

“What We Say and What We Do”
James 4:11-17; 5:1-6
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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This morning we continue our focus on the Book of James. We are almost at the end of the letter which is full of practical Christian wisdom. In last week's passage James gave us a choice: are we going to be friends with God or friends with the world? The problem, according to James, is that we try to have it both ways! We may say we want to be friends with God and follow the wisdom from above, the kind that is pure and peaceable, gentle and full of mercy, producing good fruits in our lives. But in reality the wisdom of the world has a strong pull on our hearts, and this results in bitter envy and selfish ambition, conflicts and disputes with others. And the bottom line for James is that when we become friends with the world, we become enemies of God. And so the invitation is for us to repent, to turn ourselves around, to draw near to God, to humble ourselves before the Lord, and to trust in the promise that the Lord will lift us up (4.10).

Let us turn now to this morning's reading which can be found in your bulletin insert. You are invited to read the part that is in bold. Let us listen now for God's word.

James 4:11-17; 5:1-6 *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

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?

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; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin.

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 during 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 nourished your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This past week our oldest child Nicholas celebrated his 27th birthday. When I served a church in Atlanta the youth and parents there celebrated Nicholas' arrival with a baby shower. But it wasn't your typical shower! Instead of giving the traditional presents of baby clothes and accessories and toys, what we received were books. Each youth gave us a copy of their favorite children's book, ones they loved when they were little - and this made for a great way to jump start our library. This morning, as we handed out Bibles to the children, I was reminded of the joy I had reading with my own children - the hours and hours of laying in bed next to them, reading one after another, until the time they finally got sleepy - or perhaps when I would doze off myself! One of the books I remember Nicholas loving was a book called [Mr. Nosey](#). Mr. Nosey was a man who not only had a big green nose, but he "liked to know about everything that was going on. He was always poking his nose into other people's business." By the end of the book Mr. Nosey winds up with a sore nose, but he learns a lesson and becomes friends with all the people in town.

Though it's not fair to characterize people with just one feature like being nosey or grumpy or being a chatter-box, it's a literary technique that has been around for a very long time. Did you know that Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers would personify vices like Pride and Lust to make their point about what it means to live a moral life? Bible scholars believe that is what James is doing in his letter. In today's passage we hear James call out people not for being nosey or sleepy or grumpy, but instead James' focus is on the sin of arrogance. He writes, **"You boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil"** (4.16). If James was going to write a children's book, its likely title would be Mr. Arrogant or Ms. Boastful ([Kim Wells' sermon, New Hope Presbyterian Church of Asheville, 9/23/2018](#)). So this morning I invite you to explore with me this theme of arrogance and boasting according to the Book of James.

When thinking about boasting, Bible scholar Luke Timothy Johnson (Johnson, [New Interpreter's Bible Vol. XII](#), pp. 214-219) sees three different examples of arrogance in our passage. **First, it's expressed in what we say, the speaking of evil against our siblings - the slander and judging of our neighbors that comes out of our mouths** (4.11-12). I think we all know that talking bad about others is a temptation for us all the time, and there's a lot of wisdom in the old adage, "If you don't have anything good to say about someone, better keep your mouth shut!" But this "judging not" prohibition is really hard! When we see others do things that are wrong - when they lie or steal, cheat or break the law - how can we NOT judge them?! Echoing what his brother Jesus says in the gospels, what James says here is really helpful - there is only One Judge, and guess what? It's not us! God alone is the one who will judge. You see, when we judge another person, when we speak evil about them and label them as worthy of God's condemnation, we are taking the role reserved only for God. That's the highest form of pride there is! The clearest example I know of this is in the Parable of the Wheat and Tares/Weeds told in Matthew 13. While we may be tempted to do God's work and pull up the weeds that are springing up with the wheat, God says "not so fast!" In the parable the Master says to the servants, "If you try to gather the weeds now you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will deal with it!" (Matthew 13.29-30). Such restraint requires humility

from us, as Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s” (Matthew 7.1, 3-5). In other words, we have a lot of work to do on ourselves before we even begin to turn to our neighbor’s sins. And if we ever come to the point of taking the speck out of the neighbors eyes, I believe we are not judging them but loving them- it’s a movement not of condemnation but one of reconciliation. When we speak bad about another person, telling others about how they mistreated us or what they did wrong, I’m afraid such talk never leads to reconciliation - it’s so much easier to talk about the other as “the problem” and get others on our side, than to actually talk directly to the person who may have committed an offense. In my experience, when I find the courage to talk to the other who has offended me, I end up seeing them as being more human and complex than I had imagined. In my arrogance it’s easy to condemn them as being “all bad.” In my humility it becomes possible to see them as a flawed person (like me) who is also made in the image of God.

The second example of arrogance has to do with our boasting about plans for the future. We say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money” (4.13-16). James says that is not the approach we should take. Instead, we should say “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” To be honest, this example of arrogance was not the one I would think would be included in James’ top 3 list. Don’t we all have to make plans? Don’t we all have hopes for things we are going to do in the future, whether it’s this summer to go on vacation or a big dream trip when we retire? Couldn’t James come up with a better example of Mr. Arrogance or Ms. Boastful??

When we look into these verses a little closer, I think we can see a couple of things. First of all, such presumption about what we think we are going to do in the future is rooted in a subtle, perhaps unspoken arrogance that we think we have control over our lives - but do we?! How many of you have planned to do something only to find that you or a loved one has gotten sick, or received a diagnosis that has turned your world upside down. I think we all learned that during the pandemic, that life indeed is fragile and that our health is a gift we should never take for granted. James is echoing the wisdom we find in Proverbs 27: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day will bring” (27.1). And Jesus again in the Sermon on the Mount, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matthew 6.34).

But I believe James is trying to tell us something deeper here, and it has to do with the illusion that our wealth, our resources will guarantee us a future, that our riches will be the source of our security. In chapter 1 James echoes the wisdom of the Hebrew scriptures: “For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.”

So this leads to the third and final example of arrogance that has to do with the rich, those who have laid up treasures for themselves. Again, James remembers what Jesus

said in his Sermon on the Mount: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6.19-21). But in today’s passage James is not just giving us a refresher course on his brother’s advice. Instead, he’s ringing the bell of God’s judgment on the wealth that has accumulated corruptly through the laborers whose wages have been held back. “Your riches have rotted, your clothes are moth-eaten, your gold and silver have rusted...” In trying to secure their own futures, the wealthy in James’ community have misplaced their loyalty - their treasure in worldly things will not last, and they will be held accountable for their arrogance. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, James is not saying being wealthy materially is a bad thing per se. Some of the most faithful and generous people I have known are people with great resources who are willing to be good stewards of the gifts entrusted to them. But the witness of the scriptures is that the love of money can be a stumbling block to following the call to trust in God’s abundance. So whether it’s in what we say or what we do, James insists that our arrogance keeps us from loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our arrogance, our attempts to be Mr. or Ms. Boastful, this is the thing that keeps us from living the life God intends us to live.

So according to James, the brother of Jesus, what exactly is the cure? What is the remedy to our hearts which are prone to putting ourselves above God and others? Well I believe the answer has a lot to do with learning how to walk in the way of the Lord, the way of humility. The verse immediately before our passage this morning simply says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and the Lord will exalt you.” A good friend of mine recently reminded me that the call to humility is not about us thinking we are worthless, that we need to grovel and act like we are nobodies. We all have a need to be seen and loved, to be recognized for our worth - to be valued. The problem with the human heart is that we often want to get affirmation by putting down others. When we speak badly about someone else it’s a way of building up ourselves, a way of saying “I’m not like that, I’m much better!” This kind of slander and prejudice happens on small and grand scales - when we think we are better than the kid in our class because we live in a bigger house, or when we think our nationality or race is better than another because we assume our way of doing things is the norm. Wealth is definitely a way we seek to measure ourselves in comparison to others - the more we have the more we want to think we are worth.

But the Book of James is like a big red sign that says “Stop! Don’t try to elevate yourself by putting others down or speaking badly about them or making plans for a future or a life with riches, all designed to fill the hole in your hearts.” Stop! You can’t find love or worth in being friends with the world - no, our worth comes when we trust that we belong to God who is our Friend in all things. That we are God’s Beloved not on the basis of being better than others or having more money or better grades or anything at all. Remember in the opening chapter, James shared this amazing truth, that God is a generous and loving God, One in whom there is no shadow due to turning. Yes, God is for us, not against us! Like a mother who has given “birth to us by the word of truth” (James 1.18), God is the only One who can truly lift us up, to exalt us. Thanks be to God. Amen.