

Fact Sheet for **"You Are a Mist"**  
**James 4:11-17**

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Last week I mentioned that from the outset of our study of James we've seen that much of what James wrote has the inordinate desire to get rich in the background. As we came into chapter four James picked up the intensity. Friendly words like "brother" were missing. In verse 4 he addressed his readers as, "You adulterous people!" But in verse 11 he switches back to the term "brothers".

In the last half of chapter four he will mention a mist. That mist will serve us well if we keep it in mind.

There were some rough relationships among the people James was writing to. Listen to his words.

**<sup>11a</sup> Do not speak evil against (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-le'-o) one another, brothers.**

The grammatical construction of this sentence usually forbids the continuation of a practice already in progress. It could be translated, "Stop speaking evil against one another, brothers!" That verse continues with a second sentence.

**<sup>11b</sup> The one who speaks against (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-le'-o) a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-le'-o) the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.**

The word in verse 11 translated "speak evil against" (καταλαλέω, ka-ta-la-le'-o) appears three times in that verse. It means to attack verbally, express hostility towards, make misrepresentations that damage a person's reputation, criticize and judge, or slander. And it is included in several New Testament lists of human vices as "slander" (Romans 1:28-31; 2 Corinthians 12:20; 1 Peter 2:1). Why did James use this word here? It was because they were slandering each other as they quarreled and fought over money (4:1-2a).

Behind their slander was their judging and condemning of other brothers. When they slandered a brother they were actually putting themselves in jeopardy under God's law. They were themselves guilty of slander under that law. Leviticus 19:18 may have been in view. By ignoring God's law they essentially set themselves above it, or in other words became a judge of it. And James ends verse 11 by contrasting the one who judges the law with the one who does the law. Remember his earlier words (1:22)?

**<sup>12</sup> There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?**

"You" is emphatic, as it is in Romans 14:4. Having rebuked them for the slander propelled by their greed James then addressed business people and reminded them of the context of their life.

**<sup>13</sup> Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- <sup>14</sup> yet you do not know what tomorrow**

**will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.** <sup>15</sup> **Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."**

When James wrote **"Come now, you who say"** it was sort of like "Think about what you are saying". He was in essence saying "look here" or "now listen". They were oblivious that this what they were doing was actually presumptive bragging. God had been left entirely out of their statements.

James wrote, **"you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."** Other words for mist could be "steam" or a "vapor". It reminds me of how Solomon opened Ecclesiastes (1:2). The Hebrew word "vanity" there means a vapor or a breath. King David put it another way (Psalm 103:15-16. Isaiah and Peter wrote similar words (Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24). And this has even appeared earlier in the book of James (1:9-11). I find this thought can bring great context to the pursuits of life.

Take a moment and reflect on these words... **"you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."**

Now, how important is the intense pursuit of wealth that can produce quarrels and fights? What value is there to bragging about what you plan to earn? On the other hand how important is God's promise of provision for you (Hebrews 13:5-6)? How important is the promise of eternal life to you?

By the way, this is not a "get out of jail free" card for being foolish with your finances (Ecclesiastes 11:2).

Instead of bragging about what you will do, keep God in the picture by a good "Lord willing"!

One commentator put it this way... *"Without trust in God, these believers become nearly indistinguishable from the wicked, who take no account of God."*<sup>1</sup>

James then continues to rebuke them for bragging about their future financial plans.

<sup>16</sup> **As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.**

The key to avoiding boasting is to maintain a godly perspective on life. Replace self-centered bragging by God-honoring trust.

<sup>17</sup> **So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.**

Think about it. James has just reminded them of the right thing to do. If they now chose to go down the same path they had been going down then this would clearly have been a sinful choice for them.

I find it wondrous that even though our life-span is only like a mist or a vapor God still has promised to provide all that we really need in this life (Matthew 6:25-33). Trust Him in this. Rely on Him when times get dicey.

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<sup>1</sup> The New American Commentary, James, p. 199.