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Faith Brought to Life: James 4:11-17

Major Errors

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Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you-- who are you to judge your neighbor? 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." 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. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

We tend to associate greatness with great feats. Great athletes with great games, matches, or wins. Great writers for major books. Great business leaders with great bottom lines. Great actors and musicians with great performances. But truthfully, that is not where their greatness lies. Their greatness lies in doing the right things day in and day out. Practicing, honing their skills, making the right small decisions and getting past the wrong ones, so that all those minor wins make the major ones, seemingly without much effort.

So it is with faith. We tend to think of great faith as the kind that leads to spectacular feats. We tend to write off Christianity because we think it takes some kind of major faith and miracle before we will really see God. But James seems to say differently. The faith James wants for us to have doesn't have to move mountains, produce miracles, or send us overseas to do missions work. The faith James wants us to bring to our lives is for the unspectacular business of ordinary, daily life. It's not the stuff you see on TV. For the record, televangelism has about as much to do with evangelism as the WWF has to do with the sport of wrestling. I think that's partly why we're afraid that we don't move the mountains, so we disassociate faith with our daily lives, and we commit major errors.

Here's the first problem: We make it a habit to live out our major errors. And that's poor judgment. We make a stupid choice, but then we spend 90% of our energy trying to defend ourselves, cover up, or play along, rather than turning around, admitting it, and asking forgiveness. We try and "play along," to see what we can do to remedy the situation, because we want to be right.

It's like the premarital counseling appointment I had last week. First of all, I missed the appointment in my calendar, so when they walked in the door I knew I was in trouble. Second of all, I knew I had met with them once before several months ago, so it was too late to ask their names. Third of all, I was too proud to humble myself and tell them I was drawing a blank on their names, (let alone unprepared for their meeting). And so, fourth, I faked my way around for a bit, flipping through my "weddings file" hoping for a clue. My weddings folder is a good inch thick with papers, so it wasn't easy. But fortunately, I found the year-long calendar of weddings. Aha! I asked them "Remind me of the date and time of your wedding, again?" Yes! I got it. Then I could find my notes from our first meeting. Smooth as silk.

It's just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Rather than admit it, they first tried to hide from God (duh), then deny it. "The woman made me do it." Actually, Adam did one better than that: "*The woman YOU gave me made me eat it.*" At least Eve said "*The serpent tricked me...*" Not much has changed. We still make major errors in our day-to-day judgment and James is on us again about it. James writes to the early Christ-followers about 3 major errors: Slandering (more dragon breath), judging, and planning.

First, don't make the major error of slandering -

1. What we say about other people so easily leads to disunity and disharmony). And yet we speak against other people all the time.
2. Slander is not just untrue statements, it is also harsh words about someone not present. Beware of your intent in sharing – is it to cause pain, to tear down and to damage?
3. "This is the sin of those who meet in corners and gather in little groups and pass on confidential pieces of information which destroy the reputation of those who are not there to defend themselves."

James would say do what you know. Now you know, slandering implies you are above everybody else. Quit speaking against other people.

Second, don't make the major error of judging –

1. James is referring to our tendency to regularly criticize others. Watching others in order to criticize them.
2. This kind of judging is nitpicking, lashing out, and petty.
3. In v.11 James writes "When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it." What law does he mean? The Royal Law, which he mentions in 2:8 "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right." This is the Law of Love, and our speech just walks all over it.
4. James is NOT prohibiting the proper and necessary discernment that every Christian must use in determining what is true versus what is false. He's not forbidding discipline and confrontation of sin in another Christian's life. We need to be discerning and edifying for one another.
5. James is going after our love for finding fault with others. He is rooting out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit.
6. It is a huge error of judgment to operate that way in church.

Third, don't make the major errors of planning – (v.13, 14) *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." 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.*

1. Here James is writing some pretty sharp business people, who as a part of their success were big planners.
2. The problem is not in the planning, per se. It was the fact that God was not in the plans. These Christ followers were hitting homeruns in the corporate world. They were doing business and using money just like any other businessperson. The problem was, they made decisions and planned for the future and lived essentially as if God was not a part of the equation.

3. They presumed tomorrow was in the bag – a guarantee. They’ve got everything under control, when in truth, their next breath is not even a sure thing. This is no evidence of their business decisions involving prayer. There is no suggestion that biblical wisdom impacted their planning.
4. They slipped into thinking it was all about them. James actually writes in 4:16 *“As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.”*
5. The most dangerous moments in life occur when a plan we have engineered succeeds. That moment of satisfaction can easily feed our ego and leach away our sense of dependence on God.
6. Since we’re talking about “faith brought to life, let’s look at some real ways we do this...
 - a. When we describe our retirement in selfish terms – as our time to enjoy ourselves, as opposed, perhaps, to thinking how God might want to use us in a significant way in ministry for his kingdom. (Think of the skill sets that could be brought to bear, amongst the retired among us).
 - b. We do this when we see our work and careers simply as ways we can make money and buy what we want and go where we want – without any sense of giving back to God generously of our finances to multiply his work.
 - c. We do this when we plan with great enthusiasm and excitement our next vacation trip, but never think about a plan to share Jesus Christ with those we connect with every day of our lives, including the children in our lives.
 - d. When we make decisions about education, job changes, moving, investments, and spending – all without any thought of God or any inclination to pray through those decisions.

Those approaches to the future are errors in judgment for a Christ follower and need some correction, which James is so good at giving us. (Whether we want it or not! But then, you all are still here, so you must be gluttons for James’ punishment – or wisdom.)

In these verses, even as James is naming the major errors, he builds in the correctives, or solutions.

1. Always remember the God factor – impacting both speech and judgment. 4:12 “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?”
2. Live out the Royal Law – Love your neighbor as yourself. In order for us to live at our best, we need that law on our front burners of our lives. When we slander and judge others, we try to place ourselves above God’s law, and even above God. We are saying in effect “The royal law is a mistake: it shouldn’t command love, it should command criticism.” And we’re treading on dangerous territory.
3. Our proper position – James says “Let’s remember – neither you nor I are God. The law of love is his idea. And let’s remember we cannot take his place.”
4. Exercise Godly judgment: You don’t throw out all discernment between right and wrong. Don’t abandon our understanding of what is sinful according to the Word of God. But face it – most of the time our slander and poisonous judgments are not dealing with sin, but with other areas: opinion, preference, or personality. The problem is, we like to play god in those areas. James says “Don’t.”
5. Plan with God on the front burner. The God factor must be a dominant part of our planning for the future. 4:15, 17 *“Instead, you ought to say ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this and that...If anyone, then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.’”*

6. The Christian worldview believes that God is the one who not only gives us life, and redeems our lives, but who also *sustains* our lives. In other words, the next 24 hours are not “ours” automatically. Just talk to the family and friends of Diana Walters. Just ask any parent who has lost a teenager in a car accident. Just ask the company vice president of 20 years who just had his office cleaned out after the company was bought out. Just ask the mother whose baby was born stillborn with no advance signal or the parents whose child died a crib death... just ask them about the guarantee of tomorrow. Apart from God, there is none.

7. Take God’s view of time – that tomorrow comes to us as a gift of grace from the hand of God and so we must approach our planning with that attitude that couches everything around the mindset that says, “*If it’s the Lord’s will.*” It’s more than a mantra. More than just saying words. It means we actively think about and plan our futures with God in the picture. This attitude allows God to actually enter our world from Monday to Saturday. So, as we look to our future, our plans and desires should be evaluated by God’s standards and by biblical principles and priorities. Our plans should be discussed with godly counsel, with prayer and with an intense desire to hear from God before we act. It is a mindset that works hard to draw God into our daily life and routine.

“It’s good to have goals, but goals can disappoint us if we leave God out of them. The beginning of Godly planning is to ask, “What would I like to be doing 10 years from now? 1 year from now? Tomorrow? How will I react if God steps in and rearranges my plans?”

What is our response? V.17 “*Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.*”

What good do we know? That Jesus came so we can stop trying to live out our errors. Admit your major errors to God first. Be faithful in the day-to-day small things. Operate with the “law of love”, not criticizing and judging each other. Add to that a God’s eye view of time – we are to live each day in the constant awareness of God, because he has literally given us each day. It’s a matter of obedience or sin. You choose. You be the judge.