

THEOLOGY FROM SCRATCH— WEEK 11



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is St. James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640),
on display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.*

Week 11 ties everything together. James teaches the specifics of patient humility. Instead of boasting and focusing on riches, we should patient avoiding judging others and should be sincere.

Encouragement rooted in *koinonia* is the secret sauce.

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Theology From Scratch — Week 10

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Dialogue 51 — Judgment

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)

I like, “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” That’s one part of Christian teaching that’s popular.

That teaching traces back to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” — Matthew 7:1–2 (ESV)

Right. Everyone knows that one.

Here James revisits a couple of previous topics to bring everything together. The Greek word translated as “speak evil against” (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-leh-oh) means slander. It’s not about sincere criticism.

James is getting back to what he said in chapter three about the potential to do evil with our tongues.

The Greek word translated as “judges” (κρίνω, krin-oh) is about partiality. The first example in the BAGD lexicon is, “prefer someone to someone.” James lit into partiality back in chapter two.

So, is this passage tying James’s earlier teaching about partiality and the tongue to his recent point about relaxing and letting God run His universe?

Bingo. They all merge when he says, “*The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.*”

Judging the law is way above our pay grade. It’s inappropriate and unproductive, but notice that it takes speech to activate the problem.

So, this isn’t about feelings; it’s about actions?

Exactly. James isn’t just talking about thoughts when he says, “*But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.*”

And, of course, this is also about not letting God be God.

There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor.

This sounds like James is saying, “Give it a rest.”

That’s not a bad summary. The judging behavior that James is criticizing is essentially about people being busy-bodies.

But note that there is plenty of evil right now in our world, and James is *not* saying that we should ignore that.

So, where should folks draw the line?

Exercising judgement over issues of right and wrong is essential. One of the church’s main roles is to set an ethical standard. That’s what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5:13–16

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (ESV)

But many churches in Germany failed miserably in the 1930s and 40s. They were silent, choosing to “not judge.”

Exactly. If they did that based on their reading of James, they totally missed the point. The 1933 Reich Concordat violated every imaginable Christian principle. Rome hoped to secure the freedom of the church and its schools.

But all it succeeded in doing was neutralizing the Catholic church as an organized political opponent of Hitler. In fact, their failure is so mind-bogglingly stupid, I’m hard pressed to see any way to fit a logic to what they did. It certainly was light years away from James’s teaching. The holocaust was partiality on steroids.

And everything in chapter four up to this point has been fiercely against letting evil thrive unchallenged. Rome chose to be “a friend of the world,” which James clearly said is at enmity to God. James’s instruction to resist the devil was ignored in every way imaginable.

Yeah. They were anything but “*the light of the world.*”

But some Christians did stand up—Deitrich Bonhoeffer being one classic example. So, while some failed spectacularly, some succeeded.

That’s kind of been the story all along.

Yes. There’s a lesson in that too. We’ll talk more tomorrow.

Dialogue 52 — Tomorrow

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin. — James 4:13–17 (NKJV)

James seems to be saying, “Don’t put off to tomorrow, what you can do today.”

Yes. James is moving on to one of the most obvious aspects of the fact that we’re not God—we don’t know the future. We all understand this truism, yet we often act like we don’t believe it.

This is sort of what James has been saying all along, if we act like we don’t believe it, then we don’t believe it. We have a *confidence* about the future that’s not really all that confident.

That makes sense.

The point is that we should never disconnect from God. He is Lord, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”

“But,” James continues, “now you boast in your arrogance.”

That is kind of nuts. Do you think there’s a psychological connection between boasting about that confidence and that confidence being actually shaky?

That is a common psychological phenomenon, but James doesn’t make that connection. He’s more concerned with the consequences.

And note that this part is directly addressed to his first century readers. While it’s for everyone’s edification, the direct implication doesn’t apply to all.

But then the next sentence does apply to all. *All such boasting is evil.*

Yikes. Boasting is a big part of the American culture.

Exactly, and the strength of this statement is easy for Americans to miss. We tend to wear out every superlative. We speak of “giving 110 percent.” People we disagree with are “idiots.” People we don’t like are “worse than Hitler.” Overuse has robbed strong words of their meaning.

So, this point is going to land with a thud in the American mind, right?

Yes, and that's a problem. This is supposed to be startling. The Greek word that's translated as evil (πονηρός, pon-ay-ross) means wicked or evil. It is a literally damnable crime against God.

Seems like James then makes it worse by implying that just failing to act is a sin, too.

Yes, and that last sentence introduces an advanced concept. *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

Wait. What does James mean by, "*him who knows to do good.*" Can something be a sin for one person but not for another?

Yes. In this case, the rule, "Ignorance is no excuse," doesn't apply. If we're careful to define what James means, there are situations where ignorance **is** an excuse.

Ignorance of the law is never an excuse in court. We're expected to know what the speed limit is, or the catch limit on a fishing license, or which species are protected, or whatever.

Right, but with sin, knowledge matters. This is because sin is fundamentally rebellion against God. It's all about what's in the heart. The actions reveal what's in the heart to us, but God sees what's in the heart directly. He sees the sin, not just the symptoms of the sin.

So, if you do something that's wrong, or don't do something you should, not knowing the rule means it's not as bad. Still, like knowing the law in court, we're expected to know basic right and wrong, but there are situations where details can be hidden from us. Then the lack of knowledge matters. The classic example is about food that's been sacrificed to idols. Paul details this in 1 Corinthians 10:27–28.

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." (NKJV)

So, in that case, if you don't know, it's not sin, right?

Exactly, but if you know the food has been sacrificed to idols, then the meal has become a test.

It's kind of curious that someone would suddenly blurt out, "*This was offered to idols,*" when you didn't already know. It's just hypothetical, but it feels like a test.

Right. So, James's point here is that knowingly defying the Lord's will is straight-up sin.

He'll amplify this tomorrow. See you then.

Dialogue 53 — Riches

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you. — James 5:1–6 (NKJV)

James has been pretty tough all along, but this might be the harshest yet.

Yes, here James gets back to what it means to be rich in the first century. Back then, the rich generally did not come by it through their own effort. So, James gives them an alarming warning.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!

That's creepy.

This time, James details how their *riches are corrupted*. Their *gold and silver* came from the sweat of others. Even so, they weren't content to garner profits honestly. Instead, they cheated their workers.

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

But justice is coming!

Yup. The Greek word transliterated as Sabaoth (Σαβαώθ, Sab-a-oath) literally means armies. James is warning them of their ultimate fate at the hands of the heavenly host. This is what Jesus was talking about when He explained the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13.

“...the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.” — Matthew 13:39b

Then James wraps up this point with a grotesque forecast—“*you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.*”

It's amazing that James would use such harsh language. He has to be talking to people that would read this letter.

Yes. His bold admonishment of them reflects his authority. James has to expect that they will listen.

While this tongue lashing is only directed at some of his readers, we should all pay careful attention to its message. Every modern American is incredibly wealthy compared to even the richest people in the first century.

Exactly. Just consider what the teeth of first century folks must have looked like. The only dental treatment they had was extraction. Being rich didn't make any difference either. And there was no modern toothpaste and nothing even approaching the cleaning power of a modern toothbrush. And while soap had been invented, it was mainly used for washing things, not people. And don't get me started on the lack of basic hygiene.

Yes, things back then stank, literally and figuratively. That's true even today in some parts of the world. We are incredibly blessed, yet we tend to take it all for granted. We don't thank God enough.

Still, modern blessings are not, in and of themselves, wrong—and this passage explains that.

So, what's secret?

The key is attitude. You can have a bad attitude with little wealth or a good attitude with great wealth. James especially lights into the ones who *“have heaped up treasure in the last days.”*

That reflects a direct lack of faith—trusting in stored treasure instead of in heaven. That's what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6:19–21 in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (NKJV)

Wait. What's the causality order in what Jesus said at the end there. Does the location of the treasure cause the heart to follow, or do you tend to put your treasure where your heart is?

That's a very advanced question. It could be both, but Jesus is speaking to the former. His command, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth,”* is in the imperative. He's effectively saying, “Do this or else this will happen.” That's the heart following the location of the treasure.

Okay. Either way makes sense psychologically.

Maybe it is both, forming a grand feedback loop. Your heart follows your treasure, which follows your heart, which follows your treasure, in a vicious cycle.

In any case, we'll wrap up everything tomorrow.

Okay. See you then.

Dialogue 54 — Patience

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. — James 5:7–11 (NKJV)

I’ve always liked the prayer, “Lord, give me patience, and give it to me now!” This seems to be more prevalent with the well-off. So, I guess this makes sense coming on the heels of James busting on the rich.

Yeah, but notice that James is now turning his attention to the *brethren*, who are mostly not rich. His message is simple but critically important—be patient. It’s a message for everyone.

So James gives three examples of patience: the farmer, the prophets, and Job. Individually they show how patience pays off.

But it’s the common thread that is James’s message here—impatience doesn’t help. In fact, it’s destructive. That’s the point of verse nine.

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

Wait. What? James condemned the rich who have cheated their laborers and stored up wealth (and wrath!) for themselves.

But is James now saying that the victims of that cheating can also be condemned—for just grumbling? How can this be? Can that sin be just as bad as the cheating?

In a way, yes. Both sins are what you might call “sins of atheism.” They display not trusting God (or not believing in Him at all).

Impatience is America’s signature sin; it’s an integral part of our culture. We’re marinated in it. That was true before computers, but it’s ubiquitous now—especially with kids that grew up staring at computer screens.

Yeah, “screen time” is the enemy of every parent. Kids nowadays have the attention span of a goldfish, and the patience to match.

Conversely, my prayer partners and I have noticed a distinctly slow style in how God answers our prayers. It often feels like He’s making a point of teaching us patience.

You've never had a prayer with a short deadline?

Sure, some prayers have been urgent; we've seen some stop-your-heart miracles there.

What do you mean by "stop-your-heart miracles"?

It means something spectacular that cannot be explained as mere coincidence or anything natural. I say 'stop your heart' because they're so awesome they leave you in shock.

But they're rare and not the point here anyway. Teaching patience seems to be the more common motif. A frustratingly slow pace has been a relentless theme with my prayer buddies and me. Many of the biggest cases, with the most impressive answers, have been agonizingly slow.

The Lord even seems to deliberately hold back until after the intensity of our prayers has waned. Only when our prayers had settled into an enduring—even monotonous—style has God brought glorious results.

Methinks there's a point to that.

Me too. God seems to be making the same point that James makes in this passage. Being in a hurry is toxic.

And this connects to grumbling. Impatience can make you upset with someone who hasn't done anything wrong. That's frighteningly far from glorifying God.

Okay, I'm starting to see how this can be so serious that James could say something like, "*Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!*"

Yes, if everything is about God's glory, and this kind of sin is particularly embarrassing to the kingdom, then it's a major sin, even if it seems minor from a human perspective.

But I think there's also a secondary lesson in God's timing, particularly His tendency to wait until prayers have lost their initial spark to act. I suspect He's teaching us that prayer "intensity" isn't the secret sauce.

Why would that be?

One of the subtle lessons for a Christian is that God is God. I know that sounds obvious, but what I mean is that Christians often aren't willing to fully relinquish "control" over things. We need to learn that it's totally up to God how (or whether) He's going to answer our prayers. Prayer style, or intensity, does not control the outcome.

This reminds me of the "body English" people use to try to affect the path of a bowling ball that's half way down the alley. They know it has no effect, but they do it anyway.

Not sure this is analogous. I don't think Christians even know that they don't control things. And with that I'll say goodbye until tomorrow.

Dialogue 55 — Encouragement

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. — James 5:12–20 (ESV)

It seems odd that James would say, about not swearing oaths, “*But above all.*” Is that really above all the things he said before?

Yeah, this does seem strong. The Greek words translated as above all (πρό πάντων, pro pahn-tone) literally mean “before everything.”

In other words, this takes precedence. After all the things James has covered, it is surprising for him to declare that this is more important than everything else.

But that’s exactly what he does. Swearing oaths, which was a common practice back then, is not okay. Jesus strongly condemned it in Matthew 5:33–37, too. James’s condemnation is just as strong, threatening, “*so that you may not fall under condemnation.*”

I don’t see how that can rise above the other things James has been condemning.

Well, notice that the condemnation isn’t directed simply at oath swearing. It’s reserved for deceivers. They’re the ones for whom “yes” wasn’t “yes” and “no” wasn’t “no.” The oaths simply magnify the sin. Oaths are especially offensive as a part of a strategy of deception.

Is that because it invokes the Lord’s name?

Not necessarily. That’s why James adds, “*either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath.*” It does imply that the swearing is “by” something, but it doesn’t seem to matter what.

So, lying is worse if you “certify it,” right?

I suppose. In our society, the only oaths I know of are with respect to the legal term “under oath.” The penalties for lying in that case are shockingly severe. We even have a separate term for that—perjury.

We used to say, “So help me God,” in court, but I don’t think that’s required any more.

It’s still the traditional oath, but it’s now optional. The reference to God can be omitted, but it’s just as legally binding

So, in conclusion, James cites with two examples of mature Christian behavior. First, he makes the case for constant prayer and praise. Then he advises confessing our sins to one another. This kind of deep relationship is often called *koinonia*.

Does that really happen?

Not often enough. This is also known as having an “accountability partner,” and not many Christians (especially men) have one. Being that open can be risky. The problem isn’t that people aren’t open enough; it’s that people aren’t good enough listeners to be qualified to be a competent accountability partner.

Christians should strive to get to this level of spiritual maturity. There’s a great book on this—*Encouragement: The Unexpected Power of Building Others Up* by Larry Crabb and Dan Allender.

Sounds like a good idea for everyone, not just Christians.

Absolutely. Relationships in our society are almost universally hollow. Imagine what would happen if someone asked you how you’re doing and you actually told them. They’d think you’re nuts.

Finally, James adds a curious instruction. Turning back someone who has wandered from the truth is a great victory. *It will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

But there’s a twist. James doesn’t just say this; he announces it. “*Let him know that*” all this good will result. In other words, rather than simply teaching this truth, James tells his readers to use it in shout-outs.

This isn’t doctrine; it’s a special case of encouragement.

Bingo, and what was the title of Crabb and Allender’s book? See the connection?

Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering has done a great work. We should say so.

And it all depends on *koinonia*. You’re not going to have much impact on someone if you have the kind of hollow relationship most folks have.

This is the perfect ending. Thanks.