

Sermon for Sunday, Sept. 25, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Pride and Humility
James 4:11-17

11 Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 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? 13 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." 14 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. 15 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 and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Do you know the name Klement Gottwald? It's OK if you don't. He was Czechoslovakia's first communist premiere - 1948-1953. He was a forceful man, but not a good man. If you visit Prague's Museum of Communism, you will see many statues or busts of the man piled in a corner on the floor. No one cares about Stalin's first puppet ruler any more.

We do remember Stalin, but in Prague his statues are gone too. The pedestals are empty. Today the square where a great statue once stood is now known as a terrific place to go skate-boarding. We recall Jesus' word: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" Luke 14:11.

James 3-4 picks up the theme. He says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And he adds this excellent promise, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4: 6, 10).

God will lift us up, but we must humble ourselves. We have many reasons to be humble – take a moment to consider how little control, power you really have, how far you fall short even of simple commands – "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). It should be easy for us to humble ourselves. Another way to become humble – consider the marks of true religion:

Control the tongue, care for widows and orphans, stay unpolluted by the world.

Then: we don't control our tongues or care for widows and orphans, and we are polluted by the world. Yet we are boastful and self-promoting.

We sigh... How human, how typical of this world! But we are open to God's wisdom so we do humble ourselves. But how do we humble ourselves? Do we call ourselves worms? Stop all assertiveness? Read James 4:10 and you could think James says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord" and then leaves us to figure it out. But no, the next paragraphs name three sins against humility:

- Slander and false judgment (4:11-12).
- Overconfident planning – "I shall go, trade, make a profit" (4:13-16).
- A toxic mix of oppressing the poor and living for personal luxury (5:1-6).

These are sins of arrogance. They contradict gospel humility.

Sins against gospel humility 4:11-5:6

First, in 4:11-12, slander and judgment are acts of pride. When we judge and condemn others we place ourselves over them, as judge. But what gives us that right? Jesus commanded his disciples to "judge with righteous judgment" (Jn 7:24). So we have to make judgments at times. But God owns the role of judge. So James asks, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?"

Second, anyone who says, "We will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money" surely has some pride (4:13). The idea: My business ventures will certainly prove successful. The thought "I can control destiny" is surely proud. God is lord of history and we are not.

Third, from James 5, oppression is a sin of pride, since oppressors put themselves above the law that requires justice for all. Oppressors try to keep everything for themselves, even if they must defraud and oppress the poor to do so.

James treats these sins ever more sharply. He begins with a blunt command, "Brothers, do not slander." Then he stops calling his readers "brothers" (1:2, 1:19, 2:5, 2:14): "Now listen, you who say" (4:13). Next, "Now listen, you rich people" (5:1).

James also poses deflating questions: "Who are you to judge?" (4:12). Have you forgotten that God is judge? That He is ruler of all, including the length of your life and the success of your plans (4:14).

Theology in 4:11-17

James 4 asks questions designed to lead us to proper humility. The answers remind us who we are and where we fit in God's world:

- "Who are you to judge your neighbor" (4:12)? Do you have what it takes to judge humanity?
- "What is your life" (4:14)? We are mist on a lake, we can't guarantee our existence for one day, so can we really declare what will happen tomorrow?
- Each time, James reminds us of God's strength in contrast with human frailties:
- Humans pass judgment, but God is the judge. He can save or destroy (4:12).
- Humans make plans, but God determines the progress of our plans. He even sets the span of our days (4:15).
- Humans may mistreat their workers, but God, the Lord of Hosts, hears the cry of the laborers. He will judge (5:4-5).

Throughout, James describes two approaches to life, two world views. All that we do flows from a heart commitment, a perspective on life. Either we serve God or self. We live by his word or in our own wisdom and strength (4:16). So let's look at these sins of pride, beginning with slander and pride.

Slander and judgment 4:11-12

Once more, James addresses sins of speech: "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it" (4:11). James forbids slander and judgment because they are acts of pride. Slander promotes ourselves and crushes rivals (3:14, 16, 4:1-2).

To slander is literally to "speak against" someone. Now we can speak against people truly or falsely. *Gossip* takes a true story where it should not go. *Slander* creates and spreads false stories. Both are sins, both destroy someone's good name, but James especially warns about slander (false charges) not gossip (*katalaleo* - "slander" (New International Version (NIV)) or "speak evil" (English Standard Version (ESV)), appears alongside another term that clearly means gossip in New Testament vice lists (Rom 1:30, 1 Cor 12:20).

James moves to the deeper problem of judgment: "But you - who are you to judge your neighbor" (4:12)? Again, judgment can mean false condemnation of the innocent or improper condemnation of those who have sinned. We know false condemnation is wrong, but is it wrong to judge others when they err? Yes.

We don't know why people make mistakes. Perhaps their act was deliberate, but perhaps it was an accident, a slip. To judge, we must know motives, and so often motives are hidden from us. We should be slow to anger, gracious, forgiving.

Of course, judgment is necessary at times. That is why Jesus told his disciples, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). Scripture requires leaders to discern or "judge" when someone commits a serious sin, especially if they claim to be disciples and refuse to repent. (Matt 18:15-18, Gal 6:1). Leaders must likewise judge if a Christian teacher misleads others. If they promote falsehood, they must be confronted (Deut 13:1-11; Gal 2:11; 1 Tim 1:3-4, 6:3-5). Godly leaders confront serious sin, especially if someone refuses to repent.

In essence, someone says, "I will do what I please and I refuse to listen to people who tell me otherwise. I am my own authority." To which church leaders reply, "Ok, if you refuse to follow Jesus' teaching and reject the leaders he appointed, we can't regard you as a follower." But this is very rare.

Normally there is no need to judge the words or deeds of another; we should evaluate ourselves. Jesus says this at the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged.... Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matt 7:1, 3, 5).

Jesus knows that those who hear his teaching will be tempted to judge, to tell how they have failed. He says "Don't. Don't criticize others, attend to yourself."

It's dangerous to attend a marriage seminar alone. Going alone changes the way we listen. Sadly, we are prone to dwell on the counsel the speaker had for our spouse, thinking, "She really needs to hear this." Reporting on the conference, we say, "You should have been there, honey. The speaker suggested three ways for me to be a better husband and seventeen ways for you to be a better wife. Let me share the top eight with you." Instead, let's say: The speaker labeled so many ways in which you are an excellent wife. Let me share them with you...

Preachers see the same reaction when someone greets them at the door after church, "Great sermon; I just wish my friend Zelda had been here." We politely say, "That's nice. I hope you were here too."

Judgment is risky. When we judge others, the same standard applies to us. Anyone who knows God's standards well enough to judge others shows that he knows them well enough to be judged by them (Rom 2:1-3). When we violate the standards we enforce, we have no excuse.

James specifically forbids that brothers slander each other. That is apt, for we most often accuse against family – husband and wife, brother and sister, parent and child, fellow Christians and fellow laborers.

Slander brings other sins too. Slanderers and judges do not love. They are not humble, they act superior. When we judge we exalt self and diminishes our neighbor, for a judge is superior to the one judged.

That's what James means when he says a slanderer speaks against the law and judges it. Everyone has felt the sting of misplaced criticism. Someone reproaches our manners, or clothing, or ideas. The censure may even be half right, but we ask, "What gives them the right to judge me?"

We feel the critic exalting himself over others. He thinks he enforces the law while he actually violates it. The critic "speaks against the law and judges it" in two ways (4:11). First, he violates the law of love. Second, he picks and chooses among its commands, deciding which to obey and which to disregard. When he disregards the law of love, he judges the law, saying (in essence) "I need not obey the laws that require love and respect for everyone."

When we pick which commands to obey, we insult God too. His commands are not arbitrary. They express his nature and suit us perfectly. They tell us how to become more like him. To reject God's law is to reject him and to enthrone ourselves. But God is the one Lawgiver and Judge. He alone "is able to save and destroy" (4:12). We have no right to declare another person ripe for condemnation.

Even mild forms of judgment can cause trouble. Imagine the drive home after a party. The husband judges his wife, "You told that story poorly and botched the punch line." She replies, "If I botched it why did everyone laugh?" The wife judges her husband's manners. "You put your elbows on the table tonight" she says. He replies, "They weren't my elbows, they were my forearms. Besides, real men put their elbows on the table."

Instead, we should bless each other: "You didn't tell that joke just right, but you're so vivacious and people like you so much, that they laughed hard anyway. It's great to see their affection for you." Or "I was watching you across the room and it was great to see you relaxing and laugh with your manly friends."

God is the judge. Without his mercy, all would suffer condemnation. Since we have received mercy, we should show mercy. We shouldn't talk down to others, we should come down, to meet their needs. We should lift each other up, as God lifts us up.

Boastful ambition and presumptuous planning (4:13-16)

Next James discusses boastful ambition and presumptuous planning: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year and trade and make a profit' (4:13, ESV). This is arrogant in three ways:

- It presumes we will live as long as we please.
- It presumes we can accomplish whatever we please: We can go today or tomorrow; the choice is ours.
- It presumes we have the capacity to execute our plan. "I will make a profit."

Boastful planning forgets three things. It forgets our ignorance. We think we can plan a year in advance and come and go as we please, but we do not even know what tomorrow will bring. We don't know what will happen *tomorrow*. We can guess and we're often right. But some days bring big surprises.

Boastful planning also forgets our frailty. Can we master our destiny? Our lives are as insubstantial and fleeting as the morning mist that appears each morning and dissipates before 10 a.m. Have you spent time at a lake in the summer? When nights grow cool, there will be an early mist on the lake. The beauty of sunrise on a lake is a treasure, but by mid-morning the mist is always gone. The Lord says our strength is as ephemeral as a mist.

Presumptuous planning also forgets our dependence on God. Our weakness should lead us to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (4:15, ESV). We are permitted to say, "I will do this." But we need a preface, "If the Lord wills." Jesus had more clarity than we do, yet he modeled this spirit in Gethsemane. Facing the cross, he said, "Your will be done" (Matt 26:42).

It's good to make plans. God commends the ant for gathering food in the summer. Godly leaders often have a God-given mission. The saints do not hesitate to say, "I will" or "We will." But we add, "Your will be done."

Some people like life goals. Others like two, three or five year plans. Some are afraid to plan ahead. But God never censures planning. Planning is wise, maybe essential and it's good as long we confess, "Lord, you are sovereign. I am frail and ignorant." The phrase "Lord willing" is no magical incantation. But it calms our thoughts and feelings. We can rest in the phrase "If the Lord wills." Yes our plans, our lives, are as frail as the mist. But we plan, hoping God will use our plans so our hopes match his purposes.

Overall planning is good. In the Bible, the fool and the lazy refuse to plan, fail to tend their fields and crops. Today, some drift along, doing what others want, taking whatever comes, hardly troubling over the future as long as we meet our basic needs. But the Lord expects us to do more than take the pleasures of the day.

Yes, much of our planning is boastful or arrogant (4:16). We forget God. We forget that we may not be alive tomorrow. We think we can master history, trade and make money. Such planning shows the selfish ambition James mentions earlier (3:14-16), since trade was the way to become wealthy, in that day. People purchased land to stay wealthy, but traded to get wealthy. So James warns against planning for nothing more than riches.

But there are humble ways to plan. First, we dedicate our plans to God. A businessman once told me, "I could retire, but I'm working a few more years because I hope to have more to give to some kingdom causes." That sounds good. The man hoped to accumulate capital, but he was humble. He said, "I hope." And he planned to use his wealth for the Lord, not himself.

Second, planners confess they need God's favor. We can do everything right and still fail. We can buy a farm before a drought or buy a bank in 2007. Unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain (Ps 127:1). As James says, "If the Lord wills we will live and do this or that" (4:15, ESV).

Third, confess that whatever we achieve it is through God's favor. Some men inherit a thriving business from their fathers. If we have skills, let's remember that the starting point is a gift. No genius built his own brain. No athlete or singer constructed his or her own muscles or vocal chords.

Yes, we work hard to hone our skills. But even there, God guides our desires and nudges us toward godly aspirations. So let's stay humble and thank God for our gifts.

Failure of duty (4:17)

The end of James 4 seems isolated: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (4:17). In fact, it's a very "James-ish" summary of the situation. We should always do what we know, James says (1:21-25).

This is a strong call to exert oneself for righteousness. If you know to do the good, do it. If not, it's sin. Perhaps you should make a small list of things you know you ought to do, things you are not doing.

This kind of teaching can make us uncomfortable and we may want to skip over it. I even have some old notes on James where I do just that. To quote, James says that anyone "who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." Since we know we can't simply "do the good" no matter how well we know it, we must ask the Lord for the grace that he offers to penitent sinners.

It's a true statement, but... It skips past the solemn call to *do the good we know we ought to do*. James had a nickname in the early church. People called him "Righteous James" or "James the Just" because he was righteous and he called people to righteousness. So let's hear his call to arduous obedience. If we jump to grace for our failures, we aren't hearing him.

Once I was with some friends discussing small weddings and short engagements we had known. These people wanted a small, simple wedding - maybe a destination wedding. Of course, someone said whenever people hear of a short engagement, some will ask "Is she..." In the weddings we knew, no one was... If they had been, we agreed, everyone would have gathered around and been gracious, which is a beautiful thing. It's good to say, "We are all fallen; it's so great to live by grace." We're gracious with other mistakes too - the kind where we all feel the weight of temptation. That also includes losing our temper when pushed hard, or battles with alcohol, even drugs. It's beautiful to know God's grace personally and extend it to others. We are all fallen and live by grace.

Yet, James might say, it's better to obey in the first place. Grace is amazing, but it's even better not to need grace. All sin needs grace at many points. But at any moment, it's better to obey God and not need grace just then.

It's better to commit ourselves to a difficult obedience and avoid the results of sin than it is to sin and receive grace and healing. It is better to follow the path of obedience - to do the good we ought to do, as James says.

One of our pastors got into the conversation. He said, "Sometimes people love showy stories of brokenness not because they're truly celebrating grace but because they want camaraderie in corruption." And that is actually the opposite of celebrating grace because the camaraderie functions as an idol. It becomes a substitute remedy for guilt. Instead of repenting and asking for grace, people think "That person made the same mistake I made."

If that happens, we don't find true relief in the pardon of sin, we are simply relieved that that no one is better than we are. No one is better than anyone else. Essentially, we don't seek grace for a sad failure to meet God's holy standard, rather we make another flawed human our reference point.

The most provocative way to say it: It is a great blessing to receive grace from God and friends, but it is better not to need grace. To say, "It is better not to need grace" sounds self-righteous. We think: But we all need grace every day. True!

But I hope we don't need grace for everything we do. It's great to receive grace and forgiveness when you speak harshly to your spouse. But it's better to speak lovingly in the first place, so you don't need grace at that point.

So let us strive to do the good we ought to do. Really strive. And if we fail, then we can turn with pure resolve to God. He gives grace to the humble.

Then we can confess without manipulation of God. If we know the gospel, the call to obedience does make us sad and leads to godly sorrow and repentance. We can never do all the good we ought to do. If we have nothing but commands, it will drive us to despair. Then we can joyfully claim the promise "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:10). His grace does lift every penitent sinner who comes to him.

Humility is the way of Jesus. He humbled himself by taking human flesh and enduring all the troubles of human life. He humbled himself by dying on the cross. That supreme act of self-denial led to his supreme glory, for God raised him from the dead and crowned him with honor. So when James says "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up," he asks us to follow Jesus' path.

It ends the life of anxious ambition, arrogance, grasping and striving. The gospel path takes us to meekness, repentance, and peace. It is a good road and Jesus invites us to walk it with him.