

Do Not Boast (James 4:13-17)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the passage we will study today, from the first half of **James 4:13-17**, which addresses the sin of boasting. It is connected to other things we have already encountered in this letter, on the importance of being humble and meek in our relationships with others.
 - i. Once again, let us consider the great extent to which James' teachings are reinforcing and applying things that Jesus taught in the gospels.

II. James on Humility vs. Pride, Arrogance and Boasting

- a. Read **James 4:4-10**.
 - i. We covered this in a prior lesson, but it touches on the same topic as the current message, so let us review the earlier passage first.
 - 1. James reminds us of what it says in **Proverbs 3:34 (3:37 in the OSB)**, that "God resists (or opposes) the proud, but gives grace to the humble".
 - 2. He admonishes us to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift us up.
 - a. Peter quotes the same passage from **Proverbs** to make similar points, in **1 Peter 5:5-7**.
- b. After addressing humility and meekness, James now turns his attention to the sin that results if we do NOT have those essential Christian character traits. He addresses pride, boasting and arrogance.
- c. Read **James 4:13-17**.
 - i. Points made by James in this passage include the following.
 - 1. We have no certainty about the future.
 - 2. In fact, our lives are like a mist or vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

- a. This reference to our lives disappearing like vapor reminds me of a sobering passage in **Wisdom of Solomon**, which uses the same kind of imagery.
 - i. “When the spark is extinguished, our body will turn to ashes. And our breath will disperse like empty air.
 - ii. “Then our name will be forgotten in due time and no one will remember our works; So our life will pass away like the trace of a cloud, and be scattered like fog. Driven away by the rays of the sun and oppressed by its heat.” (**Wisdom of Solomon 2:3-4**)
- 3. To state what we plan to do tomorrow as if it definitely is going to happen is arrogant on our part. All such boasting is evil.
 - a. Instead, we ought to say, *IF IT IS THE LORD’S WILL*, we shall live and do this or that.
- 4. Anyone who knows the good he ought to do (in this case, refraining from boasting, listening to our conscience and doing the good we know we ought to do, namely humbly qualifying it by saying “If it is the Lord’s will...”), who *DOES NOT* do it, is sinning.
 - a. This speaks of listening to our consciences (doing the good we know we ought to do).
 - b. It also clearly indicates that sin is not just what we do. It also includes *things we don’t do* that we know we ought to do (a/k/a ‘sins of omission’).

III. .Jesus on Humility vs. Pride and Arrogance

- a. **Question:** Did Jesus teach anything on humility vs. being proud and arrogant? Did he ever quote (or paraphrase) what it says in **Proverbs 3:34**?
- b. **Answer:** Yes, both directly and indirectly.
 - i. Read **Luke 14:7-11**
 - 1. Take the lowest (most humble) place.
 - 2. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.
 - a. James and Peter taught the same thing.

ii. Read **Luke 18:9-14**.

1. The problem: religious Jews were thinking well of themselves and looking down on others.
2. Again, Jesus teaches that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

iii. In **Matthew 6**, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches His disciples to fast, to pray, and give alms *in secret*, so that the Father can reward them. They must not be like “the hypocrites,” who are doing these things to be seen by men.iv. In **Matthew 23**, Jesus rebukes the religious hypocrites, the scribes and Pharisees, for focusing on the “outside of the dish”, but inside their hearts was filth. They strove to outwardly appear righteous, but inside they were like “dead men’s bones” (**Matthew 23:25-28**).

1. Everything they did was intended to impress other people.

v. In **Revelation 2-3**, Jesus addressed the seven churches in Asia Minor. Note how He calls out the last church, the one in Laodicea, for being lukewarm. There, He addresses the root of their problem: they lost their humility and became prideful and arrogant. Hear what he says to that church.

1. “Because you say, *‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’*—and do not know that *you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked*—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” (**Revelation 3:17-19**, NKJV)
 - a. The people became arrogant and prideful, boasting in their wealth and accomplishments. They had lost touch with their own spiritual poverty and need for God, and as a result became lukewarm.
 - b. As a result of their pride leading to lukewarmness, Jesus found them disgusting, saying, “I will vomit you out of My mouth” if they don’t repent!

IV. Others in Scripture Who Taught on the Importance of Humility

- a. From Paul, starting with the greatest passages on humility in all of Scripture. He points us to the example of Jesus.
 - i. Read **Philippians 2:5-11**.
 1. “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (**Philippians 2:5-11**, NKJV)
 - a. Christ not only *taught about* humility during His ministry. *He modeled it.*
 - b. Paul calls the Christians to *imitate the example of Jesus* in providing the ultimate example of humility. He “humbled Himself” and “made Himself of no reputation...taking the form of a bondservant”, and unjustly suffered the death of a criminal, in public display, despite the fact that He was equal with God, the Father in nature.
 - i. As we often point out, the goal of discipleship to Christian maturity is not only to follow all the teachings of Christ, but also *to follow His example* to the best of our ability.
- b. From Paul’s own personal example and teaching:
 - i. “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, *not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think*, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” (**Romans 12:3**, NKJV)
 - ii. [Since we have died, been buried with, and raised with Christ] “...Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, *humility, meekness, longsuffering....*” (**Colossians 3:12**, NKJV)

iii. "...though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed *I also count all things loss* for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, *and count them as rubbish*, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." (**Philippians 3:4–11**, NKJV)

1. Paul now considers all his past accomplishments, in which he took pride, as *rubbish* (= refuse, garbage, filth; in the KJV, 'dung'; what would be thrown to the dogs).
2. This is how Paul considers the things that in the past would have made up his 'religious c.v.'.

iv. "...But we have this treasure *in earthen vessels* (ESV: '*in jars of clay*'), that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (**2 Corinthians 4:7**, NKJV)

1. We are like common, cheap clay pots in which God's treasure, the Holy Spirit, dwells in us as in a temple (**1 Corinthians 6:19** and **2 Corinthians 6:16**). Perhaps this 'treasure' we hold also refers to the gospel we believe and preach.

c. From the apostle Peter.

- i. "Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.' (**Proverbs 3:34**) Therefore *humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time*, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." (**1 Peter 5:5–7**, NKJV)

d. From the apostle John.

- i. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, *and the pride of life*—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away,

and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” (1 **John 2:15–17**, NKJV)

- e. A great passage on this topic, from **Jeremiah** in the Old Testament:
 - i. “Thus says the Lord: *‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, nor the mighty man boast in his might, nor let the rich man boast in his riches. Instead, let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows that I am the Lord, who shows mercy, judgment and righteousness on earth, for in these is My will says the Lord.’* (**Jeremiah 9:22-23**, LXX, OSB)

V. Examples (Good) to Imitate or (Bad) to Learn From

- a. **Question:** It is always good to have examples to follow or to learn from as a warning. Which people in the Bible stand out to you as good examples of humility (to follow) or as ‘poster children’ of pride and arrogance (to learn from and not imitate)?
- b. Great examples of humility and meekness, to me, include:
 - i. Mary, the mother of Jesus.
 - 1. She essentially undid what Eve did. Eve brought sin into the world, out of pride, wanting to become like God. Eve gave in to “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life”.
 - 2. In contrast, Mary was humble and obedient in her response to the angel Gabriel. She said:
 - a. “...Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word...” (**Luke 1:38**, NKJV)
 - 3. In her prayer of praise in **Luke 1**, Mary exalted God and considered herself a lowly instrument through which God chose to work.
 - a. “And Mary said: “My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For *He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant*; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name.” (**Luke 1:46–49**, NKJV)
 - b. “He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. *He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the*

lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:51–53, NKJV)

- ii. Abraham, in his prayer on behalf of Sodom and his nephew Lot, in **Genesis 18**.
 - 1. He humbly petitioned “the Judge of all the earth” and referred to himself as “*I who am but dust and ashes* (who has) taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord”. (**Genesis 18:27**)
- iii. Job, considering his prayer when God took everything away from him (children, wealth, reputation and health), he fell to the ground, worshiped the Lord and prayed.
 - 1. “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. As it seemed good to the Lord, so also it came to pass. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” (**Job 1:20-21**, LXX, OSB)
 - a. Job understood that he was nothing. He came into the world with nothing and would depart in the same state.
 - b. He realized that everything he had was given to him by God. Therefore, he felt he had no grounds to complain if God took those gifts away.
- iv. Solomon (early in his life), when he asked God for wisdom, in **2 Chronicles 1:7-12**.
- v. Moses, who was described as “the meekest man on the face of the earth,” in **Numbers 12:3**.
 - 1. Moses did not want to go anywhere *if God would not go with him*. (**Exodus 33:15**)
- vi. Note that according to Scripture, being “meek” does not mean you can’t do anything great.
 - 1. It means you are *utterly reliant on, and working with, the Lord*. You realize that *on your own, you can do nothing and you are nothing*.
 - 2. You see yourself as a clay jar; if there is a treasure within, the Lord put it there.
- c. In sharp contrast with the heroes of faith who showed humility, let us also consider the ‘*hall of spiritual losers*,’ people who *lacked humility* and were destroyed by their pride and boasting. Candidates would include:

- i. Satan, a powerful angel who was cast down from heaven and fell because of the sin of pride.
 - 1. See **Isaiah 14** 'Lucifer' passage, and **Ezekiel 28** 'King of Tyre' passage, both of which early Christians saw as describing Satan's downfall.
 - 2. For early Christian insights into these and similar passages that they understood as speaking about Satan, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, articles on 'Satan' and 'Lucifer'.
- ii. Other examples from the Old Testament include Pharaoh (**Exodus 5-14**), Solomon in the later part of his life (**1 Kings 11**), King Ahab (**1 Kings 16-22**) and many other wicked men and women.
- iii. One of the most memorable lessons showing pride leading to a man's downfall can be found in the story about King Nebuchadnezzar, in **Daniel 4**.
 - 1. Daniel has a dream about a great tree that is chopped down, and warns the king.
 - 2. The king does not heed the warning. One year later, he is walking around the royal palace and says:
 - a. "Is not this the great Babylon which I built as a home for my kingdom, by my mighty power for the honor of my glory?" (**Daniel 4:29**)
 - 3. After a long time of exile and rejection, when the king repents, he glorifies God, the king of Heaven, and acknowledges that "all His works are true, His paths are just, and He is able to humble those who walk in arrogance." (**Daniel 4:37**)
 - a. Moral of the story: give God the glory, and don't take credit for your accomplishments. Or else...

VI. Practical Takeaways for Us

- a. Let us see ourselves as nothing more than clay pots or vessels.
 - i. Paul said, "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (**2 Corinthians 4:7**, NKJV)
 - ii. It is only the treasure *that God has put into us* that gives us anything of value. Clay is nothing more than dirt from the earth. By itself, it is practically worthless.

- b. Let us see our accomplishments, the things most people take pride in, *as the apostle Paul did*: as rubbish, dung, or something that might be thrown out on the street (in a poor country) for the dogs to eat.
 - i. Consider your own career, knowledge, house, money, academic achievements, popularity, material possessions, etc., as Paul viewed them.
- c. From the bottom of your heart, *don't care about how other people view you*.
 - i. One of the great spiritual snares that traps many: caring about how you look to other people, and trying to impress them. Being more concerned about pleasing other people than about pleasing God.
 - ii. After Lazarus was raised from the dead, the hearts of the people who believed in Jesus were severely tested.
 - 1. "Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; *for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*" (**John 12:42-43**, NKJV)
 - a. Many of those who believed in Jesus were more concerned about the praise and esteem of influential people, rather than how God would view them.
 - 2. **Question:** *How much do you care* about how other people, including other Christians, think about you?
 - a. This concern leads many Christians to become *hypocrites*, focused on *looking good on the outside*, while "the inside of the dish" is another matter!
 - b. This is one of the main reasons many Christians will hide and *cover up their sin*, rather than confessing it and bringing it into the light.
 - c. This is why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus insisted that His disciples pray, fast and give alms *in a way that is hidden from the eyes of other people*.
 - d. Pursue *virtue* (strong moral character on the inside) *rather than honor* from men.
 - e. Realize that almost everything you have has been a gift from God (education, material wealth, knowledge, wisdom, physical beauty).

- i. “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (**1 Corinthians 4:7**, NKJV)
- f. There is a huge difference between wanting to *look and sound humble* to others, versus actually *BEING humble*.
 - i. Be honest. Don’t give in to the age-old temptation to become a religious hypocrite.
 - ii. The humble person doesn’t particularly mind if they happen to look bad or be misjudged by others. They can even rejoice when they are abased by something that happens to them (seeing it as an opportunity to be refined in their internal humility).
- g. Never forget that it was the sin of *pride* that *led to the downfall of Satan*. And it brought down many highly gifted people in the past. Let us learn from them and not make the same mistake.
 - i. Don’t end up in the condition that the Laodicean church was in, where they felt so good about themselves, what they had, and what they did, that they lost connection with their spiritual poverty.
 - ii. Jesus warned them that he would vomit them out of His mouth, and He will do the same to us if we do not heed His warnings and follow His example!