



Catalog No. 1549

James 4:11-17

Ninth Message

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March 30th, 2008

THE WISDOM OF HUMILITY

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

I'm a bit of a news and politics junkie. I enjoy reading news magazines, and during the current election process I watch my fair share of CNN. A particularly hot topic in the media these days is what is termed the arrogance of power. There has been a great deal of discussion on why men and women in positions of power seem to make such unwise personal and moral decisions. In particular, the focus has been on some politicians who are having very public consequences for their private actions. Many pundits believe that it all stems from their extreme arrogance. Some politicians don't think they will get caught or pay the price because of their position of power. The headlines and public apologies, of course, prove otherwise.

But it's not just politicians who are arrogant. In many big and small ways, I believe all of us act arrogantly. We tend to think highly of ourselves and our accomplishments. Silicon Valley is front and center of many amazing achievements. From helping to build a space station in the heavens to mapping and manipulating DNA, it's easy for us to fall into the trap of arrogance about the inevitability of our life and our human progress.

Arrogance is nothing new. The temptation for overblown self-importance is something Pastor James had to deal with centuries ago. The last time we were in the book of James we were told to take a close and hard look at our hearts and repent of the selfishness that causes quarrels and fights among us. James's concluding exhortation was, "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up."

To live fruitfully in community, according to the wisdom from above, we must humble ourselves individually before God. In our study we will see that this wisdom of humility shows itself clearly in two specific ways: how we relate with others, and how we approach the future.

The wisdom from above is evident in our humility toward others (James 4:11-12)

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:11-12)

James begins with an emphatic command, "do not slander one another." Slander, a strong word, basically, means to "speak against" someone. The word suggests taking an attitude of superiority over others and putting them down. It is the opposite of humbly building others up.

What James has in mind here includes not only our face-to-face verbal attacks against one another, but also the equally destructive words we speak about others behind their back. James is forbidding any form of gossip, innuendo or false accusations that denigrate the character of others and tarnish their reputation. Slander is currently big business. There is a tremendous profit to be made in denigrating others. An entire industry of magazines, newspapers, Internet sites, TV and radio stations are thriving on character assassination.

Unfortunately, it's not just "out there" in the world that such malicious speech is going on. Slander can also be found among us here in the church. It is easily camouflaged in the Christian community because we so often couch our denigration of others in the guise of offering up prayer requests: "Please pray for so-and-so, she's putting her family into debt with all her spending"; "Please pray for so-and-so, he's struggling with pornography," etc.

Talking and sharing loosely about others in this way may seem harmless, but James says it is very serious, and he gives three reasons why. The first reason is that we are "brothers and sisters." A humble spirit begins with understanding exactly who we are. Each of us, in Christ, has received the undeserved mercy and grace of our Heavenly Father by being adopted into his family. We are equal in standing before him, therefore it is wrong for any one of us to claim or exercise an attitude of superiority over each other.

How we view others greatly influences the way we treat them. That is why we must be keenly attentive and aware of the subtle and not so subtle ways we view one another. It is possible for me to judge my brother not because he's sinful, but simply because he is not like me. I must remember that others can be strange, off-beat, eccentric, and unusual without being sinful and morally out of step. They may well think the same about me.

A judgmental and critical spirit can cut both ways. I came across some verses by an unknown writer that expresses this well:

I dreamt death came to me the other night
And heaven's gate swung wide
An angel with a halo bright
Ushered me inside

And there to my astonishment
Were folks I judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth,
And spiritually disabled

Indignant words rose to my lips
But never were set free

For every face showed stunned surprise
No one expected me

We are not superior over each other. We have no standing to belittle or denigrate one another, because we are equal as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

The second reason James gives us not to talk down about one another is found in the second half of verse 11: “Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.”

Earlier in his letter James says that the royal law found in Scripture can be summed up in one statement: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” James says here that if I tear down my brother in Christ, I am sitting in judgment over the law that commands me to love him. I set myself up as knowing better than the law of God. Instead of keeping the law and submitting to it, I place myself above it and exclude myself from having to obey it.

James makes it clear that when we speak against our brother or sister we do more than elevate ourselves over the ones we are called to serve and love; we also elevate ourselves over the law, which we are commanded to keep and obey.

This is dangerous ground. When we presume to set ourselves over others and over the law of God, then we are in effect presuming to have the authority, character, and ability of God.

This leads us to the third reason James gives for why speaking against our brother or sister is wrong. Verse 12: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”

James awakens us out of our blinding and selfish arrogance with a powerful rhetorical question that rings in our ears. “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” In essence he is asking, “Who do you think you are?” To take up the position of judge over your neighbor and over the law is to elbow God off his throne. Are you omnipresent so that you have seen 100% of someone else’s behavior? Are you omniscient so that you know completely the heart, mind, and motive behind another person’s action? Is your character so true, upright, and pure that you are able to set the standard as lawgiver? Do you possess such wisdom, discernment, and power that you have the ability to save and destroy as the ultimate judge?

James pointedly reminds us that there is only one who is qualified to be Lawgiver and Judge. There is only one who is able to save and destroy, and neither you nor I are that one. We are not qualified to judge one another. Yet, when things are not going my way, and I’m feeling threatened, afraid or under stress, it’s easy for me to take on a judgmental and unforgiving spirit, especially against those who are closest to me. How easily it comes to me to criticize the motives and behavior of others. What James makes clear, however, is that I do not have the knowledge, the authority or the right to do so.

Jesus addressed this same topic when he said,

“Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of

measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is 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 brother’s eye.” (Matt 7:1-5)

The only judgment you and I are qualified for is self-judgment. God has every right to instantly judge and condemn us the moment we do any wicked thing, but he has chosen to show mercy. The scriptures make it clear that God will judge the world in due time, but for now he is patient and compassionate, reserving final judgment. My prayer is that you and I will be more like our Heavenly Father in his patience and compassion.

James is not asking us to ignore or excuse the sinful behavior of others. Nor is he asking us to give up on using discernment when it comes to our association with others. What he is asking, however, is for us to stop belittling them, stop maligning them, and stop condemning them.

Did you notice that in verse 12 James transitions from using “brother and sister” to also include “neighbor”? I believe he uses the term neighbor here very purposefully. It brings to mind the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, Jesus vividly portrays what it means to be a loving, non-judgmental neighbor. We are shown that being a neighbor leaves no room for judging or putting others down, but only for reaching out to those who are hurting. Being a neighbor means abandoning our own self-interest and generously and sacrificially meeting the needs of others.

Suppose we do know a blemish or flaw or weakness in the character of our neighbor. What are we to do? Our task is not to publicize it or privately berate him with it, but to speak the truth in love, to lift him up and help him on the path toward healing. This is not easy to do, but at the cross of Christ we remember the mercy and grace given to us by our Heavenly Father in our lowliness. With his Spirit within us we are able to relate with one another not with an attitude of superiority, but one of humility and helpfulness.

The wisdom from above is evident in our humility toward others. This is a very sobering word from James. But he is not done rebuking our arrogance. He continues in verses 13 through 17 to deal with another area of life where we are tempted to be arrogant. The wisdom of humility is also evident in our attitude toward the future.

The wisdom of humility is evident in our attitude toward the future (4:13-17)

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.” 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. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin. (4:13-17)

This is a word addressed to the merchants who traveled from city to city selling their goods. But it applies to all of us. Many are busy, driven, control freaks who fall easily into the trap of arrogantly assuming that we can comprehensively dictate every aspect of our life.

Just like the recipients of James's letter, we too arrogantly boast about our plans regarding time ("today or tomorrow"), purpose ("we will go"), place ("to this or that city"), goals ("to carry on business") and results ("make money").

We are convinced that we can set out on a journey whenever we want, go wherever we want, do whatever we want, and achieve whatever we want. This is the height of arrogance. We act as though we alone control our destiny. We look to the future and do not even consider the will of God. When we do that, we leave no room for the Lord's work, no contingency for the works he has prepared ahead for us.

In an effort to counteract any temptation toward a spirit of arrogance, James points out two factors which we must consider before we get too sure of ourselves. First, we are ignorant to what the future holds. We lack the foreknowledge: "you do not even know what will happen tomorrow."

Life is uncertain and unpredictable. We are totally unaware and uninformed as to what tomorrow may bring. Hurricanes, earthquakes, war, stock market crash, cancer, auto accident, even a stumble down the stairs. The course of our life can change in a split second. All sorts of unpredictable things can happen which can radically change our tomorrow.

We act as though tomorrow is there for the taking, but James stops us in our tracks with this question: "What is your life?" In all your plans, and all your arrogant schemes, in all of your boasting of what you are going to do next week, next month, next year, have you even stopped to consider the brevity and frailty of your life?

Our frailty is the second reason that James says it is presumptuous for us to plan without God: "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

Life is brief. In the scheme of eternity, our life on earth is like the morning mist that appears for a short time and then vanishes. How can we so arrogantly boast about our plans for tomorrow when we may not even be here when it comes? In Mexico recently, my good friend Pastor Francisco wanted me to be aware that there were many in his church who were currently in mourning because one of their church leaders, Enrique, had been killed in a freak accident. He was walking near an intersection when a tire came flying off a speeding truck and struck him in the head. Enrique was killed instantly. He left behind a grieving wife and two young children.

Whether we are young or old, we must remember our human bodies are fragile and delicate. We cannot take tomorrow for granted. The obituaries are filled each day with the names of people who were not given tomorrow.

James strongly points out, however, that though there are all sorts of forces we encounter every day which we cannot predict or control, the various fortunes of life are in the very capable hands of loving Heavenly Father. Therefore when we look to the future, we cannot plan apart from the Lord. That is why James says in verses 15-17: "Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin."

I don't believe that what is important to James is that we preface any plan by saying, "If it is the Lord's will," as if it were some kind of mantra or slogan meant to pacify God. What James is encouraging is not that certain words come from our mouth, but that a certain attitude come from our heart and mind. We are to have a humble spirit within us so that from the very beginning stages of our plans for the future we not only acknowledge our own human frailty, but also invite and submit to the movement and direction of God in our life.

It's important to notice that James does not suggest that our proper stance to the future is to have no plans at all. He is not trying to banish planning from our lives, but only that sort of self-sufficient, self-important planning that places ourselves at the center and puts God in the margins.

It is good that we make our plans and dream our dreams, but we must do so fully aware of God's sovereignty and eternal purpose for us. To do otherwise is to sinfully place ourselves and our way above God and his way. The scriptures remind us that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10).

We can and must make preparations for each day and the future to come, but we are to hold on to them lightly, allowing the Lord to direct us as he wants, to be ready in a moment to step into the good works he has prepared in advance for us.

I find this way of living by faith very difficult. I much prefer to live by what is on my daily calendar and keep to my schedule. Most days I get a lot done, but I'm not sure I'm accomplishing what I should. I'm afraid I don't have much time or patience for entering into the Lord's good works. When I live this way, my time with other people is squeezed and forced into a pre-determined period. Unexpected encounters with others become unwelcome interruptions rather than opportunities for love and ministry.

This passage rebukes my selfishness and invites me to live more like my Christian brothers and sisters in Mexico. There I have seen first hand the amazing blessing of investing in relationships first and programs a distant second. In Mexico, the shared meals are longer, and the church services are much more relaxed. There is really no such thing as starting or ending on time.

They start whenever everyone gets there, and when the service eventually ends, most everyone stays afterwards to visit and share a meal. They are in no hurry to get to the next thing. People are their first priority. They have mastered the art of hanging out together, of considering each encounter as a chance to enjoy and celebrate each other, of talking leisurely and sharing openly. In such an atmosphere, opportunities to love, encourage, support,

and care for one another are plentiful. I have seen the fruit of such a way of living, and I hope to imitate it more in my own life. I'm reminded of a saying that my daughter Olivia has on her computer: "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it's called the present."

My prayer is that in the midst of the stresses of life we might fully enjoy the gift of today. Yes, life is brief and we are frail, but it is my confident hope that in all the uncertainty of life, the Lord is drawing us into greater faith, trust, and dependence upon him.

James has brought before us two very penetrating questions: *Who are you? What is your life?* He asks us to consider these questions, because he knows that honest and humble self-awareness will guard us from sin that results from arrogance. Humility is characteristic of the truly wise. James reminds us in no uncertain terms that we are the creation, not the Creator. We are equal as brothers and sisters to one another, not lawgiver or judge over one another. We are ignorant to the way of tomorrow. Our life is but a mist that is here one minute and gone the next.

James puts us in our place to convince us that we are not God and there is grave danger in trying to be God. His intent is not to make us feel puny, weak, and unimportant. Rather, it is to destroy our boastful pride and free us from the burden of playing God.

James is leading us into a life of grace-reliance. Having shed our arrogant self-importance, we are free to focus on loving our neighbor, not burdened with the responsibility of correcting or judging him. We are free to see each day, not as something to rigidly control, but as a gift to enjoy. We are not confined by the limited horizon of our day-planner or BlackBerry, but in whatever we do, large or small, we can lift our eyes heavenward and be responsive to the will of our Heavenly Father and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Who are you? What is your life? I find great peace and contentment in knowing that I am a beloved child of God; that no matter what bone-headed decisions I make today, or whatever difficult circumstances come my way tomorrow, I am assured that I am in his hands. I can be at rest, because he loves me and seeks my highest good.

We do not need to try and make ourselves feel good by putting someone else down. We do not need to have everything in our life figured out. We can trust our Heavenly Father and cast all our fears and anxiety on him, because he is caring for us and transforming us into the image of his Son.

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