

**Inside Out**  
**James 4:11-5:6; Matthew 6:19-21, 6:31-34, 7:1-3**  
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My US History teacher was known county-wide as one of the grouchiest, meanest men to devote his life to teaching high school. Warren Hierl carried a three-foot wooden dowel in his hand while he lectured, using it to point at terms and dates on a chalkboard and occasionally slamming it down on an unsuspecting student's desk. Many teachers would do things like this when students weren't paying attention, but Mr. Hierl would do it even when you were furiously scribbling down notes, causing your papers to bounce off the desk and end up on the floor.

He would tell students, without fear or diplomacy, that they weren't smart enough for his class or for the AP exam that would come at the end of the year. Heaven help the airhead that stumbled into his classroom. One time, I remember someone asking why we were studying New Mexico in United States History. Instead of correcting her, he just looked on amusedly while she continued to explain the question—you know, since "New Mexico" must be part of Mexico and not one of the fifty states. He went from amused to baffled and eventually just sat down with wide eyes until some other student got the question-asker to cease and desist.

There were students who refused to take AP US History because of Hierl's reputation. There were some who shut him out immediately because he was known to be such a hard-nosed teacher. On some level, I suspect he might have reached more students had he been just a touch softer...but on another level, I can't really envision him being as effective if he had been just a touch softer, so maybe that's a moot point. In the end, although he could be mean and terrifying, he was also a fantastic teacher.

He remains the best lecturer that I've ever had. Even after college and two grad schools, I've found no one who has conveyed as much information in as short an amount of time as clearly as Warren Hierl did. Much of the stuff he taught me remains with me today. I tend to think that part of how he had such a tremendous impact was that he held us all rapt from day one because of his reputation as a taskmaster.

He wasn't for everyone, though.

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When I began this sermon series a month ago, I made two overarching assertions about the book of James. The first was that this is a letter of non-negotiables, guidelines for life that lie at the heart of the then-new Christian movement and that would form the building blocks of the foundation of this faith for centuries to come. And the second was that James is hard, sometimes so hard that we don't really understand why the author is so angry or condemning, sometimes hard enough that we run away from it or feel weighed down by its verses. It's possible that, like Mr. Hierl, these two qualities go together. Non-negotiables are, by definition, unflinching. They're tough truths. They're hard. Basically, they mean that James is a brick of a book.

The hard non-negotiables rise to their apex in the section of James that we read today. In these thirteen verses, James slams home three more vital points that lie at the heart of his take on Christianity, hitting us over the head with that brick and with a tone that is inevitably extraordinarily challenging.

First, he warns that we ought not to slander or to judge each other. There are a lot of reasons why we should avoid partaking in slander or judgment, but James chooses just one defense, one that has to do with tearing down hierarchy. For James, there is only one Judge, and everyone else is on the same playing field, so we should avoid becoming arrogant or embracing an attitude of superiority.

James continues this attack on egotism in the next section, telling his readers that they shouldn't be conceited about their futures. Here he actually calls out boasting and arrogance by name, going so far as to label this attitude "evil." He's gaining steam in his attack, building a diatribe that will explode and unload on the reader (that's us).

That happens as we cross over into the fifth chapter with this line: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you." James continues for five more verses about the evil of being rich, the corruption that is wealth, using phrases like your wealth will "eat your flesh like fire" and "you have fattened yourself in the day of slaughter."

Again...James is hard, and this is the hardest section of the whole letter. It is impossible to be a Christian in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and not be unsettled by these verses. They are presented as if they came from the Warren Hierl School of Education. They are, undoubtedly, like a brick to the head.

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Precisely because the author isn't particularly subtle, this section from James does not get preached on often. His verses aren't pleasant to hear, and there's not a whole lot that a proclaimer can add to these verses. They're true, of course—we are wise to avoid the arrogance of judging others, the arrogance of thinking we have our future perfectly planned, and the arrogance that frequently accompanies wealth. There's just not a whole lot more to say about this section. In the end, it's just not that interesting.

The interesting thing is this. The interesting thing is that Jesus makes the exact same three points as part of his Sermon on the Mount, even using the same imagery to convey his message.

With judgment, both Jesus and James note that we, humanity, are not judges—that's not our place, but rather the role of God alone. With the future, James says "you do not even know what tomorrow will bring" and in Matthew we find "do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own." And with wealth, James contends that gold and silver will corrode while Jesus also says that rust will consume our earthly treasures. The two authors aren't just making the same points...they are making them with the same language and the same images.

Despite James's vitriol, it becomes easier to view his message as essential to our faith when we realize that the same points are part of Jesus' message, part of arguably his most famous message. The Sermon on the Mount is where we find the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule. The fact that James echoes the Sermon on the Mount lends credence to the idea that his argument is crucial to our faith; the fact that Matthew and James not only make the same points but also make them with the same symbolism amplifies that confidence.

But...and this seems really important...they're not making these points in the same order. James starts with a condemnation about judging others, then warns us not to be arrogant about the future, and concludes by blasting wealth. Jesus starts with a warning about becoming consumed by material gain, then progresses to cautioning against worrying about the future, and concludes with a denunciation of judgment.

It is impossible for us to know why James and Matthew present these in a different order—any answer we venture toward that question will be nothing more than conjecture. But it is possible for us to examine the effect of that different order, to ask and address “What happens because James and Matthew have reverse arguments?”

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Despite the fact that I like the letter of James, I have to admit I like Matthew's ordering better. Matthew is moving from the concrete to the intangible. If we think of these as three challenges, the order in the Sermon on the Mount gets progressively harder. I can wrap my brain around the material goods and numbers that constitute wealth—in our current world, we even have a clear line that is the “poverty line,” making this about as easily defined as possible. The future is a little more nebulous, but I can still think about a calendar and number the days. And while avoiding worry is tricky, avoiding judgment is almost impossible. Avoiding judgment requires us to completely change our way of thinking, not just our way of acting or our way of living.

And yet, James's order is no picnic either, particularly in the here and now. Judgment is just as hard now as it was when these books were written, but worry has somehow, I think, gotten harder. We are trained to become anxious about our future, our present, and even our past; about our health, our leaders, our family, our friends, and our finances. That last one means that we live in a world where no amount of wealth feels like enough.

So we may think that the escalation occurs only in Matthew, but the truth is that there is another escalation in the reversed order of James. This is a sort of MC Escher staircase, and no matter which way we travel it, we are straining to climb to the top.

Maybe, I think, this is part of why James gets angry. His increased condemnation helps us to know that he is climbing, that these challenges and requirements are getting harder and harder. If he doesn't stress these points with language that is arresting, even off-putting, then his readers then and now will ignore them, especially the later ones. That realization doesn't make me like his tone any more, but it does help me understand it a little bit.

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There is another effect from James's reversed order. It's hard to ascribe too much structure to the Sermon on the Mount—there's definitely something intentional about the order, but overall it feels mainly like a scattered collection of sayings. But these three sections do seem to progress from external to internal. The first image is of earthly treasures, material goods that Matthew minimally connects to our inner workings. The second focus, one of worry, starts with natural images of birds and lilies, then uses more personal examples of humans worrying about clothing and food, and then culminates in the simple admonition not to worry about tomorrow at all. This entire segment is moving from the outside in. Then, when Matthew moves to the next section about judgment, he is continuing to move to the very heart of who we are and how we think. The whole thing is an outside-in progression. Matthew's advice starts by exhorting us to get our external world right, something that is a little bit more concrete, perhaps a little easier to comprehend, and concludes by insisting that we get our internal world right.

The structure in Matthew, therefore, is focused on our souls. It builds toward a deep concern for our individual essences.

Because James reverses the order, he moves not from the outside in but rather inside out. First, he says, soften your heart, then get your head on straight, and then recognize the issues that “rotten riches” create. James’s order isn’t all that concerned with us as individuals. It’s concerned with the community that we as individuals form.

This is also evidenced in some of the specific words that each author chooses. Matthew says “do not judge so that you may not be judged”—focus on the individual. James says “do not speak evil *against one another*”—focus on the community. When it comes to the future, Matthew says not to worry about where individual needs like food or clothing will come from. James says not to boast *to others* about what tomorrow will bring. And when it comes to wealth, Matthew says “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” while James derides those who have attained their wealth by defrauding others. Consistently, throughout the passages, the words of Jesus encourage each individual to pursue pureness of heart and head and soul. James, meanwhile, wants the entire community to care for each other, to thrive as a whole unit.

Again, we cannot know why James presents these three exhortations in a reverse order from how Matthew has presented them...but we can know that because he does this, he emphasizes the impact these exhortations have on community more so than on an individual.

When students talked to Warren Hierl one-on-one after class, he was a fantastic listener. He was still blunt, but he was also analytical, perceptive, and curious. He had—still has—an incredible, wry sense of humor. He knew how to teach individuals differently from how he taught a classroom.

Presenting a list of non-negotiables to an individual should be done carefully, surgically, delicately...and even then, it seems doomed from the start. You don’t get someone to go out with you by telling them “these are my demands.” But presenting a list of non-negotiables to a community is a different endeavor altogether. There is a much greater need to name and accentuate up front the places where the community cannot bend. It is still a delicate operation, but it’s a different kind of delicate. Part of what makes today’s scripture so tricky is that James has to be emphatic, firm, and even hyperbolic in order for his point to resound, in order for his community to survive.

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The title of this sermon is “Inside Out,” which you may recognize as the title of a 2015 Pixar movie. That film takes us inside the mind of a young girl, Riley, who is wrestling with her family’s move halfway across the country. The movie’s main characters are her emotions of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, and we get to see the impact those emotions have on her life.

In the movie, child Riley is primarily guided by Joy—that is the dominant emotion that steers her through life. Joy is such a powerful force that she sometimes squelches the other feelings, refusing to let Riley’s Anger or Sadness rise to the surface. In the beginning of the movie, when Riley is very much a child, this works okay, but over time, we see the other emotions find their places and, at times, even take the reins.

The anger and disgust that James exhibits here is still troubling for me...but I do think each might have its place. Those emotions cause us as readers to take these verses a little more seriously, even if they also weigh us down. They cause us to pay extra close attention and to remember more thoroughly. They speak to us as a community.

In the end, a pretty big chunk of our lives and our scripture is chaotic and challenging. When it comes to the corruptive power of wealth or the constricting paralysis of anxiety or the danger of judging someone else, we almost have to have writers who will shout at us collectively. It is about the only way we can force ourselves, as a group, to confront these issues.

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*Inside Out* is also a movie about growing up. Riley matures from being dominated by one emotion to being guided by all of them. She matures from seeing the world only through her own circumstances to seeing it through the eyes of others, transitioning her from a person who represents the individual to a person who represents the communal. Her growth is messy and, at times, a little hard to watch, especially as a parent. But it is growth.

The book of James is also messy and hard...but I think that somewhere in the midst of that mess, somewhere in the middle of the anger and disgust of these verses, there is growth, a growth that pushes an entire community toward the same values that Jesus himself taught us as individuals. A growth that takes these values that Jesus encouraged in our hearts and turns them inside out.