

“Sweat the Small Stuff”

A Sermon Dialogue

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

September 20, 2009

Steve: So, where are we, Scott?

Scott: I'm pretty sure we're at church, Steve.

Steve: No, Scott. I mean, in the book of James.

Scott: We're in chapter three today. And we're up here today doing what Pastor Mark calls a sermon dialogue. Do you have any idea what he means by that?

Probably that we're having a conversation that talks about today's lesson.

Yea, that's what I thought too but I wanted to make sure.

Okay, enough of this chit-chat. Let's get into what James has to say to us. One of the things I'd like to know, that Pastor has never told us, is *just who is this James guy?*

I think he was Jesus's brother and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem.

That probably makes him the first pastor of any Christian Church.

It also means, that having seen Jesus and lived with him and seen him resurrected too, he was ideally suited for writing down what was important for the Christian lifestyle.

And yet, Martin Luther had some difficulties with Pastor James. Do you know why that was,

Scott?

No, Steve. But I know you're going to tell us.

Because the trademark of the Reformation was that one was saved by faith and not by works.

Oh! Pastor Mark told us back in his first sermon in this James series that James says we can't just say we have faith, we have to *prove* it with our works.

Right. The works don't actually save us but the question is...

Is it really a saving sort of faith if your life doesn't reflect it?

Yes! And evidently there were a lot of folks in James's congregation who talked the talk but didn't walk the walk. So James wrote this letter to them.

What's he say this week?

Why don't you read it to them?

Okay, James, chapter 3, verse 13 through chapter 4, verse 3, and verse 7 and the first half of verse 8.

He's reading from the English Standard Version.

How about if I read chapter three and you read chapter four?

Whatever, Scott.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Amen.

It sounds like the church crowd was pretty rough in Jerusalem. Jealousy...

Bitter jealousy!

Selfish ambition.

Boasting.

Lying.

Disorder.

Vile practices.

Every kind of vile practice.

Quarreling.

Fighting!

Murder.

Are you kidding us?

That's what James said.

What kind of church was this? I mean, I can understand some lying and bickering. But

murder?

A sin is a sin, Scott. That's a good thing to remember. I think James is saying that you begin with what you consider a little sin and pretty soon you move on to the big stuff. "You desire and do not have, so you murder."

So The First Church of Jerusalem had some serious issues.

Don't we all, Scott? Don't we all?

And the most important person in the Church had some things to say to them.

How do you know he was the most important person in the Church?

Well, Acts 2 says that when Peter supernaturally escaped from jail he wanted James to know about it.

When Paul came to Jerusalem with the rest of the Church's offering for the poor in Acts 21, it was James who met him there and told him he needed to go to the temple and cleanse himself.

And Paul writes in Galatians that earlier, right after his own conversion, he spent two weeks with James the brother of Jesus but not with any other of the Apostles.

Well then, I think you're right, Scott. If James wasn't *the man*, he was at least a very important person in the early church.

So, what's he saying this week?

I think it's just that we know what's right and wrong...and that the *little* wrong things lead to even *bigger* wrong things. So the better part of wisdom may be that we take care of the little stuff and the big stuff is usually not going to be a worry.

If you practice humility by doing good works for others you won't be tempted to jealousy or harbor selfish ambitions in your hearts.

If you make it a practice to not brag about yourself, you won't have to make up lies later to keep looking important to people.

Isn't there a saying that says something about, "Don't sweat the small stuff?"

Yes, but I think James would disagree with that saying. For James everything is "small stuff" because a sin is a sin is a sin. That's why one sin leads to still another sin. But more importantly, it leads you away from God.

James is starting to sound a lot like Paul.

Well, the Bible *is* all inspired by the One God.

James says that if a person is wise he will demonstrate his good works with meekness. I suppose that means he won't make a show of it. So this must be a different kind of works than the works righteousness of the Pharisees.

If you are modestly doing good deeds, there won't be much room for all of that jealousy and selfishness James mentioned. If a little bit of that bad stuff is going on in a church, it won't be long before a lot more of it is happening. That must be why James wants to nip it in the bud.

I wonder how you can tell if a person is really wise. I mean there's lots of people out there who seem pretty smart.

James says that heavenly wisdom is pure and peaceable.

So that brand of wisdom doesn't cause strife in the church and probably doesn't scream and yell or throw temper tantrums to get its way.

Yes. He says it's "gentle" and "open to reason."

There are a lot of church people in just my experience who haven't been very reasonable.

People who are operating with God's wisdom, are merciful. And they have the good fruit to back up the content of their lives.

James also talks police language. He talks about peacemakers in verse 18 but he's not talking about a sidearm. He means that wise people, real Christian people, do everything they can to make peace—and lots of it.

If you are going for a harvest of peace, you have to first plant a few small seeds of peace. Sounds like James again, wants us to sweat the small stuff.

Little things have a tendency to lead to bigger things. If you don't deal with the little, nagging stuff, pretty soon it's out of control.

Pretty soon the little things can "produce disorder and every vile practice."

Passion is a little thing. You can't weigh it or measure its height. But it causes quarrels and fights among us. In fact it's passion that creates wars within our individual lives. But pretty soon, my life will affect your life and our two little lives will affect our families' lives, our coworkers, our church, and maybe a whole lot more. I guess I can't say that how I feel doesn't matter. It *does* matter. A lot.

You can spend your whole life being eaten alive by your passions, your feelings, your desire, your anxieties...

Tell me about it! (sarcastically)

So what are we supposed to do about it?

James says to submit to God instead of to ourselves.

How do you do that?

Do the meek thing. Sweat the small stuff. Draw near to God minute by minute and day by day.

You mean, don't wait until Sunday?

Every day. Every *minute*. And don't just draw near to God...

Resist the devil!

Hey, are you talking about...

No, Scott! I mean Satan—the wily one, the old Serpent. Resist *him*.

Oh. So, if I resist him, what happens next?

James says he will flee from you.

I'll have the devil on the run. That sounds pretty good.

But what's even better, is that if you draw near to God, he will draw near...

...to me.

And if I draw near to God, he will draw near to me.

And if you (pointing at the congregation) draw near to him, he will draw close to you too.

And pretty soon, if we sweat the small stuff, like being meek, and doing good, and asking God for the right things—like the strength to yield to God and resist the devil—we'll be a church that has God in its midst.

But that takes wisdom, Steve. And not just worldly wisdom. It takes wisdom from above. I only know one place to get that kind of wisdom...in the Good Book.

So the wise but small thing that we can do this week is spend some time every day talking with

God, just like man did in the very beginning.

You mean take a daily walk with God like Adam did?

When Adam stopped that daily walk and hid in the bushes is when everything fell apart.

How tough can taking a walk be? It sounds like a small thing. What? Maybe 30 minutes a day?

But will you do it?

I'm going to try.

I bet a bunch of little things try to get in the way.

“Get behind me, Satan!”

I bet if we practice doing this little thing, taking a daily walk with God, after awhile it becomes easier and a more significant part of our lives.

So sweating this small stuff—working hard at walking with God—is an important work that shows I have real faith.

So there's an important question to ask ourselves too: Do we have real faith if we aren't trying to draw near to God?

And do we have real faith if we aren't trying to resist the devil?

That's two questions, Scott.

Don't sweat the small stuff, Steve.

So let's recap. How are we going to resist the devil and draw near to God at the same time?

I only know of one way.

And that is...?

Letting God impart to me heavenly wisdom.

And how does he do that?

Only one way that I know of...

(with growing, mock agitation) And that is?

By taking a walk with God every day, talking to him, and listening to him talk to me.

And that can only happen in his word where he reveals himself to us.

It sounds so simple.

And yet...so wise.