

# James 4:6–17: Humility and Pride

Eric Zheng <mail@ericzheng.org>

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What follows is a talk that I gave at ACF large group on March 17, 2023 on James 4:6–17, titled “Humility and Pride.”\* The talk was meant to be about fifteen to twenty minutes long. The latest version of this essay can be found online at [https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/james\\_talk.pdf](https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/james_talk.pdf). The worksheet I made for the study afterward can be found at [https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/james\\_worksheet.pdf](https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/james_worksheet.pdf).

\*The titles and passage boundaries are decided in advance by Elder Gordon.

## The Tears of Repentance

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”<sup>1</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.\* Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

\*This is the same adjective used to describe the one who doubts while asking in Jas. 1:8.

*James 4:6–10 (ESV)*

James gives us a great promise: if we are willing to submit to God, we partake in the great victory that he has already won against Satan. But this submission is not to be taken lightly. It is no less than the yielding of every faculty to him; as Gordon likes to emphasize, it is the recognition of slavery to God rather than slavery to sin.\* It involves seeing our sin for what it is, mourning for it, and turning instead to God.

\*But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.  
*Rom. 6:22*

James tells us to *cleanse our hands*—symbolic of our outward actions—and *purify our hearts*—symbolic of our inward attitudes—in order to turn to God. In using this language, he evokes the imagery of the Old Testament priest, who must ceremonially purify himself before coming into the presence of God. But unlike the old priest’s ceremonies, which are unable to save,<sup>2</sup> our cleansing comes through Christ, the only medicine powerful enough to cleanse us of our sin. But how are we to receive this medicine? In the same manner that Jesus prescribes in the Beatitudes: through mourning and weeping.\* I think Bunyan describes it best when he says that the medicine of Christ is a pill that can be swallowed only with a glass of the tears of repentance.<sup>3</sup>

\*Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.  
*Lk. 6:25*

This kind of true repentance is characterized by deep sorrow over our sin. We cannot know God unless we admit him as the master of our lives, until our

<sup>1</sup>Prov. 3:34 (LXX)

<sup>2</sup>Heb. 10:1–4

<sup>3</sup>*The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Part II

own pride is broken. The Gospel is at once the simplest thing in the world—all you must do is accept grace freely given!—and yet it is one of the hardest things to accept, for it requires recognizing that all of our own efforts ultimately amount to nothing. Even our most righteous deeds are like filthy rags<sup>4</sup> before God.

We have thus far painted a bleak picture of our rather pitiful estate. But James, and indeed the whole Bible, give us great reason for hope. For God is faithful, and if we do submit to him, he will not be far from us. He will not despise a contrite heart,<sup>\*</sup> but rather will comfort those who mourn.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely when we perceive the magnitude of our sin that we realize how incredible James's statement is: *but he gives more grace*. As Calvin puts it in his commentary on this chapter, "James meant no other thing in this passage, than that God is never wanting to us, except when we alienate ourselves from him."<sup>6</sup>

This last point is quite important to stress. There is a sharp distinction between the godly grief that we are called to and merely feeling very bad. Paul says that "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."<sup>7</sup> How can we tell if we have the godly sort of grief? It will *produce repentance* in us. It is to be emphasized that repentance is not just turning away from sin, but actively turning toward God. If we merely feel very bad, we reap only death for ourselves, and a rather sorrowful one at that as we wallow in our regret. But if we turn to God, he is gracious to forgive,<sup>\*</sup> and our repentance becomes the mechanism by which we receive his great grace.

Since I should probably end this section with an application, I will say this: it falls to us to regularly practice this repentance. This is why many popular models of prayer, like ACTS<sup>8</sup> or TACOS,<sup>9</sup> include a time of confession, and indeed why Jesus taught us to pray this way.<sup>\*</sup> The liturgies of many churches include a moment of silent confession in each service. In this we can also derive no small encouragement from the study of Scripture. There is perhaps no example of repentance in Scripture as famous as David's after he was rebuked by the prophet Nathan for his heinous sin involving Uriah and Bathsheba.<sup>10</sup> His reckoning over his sin led him to write Psalm 51. We'll look more closely at that psalm during the study after this talk; for now, I'll just say that the regular reading and meditation upon such passages of Scripture can be a great way to practice godly repentance and humility.

\*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

*Ps. 51:17*

\*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

*1 Jn. 1:9*

\*... and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors

*Mt. 6:12*

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<sup>4</sup>Is. 64:6

<sup>5</sup>Mt. 3:4; Lk. 6:21

<sup>6</sup>Translation is by John Owen (not the famous one), "Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles" (1855), available online at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom45.html>.

<sup>7</sup>2 Cor. 7:10

<sup>8</sup>Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication

<sup>9</sup>Thanksgiving, adoration, confession, others, and self

<sup>10</sup>2 Sm. 11–12

## Judging and Doing the Law

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

*James 4:11–12 (ESV)*

What ought such humility to look like in our lives? For one, it necessitates a right understanding of our relationship with the law and with those around us. As our ACF theme verse this year says, we are to be *doers* of the law,\* not judges of it. Now of course, we must be careful: Paul writes that we have been set free from the law,<sup>11</sup> and indeed it is significant that James calls it a law of *liberty*. Our obedience to the law must therefore come freely out of our love of and relationship with him.<sup>12</sup> But we have already studied this idea in detail in previous large group studies, so I will refrain from expounding too much on it here.

More pertinent to this talk is the idea of being a *judge* of the law. What does James mean by judgment? One commentator puts it this way: “The speaking in view is speaking disparagingly of, or down on, another Christian. To criticize another one must conclude that he is right and the person he is criticizing is wrong. This is passing judgment.”<sup>13</sup> James is speaking against the act of condemning others when their actions displease us. Here and elsewhere,\* James connects judgment with “evil thoughts”; his view of judgment is clearly related to how we treat one another.

Most importantly, *why* is it that we are able to let go of judgment of others? It is because we trust in God as the ultimate arbiter of all human actions.\* If I am the master of my own world, then it is only right for me to make judgments about others. But conversely, if I submit everything to God, I have no right to judge, for he is the only proper judge. We cannot have a right understanding of our relationship with God and yet judge others, for then we would be like the unforgiving servant<sup>14</sup> and thus condemn ourselves. If we have the attitude of humility that James wants us to have, judging others should be the furthest thing from our nature.

That is why our Lord says, “judge not, that you be not judged.”<sup>15</sup> In the action of judging, we reveal that our hearts do not have the right relationship with God, and in particular that we are lacking in the required humility. Judging is so deadly because in it, we assume the place of God, an act of arrogance. Or as Paul puts it, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Rom. 7:6

<sup>12</sup>Jn. 14:15; 1 Jn. 2:3

<sup>13</sup>Constable’s *Expository Notes*

<sup>14</sup>Mt. 18:21–35

<sup>15</sup>Mt. 7:1; Lk. 6:37

<sup>16</sup>Rom. 14:4

\*But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.  
*Jas. 1:25*

\*... have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?  
*Jas. 2:4*

\*Vengeance is mine; I will repay.  
*Deut. 32:35 (LXX); cf. Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30*

Now this is not to say that there is no objective standard of right and wrong. There is, in fact, a perfect such standard: God’s Word, which every Christian must obey. He gives us the perfect law, and yet he tells us not to judge others. How do we reconcile the two? It is not necessarily by always staying silent and ignoring the fault of others. Sometimes situations call for godly confrontation; for example, Paul rebuked Peter publicly when the latter was in fear of the circumcision party.\* What, then, is the key to correcting without judgment? It must be done with the intent of edification, and only on the authority of Scripture. For the only way to both (1) maintain that there is some objective standard to which all of us are accountable and (2) avoid acting as judges is this: to hold that there is a higher judge—namely God—of whom we are merely servants. God has revealed his standard to us in the Bible, and it is good for correction.\* By remembering our right relationship with God and with others, we can correct others using the law without falling into the error of judgment that James warns about. Of course, all this must be done in love.

\*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

*Gal. 2:11*

\*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

*2 Tm. 3:16*

## Boasting about Tomorrow

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? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

*James 4:13–17 (ESV)*

Here, James confronts another common source of pride in our lives: pride over our future. There is no certainty in this life, and therefore any boasting about our future gain is nothing but vanity and arrogance. One of my favorite parables of Jesus is the parable of the rich fool. After a good harvest, he stores up all his grain and says to himself: “I have all the security that this world affords. Let my soul therefore relax and be merry, for my future is secure.” But God says to him: “You fool! This very night your life is required of you. Then all these things that you’ve stored up, whose will they be?”<sup>17</sup>

It does not take a rocket scientist to know that the future is uncertain. Practically every major religious and philosophical tradition has attempted to grapple with the problem of living in an uncertain world. Entire industries have popped up for the sole purpose of trying to predict and profit off of the future, and use up a massive amount of resource trying to do so. How do we, as Christians, think about and respond to this uncertainty? Some sort of robust answer is needed, or else we descend into nihilism like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes.\*

\*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

*Eccl. 1:2*

To the Christian, the problem with boasting about tomorrow is the same as the problem with judging: we forget our rightful relation with God. We may

<sup>17</sup>Lk. 12:13–21

try to make our own plans, but ultimately it is God who is sovereign over the universe. We cannot even know the number of our days; what folly it is to suppose that we can control much greater things! The psalmist asks, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?"<sup>18</sup> There are too many examples of this in Scripture, history, and our own lives to recount them all. This is the lesson of Nebuchadnezzar, which he had to learn the hard way: "the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."<sup>19</sup>

This, now, is a lesson that is very pertinent to us as students. Many of us—and I count myself among them—have bold visions for the future. We have signed job or internship offers; we have meticulously planned out course schedules; we have made or are making important decisions about our careers and relationships. In the midst of all this planning, James gives us a stern warning: if this is where our security lies, then we deceive ourselves. So long as we put our trust in worldly security, in the promise of future profit, we are neglecting to put our trust fully in Jesus. Yet Jesus is exactly the one thing in this world that is secure, for his work is finished!\*

Of course, the answer is not to neglect every careful preparation for the future. I do not want anyone to come from this talk saying that Eric said to stop going to classes and doing homework, regardless of what you may have heard about my personal life in the ACF group chat. In some sense, that would be too easy of an answer to James's challenge: to just give up on everything in life. But we are called to something far greater: to go out and live our lives, *yielding every part to God*.

Let me spell it out explicitly. What is the antidote to this fatal arrogance? It is the true humility that is found only in the person of Christ, who emptied himself for our sake.<sup>20</sup> Let us be as Paul writes to the Philippians. Paul had every reason to be proud: in our terms, he was born to a good family, educated at the best schools,<sup>21</sup> and had a prestigious job.\* Yet what does he go on to say? All these things he counts as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ!<sup>22</sup>

The only way to have this sort of true humility is to make much of Christ. Without Christ, our humility amounts to little more than feeling very wretched or sorry for ourselves. But in the perfect example of Christ, we see the perfect obedience that we are being sanctified toward, the ability to say, "not my will but yours be done."<sup>23</sup> Without some eternal hope to look forward to, giving up our worldly future makes no sense; it amounts to nothing more than defeatism. But if we hope in Christ and the eternal life that we have because of him, then indeed we have a good reason to forsake the world and turn to the one who has promised never to forsake us.\*

I want to end with a brief challenge. Most of us in this room are, all things considered, very successful in life. God has granted us a good education and a promising future. Yet if he were to take all these things away from you tomor-

\*When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

*Jn. 19:28*

\*...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

*Phil. 3:5-6*

\*No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.

*Josh. 1:5; cf. Heb. 13:5*

<sup>18</sup>Ps. 2:1

<sup>19</sup>Dan. 4:17

<sup>20</sup>Phil. 2:5-8

<sup>21</sup>I allude here to his education by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), a famous teacher of the law.

<sup>22</sup>Phil. 3:7-8

<sup>23</sup>Mt. 26:39; Lk. 22:42

row, would you be able to say with Job: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD?”<sup>24</sup> I cannot honestly say if I would be able to say that. But I do know one thing: that Jesus Christ, in his perfect obedience, did everything that I could not, and through him I have hope and reason to live for God.

## Version History

This is the second version of this document. It adds an explicit explanation of what James means by judgment, which I had written in the margins of my paper copy before actually delivering the talk. The first version was published on March 17, 2023.

## Acknowledgment

I’d like to thank Kevin Li for providing feedback on a previous version of this talk and Gordon Ott for providing some useful study questions, off of which I based some of my worksheet questions. I’d also like to thank Hannah Lu and all of the ACF cell leaders for doing pre-study with me on Thursday. Their questions and comments have helped me to refine my thinking about the passage. And ultimately, I’d like to thank God, through whom I do all things.<sup>25</sup> *Soli Deo gloria!*

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<sup>24</sup>Job 1:21

<sup>25</sup>Phil. 4:13