

The Letter of James

“ARROGANCE, PATIENCE, & SPEECH”

JAMES 4:11-5:20

“You are people who do not know about tomorrow, what your life will be like.” (JAS 4:14a)

“Therefore be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.” (JAS 5:7a)

I. The Section as a Whole

James 4:11–5:20 forms the final great arc of the epistle—a movement from arrogance to patience, from oppression to hope, and finally from destructive speech to healing speech. It is the culmination of James’s theological vision: a community purified of double-mindedness, living under God’s measure of reality, and embodying the “word of truth” in its life together.

James 4:11–5:6 holds together as a unified indictment of arrogance, expressed in three recognizable behaviors. These behaviors are not random moral failings; they are manifestations of friendship with the world, the very opposite of the “wisdom from above.”

James 5:7–11 then turns, with the connective “therefore,” as an exhortation in response to James’ own depiction and denunciation of the three modes of arrogance and, in particular, his attack on the oppressive rich. James has clearly turned from speaking directly to the oppressive rich to speaking to community, as his use of the term “brothers” surely indicates (used three times in this short section). Two themes dominate: the positive fulfillment promised to those who endure and the vivid expectation of the parousia, the imminent coming of the Lord as judge.

Finally, James 5:12–20 forms a unified discourse on positive speech—speech that builds, heals, forgives, and restores the ekklesia.

II. JAMES 4:11--5:6 - Envy & the Spirit of God

Consistent with the opposition to religious double-mindedness that has stretched the whole of the book, James opposes three forms of human pretension or arrogance that illustrate “friendship with the world”:

- **Slander** — Slander places the speaker in the position of judge. Slander actually connects back to the question of envy, for slander serves to lower my brother and elevate myself. Slander is, therefore, arrogance that seeks to assert oneself in the destruction of another. It is arrogance rooted in envy. To slander is to stand above the law, which is itself a violation of the royal law of love. Who are we to stand as judges of the law? James’s theological warrant is sharp: God alone is judge! God alone has the power of life and death! God alone is the giver of the law and the one who saves.

- **Boasting in Security** — The businessmen boast in their plans as though they control tomorrow. Their speech again reveals an arrogance that is tied to envy and the perception of reality as a closed system governed by human predictability and profit. James rebukes their belief in the security of that closed system by reminding them that they cannot even secure their own existence. James invites them to a new understanding that perceives an open system ordered to a gracious God.
- **Oppression by the Rich** — Here James adopts the cadence of the prophets. The luxury of the rich is a pretense built on exploitation and oppression of the worker and the innocent. What makes this attack so distinctive is the way in which the two perceptions/realities are so ironically interwoven. The attitudes of the rich exemplify the characteristics of envy and arrogance that James has sketched. The rich exploit relationships and live only to fill their own pleasures. They have a complete disregard for the royal law! The rich, though, are reminded that God hears the cry of the poor, and is preparing for the day of slaughter when their own wealth and riches will stand in testimony against them.

These three examples reveal the same theological truth: envy and arrogance are incompatible with the Spirit of God. Human behavior flows from a perception of reality—worldly wisdom or godly wisdom—and only the latter measures reality according to the God who gives generously.

III. 5:7-11 - Patience in the Time of Testing

James's understanding of judgment is not distant or abstract. It is imminent. The parousia of the Lord is expected soon, and this expectation shapes the community's life. James gives every indication of sharing in an eschatological expectation that is intense and focused on the return of Jesus as the judging Lord.

The hope herein is real: God will oppose the wicked (5:6) and reward the righteous (JAS 5:11). But the community lives in the tension between conviction ("God resists the arrogant") and experience (the arrogant oppress the righteous). How should they act in this in-between time? The answer lies in the exhortation of 5:8: "Strengthen your hearts, for the Lord is coming soon." The heart is the seat of perception. They must adopt the same posture as the judge—patient, restrained, waiting for the proper time. Oppression suffered does not justify oppression inflicted.

Now James offers two exempla from the Scriptures: the prophets (models of steadfast endurance) and Job (rewarded for his unwavering loyalty to God). Patience is not passive; it is the active stance of those who perceive reality through the wisdom from above. James then enjoins the community to strengthen their hearts in the proper perception of reality - that the Lord is approaching to judge - and the proper behavior that follows on that perception.

But they are not simply to endure, they are to adopt the same attitude toward their oppressors as the judge, who waits for the proper time of intervention. Oppression done to us does not, in

other words, justify oppression done to others. James takes as an example the prophets, tapping into the self-identity of early Christianity, and Job, who was rewarded in his loyalty to God.

IV. JAMES 5:12-20 - The Power of Speech Revisited

James brings his entire theological project to its final movement by returning to the power of speech—a theme woven through the whole letter. Up to this point, speech has revealed friendship with the world (1:13–14; 2:3, 7; 3:9; 4:11, 13; 5:9) and double-mindedness (2:14–15; 3:9; 4:3). Now, at the conclusion, he turns to how speech can function positively within the *ekklesia*. If the tongue can boast great things in evil, it can also accomplish great things in good. If speech can be an instrument of envy, arrogance, competition, and violence, it can also become an instrument of healing, forgiveness, cooperation, and truth.

James's prohibition of oaths is rooted in his theology of the word of truth. In the ancient world, speech was the primary symbol of the self—the overflow of the heart. Oath-taking, or the invocation of some special realm or power (even the name of the Lord) to buttress one's own speech becomes, paradoxically, an admission that one's own speech is untrustworthy. James's command is therefore an invitation to plain speech: a yes that reveals the heart's affirmation; a no that establishes truthful boundaries. Trustworthy speech becomes the foundation for trustworthy community.

After the prohibition of oaths, James turns to three modes of speech that build the *ekklesia*'s solidarity:

- **Prayer for the sick** — Will the community act as friends of God or friends of the world? Prayer is the speech-act of solidarity, rallying around the weak rather than abandoning them.
- **Confession of sin** — How will the community respond to the one who has sinned? With mercy and restoration, or with the divisive instincts of envy and competition? Confession tests whether the *ekklesia* embodies the royal law.
- **Speaking truth** — Truth-telling is the community's commitment to the "word of truth" over error. Correction is not punitive but salvific—aimed at saving souls through the work of the implanted word.

It is no accident that James uses **ekklesia** here for the first time. These threats—sickness, sin, error—are threats to the **identity of the community as community**. The question is not merely how individuals will respond, but how the **ekklesia**, the gathered people of God, will embody the wisdom from above in its speech, its solidarity, and its healing.