

Book of James

Sermon #9: Play Your Part – “*Otus*”

James 4:11-17

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- October 30, 2022

Well, it's a heavy passage today and powerful, so I'm going to make it a little bit fun. Let me tell you a story of something that happened to me. I'm going to start at the end because it just goes better that way. It ends with this. I have the best lawn on my entire street--I mean, a lot better. And I'm counting the people that have a yard service, I'm counting the retired guys on the block. It's a better lawn—that's all there is to it. It's been a lot of hard work on my part, but the full truth be told, I think I took the pole position this summer because we were gone during the time when they had the water rationing, and I didn't water ration. And so, when we came back, all the lawns were dead, but mine was great. But that doesn't matter. I still have the best lawn on my street.

Okay, now the story that sets this up is important. Years ago, in my climb to the top, I had just finished a big Saturday of getting the yard cleaned up, and I had mowed and edged and done all the trimming around and had blown everything. And then there was that after thing when you compare and celebrate, and then you gloat. I was on my way around to the back yard and I was carrying the leaf blower. And out of nowhere this little bug comes flying in and zaps. Mach 2, right into my ear, knocks me to the ground. I fall on the leaf blower. I think I bruised a rib. And I was down there and didn't know what happened. And the little demon was still alive. And I know it had to be this big to fit into my ear canal. I appreciate that. But, listen, when it started to try to fly, it was like he was a California king condor. He tried to crawl his way out of there with his razor claws. And so, I was just on the ground yelling and trying to get some help. When I finally got inside the house, I figured out what I had to do to get this kamikaze bug out of my ear.

But lying there, I felt like there was a lesson for me. And here's what I thought: *Me---of all people, me*. I mean, I have the strength and the intelligence and the sheer competitive stamina to have already had a yard better than the four widows that live on our street, and that guy who

doesn't even edge, and I was right on the heels of the two retired guys. *Me—taken out by a simple little bug—completely disabled by something this small.*

And then I projected—That's all it takes? I thought about how all of world history could have been changed by a bug flying into the ear of Alexander the Great or Kublai Khan. And then thousands or millions of people would have lived. Lying there on the ground in my house, waiting for this bug to get out of my ear, I thought, I am no more than an *otus*—O-T-U-S. It's a Greek word that means "breath." It means "like a vapor." And therein lies the nature of *homo sapiens*, made in the very image of God, and yet weak as candle smoke. The nature of man is that we're below God, but we're above the mammals. And we have to play our part in this in-between place.

And sometimes our inflated egos will want us to elevate, and they will call us to play the part of God, as if we could do that. But arrogance does that. And sometimes our passions, when we surrender to them, will have us finding ourselves desiring to play the part of a stray dog, just to feel good. That's the nature of *homo sapiens*. And sometimes when we're proud we feel like little things that humiliate us—we have that coming to us. I don't know—like a bug.

The idea of us playing our part and that desire to play the part of God instead—arrogance, egocentric living, that pride—that's the theme of a lot of James' book in the Bible. He's going to write a lot towards that. Because when we play the part of judge or sovereign, it ends up tearing the church apart. It ends up tearing the family apart. And he's writing towards that in his lessons and addressing that directly.

Earlier in the book he started talking about the power of the tongue or the mouth, the words that we say. And he says, *Listen, you can destroy in a single e-mail or in a short afternoon something that is beautiful and has taken years to develop—just by saying words. So, watch your mouth.*

And then later he addresses that the problem with the mouth is not the tongue and not the mouth itself, but rather, it's the heart, because out of the heart is what the mouth speaks. And so, last week we saw in chapter 4 of James, verses 1 through 11, that he just says, *We've got to get right with God. We've got to get our hearts right.* And so, he calls on a full-blown revival to take place. He expects absolute repentance to be part of our experience, because he is trying to bring us to a place of true humility, complete humbleness. That's the part that the man is supposed to play. As *homo sapiens*, we are to be humble. That's the theme. And his final conclusion in his

revival sermon begins and ends with humility being the gold standard of what it means to play the part of a man.

Humility

James 4:6, 10

This is why the Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Look at what he says in chapter 4, verse 6, and then in verse 10: “That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’” And then he says in verse 10: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

So, Christian maturity is not passion or emotional experiences. It’s not Bible memory for the sake of Bible memory. It’s not rituals. It’s this. It’s being identified with Christ. And Christ is humble. It’s becoming like Christ in life when we attach our self-image to the nature of Christ and Christ crucified. Christ crucified—He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. When we do that, we’re acting like we were made to, we’re playing the part we were prescribed.

So, humility—that’s the theme of today’s passage. We love to see humility in other people’s lives. It’s attractive, it’s winsome, it draws us to that humble person. We want humility in our lives. We just don’t want to have to get it. It’s like how I want to be in shape, I just don’t want to have to get in shape. I just want to be in shape.

Stay In Your Lane, Human ...

So, this week we’re going to look at humility: what it looks like, how to get it, those sorts of things. And the idea here is that we just need to play our part, *otus*—not the part of Yahweh. That part’s taken. He’s going to say, *Stay in your lane, human, before things start breaking*. Things that are sacred, like a church or a family, start being torn apart when we do things we shouldn’t do.

Now before we look at the passage itself, it would be great if we started at the end, because it's better that way. What he's going to tell us is that we have these deep-seeded, life-changing convictions about two truths about God and one truth about man. We can find ourselves, like Christ, being humble. There are two truths about God and one about man.

The first one about God is that God's precepts, His Bible, is over us. It defines us. It tells us what is right and real and true. And the second principle we learn about God in this passage is that He's sovereign. He rules—that's what "sovereign" means. Everything we see, all created things, seen and unseen, belong to Him. And He can do whatever He wants with them. He's not asking for advice.

The thing we learn about man is this. James asks a question in verse 12, and then he answers it in verse 14. And the question is, "But you—who are you?" And then in verse 14 he answers the question by saying, "You're a vapor, a mist, a breath." In Greek, it's *otus*—O-T-U-S. Who are you? Who am I? Oh man, you're otus.

And so, the theme here is to settle down, *otus*. Be humble. Play your part. Just do what you're supposed to do. Rise above your passions unlike the animals, and don't try to pretend to be God.

What Happens When We Try to Play God

And when we pretend to be God, we play God's part and we do two things. That's the issues in verses 11 through 17. There are two ways we show ourselves as trying to be God. One is that we're going to judge others. And the second way, in our own life, is that we're going to act like we're sovereign over our own life. And when we do that, we destroy the things that are beautiful around us. So, stay in your lane. And we leave our lane when we look down at other people, when we get cocky and feel like our plans have to come into effect.

James 4:11

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a 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.

So, let's look at the first one—when playing God with others as a judge. Look at verse 11 of chapter 4. “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a 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.”

So, first let me tell you that James is not saying to not be discerning about other people. Of course, you need to know how to avoid troublesome people in the nature of a society that's civilized and has judges that are making judicial decisions. What he's saying here is that this is a proud Christian who looks on other Christians and sees himself as superior to them, and speaks down to them. In a word, it's condescending. The Greek work itself paints a little picture. The same word is used for “slander” and “speaks against.” Literally, it says “talk down”--when you're talking down to a person like they're less than you, or you're talking down to a third person about them, putting them in your place, when you're judging and pronouncing condemnation towards people.

Why We Can't Look Down on People

James says when we do that we're acting like God for two different reasons, and we are way out of bounds. Two reasons—it's showing that we're proud and not humble.

The first one is that when we're looking down and speaking down to someone, it's more than about that person—it's about the law itself. We're talking down at the law itself. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. The Bible clearly says, “Do not slander.” It clearly says, “Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” James even quotes where it says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And the person who does that is doing what he's told, is not obeying the law, but judging the law, saying, *Oh, that's a law for these people, but not for me. That's a law that I'm not particularly currently interested in obeying.* That's like pulling a page out and saying, *I don't like those verse,* and tearing it right out. Never do that ... again. But he's saying, *Play your part, otus. You didn't write those rules; you don't judge those rules. Those rules are over you.*

And the second reason this is not our part to play is because if you're judging the rules, you're actually judging the rule-maker. And so, you're judging the rule-giver.

James 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?

Look at verse 12. He says, “There’s only one lawgiver, one judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” You—who are you? It’s not you, *otus*. You’re not the lawgiver. You don’t judge. You’re not the one who can save and destroy. That’s a position of authority, and we don’t have that. We don’t define what is right and real and true.

I love how he says, “But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” It’s written in a way that puts “you” at the very first of the sentence and then repeats it over here. Like, *of all people—me—me, of all people, am judging others?* This is kind of a slap in the face towards our pride.

With shattering bluntness, James crushes any right his readers may have claimed to sit in judgment over their neighbors. This is not to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with other.

--- Dr. Donald W. Burdick

Here’s a wonderful quote by a scholar: “With shattering bluntness”—yeah—“James crushes any right his readers may have claimed to sit in judgment over their neighbors. This is not to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with others.” Humility is under the law and under the lawgiver. And the next time you catch yourself in a self-righteous declaration of *Oh, those people ...*, here’s a great Scripture to memorize. Not a lot of people memorize this verse. Me ... me, of all people, playing the part of judge? I’m judging the Bible and I’m judging the Bible’s writer. That’s going to leave nothing but chaos and destruction in my wake. You—you, of all people.

Humility radically changes how you respond to the sin, weakness, failure, immaturity, error, or opposition of others. Humility makes it hard to be quick to criticize, dismiss, or judge others because you know you're numbered among them.

--- Paul Tripp

Paul Tripp writes about the power of humility in a community. Because when we start playing our part accurately, he says, watch how peace and unity and beauty break out. Here's a quote from Paul Tripp: "Humility radically changes how you respond to sin, weakness, failure, immaturity, error, or opposition of others. Humility makes it hard to be quick to criticize, dismiss, or judge others because you know you're numbered among them."

So, humility makes us compassionate and understanding towards people, and arrogance makes us want to be a judge. And that's not our role to play. That's not our part. That's God's part.

James 4:13

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."

The second way we play the part of God in our lives—not in other people's lives, but in our own life—is when we act like we're the one who's sovereign. When we play God with our lives as a sovereign, he says, "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.'" James is not criticizing people who plan ahead. The Bible is full of passages that say plan ahead, be shrewd. He's talking about being way too confident in that plan. In a word, it's presumptuous. *Oh, I have final authority about how this is going to work.* It's about tone, and you can hear the heart or the attitude of the person's soul in his tone. *I know when I'm going to go in this business, I know when I'm going to move, I know how long I'm going to be there, I know what business I'm going to be in, I know how much money I'm going to make.* He's got this whole thing worked out, as if we can actually control those things.

It's funny how many cultures have seen that type of presumption and mocked it. Oh, you *otus*. There's a Yiddish proverb that says, "We plan, God laughs."

There's an American version of that that says, "When you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans."

There's a Scottish poem called "To a Mouse" that says, "Oh, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

I think Mike Tyson said it as well as anybody: "Everybody has a plan until they get punched."

And there is the problem, right? James is listening to this person roll out this plan, and he's watching and saying, *I'm just going to sit at a safe distance and watch this person explode*. Because, look, as breath, as a reed, as a vapor, we've got to understand that we don't have this ability to be sovereign. To be sovereign you have to be at least these two attributes: you have to know and you have to have power. Knowledge and power—that's what happens. That's what you need to have sovereignty. You have to know what the future holds, and then you have to have the power to do something about the future.

James 4:14-17

Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You're 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 in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

And so, James is going to say, *Hey, otus, you've got neither of those, and you're arrogant*. Look what he says about how little we know in verses 14 through 17, the rest of our passage together. For the knowledge part, he says, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow." And for the power, "What is your life? You're 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 in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

So, this first principle here is that life is unpredictable. Look what he says. Why? Because you don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow. Making certain, long-term plans? Oh, that's cute. I mean, all it takes is an accident, a change in financial situation, weather ... let's just say, a bug ...

The emergency rooms are filled with people who had plans. So is the cemetery.

--- D. Edmond Hiebert

This will set you back one. Here's a great quote. "The emergency rooms are filled with people who had plans. So is the cemetery."

What are you going to do today, honey?

Big plans, I've got a full list of things to do. I'm going to start off by taking a shower, slip on the soap and spend four hours in the ER.

No one does that. People don't end up in a graveyard because they finish their to-do list. Many of them didn't expect to be there. So, you don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow.

James 4:14

What, after all, is your life? It is like a puff of smoke visible for a little while and then dissolving into thin air.

Not only do you not know, you can't do anything about it anyway. You don't have any power. Let's see your power. Look what he says about our power. "Why, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." We're just a mist. We're *otus*.

There's a translation by J. B. Phillips that says, "What, after all, is your life? It is like a puff of smoke visible for a little while and then dissolving into thin air."

The Bible describes a man, mankind, homo sapiens, as a flower on a hot day; as a leaf being kicked around by the wind; as a shadow.

I like what Kansas, the band, did with the Bible passage. "All we are is dust in the wind."

So, James is saying, *Don't write your plans down in cement, or maybe even ink. Maybe pencil? Use that Etch-a-Sketch. Don't think you can do much, because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, and you can't do much.*

James 4:16

As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

A life properly understood, with humility, lives life as if they're not sovereign. And their hands are open to that. Look at verse 16. He's condemning us. "As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes, and such boasting is evil." This is humbling for us to hear—how little control we have over future things. We don't know what's going to happen and we can't control what's going to happen.

We experience this regularly. Like, I don't know ... when the Astros are ahead by five runs in the bottom of the third. You're looking at it and thinking, *This game's over. I'm turning the TV off. I'm going to bed and calling it an early night.* Right? That's easy. Five runs in three innings? You wake up the next morning ... I didn't even know what was going to happen in the fourth inning. How did that even happen? Did God know what was going to happen? Did He care? Is He a Phillies fan? What happened?

Dave Freedman co-authored a book called *100 Things You Should Do Before You Die*. Now this was a runaway best-seller and started the entire genre of things you ought to do before you die. It's a list of spectacular experiential events that you need to make sure you have on your bucket list. He started the bucket list thing. He tells stories about how he's able to make all these plans to run with the bulls in Spain. And he did that. He made plans for that and executed those plans.

What he didn't plan on was walking down his hallway in his house in California, tripping, hitting his head, and dying at forty-seven years old. He hadn't planned on that. The newspaper said he didn't get to quite fifty of his own hundred things to do before you die, because he didn't know what tomorrow holds and he didn't have the power to change it.

We're not supposed to play God. And that idea applies in our own lives, like we have some kind of sovereignty over that.

How to Live in Humility

James 4:15

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

We’re supposed to live in humility. And what that looks like is opening our lives to God, opening our futures to Him, because He is in control. Look what it says in verse 15: “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live here or do this or do that.’” It’s verbalizing your submission to His authority and His rulership over all things, especially your lives. And that shows itself in two different ways.

This is what it means: opening your hands. If you’re not writing, you could just turn your palms up. You give Him your life, your plans. *This is what I hope to do, God willing.* And if you don’t know whether or not you’re holding those plans or not, it’s kind of easy to tell. When you lose that plan, how angry or despairing do you become? It’s a petty example, but it makes a good point—regularly, our trip to the beach. It’s a vacation. Open your hands up, it’s supposed to be fun. Flat tire south of San Antonio—I’m so angry, not just because I’m changing a tire in the hot sun, but because we’re supposed to be in Three Rivers by now. There was a schedule to keep. On a vacation? I’m holding plans on a vacation!

So, one way to see if you’re holding your plans open or not is by what happens when your plans don’t happen. Yeah, it’s upsetting, but is it worthy of wrecking the rest of the day for the whole family? Did you think you were sovereign?

Another way of doing that is this: the twin sister of anger can be depression or despair. If you don’t get that job promotion, sure, it’s disappointing. But you’re holding your hands open, and because you are, you’re not devastated by it. You’re not depressed and overwhelmed by it. But if you are, you’ve been holding that. You’re going to go to this city and work at this company for this long and you’re going to have this title. Look at you, sovereign. But you’re not. We’re just an *otus*.

So, to live the way we were meant to live as human beings, stuck between being in the image of God and above all mammals, is to have a world view, a whole way of looking at life,

that's humble. And our hands are open with our lives. And we're saying, *I am not sovereign, but I a surrendered to a sovereign King. I am not in charge, but I'm a slave to the most powerful Yahweh.*

And while our hands are open (I said there are two ways we can open our hands up)—one of those ways is that we give God our plans—and the second is, while our hands are open, and He might be taking some of those away, He might be adding some to us. When God gives us His plan for our lives, we're open to receive that. We're wanting to hear what He has. We want to do His will for our lives.

For years I had a plan to become a lawyer and God took that and put in ministry. Okay. Jeremiah Ebeling spoke three weeks ago and that was the theme of his whole lesson, if you could go watch that. But his introduction was clever. He was talking to his wife, saying, "I've got these plans, and they include never doing youth ministry again." If you remember the story, he had to hold those open, and God took those plans and then inserted youth ministry for seven more years. But because they were surrendered and humbled, Jeremiah said, "Sure, we'll do what's next." It's letting go of our plans and being open to God's plan. That's because He's the King and we're just *otus*.

You can see this in the writing of Paul, Saint Paul. He's humble. He wrote the Corinthians and said, "I care to see you"—he literally writes—"Lord willing. I'm hoping to remain here if God permits." He even begins his book of Romans by saying, "Perhaps God will allow me to come see you." And God does not. He'll never leave there. And Paul was open to that.

I'll go to college, Lord willing.

I'll start a family—ah, I'd love to have children. That's a deep—no, back open. Maybe, maybe not.

Deo Volente

Humility is understanding our *otus*-ness, that we're just dust, a breath, a vapor, smoke. In Latin, it's Deo volente. Let's all say that—Deo volente. It's a saying the Puritans had for years. It's still somewhat popular today. It means "if the Lord allows" or "Lord willing." And the Puritans would give speeches, or they would just talk to one another, and they would say, *Well,*

Deo volente. They would end their letters to one another, for example, signed “Matt Cassidy, DV”—Lord willing. They were just playing their part, knowing that their hands were open.

And so, James would say, *Look, plan! Dream! Aspire! Deo volente. All of that is good--- with your hands open.*

James 4:17

If anyone, then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is a sin for them.

Finally, James, who talked about being under the Word of God and obeying the Word of God and not judging others and not being sovereign, is going to come back to that first part in this last sentence here where he's not playing God. He says, “If anyone, then, who knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.” He's showing us that the Bible is how we rule our lives. It has authority over us. We are doers of the Word, not judges of the Word. And we show ourselves in submission to the great judge that's merciful but just by doing what He says. An open soul lets God speak to them, and they listen.

Psalm 40:6-8

**Sacrifice and offering you did not desire---
But my ears you have opened.
Burnt offerings and sin offering you did not require.
7 Then I said, “Here I am, I have come---
It is written about me in the scroll.
8 I desire to do Your will, my God;
Your law is within my heart.”**

Let me show you how David, famous for being a man after God's own heart, talks about this attitude of humility and wanting to play his part as a servant of a sovereign judge. Listen to how he writes about listening for the Word and how the Word is written to him. And ultimately, it's so that that Word would be tattooed on his soul and he would live that out in his life. This is in Psalm 40, verses 6 through 8. He says, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire ...” Right?

Rituals, Bible memory ... all that is good, but it's not how you keep score. "But my ears you have opened. Burnt offering and sin offerings you do not require." Here's what matters. "Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in Your scroll. I desire to do Your will, my God; Your law is within my heart.'"

He's listening for that. He's reading this Bible, it's over his head. God is sovereign over him. It's written to him. He's looking for an opportunity to have his will open, his life goals and God's will for his life.

Another beautiful expression of the way we're supposed to live and the part we're supposed to play as a simple *otus* is the prayer that Jesus tells us to pray. Listen to the humility. Listen to the power of knowing where we are in creation and enjoying that. *Our Father, who art in heaven, holy and sacred is your name up there. Your kingdom come, Your will be done (not mine), on earth as it is in heaven. This humble aspect of I need You for daily bread. I need You to forgive me of my trespasses. I need You to help me forgive other people of their trespasses against me. I am so pulled towards my mammal animal that I need You to deliver me from temptation, and deliver me from evil. And just to be clear, it's Your kingdom, it's Your power, and it's Your glory, forever and ever.*

The life of a Christian is in surrender to the great Judge and the sovereign King. And humility means identifying with Christ. And it's identifying with Christ crucified. There's a passage that literally says, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life that I now live I live by the power of the Spirit, and I'm just obeying that." But it's Christ crucified that he's referring to here. He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And the death on a cross, this crucifixion, is a long and lingering death, isn't it? And I must say that life can be that way. Sometimes you have to be humiliated to become humble. And sometimes what doesn't kill your ego can make you humble. So, don't be afraid of those things in your life, when a bug flies in your ear, maybe in front of people you're trying to impress. It could be a good thing. It could remind you of who you are and also who you're not. You're to be and play the part of a humble servant, a breath, but in the image of God. And when we play that part, we're giving and forgiving to those around us, and beauty and community breaks out in families and in churches. And that's why James wrote this passage.

Would you join me in a prayer of God bringing humility into our lives?

Lord, we love to see humility ... in other people. And I know you'd love to see humility in us. And I'd ask that You would help make that happen. You chose us, You died for us, You provided righteousness, You bring us security because of the promises You give us. Our hope is in Your return. Everything that matters for the significance of eternity comes outside of me and from You. And so, pride makes no sense. There's nothing logical or theological about it. We are humbled by who You are, what You have done, and the Word that You have given us. And so, now we turn our palms up.

Let's turn our palms up. Let's pray this.

*Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.
You are the potter, I am the clay.
Mold and make me whatever You will.*

*Spirit, reign in us.
Let Your will be done.
Let Your kingdom come.
Your will, Your way,
Do whatever You want.
Come and move, come and reign,
Let Your kingdom invade our hearts.
Let Your kingdom invade our hearts.*

You're the King. We're the slaves. We pray this as we live this out. In Jesus' name. Amen.