

So far in the book of James we've explored topics on Joy, Trials, and Temptations; Words unto Good Works; Faith unto Good Works; Faith unto Good Words; and Wisdom unto Good Works. In the course of this exploration, we've seen James warn against dead faith, bad works, and earthly exaltation, but this week we're going to focus more on these warnings, and how the earthly man's pride and boasting inevitably leads to misery.

Maybe the best evidence – besides the Word of God – for total depravity in this world is the visible prominence of pride. It doesn't have to be taught to us as children. We see children manifest pride from their earliest years.

Lest I be misunderstood, I will not be using the word “pride” or “boasting” in the sense that we rejoice in the accomplishments of our neighbor, spouse, or children. Saying “I'm proud of you” is a very different thing than what we're talking about this morning. James himself tells his audience in the first chapter, “let the lowly brother boast, or glory, or rejoice, in his exaltation.”¹ Isaiah 61 says “you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast.”²

No, the kind of boasting, which we call “pride” when we say, “I'm proud of you” is much different than this word used in James and elsewhere in the New Testament. The word ὑπερηφανος is a compound word, which separately may be more familiar. The first word is “hyper,” as in “hyper.” Used as a prefix in words like “hyperactive” to describe being over-active, and in “hyperbole” to describe an exaggeration above or over the truth. The second word is less obvious, but still frequent – phaneros is the root word for things like “phantom” and “phantasm” – i.e., something apparent, but illusive; and in “phenomenon,” i.e., that which is apparent or visible. So a literal interpretation of this compound word “ὑπερηφανος” would be something like, “someone who makes themselves appear to be superior, above, or over another.”

In this sense, we see this sin of pride from the outset of humanity at the fall in the garden of Eden. Eve and Adam's sin was outward disobedience to God by eating the fruit, yes, but in their hearts they made themselves and their own subjective laws superior to God. We see it in the murderous Cain, who could not accept the humility of his brother's acceptable sacrifice, and was prideful enough to keep the firstfruits of his harvest for himself, unlike his brother, Abel.

We see it in our children when they don't “get their way” or even if their siblings treat them as inferior with unwarranted authority. We see it when siblings exercise unwarranted authority over their siblings. We see it in ourselves when we can't admit when we are wrong, when we refuse to apologize, when we insist on responding *tu quoque* when a fault is pointed out to us: “But what about what YOU did?!”

¹ James 1:9

² Isaiah 61:7

We see this type of pride in people that have been placed in exalted positions of government or wealth; exalted positions in entertainment, academia, or even sports. People who think they are above the law, above criticism, in a class of their own, deserve to be heard. We see the partiality that pride creates in our expectations of justice; rather than recognizing all citizens are treated without partiality under the law, we have seen time and time again, individuals treated better or worse because of their social or economic status: sometimes in the prideful pursuit of “social justice” that allows litigators and judges to hang their hats on “progress” at the expense of equality; other times in the prideful pursuit of power that allows the litigator or judge to progress their own careers with a quid pro quo.

We see the partiality that pride creates even in ourselves, when we commit the sin of elevating the man with gold rings above the man with shabby clothes. This is prideful because we place our desire, our passions, for social or economic profit above the laws forbidding partiality.

Our hedonistic passions,³ that see the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the ultimate goal, is a manifestation of our pride: that what we feel physically, emotionally, or reputationally, is made to be seen as above – hyperephanos – the desires of God.

And what do these passions inevitably lead to? Quarreling, strife, murder, fights, the absence of peace. It results in a lack of communion with God our heavenly father, even. Even when we do pray God in this state, we ask for things not agreeable to his will,⁴ but instead treat God as a vending machine to fulfill our passions. In 1990, a song written by Larry Bastian – from my home county of Tulare County, California – was released and it reached #1 on the Billboard charts. It was called, “Unanswered Prayers” and was sung by Garth Brooks, and it told the story of a boy who prayed to God that his passion and love for a girl would be requited, but it wasn’t. And he realized later on in life, when he saw her at the hometown football game, that this “unanswered prayer” was a good thing because it resulted in his marriage to a woman he loved even more.

This song was particularly resonant to me because it was around this time I had my first crush, and like Garth Brooks, prayed “that God would make her mine. And if he’d only grant me this wish I wished back then, I’d never ask for anything again.” But praise God he didn’t “make her mine.” I was praying for things not agreeable to the will of God; I was praying according to my passions, to the point of presuming I could bargain with God.

Now, I could have continued in this passion, and blamed God for not granting this wish, and made an enemy of him. It seems ridiculous that anyone would go down that path over a 6th grade crush, but people have made enemies of God for far less.

³ The word James uses that is translated as “passion” is ἡδονή, whence we get our modern word “hedonism”.

⁴ See Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 98.

The story of the Old Testament shows a jealous God,⁵ especially when it concerns our idolatry. The Second Commandment equates idolatry with hating God, and non-idolatry with loving him and keeping his commandments. The sin of pride is, in the end, a sin of idolatry – of placing our selves in the place of God.

God is opposed to the prideful – the hyperephanos – who place anything they can except God on the throne of God; but he gives grace to the humble. I don't think this is meant to be a paradox, but it seems counterintuitive when we exercise pride in our lives. Whenever a situation concerns our sense of self-worth, we are prone to do whatever we can to preserve that self-worth. We think that preserving our value is the gracious thing to do, and stand in opposition to humility.

But this is our distorted sense of reality, and we know it. How much more favor do we show our children when they come to us in submission and humility; and how much strife is caused when they come in arrogance and stubbornness?

How much more then are we as God's children to submit to him? Much, much more! While we as parents are fallible, errant, and imperfect, our Heavenly Father and his Words are infallible, inerrant, and perfect.

If your joy and your laughter is rooted in friendship with the world, it will fail and you know it. If your joy and passion is found in your self-worth, you will never be enough of your self to satisfy your self. Turn that laughter into mourning, turn that joy into despondency. Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Humble yourself before the king and he will exalt you.

This humility does not only have consequences in the vertical relationship between God and man, but in the horizontal plane between neighbor and neighbor. If we do, in our self-idolatry, pretend to be God unto our brother and sister, we are doing evil to them in our words and judgments of the heart. But if we humble ourselves before God, we see ourselves as equal with our brothers and sisters under his justice and judgment, equal under his mercy and grace, equal in our promise of eternal life.

Pride also affects our sense of control over the future. The elements of capitalism in our society really expose this for many. The ability to “risk it all” on speculation has made capitalism the most fluid economic system in history – making millionaires out of paupers, and making paupers out of millionaires. Sometimes risk pays off, but so many people have thought in their pride they had a “sure thing,” and bet it all on the housing market, for example, in the 2000s, only to have reality join them and remind them, “you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”⁶

⁵ Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4:24

⁶ James 4:14; also Proverbs 27:1

James does not discourage investing; but he does discourage the arrogant speculator who not only boasts about the future in self-idolatry as a “sure thing,” but encourages and influences others to go along with his “sure thing.” We are to be reminded in all our speculation that there is only one omniscient and all-seeing sovereign Lord of the Harvest, and it is not us. How nice it would be to watch CNBC or Fox Business and the hosts say, “We are guessing that the price of pork bellies will go up in the next week, but God is sovereign and he alone controls all the market variables. Oil looks to be headed toward \$200 a barrel, but don’t invest on my mortal opinion; I know nothing compared to the omniscient king of the universe.”

Some have mistakenly seen the inherent risk of capitalism as evil per se, instead of seeing evil in the **arrogance** that comes along with it. And in response, the socialistic economic systems have tried to exercise further governmental control over the market variables to achieve predictable outcomes. This is just another form of prideful arrogance: to control the means of production; to establish maximum or minimum prices on goods and services. This system is much worse because it is more easily corrupted, to the point where government control can mandate the purchase of a certain product so their preferred investments yield more profit. Instead of arrogantly thinking they can predict market outcomes, they arrogantly think they can control market outcomes, even if it’s at the expense of others’ property. In both cases, this is not just self-idolatry, they each commit the sin of coveting what is not theirs – prioritizing the acquisition of future wealth above submission to God as the sole proprietor of the future.

This is the rich man James pronounces woes upon in the beginning of chapter 5. The rich man who in his self-idolatry likewise idolizes money and prosperity; that sees earthly value as the measure of his self-worth instead of his heavenly value; that finds his identity in the future price of copper, gold, oil, or pork bellies, instead of an eternal identity in King Jesus; that will deceive and stratify his neighbors for material comfort, rather than commune with them in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The rich man James is describing is not just the man who has wealth, but the man who feels entitled to the wealth of others, and will voluntarily submit to the deceptive and corrupt promises of politicians who arrogantly maintain they alone can control the market in a way that is favorable to him.

Brothers and sisters, though it seems that the self-idolatrous are winning, we know their misery awaits them unless they repent. The boastful will not stand before the eyes of the LORD.⁷ All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols.⁸ When pride comes, then comes disgrace.⁹ Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before the fall.

⁷ Psalm 5

⁸ Psalm 97

⁹ Proverbs 11:2

Your riches and idols have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded; your pork-belly futures are putrid; their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire; You, who have deceived and defrauded your neighbors to amass wealth, the cries of your victims have reached the ear of the Lord of Hosts. You who have coveted the wealth of others to luxuriate yourself; you who have harmed your neighbor's life and livelihood for the sake of your idolatrous entitlement; the slaughter of your self-fattened heart awaits you. You, like the pharisees, the priests, and the scribes, would crucify even the son of God – the consummate righteous one – to protect your power, wealth, and influence. Your day awaits you. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

But to those who seek righteousness not in themselves, but in the perfect law of God, the law of liberty as James also calls it, God has promised bounty out of desolation, with eternal joy and gladness, with songs of thanksgiving. To you who draw near to God, the salvation and righteousness of the LORD will draw near to you. The earth will wear out like a garment, and those who make friends with the world will die in like manner. But the salvation of the LORD will be forever and his righteousness will never be dismayed. Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people in whose heart is the perfect law of God: fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed in their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool. But the righteousness of God will be forever, and his salvation to all generations.¹⁰

Where is this righteousness? Who is this righteousness? Who is the consummate righteous one whose given name means, “The LORD is salvation?” The promise of Isaiah in our Old Testament reading is the promise of the Messiah – Jesus Christ – the bread of life that came down from heaven, to whom we are drawn near, so that we may feed on him – not ourselves, not our wealth, not our passions – so that we may feed on him forever.¹¹

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Get your idolatrous eyes off your self, and submit to king Jesus; humble your **selves** before the LORD Jesus, and he will exalt you.

BENEDICTION: Romans 11

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways. For from him and through him and to him are all things; to him be glory forever, Amen.

¹⁰ Isaiah 51:1-8 here combined with the themes of James 4:1-5:6.

¹¹ John 6:41-51