

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Faith to Faithful**

(Studies in the book of James)

#### **Metrics for Humility**

(James 4:11-17)<sup>1</sup>

Study #10

#### **Introduction: Measuring stuff...**

I like to measure stuff.

I like to know the temperature outside, how many miles I walk when I go camping, and what is the elevation. When I used to do a lot of running, I never wanted to run for *about* four miles. I wanted to know how many minutes and seconds it took me to run 4.0 miles.

In my defense, I'm not alone in my interest in measuring stuff. Ours is a measuring-crazy culture.

- You measure your children's growth and keep track of their grades.
- Our government measures leading economic indicators, health trends, and every form of demographic.
- MacDonald's measures traffic volume before building a new store.
- Politicians measure voters' opinions by taking poll after poll.

It's easy to measure most of these things, but it is much more difficult to come up with metrics for others. For instance, you and I both know that measuring character and spirituality is tough.

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<sup>1</sup> Adamson points out that James is addressing Christians throughout in this passage. I agree. While James makes witheringly challenging comments here, he is speaking to and about children of God.

So I believe that we have a rare treat before us in our study of Scripture today because the passage we are exploring serves as a very helpful metric to determine relational and spiritual health. Specifically, James, the half-brother of Jesus, helps us measure one of life's cardinal virtues: humility.

*Review...*

After taking a nearly two months long layoff from our study in James due to Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Years, we're returning for the next three Sundays to consider the final chapter and a half of James' letter to suffering first-century Christians.

To review, James' letter charts a path for us to move from *faith to faithful*.

He tells us to rejoice in trials because trials, properly responded to, can build deep character. He says that we are to *listen* to what God's Word says - and then DO IT. We are to put aside partiality and live by the law of love (**[2:8] You shall love your neighbor as yourself**).

James also says that a faith that doesn't work doesn't do anybody any good at all. So, by all means, put your faith to work! Bridle your tongue. Speak lovingly. Pursue wisdom. Exercise self-control. Submit to God. Resist the devil. Draw near to God.

And then this - **[4:10] Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.**

#### **Humility - Toward Each Other (vv. 11-12)**

##### **Christians Who Slander Each Other (v. 11a)**

*This is a church problem*

From that call to humility, James goes on to speak about how you and I are to relate to each other, here at church.

The call to humility is critical and what he says here is timely. All of us are painfully aware of how damaging arrogance is and how possible it is that we might become haughty toward each other.

And the first thing I'll point out, before even reading a word in the passage, is that James is dealing with Christian-to-Christian relationships.

He refers to "**brothers**" three times in the first half of the passage's first verse.

He imagines something going on in a church and he doesn't beat around the bush about what that "something" is. It's not "*a general tendency to do wrong things.*"

No! He speaks bluntly with a command that they stop doing the "it" that they are doing.

So, what is the "it"? We need to know because "it" just might be an "it" that we're tempted to as well. OK. Here it is. Ready for it?

People in the church were "**speaking against**" each other.

#### *Speaking evil*

The Apostle Peter used this exact term to describe the treatment Christians were getting by those who opposed the faith.

**[1 Peter 2:12] Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they SLANDER (there is the word) you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.**<sup>2</sup>

We can certainly understand *that* happening. In lots of places in the world - and sometimes here - people who don't share our faith in Jesus speak against us and what we believe.

But here, James is not talking about the slander Christians might get from outsiders. He is speaking about Christians who slander, who speak against, their fellow Christians.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Peter 3:16.

<sup>3</sup> In the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Gerhard Kittel notes that this evil of slander was not stressed in the ethical exhortations of the non-biblical world. However, it was frequently mentioned in the church fathers (ancient

And here is a comment I'll make about Christian slander that isn't in the text but *is* something I've seen over and over again. It is the reality that much speaking against occurs, not face to face, but back to back.

#### *Backbiting*

It is far more likely that speaking against / slander will occur by speaking about someone behind their back. It's just so much easier that way. But it is always destructive.<sup>4</sup>

So James just lays it right out there: **[11a] Do not speak<sup>5</sup> against<sup>6</sup> one another, brethren.**

The way he says what he says tells us that the practice was well established and on-going.<sup>7</sup> There was a chronic habit of slander already in place. And the practice was to stop - NOW!<sup>8</sup>

As we keep reading, we get a much clearer idea of what James specifically has in mind when he mentions "**speaking against**" because he also refers to "**judging.**"

#### **Christians Who Judge Each Other (v. 11b)**

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Christian writings). One writer says that the Old Testament denounced "evil speaking," both against God and man more often than any other offense.

<sup>4</sup> In the first century Jewish world, slander was referred to as "the third tongue" because it damaged three people: the speaker, the one spoken to, and the one spoken about.

<sup>5</sup> Grammatically, there is a great contrast between this passage and the preceding. In 4:7-10 there are ten aorist imperatives, which amount to commands to *start* doing something. Here, James switches to a present imperative where the thrust is to *stop* doing something that someone is already doing.

<sup>6</sup> The word (literally "**speak evil**") is broad enough to cover all kinds of harmful talk, regardless of whether the subject matter was true or false.

<sup>7</sup> The present tense denotes that this is a chronic practice, while the "**Do not**" demands that it be terminated.

<sup>8</sup> We're not surprised that James speaks so bluntly here, as he is none too subtle. James is of the Bob Newhart School of Counseling. (YouTube - "*Stop it!*")

**[11b]...He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother<sup>9</sup>, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it.**

*When judging isn't judging*

Now, to be clear, there is *judging* and there is *judging*.

There are times when it is perfectly appropriate to “pass judgment” on someone.

When your brother or sister in Christ is involved in something that the Bible identifies as sin, it is the right thing to prayerfully, honestly, humbly, and lovingly approach him, confront him, and call him to face his sin.

That’s not “judging” in the sense that James is talking about here. That’s you, agreeing with Scripture about his behavior.

And honestly, some of the most life-giving words my friends have given to me over the years has come in the form of honest confrontation when they have seen me veer off into sin.

You should gush with gratitude when your sister or brother has the courage to speak to you, honestly, about your sin, because they love you.

However, there are other scenarios where passing judgment is off-limits because there are lots and lots of times when Scripture is silent about how we should act.<sup>10</sup>

*Life in the grey zone...*

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<sup>9</sup> The words “**his brother**” stresses the heinousness of this sin in light of the bonds that unite us in the Body of Christ.

<sup>10</sup> By the way, when James speaks of the “law” here, he is not referring to the Mosaic Law, something that would be quite out of place in a letter written by a Christian to Christians, but to the only “law” he mentions in his letter, [2:8] **the royal law** (You shall love your neighbor as yourself.)

There is room for ambiguity, difference of opinion, and freedom to come to different convictions, all under the Lordship of Christ. To be honest, life is filled with a lot of grey.

In the first century, one grey area had to do with what food was allowable to serve at mealtime.

Exhibit A: A first century case study - eating and drinking...

The food fight revolved around such things as Jewish dietary restrictions, Gentile food items, and meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols. Put these factors together and you had a judgment-rich environment.

- Some Christians would eat only veggies.
- Some felt bound by the Jewish kosher laws.
- Some didn’t eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols because they thought that would involve them in idolatry.
- And some realized that they were actually free in Jesus to eat anything they wanted to eat.

So, you had sincere and committed Christians coming to wholly different convictions about food. None of their convictions were unbiblical. The Bible gave no “*Thus saith the Lord*” on what to eat.

And the Apostle Paul told all of them to get along. He said, “*Don’t judge.*”

**[Romans 14:3] The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.**

In the New Testament, LIBERTY is the watchword when it comes to food and drink.

Now that does NOT mean “anything goes.” As Paul went on to explain and as James says in our passage for today, all of us who belong to Jesus will answer to God for the personal convictions we arrive at.

Paul wrote, **[Romans 14:10]...For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.**

And this is how James says it.

### **Christian - there is Only One JUDGE! (v. 12)**

**[12] There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy;<sup>11</sup> but who are you to judge your neighbor?**

When I judge your personal convictions, when I condemn your opinions on matters where the Bible doesn't give explicit instruction - I have become your judge. And the problem with that, of course, is that the universe already has a Judge.

God is perfectly capable of carrying out His judging role all by Himself. God doesn't need our help and our fellow Christians certainly don't need us judging them.

The call, instead, is for us to deal with each other in humility when we interact about convictions, opinions, and matters of preference and style.

### **Summing Up**

#### *Areas of conviction*

- So, what am I talking about? Lots of stuff, actually. Arenas where Christians may have difference of opinions will include:
- *alcohol* - The consumption of it or not, and if so, of what variety and how much.
  - *vocabulary* - I find no Bible-based list of words we are to not say.
  - *purchasing practices* - Nowhere is it written that someone may or may not live in this or that neighborhood or drive this or that car, make that much money, or wear that much jewelry.

- *music/art* (generally) - In or out of church, it's hard to find biblical commands about the style of artistic expression.
- *politics* - There is no "Christian" political party and two devout Christians may enter the voting booth and choose to support very different candidates.

This is to mention only a few of the arenas where there can be differences of conviction.

Equally applicable to us, here at Northwest, are things like ministry style and beliefs about secondary theological issues.

We could even lump into the discussion opinions about decisions we are facing, like what to do with the proceeds of a potential sale of property (more on that later...).

#### *Talking with and learning from each other*

Now, in mentioning these various items, I am NOT saying that if we disagree we should stop talking, as if talking is the problem.

Nor am I saying that unity in the Body of Christ requires that we all agree with each other on these and other matters. Our unity is based on Jesus, not on style points.

I actually think that James is calling us to a higher, not to a lower, level of engagement with each other. We aren't to be indifferent about what others think. We're to be vitally interested.

In fact, here is part of my vision for us at Northwest. I want us to be more open to question each other, face to face. I want us to learn to disagree lovingly and to challenge without condemnation.

For instance, in the middle of a Care Group meeting or an ABF discussion or over lunch, someone may express an opinion that you wonder about. OK. What do you do?

Ignore it? Talk to others about it later? No!

<sup>11</sup> Hodges points out that there is no reason to read the doctrines of eternal salvation into these words, "**save and destroy.**" James is here referring to physical life and death, as he does elsewhere. (James 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:15, 20)

Talk with your friend. As he talks more, you'll understand more. You might see the reasonableness of his position. You might learn and better appreciate diversity.

Or, you might become concerned that he's moving into a danger zone. You might need to warn him or even counsel him off of his present course.

To reflect the wisdom James gives, our interactions with each other in this church must be honest and loving and face to face. To do anything less is to be guilty of judging and is to violate the law of love.

### *Humility metric*

To judge is to be arrogant, but you and I are called to humility. So a measuring stick for humility when it comes to your relationships with your family in Jesus might look something like this:

- When you see a fellow Christ-follower committing sin,<sup>12</sup> do you prayerfully, honestly, humbly, and lovingly approach him or her to confront and call him or her to face their sin?
- Are you growing in your capacity to go "toe-to-toe" with another Christian while always being loving?
- When you hear from a fellow Christ-follower that he or she has a conviction or opinion on a matter where the Bible gives freedom that is different from your own conviction, do you -  
     withdraw?  
     judge and condemn?  
     speak to others about him or her?  
     approach him or her to talk, eager to listen and learn, even willing to warn, instruct or reprove?

To the extent that you speak honestly and lovingly to a brother or sister who is caught in sin and to the extent that you accept and talk with (not ABOUT) the one who disagrees with you on a matter of conscience, to that extent you are doing well. You're growing in your relational humility.

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<sup>12</sup> That is, he is behaving in a way that is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

And having helped us when it comes to fighting for humility in our dealings with each other, James now helps us learn humility in another arena of life.<sup>13</sup>

James speaks about business practices and his words apply to the twenty-first century as much as they did to the first.

### **Humility - When We Plan for the Future (vv. 13-16)**

#### **Your "Sure Thing" Plan (v. 13)**

*An example of what NOT to do*

***[13] Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit."***<sup>14</sup>

He is NOT saying here that there is anything wrong with trading and commerce. He's not writing against making a profit and he's not writing against making a business plan.<sup>15</sup>

But there is a problem with the spirit of the way the merchants express their plans and James puts his finger on the problem.

*The "spirit" of this planning strategy - PRESUMPTION*

The plan is fully developed. The planners are industrious and ambitious, on the alert and eager to move to places where business is most profitable.

They exude confidence. Their plan is flexible - "**today or tomorrow**" - a key ingredient in any plan.

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<sup>13</sup> Having shown that he is capable of good writing from a "wisdom literature" perspective he now shows the boldness to write as a prophet, and invites us to defend our practice of presumptuous planning.

<sup>14</sup> "**Make a profit**" - the phrase is used in Philippians 3:8 of avoiding injury or loss.

<sup>15</sup> The goal of the plan is to make a profit. James is neither condemning their trading practices or their aim to gain profits as unethical.

They have planned their work and now they are prepared to work their “sure thing” plan.

The problem with their plan is that it leaves no room either for God or for the uncertainties of life.

So here, James isn’t warning against unethical behavior.

He’s warning against independence. He is concerned with the sin of arrogant presumption because the ugly secret is that regardless how sophisticated our plans are, none of us know what the future holds.

### **Future Shock - a Fact of Life (v. 14)**

*Tomorrow is a mystery (v. 14a)*

***[14a] Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.***<sup>16</sup>

The simple fact of our humanity guarantees that we do not know the future. We are subject to accident and disease and mistakes, and there are no crystal balls.

Some of our favorite stories are inspiring “rags-to-riches” stories. But, history is just as filled with “riches to rags” stories.

Lots of people have made wonderful plans that were derailed. They were blindsided and their plans were shot to pieces.

That’s why Solomon wrote,  
***[Proverbs 27:1] Do not boast about tomorrow,  
For you do not know what a day may bring forth.***

Once, Jesus told a story about a man who decided to build larger barns to store his crops so that he could spend his life at ease in luxury and comfort.

God said to that man, ***[Luke 12:20] “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you”*** - and he never did enjoy those big, new barns.

The Bible affirms throughout what we see lived out every day. Life is uncertain. Things that appear to be rock-solid may turn very iffy.

I have a good friend whose father sold all of his stocks in early 2009, when the stock market was at its lowest point in an historic slide. He didn’t know that the next seven years would bring a tremendous bull market rise. He now wishes he hadn’t gotten out.

You may have heard that there’s lots of volatility in the markets right now. Is now the time to jump ship? Dive in? One thing is certain: nobody knows.

Hopes can be crushed AND disasters can be averted . We just can’t tell which it’s going to be. Life is unpredictable.

James is not inviting us to a morbid preoccupation with the possibility of disaster. He is just counseling us to adopt a humble and realistic attitude about the future.

We have no certain knowledge of what the actual situation will be tomorrow. And don’t forget the fleeting nature of our lives.

*Our lives are a vapor (v. 14b)*

***[14b] You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.***

Steam rises from a pan of boiling water and it’s gone. Breath on a cold morning appears for an instant - and vanishes. That is your life.

Everything we have and all in which we engage, of necessity, is brief and unstable. But in setting up our 5 and 10 year plans, we are tempted to view our lives as fixed, our lifespan as endless. (These days, though, I eat dessert first, cuz you never know...)

<sup>16</sup> See Psalm 102:11; Job 7:7; 7:9; Psalm 103:15 which deal with the transitory nature of life.

A realistic approach to planning acknowledges that our lives are fleeting, that the future is uncertain. So, we hold to our plans with an open hand. We admit that we are not in control - but we know full well Who is.<sup>17</sup>

### Planning With an Open Hand (vv. 15-16)

*Plan in submission to God's sovereignty (v. 15)*

**[15] Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills,<sup>18</sup> we will live and also do this or that."<sup>19</sup>**

No. There is nothing magical about saying these words. And a rote, mechanical use of the phrase is not what James is urging.

The point of the words is to consciously acknowledge God. It is to give voice to our submission to God when we are making plans for the future.

The thought is certainly NOT that when we submit to God's sovereignty, He will let us in on how everything's going to wind up.

It is presumptuous arrogance to say that we know how things are going to turn out. Of course God knows - but He's not telling.

And having said all of this, planning is good. And the fact of God's sovereign control is no excuse for sitting on the sidelines.

It is simply that we have to come to grips with the ideas that, (1). we don't know the future; (2). our future is in God's hands.

If we fail to recognize this stuff and plan as if we could "lock" the future to our preference, then we have engaged in evil, arrogant boasting.

*Planning presumptuously is evil arrogance (vv. 16-17)*

**[16] But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. [17] Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.<sup>20</sup>**

Just because we make a plan - even a good plan - the future isn't a done deal. And to not lay our plans before the Lord, to not submit them to His will, is the very essence of pride. It is the exact opposite of humility.

So, planning for the future is good and right and wise - and iffy. There are no guaranteed outcomes. We humbly plan knowing that God can do with our plans as He sees fit.

Now this wisdom follows on the heels of what James wrote earlier - **[4:10] Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.**

What he has already told us today about relationships *and* what he has just told us about planning for the future is all to be understood in light of the need for humility.

So, as we wrap up our time together today, I'd like for us to consider how we might bring a God-centered humility to our plans for the future.

First, let's consider personal planning.

<sup>17</sup> These verses look back to verse 13, making verse 14, in effect, a parenthesis.

<sup>18</sup> For the expression, see Acts 18:21; Heb. 6:3; Phil. 2:24. Sometimes, Paul spoke of his future plans without using the term. However, his submission to God's sovereign will was so ingrained that the phrase was unnecessary every time.

<sup>19</sup> In the earlier stages of Roman religion when nothing was done without first consulting the gods by means of oracles, the phrase "*if the Lord wills*" (or "*if the gods will*") held great meaning. But, by the first century the words' significance had degenerated to the equivalent of a weak "*I hope so.*"

<sup>20</sup> Verse 17 is vitally related to the context, as is evident by the word "**Therefore**". I see v. 17 wrapping up the thoughts about humility (vv. 10ff), although it could be pressed out to involve 4:1ff or even 3:13ff.

## Summing Up

### *Personal planning*

On a personal level, many of us are looking ahead to a full 2016 - and January 10<sup>th</sup> is a great time to be making plans for such.

We have images of what might need to happen this year that would allow us to say, on December 31, *"2016 was a GREAT year!"*

There are some plans, of course, that are completely up to you to fulfill. I'll wager that you have a vision for the year ahead being a year during which you grow in your relationship with Jesus, trust Him more, and walk in closer obedience.

What a fantastic vision. And you know that all of this is God's will for you. You can be confident that He will meet you way more than half-way as you move toward Him (**[James 4:8] Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.**)

So - and I mean this with all due reverence - GO FOR IT!

Pray like you've never prayed before and make the Bible your own this year. Learn it, love it, live it, and let it loose! Seek out challenging, Christ-centered community and share Jesus with your friends. Exercise your generosity muscles.

What a year it would be with that kind of an experience with Jesus. And, beyond those dreams I suspect that there are some other dreams that are dependent on more than your faithfulness.

Would you like to expand your business? Explore other career options? Hire more employees? Open a branch in another city? Diversify? Multiply income streams? Cool.

It's going to take your initiative PLUS lots of other pieces coming together that are out of your control.

Your plans coming to fruit will depend on the business climate here and elsewhere and finding exactly the right hire, and more.

It is a tailor-made scenario for a dependent, *"If the Lord wills..."*

Do you want a stronger marriage? Better connection with your kids? Deeper friendships with neighbors? Wonderful!

These are sweet dreams and will require the best effort you can possibly give *AND* a willingness from others over whom you have no control.

James says to lay these dreams before God. *"If the Lord wills..."* Ask Him to do what only He can do. Admit that you need Him to come through for you.

Back away from and take a look at most everything you'd love to see happen in 2016 and you'll realize that you are sovereign over very little of it.

You have very little power to control the things that matter to you most. And it is with that realization that James' words ring so true and help so much.

So bring your plans and hopes for the future, your dreams and visions of what could be, to God - *"If the Lord wills"* - and trust that He knows exactly what He is doing with your life.

That's a word about personal planning. Now, a word about plans with our church in mind.

### *Church planning*

Like the leaders of every other church do, Northwest's leaders spend time planning. We plan weekly worship services, special events, budgets, and more.

This year, a wrinkle has been dropped into our planning laps.

If you have been around here over the last several months, you have heard about a potential sale of some church property we own on Old Tezel.



Last year the Elders asked about and discovered that the value of this property had increased dramatically in the years since we bought it (2004).

Then, with the land NOT on the market, a couple of potential buyers showed keen interest in purchasing that property.

After some discussion, we entered into a contractual agreement to sell ten of the twelve acres for a considerable amount of money - just about 20x the original purchase price.

Now you should know that this deal is contingent on the State of Texas giving the purchaser what are called "tax credits" that will allow the construction of affordable housing apartments on the land. So, it is not at all certain that the deal will go through.

But if it does, it will mean a tremendous windfall for Jesus' kingdom work.

It will also mean a couple of other things, things that make today's study in James 4 hilariously appropriate.

Over the next several months the Elders will be praying and inviting you to join us in prayer for wisdom from God as to how to use the proceeds from the sale if the deal goes through.

I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that we might not all agree on what ought to be done with these funds.

What a great time to practice NOT "*speaking against*" each other!

What a great chance God is giving us to practice loving those who hold a different opinion than we hold.

What a fantastic opportunity we will have to show a watching world how a church lovingly comes together, learns from each other, listens to each other - and then, together, moves forward with a wonderful God-honoring plan.

And as far as that plan goes, we need to make a plan. The Elders have been in discussion and in prayer about this possibility for months now. And we are committed to planning in submission to the sovereignty of God.

So...

*"If the Lord wills"* the sale will go through.

*"If the Lord wills"* we will invest in THIS or THAT Kingdom-of-God advancing effort.

*"If the Lord wills"* and by God's grace we will emerge a more faithful, more grace-centered church than we have ever been, all to His glory.