

## PROACTIVE OR REACTIVE

James 3:13-4:10

13Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ...4You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

When I used to play baseball as a kid, I was taught two different types of play. One, I would call **reactive**. A guy hit a ground ball. You stood there, waited for the ball to come to you, -- bounce, bounce, bounce -- and often you were taken by surprise, caught completely off-guard, when the ball went flying out of your reach because it hit a dirt clog or rut or some other imperfection in the field. It was very frustrating (and not just a little bit frightening). Just when you thought it was going to fly right into your mitt, it skipped away into the field (or into your face), and the batter made it to first base.

Then there was **proactive**. Same guy hits a grounder, but instead of standing there and waiting for the ball to come to you, you moved briskly toward it and tried to grab it early, before it had the chance to ricochet out of your grasp. In this way, not only did it minimize the opportunities for the ball to hit a bad patch, but it also helped you get the ball earlier and quicker so that you had more time to make the play. And many times, you got him. He was OUT!

Proactive and Reactive. Then there's this shirt. Can you tell it doesn't fit? I wore it on purpose to illustrate my point. A reactive person would say, "let's move the button. Let's give it to the rummage sale. Let's leave the top button unbuttoned. Let's go to the tailor." A proactive person might say, as I intend to, "let's put this in a prominent place and have the goal to fit into this shirt. And let's diet and exercise to the point where we can make it happen. And someday the shirt will fit."

Proactive or reactive. It's the same way in life. People with a plan – people who go after their dreams, pursue their goals, drive toward the things that are important to them tend to get more out of life than those who are just responding to the daily urgencies and waiting for life to

come to them. People who look toward the future with vision, who believe that they can get where they would like to be if they put some effort into it, are more likely to make it there than those who just hope for it. Do you agree?

In our text for today, the book of James declares: “come near to God and He will come near to you.” Now does that sound proactive or reactive? {Right. Proactive. Take hold of it. }

Now I know what you’re thinking because you’re a Lutheran and you understand sin and grace. You’re thinking that I’m possibly going to say that we should work hard to try and get closer to God – that we should run toward Him with zeal, with gusto, with a plan. You think you know where I’m taking this sermon, and you’re putting up your theological antennas and saying: “But wait a minute, Pastor Hillenbrand. Don’t you realize that we are, by nature, sinful – that, left to ourselves, we will NOT draw near to God, but will, instead, run the other way. Don’t you know that our fallen, sinful nature will more likely take us to greed, selfishness, pride and lust than it will to godliness, love, generosity and kindness?”

And you would be right. In fact, even in this very text, James warns that friendship with the world is a BIG problem for God’s people. That we can become so comfortable standing out here in the field of green grass that we just want to get comfortable and let life come to us. And soon, as we immerse ourselves in the culture and ways of our times, we can start to mirror the ways of the world.

Take the TV. Those who create the stuff we see there subtly (or not so subtly) shower us with images of products – phones, cars, food, drink, clothes, wine, perfume, lipstick. They show us families who deride and demean each other. They show us relationships where sex is cheap and love is a punch line. They give over-coverage to the images of violence and undercoverage to the images of generosity. And inside, we can almost feel the desire welling up – the current stream of the world taking hold.

But it’s not just the television. It’s also the billboards and the coworkers and the politicians and the salesmen and, quite honestly, the cry of our inner selves. We want the easy way, the quick way, the prosperous way, the fun way. So your theological antennae are correct. That’s who we are, brothers and sisters, our sinful nature is prone to wander, prone to seduction, prone to desire. And we might even become proactive for that stuff. Right?

“I want to be proactive and get that new car. I want to be proactive toward that house, that vacation, that job promotion, that thing which will make others admire me, that person who will make me happy. I want to eat, drink and be merry. I want to do what I want and live as I please. And we will pursue friendship with the world, because the world is our playground.

So, you’re right, telling you to be proactive in your relationship to God would be counterproductive, because you won’t do it. You’re a sinner.

But here’s the deal, folks. I’m a Lutheran just like you. I know well the weaknesses of our sinful nature. But I also know well that being a sinner is not the last word. Being a sinner is not the only thing that defines us.

Because, you see, we are also **SAVED SINNERS. REDEEMED SINNERS. RESCUED SINNERS.**

And to explain what that means, I want to refer to our Gospel Lesson. Note there that Jesus shows us the character of God when He prophesies, to His twelve closest followers, this: “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”

See how different He is from us! Proactively, knowing that His people had fallen away and were trapped in the web of a sinful nature, God planned our rescue. God knew, even from the outset of our fallenness, that we would need serious help – help beyond ourselves. And so God made a plan. This plan is revealed, first, to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, and comes to fruition when Jesus pays the price for all sin by His sacrificial death on the cross.

This is the antidote to our poison. This is the life preserver that pulls us out of the raging waters. Jesus blasts through the wall of our sinful DNA and, as we trust in Him, He begins to work change in us.

So, in Christ, no longer are we trapped by the iron bars of ego, pride, greed, anger, lust, jealousy. In Christ, no longer are we chained by the shackles of conformity, jealousy, dishonesty, and idolatry. No. Jesus came to change all that.

You want to see it? Look at the disciples. What happens after Jesus reveals God's plan to them in our text? How do they react. As sinners the first thing they can think about is "who is the greatest?"

Imagine, Jesus pours out His heart to them about His mission of rescue, and their reaction is to say, "who does Jesus love the most?"

But after Jesus accomplishes His work on the cross and rises from the dead, what happens? The next thing we see is bold and empowered disciples preaching the Good News to all the then-known world. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is dispatched to them and literally sets them on fire to serve God. And they are ready to risk life and limb to reach out beyond themselves.

And that's what God can do in you and me. As redeemed children of God He can burn in our hearts a new desire and goal to follow Him and to transform the world – to grow as His people and to serve one another.

SO what does that look like?

Well, James here seems to encourage God's people to be proactive as they consider their relationship to God. To not just put Band-Aids on to cover over our sinful wounds and scars, but to energetically consider how we might improve our walk with Christ and do more and more to serve Him.

Listen again: <sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (And) the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup>Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. But he gives us more grace. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>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.

Doesn't that sound like a person who has a plan? Of course it does. But not someone who creates their plan apart from God's rescue. Rather, one who knows that he has been saved,

who knows that God loves him, who knows that there is power, from God, to live lives of purpose.

So what's your goal, spiritually? How do you want to improve yourself? Would you like to be more regular in your worship life? Would you like to be more committed to your daily devotional life? Would you like to dedicate more of your time, treasure, or talent to service for God? Would you like to be rid of some old habits, conquer some weaknesses, be stronger in your attempt to get rid of those Achilles Heel struggles that have persisted for years and years?

Don't be afraid to be proactive. Don't be afraid to set some goals. Because, you see, you're not on your own. You have Him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords right beside you to enable your success and to pick you up when you falter.

Picture a proactive church..... What does it look like?

God grant it to you for Jesus' sake, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.