

What is Your Life?

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[0 : 00] You'll find it a help if you take your Bible and open to James chapter 4 and 5 that Phoebe read. The last two paragraphs of chapter 4 and the first one of chapter 5, three little paragraphs, but I've decided to start one verse early in last week's passage because Dan didn't come close to getting it.

That's a joke for those of you who knew. It was great last week. Chapter 4 verse 10, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. And the reason we start there is that we can't make sense of these paragraphs apart from chapter 4 verse 10 because last week as we heard from James 4, we got to the bedrock fundamental issue that James has been driving at since the beginning of the book, our God complex, our spiritual pride.

And I don't know if any of us think of ourselves as proud people usually because the thing about pride is that it hides itself in the deep recesses, you know, in the reeds at the bottom of the heart. And what it does is it puts itself behind other things and holds onto them. So you can't go at pride directly. You have to take it by surprise.

You have to go at it by its fruit, its work and its effects. And that's exactly what James has been doing ever since we've begun this book. So behind our double-mindedness and behind our worldliness is actually spiritual pride.

[1 : 35] Behind the fact that we will hear the word, gobs of the word and not do it is pride. The fact that we prefer our kind of people or the fact that we lack love or the fact that we have poisonous tongues.

It all has to do with pride. Because pride is the most painful and hidden spiritual undoing in all our lives since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

You remember back then God's word to them was specific and clear. But the voice of the snake said, no, no, no, no. When you disobey God, your eyes will be open and you will be able to know good from evil.

He didn't mean know in the sense of experience good and evil. He meant know in the sense of determining and deciding what was good and evil.

And at the heart of every temptation outside the Garden of Eden, at the heart of our lives, is this constant desire we have to play God. And it's spiritual pride.

[2 : 42] We want to put God off the throne and put ourselves back there. This is the way Satan takes hold of us. The best Christian I've ever met, best Christians I've ever met, confessed to struggling with it very hard.

It was the first sin to enter the world. It's going to be the last sin that's going to be rooted out of the world. And James has had a number of ways of describing it. Having a divided heart.

Being worldly. Having friendship with the world. Arrogance. But they're all pictures of just one thing. And that's spiritual pride. And here is the thing. This is written to Christians.

This is written to Christian churches. Christian communities. Because even after we take up the cross and begin to follow Jesus, you and I have to deal with spiritual pride day by day, which hides itself so very cleverly.

C.S. Lewis, Christian writer, says this. This is great stuff. He says, Pride is the essential vice. The utmost evil. It leads to every other device.

[3 : 46] It is the complete anti-God state of mind. He says, It doesn't come from our animal nature. It comes directly from hell. It is purely spiritual.

Consequently, it is far more subtle and deadly. And I think that's one of the reasons why the book of James is just so strong. Strong medicine.

And particularly in today's section is because he loves his readers and he wants to warn us of this terrible danger. This danger, the spiritual pride that hides behind other things so well. It's our most difficult battle, brothers and sisters.

And what James does in these three paragraphs is he shows three ways in which our spiritual pride works. Three arenas, if you will. Three concrete manifestations of spiritual pride.

And each of them show how we try and play God. So the first paragraph, verses 11 to 12 in chapter 4, spiritual pride is seen in how we play God at church.

[4 : 51] So let me just read verse 10, which is the heading, and 11. And there are no paragraphs, of course, in the original.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. In the original, the word speak against is literally speak down against.

In other words, it could be slander or it could be gospel. You could be saying something perfectly true about another person. But what you're doing is you're putting yourself up and you're putting them down and them below you.

And we do it so skillfully, almost unconsciously. And watch what James does. He works from the surface down into the depths. He says, whenever you put someone else down, whenever you badmouth someone else and put yourself up, you're actually speaking against the law of God and judging the law because you've assumed the status of judge.

And you've looked at that other person. You've measured them in your measure and you've found them wanting. And so you condemn them all behind their back. So we imagine to ourselves no harm has really been done.

[6 : 17] And James says the only way to do that is to push God off the throne and say, God, you step aside for a moment. I've got this one. I'm going to set the standard. Very important to see how this works.

James does not appeal to our pride and say, don't do that. It's bad manners to treat other people that way. He doesn't use a pragmatic argument. He doesn't say, well, you'll never have a close-knit Christian community if you keep badmouthing others.

He doesn't even say it's a sin against love. He says it's a sin against humility. It's pride because ultimately it's directed at God.

You see, the question for us is in verse 12. The end of verse 12. Who are you, he says. It's a very good question. Because you are not the lawgiver.

And if you judge the law, there is one who stands behind the law. That's God. And only one person is able to save and to destroy. You see? It's a very helpful.

[7 : 21] Every time we gossip and every time we say something cynical and snide about another person. And every time we denigrate or say something suspicious. What we're doing is we're playing God. We're taking God's place.

There's only one way forward for us. 410. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. And I have to say, we have a wrong idea about humility.

We think of humility as a sort of a shy, introverted personality. You know, I know introverts are going to rule the world. But we think of humility in terms of peace at any price weakness.

Humility is just facing the truth. It's allowing God to be God. It's living in the light of the fact that everything I have and everything I am, I owe to the Heavenly Father who is the source of all good gifts.

Jonathan Edwards was a brilliant theologian in the 1700s who saw a fantastic revival under his own preaching. He was a very interesting man actually.

[8 : 26] He never used intonation. He read his texts closely like this. Which Dan and I are going to try out for a few weeks. But they saw revival.

I mean, whole towns came to faith in Christ and lots of extraordinary things happened. And he wrote a treatise on revival.

And he said that whenever a revival happened, what stopped it was Christians fighting with each other. And what was behind it was pride. And in this treatise, I've just chosen four things he says which show spiritual pride and its opposite what real humility is.

Let me give you these four. First he said, Spiritual pride is seen when you speak about another person's faults with bitterness or laughter or contempt. Christian humility is seen in either being silent about the other person's faults or going to them and speaking with mercy and grief.

Secondly, a spiritually proud person is very quick to see faults in other Christians. But a humble person esteems others better than themselves and is so busy with God's things and is very aware of the evil in their own hearts.

[9 : 44] And they think nobody has a greater reason to thank God and to love others than they do. Thirdly, spiritual pride takes very quick notice of any injury or perceived injury received to themselves and they're very easily aggravated.

They deserve better. Whereas humility concerns itself with the injury of others. And fourthly and lastly, the spiritually proud person thinks everybody wants their help and likely instructs others. Like a consultant, you know. The humble person carries with them the air of the disciple. And their question is, What can I do to better honor God?

Well, here is the application of chapter 4, verse 10, to the use of our tongues. Very interesting, isn't it, again? Prime instrument for pride. And James says, Don't play God with others at church. Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you. What's the second area? This is in verses 13 to 17, the last paragraph in chapter 4.

[10 : 49] And here we see that spiritual pride is seen in how we play God with our lives. And again, he works from the surface down. We read the first two verses.

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. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Now, the Bible is not against planning. The Bible is not against strategic plans and visions.

The Bible is not against trading or making profits. The issue is much deeper and spiritual. Here is a person doing what everyone does. But they are pretty confident about the timing today and tomorrow and about the location, where they are going to go and how long they are going to be there and about the outcome.

And what strikes me about verse 13 and I think strikes everyone is just how very normal it is. We all do this. And that's exactly the point. We all live very naturally as though we are the masters of our time, of our place, and of our future.

[12 : 06] We act as though we're captains of our own lives. We think and plan as though this life is mine, that the future is mine, and the only really big issue is my choice in this.

And so I make my plans. I decide where I'm going to live. I wouldn't pray about that sort of thing. I decide where I'm going to invest my money. I might give some to God. But I'd certainly never lay all those things before him and ask him for his will.

And I don't bring God into the sort of short-term future planning. Sure, God's involved in the long, long-term planning when I go to heaven. But between now and then, I'm in the driving seat. I make the choices.

I control my future. You see, we're playing God. We just slice God out of whole areas of our lives and put ourselves in the driving seat. And the irony is that we don't even know if we're going to be here tomorrow, he says.

It's completely fatuous. On Saturday mornings when I was a child, my mother used to read the obituaries. Cheery thing. But she would always pause when she came across someone who died under 25.

[13 : 12] And she'd read it to us. Very interesting. This morning as I drove to church, I heard on CBC that a 21-year-old man last night died in a car accident. And here is the question that James puts before us in verse 16, in verse 14, I'm sorry.

What is your life? What is your life? Is it yours to dispose of as you wish? No, it is a gift of God. It is a gift from the Father of lights to be used for his purposes.

And the shortness and uncertainty of human life ought to produce in us humility. We're a vapor.

What does it mean to humble ourselves before God?

Well, verse 15, James, gives the answer. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this and do that because we are controlled by the fact that God controls the future.

So, in the way we think about our planning and our future and what we are doing, James says, we need to say verbally, if the Lord wills.

[14 : 26] In previous generations, sometimes when Christians wrote letters, pious Christians, they would put DV, which is the Latin for God willing. And someone told me after the nine o'clock service, he had lots of friends that used to do that and they'd put DV on their letters and then they'd

do what they liked anyway.

It's a good thing to do, but that's not quite what this is saying. We need to say things like, if the Lord wills, we will live. We don't know if we're going to make it home today, honestly.

Our days are in his hands. Every day that we have is a precious gift from him. He does not owe us anything. He doesn't owe us a minute longer. And the fact that our lives and our days are in his hands is just the most wonderful security that we as Christians ought to enjoy and rest in.

We don't need to lead the sort of anxious consumer life thinking that we have to squeeze the best out of this life. We've got to get every experience. We've got to make a bucket list of places to go and things to do.

And so I control my money and I control my family and planning for my own self issues. No, no. We say, if the Lord wills. And when we do it, we're doing exactly what Jesus did.

[15 : 41] From the day Jesus met the woman from Samaria. He hadn't eaten and the disciples said, come on, you've got to eat, you've got to eat. He said to them, my food is to do the will of my father who sent me.

My very, my very food. And he teaches us, we've already prayed this this morning, he teaches us to pray in the Lord's prayer, your will be done. And when we prayed that this morning, what, what, what's in your heart when you pray that?

Is it a sort of vague, general, you know, cosmic hope something happens? Because I think the intention of that is that we bow our hearts before the father. And we lay before him all our plans and our progress and our possessions.

And that's why verse 17 is such a perfect transition between the second and third paragraphs.

Because spiritual pride, there's two kinds of sin. There's sins of commission, where we commit sins and do things against God.

And there are sins of omission, where we fail. And verse 17 is about sins of omission. Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it. For him it is sin.

[16 : 49] And I think sins of spiritual pride are much more seen in sins of omission. In what we fail to do. In how we just treat God as irrelevant and leave him out of our future and our finances and our family.

So spiritual pride shows in how we play God at church. Spiritual pride shows in how we play God with our lives. And thirdly, in the final paragraph, chapter 5, verse 1, come now you rich.

Now, James is speaking to the wealthy, to the rich. And it's very strong.

And the easiest way for us to tune out of this is to draw a line that separates the rich from us just a couple of dollars above us.

Then you can ignore everything James says. That's a safe way. You'll avoid the issue of pride altogether there. It's easy to make us feel guilty about this.

[18 : 00] But the line probably ought to go just a few thousand dollars below all of us. The point of coming to this is that there is something uniquely spiritually hazardous about money and lots of it.

It has a way of cooperating with our spiritual pride like nothing else in the world. So Paul said, for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

It is through this craving some have wandered away from their faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows. We've seen that at St. John's. But there's something highly spiritual risky about wealth.

It colludes with our God complex. And it's not something you would wish for your children. Again, the Bible is not anti-wealth.

Nor is it anti the wealthy. The Bible never takes a class and says the class is responsible for evil. Be it rich or poor. Never privileges a class or anything in between.

[19 : 06] There's no sin in the Bible's view in being wealthy. We've used Abraham as an example in the book of James who is fabulously rich. However, it is the perfect arena to hide your spiritual pride.

And James says we hide our spiritual pride in the way our money affects us, in the way we acquire it, and the way we use it. And these are three little tests for us.

Three ways that money is colluding with our spiritual pride. And I'll just go through them quickly. The first is, the first test of money colluding with our spiritual pride is when we hoard and stockpile our money.

Verses two and three. Your riches have rotted. 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. James drops into prophetic voice. Gathers up the whole biblical tradition.

[20 : 09] And we've got to say again, the Bible is not against prudential saving. It's not against life insurance or financial planning or retirement saving. We have a fantastic financial planner. And, you know, we'll meet for two and a half hours and about three minutes is about money.

And then the rest is about how futile money is. Actually, that's not a good recommendation for a financial planner. The Bible is not against planning.

But the Bible, from beginning to end, condemns the hoarding of wealth and not using it for God. It's an explicit mark of trying to play God. I think that's the purpose of these words.

Rot and moths and rust. It's the lack of the use of our wealth for God that bears testimony against us.

We know it's the last days before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know God's purpose is to build a church to make disciples of all nations. And you have the resources.

[21 : 10] You have more than you need. But holding on to them, hoarding them, hiding them away for yourself is not laying up treasure in heaven. It's laying up treasure on earth.

And though you may be the very model of a Western Coast hopeful, you're not rich towards God. And James asks the question, why?

Why are you accumulating? Why are you amassing such wealth? It's an attempt to play God. C.S. Lewis again. He says, pride is competitive by its very nature.

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next person.

We say that people are proud of being rich and clever and good looking, but they're not.

They are proud of being richer or cleverer or better looking than others. Pride is the pleasure of being above the rest. That's why a lot of money is spiritually treacherous.

[22 : 12] It enables you to look down on others and it colludes very cleverly with the God complex. But all the wealth, every dollar that you and I have is a gift from God.

And those of you who have a lot of it, or more than you need, let's say, that includes more of us, you don't deserve it. I mean, God hasn't given it to you to pile it up, but to use.

So I ask those of you who are wealthy in the congregation, are you looking for ways and praying for ways to use your wealth for Christ? And I say to those of you who think of yourselves as poor in the congregation and not wealthy, do you pray for your wealthy Christian friends who face this burden and temptation of spiritual pride?

A very wealthy Christian man once said to me that he had set up one of his children in business, given him a lot of money, and it had ruined his son spiritually.

It had drawn him away from Christ to a life of hoarding, and it's one of his great regrets. That's the first test of whether money is colluding with our spiritual pride, we hoard.

[23 : 22] The second is the way money is acquired. Verse 4, 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. This is wealth that's been made dishonestly. This is made on the backs of those who have no power of reply.

By not paying workers adequately, by holding back their rightful wages, not because we couldn't pay, but because it enabled us to amass more wealth, comes under the condemnation of God.

The Bible is very concerned about the treatment of workers. Deep in the Old Testament, you had to pay your worker daily. You couldn't keep back their pay overnight. And it's very difficult for us, isn't it?

Those of us who live in the West, who have investments, that are invested, that are built on the backs of unjust economics of the developed world.

[24 : 26] How much of it comes from shady deals? Because the blood, like the blood of Abel that cries out from the ground for vengeance, the cries of those whose labor has been extorted cries out and has been heard, and it's been heard by the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of heaven.

I think for us, shady deals, quick money, without right payment to those who deserve it, we need to know that's putting ourselves in the place of God.

And if we're going for that, it's a sure sign that money is colluding with our pride. But God's power stands against the proud and stands with the humble. So hoarding, how we acquire it.

And the third sign that wealth is colluding with pride is indulgence. Verse 5. You've lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.

You've fattened your heart in the day of slaughter, a particularly gruesome expression. Well, here is friendship with the world in visible form, not just self-indulgence, it's luxury, extravagance.

[25 : 31] It's what every advertisement that comes under our door appeals to. Luxury, the luxury life, a luxury house, a luxury car, a luxury watch.

It's ridiculous. But living for luxury means setting aside my concern for others and setting my concern for the glory of God and using my resources for myself and pampering myself with it.

And part of the sadness of this is that God's given us that money and wealth can be used for great, great good. And when we appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, it's going to be a great embarrassment if we've hoarded what he gave us.

And when he asks you, what did you do with the wealth that I gave you? What will you say? It is possible, I think, in our proud use of money in the end to be opposing Jesus.

And verse 6 is not an easy verse to translate. But let me try and, I'm not sure it's quite right here, verse 6. Literally it says, you have condemned and murdered the righteous one.

[26 : 38] And the last second phrase ought to be a question. Does he not oppose you? Does he not resist you? And if I'm right in thinking the righteous person is Jesus himself, then James is saying that a life of luxury and the life of playing God will end up in wanting Jesus out of the way because he keeps getting in the way.

And here is the Lord Jesus who gave us the model of humility, who though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, that through his poverty we might become rich beyond all riches.

And through his riches create a community of people who think, who don't think less of themselves but think of themselves less.

A community that puts its plans before God and lives for God and holds its wealth with an open hand.

And we cannot know each other's hearts. I can't know your heart, you can't know mine. But I think the passage calls us to humble ourselves before the Lord and we need to repent.

[27 : 48] If we're playing God at church, if we're putting ourselves above others and speaking down about others, you need to repent and humble yourself before the Lord. And if you're playing God with your life and living and planning as though God is irrelevant, you need to repent and I need to repent.

And if you're hoarding your money and spending it on yourself in great luxury, you need to repent. All these are fruit of spiritual pride. And the only way forward for us is to humble ourselves before the Lord.

Final quote from Lewis. 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're looking down, you cannot see something that's above you. So brothers and sisters, chapter 4 verse 10, humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you. He will fill you. He will lift you up. Not so that you can be proud again, but He'll fill you with Himself. He will exalt you so that you might see His face and be filled with Him and see that that's where the real beauty and the real treasure is in Him.

[29 : 01] So let's bow on our knees. Let's humble ourselves. Let's seek Him as we pray together. Bev comes and lead us in prayer, knowing that He promises to exalt us in due time.