

“AUTHENTIC: Are You Smarter Than God?”

James 4:11-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 21, 2017

The comedian Jeff Foxworthy used to host a great game show called *Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader*. Anyone remember seeing that show? The way the show worked is that adults would compete to win money by answering a series of questions that were taken from real elementary school text books for first through fifth graders. The questions would start easy, at the first grade level, and then if the contestant answered correctly they would move up to second grade then third grade, etc.

To make the show more interesting, and perhaps a little more embarrassing for the contestants and for those of us at home trying to answer the questions, there were fifth grade school children playing along with the adult. If a player “flunks out” by answering a question incorrectly, he then has to say, “I am *not* smarter than a 5th grader.”

We are getting close to the end of our series on James where we’re studying *authentic* faith. Throughout the book of James we are presented with the choice to have authentic faith or fake faith, to use worldly wisdom or godly wisdom. We can choose between humility and pride. In this morning’s passage, James deepens our understanding of pride and humility. He essentially asks, “Are you smarter than God?”

Last week we looked at what causes conflicts or arguments. As much as we would like to blame it on the other person, we realize that James is right when he says that it’s caused by our own selfish desires and that our only hope is God’s grace. That’s why verse 6 says, “But God gives more grace.” The only way to truly live for Christ, to have an authentic faith, is to see your true standing before God, submit yourself to him, and experience his grace and forgiveness.

But if you experience God’s grace and forgiveness in your life it should be visible. It should impact your relationships with other people. And so James says, “Do not speak evil

against one another.” James literally says “do not speak against or speak down.” Some Bibles translate it as “do not slander.” To slander means to say something that is false in order to damage someone’s reputation. Slander is certainly included in what’s prohibited but it’s more than just slander. Speaking against someone includes gossip, criticism behind the back, and demeaning the other person directly. God prohibits any kind of speech that is intended to harm someone else.

When I was growing up I sometimes heard the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but *words* will never _____ (hurt me.)” Sounds like you’ve heard that, too. If you’re a parent, you’ve probably said it. But we all know that words *can* hurt. You could even make the point that words can hurt worse than sticks and stones. We tend to carry the effects of the hurtful things people say to us for a long time. And those hurts can have a cumulative effect.

Let me share with you an illustration I use with couples who want to get married. They’re required to come to a number of premarital counseling sessions with me and one of the areas we cover is communication. I tell them they need to be very careful about their harsh, angry words and their subtle and not-so-subtle insults. Every time you criticize or embarrass or insult the other person it’s like putting a brick in a wall. One brick doesn’t really make much of a difference. One harsh word is not going to destroy someone’s soul. But if you add brick after brick, before long you have a wall. Angry words, undeserved criticisms, joking insults or put-downs add build walls between people. This is not just for married couples. The same applies to your relationships with your children or parents or friends, too. James says that if you are redeemed by Jesus you should be becoming more like Him, and that includes the way you talk to people.

Then he goes on to tell us why. “The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, 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 only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy (and it’s not you!). Who are you to judge your neighbor? Are you smarter than God?”

For you to “speak down” to someone you have to consider yourself superior in some way. James reminds us that to consider ourselves superior to someone created in the image of God is like judging God’s law. This doesn’t mean that we are not supposed to ever judge. There are lots of people these days who will quote Jesus saying, “judge not lest you be judged.” But Jesus also tells us to beware of false prophets. How will you know they are false prophets without judging them against the Word of God. And in John 7, Jesus says, “Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgment.”

What our passage is condemning is not judging but rather being judgmental, constantly comparing yourself to others and putting yourself in the position to condemn them. When you do that you are elevating yourself above God’s commandment to love your neighbors as yourself. Now I want to make sure you’re following the logic here because each step builds on the one before. If you speak evil against a fellow believer you are choosing which of God’s laws you will obey. Ultimately, if you put yourself above the law you put yourself above God, who gave the law and is the real judge. And so James asks, “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” In other words, what makes you think you’re superior to your neighbor, to God’s law, and to God himself? What pride and arrogance. This would be the exact opposite of humbling yourself before God.

OK, timeout. If you’re like me you’re feeling really lousy about yourself right now. You realize that James is talking to you. Let me say two things before we go on. First, it’s about to

get worse. Second, remember that James is writing to the very first Christian church ever. This is the so-called “pure” church that so many people are trying to recreate. Also remember that James is the brother of Jesus. Many of the people he’s writing to probably also knew or knew of Jesus while he was alive and teaching. Third, remember, God gives more grace.

The last thing James addresses in this passage is arrogant boasting that comes from pride. James says, “you are so arrogant that you think you can declare what will happen in the future – where you will go, how long you will spend there, and even how much money you will make. You do not know what tomorrow will bring.” This is one of those sins that we are especially good at. We love the American idea of the self-made person. I’m successful because of *me*. Sadly, what happens when we fall for that kind of thinking is that we may come to church on Sunday but then we end up living the next 6 days with no thought of God or His will. We think we have total control over our lives. James smacks us on the side of the head and says, “you’re about as durable as fog.” Because of all the water surrounding us we sometimes get really dense fog in the morning. But no matter how dense the fog is first thing in the morning, when the sun comes up and heats it up it’s gone.

This doesn’t mean that planning is wrong. The Bible frequently encourages us to make plans. In fact, not planning is really a sign of laziness. The problem is the way we plan. We’re like the merchants James is addressing. I know sometimes I’ll make elaborate plans and then when they’re all done ask God to bless them. Instead, we should be seeking and discerning God’s will, recognizing that we depend on Him for our very next breath, much less our time and money and abilities. So James says, “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”

Let me ask you, is your focus first on God’s will or are you focused on your own plans and then asking God to bless them? Are you

choosing humility or pride, godly wisdom or worldly wisdom? That brings us to the final point in this passage: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This is a strong command all by itself, but it's not meant to be all by itself. This ties all the way back to verse 7. If you know your true standing before God, if you know that you are

to submit to him and humble yourself before God, if you know you are to speak kindly and not harshly and you refuse to do all those things, if you think you're smarter than God, then you know that it is sin. But if you humble yourself before the Lord, he will lift you up.

Amen.