

I. What Kind of Writing Is This?

Who is being addressed here? Like is James writing *these* words to these followers of Jesus who have been scattered by persecution?

Both sections – James 4:13-17 and James 5:1-6 - begin with this phrase, “Now listen...” In every other major section of this letter James addresses his audience with something familial, something tender, like “my brothers and sisters” or even “my *beloved* brothers and sisters.”

Is James directly addressing the followers of Jesus in this section; or is he describing the faithless approach of arrogant merchants and the fate of oppressive landowners (the two main ways of growing rich in the ancient world)?

This text is ‘working’ on two levels:

- A. The Christians James is writing to are likely being persecuted - losing land, economic stability, maybe being shunned by business contacts, and being treated poorly, even violently.

*“...Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?
Are they not the ones dragging you into court?”*

James 2:6b

This indictment of rich oppressors would bring comfort to his audience, to remind them that those who mistreat them will be judged accordingly, by the perfect Judge (see James 5:7-9).

This is also a call, then, to those who are being tempted into revolutionary responses - who might take up the zealot response of violence - not to take matters into their own hands; but instead, to be patient, to trust God with their pain.

James offers this in response,

*“Be patient, **then**, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming...”*

James 5:7a

- B. Are we tending to act like the arrogant merchants James describes? Are we at risk of becoming like those oppressive landowners?

II. Presumptuous Much?

“¹³ Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’

- ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life?
You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.
- ¹⁵ *Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’*
- ¹⁶ *As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.*
- ¹⁷ *If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”*

James 4:13-17

A. *Be Humble*

The issue James points out is the sin of presumption. There’s an arrogance here that says, ‘We are in control of our own destiny.’

We, in the modern-West, are inheritors of a mechanistic view of the universe.

The logic is simple: ‘You don’t even know what’s going to happen tomorrow. We can’t presume on the future;’ and his evaluation: *“You boast in your arrogant schemes, [and] all such boasting is evil.”* – James 4:16

The wise approach:

“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’” - James 4:15

- i. To say, ‘If it is God’s will,’ is not a formula. He’s not talking about words so much as attitude.
- ii. The Bible encourages wise planning.

The humility described here is an attitude not a formula of speech.

“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”

Proverbs 27:1

‘If the Lord wills’ is powerful because it keeps us in a place where we know we are not in control of the outcomes.

This is ‘evil’ because since to boast like that is to overspill the boundaries of what it means to be human. It’s to presume on the territory which belongs to God alone.

B. *Be a Human*

“...You are a mist...” (James 4:14b) - What is James saying? Be aware of the limits of your humanity, including your mortality.

“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Psalm 90:12

This text reminds us: ‘My life is the Lord’s.’ My goal isn’t to make *my* plans, write *my* story without reference to God, or just God as a minor footnote.

C. *Be Where Your Feet Are*

“I want to be where my feet are
I want to breathe the life around me
I want to listen as my heart beats
Right on time
I want to be where my feet are”

*“Centering Prayer” – The Porter’s Gate*¹

Part of the hubris, the pride, and the problem of living for the ‘next thing,’ is how James concludes:

*“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and
doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”*

James 4:17

We often call this ‘the sin of omission.’ There’s the sin of doing the wrong thing; and, as James says here, there’s also the sin of not doing the right thing. It’s the problem with living constantly in the future, or in the past and not the present. Because right now, in the present, there are good things God has for you to do; but you have to be present in the present to do it.

III. Lifestyles of the Rich and Oppressive

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you.

² Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.

*³ Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you
and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.*

*⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are
crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached
the ears of the Lord Almighty.*

*⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have
fatted yourselves in the day of slaughter.*

⁶ You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

¹ The Porter’s Gate. (Released 15 Sept 2023). *Centering Prayer*. Sanctuary Songs: Integrated Music Rights.

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming...

James 5:1-6, plus 7a.

James is preserving the language of, “...*you rich people*...” (James 5:1a) not to describe his Christian audience, but as a category for those who, in defiance of God’s ways, are defrauding and abusing the poor for their own gain. He is stating the reality of the coming judgment on those who remained, like Pharaoh, stubbornly committed to their evil.

A. *Be Patient*

The next section, James 5:7-11, makes best sense as to how the community of Jesus-followers should respond to the rich oppressors described in this passage.

*“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming...
The Judge is standing at the door!”*

James 5:7a & 9b

Psalm 73

*Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.*

*² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.*

*³ For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (vv. 1-3)*

....

*¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply*

*¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny. (vv.16-17)*

....

*²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.*

*²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds. (vv.27-28)*

B. *Be just and generous.*

The ‘be patient’ doesn’t mean that there would never be a cry for justice. This text is, itself, a cry for justice. This text gives us warrant to join our voices and our prayers with and for those in need.

This text tells us that God’s world is still a ‘moral world.’ It tells us that greed and avarice and injustice, that the hording wealth and violence, is still wrong.

Don’t fall prey to the temptation to emulate the oppressive rich; and among the best ways to do that is, well, be generous right now. Be humble - be a human - be where your feet are.

Good News

- This is all very good news because it means that, despite looking like all evidence is to the contrary, God has not forgotten you when you are in hard times - God is still for you.
- It’s good news because it assures us that those who gain riches by oppressing others will be held to account by the God who is the God of Justice. It means we can let go of any need to avenge.
- Yes, your life is a mist; but Jesus was raised, and if you are ‘in Him,’ trusting Him, you will be raised too. Yes, your life is fleeting; but because death is not the end, as Paul says, your work is now full of meaning! Because *this is the only life* you have this side of eternity, and it matters how you live it.

Memento Moriendi

“If the last thing you did was the last thing you do.
If the last breath you breathed was the last breath you drew, would you
be okay with the way they remember you?
If the last thing you did, was the last thing you do?”

“The Last Thing You Do” – High Valley²

Remember your death; Remember that your life is a mist, and ask:

- Are you living in a way that accepts each day as a simple gift from God?
- If you would die tomorrow, what would you regret?
- What have you left undone that God has called you to do? The good you ought to do, but didn’t do it?

More good news: if you have the breath to answer that question, you have breath to ask God for His help to do it! So, pray.

² High Valley. (2010). *The Last Thing You Do*. Centricity Music.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

When did you first become aware of your own mortality? What was that like?

Dig In

Read James 4:13-17. James addresses the arrogance and presumptuous nature of the ‘arrogant merchant’ by saying, “You are a mist...” Do you ever have moments where you ‘remember your death’ (*Memento Moriendi*), or is that something you try to avoid? Why do you think that is?

How might remembering that we are “mist” (James 4), and learning to “number our days” lead to a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12)?

In James 4:17 we read, “*If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.*” Are there ways you are tempted to live in ‘planning ahead mode’ that might make you prone to miss the good things God has right in front of you, right now?

What might some of those ‘good things’ be for you? What action could you take to lean in and do those things?

Read James 5:1-6, plus 7. How is this text good news for you? How is this a challenge for you - maybe for you to care about injustices toward the poor in a way you haven’t to this point?

Pray

Take some time to thank God that He is just and generous toward us. Share your requests and pray for them. Ask God to help us, as a community, be those who are not presumptuous in our planning, but to be those who trust God for every detail of our life together.