

## **EXAMPLES OF ARROGANCE**

**Jas 4:11-5:6**

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John Grisham's *The Firm*:<sup>1</sup> completed in 1988, published in 1991, and released as a movie by Paramount Pictures in 1993. The story: a young lawyer joins a prestigious law firm only to discover that it has a sinister dark side. As one reviewer of the movie put it, "Joining a law firm from hell can be detrimental to your health." Mitchell McDeere, raised in the coal-mining region of rural Kentucky, has worked hard to get where he is: third in his class at Harvard Law. He's young. He's bright. He's ambitious. Mitch could have the pick of the big firms in New York and Chicago, but he's chosen the Memphis tax firm of Bendini, Lambert & Locke. They're selective. They pay outrageous salaries. They have a turnover rate of zero. And Mitch is about to find out why. Mitch discovers that the firm is owned and operated by the most powerful organized crime family in Chicago. Mitch finds himself caught "between a rock and a hard place": the FBI wants him to be an informant inside the firm, and the firm wants to make him a very rich man or a very dead one.

What persuaded Mitch to work with the Memphis firm? It was the mind-boggling package of perks and financial incentives: a new BMW, a six-figure special annuity package, the payment of his law-school debts, down-payment assistance for his new house, a \$3,000 clothing gift, and generous funds for home furniture. Abby, Mitch's wife, seems uneasy about the avalanche of good fortune. Mitch, however, seems oblivious to the dangers lurking in the perks and pay. Why? Why isn't he suspicious from the very start? How could such a brilliant young man be so blind to the hooks hidden by the bait of financial fortune? I would suggest that Mitch is blinded by his pride and his perception of self-importance. He is convinced that he deserves what he is receiving. The partners in the Memphis firm have recognized his abilities and ambition,

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<sup>1</sup>John Grisham, *The Firm* (Doubleday, 1991).

and are simply rewarding him for it. His sense of feeling worthy renders him unable to sense his own seduction.

Exaggerated self-worth, inflated self-esteem, over-confidence in oneself, being puffed-up or “high and mighty” or conceited, vanity, pride, arrogance—call it what you will, *but as the head swells the brain shrinks!* Someone has quipped, “Many a bee has been drowned in his own honey.” Speaking of an arrogant man, the English novelist George Eliot (1819-1880) remarked, “He was like a cock who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow.”

These past few weeks, we have been studying the New Testament Letter of James. In 4:11-5:6, James warns his readers about the pitfalls of pride by providing examples of arrogance. Let’s read.

<sup>4:11</sup>Brothers [and Sisters], do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against their brother [or sister] or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup>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?

<sup>13</sup>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.” <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” <sup>16</sup>As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup>Anyone, then, who knows the good he [or she] ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.

<sup>5:1</sup>Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. <sup>2</sup>Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. <sup>5</sup>You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. <sup>6</sup>You have condemned and murdered innocent people, who were not opposing you (Jas 4:11-5:6, NIV with modifications).

At first glance, this section of James may appear to be a combination of disconnected passages. But I think it is appropriate to consider this section as a single unit, primarily because it is unified by a single theme. Whether James is addressing those inside the church community or those on the outside, he condemns their behavior and characterizes it as a form of arrogance. Citing Scripture in 4:6, James has pointed out that God

opposes arrogance and so James issued a call to repentance in 4:7-10. Now, in the section we read, James presents three specific examples of arrogance. These examples move progressively from Christians to non-Christians. There is also progression in the degree of arrogance displayed, from slander that judges another in secret, through public boasting that accompanies public projects, to the corruption of society where the innocent are exploited and oppressed. Corresponding to these degrees of arrogance, there is a progression in the condemnation, from the reminder of who is judge and lawgiver, through the identification of arrogance as sin, to the threat of destruction in the day of judgment. We should also note how James continues to use Lev 19:13-18 throughout his letter. In 2:1-7, James chastises his readers for showing favoritism, calling to mind Lev 19:15 where judges are forbidden to practice partiality. Following, in 2:8-13, James refers to the “royal law”—namely, “Love your neighbor as yourself”—which is a reference to Lev 19:18. Lev 19:16 prohibits slander against a neighbor, and Lev 19:13 prohibits defrauding one’s neighbor and the withholding of wages from the worker who has earned them; issues dealt with by James in the text we read.

Slander, literally “evil speech,” serves both to lower one’s neighbor and to elevate oneself. It takes away status from another and ascribes it to oneself. In so doing, the slanderer acts as a superior judge, expressing critical judgments designed to enhance one’s own position. *Slander, therefore, is a form of arrogance that seeks to assert oneself by demeaning and destroying someone else.* Do not miss the fact that James is addressing those within the Christian community. Whether we call it slander, backbiting, rumor-spreading, or gossip, it all amounts to “evil speech” and it is motivated by the prideful desire to make oneself look good by making others look bad. “Do not speak evil against one another.” Period.

The form of arrogance shown in 4:13-17 is not so subtle as was the situation in 4:11-12 with slander. James begins this example and the next (4:13 and 5:1) with the admonition “Now listen” and in both he rebukes the attitude of well-to-do people who arrogantly suppose that they can think and act without any reference to God. The merchants of 4:13-17 may or may not be Christians—but I think it best to see them as Christians who follow worldly “wisdom”—but the rich of 5:1-6 are probably not Christians. Concerning those who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that

city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money,” James in not condemning these merchants for their plans or even for their desire to make a profit. He rebukes them for the this-worldly self-confidence that they exhibit in pursuing their goals. *The root problem is arrogance, the attitude underlying the planning and pursuing: “you boast and brag.”* J. B. Phillips, in his New Testament translation, captures very well the meaning of v. 16: “You get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence.” These Christian merchants are guilty of at least two arrogant assumptions: (1) That they can depend on the future as though it were secure, and (2) That, by selling and getting a profit, they can secure their own future. And Christians are without excuse in this matter! We know that we should say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” *Just because we may claim that we have done nothing wrong in our business pursuits, we are doing everything wrong if we make our plans without any consideration of God.* Christian entrepreneurs who pursue profits without reference to God, fail to do what they know they should do. Furthermore, this sin of omission—“Anyone, then, who knows the good he [or she] ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins”—sets the stage for 5:1-6 where certain “rich people” are deliberating defrauding others by *not* providing wages for their workers.

James’ final example of arrogance in 5:1-6 is the most blatant and evil. These wealthy landowners, probably non-Christians who are oppressing the Christian community, rob the earth of its resources and exploit people in order to support their extravagant life-styles. *They live lives of luxury at the expense of others.* They withhold from the poor their daily wages, thereby depriving them of the means of life. According to the apocryphal Book of Sirach,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>25</sup>The bread of the needy is the life of the poor;  
 whoever deprives them of it is a murderer.

<sup>26</sup>To take away a neighbor’s living is to commit murder;  
<sup>27</sup>to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood  
 (Sir 34:25-27, NRSV).

James declares that the cries of the oppressed and exploited “have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty,” and he depicts a fiery and fearsome judgment as the future fate of the

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<sup>2</sup>Ben Sira, a teacher in Jerusalem, wrote sometime between 200 B.C. and 180 B.C.

evil-doers. God Himself will oppose the oppressors;<sup>3</sup> after all, Scripture says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (4:6).

Douglas Groothuis (Associate Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary) penned this pithy restatement of the greatest commandment: “Pride says, ‘I am the Lord my God, and I shall have no other gods besides me,’ and, ‘I shall love the Lord my Self with all my heart, soul, strength and mind.’” Thomas Carlyle (Scottish writer, 1795-1881) observed, “The greatest fault is to be conscious of none.” *Arrogance: it is to live our lives as if God did not exist. Arrogance: it is to think that we know better than God, that we can take care of ourselves without God, and that we are not answerable for our actions to God. Arrogance: it is to live as if we were God.* “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up” (4:6, 10, NIV). In the words of Dwight Moody (American evangelist, 1837-1899), “God sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves.”

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<sup>3</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, NIB, vol. 12 (Abingdon, 1998), 215, 217, takes the last clause of 4:6 as a question with God as its implied subject: “Does not [God] oppose you?” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Eerdmans/Apollos, 2000), 218-220, discusses the translation issues and sees the focus of 4:6 as “the righteous [who] are helpless victims of the stratagems of the rich and powerful.”

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