

Straight Talk from the Epistle of James
JUDGING AND PLANNING by Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Psalm 146
James 4:11-17

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[IMAGE – James-Title Slide]

We have been considering “Straight Talk from the Epistle of James...” practical guidance for living a faithful life.

[IMAGE – hello-im-arrogant]

This morning we take up the subjects of “Judging and Planning” both of which can be motivated by arrogance.

Arrogance finds humility embarrassing.

Arrogance exaggerates one's own worth or importance, often in an overbearing manner.

Arrogance is full of self-importance and acts as if all others are inferior.

Arrogance doesn't see the need to listen or learn, and prefers to push one's own agenda.

Arrogance speaks evil of others believing they are much less important.

Arrogance judges others because arrogance believes he is always right.

Arrogance forgets God, doesn't need God, ignores God.

[IMAGE – foolishness]

We might title this section of James' letter, “The Foolishness of Ignoring God.” We have busy lives...much on our plates...things to do... We make judgments and set our plans. But how often do we consider God's place or God's perspective on our affairs? How can we fit God into our daily living in a genuine and faithful way? We don't want to ignore God, but do we forget God sometimes?

James suggests that when we judge another person or speak evil about them, we forget about God and God's law. That's no good...so we have no business being judgmental. Over and over the Bible emphasizes that God is judge, and James reiterates that here, saying “*There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.*”

[IMAGE – fingers pointing back]

Jesus, of course, warned in his Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 7:1-5

7 “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

Jesus was explicitly rebuking the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were quick to see the sins of others but were blind and unwilling to hold themselves accountable to the same standard they were imposing on everyone else.

[IMAGE – account to God]

The Apostle Paul had a similar warning in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 14:10-12

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

[IMAGE – Mother Teresa quote]

One of the problems with being judgmental is that it doesn’t allow space or time for us to be compassionate, for us to act out the love of God, as Christ calls us to do. So often Christians are associated with being judgmental. I try not to be that way...What about you? Do you think of yourself as judgmental? Do others think of you that way?

[IMAGE – Mental Health Training]

Thursday night, Carol McCaskey, Frank McCoy and I attended a Mental Health training sponsored by Samaritan Counseling Center in Sewickley. It was an enlightening workshop. I’m so glad we attended. One thing we learned is that we tend to be judgmental of our youth. We wise and knowing grownups see young people acting out or being what we would call unruly or

causing disruption and we immediately think there is something wrong with them. We might say that one is a bad seed...or, he is out of control...or, she is a real instigator.

Rather than see that youth as a child of God who might need help, or might be hurting, we too often dismiss them by judging them harshly.

[IMAGE – baby crying on street]

This, of course, is not how we treat everybody. It's not how we treat the very young, infants and babies. Most of us, when we see a baby causing a ruckus, we don't immediately assume that's a bad baby, do we? No, we usually ask ourselves, "What does that baby need?"

[IMAGE – baby crying grocery cart]

If we see a baby screaming in a grocery cart...we wonder, "What does that baby need?" Maybe he is hungry. Maybe he wants to be held. Maybe he needs his diaper changed. Maybe he is teething. Maybe he is tired and it's time for his nap.

[IMAGE – teen acting out]

The workshop leader invited us to think in that same way...with that same compassion, when we see a teen who is acting out or behaving badly...to ask something like "What does that baby need?" It's a whole different way of approaching people...and I don't see why we couldn't ask that kind of question with regards to anybody... "What does that person need?" It gives people the benefit of the doubt. There's often a reason behind the way people are. If we knew their story, we would probably understand better. We might realize that we would be acting the same way, given a similar situation or background.

[IMAGE – Bro Lawrence – God is near]

As we remember God in the everyday, it becomes easier to refrain from spot judgments and evil talk about other people. It's not how God would have us be. When we remember God, it is much more likely that we will see people with eyes of compassion.

Brother Lawrence was a 17th century Carmelite monk in France. He was assigned to kitchen duty in the monastery, where he prepared and cooked the food for the day and cleaned the plates afterwards. With such a dull task, Brother Lawrence began to infuse His relationship with God into His menial tasks. Instead of just doing the dishes or cooking the meal by himself, he decided to practice, to remind himself that God's Spirit was with him. He decided to have an on-going conversation with God as he went about his chores.

[IMAGE – Brother Lawrence Book]

He wrote a little devotional book titled, Practicing the Presence of God. It's a very simple

spiritual exercise that challenges us to remain focused on God during regular parts of the day, during everyday tasks or chores. It invites us to break down barriers that distract us from God's presence. -- I don't think you have to buy the book and study the concept...it's easy to understand. But it requires commitment...It's easier said than done...It takes an act of humility...It takes discipline.

[IMAGE – Bro Lawrence quote]

We are brought up to figure out our own problems and troubleshoot. We go about our days as decision makers. Sometimes we might just feel like firefighters, constantly putting out the flames of the latest issue to flare up. We often feel so capable, and it's not until things start to get bad that we realize how much we need God. When we have no other options but God, that's when we are most likely to seek Him.

But what if we remembered that God is near more often than when we are in trouble?

[IMAGE – right side up]

We become so preoccupied with the to-do list and so overwhelmed by the pace of life that we forget to look for God, remember that God is near all the time. That would help us with judging...and it would also help us with planning.

The Prophet Jeremiah shared God's assurance with Israel:

[IMAGE – Jeremiah quote]

Jeremiah 29:11-13

¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

[IMAGE – plans]

One scholar suggested that God does the planning; we do the preparing: Preparing involves cultivating God's presence and listening for God's leading, praying, seeking the Lord's intentions, discerning the Lord's plan...so that our faith is not one more item on a "to do" list. Rather, our faith forms our "to be and to do" list.

Our God is keen for our well-being, for ours, and our neighbors, for the well-being of the world.
And our God keeps faith forever. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy
Spirit. Amen.