neither person sees completely.
That experience can teach us humility.
We rarely know as much about another person's situation as we think we do.
So when correction is necessary, correct.
When wrongdoing must be confronted, confront it.
When someone is in danger, protect them.
When truth must be spoken, speak it.
But do all of those things with the humility that says:
“I can evaluate what I see, but God alone sees everything.”
That humility changes our tone.

It changes our purpose.
It changes the words we choose.
And perhaps most importantly, it leaves room for grace.

Something Worth Pondering

There is a simple question that might prevent an enormous amount of harmful speech:
Why am I saying this?
Not merely:
Is it true?
But:
Why does this person need to hear it?
Will it help?
Will it protect?
Will it correct?
Will it restore?
Or will it merely lower someone else in the listener's eyes?
James has just told us to humble ourselves before God.
Perhaps one evidence of that humility is learning that we do not need to have an opinion about every person's motives.
We do not need to pronounce a verdict on every failure.
And we certainly do not need to distribute every piece of damaging information we happen to possess.
Sometimes faith that works looks surprisingly simple.
It knows when to speak.
And it also knows when to remain silent.

Ask Yourself This

When I speak about another person—especially someone who has disappointed, hurt, or angered me—am I speaking because truth, protection, correction, or restoration genuinely requires it, or am I using even truthful words to tear that person down; and have I moved from discerning what they did to assuming I know who they are, forgetting that I am called to be a doer of God's law rather than the judge who sits above it?

A Closer Look

James 4:12 — One Lawgiver

“There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?”
— James 4:12, KJV
James has spent verse 11 warning his readers against speaking evil of one another and assuming the role of judge.
Now he tells us why.
The position is already filled.
There is one Lawgiver.
There is one Judge.
And James's argument is wonderfully simple:
If God alone possesses the authority to give the law, if God alone possesses the knowledge required to judge perfectly according to that law, and if God alone holds the ultimate authority over human life—
then who are we to take His seat?

1. “There Is One…”

James begins with a word that leaves very little room for competition.
One.
Not many.
Not God and us.
One.
There is something deeply theological behind that little word.
Israel's confession had always begun with the uniqueness of God:
“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”
James stands firmly within that biblical conviction.
God's authority is unique.
His sovereignty is not shared with human beings.
We may exercise responsibility.
We may make judgments entrusted to us.
Parents must make judgments.
Pastors and church leaders must make judgments.
Employers must make judgments.
Courts must make judgments.
Christians must exercise moral discernment.
But every human judgment remains **limited and accountable**.
There is only one ultimate Judge.

2. “Lawgiver…”

God does not merely enforce the standard.
He establishes it.

That is what makes Him the Lawgiver.
Human beings have an extraordinary ability to create standards that conveniently favor ourselves.
We can become very strict about sins that do not particularly tempt us.
And remarkably understanding about the ones that do.
We can demand mercy for ourselves and justice for everyone else.
We can even use Scripture selectively—emphasizing the commands that expose another person's failures while quietly avoiding those that expose our own.
James will not allow us to rewrite the law.
God is the Lawgiver.
Our task is not to edit His Word until it becomes comfortable.
Our task is to become **doers of it**.

3. The Lawgiver Is Also the Judge

James joins two titles:
Lawgiver and Judge.
That matters.
The One who established the standard is also the One who evaluates human lives according to it.
Unlike us, God's judgment is never based upon incomplete information.
We see fragments.
God sees the whole.
We hear one conversation.
God knows every conversation.
We see an action.
God knows the motive.
We remember someone's failure.
God knows every circumstance that led to it.
We know what a person did yesterday.
God knows what grace may make of that person tomorrow.
This is not an argument for ignoring wrongdoing.
It is an argument for **humility when confronting it**.

4. Our Knowledge Is Partial

Think about how easily we make judgments with limited information.
Someone fails to return a telephone call.
We decide:
“They don't care.”
Someone walks past without speaking.
“They're angry with me.”
Someone makes a decision we dislike.
“I know exactly why they did that.”
Someone leaves a church.

“They were never really committed.”
Someone struggles repeatedly.
“They'll never change.”
Notice how quickly we move from what we **know** to what we **assume**.
The event may be real.
Our interpretation may not be.
Perhaps the telephone call was forgotten.
Perhaps the person who walked past never saw us.
Perhaps the decision had factors we knew nothing about.
Perhaps the person who left was carrying pain nobody recognized.
Perhaps the person who keeps struggling is one encounter with grace away from a completely different life.
God knows.
We often guess.
Humility remembers the difference.

5. “Who Is Able to Save…”

Now James introduces something much larger than ordinary human judgment.
God is the One:
“who is able to save.”
That should immediately remind us that the Judge James describes is also the God of grace.
The One who judges is the One who saves.
That matters especially after everything we have just read in verses 1–10.
James's readers were hardly innocent.
They fought.
Coveted.
Prayed selfishly.
Befriended the world's values.
James called them spiritually unfaithful.
Yet what did God do?
“He gives all the more grace.”
He invited them:
“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”
The Judge is not searching for excuses to prevent people from being saved.
He is the God who gives grace to the humble.

6. We Do Not Decide Who Is Beyond Grace

That truth should make Christians very cautious about declaring another person hopeless.
We may rightly say:
“What you are doing is wrong.”

We may sometimes have to say:
“This cannot continue.”
We may need boundaries.
Consequences.
Accountability.
Church discipline.
Civil justice.
Protection for victims.
None of those things contradict grace.
But there is one sentence we should be very careful about saying:
“God could never do anything with that person.”
We do not know that.
Scripture contains too many people whose stories should warn us against making that declaration.
Moses killed a man.
David committed adultery and arranged a man's death.
Peter denied Christ.
Paul persecuted the church.
If we had been allowed to write the ending of their stories at the moment of their worst failure, what would we have written?
God wrote something else.

7. Grace Means God Is Still Writing

This does not mean every story ends the way we hope.
Human beings can resist grace.
Choices have consequences.
Some damage cannot simply be undone.
James certainly does not minimize sin.
But as long as God is dealing with a human life, we should be cautious about assuming we know the final chapter.
We see what someone **is**.
God knows what someone **may become**.
Perhaps that is one reason Christians should leave room for repentance.
The person we condemn today may be the person God transforms tomorrow.
And perhaps someday someone will need to leave that same room for us.

8. “…And to Destroy”

Then James gives us the other side.
God is able:
“to save and to destroy.”
James will not allow us to reduce God to sentimental kindness.
God's grace is real.
So is God's judgment.

The God who saves is also the righteous Judge.
Sin matters.
Human choices matter.
Justice matters.
James has spent the entire letter insisting that faith has consequences.
So this verse holds together two truths we sometimes separate.
God is gracious.
And:
God is Judge.
Grace does not eliminate judgment.
Judgment does not eliminate grace.
Both belong to God.
And because both belong to God, neither belongs ultimately to us.

9. Justice Still Matters

This verse must not be used to silence legitimate accountability.
Suppose someone commits abuse.
Fraud.
Violence.
Exploitation.
Or another serious wrong.
James is not telling victims:
"You cannot judge, so remain silent."
Nor is he telling authorities:
"Only God can judge, so do nothing."
Human beings sometimes have God-given responsibilities to investigate facts, protect people, establish boundaries, administer discipline, and impose lawful consequences.
James's point concerns **ultimate judgment of the person**, not the abandonment of justice.
We can say:
"This action was wrong and must have consequences."
without saying:
"I possess God's complete knowledge of this person's heart and final destiny."
Those are very different claims.

10. "So Who, Then, Are You…?"

Now James turns directly toward us.
"So who, then, are you…?"
It is one of those biblical questions that becomes more uncomfortable the longer we sit with it.
James does not ask:
"What did your neighbor do?"

He asks:
“Who are you?”
That shifts the entire conversation.
Because when someone hurts us, our attention naturally moves toward them.
What they said.
What they did.
Why they were wrong.
Why our response was justified.
James turns the mirror around.
Who are you?
Are you the Lawgiver?
No.
Are you the Judge?
No.
Do you possess perfect knowledge?
No.
Can you see the human heart?
No.
Can you save?
No.
Can you pronounce God's final judgment?
No.
Then perhaps some humility is appropriate.

11. “…To Judge Your Neighbor?”

And James ends with:
“your neighbor.”
That word matters.
James could have said:
“another person.”
Instead:
Neighbor.
We have heard that word before.
James 2:8:
“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”
The person we are tempted to condemn is still our neighbor.
Perhaps difficult.
Perhaps wrong.
Perhaps someone from whom healthy boundaries are necessary.
But still a neighbor.
And the command concerning our neighbor has not changed.
Love.

12. Loving Someone Does Not Mean Agreeing with Them

This is another distinction worth making.
Christian love does not require pretending that everything another person does is acceptable.
Sometimes love says:
"No."
Sometimes love confronts.
Sometimes love warns.
Sometimes love establishes a boundary.
Sometimes love refuses to participate.
Sometimes love reports wrongdoing.
Sometimes love allows consequences to occur.
But love never requires us to become God.
We can speak truth without claiming omniscience.
We can exercise discernment without contempt.
We can seek justice without vengeance.
We can establish boundaries without hatred.
We can disagree without dehumanizing.
That may be one of the most difficult forms of Christian maturity.

13. The Judge Who Knows Us Completely

There is another side to this verse that is strangely comforting.
God's perfect knowledge is frightening if all we think about is judgment.
But consider what it also means.
God knows **our** whole story too.
He knows what other people misunderstand about us.
He knows motives others misinterpret.
He knows wounds we have never explained.
He knows battles nobody else sees.
He knows every faithful act that received no recognition.
He knows every quiet prayer.
He knows every struggle.
He knows every failure.
And He knows every sincere attempt to return.
Human beings may judge us unfairly.
God never will.
The same truth that prevents us from sitting in God's judgment seat also allows us to stop desperately trying to defend ourselves before every human tribunal.
The Judge knows the whole story.
Sometimes that must be enough.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something exhausting about trying to correct everyone's opinion of us.
Someone misunderstands.
We want to explain.
Someone criticizes.
We want to defend.
Someone tells an incomplete version of the story.
We desperately want everyone to know the rest.
Sometimes explanation is appropriate.
Sometimes truth needs to be corrected.
But sometimes we have done everything faithful that we can do.
At that point, there is freedom in remembering:
There is one Judge.
He knows.
He knows what happened.
He knows what we intended.
He knows where we were wrong.
He knows where we were misunderstood.
And He knows where repentance is needed.
That allows us to release both sides of judgment.
We do not need to sit in God's chair judging our neighbor.
And we do not need to spend our lives forcing everyone else out of the chair when they judge us.
We can live faithfully before the One whose judgment actually matters.

Something Worth Pondering

James has reduced the entire issue to one question:
Who is the Judge?
If the answer is God, several things change.
I can confront wrong without pretending I know another person's heart.
I can forgive without pretending the wrong did not matter.
I can establish boundaries without hatred.
I can leave room for another person's repentance.
I can accept correction when I am wrong.
And when I am misunderstood, I do not have to convince every person on earth of my innocence.
There is one Lawgiver.
There is one Judge.
He is able to save.
He is able to judge.
And the rest of us are neighbors.

Ask Yourself This

When I am tempted to pronounce a verdict on another person—or when I become consumed with someone else's verdict about me—can I remember that there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, entrust both of us to Him, speak truth where truth is necessary, show grace where grace is possible, and return to the responsibility James has actually given me: to love my neighbor and faithfully live as a doer of God's Word?

A Commentary on the Epistle of James

James 4:13–17 — Boasting About Tomorrow

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

— James 4:13–17, KJV

There is nothing obviously wrong with the plan in verse 13.
That may be the first thing we need to notice.
These people are not planning a crime.
They are not describing some immoral enterprise.
They intend to travel to another town.
Stay for a year.
Conduct business.
Make money.
It sounds remarkably ordinary.
In fact, it sounds responsible.
They know where they are going.
They know approximately when they are leaving.
They know how long they intend to remain.
They know what they intend to do.
They even have a financial objective.
If they presented this plan at a business meeting, someone might compliment them for thinking ahead.
And yet James says something is seriously wrong.
The problem is not that they made a plan.
The problem is that **God is completely absent from it**.

The Movement of James

Once again James moves almost like a preacher standing before a congregation.
First he presents the situation:
“To day or to morrow we will go…”
Here is the plan.
Then he challenges the assumption underneath it:

“Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.”
Here is the problem.
Then comes an illustration:
“It is even a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”
Here is reality.
Then James gives the faithful alternative:
“If the Lord will…”
Here is the solution.
Then he exposes the spiritual problem beneath the original attitude:
“Ye rejoice in your boastings.”
And finally comes the application:
“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”
The movement is almost sermonic:
Plan → Reality → Illustration → Submission → Diagnosis → Application.
James is not opposed to planning.
He is opposed to **planning as though we were God**.

1. “Go to now…”

James begins:
“Go to now…”
There is almost a pastoral sharpness to it.
We might hear:
“Now listen.”
James wants their attention.
He has just reminded them that there is one Lawgiver and Judge.
Now he confronts another way human beings quietly occupy God's place.
We assume control over the future.
The connection between these sections may therefore be stronger than it initially appears.
In verses 11–12:
You are not the Judge.
In verses 13–17:
You are not the Lord of tomorrow either.
Both problems grow from the same root.
Pride.

2. A Perfectly Reasonable Business Plan

Listen carefully to the confidence of verse 13:
“Today or tomorrow…”
They control the schedule.
“We will go…”
They control the journey.

“To such and such a town…”
They control the destination.
“Spend a year there…”
They control the duration.
“Doing business…”
They control the activity.
“And making money.”
They control the outcome.
Every part of the future has been spoken of as though it were already secured.
James does not criticize business.
He does not criticize profit.
He does not criticize travel.
He does not even criticize planning a year ahead.
He challenges the assumption beneath the language:
You have written tomorrow's story without acknowledging the One who actually holds tomorrow.

3. Planning Is Not the Problem

Scripture does not condemn wise planning.
Quite the opposite.
Biblical wisdom regularly praises foresight, diligence, preparation, and responsible stewardship.
Jesus Himself spoke about counting the cost before beginning a project.
The problem is not having a calendar.
The problem is imagining that because something appears on our calendar, **we therefore possess the day**.
There is a difference between:
“This is what I plan to do.”
and:
“This is what will happen.”
The first recognizes responsibility.
The second can quietly assume sovereignty.
Faithful planning holds the future with open hands.

4. “You Do Not Even Know What Tomorrow Will Bring”

James states something every human being knows intellectually and frequently forgets practically.
We do not know tomorrow.
We can forecast.
Estimate.
Prepare.

Schedule.
Budget.
Insure.
Save.
Invest.
Plan.
All of those may be wise.
But none of them gives us knowledge of tomorrow.
One telephone call can change a year.
One medical appointment can change a life.
One conversation can change a career.
One unexpected opportunity can change a direction.
One closed door can redirect an entire future.
One person we did not expect to meet can become enormously important.
Sometimes the event that appears to have ruined the plan becomes the very thing that sends us toward a future we never would have planned for ourselves.
We simply do not know.
James does not say that to frighten us.
He says it to **humble us**.

5. "What Is Your Life?"

Then James asks one of the great questions of Scripture:
"What is your life?"
Notice that he does not ask:
What is your career?
What is your income?
What have you accumulated?
What have you accomplished?
How successful have you been?
He asks something more fundamental.
What is your life?
And James answers his own question.

6. "It is even a vapour"

"For it is even a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes."
The image is simple.
Morning mist.
Vapor.
Breath visible in cold air.
Here—
and then gone.
James is not saying that human life is meaningless.

He is saying that human life is **brief**.
There is an enormous difference.
Because life is brief, it matters enormously how we live it.
We sometimes behave as though time were an unlimited resource.
Later.
Someday.
Eventually.
When things settle down.
When I retire.
When I have more money.
When the children are grown.
When the project is finished.
When life becomes less complicated.
James interrupts:
You are a mist.
Do not confuse God's patience with an unlimited supply of tomorrows.

7. The Humility of Mortality

Remember where James has just brought us:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord."
Now he gives us one of the greatest reasons for humility.
We are mortal.
No amount of wealth changes that.
No title changes it.
No technology changes it.
No achievement changes it.
The wealthiest businessperson and the poorest laborer share the same limitation:
Neither owns tomorrow.
Mortality is the great equalizer.
But James does not use mortality to produce despair.
He uses it to teach **dependence**.

8. "If the Lord will…"

Here is James's alternative:
"Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord will, we will live and do this or that.'"
Notice the first part.
Before:
"We will do business."
James says:
"If the Lord will, we will live…"
Before we can accomplish tomorrow's plan, we must first **be alive tomorrow**.

Even life itself is received.
That realization changes planning.
Not:
“God, here is what I have decided. Please approve it.”
But:
“Lord, this is what I intend to do. If You open the door, I will walk through it. If You close the door, give me enough faith to trust You there too.”
That is not fatalism.
It is humility.

9. “If the Lord will” Is More Than a Phrase

Christians sometimes say:
“Lord willing.”
There is nothing wrong with the phrase.
It can be a beautiful expression of dependence.
But James is describing something deeper than adding religious words to our plans.
We can say:
“Lord willing”
while having absolutely no intention of allowing God to redirect anything.
The phrase can become verbal decoration.
James is describing a posture of the heart.
Open hands.
We make the plan.
We work responsibly.
We prepare carefully.
But underneath everything is the prayer:
“Lord, You retain the right to change this.”
That can be difficult.
Especially when we really like the plan.

10. When God Changes the Plan

Most of us can look backward and identify moments when life did not go according to plan.
At the time, some of those moments seemed disastrous.
A job ended.
A relationship changed.
A move became necessary.
A door closed.
An opportunity disappeared.
Something we had counted on did not happen.
And sometimes, years later, we can see that the closed door redirected us toward something we never would have discovered otherwise.

Not always.
There are events whose purpose we may never understand in this life.
Faith does not require pretending every painful event eventually becomes obvious.
Sometimes all we can say is:
“I don't know why this happened.”
But faith can add:
“I still trust the One who holds tomorrow.”
That may be one of the deepest meanings of:
“If the Lord will.”

11. Planning with Open Hands

There are two extremes we should avoid.
One says:
“Everything depends upon me.”
That is arrogance.
The other says:
“Since God is sovereign, there is no reason for me to plan.”
That is irresponsibility.
James teaches neither.
Christian wisdom plans carefully and holds the plan loosely.
We prepare as though our decisions matter.
We pray because God's will matters more.
We work faithfully today.
We trust God with tomorrow.
Perhaps the Christian approach to the future can be summarized this way:
Make plans in pencil. Give God the eraser.

12. “Ye rejoice in your boastings”

James now exposes what lies underneath the original business plan.
Arrogance.
Again, the problem was not commerce.
It was self-sufficiency.
The planners spoke as though future time, opportunity, success, and life itself were possessions already under their control.
James calls that boasting.
This does not require someone to stand publicly declaring how wonderful they are.
Arrogance can be quiet.
It can simply be the unspoken assumption:
“I have this handled.”
No need for God.
No dependence.
No prayer.

No openness to redirection.
The plan may even succeed.
And success can sometimes make the illusion of self-sufficiency stronger.

13. “All Such Boasting Is Evil”

James does not soften his conclusion.
Evil.
Why such strong language?
Because self-sufficient boasting attempts to place the creature in the position of the Creator.
It treats life as possession rather than gift.
It treats tomorrow as certainty rather than grace.
It treats success as entirely self-created rather than dependent upon countless things beyond our control.
The humble person can still say:
“I worked hard.”
But also:
“And I was given the opportunity, strength, ability, time, relationships, and circumstances that made the work possible.”
Humility does not deny effort.
It recognizes that effort never operates independently of grace.

14. “Anyone, Then, Who Knows the Right Thing to Do…”

Then comes verse 17.
At first it almost seems detached from everything preceding it.
But that little word:
“then”
connects it.
James has brought his readers to a point of knowledge.
They now know.
They know that life is brief.
They know tomorrow is uncertain.
They know their plans belong under God's will.
They know arrogance is wrong.
So what happens now?
Knowledge creates responsibility.
Once we know what faithfulness requires, we cannot pretend ignorance.

15. “…And Fails to Do It, Commits Sin”

This expands our understanding of sin considerably.
We often think of sin primarily as doing something wrong.
James reminds us that sin can also be **failing to do what is right**.
The traditional distinction is between:

sins of commission — doing what we should not do,
and:
sins of omission — failing to do what we should do.
James is speaking about omission.
Sometimes the question before God is not:
"What evil did I do?"
but:
"What good did I know to do and leave undone?"
That is a much more searching question.

16. The Opportunity We Keep Postponing

Verse 17 becomes even more powerful beside James's warning about tomorrow.
Life is a mist.
We do not know what tomorrow will bring.
Therefore:
If there is good we know we should do—
why are we assuming tomorrow will provide another opportunity?
The apology we know we should make.
The person we know we should forgive.
The encouragement we keep meaning to offer.
The relationship we need to repair.
The generosity we keep postponing.
The person who needs our help.
The conversation we know we need to have.
The calling we keep putting off.
The faithful thing we already know God is asking us to do.
We say:
"Someday."
James says:
You do not know tomorrow.
That makes verse 17 a remarkably powerful conclusion.

17. Faith That Works Does Not Live in "Someday"

Perhaps nowhere does the title of this commentary fit more naturally.
Faith that works acts upon the good it knows to do.
It does not merely agree.
It does not merely intend.
It does not merely plan.
It acts.
James began the letter saying:
"Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."

Now near the end of chapter 4 he gives us the same principle from another direction:

Knowing the right thing without doing the right thing is itself a failure of faithfulness.

Intentions matter.

But intentions are not obedience.

Pastoral Reflection

We spend an extraordinary amount of life thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow's work.

Tomorrow's problems.

Tomorrow's appointments.

Next year's plans.

Retirement.

Projects.

Dreams.

Things we hope eventually to accomplish.

There is nothing wrong with any of that.

Planning can be wise stewardship.

But James reminds us that **the only moment in which we can actually practice faithfulness is the moment God has given us now**.

Yesterday cannot be changed.

Tomorrow has not been promised.

Today is where obedience lives.

Perhaps that means there are occasions when the most faithful prayer is not:

"Lord, show me Your five-year plan for my life."

Perhaps it is simply:

"Lord, show me what faithfulness looks like today."

Then do that.

Tomorrow, if God gives it, ask again.

That kind of life may not always know where the road leads.

But it knows whom it is following.

Something Worth Pondering

James asks:

"What is your life?"

His answer is:

A mist.

That could sound depressing.

But perhaps James intends it to be liberating.

If life is brief, then perhaps we can stop wasting so much of it trying to control what cannot be controlled.

We can plan.

Prepare.
Work.
Dream.
Build.
Save.
Serve.
Love.
And then place all of it into God's hands.
“If the Lord will…”
Those words do not make our plans meaningless.
They put our plans in their proper place.
And verse 17 reminds us that there is one thing we should not endlessly postpone:
the good we already know to do.
We do not know whether tomorrow will provide another opportunity.
But we have today.
Perhaps today is enough.

Ask Yourself This

What am I treating as guaranteed that God has only given me as a possibility—and is there some good thing I already know I should do, some person I should help, some word I should speak, some wrong I should make right, or some act of faithfulness I keep postponing until “tomorrow,” when James reminds me that the only day God has actually placed in my hands is today?

A Closer Look

James 4:13 — Plans for Tomorrow

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:”
— James 4:13, KJV
At first glance, there is nothing particularly troubling about this verse.
These people have a plan.
And it is a fairly detailed plan.
They have decided **when** they will go.
They have decided **where** they will go.
They have decided **how long** they will stay.
They have decided **what** they will do.
And they have decided **what the outcome will be**.
“Today or tomorrow…”
“We will go…”
“Spend a year there…”
“Doing business…”
“And making money.”
It sounds like a business plan.
If anything, we might commend them for thinking ahead.
So why does James object?
Because there is one conspicuous absence from the entire plan.
God.

1. “Go to now…”

James begins with:
“Go to now…”
There is some edge to those words.
We might express the sense as:
“Now listen…”
or:
“Come on now…”
James wants their attention because he is about to challenge something they apparently consider completely normal.
That makes this warning particularly important.
The sins that are easiest to recognize are not always the ones most dangerous to us.
Sometimes the deeper spiritual problems are hidden inside perfectly respectable behavior.
These people are not planning adultery.
They are not plotting violence.

They are not discussing theft.
They are going into business.
Yet James hears something in their words that troubles him.
Self-sufficiency.

2. Who Are These People?

James does not identify them beyond describing their commercial plans.
They appear to be merchants or businesspeople who expect to travel to another city, establish themselves there temporarily, conduct trade, and make a profit.
That would not have been unusual in the world James knew.
Commerce required travel.
Merchants moved between cities and regions looking for opportunities to buy, sell, and trade.
James does not condemn that activity.
Nothing in the passage suggests that commerce itself is the problem.
Nor does James condemn wealth merely because someone earns a profit.
The problem is not:
"You intend to make money."
The problem is:
"Listen to the certainty with which you speak about a future you do not control."

3. A Five-Part Plan

Look carefully at how complete their plan is.
1. They determine the time.
"Today or tomorrow…"
2. They determine the destination.
"We will go to such and such a town…"
3. They determine the duration.
"And spend a year there…"
4. They determine the activity.
"Doing business…"
5. They determine the outcome.
"And making money."
Time.
Place.
Duration.
Activity.
Outcome.
They have accounted for almost everything.
Except the one thing upon which every part of the plan depends:
God.
That is James's concern.

4. Planning Is Not the Sin

We need to be very clear here.
James is **not condemning planning**.
That would contradict the broader wisdom of Scripture.
Responsible people plan.
Farmers plan.
Families plan.
Businesses plan.
Churches plan.
Governments plan.
We plan for retirement.
We save money.
We schedule appointments.
We make travel arrangements.
We prepare for emergencies.
We develop goals.
There is nothing inherently unspiritual about any of that.
In fact, refusing to plan can sometimes be irresponsibility disguised as faith.
The issue is not whether we plan.
The issue is **what we believe about our plans**.

5. Planning and Presumption

There is a significant difference between planning and presumption.
Planning says:
"This is what I intend to do."
Presumption says:
"This is what will happen."
Planning recognizes responsibility.
Presumption assumes control.
Planning prepares for tomorrow.
Presumption believes tomorrow belongs to us.
That is the line James is drawing.
These merchants have moved beyond:
"Here is our plan."
Their language has become:
"Here is our future."
And those are not quite the same thing.

6. "We Will…"

Listen to the repeated confidence.
We will go.
We will spend a year.

We will do business.
We will make money.
There is nothing wrong with confidence.
But confidence becomes spiritually dangerous when it quietly becomes **self-sufficiency**.
The problem is not the words *we will* themselves.
James is not creating a grammatical rule that Christians must never speak confidently about future plans.
He is exposing the attitude represented by the words.
The future is being discussed as though it were already possessed.

7. The Illusion of Control

Human beings like control.
We create calendars.
Schedules.
Budgets.
Contracts.
Project plans.
Forecasts.
Timelines.
Five-year plans.
There is wisdom in all of those things.
But they can create an illusion.
Because the more carefully we organize tomorrow, the easier it becomes to feel as though we **own tomorrow**.
We do not.
A calendar can tell us where we intend to be next Tuesday.
It cannot guarantee that next Tuesday will unfold according to the calendar.
A business forecast can estimate next year's revenue.
It cannot create next year.
A retirement plan can prepare for twenty years from now.
It cannot promise twenty years.
Planning is useful.
Control is largely an illusion.

8. We Have All Had Plans Change

Most of us do not need a theology book to prove James's point.
We have lived it.
We planned one thing.
Something else happened.
A job ended unexpectedly.
A company reorganized.
A relationship changed.

A diagnosis came.
A family member needed us.
A door we expected to open remained closed.
A door we never noticed suddenly opened.
A move became necessary.
A person entered our life whom we never expected to meet.
And sometimes an event that initially appeared to have destroyed our plan eventually became the very thing that redirected our lives.
Looking backward, we occasionally recognize:
If that had not happened, I would never have been here.
Not every painful circumstance becomes understandable.
Some questions remain unanswered.
But enough unexpected turns occur in an ordinary lifetime to make James's point impossible to deny.
We are very good at making plans.
We are not nearly as good at predicting what God will allow tomorrow to contain.

9. God Is Not an Addition to the Plan

There is another danger here.
We can make all our decisions and then invite God into the process at the end.
We determine what we want.
Where we want to go.
How we intend to get there.
What outcome we expect.
Then we pray:
"Lord, bless this."
But there is a significant difference between asking God to **bless our plan** and asking God to **guide our planning**.
One says:
"Here is what I have decided."
The other says:
"Lord, help me decide faithfully."
The first leaves God a ceremonial role.
The second acknowledges His lordship.

10. Faith Does Not Mean Waiting for a Sign Before Every Decision

We should also avoid taking James too far in the other direction.
James is not teaching that Christians must receive some unmistakable supernatural sign before making ordinary decisions.
Should I take this job?

Should I move?
Should I start this business?
Should I pursue this opportunity?
Sometimes we pray and receive no dramatic answer.
Then wisdom must do its work.
We gather information.
Seek counsel.
Consider our responsibilities.
Examine our motives.
Look at the opportunities before us.
Pray.
And make the best faithful decision we can.
Trusting God does not eliminate decision-making.
It changes the **posture in which decisions are made**.
We decide humbly.

11. Faithful Planning Leaves Room for God to Say No

Perhaps this is where planning becomes genuinely difficult.
Most of us are happy to ask God to guide our plans when we believe He will guide them where we already want to go.
The harder prayer is:
"Lord, if this is not right, close the door."
Because He might.
And sometimes He does.
A genuinely surrendered plan gives God permission—not that He needs our permission—to redirect us.
That requires humility.
It also requires trust.
"Lord, this is what I believe I should do. I will prepare carefully and walk toward it faithfully. But if You redirect me, help me trust You enough to follow."
That is planning without presumption.

12. This Connects Directly to Verse 10

James has not really changed subjects.
Verse 10 said:
"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord."
Verse 13 shows us another place where humility must become practical.
Our calendars.
Our careers.
Our business plans.
Our ambitions.

Our expectations about the future.
Humility is not merely kneeling during prayer.
It is learning to write tomorrow's plans with an open hand.
The proud heart says:
“This is what will happen.”
The humble heart says:
“This is what I intend, Lord—but You are God.”

13. There Is Nothing Wrong with Making Money

James's reference to **“making money”** also deserves a brief clarification.
James has strong things to say about wealth elsewhere in his letter, and chapter 5 will become particularly severe.
But James does not say here that making a profit is itself sinful.
The merchants' problem is not that they expect their business to succeed.
The problem is their assumption that success is theirs to command.
Money can create a particularly powerful illusion of independence.
Enough money can make us feel insulated from uncertainty.
We can buy insurance.
Build savings.
Diversify investments.
Purchase security.
Those may all be wise things to do.
But money cannot purchase sovereignty.
Eventually every human being encounters something that cannot be controlled by a bank account.
James wants us to know where our security ultimately rests **before that day arrives**.

14. The Missing Sentence

Perhaps the easiest way to understand verse 13 is to notice what the merchants did **not** say.
There is nothing wrong with:
“Tomorrow we plan to go to another town, remain there for a year, conduct business, and hopefully make a profit.”
The missing sentence is:
“If God permits.”
Verse 15 will supply it.
And James is not primarily interested in making us attach those three words mechanically to every future statement.
He wants them written into the **heart**.
The faithful Christian may never audibly say:
“Lord willing”

after every plan.
But somewhere beneath every plan lives the recognition:
“My life and my future remain in God's hands.”

Pastoral Reflection

We make plans because we must.
A life without planning would quickly become chaotic.
There is nothing wrong with looking toward tomorrow.
But perhaps James wants us to recognize how easily responsible planning becomes assumed control.
We can begin with:
“This is what I hope to do.”
And somewhere along the way it becomes:
“This is how my life is going to happen.”
Then when something changes, we are not merely disappointed.
We are devastated.
Sometimes even angry with God.
“This wasn't supposed to happen.”
Perhaps not according to our plan.
But our plan was never a promise.
There can be enormous peace in learning to say:
“Lord, I will plan carefully. I will work faithfully. I will use the wisdom You have given me. But I will not confuse my plans with Your promises.”
That is not uncertainty without hope.
It is uncertainty held inside trust.
We do not know tomorrow.
But we know the One who will already be there when tomorrow arrives.

Something Worth Pondering

The merchants in James 4:13 made a very good plan.
Their mistake was not planning too much.
It was **remembering God too little**.
Perhaps the danger for us is similar.
Our calendars can be full.
Our goals can be sensible.
Our finances can be organized.
Our careers can be progressing.
Our retirement can be planned.
Our projects can be scheduled months in advance.
And somewhere inside all that responsible planning, we can quietly begin living as though tomorrow were ours.
James interrupts:
“Go to now…”

Remember who you are.
Remember who God is.
Make the plan.
Do the work.
Prepare wisely.
But leave enough room in your heart for God to rewrite the itinerary.

Ask Yourself This

When I look at the plans I have made for my future, am I holding them as faithful intentions placed before God—or have I quietly begun treating them as guarantees; and if God closes a door, changes the schedule, or leads me somewhere I never expected to go, will I trust Him enough to let Him rewrite the plan?

A Closer Look

James 4:14 — What Is Your Life

“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”
— James 4:14, KJV
James has just listened to the merchants describe their plans:
Today or tomorrow.
Such and such a town.
One year.
Do business.
Make money.
Everything sounds settled.
Then James introduces one word that brings their certainty crashing back to reality:
“Yet…”
You have planned tomorrow in remarkable detail.
Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring.
James is not criticizing their ability to plan.
He is challenging their ability to **know**.
And those are very different things.
We can plan for tomorrow.
We simply cannot know tomorrow.

1. “You Do Not Even Know…”

James begins with a limitation shared by every human being.
We do not know the future.
Education does not change that.
Experience does not change it.
Money does not change it.
Technology does not change it.
We may become better at predicting certain things.
We can study patterns.
Analyze data.
Calculate probabilities.
Forecast weather.
Estimate markets.
Assess risk.
Project revenue.
Plan careers.
But prediction is not knowledge.

No matter how sophisticated our tools become, tomorrow retains the ability to surprise us.
James's merchants speak with certainty about something they can only anticipate.
That is the problem.

2. “What Tomorrow Will Bring”

Most of us know this intellectually.
Very few of us consistently live as though it were true.
We put something on next month's calendar and begin thinking of it almost as though it has already happened.
We schedule next year's vacation.
Plan retirement.
Accept a new position.
Begin a project.
Purchase a house.
Start a business.
Make plans for our children.
There is nothing wrong with any of those things.
But occasionally life reminds us how tentative every calendar really is.
A telephone call.
A doctor's appointment.
A company announcement.
An accident.
An unexpected opportunity.
A conversation we never expected to have.
One moment can divide life into:
before
and
after.
Sometimes the change is painful.
Sometimes wonderful.
Sometimes both.
James says:
Remember that when you speak about tomorrow.

3. Uncertainty Is Not the Same as Fear

There is an important pastoral distinction here.
James is not saying:
“Tomorrow is uncertain, so be afraid.”
Christian faith does not require us to live anxiously because something unexpected might happen.
In fact, the opposite should be true.

If tomorrow ultimately rested upon our ability to predict and control it, we would have good reason to be terrified.
But James is moving toward:
"If the Lord will…"
Our lack of knowledge is held within **God's knowledge**.
I do not know what tomorrow contains.
But tomorrow is not unknown to God.
That does not answer every question about why things happen.
It does mean uncertainty does not have to become despair.

4. "What Is Your Life?"

Then James asks a question that stops us in our tracks.
"What is your life?"
That is much larger than the merchants' business plan.
Suddenly James is no longer talking merely about commerce.
He is talking about existence.
What is your life?
We could answer that question in many ways.
Our lives contain relationships.
Work.
Family.
Memories.
Accomplishments.
Failures.
Joy.
Grief.
Faith.
Love.
Service.
But James is not asking about life's content.
He is asking about its **duration**.
How secure is this life upon which all those plans depend?
His answer is unforgettable.

5. "It is even a vapour"

"For it is even a vapour…"
The Greek word is *atmis* (ἀτμίς).
It refers to **mist, vapor, or something like breath that appears briefly and disappears**.
Picture the mist lying across a field early in the morning.
It is there.
Visible.
Real.
Then the sun rises.

And soon it is gone.
Or imagine your breath on a cold morning.
For a moment you can see it.
Then it disappears into the air.
James says:
That is your life.
Not meaningless.
Not worthless.
Not insignificant.
Brief.
Those are very different things.

6. Brief Does Not Mean Unimportant

This distinction matters enormously.
Someone could read James and conclude:
"If life is only a mist, then nothing really matters."
James reaches precisely the opposite conclusion.
Because life is brief, **what we do with it matters tremendously**.
A flower may bloom for only a short season.
That does not make the flower meaningless.
A beautiful piece of music eventually ends.
That does not make the music worthless.
A conversation may last ten minutes and change someone's life.
Its brevity does not diminish its significance.
Human life is precious not because it lasts forever in its present form.
It is precious because it is **given by God and entrusted to us for a time**.

7. We Live as Though There Will Always Be More Time

Perhaps James's image confronts one of our most persistent assumptions:
There will always be more time.
I'll do it later.
I'll call them tomorrow.
I'll visit someday.
I'll apologize when things settle down.
I'll forgive eventually.
I'll spend more time with the family after this busy season.
I'll serve when I have fewer responsibilities.
I'll get serious about my relationship with God when life becomes less complicated.
I'll pursue that calling someday.
I'll tell them I love them next time.
James says:

You are a mist.
That is not intended to make us panic.
It is intended to make us **pay attention**.

8. The Gift of Today

There is something strangely liberating in James's teaching.
We cannot live tomorrow today.
We cannot repair yesterday today.
But we can faithfully live **today**.
Today we can pray.
Today we can forgive.
Today we can encourage someone.
Today we can tell the truth.
Today we can serve.
Today we can make the telephone call.
Today we can say:
"I'm sorry."
Today we can say:
"I love you."
Today we can help someone whose need God has placed in front of us.
Perhaps wisdom is not possessing tomorrow.
Perhaps wisdom is recognizing the gift of **today**.

9. James Has Said This Before

James's image of the mist belongs to a theme we have already encountered in this letter.
In chapter 1, he compared human prosperity with a flower in the field.
The sun rises.
The flower withers.
Its beauty disappears.
James has consistently reminded his readers that the things human beings treat as permanent are often remarkably temporary.
Wealth.
Status.
Success.
Life itself.
That is not pessimism.
It is perspective.
If temporary things become ultimate things, we will eventually lose everything upon which we built our identity.
James wants us anchored in something—or rather **Someone**—who does not vanish with the mist.

10. Mortality Is the Great Equalizer

The merchants of verse 13 expect to make money.
Perhaps they will.
Perhaps they will become very wealthy.
But wealth cannot solve the problem James raises in verse 14.
The wealthy person does not receive a longer guarantee on tomorrow than the poor person.
The powerful person cannot command another sunrise.
The successful person cannot negotiate another year.
Eventually every title disappears from the business card.
Every career reaches its final day.
Every possession passes to someone else.
Every human being discovers the truth James states in a single image:
We are a mist.
That realization can humble us.
But it can also free us.

11. If Life Is Brief, People Become More Important

Once we realize that time is limited, priorities begin to change.
Winning every argument becomes less important.
Holding grudges becomes more expensive.
Keeping score becomes exhausting.
Possessions begin to look different.
Status begins to look different.
The people sitting around the table begin to matter more.
The opportunity to help someone begins to matter more.
The chance to say a kind word begins to matter more.
Perhaps remembering that life is a mist does not make us withdraw from life.
Perhaps it teaches us **how deeply to live it**.

12. We Do Not Have to Understand Everything

There are times when life's uncertainty is painful.
Plans collapse.
Doors close.
Things happen that make no sense.
We may look back years later and understand why some road changed.
There may even come a moment when we can say:
“That's why that happened.”
But not always.
Some questions remain unanswered.
Some losses never become neatly explainable.

Some prayers leave us wondering.
Faith does not require us to manufacture an explanation God has not given.
Sometimes the most faithful words are:
“I don't know why this happened.”
And then:
“But I still trust God.”
James does not tell us that we must understand tomorrow.
He tells us to remember **who holds it**.

13. The Mist Is Still in God's Hands

There is a danger in preaching about life's brevity without grace.
It can become frightening.
You could die tomorrow.
That statement may be true, but fear is not James's destination.
Remember the context.
“But he giveth more grace.”
“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”
Now:
“It is even a vapour.”
The mist is not abandoned.
The mist belongs to God.
Our lives are temporary.
His faithfulness is not.
That is where the Christian finds peace.

Pastoral Reflection

Anyone who has lived very long eventually looks backward and wonders where the years went.
Events that once seemed recent suddenly happened twenty years ago.
Children grow up.
Careers that once seemed endless approach retirement.
People who shaped our lives become memories.
We look in the mirror and discover that time has been moving even when we were too busy to notice.
James does not tell us this to make us melancholy.
He tells us so that we will not waste the gift.
There are people worth loving now.
There is work worth doing now.
There are words worth saying now.
There are wrongs worth making right now.
There is grace worth receiving now.
There is a God worth drawing near to now.

We cannot store today and use it later.
Once today is gone, it becomes yesterday.
So perhaps the question is not:
“How much time do I have left?”
None of us knows.
Perhaps the better question is:
“What will I do faithfully with the time God has given me today?”

Something Worth Pondering

“What is your life?”
James answers:
“It is even a vapour.”
At first that sounds like a statement about death.
Perhaps it is equally a statement about **living**.
If the mist lasts only a little while, then notice the sunrise.
Love the people God has placed beside you.
Do the work He has placed before you.
Forgive sooner.
Give more freely.
Say the words that need saying.
Open the door you are able to open for someone else.
Stop waiting for the mythical day when everything will finally be settled and you can begin living faithfully.
Because James has already told us the truth:
We do not possess tomorrow.
But by God's grace,
we have today.

Ask Yourself This

If I truly believed James when he says that my life is “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes,” what would suddenly matter less, what would matter more, and what good thing that I keep postponing until someday should I begin doing while God has given me today?

A Closer Look

James 4:15 — If the Lord Will

"For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that."
— James 4:15, KJV
James has exposed two things we cannot control.
We do not know what tomorrow will bring.
And we do not know how long our lives will last.
Now he tells us how people of faith should respond to those realities:
"If the Lord will…"
Those few words completely change the posture of the person making the plan.
The merchants of verse 13 said:
"We will go."
"We will spend a year."
"We will do business."
"We will make money."
James does not tell them to stop planning.
He tells them to put two words in front of the entire plan:
"If the Lord…"
Suddenly the plan remains—but the ownership changes.

1. "Instead You Ought to Say…"

James is correcting the attitude of verse 13.
The Greek expression translated **"instead you ought to say"** carries the sense of what should characterize their thinking and speaking in place of their earlier presumption.
They had spoken as though tomorrow were settled.
James says:
Speak differently.
But even more importantly,
think differently.
This is not primarily a lesson in Christian vocabulary.
James is not establishing a rule that every sentence about the future must end with:
"Lord willing."
A person can say *"Lord willing"* after every plan and still be completely determined to have his or her own way.
The words can become religious punctuation.
James is after something deeper.
He wants the words to describe the **posture of the heart**.

2. “If the Lord will…”

Here is the great difference between presumption and faith.
Presumption says:
“This is what I am going to do.”
Faith says:
“This is what I intend to do, if the Lord permits.”
That does not mean the Christian becomes indecisive.
It does not mean we cannot make commitments.
It does not mean we cannot confidently pursue a goal.
It means that beneath every plan lies a deeper confession:
God is Lord, and I am not.
That takes us directly back to verse 10:
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord.”
Verse 15 is what humility looks like when it opens the calendar.

3. “We Will Live…”

This may be the most easily overlooked part of the entire verse.
James does not say merely:
“If the Lord will, we will do this or that.”
He says:
“If the Lord will, we will live…”
Before James places the business plan under God's sovereignty, he places **life itself** there.
That changes everything.
The merchants were assuming that they could travel tomorrow, remain somewhere for a year, conduct business, and make money.
James has just reminded them:
You are a mist.
Now he says:
Before you assume what you will accomplish tomorrow, remember that your very presence in tomorrow is itself a gift.
We usually think of life as the one thing we already possess while we decide what to do with it.
James treats life differently.
Life itself is received.
Every morning we awaken to another day we did not create.
Every heartbeat occurs without our commanding it.
Every breath is one we could not guarantee yesterday.
Before there can be:
“I will work…”
there must first be:
“I will live.”
And James places even that beneath:

“If the Lord will.”

4. This Is Not Fatalism

This verse can be misunderstood.
James is not teaching fatalism.
Fatalism says:
“Whatever is going to happen will happen, so there is little point in doing anything.”
James has spent nearly four chapters arguing against precisely that kind of passive faith.
This is the man who told us:
“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.”
This is the man who said:
“Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”
James is not going to reach chapter 4 and suddenly tell Christians to sit down and wait for God to do everything.
The merchants can still travel.
They can still conduct business.
They can still make plans.
They can still work hard.
They can still hope for success.
The difference is that they do all of it while recognizing:
The outcome does not finally belong to them.

5. Sovereignty Does Not Cancel Responsibility

There are two opposite errors we can make.
One says:
“Everything depends upon me.”
That is arrogance.
The other says:
“Everything depends upon God, so nothing depends upon me.”
That is irresponsibility.
James leaves room for neither.
Faithful living says:
I will plan carefully.
I will work diligently.
I will use wisdom.
I will fulfill my responsibilities.
I will pursue the opportunities before me.
And after doing everything that faithfully belongs to me, I will remember:
I am not God.
That is a remarkably healthy way to live.

6. The Open Hand

Perhaps the best picture of verse 15 is an **open hand**.
We make plans.
We place them before God.
But we do not close our fist around them.
"Lord, this is what I hope to do."
"This is the direction I believe I should go."
"This is the opportunity before me."
"This is what seems wise."
Then comes the difficult part:
"But I leave it in Your hands."
That is not weakness.
That is trust.
A clenched hand says:
"God, this must happen."
An open hand says:
"God, this is what I desire. But I trust You with what happens."

7. When God Changes the Plan

That sounds wonderful until God actually changes the plan.
Then verse 15 becomes much harder.
It is easy to say:
"If the Lord will…"
when everything happens exactly as we hoped.
The real test comes when the answer appears to be:
No.
Or:
Not now.
Or perhaps:
Not this way.
A job disappears.
A promotion goes to someone else.
A relationship changes.
A move becomes necessary.
A carefully planned ministry takes an unexpected turn.
A door closes that we were certain would open.
Another door opens that we had never considered.
Those moments reveal whether **"If the Lord will"** was merely something we said or something we actually believed.

8. Sometimes We Understand Later

There are occasions when we can look backward and see something we could not possibly have seen while we were living through it.

A disappointment redirected us.
A closed door moved us somewhere else.
A relationship introduced us to another person.
An unwanted change placed us in circumstances that eventually became important.
Years later we may say:
“Now I understand why that happened.”
Those moments can strengthen faith.
But we need to be careful.
Not every painful experience comes with an explanation.
Not every loss eventually makes sense to us.
Faith does not require us to invent God's reasons.
Sometimes we can say:
“Now I see.”
And sometimes the most truthful confession remains:
“I still don't know why.”
Verse 15 does not promise that God will explain every change in our plans.
It asks whether we will trust Him even when He does not.

9. “And Do This or That”

I love the almost casual way James finishes the sentence.
“…and do this or that.”
Compare that with verse 13.
There the merchants were very specific.
Town.
Year.
Business.
Profit.
James reduces all that certainty to:
“this or that.”
Perhaps that is deliberate.
From our perspective, the details can seem enormous.
From the perspective of God's sovereignty, they are simply the various things we may be given opportunity to do.
Today it may be this.
Tomorrow it may be that.
The particular assignment can change.
The calling to faithfulness does not.

10. “Lord Willing” Is More Than a Phrase

Many Christians have developed the habit of saying:
“Lord willing.”
There is something beautiful about that when it is sincere.

“I'll see you next week, Lord willing.”
“We hope to travel next month, Lord willing.”
“We'll finish the project tomorrow, Lord willing.”
But James would surely be more interested in the conviction than the expression.
We can say the words without surrendering anything.
The deeper prayer is:
“Lord, You retain the right to change this.”
Now we are getting close to what James means.
That prayer costs something.
Because it acknowledges that God's wisdom may lead somewhere our plans did not.

11. Jesus Prayed This Way

The deepest example of surrendered desire is Jesus in Gethsemane.
Jesus did not pretend He had no desire.
He expressed it.
Yet His prayer moved toward:
“Not what I want but what you want.”
That is not identical to James's situation, but the posture is unmistakably related.
Faith does not require pretending we have no preferences.
We can tell God exactly what we hope will happen.
We can pray passionately for it.
We can work toward it.
And still say:
“Your will above mine.”
Christian surrender is not the absence of desire.
It is the willingness to place desire beneath God.

12. Providence Is Often Easier to See Looking Backward

There is another reason James's teaching matters.
We usually experience God's providence **forward in uncertainty and backward with greater perspective**.
Going forward, we often see only the next step.
Looking backward, we sometimes see connections.
That person introduced us to another person.
That unexpected job led somewhere else.
That move changed the direction of a family.
That conversation opened an opportunity.
That disappointment forced us to reconsider something we never would have questioned otherwise.

But while those events were happening, we could not see the whole path.
Faith does not mean seeing the entire road.
Sometimes faith simply means trusting God enough to take the next faithful step.

13. Make Plans in Pencil

Perhaps verse 15 can be summarized with a simple picture:
Make plans in pencil.
Plan carefully.
Write things on the calendar.
Set goals.
Prepare.
Save.
Work.
Dream.
Build.
But hand God the eraser.
Not because plans are foolish.
But because **God sees what we cannot**.
The Christian does not approach tomorrow saying:
“Nothing matters because God is sovereign.”
Nor:
“Everything depends upon me.”
Instead:
“Lord, here is my plan. Help me pursue it faithfully—and if You change it, help me follow.”

Pastoral Reflection

There is a peculiar peace that comes when we finally realize that we are responsible for faithfulness but not sovereignty.
We spend enormous amounts of energy trying to control outcomes that were never ours to control.
We can prepare for the interview.
We cannot make someone hire us.
We can raise our children faithfully.
We cannot write every chapter of their lives.
We can care for our health.
We cannot guarantee tomorrow.
We can serve a church faithfully.
We cannot control every response.
We can open a door for someone.
We cannot determine whether that door becomes an opportunity.
And perhaps that is where James's teaching becomes wonderfully freeing.
Do what faithfulness requires of you.

Then release what only God can control.
Sometimes faith means acting.
Sometimes faith means waiting.
And sometimes faith means acting faithfully and then waiting to see what God does with it.

Something Worth Pondering

There is a profound difference between saying:
"God, please bless what I have decided."
and:
"God, help me discover what faithfulness requires, and then give me the courage to do it."
The first prayer may leave us firmly in control.
The second opens our hands.
James does not ask us to stop making plans.
He asks us to stop treating our plans as promises.
So perhaps the Christian approach to tomorrow is remarkably simple:
Make the plan.
Do the work.
Take the next faithful step.
Leave the outcome with God.
Or, as James says:
"If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that."

Ask Yourself This

When I say that I want God's will for my life, do I truly mean that He is free to redirect my plans, close a door I wanted opened, open one I never expected, or change the destination altogether—and can I faithfully do what is mine to do today while trusting Him with everything that belongs to tomorrow?

A Closer Look

James 4:16 — Boasting About Tomorrow

“But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.”
— James 4:16, KJV

James has taken us through a remarkably logical progression.
In verse 13, people confidently describe what they are going to do tomorrow.
In verse 14, James reminds them that they do not even know what tomorrow will bring.
In verse 15, he gives them the proper posture:
“If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”
Now, in verse 16, James tells us what is spiritually wrong with the alternative.
“Ye rejoice in your boastings.”
Those are strong words.
And perhaps what makes them especially uncomfortable is that the people James describes may not have thought of themselves as arrogant at all.
They were simply making plans.
But James sees something beneath the plans.
He sees people behaving as though the future belongs to them.

1. “As It Is…”

James begins:
“As it is…”
In other words:
Instead of living as I have just described…
Instead of acknowledging God's sovereignty…
Instead of recognizing the uncertainty of tomorrow…
Instead of remembering that life itself is a mist…
Instead of saying:
“If the Lord will…”
this is what you are actually doing:
“Ye rejoice in your boastings.”
James has moved from their words to their hearts.
Verse 13 showed us what they **said**.
Verse 16 tells us what their words **revealed**.
That is something James has done throughout this letter.
He listens to what comes out of us because it often exposes what is happening within us.

2. “You Boast…”

The word translated **“boast”** comes from the Greek *kauchaomai* (καυχάομαι), a word associated with boasting, glorying, or taking pride in something.

Boasting is not always wrong in Scripture.

Paul can speak of boasting in the Lord or boasting in the cross of Christ.

The question is:

What are we boasting about?

If our confidence rests in God, the attention ultimately points toward Him.

But the boasting James condemns points toward ourselves.

Our plans.

Our ability.

Our success.

Our control.

The merchants of verse 13 are not saying:

“Look how wonderful we are!”

Their boasting is subtler than that.

They speak about tomorrow as though their ability to manage it is unquestioned.

And James calls that boasting.

3. “In Your Arrogance”

The Greek word translated **“arrogance”** is *alazoneia* (ἀλαζονεία).

It carries the idea of **pretentiousness, boastful self-confidence, or claiming more certainty or ability than one actually possesses**.

That fits James's merchants perfectly.

They speak confidently about things they cannot guarantee.

Tomorrow.

Travel.

A year of life.

Business success.

Profit.

They possess plans.

But they speak as though they possess outcomes.

That is *alazoneia*.

And suddenly James's warning reaches far beyond ancient merchants.

4. Arrogance Does Not Always Sound Arrogant

When we hear the word **arrogance**, we may picture someone loud, boastful, and obviously impressed with himself.

But James shows us a quieter form of arrogance.

It may sound perfectly respectable.

“I've got everything planned.”

“This is where I'll be in five years.”
“This investment will take care of retirement.”
“This project is going to succeed.”
“My career is secure.”
“Once I accomplish this, everything will be fine.”
None of those statements necessarily reveals arrogance.
The question is what lies beneath them.
Have we confused preparation with control?
Have we confused probability with certainty?
Have we confused God's gifts with our accomplishments?
Have we quietly removed God from the equation?
Arrogance does not always stand on a stage and brag.
Sometimes arrogance simply lives as though **God were unnecessary**.

5. Practical Atheism

There is a form of unbelief that does not require us to deny God with our mouths.
We may affirm every line of the creed.
Attend worship.
Read Scripture.
Pray.
Believe completely that God exists.
And still organize large portions of our lives as though He were irrelevant.
Our theology says:
“God is sovereign.”
Our calendar says:
“I've got this.”
Our theology says:
“Every good gift comes from God.”
Our accomplishments say:
“Look what I built.”
Our theology says:
“My life belongs to God.”
Our planning says:
“My future belongs to me.”
We might call that **practical atheism**.
Not denying God intellectually.
Simply living as though He does not need to be consulted.
James will not allow that contradiction to remain comfortable.

6. The Self-Made Person

Our culture admires the idea of the **self-made person**.
We understand what the expression means.

Someone worked hard.
Took risks.
Made sacrifices.
Overcame difficulties.
Built something valuable.
There is nothing wrong with recognizing hard work.
James certainly does not teach laziness.
But from a Christian perspective, no one is entirely self-made.
Who gave us the mind with which we think?
Who gave us the body with which we work?
Who gave us the opportunities we encountered?
Who placed certain people along our path?
Who gave us another morning?
Who allowed circumstances we could never control to come together?
Hard work matters.
Choices matter.
Discipline matters.
Preparation matters.
But none of us created the raw materials from which our lives were built.
Humility allows us to say both:
“I worked very hard for this.”
and
“I could not have done it apart from gifts and opportunities I did not create.”
Those statements do not contradict each other.
Together they tell the truth.

7. Success Can Make This Harder to See

Failure often reminds us how little we control.
Success can make us forget.
When our plans repeatedly work, it becomes easy to believe that they worked entirely because **we made them work**.
We made the right decisions.
We developed the right strategy.
We knew the right people.
We worked harder.
We were smarter.
Perhaps all those things contributed.
But success has a peculiar spiritual danger.
Yesterday's success can convince us that tomorrow is predictable.
Eventually:
“God has blessed my work”
quietly becomes:

“I know how to make this work.”
And then:
“I know what tomorrow will bring.”
James says:
Be careful.

8. Gratitude Is the Antidote to Arrogance

One of the healthiest responses to James 4:16 is gratitude.
Gratitude remembers where gifts come from.
Instead of:
“Look what I accomplished.”
gratitude says:
“Thank You, Lord, for allowing me to accomplish this.”
Instead of:
“I earned everything I have.”
gratitude recognizes the people, opportunities, abilities, circumstances, and grace that made achievement possible.
Gratitude does not require us to deny our own effort.
It simply refuses to pretend our effort was the only thing involved.
The grateful heart can celebrate success without worshiping itself.

9. “All Such Boasting Is Evil”

James leaves little room for ambiguity.
“All such boasting is evil.”
That sounds severe.
Why would confidence about tomorrow deserve the word **evil**?
Because ultimately this kind of boasting reaches for something that belongs to God.
Sovereignty.
It treats God's world as though we control it.
It treats God's gifts as though we created them.
It treats God's tomorrow as though we own it.
And it treats God's will as though it were merely incidental to ours.
The issue is larger than poor planning etiquette.
It is a question of **who is Lord**.

10. The Connection to the Beginning of Chapter 4

Notice how remarkably consistent James has been throughout this chapter.
At the beginning, people fought because they wanted things.
Their desires became demands.
Then James confronted friendship with the world.
Then pride.

Then he said:
“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”
Then:
“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord.”
Then he warned against placing ourselves in God's position as Judge.
Now he warns against placing ourselves in God's position as ruler of tomorrow.
It is the same spiritual problem appearing in different clothing.
Pride.
In verses 11–12:
I assume God's chair as Judge.
In verses 13–16:
I assume God's authority over tomorrow.
James keeps returning us to the same confession:
There is a God.
And I am not Him.

11. Humility Does Not Mean Thinking Less of Our Abilities

There is another mistake we should avoid.
Christian humility does not require pretending we are incapable.
If you are good at something, you do not honor God by pretending you are not.
If you have experience, use it.
If you have knowledge, apply it.
If you have leadership ability, lead.
If you have resources, steward them.
If you have developed expertise through decades of work, there is nothing arrogant about acknowledging that expertise.
The question is whether ability becomes **self-sufficiency**.
Humility does not say:
“I can do nothing.”
Humility says:
“Whatever I can do, I will do faithfully, remembering where my abilities ultimately came from.”
That is very different.

12. Confidence and Humility Can Live Together

Sometimes Christians confuse humility with uncertainty.
We imagine that humble people must constantly qualify everything they say.
Perhaps:

“Well, I'm probably wrong…”
“I really don't know anything…”
“I'm not very good at this…”
That is not necessarily humility.
Sometimes it is simply inaccurate.
James does not condemn confidence.
He condemns **arrogance**.
There is a healthy Christian confidence that says:
“I have prepared carefully. I believe this is the right course. I intend to move forward.”
And then adds, whether aloud or within the heart:
“But Lord, I remain teachable, redirectable, and dependent upon You.”
That is strong confidence with open hands.

13. The Difference Is Ownership

Perhaps the difference between arrogance and humility can be reduced to one question:
Who owns the outcome?
I can own my preparation.
I can own my effort.
I can own my integrity.
I can own whether I keep my word.
I can own whether I treat people fairly.
I can own whether I take the next faithful step.
But I cannot own tomorrow.
And I cannot guarantee the outcome.
When we try to carry responsibility for things God never placed under our control, we either become arrogant when things go well or crushed when they do not.
James offers another way.
Faithfulness belongs to us.
The future belongs to God.

Pastoral Reflection

There is something wonderfully freeing about admitting that we are not sovereign.
At first, surrender can feel like losing control.
Eventually we may discover that we never had the control we were afraid of losing.
We had responsibility.
We had choices.
We had opportunities.
We had influence.

But control?
Much less than we imagined.
Perhaps that is why humility can bring peace.
I do not have to guarantee tomorrow.
I only have to be faithful today.
I do not have to force every door open.
I can knock.
I do not have to make every opportunity succeed.
I can pursue it faithfully.
I do not have to control what another person decides.
I can treat that person faithfully.
I do not have to know where every road leads.
I can take the next faithful step.
And when something good comes from those efforts, I can receive it with gratitude rather than boasting.
"Thank You, Lord."
Three simple words can keep success from becoming arrogance.

Something Worth Pondering

Perhaps one of the quietest forms of pride is believing that because we are responsible for doing something, we must also be responsible for making it succeed.
James draws a boundary.
There are things God has entrusted to us.
And there are things God has reserved for Himself.
Our task is faithfulness.
God retains sovereignty.
So work hard.
Plan carefully.
Use your experience.
Develop your abilities.
Pursue worthwhile opportunities.
Help people when you can.
Celebrate success when it comes.
But never forget the difference between:
"This is what I did."
and:
"I did this entirely by myself."
One is an honest statement of responsibility.
The other forgets grace.

Ask Yourself This

When my plans succeed, do I receive that success with gratitude and recognize the abilities, opportunities, people, circumstances, and grace that made it possible—or do I quietly begin believing that because I worked hard and planned well, I have somehow earned the right to control what happens next?

A Closer Look

James 4:17 — Knowing to Do Good

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”
— James 4:17, KJV
James could have ended this section with verse 16.
He has already made his point.
Do not boast about tomorrow.
Do not presume that your plans guarantee the future.
Remember that life is a mist.
Live beneath the sovereignty of God.
Say:
“If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”
That would have been a perfectly reasonable conclusion.
But James adds one more sentence.
And with that sentence, he changes the direction of the entire passage.
“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”
Suddenly James is no longer talking only about what we **plan to do tomorrow**.
He is asking what we already **know we should do today**.

1. “Anyone, Then…”

That little word **“then”** matters.
James is connecting verse 17 with everything he has just said.
You do not know what tomorrow will bring.
Your life is a mist.
You should live saying:
“If the Lord will…”
Therefore—
if there is something good that you already know you should do,
why are you assuming that tomorrow will give you another opportunity to do it?
That makes verse 17 much more than a general statement about sin.
It is the conclusion to James's sermon about tomorrow.
And it gives the passage an unexpected urgency.

2. We Usually Think of Sin as Something We Do

Most of us instinctively think about sin in terms of actions.
Things we should **not** do.

Do not lie.
Do not steal.
Do not commit adultery.
Do not murder.
Do not bear false witness.
Do not mistreat another person.
Those are sins of **commission**—things we do that violate God's will.
But James reminds us of another category.
The things we should have done—
but did not.
These are commonly called sins of **omission**.
James says that faithfulness is not measured only by the evil we avoid.
It is also measured by the good we refuse, neglect, or postpone.
That is much more searching.

3. Christianity Is More Than "Not Doing Bad Things"

It is possible to construct a version of Christian living almost entirely around avoidance.
I didn't hurt anyone today.
I didn't steal anything.
I didn't lie.
I didn't lose my temper.
I didn't commit some terrible sin.
Therefore:
I had a pretty good day.
James asks another question:
What good did you know to do?
Did you do it?
That changes the examination considerably.
Perhaps I did not insult the lonely person.
But did I notice him?
Perhaps I did not mistreat the hungry person.
But did I feed her when I had the ability?
Perhaps I did not speak badly about someone.
But did I speak the word of encouragement that person desperately needed?
Perhaps I did not cause the broken relationship.
But did I refuse the opportunity to begin repairing it?
Faith that works cannot be defined merely by the absence of wrongdoing.
It must eventually become the **presence of faithful action**.

4. “Who Knows…”

James places particular emphasis on knowledge.
“Anyone…who knows…”
Knowledge creates responsibility.
Once we know what faithfulness requires, we cannot retreat into ignorance.
That principle has been building throughout this entire letter.
James has taught us what faithful living looks like.
We know we should endure trials faithfully.
We know we should ask God for wisdom.
We know we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.
We know we should care for those in need.
We know we should show no partiality.
We know that faith must produce works.
We know the tongue must be brought under God's control.
We know the difference between earthly wisdom and wisdom from above.
We know we should humble ourselves before God.
We know we should not tear down our neighbor.
And now James says:
You know.
So what will you do with what you know?
That question reaches far beyond verse 17.
It reaches backward through the entire letter.

5. James Has Brought Us Back to Chapter 1

Remember one of the great statements near the beginning of James:
“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”
— James 1:22, KJV
Now, near the end of chapter 4, James returns to the same truth from another direction.
Knowing the right thing is not enough.
Hearing the right thing is not enough.
Agreeing with the right thing is not enough.
Studying the right thing is not enough.
Even teaching the right thing is not enough.
Eventually the Word asks something of us.
Do it.
This is why the title **Faith That Works** fits James so naturally.
James refuses to allow faith to remain theoretical.

6. The Danger of "Someday"

Verse 17 becomes especially powerful when we keep it connected to the discussion about tomorrow.

There is a word that can become one of the greatest enemies of faithful living:

Someday.

Someday I'll apologize.
Someday I'll forgive.
Someday I'll spend more time with my family.
Someday I'll reconcile with that person.
Someday I'll become more generous.
Someday I'll volunteer.
Someday I'll make that telephone call.
Someday I'll tell that person how much they meant to me.
Someday I'll deal with that habit.
Someday I'll get serious about prayer.
Someday I'll follow where I believe God has been leading me.
Someday.

James has just told us something uncomfortable about someday.

Someday is not ours.

Today is the day we have actually been given.

7. When Delay Becomes Disobedience

Not every delay is sinful.

Wisdom sometimes tells us to wait.

There are conversations that should occur at the right time.

Decisions that require more information.

Actions that require preparation.

Sometimes patience itself is obedience.

James is not commanding impulsiveness.

His statement includes an important qualification:

"who knows the right thing to do…"

The issue is not uncertainty about what should be done.

The issue is knowing—and refusing.

Sometimes we say:

"I'm praying about it."

And that may be exactly what we should be doing.

But occasionally, if we are truthful, we are not waiting for God's direction.

We already know.

We are waiting for a more convenient answer.

There comes a point when continued delay is no longer discernment.

It becomes disobedience.

8. The Good We Can Actually Do

We should also keep this verse from becoming an unbearable burden.
There is more good in the world than any one person can possibly accomplish.
We cannot help everyone.
We cannot solve every problem.
We cannot answer every need.
We cannot carry every burden.
James does not say:
“Anyone who fails to do every possible good thing commits sin.”
The verse speaks about the good we **know** to do.
That requires wisdom.
What responsibility has God actually placed before me?
What opportunity is genuinely mine?
What relationship has been entrusted to me?
What need am I actually capable of addressing?
We are not called to be omnipotent.
We are called to be **faithful**.

9. Sometimes the Good Is Very Small

We may imagine that doing good requires something dramatic.
Usually it does not.
Sometimes the good we know to do is remarkably ordinary.
Make the call.
Send the note.
Visit the person.
Listen.
Give someone a ride.
Bring a meal.
Offer encouragement.
Share what we have.
Recommend someone.
Make an introduction.
Speak up when someone is being treated unfairly.
Admit we were wrong.
Say:
“I'm sorry.”
Say:
“I forgive you.”
Say:
“How can I help?”
None of those actions is spectacular.

But James has spent his entire letter teaching us that genuine faith becomes visible precisely in ordinary acts of obedience.

10. Faith Notices the Person in Front of It

James has already given us an example.
In chapter 2 he imagined a brother or sister without adequate clothing or daily food.
Someone says:
“Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill.”
But does nothing to provide what the person needs.
James asks:
“What is the good of that?”
The problem was not lack of theological knowledge.
The need was visible.
The good was known.
The opportunity existed.
But nothing happened.
That is exactly the kind of faith James refuses to accept as complete.
Faith sees the need and asks:
“What can I do?”

11. We Cannot Guarantee the Outcome

Here verse 17 connects beautifully with verse 15.
Sometimes we hesitate to do good because we cannot guarantee what will happen afterward.
What if the person refuses my apology?
What if the application goes nowhere?
What if the introduction doesn't lead to anything?
What if my help isn't enough?
What if I try and fail?
But James has just removed the outcome from our hands.
“If the Lord will…”
Our responsibility is not to guarantee results.
Our responsibility is to do the good we know to do.
That can be tremendously freeing.
I can open the door.
I cannot make someone walk through it.
I can plant.
I cannot command growth.
I can offer help.
I cannot determine how it will be received.
I can speak faithfully.
I cannot control the response.
Faithfulness belongs to me.

The outcome belongs to God.

12. Knowing More Means Being Responsible for More

There is another uncomfortable implication in James's words.
The more we understand God's Word, the less we can plead ignorance.
Bible study is therefore dangerous—in the best possible sense.
Every truth we learn eventually asks:
"What are you going to do with this?"
James never intended his letter merely to make knowledgeable Christians.
He intended to form faithful ones.
That should give every preacher, teacher, and student of Scripture some humility.
The goal is not merely to finish the lesson.
The goal is to allow the lesson to change the life.
Otherwise we can become extraordinarily knowledgeable hearers of the Word who have become very skilled at avoiding the doing.
James warned us about that in chapter 1.
He has not forgotten.

13. Grace Still Comes Before Obedience

We should not forget what James said earlier in this chapter:
"But he giveth more grace."
Verse 17 is not a command to earn God's love by accumulating enough good deeds.
James is not keeping a heavenly scorecard:
Ten good deeds today.
Seven yesterday.
Better try harder tomorrow.
Christian obedience grows from grace.
God's grace does not make doing good unnecessary.
Grace makes faithful obedience possible.
We do not do good so that God might finally love us.
We do good because we belong to the God who has already given us grace.
Grace received becomes grace lived.

14. The Question Is No Longer "What Will I Do Tomorrow?"

That is where James has taken us.
Verse 13 began with people saying:
"Tomorrow we will…"
Verse 17 ends with James asking, in effect:

What do you know you should do now?
That is a remarkable reversal.
We began with elaborate plans for tomorrow.
We end with responsibility today.
Perhaps that is precisely James's point.
Tomorrow belongs to God.
But He has placed something in our hands:
today's opportunity for faithfulness.

Pastoral Reflection

There are things in life we cannot control.
James has made that abundantly clear.
We cannot guarantee tomorrow.
We cannot determine how long we will live.
We cannot guarantee that our plans will succeed.
We cannot control another person's decisions.
We cannot make every door open.
But there is something we can do.
We can be faithful with the opportunity before us.
Sometimes that means something large.
More often it means something quite ordinary.
A conversation.
A kindness.
An apology.
An act of generosity.
A word of encouragement.
A willingness to stand beside someone.
An introduction that might help.
A decision finally made.
A responsibility no longer postponed.
We may never know everything God does with those small acts of faithfulness.
Perhaps we are not supposed to.
Our responsibility is not to write the entire story.
It is to faithfully write the sentence God has placed before us.
And then trust Him with the next one.

Something Worth Pondering

James began this section with people who were certain about tomorrow.
He ends it with something they could actually be certain about:
the good they already knew to do.
Perhaps we spend too much time asking:
“What is God's will for my life?”

when there are moments in which Scripture has already made God's will quite clear.
Love your neighbor.
Tell the truth.
Forgive.
Show mercy.
Care for those in need.
Keep your word.
Humble yourself.
Encourage one another.
Do justice.
Walk faithfully.
And when the opportunity to do those things appears before us, perhaps we do not always need another sign.
Sometimes we simply need to act.
Because faith that remains forever in our intentions has missed the point James has been making from the beginning.
Faith works.

Ask Yourself This

What good thing do I already know I should do but keep postponing until "someday"—and if tomorrow is not mine to command, what is keeping me from doing faithfully today what God has already made clear?