Legacy Church

James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Eleven

If the Lord Wills

Humble Plans, a Fleeting Life, and the God Who Sees

James 4:13–5:7

Good evening. We are in our series called Truth that Hurts, where we are working verse by verse through the book of James, and we just came off the most intense few weeks of the whole letter. First, James laid out the problem: his audience is double minded and half hearted. To borrow the language of Jesus in Revelation 3, they are lukewarm. They are filled with compromise, and they have slowly drifted from being friends of God to being enemies of God. So James does what every good pastor does. He confronts them. But he doesn't simply confront them; he calls them to repentance.

Last week was all about what that repentance should look like. Receive the rebuke with humility. Don't resist it with pride. Draw near to God and resist the devil. Cleanse your hands, purify your hearts, and feel the weight of your sin. Don't minimize it, don't justify it, don't blame shift, and don't drag others into it.

Today James shows us what a life lived in humility before God looks like. If you are tracking with the letter, the flow goes like this: he calls out our sin, he calls us to repent, he explains how to repent, and then he explains how that repentance should change the way we live.

Many of you should file that process away, because you are going to need it. At some point, because you are in fellowship with other Christians (even here at Legacy), you are going to find yourself in a situation where you need the courage to call a brother or sister out for their sin. Most people stop at the first step. They say, "That's sin, you can't do that," and then they leave it there. That isn't always the most helpful thing. Call them out, yes, but then call them to repent, explain what repentance looks like (confession, restitution, reorientation), and show them how life should look different going forward.

The Whole Process

Call Out Sin › Call to Repent › Explain Repentance › Show the Way Forward

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Here is what that sounds like. You are hanging out with some Christian friends, people are enjoying a beer, and one of them takes it too far. He steps past the boundaries Scripture lays out and ends up drunk. The

answer isn't, “You're in sin!” The answer is, “Hey man, you just sinned, and you seemed unbothered by it. That's not okay. I love you, we're friends, we're brothers in the Lord, and I have to tell you that you need to repent. You probably need to confess this and make it right, maybe by apologizing to the people who were there and owning it. And going forward, you probably shouldn't have a drink for a while.”

So let's look at how James describes a life lived in humility before God. Open your Bibles to James 4:13.

i.

Who Is in Charge?

> Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”
>
> James 4:13, ESV

Let me start by saying what James is not saying. He is not saying it's wrong to make plans. He is not saying it's wrong to travel. He is not saying it's wrong to make a profit.

The problem is that these people are in charge. Listen to the sentence again. It is them who decide when: today or tomorrow. It is them who decide where: such and such a town. It is them who decide what, for how long, and for what purpose. God is nowhere to be found in this scenario. They are making plans without so much as a thought for what the Lord would require of them, and James says plainly that they are doing it out of their own arrogance.

Listen, we don't make decisions out of pride and arrogance. That means we don't make decisions with ourselves as the center of gravity. The Lord is the center of gravity. We don't decide things simply based on what we want, when we want it. We incline ourselves toward the Lord and ask, in whatever way you are comfortable asking, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” That is the difference between humility and pride, and remember, James is calling us toward humility.

His audience were believers, but they had slid into real compromise, largely because they had built a life void of the input of God.

Pride isn't just thinking you're better than someone.
It's also building a life on your own will, void of God's.

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ii.

You Do Not Know Tomorrow

> ...yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.
>
> James 4:14–16, ESV

The second problem is that they spoke with confidence. It was in their language and in their mindset: this is what we are going to do. And James rebukes them for it. He is essentially saying, "You don't know what tomorrow brings. You aren't the Lord."

I think James is communicating the same thing Solomon said long before him.

> The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.
>
> Proverbs 16:9, ESV

At the end of the day, we make our plans, but the Lord is ultimately in charge, and for a Christian not to leave room for that is foolish. Anyone here like your plans? That's me. I love making a plan, and I get frustrated when things don't go according to it. But what James is trying to get you and me to understand is that things don't always go according to plan. We have to trust His sovereignty and be ready to pivot and flex according to His will when it conflicts with ours.

Then he makes this statement: your life is a mist, a vapor. I love this verse, and it has been a great comfort to me over the years. It means our lives are something like our breath on a cold day. You can see it, but only for a moment before it's gone. Here is the idea: life is short, and everything is temporary. I know we know that. But sometimes we just need to sit in the meaning of it.

Life is short and it's fleeting, and that is why we don't live for this life. We live for the eternity that comes afterward. Don't live for the pleasures and comforts of this life, because this life is so short.

And everything is temporary. The best moments and the worst moments. The best seasons and the worst seasons. That means we need to be better about cherishing the good, and we can't let the bad ruin us, because neither one is going to last.

Before You Turn the Page

Let me ask you a question. If you knew you had two years left to live, how would you spend your time? What would you do to make those two years count? How would your attitude change? Whatever your honest answer is, that is probably the bullseye of how you should be spending your life today. Your plans are not the problem. The question is whether the Lord is anywhere in them.

iii.

Knowing the Right Thing

> So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.
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> James 4:17, ESV

So what is "the right thing" they know to do? In the immediate context, James has just told them. They now know the proper response, and so do you. Acknowledge your dependence upon God and submit your plans to His will. You can't hear this passage and walk out the door unaccountable for it.

iv.

A Word to the Outsider

> Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.
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> James 5:1–6, ESV

At first glance, this is the harshest rebuke in the whole book. The language is so intense that it makes everything James has said up to now look like child's play.

But here is something important I want you to understand. A long line of Protestant scholars and commentators, including John Calvin, Matthew Henry, and Douglas Moo, hold that this passage is not addressed to James's readers at all. It is what is called the outsider view, and I agree with it. I don't think James is rebuking his audience here. Let me explain why.

This rebuke is different from every other rebuke James has given so far. The others are addressed to his "brothers"; this one is not. The others are followed by a call to repent; this one is not. In verse 7 he turns back to his readers and says, "Be patient, therefore, brothers," which tells us that the verses before it describe the world his people are living in, not the people themselves. And notably, the speech shifts here and starts to sound like the Old Testament prophets.

So who is James addressing? The unbelieving world around them. And he isn't just rebuking them; he is pronouncing judgment on them. In the Old Testament, prophets often brought rebuke and judgment against a group of outsiders who would never read the prophecy in the first place. James is likely doing the same thing here. He is pronouncing judgment on the world system, and he is letting the people of God, broken as they are, see it.

v.

Comfort for the Weary

> Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.
>
> James 5:7, ESV

Why would James do that? To comfort them. And he does it in three ways.

First, by promising judgment on those who afflict them. The rich who oppress God's people are not getting away with it. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

Second, by showing the difference between a Christian who has lost his way and a wicked pagan. It is really important to James that his people realize this. Even though he has just used harsh language to describe them and the state of their own souls, they are different from the world around them. And that is a helpful word for everyone in the room today. It has been a convicting several weeks as we've worked through James, and he has had some hard and strong words for us. But you need to know there is a difference between a double minded Christian and the world. James wants his audience to see that, and God wants *you* to see that. You do not fall into the same category.

Third, by validating that the trial is real. James started his letter by addressing the trials his people were walking through. Here you get the full picture of what they were living in. He doesn't minimize it. He doesn't tell them it's not that bad. He calls it what it is: it's hard, because the people pressing on them are wicked.

And look at what those people were doing. They were hoarding wealth and storing up treasure. They were withholding wages and defrauding their workers. They were living in luxury and self-indulgence, fattening themselves for judgment. They were condemning and murdering the righteous, oppressing people who did not resist them. That is the world James's readers were living in. God saw every bit of it, and He has not forgotten His people.

A Christian who has lost ground in their own soul
is not the same as a wicked, godless pagan.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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