

## “A Less Stressful New Year (Can I Get an ‘Amen’?)”

Luke 18.9-14; James 4.1-10

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017

*And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." <sup>15</sup> And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>17</sup> "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all."*

**James 4** *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? <sup>2</sup> You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. <sup>4</sup> You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? <sup>6</sup> But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." <sup>7</sup> Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

Today, we are between series and on this New Year's Day, I want to propose a less stressful year in 2017...AND... a counterintuitive way to getting that less-stressful-year... I want to propose a moratorium on defensiveness.

This is the idea taken from these passages that I want to sort of reinforce and drive home today that defending our reputations, being hypersensitive to criticism, being insecure that we may not measure up to people around us, being fiercely protective of our rights and our merit and

worthiness...our yearning for recognition/appreciation... all of these are tremendous burdens to bear and all lead to STRESS.

The question is: Is there another way to live? Why is it so hard to stop defending oneself (it comes so naturally – it’s really a reflex response, a kind of default reaction) and why is that? IS there an alternative to this instinctive hypersensitivity to criticism? How do you even go about NOT defending yourself (especially if...in this instance you happen to be right!)? And how do you implement this less stressful approach to life? Let’s think about that

1<sup>st</sup> – Analyzing the Universal Problem

2<sup>nd</sup> – Accepting a New Footing

3<sup>rd</sup> – Operating From This New Platform

The problem, the cause of so much stress/friction/aggravation is pride or arrogance and this is how Christianity looks at things, THIS IS the core problem in the human heart.

Let’s notice 4 things about this universal problem:

#1: It’s fueled by comparisons and competitions between people. The Pharisee in the first reading goes to the Temple to pray and as he does pray ... he immediately begins comparing himself to others...

“I am NOT LIKE other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even THIS tax gatherer...” And these comparisons feeding our pride are so stressful to maintain.

An amazing and short article in the Washington Post (December 20, 2016, Jena McGregor) discusses the changing status symbols in our society... and according to an extensive joint study by Columbia, Georgetown and Harvard, busyness is replacing luxury items as the chief indicator of a person’s worth – a new way of comparing and getting status!

Good people, valuable, important/worthy people are those who are most busy...work long, long hours (send Tweets in the middle of the night!) They “humblebrag” (I LOVE that word!) he humblebrags how he hasn’t had a vacation in years...he thinks he’s making you feel sorry for him but OTHERS see right through it and realize “Ah-HA, this is just a boast about how important and indispensable he is!”

And it can really be a way of feeling better about ourselves and superior to others – I’m busier than you are! People depend ON ME! Compare and see...so much work!

2<sup>nd</sup> – Arrogance or Pride is a ROOT sin i.e. it leads to other more visible sins.

C.S. Lewis, in a chapter he called, The Great Sin, he wrote, “Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” It’s THE ROOT that drives all kinds of selfish behavior, all

kinds of violence, immorality and unfaithfulness, the DIS-integration of the self...arrogance is the root.

AND not only is arrogance the root of bad and sinful behavior, it's also the contaminant that can turn all kinds of good behavior into things poisonous and destructive.

In both these passages PRAYER is an example: under the influence of his arrogant heart, the Pharisee's prayer is an expression of scorn for others and boasting about himself.

And James says their prideful prayers are only toxic expressions of their selfishness "In the grip of arrogance you pray as an expression of selfishness" (not all prayers are good).

Pride can turn charity into paternalism. It turns honesty/truth into a weapon. It can turn any good deed into a reason for looking down on others.

Third: Pride is fuelled by comparisons. Pride is a root - all kinds of bad stuff comes from it AND it can turn good deeds sour. AND third, PRIDE itself is an expression of self-trust.

In our latest series (on the Book of Numbers) we said that THE root sin is unbelief... but pride... is really a form of unbelief. Arrogance says, "I am self-sufficient and I don't NEED anyone, I don't depend on God..." And faith (the opposite of unbelief) FAITH says, "I am NOT the source of goodness and fullness - I depend on God and His promises - HE'S the source... not I."

People who are prideful don't want to look NEEDY so they don't ask for help (James v.2 - "you don't have because you don't ask") - they'd rather take matters into their own hands. They're often prayer-less because THEY CAN DO IT THEMSELVES.

They (Luke v.9) "trusted in themselves that they were RIGHTEOUS and viewed others w/contempt..." They trust themselves - it's a form of unbelief.

"I thank You I am not like other people" ... He confuses snobbery for holiness and he prays NOT to God but to himself (v.11) ... He says, "G-O-D" but really he's praying to himself - his source.

He's all about what HE has done. He bases his hope on his own achievements "I fast...I pay tithes...I'm not like other people...I ... I... I!"

James' calls his people, "friends of the world" i.e. living by that world system of MERIT...and comparison, trusting themselves... speaking about God and spiritual things but living as "practical atheists" - not trusting in God...only trusting themselves!

Lastly, arrogance is preoccupied with externals (as in the article, "status symbols"). So the Pharisee stands where he can be seen in the Temple. He prays according to that acceptable

formula which starts with thanksgiving, "I thank You..." (But then his heart leaks out: "...that I'm not like other people...")

He DOESN'T do those outwardly BAD, scandalous things the BAD GUYS DO...

But the unseen part of the man is mean and contemptuous ... James says the most awful/offensive things about the hearts of church people ... "murderers ... adulteresses ... double-minded ... friends of the world ... enemies of God ... wrong motives...get passed the externals and see your deeper need."

See, it's not just a matter of shaping up your behavior because it's possible to DO the externals while the heart remains spiteful and unkind... and proud. The arrogant person flatters himself by focusing on outward behavior and appearances and rarely if ever looks at his own heart and motives...AND ONE WRITER SAID,

"On the way home from the Temple that day he was merrily singing ... "Amazing Grace""

So, that's the sickness. Now let's ACCEPT A NEW FOOTING ... If we really do tend in this direction and WE DO...it's the way of the world, the law of the jungle, the default mode of the human heart...everybody does it (AND we carry this approach with us when we come into the church!)

NOW, if this is our natural instinctive bent, if this is how humans roll, WE NEED A NEW FOOTING...a new platform, a new basis for life.

And what the Gospel, the basic message of Christianity, what the Gospel provides is not a comparative goodness that we can see and measure and USE to feel better about ourselves as we look scornfully at others – the Gospel gives us an imputed righteousness... a record we didn't earn but which is attributed to us and received by trusting... a totally different footing!

God, who is without arrogance, did not stand aloof from sinners and look down on us...but instead, He incarnated, He became one of us in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ, the God-Man lived in true and beautiful, harmonious obedience to all His Father's laws. He did so with an exquisite sense of blessed self-forgetfulness... not arrogance or comparisons...He obeyed out of joy.

He obeyed NOT just the externals but from the heart... His heart harmonized with the Father. He was the world's only TRULY righteous Person... He always did what His Father wanted and did it as His delight... always natural/organic and heartfelt doing the Father's will.

And the Christian is a person who sees that Jesus Christ lived and died IN MY PLACE. He rose from the dead, in my place, representing ME, showing that death will not HOLD ME, just like it couldn't hold HIM.

The Christian is a person who sees himself sanely – I may try and compare myself with others (so I feel better about myself) but when I compare myself with God and God’s Law... I’m TOAST! I am not a righteous man... I CAN NOT TRUST MYSELF, my good deeds, my efforts, my righteousness... I must trust the borrowed righteousness of Jesus Christ...grace received by faith!

And when I am standing on THAT platform, it takes away the necessity of defending my record or my competencies or my right-ness. I no longer have to prove how busy and important I am or how thin and shapely or cool and informed or religious/pious or any other of the standards we impose on one another...and on ourselves.

In fact, even the ONE STANDARD that really matters...even the Law of God is now silenced... it is no longer my judge because the righteousness of Jesus Christ is accounted to me. I’m depending on His righteousness and there IS NEVER ANY REASON TO LOOK WITH CONTEMPT on anyone... Truth is: I HAVE NO RIGHTEOUSNESS OF MY OWN – only the righteousness of Jesus Christ which I am borrowing.

Now how does this new footing translate into a life, an approach to God, to others and to myself that really is less stressful? How do I wear it and how do I function from this new platform? Here are a couple of ideas (3) to keep in mind:

#1 - Humility is elusive. The fact is: we would all like to LOOK humble more than actually BEING humble. We want to look humble so we can be proud of our humility – then we can “humblebrag”. It’s NOT achieved by a great deal of effort because then it becomes very self-conscious and humility IS NOT very self-conscious.

Humility is internal...and it’s attained (like happiness) only indirectly. Others aren’t often conscious of it when they see it. AS C.S. LEWIS put it...“When you meet a humble man you will probably NOT say ‘There goes a humble man’, you’ll simply have a sense that he was interested in you and what you had to say.” (As Jesus was interested in the needs of those un-important children and treated them as if they were VERY important!)

One way to tell how humble you are (it’s elusive!) is how you respond to criticism – that tells you whether you’re standing on your reputation or on another platform all together.

Humility is ...NOT the same as low self-esteem (which is often a form of hyper self-consciousness). Humility is blessed self-forgetfulness... It comes from the heart.

I THINK, the meaning of the man beating his breast ... his heart ...his insides ... he has grief over the “real me that only God can change.”

Realize the conceited person rarely if ever KNOWS he’s conceited so ASSUME that you are (IT’S A SAFE ASUMPTION!)

#2 Spiritual, Moral, Religious, Socially Conscious people are at great risk. Both passages are addressed to these kinds of people...James says some VERY harsh words to US and I think the reason is – we somehow forget that: #1 – I am living on borrowed righteousness (I'm standing on the record of Jesus Christ) and #2 – Any progress I've made (which we often overestimate) the progress is due to the patient work and energy of the Holy Spirit NOT that I've been better than others – comparisons have to go!

#3 – Last, THE WAY you get the courage to face your own smugness and arrogance and self-trust and self-obsession is to keep looking at Jesus Christ.

Where I want to distance myself from sinners, and say "I am NOT like those swindlers and adulterers and tax-gatherers....THOSE YUCKY PEOPLE!"

But He, Jesus Christ, is IDENTIFYING HIMSELF with sinners...He is come to take their place.. HE IS RECEIVING SINNERS... taking the blame for sinners like me.

AND He is the One with greater grace ...pursuing this arrogant, independent man...saying, "Stop your running and rest in Me...come T.J. humble yourself and I will lift you up!"

AND when I see Him, then I want to pursue all these imperatives at the end of the text...submit to God...resist the devil...draw near to God... cleanse your hands... purify your heart...

When I'm believing HIM (and NOT trusting in myself) THEN I can really FACE my own egotistical, superiority complex...and I can weep ...be miserable...but then ALSO, laugh at myself ... even have fun with it like a child. Because, Jesus Christ values the outsiders, the children, those who don't dare come forward or lift their eyes to heaven...He comes out to us, He came DOWN to us...That's how He is and seeing that ... believing it... THAT is the key to a less stressful new year.