WHO ARE YOU?

Several passages throughout Scripture seek to give the reader a correct view of themselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shared how God took care of the sparrows, and then asked, “‘Are you not of more value than they?’” pointing out God’s value on every human life (Matt. 6:26). God sometimes directly asks about His listener’s identity to draw their attention to who they really are. In Isaiah, He asked His people, “‘Who are you that you should be afraid of a man who will die, and of the son of a man who will be made like grass?’” (Isa. 51:12). He appealed to their identity as His people to demonstrate the foolishness of fearing another human. These passages and others like them focus on the need to value oneself as a child of God and see oneself more valuable than one might think, based on what God says.

In this week’s passage, James has a parallel goal in mind. Instead of elevating one’s view of self, James encourages his listeners to lower it when it has become too high. “Who are you to judge another?” he asks, pointing out that their identity did not come with judgment credentials (James 4:12). “What is your life?” he asks, pointing out that no human is eternal nor omniscient (v. 14). Though the earlier mentioned verses on the value of human life are possibly more encouraging outright, James’ words have the important function of providing a well-rounded view of oneself: every human is eternally valuable, loved, and cared for; at the same time, God is God and His creatures are just creatures after all. Understanding both enables a balanced view of oneself and of God.
Write out James 4:11–17 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 4:11, 12. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
HIGHER CONSEQUENCES

After establishing the great power of the tongue (James 3), James further explores how using one’s tongue inappropriately has consequences. Speaking evil of a brother is closely tied with judging that brother, which is a job that God has not given His children. The Greek word used here for “speak evil” refers to slander, which is “the sin of those who meet in corners and gather in little groups and pass on confidential tidbits of information which destroy the good name of those who are not there to defend themselves.” (William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter, The New Daily Study Bible, 128.) This is not a good use of the abilities God has entrusted.

There’s a higher consequence here, though. Not only is the evil speaker judging their brother, but they are speaking evil of and judging the law. Jesus already made it clear that His followers are not to judge one another (Matt. 7:1–5). Furthermore, speaking evil is also not loving one’s neighbor as oneself, which is a key part of summing up the entire law (Matt. 22:38–40). Sometimes someone can think the law doesn’t apply to them because they’re breaking it for a good reason. In this way, they place themselves above the law, judging it as unfair, unreasonable, or not worthy to be wholly followed. This changes one’s relationship with the law from a doer to a judge, which is not humanity’s place.

God is the only one who can give the law and judge people, because He’s the only one with the right to do it (as both Creator and Redeemer), and He’s the only one who does it correctly. “Who are you to judge another?” James asks, appealing to His followers’ lack of credentials for such an action.

James wraps up this section with an expanded definition of sin: “To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Lack of doing can be just as sinful as doing. It was a sin for the priest and the Levite to not help the man on the road (Luke 10:25–37). Notice that there is knowledge involved: “... who knows to do good.” This was a theme in Jesus’ parables, too, as in the unfaithful servant who was punished more severely because he knew his master’s will (Luke 12:47). With increased understanding comes increased responsibility and greater consequences; simultaneously, with increased understanding comes increased potential for blessing others and having a closer intimacy with God. As His children allow the Holy Spirit to teach them, God will also guide them in what He has already revealed, leading them into doing more good as they learn more good.
IS PLANNING EVIL?

Those with a P (“perceiving”) in their Myers-Briggs personality type may try to use James 4:13–15 to denounce all planning. The idea can even be bolstered by the Sermon on the Mount, right? “Do not worry about tomorrow…” (Matt. 6:34) means, “Don’t even think about it,” so planning for the future and reaching toward the unknown is a Christian taboo. Right? Ah, no. Actually, like the latter verses of Matthew 6, planning is not being denounced here in James, but a harmful posture of the heart while planning is.

While there is a type of planning for organizational purposes, there is also a type of planning that grasps at control it can never have. James is warning against losing sight of the lack of control humanity has over the future, and even the lack of foreknowledge. He encourages his listeners to remember that their lives are “even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). Don’t pretend that you are immortal or all-wise, he warns, and a good heart-check for you to do is to see how you go about your planning.

How can His children adjust their plans to acknowledge God and their frailty? To set plans with an understanding of their dependence on Him, “instead [they] ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’ ” (v. 15). Plans are all right; they just have to be made in the context of God’s will and providence, leaning on Him as is always needed in the past, present, or future, being willing to change or even give up on these plans if God’s leading so directs.

The converse is continuing in one’s own way, boasting in arrogance, thinking that one knows everything, can control everything, and has no need of consulting or depending on God for future plans. This is not only harmful, but it also departs from reality. As has been shown in earlier lessons this week, this is why a balanced and biblical view of oneself is paramount. Thinking too little or too highly of oneself warps reality, because there are ripple effects based on one’s grasp of one’s own identity. “Lord willing” should not be used as a simple cliché that’s appended to what was being planned anyway. What is needed is a posture of the heart that bows in submission to God’s enduring love and vast knowledge, that trusts He will do what’s best even when He’s painting on a larger canvas than His child can immediately see. “If the Lord wills” means the plans are only desired if the Lord wills, because He is more trustworthy than emotions or short-sighted understanding.
Review your memorized verse from James 4:11–17.

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 6:25–34
Proverbs 19:21
Colossians 2:9, 10
1 Peter 2:9, 10
Jeremiah 31

What other verses come to mind in connection with James 4:11–17?
THE JUDGMENTS OF JESUS

Though Jesus was perfect and had every right to judge those around Him, that’s not why He came to earth. In his conversation with Nicodemus under cover of darkness, He explained that He did not come “‘into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved’” (John 3:17). He didn’t come to judge and revamp the law, either; He came to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). From the start, Jesus’ mission and focus was far different from what the Pharisees of back then and today wish it was.

Humanity’s natural way of judgment, stemming from selfishness, is to harm, get back at, or criticize out of pride. When Jesus was unwelcome in a Samaritan town on the way to Jerusalem, His disciples recommended calling down fire on the town as a response. But Jesus rebuked them, saying, “‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them’” (Luke 9:55, 56). God’s way of judgment is different. Instead of coming from a place of selfishness, it pours out from a place of deep, redemptive love. As Jesus cried out the destruction in store for His people, He lamented that they would not come to Him instead so that He could protect them (Matt. 23:37). This is not a judgment that delights in destruction or harm, even when it’s justified! It is a judgment that desires to redeem.

All of Jesus’ judgments, too, are not arbitrary but simply trying to bring people back to reality. He beckoned the people away from the religion of the Pharisees because it was truly not going to help them; they would only thirst more after water from these broken cisterns. He pointed out the spiritual poverty of the religious leaders to show them where they were, so that they could change through surrender.

If Jesus had been “judgmental” in the way that humanity can be and often use that word, then the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners would not have flocked to Him as they had. This was one of the religious leaders’ most constant complaints against Jesus: “Why do all these bad people love You so much? And why do You let them come to You?” (see Luke 15:1, 2). It was because all of Jesus’ instruction, censure, and guidance came from an overflow of love. The only people who can be offended by that are those who choose to not see their need.
MEEK AND LOWLY IN HEART

The less you meditate upon Christ and His matchless love and the less you are assimilated to His image, the better will you appear in your own eyes, and the more self-confidence and self-complacency will you possess. A correct knowledge of Christ, a constant looking unto the Author and Finisher of our faith, will give you such a view of the character of a true Christian that you cannot fail to make a right estimate of your own life and character in contrast with those of the great Exemplar...

The fitting up for your work is a life business, a daily, laborious, hand-to-hand struggle with established habits, inclinations, and hereditary tendencies. It requires a constant, earnest, and vigilant effort to watch and control self, to keep Jesus prominent and self out of sight.

It is necessary for you to watch for the weak points in your character, to restrain wrong tendencies, and to strengthen and develop noble faculties that have not been properly exercised. The world will never know the work secretly going on between the soul and God, nor the inward bitterness of spirit, the self-loathing, and the constant efforts to control self; but many of the world will be able to appreciate the result of these efforts. They will see Christ revealed in your daily life. You will be a living epistle, known and read of all men, and will possess a symmetrical character, nobly developed.

“Learn of me,” said Christ; “for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” He will instruct those who come to Him for knowledge. There are multitudes of false teachers in the world. The apostle declares that in the last days men will “heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears,” because they desire to hear smooth things. Against these Christ has warned us: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.” The class of religious teachers here described profess to be Christians. They have the form of godliness and appear to be laboring for the good of souls... They are in conflict with Christ and His teachings, and are destitute of His meek and lowly spirit...

The Good Shepherd came to seek and to save that which was lost. He has manifested in His works His love for His sheep. All the shepherds who work under the Chief Shepherd will possess His characteristics; they will be meek and lowly of heart. Childlike faith brings rest to the soul and also works by love and is ever interested for others. If the Spirit of Christ dwells in them, they will be Christlike and do the works of Christ. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, 375–377.)
Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How much of a balanced view do you have of yourself? Of your value and importance in your place as a human? Explain.

How does Jesus help those who naturally have too low of an estimate of themselves, but also those who have too high of an estimate?

Are you more of a planner or more spontaneous? How can you express trust in Jesus more in both?

How does judging harm us?

What are some of your favorite verses that articulate our relation to God? What do you love about them?

How did Jesus balance being completely accepting but also not excusing sin?

What are practical ways to regularly meditate on God's love?