



9. Vapour Trails (James 4:11-17)

The banks in New Jersey had been robbed systematically, one after the other. What made the robber stand out was his politeness. He just gave the tellers a note which said, "Please place your money in this bag. Thank you." The newspapers called him the Gentleman Bandit.

The widespread publicity led to a very unlikely arrest - the suspect was a Catholic priest. His church was appalled but stood beside him, saying they knew he could not be the bandit. They signed petitions, held protest marches and came up with his bail. But the police were certain they had their man. All of the eyewitnesses positively identified him.

And the news media dug into his past, to find that in a previous church he had left under a cloud because of financial irregularities in the parish. For a priest he had a pretty expensive lifestyle - his own apartment and a fast car. His church was probably standing up for him because otherwise they looked like dupes. As you know with the press, they were going to get their man! It was obvious he had done it; wasn't it?

But then a funny thing happened. The REAL Gentleman Bandit was caught red-handed. As it turned out, he was the spitting image of the priest. It's just that he WASN'T the priest. The priest was released, his church threw him a big party, and the news media were a little sheepish (after David Holwick).

It's easy to make snap judgements on people and condemn them even though you're not in full possession of the facts. It's awful when the press wrongfully accuse people even before the due process of law has taken place.

When we bring it into the church it is immensely damaging. I suspect that many of us have been victims of it; I certainly have. It can be distressing and hurtful when someone comes up to you and says something like "Pastor, I think it's a disgrace that you would say so *and so* to *whoever*." When I ask where they got that from, I find it was from someone else and certainly not me. They were not in possession of the facts and they started saying things to others before they knew what the truth was. And there was a danger that someone could be hurt or their reputation destroyed.

Let me give you a story to illustrate this: *He was Queen Victoria's favorite preacher, and he was a Baptist. Spurgeon and his wife had a practice of selling, but refusing to give away, the eggs their chickens laid. Even close relatives were told, "If you want them, you have to pay for them." Since he had a huge church and a salary to match, some people labelled the Spurgeons as greedy. The Spurgeons accepted the criticisms without defending themselves. It was only after Mrs. Spurgeon died that the whole story was revealed: All the profits from the sale of eggs went to support two elderly widows.*

Yet gossip and slander is part of our society and it's easy to slip into it. Last week we saw that we need to put ourselves under God's control – submit then to God. Part of that was *humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up*. And the next verse immediately says don't slander, or perhaps that would be better put – don't backbite. Tasker has said "*Backbiting is taken as a signal; illustration of the failure to possess the humility which alone makes it possible for anyone to be exalted by the Lord*" If you are under God's control and are humble before Him, you're not going to be a backbiter.

There is a lot about careless words in James as we know. It's all part of James helping us to understand that things we see as part of life are an abomination to God. People then thought it was OK to pass judgement on other people. You'll find people like this everywhere today. You know them, the people who have nothing good to say about anyone. They are happy to criticize anyone.

I've met plenty in my time and I'm sure you have too. They're the sort that haven't realized that being judgemental is not a spiritual gift! They haven't realised either that God doesn't need help when it comes to judging the world – He'll do that.

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. 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 neighbour?

James is saying – when you backbite, slander and therefore stand in judgement on someone else, you in effect think you are better than God because you think He isn't or won't do His judging job properly. Maybe you haven't thought of it like that before.

It is God's prerogative to judge e.g. Rom 12:19 - "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. . Our task is mercy, not judgement. Matt 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. So when we judge others we usurp God's authority because that's God's job and we do not have the authority to do it. So the judgement falls on us.

But there's more. If we ignore what God is telling us to do, the implication is that we think it is a bad command or law. That's what James is saying in effect here. For example, if I don't like where the council have painted double yellow lines and park there, I'm making a statement that I think that the law is bad because it restricts what I want to do. If you stand in judgement, or in fact commit any sin of any sort, we advertise to God and to the rest of the world that we think that God's law and therefore God is in some way bad because He has restricted my freedom to act – so we've had to do our own thing instead. So in other words, we are passing judgement on God. It's the ultimate in human arrogance.

"I don't do that, I hear you think!" You may not like to entertain the thought that you do. But each time you consciously sin, you stand in rebellion against God and tell Him that you think His law shouldn't apply to you in that respect. That's why sin brings death. We must understand what sin is: what the enormity of it is. When we do, we understand more just what it meant for God to redeem us in Christ.

Yet we still pass judgement and backbite! As a church we don't have a reputation for backbiting. Good. May that continue! However, if I got a pound for every time I've heard what is judgemental in the last few years, I still would have supplemented my income. I've been told how I should deal with others in the fellowship, I've been told how bad people are because of what they believe. I've been told how bad people are because of the version of scripture that they use. I've been told how bad people are because others don't approve of their lifestyle. I've been told how awful the worship is here. People aren't getting what they want. The Bible teaching isn't deep enough. If I go any further I guess you could add the Pastor is judgemental too! Actually we all do it to a greater or lesser extent. But that doesn't justify it. It means we have to deal with this sin in our lives and humble ourselves before the Lord.

Do you think you are better than another brother or sister in Christ? Then think again! Who do you think you are? You needed the same Saviour and still need the same Saviour as every other believer. I think the saying is quite true. When you point the finger, there are three pointing back at you. Understand that and let God be judge. As I said, this kind of sin is not prevalent in this church – let's keep it out. If you are called to this church, then contribute to it and build it up – that's what you are called to.

As I said, judgementalism is about arrogance. It's borne out of anyone who thinks they are better than others – or to be quite honest, think they are better than God. "What", you may say: "I'd never suggest I was better than God!" Really? You may say that to yourself and others. Your lifestyle may say something else. Our deeds always tell what's on the inside. Remember faith without works is dead. Let's read on:

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 and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

This passage is also about the sin of presumption based on arrogance again. We think we are just so clever and ingenious. We boast about how we have control over ourselves and our lives. We think we are entitled to and will get, as many years as we want to do what we want because that's what modern man has achieved. We do live longer – but not forever.

When historian H.G. Wells died in 1946, many newspapers quoted the last words he ever spoke. Friends and nurses were fluttering about his bedside trying to be helpful, adjusting his pillows, pulling up the covers, administering sedatives and so on. Wells turned to them and said, "Don't bother me! Can't you see I'm busy dying?"

"Can't you see I'm busy dying" I don't want to be morbid, but we're all busy dying. Life is 100% terminal. If you don't know Christ this morning, then it's time you did. It's like the old call on the boat- ing like - "Come in number seven, your time is up!"

But if you do know Christ, are you presuming on God that you can do what you like where you like as if you were going to live forever, or as if you had the right to a long life? You're busy dying too.

The problem is that there are countless people who have not looked at their eternal future: both non-Christian and Christian. There are a lot of Christians that have forgotten that their life has another perspective. They boast about their achievements in life. They just think that somehow that they are going to live forever, or at least long enough to achieve everything they want in life. The writer in Proverbs says : *27:1 "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."* Worse is James' comment on life - Life is like a vapour or a piece of morning mist.

I take the dog for a walk each morning and usually it's about 7am and we walk along by Northwell Pool. At this time of year on a clear morning there is a thin wisp of mist just above the water. However, by the time we go out into the fields and back, the mist is gone. Even a little bit of heat from the sun means it burns off. James says; life is like that. It's a vapour and it so easily disappears. If you've lived a long time, you'll know how quick life goes by.

What about your life? Has it been fulfilling, or a disappointment? Or perhaps mixed? Let's heed James and not waste the rest of it. *Tony Campolo: "... you may not think you are going to die, but you are. One of these days, they'll take you to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt on your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad."* Whatever our age and life experiences have been, we have been placed here by God for such a time as this. What are we going to do about it? Where will our priorities lie from now on? James says:

Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Our lives are in God's hands. Are they going to be: I'm doing this and that: I've got plans? Or is it going to be – what about God's will? Notice the wording. It isn't "I'm going to do that. I hope it's the Lord's will". It starts with "If it's the Lord's will...". What does He think about this? If it's in His plans for us, then we'll do it.

I have been excited in the last week with some of the comments that have come back in response to the letter I sent out. As a church our desire is to do God's will and see Him build church in a new way here. God, I believe is calling each one of us to play a part in this venture – all of us. Whether that part is big or small – it is according to His will. We need as a church to seek that out. We can be part of it; or we can sit on the sidelines. Maybe we can sit on the sidelines and criticize – but we know what God thinks about that don't we?

You might wonder why we are doing things like we are. It's because we want to start with "If it's the Lord's will... - then we'll build church here. Those things we need to do will be according to His will because we have sought it. Remember the promises last week – resist the devil, draw near to God, humble yourselves. All have promised outcomes – the devil flees, God draws near and He lifts us up. Let's get things the right way around.

You may not be familiar with the way we are trying to do things. It may be new to you, but it's been there in Scripture for 2000 years and people have taken God at His word in that time and seen

streams of blessing. Now it's our turn to go down that road at this time and this generation in this fellowship.

Let me finish. There is a third sin in this passage besides backbiting and boasting. It for those who chose to be spectators and sit on the sideline. It's this:

17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

There you go – it's the sin of omission. It's when we know what God's will is for us (and usually God's will is clear in Scripture - you don't need to perceive anything more) and we decide not to act. It's just another piece of rebellion. Sin brings death. The church's inaction in Britain today had brought as much death as some of the negative things it has done. It works both ways. And we have been part of a generation that has brought death to the church of God. We have the opportunity to stop the rot in our corner of the vineyard before it becomes terminal.

A past minister of my last church was a famous 50s evangelist called Gordon Thomas who worked with Tom Rees after a successful pastorate in Tottenham during the 40s. On one of his newsletters to his old church in 1957 he wrote *"Only one life, it will soon be past. Only what's done for Jesus will last"*. He died shortly afterwards. He was in his fifties. Sad, you may think. A great evangelist cut down in his prime. I'm not sure he saw his death like that. He made the most of the opportunity of life that God gave him. Are we? Even if we are in the latter years of our life, God has placed us here as his foot-soldiers to do a new thing. What are we going to do about it?

The answer is, everything that isn't submission to God is against Him: it's rebellion, it's against His will – it's sin and sin brings death. We are at a crossroads as a church. We see the new thing and we see what we have. God is doing the new thing and in that new thing is life and hope. We move from where we are into what He is doing. Let's move there personally. Let's move there as a church.

Life's a vapour. Let's not waste a moment of it.

*Only one life, it will soon be past;
Only what's done for Jesus will last.*

Prayer of repentance
Prayer of commitment

