OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Those Who Trust — and Some Who Don't

An Overview of 4.13—5.11

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In the seventeenth century, English minister David Clarkson observed that "if we think of our soul as a house, 'idols are set up in every room, in every faculty.' We prefer our own wisdom to God's wisdom, our own desires to God's will, and our own reputation to God's honor" (Keller 2009, 154).

Clarkson's four-century old observation reminds us that these preferences are not new. But as we continue in James, we are also reminded that what at first seem to be innocuous ideas can metastasize into behaviors that "ignore God's ethical imperatives" (McCartney 2009, 223). In James 4.13–5.11, a section that includes some of "the harshest rhetoric of the whole letter" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 214), James directs his attention to self-reliance and self-indulgence and the related challenges those practices pose for devoted believers. Before examining the section's three paragraphs in detail, we will benefit from seeing how they fit together.

A Big Picture Perspective

Recall that James's first readers saw no chapter-verse breaks and likely first heard the whole letter read in one sitting. How would they have heard the section before us within the letter's

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entirety? That James has turned to a new theme is obvious. His subject matter changes from the tongue, the influence of wisdom on its use, and the strife that results when it is abused (3.1–4.12) to the casual and callous misuse of wealth and the response to oppression expected of faithful believers (4.13–5.11). The repetition of "come now" (ἄγε νῦν, *age nun*) in 4.13 and 5.1, and use of "therefore" (οὖν, *oun*) in 5.7, connect the three paragraphs, the theme of which we can summarize as follows: "don't be arrogant; don't be materialistic; instead be patient" (Stulac 1993, 157).

But 4.13–5.11 is not unrelated to what precedes it. As some have noted, there is an emphasis on what is said in 4.13, 15, suggesting that James is still dealing with the issue of the abused tongue. Additionally, the condemnation of boasting (καυχάομαι, *kauchaomai*; καύχησις, *kauchēsis*; 4.16), a result of demonic wisdom (3.14–16), is connected to what has gone before (cf. Martin 1988, 159–162).

Taking these ideas together, we conclude that, beginning in 4.13, there is a shift in emphasis, but that, as he does throughout the letter, James is linking related ideas to continue one main theme. The three examples in 4.13–17; 5.1–6; and 5.7–11 amount to other ways people can "play God" (cf. 4.11–12). Recall, too, James's emphasis on God's grace extended to the humble (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*) and his resistance of the proud (ὑπερήφανος, *hyperēphanos* in 4.6, 10; the latter word is a synonym for verse 16's ἀλαζονεία, *alazoneia*; "arrogance"). In view of these ideas, we can say that what is described in 4.13–17 and 5.1–6 are additional examples of pride and that 5.7–11 calls believers to maintain humility and continue to endure with authentic faith.

Warnings to the Untrusting

The merchants in 4.13–17 exemplify those who waver in faith because they are *self-reliant*. Their focus was on what *they* would do as they planned, without regard for the realities of their temporal lives. Presuming knowledge that no human can possibly have (v. 14), they took "autonomous planning" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 203) to an extreme, playing God just as surely as their judgmental brothers in verses 11–12.

The landowners in 5.1–6 exemplify what happens when the presumptuous attitudes of the self-reliant are pressed; they were *self-indulgent*. In what amounted to idolatry, they were placing their trust in inferior things (vv. 2–3). Overvaluing their possessions, they minimized or ignored God's eternal values (vv. 3–4). Seeking mainly their own desires, they oppressed the righteous (vv. 5–6).

In stressing these failures, James is not issuing a blanket condemnation of making a profit, owning land, or being rich. He is pointing to what, in his setting, were specific examples of wavering faith, continuing the theme of the entire letter. The issue was that they were planning their lives without taking God's will into account, living as if God did not exist or matter. But as McCartney points out, the principle at stake is broader than these examples, for "anyone who pursues a career or runs a business without reference to God's will, or who controls property or makes

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investments without reference to God's ethical concerns and in defiance of his principles of equity, is subject to James's opprobrium" (McCartney 2009, 224). And don't miss this: the fact that what the landowners were doing was more obviously harmful to others than the neglect of the merchants did not let the merchants off the hook.

A Call to Endure in Trust

Chapter 5.7–11 turns to the issue of the trials faced by "brothers" (v. 7) who were suffering because of the casual attitude and callous treatment of those who showed no regard for God's values. James's remedy for their problem is threefold. First, they needed to trust God implicitly, however desperate things appeared to be (vv. 8, 10–11). Second, they were to remain focused and therefore live faithfully so as not to be subject to the same judgment that awaited their oppressors (v. 9; cf. 4.1–3). Third, they were to be patient (μακροθυμέω, *makrothymeō*; μακροθυμία, *makrothumia*; vv. 7–8, 10) and endure (ὑπομένω, *hypomenō*; v. 11; cf. 1.3–4, 12), remembering that God works in his own time and way.

Conclusion

The section from 4.13–5.11 thus illustrates the theme of James: endure, remain focused, undivided in purpose, and committed to demonstrating behavior consistent with the nature of authentic faith. As is true of the biblical story generally, James's exhortation utilizes specific examples to remind us that whether we pursue a life well lived or not comes down to the question of unwavering loyalty to God. Will we commit to grow in service to the spiritual, eternal God, or settle for lives devoted to lesser things? Timothy Keller points us to an important issue to consider as we work out our answer:

> A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought.… An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure" (Keller 2009, xviii).

What, or rather who, matters most to you?

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Additional Thoughts on James

"Among other Christian voices, those of Jesus and Paul are closest to James. Although James is not, as noted, Christological in the usual sense of the term, the writing makes heavy use of Jesus' sayings.… Four statements are particularly close to the spirit of Jesus as we find it in the Synoptic Gospels: the declarations that the poor receive the kingdom (2:5; see Luke 6:20), that the merciful receive mercy (2:13; Matt 5:7), that the pure of heart and peacemakers are blessed (Jas 4:6; 3:18 and Matt 5:8, 9). And three statements in James are so close to Jesus' sayings in substance and style that the most reasonable surmise is that they in fact derive from Jesus: that God responds to those who ask (1:5; Matt 7:7), that they should not judge lest they be judged (4:11–12; 5:9; see Matt 7:1), that they should not take oaths but speak with a simple yes or no (5:12; Matt 5:34)."

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 2004. "An Introduction to the Letter of James." *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*, 24–38. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 29

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