

James 4:1-12

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[0 : 00] Well, please do turn up James chapter 4. We'll be focusing on verses 11 and 12 this morning. I read the wider passage to give us the context from last week.

If we were to boil the letter of James down, if you've been with us over the weeks, this is now the ninth sermon in the series. If you've been with us through that time and we were to boil the letter all the way down to its essence, it would simply be this, the Christian faith is visible.

That is a heart that has been genuinely renewed by God can be seen in the life that it produces. What has been done to us internally by God in terms of transforming our hearts can be seen in a transformed life.

God's people are, James says, doers of the word, not hearers only. And he says there is no alternative. Faith that is professed but that doesn't have any apparent effect on the one who is professing it, James says, chapter 2, verse 26, is dead.

He's absolutely stark on this point. If God has changed your life internally, it is visible externally.

That's one of the big problems that our culture has with Christians.

[1 : 19] The inconsistency between what we say and the way that we act. And James is saying they're absolutely right to think that way. Because that is supposed to be how it works. Real faith is living and living things are by nature, guess what, alive.

And faith is no different. Things that are living get out there. They move. They animate things. And faith is no different.

The problem is, we know, truth is, lots of us keep our Christian faith up in our heads. But this kind of person knows what the faith teaches. May even think great things about God.

May even think lofty, true, wonderfully rich theological things about God. And even in their better moments, they want their life to reflect what they know more closely.

But the pressures of life, the conflicting desires that we all feel in here, that desire, I want to be Christian, but I also want to be well-liked and popular. That desire, I want to be Christian, I also want to be rich and I want to be powerful.

[2 : 24] They conflict. As well as that, the context around us means that our Christianity doesn't venture any further than actually up here. The top two inches stays in our heads.

We have very holy thoughts, but there isn't much holiness in the way that we live. And we've seen that James is writing to people like that.

And he is challenging them and he is exhorting them to change this. And last week, if you were here, he took us to ground zero of where this change will come from. Look back over in the next column, chapter 3, verse 6, he says, Sorry, chapter 4, verse 6, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Ground zero of the changed life is repentance. Cleanse your hands.

Verse 8 of chapter 4, Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Repent of the heart that you have.

[3 : 29] The sinful desires. The sinful behavior. The fact that you say with your mouth that you're Christian and your life doesn't bear that out. James is writing to people like that and he's saying, I'm taking you to ground zero of where this transformation comes from.

It's repentance. However, he knows that any change in our lives comes from a changed heart. But that repentance, that mourning and weeping, if it's sincere, it always leads to action.

It always leads to something happening. The truth is, if we're honest, we don't mind talky Christianity. We can even be quite good at explaining the truthful Christianity.

And we also don't mind, I'll get to it later, Christianity. Or, I really must get round to it, faith. But those versions of the faith, James has been at pains to assist.

If they're not followed by action, they're dead. So, James lays out what action is required. He describes what it looks like to live in the light of repentance.

[4 : 38] He says, humble yourselves before the Lord. And just to be clear, that means changing your behavior in these specific ways. And he names several areas that, Lord willing, we'll come to as we close out the letter in coming weeks.

But he begins this morning with the tongue. Verse 11. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

Now, if you have read James with any care, actually, let's be honest, if you read it even at a superficial level, you can't miss how significantly James views the tongue. It's one of the big threads that runs through the letter, particularly the damage that it can do.

Do you remember I said that when we talked about the tongue previously in chapter 3, he really describes the tongue as a weapon of mass destruction. This tiny little piece of skin in this flesh, in the cradle of your jaw, can burn whole forests down.

It can destroy things. James has been at pains to say that. And it is this that he takes up again with his hearers. Because we've seen they are quick to speak.

[5 : 51] They are angry, especially their leaders. They are stirring up intemperate rhetoric. They are using their words in a way that is going to have a terribly devastating effect. They are careless with their words.

And their distorted desires for power and influence are leading them into fights and quarrels, which are expressed in harsh words, critical words. Turning on others and speaking evil against them. And James says that repentance means that you actually need to do something about this. I can't just tell you about it. I can't just say you need to humble yourselves in repentance. Actually, the truth that accords with repentance looks like changing the way you speak.

He says, no, don't explain it away. Don't suggest that other people have misunderstood you.

Humbling yourself before the Lord requires you to humble your mouth before Him.

He says your mouth needs to become Christian. And that will mean stopping doing two things. First of all, two points. Stop saying what you're saying.

[7 : 01] Verse 11. Stop saying what you're saying. Do not speak evil against one another. Brother is the one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, he says. Now, the word evil isn't there in the original.

Do not speak evil against one another. That has been supplied. It just says don't speak against. Don't speak against one another in the life of the church. James isn't saying that you never criticize somebody.

He isn't saying that you never challenge somebody. He isn't saying that you don't rebuke somebody. Don't take that, clip it out, rip it, as it were, bleeding from its context and say, you can't say these things to me because this verse says it, if somebody's challenging you about a particular thing.

What he's doing is talking about the angry speech that he's already ruled out in chapter 1, verse 19.

He's talking about the harsh criticism that is delivered by an unbridled tongue in 126.

He's talking about the kind of fiery speech that I mentioned from chapter 3 that will burn those that it's directed at and it will stain those who hear it. James is talking about speaking with malicious intent to bring someone else down.

[8 : 14] And I think going further, he means this with particular respect to people's Christian faith. So in verse 12, you see when it says that only God can save or destroy, the implication is that these people are speaking ways that assume that they have the authority to do that.

We'll come to that a little bit later. But they think that they can judge the condition of another man's heart. They are critical of others with respect to their grasp of or their commitment to or their outworking of the Christian faith.

This often happens when the pressure is on. Remember these people scattered and persecuted. They are struggling. They are marginalized.

They are in small groups. And often what can happen, you would think that that would be a cause for people to pull together. But often what happens is that there is a pulling apart. There is a fracturing because people's egos get in the way.

People position themselves wanting influence. That's what we've seen in James. But also they turn on one another because they don't think that they're handling the situation appropriately. In church life it can work out in a number of ways.

[9 : 28] We can dismiss people because they're immature and they don't really get it. When it is you and your group's perspective on a particular application of the Christian faith.

If you don't hold the same view as me on this issue that's secondary to the gospel, maybe important, but it's not at the heart of things.

If you don't hold the same view as me, you're written off or you're talked down to or you're not with us on this kind of language. Or worst of all, you're viewed as deficient in some way.

Now this attitude invariably creates an in-crowd and an out-crowd in church life. It is its own version of partiality. Another way this can happen is when people in church life criticize one another because they have, it is argued, adopted ideological convictions.

And again, this works both ways. They, whoever they are, have been captured by the woke agenda. Whereas they are too engaged in the culture war.

[10 : 38] Now whether that's true or not isn't the point. The assessment may indeed be correct. The problem is the way we speak about the person on the other side. In a church that is diverse, you would expect that there would be a raft of opinions on these sorts of issues.

And one of the beautiful things about the body of Christ and her unity is that we can, we can be united at what is most vital and central and still hold a diversity of views.

So the assessment may be correct on either side, but the important thing is how we speak about people on the other side. It's rarely done with compassion. It's rarely done with concern. It's rarely done sowing in peace, as James has already told us.

In pursuit of a harvest of righteousness, our tone is usually against. We typically go after them. We criticize them. We speak against. Yet another way we can do this is by speaking against people for being too prescriptive, too idealistic, too, dare I say, serious about the Christian life.

Each of us is called to apply the scriptures to every corner of our lives in obedience. We must do every single thing that we do to the glory of God.

[11 : 58] Every single thing that we do as Christians is submitted to the Lordship of Christ. What we eat and what we drink, the way we speak, the way that we conduct our family life, the way that we conduct our business life, the way that we conduct our relationships inside and outside the church, everything.

There is a Christian way to eat an apple. Everything we do to the glory of God. Christian way to eat an apple. You take a bite and you give glory to God for the wonderful flavor and the taste.

And you say, Thank you, Lord, that this is not something that belongs to Satan. That's a Christian way to eat an apple. Okay? Everything is to be done to the glory of God. Now that means that we do things that make us outliers in the culture.

And particularly in the context that James is describing here, that we've been talking about a context where we are on the back foot as Christians. It's going to make us outliers.

If we say, No, I'm not bowing the knee to these cultural gods. I am only bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus. And I do all that I do to the glory of his name. Increasingly, outliers become the object of scorn in the culture.

[13 : 07] And we see that as well. But this should not be the case in the church. And yet, it often is. People who have a particular view on certain things.

People who take the Sabbath seriously. I've been maligned for that by Christians in the past.

Christians who have a particular view about the importance of Christian education.

Christians who choose not to own a television because they don't think that it's a wise and prudent use of their time. Christians who are T total. They're all a bit serious, we're told.

That's a terrible way to speak about brothers and sisters. Back in the day when our older children were homeschooled and people sometimes asked me, Well, do they go to local schools? Christians asked me, Do they go to local schools?

I would say, Yes, very local. Because I didn't want the eye rolling. I didn't want them to hear me mention the H word. It's this kind of thing that we see in church life, speaking against others.

[14 : 07] I should say I've heard very little of it here in the time that we've been here. But these are things that we need to be aware of. We need to be mindful of. Speaking against others can be toxic in church life.

Writing off a new Christian or a young believer because they don't get it is like an employer criticizing a new employee because they don't get their new job fully yet. You would think that was a very strange thing to do.

They don't need to be criticized or patronized or gossiped about. They need to be helped and encouraged and enabled to grow. Similarly, speaking against the people who value and emphasize things that they think are important in their discipleship but that you don't see the same way is just as bad.

We all have to work out our salvation with fear and trembling and if someone in the church takes a different view to you on something for biblical reasons don't speak against them.

Don't judge their faith for it. James says stop saying what you're saying. And here's why. When you speak against someone you are positioning yourself above them.

[15 : 15] Look Timothy Johnson in his commentary on James says this. It has the same root as the fights and quarrels that we talked about last week.

Disordered passions with yourself at the center. Making yourself the judge. Making yourself superior to others. I've just alluded to where James goes next.

It isn't just as simple as being critical of another person. James goes on to explain alongside stop saying what you're saying. He says secondly, stop sitting where you're sitting.

When you speak against someone you're passing judgment on them. But you don't just sit in judgment over them. You also, verse 11, sit in judgment over the law.

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

[16 : 26] Why is James introducing the law here? What's the law got to do with this? Well, back in chapter 2, verse 8, you remember he told us what law he means here.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Taken from Leviticus 19, verse 18. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Taken from the words of Jesus that we heard before our confession this morning.

And James is saying that if you speak against your brother, speaking against him falls foul of that law. In fact, in your judgment, the law that says you should love that person is actually evil.

What he means is you think that it's actually beneath you. It's not something you need to obey. You don't do the law. You stand in judgment over it, actually. It's like when you're driving along and you see the speed limit sign.

Your eyes are working fine. You see the speed limit sign. You see what it says and you choose to drive faster than the speed limit. You're the one who's deciding whether or not you're going to heed the law.

[17 : 35] And when you drive above the limit, you don't do the law. You judge the law to be beneath you. It doesn't apply to you. You clearly are above the law. When it comes to God's law, Christians aren't allowed to do that.

We're not allowed to judge it. We have to do it. We don't like it when people flagrantly break the law. When we're driving along and somebody in their lowered, blacked out sports car zips up the inside and cuts through at high speed and we think to ourselves, who do they think they are to do that?

They think they're above the law. We don't like people who think they're above the law, except when we like to position ourselves there. And James says it's the same when you criticize and demean or slander others in the church.

If you think that you're above the law, you're sitting in judgment on God's law. And he doesn't stop there. Keeps going.

He's pushing us hard this morning. Thanks, James. It doesn't stop there. The superior attitude means that in the end, secondly, you sit in judgment over God. Verse 12. Do you see that? There is only one lawgiver and judge.

[18 : 48] He was able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? It's God who says, love your neighbor as yourself.

And God has the right to say that and to say that it's good for us to do that because he is God. But when we speak against someone, we take God's seat and we assume God's right to judge another person.

It's incredibly searching, isn't it? And it's James. He doesn't, again, he doesn't just state it as he always does. He doesn't just assert the theology. He turns it into a personal challenge.

He says, who do you think you are? When you judge your neighbor, rather than heed God's word to love your neighbor, who are you to do this, Reuben?

Who are you to sit in judgment over the law, even over God himself, Reuben? There is no higher expression of arrogance.

[19 : 58] Stop sitting where you're sitting. Stop saying what you're saying and don't sit in judgment over other people. Well, thanks, James.

It's all very good. Easier said than done. How can we do this? What on earth does it mean to stop saying what you're saying and stop sitting where you're sitting? Well, I want to suggest three areas of application that start in the church but broaden out as well.

Simply, the first one has to be use your words well. Use your words well. James has already told us in chapter 3 about the disproportionate power that we possess with our tongues.

It works both ways. Criticism, lies, slander, harsh judgment. These things can devastate another person. Proverbs 25, 18. A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club or a sword or a sharp arrow.

When you lie about someone, which is what you do when you misrepresent them, when you speak ill of them to someone else, it's like hitting them with a club.

[21 : 07] It's like slashing them with a sword, piercing them with an arrow. To think that this is what we would do to our brothers, verse 11, we would do in the life of the church.

The people that we have taken vows to link arms with in church membership. May it never be. But it is also important to remember that when the Bible prohibits one thing, in doing that it is promoting the opposite.

So you know that do not murder means, don't just not murder but promote life. Do not commit adultery means love and cherish faithfulness. So do not speak against means use your words well. Again, because of the disproportionate good that they can do. Encouraging, supportive, edifying words. Good humor to bring a smile.

Light words that brighten the mood. Respectful words that show honor where it's due. Husbands to wives. Wives to husbands. How many of your words have built the other up rather than torn them down, even in the last few days?

[22 : 20] Children to your parents. Boys and girls, look up. This applies to you as well. It applies to the way you speak to your siblings, but also to your parents. You think to yourself, oh, it's just mom and dad.

I'll just say what I like to mom and dad. No. Speak well. Be respectful. And parents, to your children, don't sit above God's law with the words that you use.

Be gentle and loving and encourage them. Make your children laugh.

Speak wise words to them. Speak well to them and of them. Maybe you need to apologize this morning to someone.

someone that you've spoken against and you need to put that right. Well, your apology, your repentance will be a good word that will bring healing.

[23 : 31] Use your words well to do that. Maybe you need to resolve to use your words in a new way and certain relationships start today. First of all, use your words well. Secondly, be a positive voice on social media.

if you absolutely, absolutely have to be on social media. Speak against, as a phrase, seems to be made for X, formerly known as Twitter.

There is something about the unreality of social media that lends itself both to against and above, speaking against and sitting above others. Remember that your Christian faith extends to what you say and how you say it on social media.

Love your neighbor as yourself applies on Instagram and TikTok just as much as anywhere else.

And it's not just about restraint, but also trying to use the platform to speak positively, if you absolutely, definitely have to be on there.

If you read through your last month's posts, how many of those words are marked by kindness and wisdom that is seeking to encourage and build up or sarcasm and criticism that is designed to promote yourself and tear others down.

[24 : 42] Have a look. See what you think. What you said might be incredibly funny. Sarcasm and cynicism are often very funny and they do have their place, particularly in exposing pride, but they don't usually build up and that is to be our goal.

Doing rather than judging God's law. Be a positive voice online and then thirdly, finally, remember God's words. If like me you find this convicting, this is where you need to land this morning.

The only person who has the right to judge our neighbor is God. So he is the only one with the right to judge you and me. How has he treated us?

Not as we deserve. Think of all the legitimate ways God could speak against you. Imagine if the God of truth who cannot speak evil, who cannot lie, said in here now, in this room, right now, out loud, so you could all hear all the things that are true of me.

Most of it would be speaking against me because the truth is that my sin, my failures, my pride, my speech would make up most of what he said. And imagine that for yourself.

[26 : 11] Imagine how you would feel if he came in and he said, stand up please, and he said everything that was true about you. The guilt and the shame would be awful.

And yet he never speaks about us like that. God never speaks to humiliate us.

Ever. Instead, he forgives us. He covers our guilt and our shame. 4 verse 6, look again, he gives more grace.

More grace. If you are in Christ this morning, God's words to you are no condemnation. Those words hang like a banner over your life.

No condemnation. The question is, how is that even possible? How is that even possible given the way that we've used our words? Well, it's because the one who does have the right to judge us, the one who is perfectly within his rights to speak against us, to condemn us for all eternity, chose not to do that.

[27 : 17] He chose instead to judge his son in our place. The judgment that we deserved fell on the Lord Jesus so that it didn't have to fall on us.

So, as David Gibson puts it in his book on James, quote, God has a bottomless sea of grace and mercy. All our sins and offenses are taken to Calvary and punished and paid for and done away with and he buries them in the ocean of his forgetfulness.

He gives grace to humble, penitent sinners. The judge becomes a savior, a friend, end quote. God's words to you this morning are, I love you, I sent my son for your sin, I sent my son for all your bad words and he took those words to the cross.

I punished them there and they're gone. And as is always the case, it is as we experience that grace in our own hearts that we are able to get ourselves out of the way, to reorder our desires and so speak well of others.

speaking against someone flows from our own superiority, our own need to push ourselves up and to push them down so that we know that we are okay. But when we remember God's mercy and grace to us and when the words that God speaks to us of no condemnation in Christ, I love you and I have accepted you and I have forgiven all of your sin, when those words hit our hearts, we are liberated from that need to be superior.

[28 : 59] We are liberated from the need to push others down. We can build them up. We can serve them. We can seek their blessing. We can speak words that are positive to them rather than tearing them down.

Do your words show that you know this grace in your life? Remember God's words to you and allow them to lead you to humble yourself before Him.

That will change your heart and then your words will follow. Let's pray together.