

# Arrogant Pride

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Okay, with James 4 open in front of us in our Bibles, on our laps, what I want to speak about! this morning is arrogant pride. We're going to speak about when a person is too full of themselves, when you think too highly of yourself, when you have an exaggerated sense of your importance and your ability. Arrogant pride. Do you know, just before we get into it, there is something very good. There's something almost delicious even, when proud people are brought down to size.

About 20 years ago, I got really interested for some reason in Muhammad Ali, the world champion heavyweight boxer. Muhammad Ali fought in some of the biggest fights of the 20th century, just to let you know. The Rumble in the Jungle, 1974 in Kinshasa. The Thriller in Manila, 1975 versus Joe Frazier. And back in the 1970s, the world stopped to watch this on TV. About one billion people tuned in to watch the Rumble in the Jungle. And Ali was nicknamed the greatest. And it kind of went to his head of just a little bit. In 1976, he published an autobiography entitled The Greatest, My Own Story. And the back cover recommendation is by Muhammad Ali. Quote, this book is so great, so good, it's hard to be humble. Anyway, there's a little story told about Muhammad Ali getting on a flight one day. And he settles into his seat and the plane's about to take off. And the air steward approaches him and asks him to put on his seatbelt. And Ali looks up at her.

And he says, Superman don't need no seatbelt. And she, tiny air steward, looks down at him and just says very quietly, Superman don't need no plane either. And the heavyweight champion of the world just brought down a touch and buckles up quietly. In James chapter 4 verse 6, it says, God opposes the proud, but shows favour to the humble. And in many ways, James's letter to first century church people aims to puncture pride, seems to me. He writes to church people, to people who consider themselves religious, who claim to have faith and know God and belong to him. And he says to them, so tell me about your life then. Tell me about what comes out of your heart, what you say with your tongue. Do you do what the word says or not? And since September the 1st, many of us have found this letter and James's message exposing us and showing us up and puncturing us a little bit.

In last week's passage, chapter 4 verses 4 to 10, James is at his most stark. You might remember this from last Sunday. He speaks to adulterous people, chapter 4 verse 1, commanding his readers to return to the God of grace and submit ourselves to him and humble ourselves before him. Today, if you see, in chapter 4 verses 11 to 17, he changes tack a little bit. He speaks again to brothers and sisters.

And on his radar, in his sights, are two examples of the kind of arrogant pride that God opposes.

[ 3 : 3 2 ] He writes these verses, chapter 4 verses 11 to 17, that we might recognise arrogant pride in our lives, some of us, and that we might then stop. So let's look through these verses together.

The two things I want to point out from verses 11 to 17. Firstly, verses 11 and 12 is about the arrogance of bad-mouthing people, if I can put it like that. So let me read again from verse 11.

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them, speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy, but you. Who are you to judge your neighbour? Okay, let's explore this together. In verse 11, the word slander is the same word as, just a touch later, speak against. It means when you speak against someone in personal harmful attack. And verse 11 also talks about judging a brother or sister, standing in judgment over someone by what you say. So what are we talking about here? We're talking about when you find fault in others and judge them, and then you put them down with personal critical, critical, harmful words. You bad-mouthed people. And James's command, very straightforwardly, is brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. The command to take to

heart, to think about, we live in a world, do we not, where judgmental bad-mouthing is really pretty normal. Think of the world of politics. A quote from an opposition leader. Have you ever seen a more incompetent, hopeless, out of touch, U-turning, pledge-breaking, make it up as you go along, back of the envelope, miserable shower than this Prime Minister and this government? And everyone listening in the conference hall goes, hooray! Because personal attack is the way to do public life.

Think of the playground. Think of the chat at school and the constant taunts and bashing and name-calling. And think of closed front doors you walk past and behind those doors the hidden verbal abuse that takes place. Or the trolling on social media, the barrage of abusive and harmful words. So easy to be like that when you're not face to face but just tapping away. Bad-mouthing, judging, criticising, putting people down. It is the way of the world. The thing is though here James is talking more about the church, in fact he is talking about the church among brothers and sisters who say they belong to Jesus together.

There are churches where bad-mouthing one another is the norm. At church council meetings everybody sounds off, sharp emails fly around, little factions form against one another. Maybe you've been part of a church like that. Wonderfully, praise God, I don't think St John's is particularly like that.

But it is still possible to nurse a fault-finding critical spirit inside here. So when every person you come across you weigh them up. And if they say or do something you think is not quite right you latch onto it in your head. He's so mouthy, so centre of attention. She's so nosy, always smiling and asking how I am. He's so stuck up, casual, miserable, wet. Their use of time and money, their life choices, their children so out of control, she really hasn't got her life sorted out.

And in my heart I act as prosecutor and judge and jury, as I find fault and make my mind up and then certainly in my mind and very occasionally it slips out, I put you down.

[ 8 : 03 ] Do you know what that's talking about? Whether it comes out very obviously here, maybe it comes out more obviously elsewhere, in the car or at home.

You know where other people, other drivers are the fools, never me. And it does come out in that little four windows where no one can hear me. You idiot! Or at home, because that's often where we let go and let rip.

Where you can be a fault finder with a flatmate or a spouse or a child and then openly harsh or critical. You silly woman, you stupid child.

Personal, critical, harmful word, bad mouthing. That's what James is talking about. And James says to us, do not be like that with one another.

Now, here's the reason why in these verses. James could say, by the way, hey it's hurtful and it messes people up and that would be right. Instead here he says there is something, well something terribly arrogant and proud about bad mouthing other people.

[ 9 : 17 ] Brothers and sisters, don't slander one another. Why? Because anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it.

I've got to think about this. James is talking about the revealed law of God, spoken through Moses, taken up, spoken through Jesus, commanding us how to live.

You say, how might my harmful words speak against God's law? That's why we read a little bit of Leviticus chapter 19 earlier, where the Lord commands Israel and he says, quote, do not go about spreading slander among your people.

Do not bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. God's law, his command for us. But you see, when I disregard that, when in my life I find fault in you and judge you and put you down with a critical word, I am saying with my actions that God's revealed law, don't slander but love your neighbour, actually means precious little to me.

Rather than sitting under God's commands in humility, I sit over them in judgment. It says here, do you see in the verse, when you judge the law, you're not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it.

[ 10 : 52 ] Thank you, Father, for your perfect law to me. Don't slander. But I'm not going to do it. It's not for me. That is arrogant pride to stand over and dismiss his law.

But there's more than that because when I judge God's law and I make myself the judge of people around me, then, well, to put it delicately, I place myself in competition with someone else.

Because, verse 12, there is only one lawgiver and judge. The one who is able, by the way, to save and destroy. If you can feel the force of this.

The job of lawmaker and lawgiver and judge of all the earth is taken. And it's not you and me. I think the end of verse 12 is meant to slice into the proud and arrogant.

But you, who are you to judge your neighbour? That's a good question. Creature. Who on earth do you think you are to look down on your neighbour and judge them?

[12:11] Husband, parent, friend, church member. Who on earth do you think you are to set aside God's law and look down on and badmouth the person in front of you?

This is point one, these verses this morning. The offensive arrogance, really, of badmouthing people.

When above us stands the one lawgiver and judge of all. The one who says, love your neighbour as yourself. In these verses, James wants to correct us.

He wants to resize us. Bring us down to our proper place. Before the God who is Lord of all. Listen to C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity talking about pride.

He wrote, in God, you come up against something which is in every respect superior to you. Unless you know God as that, and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all.

[13:21] As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud person is always looking down on things and people. And of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

See, above us, today and in our lives, a lawgiver and the judge of all who is able to save and destroy. The one before whom I am nothing. Who do I think I am?

Walking around in the world, fault-finding and criticising and badmouthing. Imagine how it might change us. And politicians and children in playgrounds and members of churches.

When we find our proper place before this high and holy God. First thing, there's a second kind of arrogant pride that God opposes.

Just two things to say this morning. The first, verses 11 and 12, the arrogance of badmouthing people. But second now, from verses 13 to 17, the arrogance of boastful planning.

[14:33] Let me read this. Now listen, you who say today or tomorrow will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. Okay. The scenario, so look at this.

The scenario, verse 13, is someone who says, quote, Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. So what is wrong with that?

Because, just to clear away some bits, the Bible does not have a problem with doing business. The Bible doesn't have a problem with making money. The Bible doesn't even have a problem with living somewhere for one year.

[15:40] That's okay. The issue here is the kind of self-confident planning when you believe that you can direct your destiny and control your future.

Today or tomorrow, this is what we will do. We'll go into that city, spend a year, do business, make a profit. I'm in charge of things. This is my plan and this is what I will do.

These are great persons to think about. It's so up to date, this. Is it not? Two thousand years later. Because human nature doesn't change.

New governments begin with big promises. In the next four years, this is what we will achieve. In life as a whole, you're encouraged, you're trained to plot your course, the direction you want to go in and you can make it happen.

And if you believe in yourself and you're strong enough, nothing can stop you in your life. I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul. It's so tempting to believe this.

[16:49] What might that look like? And we're going to wait for three or four years and then we're going to have children. I'm going to work here for a while and then I'm going to build up some experience and then I'm going to move on to better things.

My plan? I'm going to live here for a few years. I'm going to get a visa. I'm going to save up. I'm going to move somewhere bigger. You can be a super self-confident planner in your life.

I will make it happen. Just to say, I think on the flip side, you can also actually be a very unconfident and anxious person. And you're so worried about your life that only when you have a plan in place do you feel a bit safer, a bit more in control.

Now you say to yourself, what's wrong with that? What is wrong with deciding on your tomorrow and controlling your life? The answer is, you're not in control.

Verse 14. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. That is, you're busy standing tall and planning your year and your life, but the details of the next 24 hours are absolutely completely unknown to you.

[18:12] In fact, says James, verse 14, what is your life, oh big planner? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. James is resizing us.

And what he says here is brutal, but it's kind and it's true. When you get up tomorrow morning, look at the steam from your kettle or the early morning mist.

Or if you have a little shower room and you have a shower and you get out and the mirror's all misty, maybe just write on it with your finger, you are a mist. What is mist?

Mist is there just for a moment and then it vanishes. James doesn't say, let me think of something that you are like. He says to us, you are a mist.

You're here and then gone. I wonder whether we know that. I worked in a bank in London about 25 to 30 years ago and I had a really good friend called Mark.

[19:26] And he was Greek, he was from North London, he was just a couple of years younger than me. And we used to take slightly extra long lunch breaks that we shouldn't have and go and play pool together. And we got on really well.

And after I left the bank and started working for a church, we stayed in touch. And Mark moved on and moved up in the banking world. He spent his first bonus on an old BMW.

He's a really, really nice, gentle guy. And he met a Polish girl and they got on well together. And Mark and I would have the occasional pint. And Meg and I, when we were married, we saw him and his girlfriend for a meal and we got on really well as a four.

And a while back, six or seven years ago, I was going down to London and I thought I'd track Mark down. And go for a drink and catch up and see how he'd been. I didn't have an address or a phone number.

So I googled his name. And the very first search result was his death notice. He was gone. Like age 37, brain tumour.

[20:29] My friend. Mark wasn't a boastful planner. That's not what I'm saying. But you see James' point here in these verses.

What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. You're really going to plan out your life? I'm the master of my fate.

I've got it all under control. You haven't. I haven't. And to think I have is the height of arrogance. Such an exaggerated sense of my importance and my ability that I will plan and make it through.

It's deluded. And James says here, come back down to your proper size, O man. Verse 15.

Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. See, I'm not the lawgiver.

[21:33] I'm not the judge of all. And I'm not the controller of the future and the master of life and death. Say, if it's the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

See, he is the one who is the sovereign creator and good lord of the universe. He is the one who sustains every particle of existence. He is the one who exercises his will over human history.

He is eternal. He knows every tomorrow. He is God. And he is the God who holds each of our tiny lives and our futures in his hands.

Verse 16. As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

If anyone there knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. To imagine that I can direct my life in my strength. Who on earth do I think I am?

[22:35] All such boasting is evil. James 4.11-17. The arrogance.

Arrogance is an exaggerated sense of who I am. The arrogance of bad-mouthing people. The arrogance of boastful planning. I mentioned at the start with Muhammad Ali.

There is something good, delicious even when it's someone else, when the arrogant proud are brought down to size and when we're put back in our place before him. There is something, though, very offensive, do you not think, about acting as though we're the big ones.

I look down on and I speak against other people. And I control my future and I'm the centre of the universe. It's offensive. It's also a bit laughable, to be honest.

And it's pretty ugly. And God's word to us here in James 4 is meant to resize us. He, our mighty creator and lawgiver and judge and master, and we, flawed, frail, mist-like creatures.

[ 23 : 53 ] That is our real place. Not worthless pawns, but tiny, dependent creatures. Not worthless. Do we know that about ourselves?

The most remarkable thing, though, just to ram this off this morning. The most remarkable thing is that this lawgiver and judge and master who opposes the proud, he actually decides to humble himself and make himself nothing.

He does that in the person of Jesus Christ. He does that in the person of Jesus. He does that in the person of Jesus. So that through the work of Jesus, it's the most amazing thing.

Little, proud, mist-creatures like you and me can be captured and forgiven and lifted up and know our God as we humble ourselves before him.

And when you and I truly know our God, when we repent of arrogant pride and humble ourselves before our gracious Lord and God, it will change us.

[ 24 : 59 ] It will change us. I'm just listening once more to C.S. Lewis. Quote, He wants you to know him. He wants to give you himself.

And he and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with him, you will in fact end up humble. Delightedly humble.

That is before him in our days this week, our mighty Lord, our glorious saviour, the judge of all. We, having received his grace and with our lives in his hands for good.

We can go out into our weeks and we can say no to bad-mouthing people. And instead say we will love our neighbours. And we can go into our weeks and say we are going to say no to boastful planning.

And instead we will say if it is the Lord's will because he is our Lord and God. And the more we live our lives like this in true right humility, the more we find our place living under him, we will become people who are delightedly humble.

[ 26 : 15 ] Not just humble but happy. And not just humble and happy but humble and happy and holy. And it is the most glorious thing in the world.

I am going to lead us in a prayer and then we are going to sing together. Let's pray. Let's pray. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. Gracious Lord, we pray to you this morning.

Many of us, I guess, like me, conscious of our own foolish pride. How easily we judge, look down on and bad mouth others.

And so judge the law. How tempted we are to plan out our futures. Yet forget that we are but missed.

[ 27 : 25 ] Thank you for your correcting word. Thank you for your kind word to us. Thank you that in humility before you we will find true blessing.

Thank you that you're a God who gives more grace to proud, mist-like creatures like us. And so together today we say to you that we turn away from bad mouthing and slander.

And we want to turn away from boastful planning. And we do want to humble ourselves before you. And place ourselves in your care. And under your sovereign authority and rule.

Grow us and change us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.