

## Submitting to God James 4:6-17

Speak not evil one of another. Well, even though our politicians don't seem to have gotten the message, we already know that, don't we? Back in chapter 3, James warned us again and again about how much damage our tongues can do. He explained how wrong, how perverse it is for anyone to speak blessings and curses from the same mouth. And we all know from personal experience how devastating harsh words can be. And we all have to admit that we've all said things we're ashamed of both to others and about others. So, however inconsistently we might practice this belief, we know that we should not speak evil of one another, hurting people with our words.

But back in chapter 3:9, James gave us a hint of another reason why abusive speech is such a problem. In that passage he says that it's wrong to bless God and at the same time curse people who are made in God's image. In other words, a big part of the reason that it's wrong to hurt other people is because, whether we realize it or not, attacking images of God always involves attacking God Himself. That means that saying abusive things to other people isn't just wrong because it hurts them – it's irreverent, and even blasphemous.

In today's passage, James carries this idea of reverence for other people a bit further. In verse 11 he says that we should not speak evil of one another, and then in verse 12, he says we shouldn't judge one another – and aren't those two ideas closely related? Aren't we really sitting in judgment on others when we say hurtful things about them? What right could we possibly have to judge someone God created, someone who bears the image of God as clearly as we do ourselves?

So we shouldn't be surprised when James goes on to tie these two ideas together: Speaking evil of others, judging others is a clear breach of God's law. And this point should be beyond dispute. For what did Jesus say in our responsive reading this morning? "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And that commandment to love wasn't a minor point, a detail, a technicality. No, on another occasion, Jesus also said that the sum and substance, the essence of God's law is to love the Lord our God with all we are and all we have – and to love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves.

So it should be obvious that speaking harshly of others, setting ourselves up in judgment over them is in no way keeping God's law of love for one another. And from what we learned in chapter 3, we should also be able to see how speaking ill of other human beings also breaks God's commandment to love Him. After all, if all human beings are made in God's image, then when we speak harshly of others, when we pass judgment on others, aren't we saying that God didn't know what He was doing when He made them?

And this is a serious matter. For whether we refuse to love God by honoring those He made in His own image, or whether we refuse to love those whom we have been commanded to love, whenever we break God's law, James tells us in verse 11 that we have in a very real way set ourselves up as judges of God's law. We are in a sense saying that it isn't important, or that the Lawgiver doesn't matter or perhaps that God doesn't care if we defy His will. And if that's our attitude, we aren't just setting ourselves up as judges over other people. Aren't we setting ourselves over God Himself?

Now, I know. We are accustomed to letting ourselves off the hook where it comes to sins of the tongue. We excuse gossip by pleading its truth, and we excuse ourselves for abusive language by blaming the person with whom we are arguing. But we need to take James' words, Jesus' words seriously. Hurtful speech actually reveals the worst sort of pride toward others, and even toward God Himself. Can we doubt that we need to repent of such pride?

But saying overtly hostile things to other people isn't the only way of expressing our pride. In fact, verses 13 and 14 point out that we can be proud without even knowing it. We can express pride simply in the way that we live our lives, merely by making the most routine plans for the future.

On Wednesday evening, many of you saw a film called *God's Not Dead*. One of the main characters is a reporter who regularly published articles attacking and demeaning the Christian faith. She didn't think she needed God, but then she discovered she had cancer. All her plans, all her dreams, everything she thought was real and permanent suddenly changed in a moment.

But it's not necessary to appeal to fiction to make this point, is it? We've seen the devastation of Hurricane Matthew this week – how many people planned to have their homes, their dreams wiped out? Closer to home, how many people planned for all that flooding in South Louisiana a few months ago?

Of course, the most famous example of this may be even closer in space if not in time – the ruins of Windsor. Smith Coffee Daniell spent \$175,000 on his magnificent 32 room house. To put that into perspective, that's the same amount that David Hunt gave to Oakland College over his whole lifetime, and in today's dollars it would approximate \$10 million. Anyway, Windsor was completed in March of 1861. Undoubtedly, Mr. Daniell thought he and his family would live many happy years in the mansion, but he died only one month after moving in – at the age of 35.

Now, James would undoubtedly agree that there's nothing wrong with making plans for the future – as long as we understand they are all contingent on God's will, as long as we realize our plans are dependent on God's plans, as long as we seek to do what God wants instead of what we want. For if we simply make our plans, even to do good and helpful things, all the while assuming that we will in fact have a future in which to work out those plans, we may well be kidding ourselves.

Now, I know. We might think James is being unrealistic. We might want to complain that he's setting the bar for Christian behavior way too high. But James wasn't making this stuff up. For just as Jesus commanded us to love one another, so He also taught about the danger of making plans without reference to God. You may remember this parable from Luke chapter 12:

"The land of a rich man produced plentifully,<sup>17</sup> and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'<sup>18</sup> And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'<sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"<sup>20</sup> But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'<sup>21</sup> So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Okay, so James has warned us about the dangers of pride, the pride of setting ourselves up as judges over other people, and the pride of making plans independently of God's desires. But there's yet another form of pride we can display toward God, and it may be the most subtle of all. Look at verse 17

– if we know something good that we ought to do and just don't do it – that's sin. In other words, we can just as easily break God's law by omission as by commission, by things we leave undone as by things we do.

So yes, it reveals a proud spirit when we hurt one another, even just with our words. And yes, it reveals a proud spirit when we leave God out of our plans, when we imagine ourselves somehow independent of Him. But it's just as proud to neglect anything that God has told us to do. It's just as disrespectful of His authority, it's just as dismissive of His law.

So, what's the answer to any of these expressions of pride? Whenever we find that our lives aren't measuring up in any way to God's expectations, we must not laugh it off. We must not excuse ourselves by comparing ourselves to other people, and we must not become defensive, trying to deny what God's Word has clearly said. No, verse 9 tells us we must embrace the affliction and accept the heaviness that conviction of sin always brings. I know we want to be joyful when we come to worship, but sometimes it's not a bad thing to mourn our sins – you have to realize you're sick before you'll go to the doctor, right?

But hear the good news. If we'll repent, if we'll turn away from our pride and turn back to God, we can be sure that He will welcome us home. Look at the promise we find in verse 8 – if we draw near to God, He will draw near to us. That's the good news of God's grace – that God gives sinners not the punishment that we deserve, but the forgiveness and welcome that we so desperately need. As James tells us in verse 6, God may oppose the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

And how does God give us that grace? What did Jesus say in our responsive reading? "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." That's the amazing truth – that in spite of our sinful pride, no because of it, Jesus came to humble Himself not only before the Father, but before us. Jesus allowed sinners like us to crucify Him so that sinners like us might be made clean and holy and righteous in God's sight. And He went through all of that because of His love for us.

The One Who has given us new life just as surely as a branch receives nourishment from a vine, is calling us to abide in His love – to give up our pride and to keep His law of love for Him and for one another. Jesus has loved us enough to die for us – shouldn't we live as though we belong to Him?