

Playing God and Other Perils

James 4:11-5:11
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In our study together last week, we saw that conflict is the product of our self-assertive spirit. We want what we want, when we want it. We are not willing to wait *for* God to give it to us in his *way* and according to this schedule. That is what causes war and strife, feuds and vendettas. Breaks up nations and homes and friendships. James continues with the same theme in the section of his letter we will consider today. First he turns his attention to our tendency to judge and to criticize other brothers and sisters in the family of God in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 4, James writes:

"Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, Or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judges your neighbor?"

James is saying that the same self-assertive spirit that causes conflict also makes us critical of one another. In the parable of the Pharisee and the sinner who prayed in the temple, Jesus made plain that it was the self-righteous spirit of the Pharisee that caused him to be contemptuous of his brother, This is what James is saying also.

He gives a command in verse 11 and then supplies a number of reasons for stating that command. The command is, literally: "Stop judging your brother." Evidently this was an ongoing problem in the church at the time that James wrote this book, and it is still with us today. Criticism is probably the most widespread sin among Christians. It is a passion we can indulge without feeling much guilt because we have devised ways to disguise it. Our criticism can even take the form of an expression of concern or care for others. We can elicit prayer for them and criticize them all in the same breath. This is a way of venting our critical, judgmental, harsh, carping, loveless spirit.

But James says, "Stop it!" His primary reason is not that it injures the person who is criticized. There are ways that the individual who is the object of our criticism can be salvaged. As a matter of fact there is a great deal of Scripture to that end. There is a procedure he can follow if he is unjustly criticized which brings glory to God and results in greater growth in his life. So James' concern is not so much for the person who is the object of our criticism but, rather, it is for us, because a critical spirit devastates us. It does something terrible to the inner man. It makes us harsh and unloving, relentless and cold.

So James says, "Stop it!" because when we criticize our brother we are, in effect, criticizing the Law. We are sitting in judgment upon the Law. In chapter 2, verse 8, James defines the law as "the law of love." All the Law is summed up in this one statement: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If I sit in judgment on my brother I am sitting in judgment on the law of love. God says, "Love your brother." But I choose to set limits on my love and, instead of taking my place under the Law and submitting to it, I place myself above the Law and presume to become a judge of what is right and what is wrong and what is loving and what isn't. This attitude leads into greater and greater areas of lawlessness and rebellion. James is saying that, in effect, we are playing God, for there is only one who can give the Law, and who can save and destroy, and that is God himself. And I must not presume to take over his role. That is why James says, "Who do you think you are to criticize your brother? Do you think that you are God?" God is the only one who has that right.

Paul says in I Corinthians 4 that we are to judge nothing before the time, before the Lord comes, who will judge the secret motives of men's hearts and bring everything to light and then every man will have his praise from God.

His point is that there is a time for judgment yet future. All the facts aren't yet in. We don't have enough data to assess the motives of men's hearts. Only God can see the heart. So it is both premature and presumptuous of us to sit in judgment on any brother.

Now, the Scriptures tell us that there is a legitimate form of judgment that we can carry out. Paul says in Galatians 6:1 that if we see a brother overtaken in a fault we are to go to that brother and restore him in a sense of gentleness, with awareness of our own proneness to fall. By so doing we fulfill the law of Christ. He establishes several guidelines for this kind of judgment. We cannot judge in the area of a man's conscience. Nor can we judge his motives because we do not know his motives. But if we see a man living in rebellion against a stated principle of Scripture then we can go to him in love and wash his feet with the word of God and cleanse him and thus restore him. That is a redemptive kind of judgment that builds up and encourages. It causes growth. It puts people back together again instead of tearing them down and fragmenting their relationships with others. That is why Proverbs says, "He who rebukes with his tongue afterward finds more favor," Some of the closest friendships I have right now are with men who have corrected me and rebuked me in love when I have violated some clear principle of Scripture. That is a legitimate act of love, and James is not forbidding that. What he is forbidding is a harsh unyielding, critical, judgmental spirit.

He goes on in verses 13 through 17 to deal with another area of life where we are prone to play God - our business ventures and our vocations. James says,

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' "

This is a word addressed to the wealthy merchants who traveled all over the ancient world, buying and selling in the major trade centers of that day. Their sin lay not in the fact that they engaged in business. There is nothing wrong with being involved in business, obviously. Nor did their sin lie in the fact that they wanted to make a profit, because profit making, per se, is not wrong. The chief aim of any business man ought to be to glorify God and to save humanity. If God gives you a profit in the course of that it is not wrong. When profit-making becomes the supreme end of life if it becomes your utmost passion, only then is it wrong. Nor did their sin lie in the fact that they were planning, because obviously you have to plan in order to succeed in business James says that the problem was that they planned apart from God. They didn't take into account the fact that God is a sovereign lord and that he has the right to control our destiny. There are two factors that James points out which they did not take into consideration. First:

"Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow."

We are totally ignorant of what our life will be like tomorrow. We can't rely upon our own wisdom in this area. All sorts of unpredictable things can happen which can radically change the course of our life. I had a close friend in school who was an outstanding Christian and an excellent football player. He had his whole life planned ahead. He was going to play professional football and then go on to coach. He thought that by so doing he could have a ministry among young men. One day he went in for a routine physical exam before football season. The doctor discovered that he had a heart murmur. He told him, "You will not only never play ball again -- you'll never run again." In that split second his whole plan for life went right down the drain. Fortunately his life was really centered in the Lord and not just in playing football. Other wise this would have destroyed him. But that is why we can't plan our lives apart from God's ability to control our destiny. We are ignorant of the future.

The second reason that James says it is presumptuous for us to plan without God is that we are really impotent to do anything about the future:

"You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

There are all sorts of forces that impinge upon our life that we cannot control. The other day I was driving around a cloverleaf ramp toward the freeway. I glanced to the left to see if any cars were coming and when I looked ahead again there was a truck parked right in the roadway. I hadn't seen it earlier because it was obscured by bushes. I

finally saw it just a split second before I would have ploughed into the back end of that truck at about forty mile's per hour. I barely had time to yank the car to the left and scoot by with inches to spare. As I drove on down the road I was praising God for his ability to look out for fools on the freeway. And this verse flashed through my mind: "Your life is just a vapor. I would have been utterly powerless to do anything about what might have occurred because of that accident. I could have been maimed for life. I could have been killed. My life would have been radically changed. There are all sorts of forces like that which we encounter every day and which we cannot control. They control us. Therefore we cannot plan apart from God. That is why James says,

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

That is not a slogan. We so often use it that way : "Lord willing, I shall do such and such tomorrow." But it really should reflect an attitude of submission to God, an acknowledgment that all of our life is to be lived out in recognition of the fact that God is sovereign Lord. He commands the future and he runs my life. He does what he chooses to do in my life and therefore behind my planning must be the recognition that God is sovereign. I must accept what he chooses to do. James says that anything other than that is *arrogance*. That is seemingly a very strong term, because planning for the future is a very ordinary activity. We do that all the time. And yet James says that if we plan without making room for God in our life it is an act of evil arrogance:

"But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin."

To know that we ought to plan our lives in recognition of God's sovereign operation in our life and yet not to do so, is sin. There is no way we can escape that fact. This is another of the sins that grows out of the feeling that all we need do in order to have life as we want it, is to assert ourselves and live as we please. James, says that this is arrogance and it is sin.

In chapter 5 he moves into another area where I-he same self-assertive attitude is apt to display itself. This passage deals. With the subject of oppression. Verses 1 through 6 deal with the condemnation of the oppressor and verses 7 through 11 with the conduct of those who are oppressed. Let's look first at the condemnation of the rich oppressors:

"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the Last Days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you."

I would like to make some general observations about this passage. The first is that we need to understand the background of this statement. James was writing to people who were being oppressed. These were Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman world. They were experiencing persecution by both Jewish and Gentile authorities as well as by neighbors and friends and family. Many of them had lost their jobs. Their businesses were being boycotted. They had been thrown out of their homes and their schools. So they were experiencing genuine persecution. Many of them were being oppressed by wealthy Jewish and Gentile overlords. So this is not mere theory. James was confronting a practical situation.

Another observation is that the first six verses of this chapter are addressed not to Christians but to non-Christians Notice that in verse 7 James says, "Be patient, therefore, brethren." At this point he begins to talk to Christians. But in the first six verses he is talking to those outside the body of Christ. James' point seems to be that no true believer in Jesus Christ can persist in being an oppressor. An awful lot of oppressive things have been done in the name of Jesus Christ. But no *true* Christian can oppress a brother. The mark of a true Christian is love. He doesn't

treat people as things, as objects, as a means by which he can gain wealth or power or influence. Although a person may name the name of Christ, if he is an oppressor he is not a member of the family of God.

There is a third observation that we can make. Verses 1 through 6 declare to the oppressor that certain judgment is coming. Verses 7 through 11 declare to the oppressed that they are not to retaliate but are to submit. But there is not a word here to the man who stands outside either of these two categories. James is saying that if we are oppressed then we are to give up our rights. If we are an oppressor then we are to set things right and are not to be guilty of such conduct. But if we are neither, then we are certainly not to be silent nor submissive when we see other people oppressed. A lot of the oppression in the world is due to the fact that believers in Jesus Christ are not willing to stand for the truth. So the point I want to make is that these two paragraphs don't to the person who is a third party in a situation of oppression. These words are only for people who are oppressing or who are being oppressed.

Now let us examine the passage. James says a number of things about the oppressor. The first is that wealth and misery very often go hand in hand. He is not saying that wealth, per se, is bad, nor that wealth, per se, causes misery. But he is saying that there are certain tendencies inherent in the possession of wealth that can cause misery. Paul says in I Timothy 6 that the man who craves being rich pierces himself with many sorrows. His money never satisfies him. It always disappoints him -- whether he gets the money or whether he doesn't. If to gain wealth is our aim then misery is always our lot.

The second point he makes is that as our wealth deteriorates, so does our life. Our wealth will rust and rot away and the same thing will happen to our life. Our life will become less and less meaningful and more and more empty.

But the major point that James makes in the first six verses is that oppression moves God to action. He is the "Lord of Sabaoth", the Lord of Hosts. That word is used in the Old Testament to refer to God as the leader of the hosts of Israel. He is the ruler of the angelic hosts and of the heavenly bodies -- the sun, the moon, and the stars. This is a reference to the fact that he is the sovereign Lord of the universe. James says that oppression, wherever it is found, moves God to action - perhaps not immediately - but He hears the cries of those who have been oppressed, and judgment is certain. In fact, James says, the oppressor is just like an animal being fattened at the trough before being led to the slaughter.

I was in 4-H Club when I was in high school. One of my projects was to raise a pig. My pig was rather skinny when I got him, so to fatten him up I put a feeder in his tiny pigpen so that all that pig could do was eat. He got fatter and fatter. I used to chuckle because that pig was eating himself right into the slaughterhouse. That is what James is saying. Oppressors are fattening their hearts for the day of slaughter. Judgment is coming. By the way, as a historical note, Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that when Titus, the Roman general, overthrew Jerusalem in A. D. 70, he picked out the fat citizens and tortured them to death to find out where their treasures were. So in a very literal sense judgment did fall on these individuals.

Of course the significance of this passage runs much deeper than that. James is saying that God is coming to judge and to set things right. It is true that at the moment he is not running the world right. He is not trying to. He is allowing men to oppress. He is allowing men, to some extent, to act as they wish and to destroy and defile and humiliate and ruin. But as someone has said, "The mills of God's justice may grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." Judgment is coming.

In verse 6 James makes a further statement that is almost axiomatic; "You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you. Some have taken this as a reference to Jesus himself, the righteous man who didn't resist and was condemned by oppressive men. But I think that James' application is to all righteous men in general. A righteous man does not fight back. He doesn't use violent measures to preserve his own rights. He does not resist.

Verses 7 through 11 are a further description of that nonresistant attitude toward oppression. These words, remember, are addressed to the followers of Jesus Christ, not to the world in general. They are addressed to those

who have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord and who are waiting for God to set right the wrongs done to them in this world. James says:

"Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient . . ."

His first admonition is patience. In the Greek the word implies having a long temper, a long fuse, not retaliating, not getting bitter and resentful and lashing out at your oppressors. Just as a farmer sows a crop and waits for the harvest to come, so we are to be patient and wait for God to act. The illustration provided by the farmer is that of awaiting due process. There may be a time-lag, but the harvest is certain. So be patient. Obey God right where you are. Submit to that injustice, whatever it is. Now, remember that we are not to stand aside and watch other people's rights be assailed. But if it is our rights that are, being violated, James says, we are patiently to trust God's adequacy on our behalf, right where we are in that situation.

That is often the hardest thing in the world to do. That fact struck me last week as I was reviewing the story in the gospels of the time when Jesus was walking by the sea and saw the fishermen still casting their net unsuccessfully into the water after working all day. Jesus said, "Cast your net in again." And they complained, "Lord, we have been fishing all day." He said, "Do it again." And I realized how much of life consists of just casting the same old net into the same old fishing hole -- faithfully doing the same thing over and over again. That is what is so hard. We would like to get out of that situation, to have a change of scenery and new climate. We think that if we just had better circumstances then we could endure. James says, "Be patient right where you are. Just keep obeying God and doing what you are called to do right in the midst of that oppression." He continues,

" . . . strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

The Lord is in control. It may appear that the world is out of control but it is not. The Lord of Hosts hears and knows, and he is going to act. So, literally, "prop up" your hearts. Strengthen them in your knowledge that God is at hand. He is not off in Heaven some place, oblivious to your needs. He is right there in your circumstance. So strengthen your heart in his strength. And then, third:

"Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold the Judge is standing right at the door."

The New English Bible translates this verse, "Don't blame your troubles on one another . . ." Our tendency when we are under pressure is to complain and gripe and to take out our troubles on others who are around us. James says, "Don't do that. Don't blame your brother and complain against him, lest you incur judgment." Finally,

"As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful."

Take a look at the lives of the prophets. They were God's men. They spoke in the name of the lord and yet they suffered, because suffering is part and parcel of being God's man. You cannot avoid it. It is part of your life. But if you look at the lives of the prophets you discover two things about God: he is compassionate, and He is merciful. He is loving, and He is faithful. He will minister to you and supply everything that you need. You will lack nothing. And then, in time, God will set things right. Perhaps he will not do it even in your lifetime . . . but He will set things right.

I have never forgotten a story that was told from this platform a number of years ago. At the risk of being repetitious to some of you, I want to share it again. There was a missionary couple who had labored many years in Africa. They had given some forty years of their lives. They were returning home and happened to be on the ship that brought the Beatles to America. When they arrived in New York a huge crowd was there to meet the Beatles,

screaming and jumping up and down. But no one had come to the dock to greet this couple. Suddenly the husband felt a great sense of resentment. "This is not right! We've given forty years of our lives in sacrificial service and here comes a frivolous group of musicians and the whole town has turned out for them! It's not right that we should be treated this way!" And his soul became deeply resentful and restive.

They went home to the barely adequate lodgings their missionary organization had arranged for them and the man's wife tried to encourage him. But he continued to be bitter and resentful. Finally one day she said, "Honey, why don't you go into our bedroom and tell God how you feel." So he did. He got down on his knees and said, "God, this just isn't right. We've come home after all of these years and have received nothing!" And he went on to pour it all out. A few minutes later he came out of the bedroom and his wife knew by the look on his face that something was different. She asked, "Honey, what happened?" He said, "Well, I told God all about how I felt -- how bitter I was that we had come home and he hadn't given us what was right. And he said to me, "But you are not home yet."

You see, that is the way we must live life. We are not home yet. And we will be oppressed and will have our rights taken away from us. If we insist upon asserting ourselves and trying to get what is rightfully ours we will cause chaos. We will unleash in society the powerful forces that create war and destruction. But if we will rest in God and trust in his love for us and rely upon his adequacy, the result will be peace and quietness of heart. And then when we get home . . . God will set everything right.

Father, we thank you that you are a faithful Lord. We look forward to the time when you are going to set things right. Deliver us, Father, from playing God and feeling that we have to vindicate ourselves and secure our own rights. Please give us, Lord, that spirit of quiet, restful, humble obedience to you. We thank you for the way you pour yourself out to us and satisfy us in every way. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

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