

Sermon: James 4:1-5:6. "Humble yourselves"

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Sermon text and audio available for download at www.waitara.anglican.asn.au

- **"I am the greatest"**

Mohammad Ali, also known as Cassius Clay, 3 time world heavyweight boxing champion of the world, 56 wins and only 5 losses. "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee".

Ali loved to put his opponents down before a match saying things like:

- "If you ever dream of beating me, you'd better wake up and apologise!"
- "I'll beat him so bad he'll need a shoehorn to put his hat on."
- "Frazier is so ugly that he should donate his face to the US Bureau of Wild Life"

But what he's remembered for is probably this phrase:

- "I am the greatest"

We can often think that – we may not say it, but we may sometimes think "I am the greatest". And thinking like that changes the way we see ourselves and the way we see others. So James confronts us with three common attitudes:

- **1. Putting down others**

- ¹¹ *Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.*

Why do we put other people down? We do it to make ourselves look good. When we slander people, or put people down, or pass judgment on others, or point out what's wrong with them – the mistakes they've made, the problems they have, the things they do wrong – it's often for the very simple reason that we want to make ourselves look good. And when we do that, when we judge, and slander, and put others down, we ignore God's law. What law? James 2:8 – the royal law – "Love your neighbour as yourself." So James asks us:

- ^{4:12} *But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?*

Who are we to judge another person? Yet we do judge. Because it often makes us feel better about ourselves. It makes us feel "greater", but it's not loving and it's not goldy.

- **2. Lifting ourselves up**

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.*

We've all made plans like that haven't we? Go there, work, make money, go here, holiday, have a good rest... And there's nothing wrong with making plans! James isn't saying: **"Don't ever make plans!"** But he's saying "Don't make plans and leave God out of them! We can often fall into that trap of making plans for our lives and boasting about our plans as if we have control over everything that's going to happen, and we leave no room for God to be involved. But we should be saying, when we make plans, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." **If it is the Lord's will.**

I will get a new job... if it is the Lord's will. But what if the Lord doesn't want me to have a new job! What then? Well, I won't ask the Lord. I'll just go to my new job and make my own plans! If it is the Lord's will, I'll travel here. But what if it's not the Lord's will. Well, I'm going to do it anyway!

Be careful! Be careful that you're not making your own plans that have no room for God. Because, remember, you are a mist. You appear for a little while and then vanish. God is the creator and sustainer of everything in this world, but we often make plans as if we're the ones in control. God must be involved in our plans. And it's a big mistake to leave him out of them.

• 3. Stepping over others

5:1 – "Now listen you rich people..."

- In 2000, statistics showed that if you had assets worth more than \$2,200, you were in the top half of the world wealth distribution. If you had more than \$61,000 in assets, you were among the richest 10% of adults in the world. If you owned assets of more than \$500,000, you were in the richest 1%.

If you live in Sydney, you are among the richest people in the world. We have food on the table each day, a roof over our heads, a place to sleep, and maybe a computer, a home, a car, a bank account, a TV, a phone...

So when he says "Now listen you rich people", he's talking to us!

Weep and wail. Our wealth rots. Moths eat our clothes. Our gold and silver corrodes. And wail louder if you've ever ripped anyone off. Not paid proper wages. Cheated on your tax return. Heaven help us when we live in luxury and self indulgence, fattening ourselves while others waste away. Listen you rich people. Now there's nothing here against being rich. But if we have self indulged, if we have been unfair with our wealth, if we have hoarded our riches... look out.

Perhaps this is one of the hardest challenges. Because when it comes to wealth, what James is saying is that we don't seem to know when to stop! Wealth takes hold of us. We accumulate more and more and more and we just don't know when enough is enough. Just a little more. And a little more. A little more pay. A little more for our retirement fund. A few more possessions. And as we live in luxury and self indulgence, others are condemned. This is not a warning, as the heading in the NIV Bible says, to rich oppressors. It's a warning to us rich people not to become oppressors! Because it's easy to fall into that trap. Accumulating more and more. Indulging. And stepping over others to get more.

And so on the day of slaughter, on the day Jesus returns to judge, when we've put others down, lifted ourselves up, and stepped over people to get where we are, what does it matter how "great" we are? What does it matter to be better or richer or more successful than others?

And so I think we have to ask this question – where does this desire to be great come from? So let's go back to the start of chapter 4...

• What causes fights among you?

- ¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Fights and quarrels come from our desires. We want something and we'll do anything to get it! We kill and covet. We quarrel and fight. We say "I want this" but we do not get it because... we don't ask God! And when we DO ask God, we ask him with the wrong motives! We ask him for things to satisfy our own pleasures. And so we fight amongst ourselves. We put others down. We lift ourselves up. We step over others so we can say "**I am the greatest**".

- **Humble yourselves**

Mohammad Ali is also quoted as saying:

- *"At home I am a nice guy: but I don't want the world to know. Humble people, I've found, don't get very far."*

And what does God say in verses 7-10?

- **Verse 7** – submit yourselves to God and resist the devil.
- **Verse 8** – come near to God and he will come near to you
- **Verse 10** – humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

God calls on us to do this one thing: If we want to live a life that pleases him and overcome this desire to be better than others, God says this: submit to Him, come near to him, HUMBLE YOURSELVES before him. And HE will lift you up.

God will lift you up! God is the greatest, God is the one who judges, and God is the one who is able to make plans happen in our life. We need to humble ourselves. And do you notice that this is *plural*? This is about the church. **WE** need to humble ourselves. Not only as individuals, but as His church. If we want to reach out to people with the gospel, we cannot do that when there are fights and quarrels among us.

- 3 things to watch out for here at All Saints:
- **1. We cannot be judging others** to make ourselves look better. That includes other people, but also includes other churches and other lifestyles. God is the judge.
- **2. We cannot plan without God** – as individuals and as a church – making our own plans without considering God's will is not wise.
- **3. And we cannot be self indulgent with our riches.** We cannot indulge ourselves and ignore the greater needs of our world, such as mission work.

Now it's easy to walk away today thinking about ourselves. But we also need to remember we're part of a church, so we need to walk away today also asking this:

- **What kind of church is All Saints Waitara?**

Let's pray.