

In our passage for today James returns to the power of the tongue and our inclination to use words to the harm of our brothers or sisters. He is expanding on a proverb of Solomon. ²¹ *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.* Proverbs 18:21 Sow death and you will eat the fruit of death. What a warning that we should take seriously! Sow life and you will reap the fruit of life. What a promise that should motivate us! If our words tear down someone, we will be torn down. If they build others up, as we should, then we will be built up.

¹¹ *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.* ¹² *There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*

James 4:11,12 There is something about our old nature that loves to hear gossip and slander. We must be so careful to avoid this, both of letting it come from our own lips, or of joining in when others speak (2 Corinthians 12:20ⁱ; 1 Peter 2:1ⁱⁱ). It is often wrapped in a cloak of caring. We begin with something like, “I have a confidential prayer request...” If you would not say it in front of the person you are speaking about, do not say it at all. If you are not sure if it is helpful, ask the person you are planning on speaking about if they would like their need shared with others. If someone privately shares something with you, consider it confidential unless they say otherwise.

James’ point is that when we speak evil of a brother or sister, we have put our self in the place of God who is the only righteous judge. He is the only one who can see their heart and knows the details of what they are going through. Speaking evil of someone violates the royal law to love one another (John 13:34ⁱⁱⁱ).

James has emphasized that we must be doers of the Word and not hearers only (1:22^{iv}). But if we step into the role of judge, we are no longer a doer. We have taken the role of judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, and you and I are not it (Isaiah 33:22^v). He is the final Judge. He can save or destroy because He knows what is best and has all power (Deuteronomy 32:39^{vi}). He knows the heart and whether it is hardened or has a chance to change. Would we presume to know if grace or judgment is needed?

James asks us a thought-provoking question. *Who are you to judge your neighbor?* It is like Paul’s question to the Romans. ⁴ *Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?* Romans 14:4a Do you believe that you have the discernment of God to tell others about your neighbor’s heart? That is prideful! And yet, we are so often tempted to do just that. It is especially tempting when we feel we have been wronged. I have certainly been guilty of this. Meditating on this passage really convicted me. Who am I to judge my neighbor who, by Jesus’ definition, is anyone I encounter? (See Luke 10:25-37) That is not being humble before God! When I do that, I am asking for the same lack of grace to be shown to me (5:9^{vii}; Matthew 7:1^{viii}). We all fall short of the royal law, the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37^{ix}). We violate the two most important commands when we speak evil of someone made in God’s image.

The fact that everyone does it is not an excuse. Everyone is a sinner (Romans 3:23^x). **That what you are saying is true is not an excuse.** We are to demonstrate the difference God has made in our hearts. I was blessed the other day to hear someone speak out and say, “We should not talk about that person when they are not present.”

This does not mean that we never make a judgment regarding a person's behavior. Kent Hughes in his marvelous sermon on this passage explains: *...it is the Christian's duty to exercise judgment. For example, we are to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15). How can we determine a false prophet except by judging him against the standard of the Word of God? Likewise, we are told, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:16). Recognition hinges on careful judgment. We are to judge adultery, murder, lying, and theft as sins, and if anyone does these things, we must judge them as being sinful! Jesus said, "Stop judging by mere appearances and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). What the Scriptures forbid is judgmentalism, a critical and censorious spirit that judges everyone and everything, seeking to run others down.*^{xi} There are times in which we must make a judgment, but even then, it is rarely necessary to tell it to others.

¹³ 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 During this period in Roman history, Rome would encourage the building of cities in places that might assist the empire in trade and defense. They would give the first pioneers tax benefits and sometime even support building public edifices and defensive walls. Jews were especially gifted at business and would take advantage of these benefits. This was a major factor in the Jews being dispersed throughout the known world. Their synagogues brought the knowledge of the only God who is the Creator.

It could be that James is speaking of trading from city to city. Jews would notice the difference in prices from region to region. They would buy things in a region where the price was low and transport it to a region where the price was much higher and make a profit. James is addressing that tendency to make plans to become wealthy without any acknowledgement of God while boasting in our ability to do so. He is addressing our prideful way of forecasting what we will make of our life, as if we are in control. *It is the presumption that we are masters of our own life, so that we need to do no more than decide and, lo and behold, it will happen like that.*^{xii} That kind of life keeps God in the Sunday box and pursues our desires Monday through Saturday.

The redeemed should know that our lives are in God's hands, not ours. We need to be aware of the possibility that He may call us home at any time. That will keep us from being overly focused on the temporal. Spurgeon said, *"There are two great certainties about things that shall come to pass—one is that God knows, and the other is that we do not know."* When life's uncertainties present something you never expected, where you have placed your trust will make all the difference in how you face it. If you trust in yourself, you will probably panic, be full of anxiety, and start trying to think of how you can rescue yourself. If you trust in God, you can be at peace and seek His direction.

Motyer writes, *'it is all so ordinary, indeed so natural. That is exactly the point. When James exposes the blemish of presumptuousness, he exposes something which is the unrecognized claim of our hearts. We speak to ourselves as if life were our right, as if our choice were the only deciding factor, as if we had in ourselves all that was needed to make a success of things, as if getting on, making money, doing well were life's sole objective.*^{xiii}

¹⁴ 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. James 4:14 *The idea that our life was a vapor or shadow was a frequent figure of speech in the Old Testament (Psalm 102:11^{xiv}; Job 8:9^{xv}; 1 Chronicles 29:15^{xvi}).*^{xvii} What will happen tomorrow? Only God

knows. Everything can change in an instant. Wars, health, relationships, theft, inflation, and accidents are a few of the things that can suddenly change the course of our lives. We do not live in fear, for all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28^{xviii}). But we do need to understand that tomorrow may be a very different. What if Christ returns tomorrow? Am I ready to see Him face to face? Have I forgiven those who have sinned against me? Am I still clinging to some sinful behavior I know I should change? Would I have regrets, or am I looking forward with expectation knowing that I am right with God, that I have done my best for His glory, and that my conscience is clear? I imagine my greatest regret, before my tears are wiped away, will be that I did not do more for the glory of God at His leading.

Sadly, so many American Christians live in pursuit of the American dream without seeking God's will for their lives. They do not seek God about their purpose, their vocation, future spouse, occupation, church they should attend, or how much to give and where. **So many people declare that Jesus is Lord of their lives but never ask Him what His will is for them.** Life flies by, and in the end, they find that all that they worked for is fuel for a fire (1 Corinthians 3:12-15^{xix}).

Life is so brief. The years fly by (Psalm 90:10^{xx}). So many of my friends and loved ones are already with Jesus. Ray Crowe just went on to glory a couple weeks ago. Gloria who played piano for us years ago died of cancer. Some of you had your spouse move on to glory this year. It does not matter how young or old we are, we need to be ready. Life is like the vapor from your tea kettle or the mist you exhale on a cold winter day. You see it vanish so quickly. That is the brevity of our lives, here one moment and gone the next. Are you using this short time for God's glory? Are you ready to stand before God, or are you so wrapped up in future plans that your focus is on this world?

Again, we see James use one of Jesus' themes. Jesus told the parable of the rich man who had a great harvest (Luke 12:16-21^{xxi}). He said he would build more barns and store it all up. Then he would kick back and enjoy the rest of his life. But Jesus called him a fool because that night he would die. Maybe it was a heart attack, or an aneurysm, or a thief. It did not matter the means. His time on earth was done. He had only lived for himself and his own pleasure. He had not thought of eternity or of God who had blessed him. He was focused on his own pleasure, not his laborers, nor the poor, nor God his creator (1 Corinthians 10:31^{xxii}).

¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." James 4:15 This is more than just tacking onto our plans a few words so that we can justify doing what we desire. It is acknowledging that God is the One who holds our life in His hands. He may call us home tomorrow, or He may direct us according to the path we imagine, or He may do something much greater. He often does more than we dream but not always in the way we dream.

Regarding the thought that we can do as we please, Guzik writes: "*This boastful arrogance is the essence of sin: a proud independence, the root of all sin, as was the case with Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15^{xxiii}) and Adam (Genesis 3:5-7^{xxiv})*"^{xxv}. The point is that we serve a loving God who predestines our lives. I do not understand how that works with our freedom to choose, but I know it does. Nor do I pretend to understand the path he takes us down. But we should all acknowledge that He put us where we are in the time that we live so that we might be drawn to Him. Here is how the Apostle Paul expressed that truth: *²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of*

the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, Acts 17:26,27 We are dependent on God. That is the humble reality of our condition. James has given us three reasons to not be cocky about our plans. **We are ignorant regarding what tomorrow holds. Our lives are brief, like a vapor. And we are entirely dependent on God.**

Paul is telling us in that Acts passage that God is involved in the intimate details of all of our lives. He allows things and ordains things to come into our lives to draw us to Himself. We must realize He is a loving God and sees our situations as His divine opportunity to draw us to Himself. Whether we see it as good or bad, God sees it as necessary to bring us into a deeper relationship with Him. When we do not see life in that way, we stress out, are miserable, and we blame God for what we consider to be bad. That only deepens the trial we are enduring. When we do see our situation as a part of God's design, we look for what we are to learn and how we might draw closer to Him.

The Puritans often added to all their future plans the Latin words *Deo Volente*, meaning God willing. It became such a common expression that they would abbreviate it, D. V. It is holding the continual attitude that our life is in God's hands to do with as He wills. Drawing again from Motyer, *To be sure the words 'If the Lord wills' can be a protective superstition; but they can also be the sweetest and most comfortable reassurance to a humble and trustful spirit.*^{xxvi}

¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. James 4:16 It is not a sin to look ahead and plan, but when we are so cocky as to say the plan will happen just as we think, we are forgetting that all things are in God's hands. James calls this faith in oneself arrogance. The word translated as arrogance was used of the quack who traveled around selling what he claimed was a miracle cure that in reality did nothing. It is also translated as vainglory, self-confidence, or the pride of life. It is evil not to accept that God is the One who has planned out your life before you were born. Psalm 139:16 tells us, *¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*

Not only is thinking we control our lives arrogant, but then when it does not turn out like we were sure it would, we tend to blame God for interfering in our lives. His so-called interference is for our good. What effect would your planned success have had on your soul? God knows, but we can only guess. God's path may be harder, but that is because He cares more about your eternal good than your temporal happiness. When we try to bring glory to ourselves, we are blessed to hit roadblocks and to be reminded that all glory belongs to God (Romans 11:36^{xxvii}). If the business we plan is with a heart to bring glory to God, that is a different matter. But so often our heart deceives us. We must discern if the plan is God's direction or is an attempt to satisfy our old nature's desires.

When God is our only desire, whether He ordains life or death, ease or pain, it is all equal, for we know it is from His loving hand. Seeing that our growing desire is to live for God's glory is a sign spiritual growth.

¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James 4:17 We know our lives are to bring glory to God. We know we should build up one another and not tear others down. James' maxim that followed his warnings to not speak evil and not to speak boastfully about our plans that do not look to God. Knowing we should not and yet to do so anyway is sin. We know God wants us to give to a need that

He puts before us, but we refuse to give. We know we should spend time with a person who needs encouragement, but we have other plans. We know we should build one another up and not tear down, but we make excuses to ignore God's command. We know we should not boast about our plans, but we yield to the pride of life and do so anyway. These are what we call sins of omission.

This verse is one we all should memorize. It will help us to accept the opportunities God puts before us. It will be the voice of the Holy Spirit helping us live as we should in obedience. We will find we are blessed in the process. We will be laying up our treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19^{xxviii}). God blesses the generous giver (Luke 6:38^{xxix}). He calls us to a life of generosity that He exemplified.

In Luke 12:41-48 Jesus taught a very similar message. It seems to me that James often boils down Jesus' teachings to brief expressions. The parable was of a master who went on a journey and left the care of his house to his servants. Jesus knew that He would be going away and that His house, the church, was being left to overseers, also known as elders. The ones in the parable took advantage of their position and abused their fellow servants and ransacked the food storage to eat and drink the master's food, and they abused the other servants. The master will suddenly return and deal severely with them.

Jesus summed up His message in verses 47 and 48: *⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.* Luke 12:47-48 The more we know, the more we are accountable for.

James' message throughout this letter is a call to action, to live out the faith that we profess. He points to our weaknesses that we might let God transform us. He calls us to do what we know we should be doing. Compared to eternity, this life and its opportunities to glorify God and lay up our treasures in heaven is so very brief.

Some people work as hard as they can so they can retire early. They carefully invest and work overtime and watch for opportunities to make money all for the hope of a carefree retirement. They are like the man who filled his barns. But what if they knew that eternity is incomparably longer than retirement in this short life? What if we realized that God loves us so much that He wants us to invest these short lives for His glory and our eternal good. Should we not be even more eager to prepare for eternity than the person who labors for a carefree retirement? Our reward is infinitely greater than his. It is good to provide for your own so you will not be dependent on others, but when that supersedes our preparation for eternity, our priorities are misplaced. May God *teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom* (Psalm 90:12^{xxx}).

Questions:

- 1 Why should we refuse to speak evil of someone?
- 2 What are the consequences of doing so? 3 Is it alright to do so if it is true?
- 4 When and how can we make judgments? 5 How brief is life? So...?
- 6 What should our attitude about the future be? Why?
- 7 Why is boasting about our future so wrong? (Guzik quote)
- 8 What is verse 17 teaching us? 9 What did Jesus say about it?
- 10 What does God want us to prioritize and why?

ⁱ **2 Corinthians 12:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

ⁱⁱ **1 Peter 2:1 (ESV)**

¹ So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.

ⁱⁱⁱ **John 13:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

^{iv} **James 1:22 (ESV)**

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

^v **Isaiah 33:22 (ESV)**

²² For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver; the LORD is our king; he will save us.

^{vi} **Deuteronomy 32:39 (ESV)**

³⁹ “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

^{vii} **James 5:9 (ESV)**

⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

^{viii} **Matthew 7:1 (ESV)**

¹ “Judge not, that you be not judged.

^{ix} **Matthew 22:37 (ESV)**

³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

^x **Romans 3:23 (ESV)**

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

^{xi} R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 196.

^{xii} J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 160.

^{xiii} *ibid*

^{xiv} **Psalms 102:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.

^{xv} **Job 8:9 (ESV)**

⁹ For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow.

^{xvi} **1 Chronicles 29:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.

^{xvii} David Guzik, *James*, David Guzik’s Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2013), Jas 4:13–16.

^{xviii} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xix} **1 Corinthians 3:12-15 (ESV)**

¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³ each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

^{xx} **Psalms 90:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

^{xxi} **Luke 12:16-21 (ESV)**

¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul

is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

^{xxii} **1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)**

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

^{xxiii} **Isaiah 14:12-15 (ESV)**

¹² "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! ¹³ You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; ¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' ¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.

^{xxiv} **Genesis 3:5-7 (ESV)**

⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

^{xxv} David Guzik, *James*, David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible (Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik, 2013), Jas 4:13–16.

^{xxvi} J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 161.

^{xxvii} **Romans 11:36 (ESV)**

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

^{xxviii} **Matthew 6:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,

^{xxix} **Luke 6:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

^{xxx} **Psalms 90:12 (ESV)**

¹² So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.