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# Arrogance Dismantled: James 4.11–5.6

Sara Barton

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*This sermon was preached at the Pepperdine University Bible Lectures on May 6, 2015. It was the first keynote sermon preached by a woman in the history of the lectures.*

**Y**ou can open your Bibles to James chapter 4, verse 11, and I'll read from it in just a few minutes. When I started preparing for this sermon, I had no idea where the journey would take me. James has often been neglected in Protestant history, especially since the Reformation, so I didn't know a lot about the epistle. I must tell you—I was surprised when our passage from James led me to do a little research on sitcoms. Sitcom: short for situation comedies.

We think the *old* sitcoms are *The Honeymooners* or *Gilligan's Island*. But it turns out that even the ancient Greeks and Romans appreciated a good sitcom, as far back as four hundred years before Christ. It was in those old works, of playwrights like Plautus and Terence that the sitcom storyline we all know was born: Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl back again. An ancient version of Ross and Rachel, or Sam and Diane, or Leonard and Penny. If you read these old plays, you find characters who will make you laugh just by the way they walk—picture an ancient Barney Fife or George Jefferson strutting across the stage in a toga. The plays have clumsy characters. They walk onto the stage carrying too many dishes. You know they're going to trip and fall and drop the whole pile, but that doesn't make it any less entertaining when they repeatedly do just what you expected. Think of Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*.

People flocked to these plays; sometimes thousands crowded around the stage on wooden benches. Part of the fun of the comedy experience was learning to recognize predictable characters in the play, called stock characters. Audiences knew that there would be a damsel in distress or a superstitious man or a clever servant. I want to zone in on one of those stock characters.

Imagine we're in the audience at one of these plays, and when the play commences, a character walks onto the stage. The actor is a really good actor, so before he even says a word, simply by his body language, we know this guy. We've seen stock characters like him before. He holds his nose a bit higher than necessary. With his hands on his hips, he strikes a pose that's a bit too "posey." He swaggers. We can tell just by the way he carries himself that he's in love with himself. Narcissists are as old as time.

And when this character opens his mouth and speaks, our every instinct about who he is, is confirmed. He boasts about his accomplishments, and with every word he utters, he pompously elevates himself. He has lines like this: "It really is a plague to be as handsome as I am." Or he says, "I've just come from battle where I slayed a hundred men, but I am not tired." This is the kind of person who would have taken a selfie and posted it on social media: #me. The ancient Greeks and Romans called this stock character the *alazon*. A-l-a-z-o-n. That's ancient Greek for "big, fat, arrogant bragger" (my translation).

The passage for this sermon is James 4.11–5.6. When I realized that the Greek word *alazon* is part of today's passage, I began to see arrogant narcissists parading around the text as if on a stage. James uses the *alazon* character not once, but three times, so watch for the *alazon* as we begin in 4.11.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor? (Jas 4.11–12)

So, here's the scene James evokes alazon character #1: when you say bad things about other people, you are using words to lower someone else and to elevate yourself. That's arrogant. It's like this—instead of obeying the law like everyone should, you think you are above the law. And even though you are not a judge, you sneak into a courtroom, put on a judge's robes, and grab the judge's gavel. And the judge you have usurped is God! Who are you to usurp God? Who are you to judge your neighbor? Alazon character #1, exit stage right. Enter alazon character #2, stage left.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the LORD wishes, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance [and here we find the root word *alazon*]. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin (Jas 4.13–17).

In this section, James presents us with another arrogant character. He comes into the scene swaggering and bragging about how much money he makes and how successful he is. James isn't against honest business—he's against the suggestion that a businessman or businesswoman's whole identity would be wrapped up in making money with no regard for God or other people or where blessings really come from.

He's not simply talking about how fast life goes when he says, "Life is a mist." He references arrogant, traveling merchants that were common in that day, boastfully standing in the alazon posture, acting as if they can grasp or hold onto mist . . . when their lives are that mist. It's a silly picture. It's like a cartoon. Someone who *is* mist trying to hold mist. James is making fun here, saying that it's arrogant, even comical, to act like we are in control when we are a mist and the Lord is the one in control. So, stop embarrassing yourself.

And now, alazon character #3 enters the scene. Fasten your seatbelts because James really gets in your face with this one.

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous ones, who do not resist you (5.1–6)

This final alazon character is the most blatant and evil. This is some of the most vivid language in the entire New Testament. You can sense the rhythms of the great social prophets of Israel, like Hosea and Micah. It's here in James 5 that we understand why James has been called the Amos of the **New Covenant**. He lets loose.

It's as if James holds out a handful of coins and says, "Look at your coins!" (And in those days, people polished coins to keep them from rusting.) He's saying, "Your coins are rusting and there's nothing you can do about it." And then James turns the image to science fiction. He says, "It's not just your coins that are decomposing. Look at yourselves—your flesh is being eaten." It's scary.

By the time James gets done with these rich, arrogant people, they are no longer swaggering, no longer boasting, no longer holding their noses high. James has them standing on a pile of rotted stuff: broken iPads

and cracked Rolex watches and stained Coach purses. There they are, broken, weeping, old and wrinkled, wearing nothing but an old sweater with moth-eaten holes in it. The plot proceeds just as we expect. The pile of dishes always falls. The alazon, the braggart, the stock narcissist is always humbled. James knows what we all know—pride comes before the fall.

Commentaries and sermons on this passage dedicate many long pages to the rich. A lot of work has been done to reframe or soften what James said. The reason people attempt these interpretive backflips is because the rich alazon have an inner defensive impulse that wants to explain away wealth: 401Ks., financial portfolios, luxury and pleasure. And if we can't explain it away, we try to soften the text so that we who are rich don't feel the punch in the gut quite the way James intended.

This passage, however, is not ultimately about rich people and their sad, vulnerable state on judgment day. This text is about poor people and their misery now. One preacher from a poor country said something that haunts me. He noticed how many sermons and commentaries, written primarily by rich Western Christians, are in defense of the rich, and he said: "Just leave it to the rich and arrogant to make James 5 about them instead of about the poor."

James emphatically says, "Listen!" So we should pay attention to what the real center of this passage is. "Listen! The cries of your laborers have reached the ears of the LORD of hosts" (5.4b). In this statement, the original readers would have made a connection: he is referring to Leviticus 19.13, which expressly prohibits holding back the laborer's wage until the next morning.

You see, laborers were worse off than slaves in those days, because the slaves could at least depend on food and shelter from their owners. But if day laborers didn't get paid on a day-to-day basis, they didn't eat, and their children didn't eat. So James forces the rich alazon to step away from their regal dinner parties and listen: listen to the cries of children going to bed hungry.

I was on a flight recently from Los Angeles to St. Louis, and two rows in front of me a baby was crying really loud. It was *shrieking*. The parents of the baby tried everything to soothe her, but the baby just cried louder and louder. We couldn't hear any of the seatbelt instructions or exit plans in case of emergency. This baby had some lungs. It's interesting to watch people respond to a situation like that. Some people are very understanding—they've probably been there before with their own children.

Some people are not understanding at all. The woman in front of me (who was just behind the crying baby) made a big show about how perturbed she was and eventually put on those big, oversized, noise-canceling headphones. At one point (you know how sometimes people yell when they forget they are wearing headphones) she yelled to her friend in the seat next to her, "That baby is so loud even noise-canceling headphones don't work." So people on the baby's side gave her dirty looks, and people on her side gave nods of agreement and rolled their eyes at the crying baby.

Normally I don't like to guess who will go to heaven and who will go to hell, but this lady got me thinking: chances cannot be good for people who don't have compassion for crying babies.

This is the kind of crying James is talking about when he says that "cries have reached the ears of the LORD." He is not referring to a quiet cry, easily soothed. This is a shrieking, a persistent and haunting cry, and there are no noise-canceling options for the rich. The word James uses to describe their cry is the same word that's used to describe the blood of Abel crying out for vengeance. It's the word that's used to describe the Hebrew slaves in Egypt crying out in their oppression. This is a serious word. These are the cries of murder victims—the cries of slaves. These are the cries of the poor because rich people ignore them and have another round of drinks.

So James says to the arrogant: Listen! The only answer to all this arrogance and selfishness is conversion. Convert. Turn around. Turn away. Alazon character #1, give up your judgmental attitudes. Alazon character #2, give up your arrogant individualism. And Alazon character #3, give up your wealth and stop sinning.

There's a certain genius to this section of James 4 and 5. When I first read these three sections, I thought they seemed like three disconnected images. But James brings them all together as one, in order to dismantle arrogance. And he connects them to his ongoing theme in the entire epistle, the royal law of Leviticus 19.18, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Every time I hear a reference to Leviticus 19.18, I think of a particular story. When John and I were in college, we had a friend. I'll call him Greg (because that's his real name). Greg Taylor found a girl he really liked. I'll call her Jill. They went on a couple of dates. They held hands. Love was in the air. Back in the old days at the Christian college where we were students, if we wanted to show a guy or girl that we liked them, we sent a letter in campus mail. It probably seems quaint to our college students now. We didn't text or IM each other. We sent these old-fashioned things called letters in these old-fashioned things called envelopes.

Greg was smitten with Jill, so he sent her one of these letters. And he told her that he was enjoying getting to know her and thought she was great. In closing the letter, Greg wanted to include a Bible verse about love, so he looked through the Bible for just the right verse and landed on Leviticus 19.18—*Love your neighbor as yourself*. "Perfect," Greg thought. "I will write the reference at the bottom of the letter, and Jill will look up Leviticus 19.18 and will know this is a love letter." So Greg folded up his letter and sent it through campus mail.

A day or so later, Jill opened that letter, and she is such a good person—a better person than I am—because she got out her Bible and looked up the reference Greg had left for her: I have to admit I don't always look up Bible verses on letters people write to me. Jill opened her Bible to Leviticus. Unfortunately, Greg had transposed the numbers, which happens to be especially dangerous in Leviticus, and he had written *Leviticus 18.19* instead. So, when Jill opened her Bible to the passage, she read: "Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period."

This is a true story.

Despite the funny story, the point is: Greg's gut instinct was the right one. When in doubt, keep it simple. Rely on the heart of the law. It's the point James is making: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and prophets hang on it.

We live in a world where loving our neighbors can seem like a complicated command—there are just so many big problems in this world. We live in a world where 17,000 children die every day, most from preventable or treatable causes. We live in a world where 2.5 billion people lack access to standard sanitation, including 1 billion who are forced to resort to open defecation for lack of other options, bringing sickness and disease to their communities, especially to their children.

There's nothing worse than the funeral of a child. John and I were missionaries in Jinja, Uganda, for several years, and there in Uganda, coffins are sold in kiosks on the side of the road. And among all those coffins, there are far too many pre-made child-sized coffins, just waiting for the one-in-five children who will not live to see a fifth birthday in Uganda. I hate those little coffins.

We tend to grieve more quietly in the Western world, but Ugandans don't hold back when they grieve. Grief is loud. Death makes noise. So at far too many funerals, we awkwardly learned to cry and to join in with devastated parents burying their children. When I close my eyes, I can still hear our friend Ida crying out for her son Regan.

But these cries don't just come from overseas—in the United States, for the first time in fifty years, a majority of public school students come from low-income families and qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. The teachers we are training here at Pepperdine University *will* teach hungry students in their classrooms. They will not have noise-canceling options if they teach in our public schools.

At the southern borders of the United States, authorities report having captured 15,647 children (*captured children!*) traveling without parents who tried to jump the border in the last six months. The captured children are held in detention centers with eighteen-foot-high fences with razor wire on top. While they are held, the children lie on mattresses on the floor, in what look like livestock stalls to me—go look it up. Inevitably, given the number of people, it smells of feet and sweat. I don't know what we should ultimately do about immigration. It's obviously complicated. But, whatever the complexities are, we live in a world where children are being caged like animals. And for Christians, there are no noise-canceling options.

In the United States of America in 2015, more African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850. In our country right now, from Ferguson to Tulsa to Baltimore, there is a cry going out that the system is not fair to everyone. Regardless of what you think in terms of media coverage and drug laws and prison reform and the war on drugs, God's

children—mothers and fathers and sons and daughters—are crying, crying out that black lives matter. A young man in Baltimore told his district representative, Elijah Cummings, this week, “I feel like I’m in a coffin, and I’m kicking and screaming. But no one is coming to help me get out.” For Christians, there are no noise-canceling options.

It would be far easier if James did not have to go poking around controversial, hot-button issues. It would be far easier if he could say things in a nicer way, a more politically correct way, without offending people by calling them *arrogant*.

I’m not so sure that’s the tactic that inspires people. If I were James’s PR consultant, I would advise him to tone it down a bit. “God’s people have an arrogance problem,” he proclaims without apology. And the only cure is simple. Stop clowning around, and love your neighbor.

This is the point in the sermon where I’m supposed to offer an action item or an example of someone who is doing it right.

I thought about telling the story of some of the sacrificial Christian people I’ve known through the years—missionaries and generous philanthropists. And families who serve foster children. And people who sell their big fancy houses to move to the inner city. Those are great examples of what James is calling us to. But today I want to tell you about an average person who exemplifies what it means to love our neighbors. Her name was Evelyn Clark.

I was at an event for new students at Pepperdine in the fall when I first heard Rick Gibson tell Evelyn’s story. Evelyn was a founding member of Associated Women of Pepperdine and a member of our board of regents. A lot of you probably knew her. Evelyn passed away several years ago, and although I never met her, when I heard her story, I thought about how she is the antithesis of the alazon character.

Evelyn was a member of a local congregation, which in the 1990s was trying to find creative ways to love their neighbors. They tried some unconventional programs geared toward young people that included theater and dancing and music. Despite the success of the programs, some of the senior citizens of the church were nervous about what they were doing. The church was being called to radically love their young neighbor— young people who didn’t know the unspoken rules of the congregation.

Rick overheard one woman complaining about something that was new at the time because the young people wanted it. She said, “I see that we’ve added a soda machine to the fellowship hall.” And she said it like an alazon—there was a challenge in the statement. She continued, “If we are putting money into a soda machine in the church building, what’s next? Slot machines?”

A crowd of eighty-somethings gathered around a table with the complainer. There was muttering about Jesus and the moneychangers in the temple. They had suspected for some time that the church was being led astray, heading down the slippery slope, and the soda machine was just the evidence they needed. It’s a lot easier to complain about a soda machine than it is to complain about the neighborhood teenagers who like the soda. Everyone at the table was involved in muttering and complaining, except for one. Evelyn Clark, nearly a decade older than the rest of them, said nothing for a while. You barely noticed her until she stood. Even then it was hard to see her, for her age was greater than her weight. Suddenly this tiny woman put a stop to all the muttering and started pounding on the table. Shocked, everyone turned to look at her. They respected Evelyn. She had clout. Like the modest string of pearls she always wore around her neck, her white hair was perfectly in place. Her dresses were always cleaned and pressed. Evelyn was a well-put-together ninety-three-year-old.

What happened next, however, was a complete and total contradiction of the image of this dignified woman. After getting everyone’s attention, Evelyn reached up under her chin and grabbed a handful of loose skin and pulled it downward, saying, “Look at this.” Everyone gasped. Rick said he was stunned by how far she could pull the skin. But Evelyn wasn’t done. She reached for the loose skin underneath her outstretched arm and pulled. “Look at this,” she said.

Now that she had everyone’s attention, Evelyn made eye contact with every person staring back at her, and said, “Look at us! Look at us! We are dying! This is not about us anymore. This church is trying to do something positive in the life of our neighbors, in the lives of children and young people. And I, for one, think we should get behind them.”

This frail superhuman in her pearls and sensible pumps is an image I want you to remember. When we have little left in this life except decaying flesh, may it be said of us that we used it to love our neighbors, that we “got behind them” as Evelyn said, instead of getting in their way. Our neighbors are not really all that interested in joining congregations that argue about soda machines, or guitars, or political candidates. That’s not compelling. Families are falling apart in our neighborhoods. Children are getting on our school buses with growling stomachs. Violence has taken residence across the street from our church buildings. People in our midst are workaholics and alcoholics and sexaholics.

Our neighbors are not really all that interested in whether we are at “progressive” congregations or “conservative” congregations. Whether we can boast about having three Sunday services and multisite campuses, or great bands, or new songs or old songs. If we brag about what we do or don’t do in our sacred hour of worship, our neighbors are onto us. They recognize the stock alazon character when he or she steps into the scene. They want nothing to do with arrogance. Humanity is crying out for love, and we must be the people who hear them and go to them.

Talking about topics like love and arrogance can be vague. So James gives us more than a simple reminder to love people. James gets in our faces with three very specific ways to convert and stop being arrogant. One, we are called to give up being judgmental. Two, we are called to stop acting like we are gods ourselves. And three, we are called to give up our money and our stuff. Our neighbors are interested in humility, tolerance, radical sharing, or—to put it more succinctly—love. Evelyn’s example to us is that she was more interested in loving her neighbor than in maintaining her own preferences. This is what God is calling us to do.

Do *whatever it takes* to love neighbors. Welcome them. See them. Hear them. Serve them. Speak up for them. Understand them. Attend to the needs they have, not the needs we suppose they have. Don’t just sit around asking, “Who exactly is my neighbor?” In the name of God, *pick* one!

When we walk onto the stage of our neighborhoods, may our neighbors say of each of us, “I know this character. I can predict what’s going to happen next. *This* is one of those people who loves like God loves.”

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