

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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James 4:1-17 *"Your Will Be Done"*

The early church developed a list of attitudes that were indefensible for Christians – not actions, please note, but *attitudes* – and they acquired the name the "*Seven Deadly Sins*." They are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride. I count five of them in this short passage of James! Together they amount to an indictment of people who are supposedly Christians, but whom James classes as "enemies of God" and arrogant fools. Uncomfortable as it may be, we should maybe take a look at these attitudes and see if, despite our Christian professions, we harbor them too.

1) *The Pursuit of Pleasure*

The first group of attitudes James describes as "warring desires, wanting something, coveting, having what you want, spending on your pleasures." We are talking here about greed, envy, gluttony, lust – and not incidentally, anger! It's a picture of people who are ruled by their wants, and become irritated when they don't get what they want when they want it.

Now in case you think this is just a description of childish behavior, it's worth reflecting on what our culture has done with what were once acknowledged as vices – they have turned them into virtues! Especially in the next 6-8 weeks, when retailers expect a third of their year's revenues and most of their year's profits, we

will be continuously bombarded with messages about spending to *get what we want* for Christmas. Never mind that we're supposedly celebrating the Feast of the Nativity by giving one another gifts, the cultural emphasis is on *what we want* and what we get. Already a week ago our local TV news was running features on that "terrible experience" of receiving gifts you don't like, and how to exchange them for what you really want! The day *after* Christmas is as busy a shopping day as any in the "holiday buying season."

So greed and self-satisfaction are now held up as normal, and the ideals of consumerism gradually filter way down into our souls. "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping," we say. We now shop as much for pleasure as for necessities. Our language gives away our consumerist mentality: we shop for homes, we shop for schools, we shop for partners, we shop for churches. Since 9/11, we have been told repeatedly that we are "a nation at war," but the burden of the war is carried by a few thousand families who are kept mostly out of sight, while millions of the rest of us are told to carry on shopping – otherwise "the terrorists win." Coveting and over-indulgence in food, goods, and sex are national epidemics. Even our elementary school children are seriously overweight. Pornography is a billions-of-dollars industry, and no longer buried very far under the surface of our society.

The Greek word James uses to describe all these mad pursuits is *hedone* – the root of our word *hedonism*, the pursuit of pleasure. And in our culture, we are in danger of being strangled by it. The American Dream of “the pursuit of happiness” has been transformed into the pursuit of pleasure. I suggest a little exercise for you between now and New Year: look at your family budget, and calculate what percentage goes on the pursuit of pleasure – that would include entertainment, eating out, sports, alcohol and tobacco, new clothes we don’t really need, vacations... See if it does not add up to as much as you spend on necessities like housekeeping, shelter, transportation, health care, savings. Don’t let us even start to think about how it compares to the national average of charitable giving - about 2% of income!

We are, as Neil Postman wrote 20 years ago, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*. Turning everything into entertainment, and investing much of our energy in the pursuit of pleasure, puts our culture squarely in the frame of the decaying Roman Empire that Juvenal said was only interested in “bread and circuses.” Hedonism is *not* a Christian calling. *Finding* joy may be part of faith, but the *pursuit* of happiness is not, and the rampant pursuit of *pleasure* is a vice! It causes strife among people, and it disrupts Christian community. In James’ word-picture, it makes people “friends of the world and enemies of God” – Christians who pursue *hedone* are unfaithful to God, “adulteresses” who have left their pledged husband to consort with other men. And the growth of Christian lives is – as Jesus said in his parable of the Sower – “choked by the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things...”

These are hard things to hear, for all of us, because by any standards we are among the very wealthy of the world, and we have

more leisure time and more disposable income than most people can even imagine. If all that spare time and money is devoted to our pleasure, or our children’s or our family’s pleasures, we are in danger of choking our spiritual lives, and becoming “unfaithful to God.” And that, says James, is dangerous, because God is “a jealous God” who does not tolerate rivals for our affections. You cannot “two-time” God for long and get away with it.

2) *Arrogant Fools*

The second cluster of issues James focuses on surround the sin of *pride* – or in the form it appears here, arrogance. He gives two examples. One is our temptation to look down on, to criticize, to speak ill of, to judge other people – the NIV renders the main idea as “slander.” It’s an attitude that springs from our inner conviction that we know better than anyone else, and at times, we feel free to let them know that! It is far too prevalent among Christians. “Why did you do that?” “Who said you could do this?” You have heard it, I have heard it. Thank God, I hear it less in this church than in any I have been in over the past 30 years!

Maybe it’s something you recognize from your family. “Why did you do that?” “Why did you let her go out?” “Why do we have to go to your mother’s for Thanksgiving?” “You need to turn left here,” says a voice from the back seat; “yes, mother,” even though you are driving the route to her home for the thousandth time. Behind all these things is an attitude, bordering on arrogance, that says “I know better, I would do things differently.” Sometimes that attitude springs from fear that “things will get out of hand if I do not control them.” But often it is based on an assumed superiority; that *I am* the wise one, that *I know* how things should be done (that is, the way I would do them).

The answer to that, says James, is “*Who are you to judge your neighbor?*” If you saw yourself rightly, you would know that you are no smarter, no wiser than other people; and that in any case, other people need the space to follow their own callings, their own consciences, to obey their own Master. As Paul says in one of his letters, “*Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?*” Other Christians attempt to serve God, as you attempt to do, and even if you think they are not doing it well, it is not your calling to correct them, to accuse them, to condemn them, to judge them. Attend to your own life, and let God do his work in them!

A second way of showing arrogance, says James, is to make your plans as though God did not exist. “*We’re going to do this, do that, go here, go there, do business, make money...*” The answer to that is the one Jesus gave in his parable of the farmer who had a great harvest, decided to build bigger barns, and to “*take life easy and retire.*” “*Fool!*” says Jesus, “*this night your soul is required – and who then will inherit all your wealth?*” The man is called proverbially “*the Rich Fool.*” So, says James, are we, if we make elaborate plans without remembering God, without remembering that our life is “*like a mist*” that evaporates in the morning sun.

Arrogance about our plans is of course endemic in our culture. We are trained to take hold of our futures, “*go for the gold,*” “*grab the brass ring,*” “*shatter the glass ceiling.*” We teach children to have good self-esteem, whether or not they have any estimable achievements. Pride is now a virtue; humility a vice. We are all masters of our own fates, “*masters of the universe*” on Wall Street or in academia or in software or in advertising – never grasping that it can all come crashing down in a moment – in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that Tom Wolfe depicted so brilliantly.

3) *What’s To Be Done?*

What’s to be done about these attitudes, which so demean the faith when they become commonplace even among Christians? It requires, says James, that we learn the dreaded word “*submit.*” If we are people of faith, it means we must at one time, and thereafter every day, “*submit ourselves to God.*”

Nothing could be more unwelcome in our culture, and in many of our lives. “*Submit! That is something no red-blooded (or blue-blooded) American will ever do!*” But that is what Christians and all believers have to do: submit to God. We do it first of all in prayer, when the creature acknowledges his Creator, when the sinner confronts the holy Judge, when the needy person cries out to the Sovereign and Sustainer of all life. Prayer has to be first and foremost about aligning our wills with the will of God, and not demanding that he provide what we want. Of course we appear before him with our needs, with our hopes, with our desires for the healing of loved ones, for the supply of our needs. But most of all, our prayer has to be the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: “*not my will but your will be done.*”

We pray that every week when we say “*The Lord’s Prayer*” together: “*Our Father in heaven, may your Name be blessed and honored, may your rule on earth extend over us, may your will be done by us* as it is by those who surround you in heaven.” Only then can we proceed to ask for what we need – our daily bread, forgiveness, protection, guidance.

So to the greedy, the gluttonous, the pursuers of pleasure, James says “*Submit to God, come near to him, become pure and humble.*” Then we may discover, as so many have done before and still do every day,

right here in this congregation and community, that in the middle of a thousand temptations, in the middle of a hectic life pursuing "good things" - which only leaves us exhausted - we may find that *God's grace will abound* in our lives - that "he gives more grace" when we need it the most, if we will only submit ourselves and our lives and our ambitions to him. To people full of pride, of criticism, of grandiose plans, James says we should learn to submit ourselves to God, and to say "*If the Lord wills, we will do this or that...*" - in other words, "Lord, your will be done."

To find God's will may, to be sure, require more of us than being submissive in prayer; that done, we may then have to rise and go, to do what lies before us, to push on doors and see if God is opening them or locking them, to *pursue goodness* instead of pursuing happiness (which is always a by-product of doing good, never an end in itself), or pursuing pleasure (which is always a dead end, because no amount of pleasure is ever enough to satisfy us).

So, Christians, says James, *submit to God and do good*. Those two things are almost all you need to know as you seek direction for your spiritual life. Seek out the good you can do (because ignoring that while you pursue your own pleasure is certainly a sin - look at Jesus' parables of the Rich Man and Lazarus, or the Sheep and the Goats, or the Talents). And in all things, say "Lord, what is your will here?" (not "what do I want out of this?"). There is a difference, and as 21st C. American Christians we all need to re-learn it!

Let us pray...