

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 18, 2009

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

James 4:7-12 - Pentecost 20

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. 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. 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?
(NIV)

Look around the room this morning and ask yourselves: Are you better than some of the other people in here? Do you think you are better? While it might be easy to say “no” because we are all brothers and sisters united in faith in Jesus, what if I brought a whole bunch of bad people in here from this world and ask the same thing. Do we think we are better than other people? In all honesty are there times when we do think that way? From my experience we all tend to look down on others and think we are better than some. In fact, I’ve seen it again and again that people even try to compare themselves with others as a way to justify themselves before God. My senior year at the seminary I was able to do some prison ministry, and I even found this true among some of the inmates. “*I know I made my mistakes and I’m locked up for these crimes, but at least I’m not as bad as so and so in the cell next door.*”

Perhaps that’s why James reminds these Christians a couple chapters earlier that “***whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.***” Perhaps that’s why throughout the Bible and the book of James God stresses humility. This morning James gives us some pointed words about looking down on others and hypocritically judging people. It is my prayer that guided by the direction of God’s Word and moved by the Holy Spirit we learn to: **Live in humble submission.**

This is where living in humble submission starts: “***Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.***” This word submit has the meaning of voluntarily placing oneself under another. In this case we are to place ourselves under God - be under God’s leadership and direction. We are to place ourselves under God’s will and Word totally and completely, without hesitation or condition. If we do that then on the opposite side of the same coin we will be resisting the devil. For the devil is always fighting against God’s will and Word. He wants to lead us into temptation. He wants to lead us into pride - which many believe was the undoing of Satan himself. The devil doesn’t want us to submit ourselves to God. So James says submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you.

We don’t want the devil near. Instead, “***Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.***” Do you understand what God’s Word is saying here? God wants us to come near to Him & humbly come before Him in the only way that is possible - in sincere

repentance. We need to be washed clean outside and inside. We need changed hearts and minds and actions.

James writes: ***“Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord.”*** Please understand God’s not telling us to walk around all the time as sad and gloomy people. We are not to go around each day crying and wailing instead of laughing or finding joy. But God is rebuking any kind of joy or laughter which in the slightest way makes light of sin. Sin is no laughing matter. Sin is the cause of all sickness, pain, and death. Sin is a stench, an offense, a transgression against a holy God. Sin condemns the sinner to an eternity of torture and death in hell. Sin is no cause for joy but gives us every reason for mourning and leaves one dejected.

So dear brothers and sisters, approach God in humble submission. Come near the God of heaven and earth in the way He has enabled you to in your baptisms - in daily contrition and repentance. Examine our own thoughts, words and deeds according to God’s holy law and recognize our unworthiness and helplessness. We are to grieve, wail, and mourn over our sins. When we compare ourselves, not to others, but to God, all reasons for pride vanish. How can I look at my many, many sins and not be humbled? How can I come near to God with anything but a broken and contrite heart?

Yet, notice what James also said: ***“Come near to God and he will come near to you.... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*** How can a holy God come near to sinners like you and me? How does the Lord lift up the humble? He comes near with His grace. He comes close to pick us up in mercy. He lifts us up with the good news of forgiveness. He comes near to us through the blood of Jesus that purifies us from all sin. He covers us in the righteousness of Christ - His perfectly humble and submissive servant. Think of how Jesus did not consider Himself better than anyone. He wasn’t even ashamed to become our brother taking on our flesh and blood. Think of how Jesus (God Himself) submitted to God’s laws in our place. Think of how Jesus fulfilled the law and became obedient even to death on the cross. On Easter morning God’s message to the world was loud and clear - forgiveness is won for all by His Son. God comes near to us with His love. He lifts up our broken hearts with His grace. He fills us with joy and peace.

Doesn’t this make a big difference when it comes to how we view others? Knowing we are under grace moves us to live in humble submission not only to God but in love for others. James writes: ***“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.”*** James addresses sins of the tongue. We don’t need to tear down anyone else’s name or reputation to make ourselves look better. We have God’s love & forgiveness. When we consider other people’s sins as worse than ours God says we speak against His law. When we break God’s law by not loving the way God’s law demands God says we are sitting in judgment of His law. We stand in the place of God when we judge ourselves as better than others. And in strong words we are reminded: ***“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?”***

Please understand what God is condemning here. There are times God asks us to lovingly judge according to God’s Word in a clear case of sin. There are times we are to

lovingly judge by the standard of God's Word when we encounter teachings that are false. But God does not want us to judge hearts. He doesn't want us to stand with proud, self righteous hearts passing judgment on everyone else. He doesn't want us to stand in the spotlight like the Pharisee and pray: "*God, I am so glad I am so good and I am not like so and so.*" There is only One Lawgiver & Judge. Our God alone has the power to save and destroy.

In one of Aesop's Fables when Jupiter makes man he gives him two wallets, one for his neighbors faults, the other for his own. He threw them over the mans shoulders, so that one hung in front and the other behind. The man kept the one in front for his neighbor's faults, and the one behind for his own, so that, while the first was always under his nose, it took some pains to see his own.

Dear friends, when we look around the room or out in the world isn't it so much easier to see the sins of others or talk about the sin out there? But thank God He makes each one of us go through the pains of seeing the sin right in here. That's where God's Word directs us this morning - to our own sin. The Lord through His Word opens our eyes to our own sins which leave us sad and staggering for help. However, we have a Lord who not only destroys; He also saves. He saved us through the life and death of His Son. When we come to God in sincere repentance our gracious God continues to wash us clean inside and out. He teaches us to submit to His will. He shows us how to truly love others. We learn to throw all comparisons out the window and fix our eyes on Jesus. By the Spirit's work we keep growing so that we live in humble submission - to God and one another. Amen.