

Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Grace for the Humble
James 4:5-10

5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The struggle to repent - Repentance in James

Politicians do not excel at humility or repentance. They promote themselves to get elected, then deny or cover misdeeds as much as possible. Once a president was accused of misconduct with a White House intern. In a news conference, he declared, "I did not have [a relationship] with that woman." Later, when irrefutable evidence proved that he *did* have a relationship with "that woman," the president expressed great sorrow and shame for his misdeeds. We could multiply stories of racist remarks, misuse of funds, unfaithfulness that show the same pattern: I did not! Maybe a little. In a moment of weakness. I have a problem. Forgive me!

Politicians make an easy target. But are ordinary citizens different? Do we excel at repentance? Doesn't everyone try to hide shameful deeds? Does the quality of our repentance even matter? It does. James says there are two ways of life. The godless life and wisdom, says we seize what we can for ourselves. This philosophy leads to envy, selfish ambition, coveting, fights, quarrels and self-justification. No God means no grace, which drives self righteousness.

By contrast, godly wisdom trusts that while we work, the Lord rules sovereignly. We work, God gives results. Since he provides for us, we don't need to grasp for ourselves. We face problems with a measure of calm; God is on our side. Even in hard times, we can have a life marked by peace, repentance and righteousness.

James asks, "Do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain when it says the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" (4:5). To review, when James writes "Scripture says" he is not quoting a Bible verse. Rather he summarizes the Bible which says how common and destructive envy is. When God fashioned us, he gave us strong spirits, an active intellect, and a passion for significance. We hunger to do things that matter, and that hunger powers us through obstacles to achieve strong goals.

But in our state of rebellion, our passions and drives become unruly. We misdirect our energy. God made our spirits strong, but sin makes them wayward. Illustration: a strong horse, responsive or wayward – one thousand pounds of muscle gone amok.

We could restate James' theme as a question. What do you think our desires are all about? What is the goal of human yearnings? Why did God give us our energies, our dreams? Not to pour them into selfish goals! Did he intend that our spirits be given over to or controlled by selfish cravings? Not at all. Such desires are the way of folly.

He gave us our willingness to fight for a cause so we would spend ourselves on noble causes. His salvation, his word, restores our sense of direction. He resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (4:6).

Unbelievers are prone to envy, since they cannot shed their selfishness. But believers succumb to envy too, even though we are free from it in principle. We trust God to give us the exalted status of his children, so we need not strive for recognition. We know He provides what we need, therefore envy is misplaced. Still, God's people fall into selfishness. Scripture does not speak in vain when it says the human race is prone to pride, selfish ambition and envy. We mentioned four records of envy last week. Here are four new ones:

- Adam and Eve envied God's knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3).
- Saul envied the praise of David, after he defeated Goliath, as Israel's women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam 18).
- Absalom envied the throne of his father David and started a civil war to obtain it (2 Sam 15).
- The disciples coveted places of honor in Jesus' kingdom. It wasn't enough to be with Jesus. James, John longed to sit at his right and left (Matt 20).

History is largely a record of selfish striving. Kings want the lands of other kings, the captains of industry seeking greater wealth, politicians and entertainers craving recognition. Inventors like the Wright brothers drained their energy fighting over credit for inventions. Today, scientists vie for recognition that they discovered an animal, a star, even a disease. Scripture rightly says human history is a tale of envy and strife.

Gospel of humility and the nature of humility (4:6-10)

If we humbly confess that we do such things, God promises to 'give more grace' (4:6). Our selfish passions lead us to fail the oft-mentioned tests of true faith. Our selfishness drives us to care for our desires before we look to the needs of widows or orphans. Because we seek wealth or recognition, we find ways to fit in with society instead of avoiding its pollutions. Our failures show that sin resides within us. Therefore we humble ourselves before God. We should confess our sins, plead for mercy and lay aside demands for 'my due'.

James 4:6-10 begins and ends with a call to humility. He starts with a warning – "God opposes the proud" – then follows with a promise – he "gives grace to the humble" (4:6). He also closes with a command that leads to a promise: "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you" (4:10, English Standard Version).

Thus the need for humility and the call to humility form bookends. God gives grace to the humble and we must humble ourselves before the Lord. The structure features Hebrew poetry, which we can arrange in stanzas.

4:6-7	Warning:	God opposes the proud,
	Promise:	but gives grace to the humble.
	Conclusion	Submit yourselves, then, to God.
4:10	Command:	Humble yourselves before the Lord,
	Promise:	And he will exalt you.

The middle of our passage develops this theme: God opposes the proud, gives grace to the humble, but how do we show humility and submission to God. It has nothing to do with a shy personality. Look again at the poetic structure of James, noting the parallel commands that tell us *how to submit to God* :

Command 1	<i>Resist the devil</i>	Positive command
Result 1	And he will flee from you	Result
Command 2	<i>Come near to God</i>	Complementary command
Result 2	and he will come near to you	Result (antithesis of prior result)
Command	<i>Wash your hands</i> , you sinners and	Hands = external cleansing
Command	<i>Purify your hearts</i> , double-minded	Heart = internal cleansing
Parallels:	"Wash/purify;" "sinners/double-minded."	"Hands/heart" (outer/inner).
Command	<i>Grieve, mourn, and wail</i>	Triple command
Specifying	Change your laughter to mourning	Command elaborated
Specifying	Change your joy to gloom	Parallel elaboration
Command	Humble yourselves before the Lord	Climax, with new structure
Result	And he will exalt you	Conclusion

James says "Submit yourselves therefore to God" (4:7a, ESV). Why? Because we are prone to selfish sin and we're wrong to live for ourselves. Where then should we direct our energy? Toward the poor and the needy? Toward family and neighborhood? Toward the church? Yes, but before we dedicate ourselves to humanity, James says we should submit ourselves to God.

Submit to God (4:7a)

"Submit" sounds like a passive word, but the concept is active. The Greek word is a compound term with two elements "arrange" + "under." To submit is more than waiting for orders and obeying them. We should obey God's commands, but we also submit when we arrange our lives under God's direction and principles.

A worker submits by doing what his supervisors say, but he also submits when he extrapolates from his leader's principles, taking on new tasks according to his principles. She need not wait for orders, because she understands the leader's goals, vision, and ethic well enough to apply them to new situations. An athlete submits to a coach by coming into the season well-conditioned, even if the coach did not specify a tight training schedule.

Obedience is one element of submission. To submit is to recognize the lordship and authority of another. We submit to God, king, governor, leader, officer, parent or expert. We also submit to laws and rules. Submission means one person, who is lower in rank, age, position or power, will yield to a person with greater rank, age, position, expertise or power. We submit even if we hear a directive that seems unpleasant or unwise.

This does not mean we must do whatever a superior says. If an authority commands something that is sinful, we must disobey because "We must obey God rather than men" Acts 4:29. A good worker will not lie and a good soldier will not harm innocent civilians, even if the commander says to. But if we simply doubt the wisdom of a superior, we may raise questions and make suggestions. But in the end, leaders must lead.

If we have good relationship with "the boss," we probably see things as they do. We **share** their direction. We don't feel that we are following orders. Ideally, that's how believers submit to God. We read the Bible, we pray, we follow his truth and principles, we want to know God's will and follow it. So normally we don't feel that we are submitting to God's orders. That is a great blessing

So ordinarily submission to God is effortless. But then, we read the Bible or we meditate on God's truth and we realize "I don't want to do this. It's hard." Then we have a test of loyalty and submission. Will we yield?

Some people call that *surrendering* to God. But the Bible never says we surrender to God. That language comes from the world of warfare, and perhaps became popular around the time of WW 1. I understand the point, but it's a little misleading because surrender implies that God's power is against us, that he is on the other side of a conflict. But in fact, we are on the same side. He is not an opposing general to whom we surrender, after he vanquishes us. He is our father, our king, our leader. Ordinarily, we submit to him easily and seamlessly. Yet there are times when we must obey a command that seems hard or strange. When we yield, it shows that we have humbled ourselves before the Lord.

Resist the devil (4:7b)

Next, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." In a way, this explains how we submit to God. If we are loyal to God, if we follow him, submit to him, we will resist the devil. But we need to address an issue, which someone expressed this way:

James' statement does not square with my experience. Temptation gets ever more intense the longer I resist. When I resist, the devil and the temptation get worse and worse. Then if I give in, I feel relieved; as if he flees when I succumb, not when I resist.

What my friend said is absolutely true of many temptations – the temptation to break a diet, to take drugs, to get drunk, dial pornography, shout or even hit in anger. It goes like this: A man vents his anger Monday night. Then he feels guilty and vows, "Never again." That night he easily passes the first test – an irritation. Same on Tuesday. By Wednesday, it's harder. By Thursday he is ready to explode and soon he does explode. It is exactly the same with cake or cookies. Guilty on Monday, resolve holds for three days, grows weak and collapses on Friday. I know a man who held out on cookies for a month. When he broke, he ate forty cookies. Can you understand that? The boom and bust of cyclical temptations.

The problem in this case is that the tempted person is drawing on willpower alone. He lives in a horizontal world. He knows his desire, sees the temptation, and tries to say, "No, no, no." But eventually willpower is exhausted. We think "Why not? I have my rights too." Or "I'm too weak to resist any more."

Have you ever known a terrific secret? At first, you are strong. One day you start to tell. You catch yourself, but your friend recognizes what happened and begins to plead, "Come on, tell me. I won't tell *anyone*." She is relentless. The pressure builds and builds - until you divulge the secret. Then the pressure is off.

What is the cure? James says two things. First, we can resist temptation and Satan by fleeing from him, by getting out of the way of sin. It is not a sin to run from sin. It's not a sin to run if someone chases you with a knife. The Bible says:

- Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14).
- Flee from [the love of money], and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Tim. 6:11).
- Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness (2 Tim 2:22). Put on the Lord Jesus and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom 13:14 ESV).

So we resist the devil by fleeing from temptations to sin. When we flee from sin, the devil flees from us. Think of Jesus' temptations. After facing down three temptations, Satan left him for a while, even though he planned try again, at a more opportune time (Luke 4:11). When we do not resist, we have given him more time with us. When we resist Satan, he must seek another time and occasion.

Behind all this is a desire to change the nature of the temptation. To move from "I want that but I will say 'No'" to "I don't want that any more." How does that happen? It's not simple or easy, but essentially, you change what you want. You substitute good and godly desires for godless and evil desires. You no longer want cookies or pornography or the power you gained through your anger.

- You gain new affections – you start to want what God teaches you to want.
- Health, not cookies. Love not pornography. Love rather than control through anger.

This is one way we submit to God (4:7) and come near to God (4:8) and resist the devil (4:7). When we submit to God, we learn to long for the things he teaches us to long for. To resist the devil means we reject his idea of the good life. Resist him, James says "and he will flee from you" means. Certainly, Satan does not always flee. He is a deceiver and an adversary (Rev 20:2, Zech 3). He won't give up easily.

Temptations fade slowly. Suppose a physician determines that salt and bacon are damaging his patient's health. To eat them would constitute self-abuse. It would be sin. But the desire for bacon and salt is strong. The patient does not simply say "no" to bacon, he also says "yes" to health. And the desire for bacon may slowly fade. So the devil flees, but perhaps not at once.

Come near to God (4:8a)

We can "Come near to God" several ways: 1) public worship, (Lev 21:3, Isa 29:13, Heb 7:19) 2) private prayer, and 3) in covenant renewal after we stray. When Israel strayed, God said "Return to me, and I will return to you" (Mal 3:7, cf. Zech 1:2-3). This is a far-reaching promise. When we draw near to God, he also draws near to us. Moses asked, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord is near us whenever we pray" (Deut 4:7)?

Wash your hands, you sinners (4:8b)

If a sinner does come near to the holy God, he will feel his sins and want to repent. James says "wash your hands." The hands represent actions or deeds (Gen 3:22, 4:11 Exod. 3:20, Deut 2:7, Ps 89:17). Next, "Purify your hearts" (4:8). The heart represents motives or intentions. James censures the "double-minded." The double-minded pursue two things at once – God and self. James already warned that the double-minded man asks and gets nothing (1:8). He is unstable. But godly wisdom has clarity of purpose. Genuine believers want to know God as Lord, trust his ways and follow them. David said, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and pure heart. He will receive blessing from the Lord" (Ps 24:3-6).

Grieve, mourn and wail (4:9)

The desire for a pure heart leads to sorrow for sin. We don't easily see our sin for what it is. We excuse it, explain it, control it. But sometimes we see and when we do, we should grieve. The prophets said that those who face God's judgment will grieve, mourn and wail. More, the prophets invite people to grieve, mourn and wail before the judgment (Joel 2:1, 12-14).

James says we can laugh now, at sin, and mourn later, over judgment. Or we can mourn now, over sin, and laugh later, at God's grace (Luke 6:25). People laugh at the wrong things. There is a fleeting joy in sin and fleeting sorrow when we break with sin. But it's better to mourn now and rejoice forever.

Steve Garvey, a former baseball star for the Dodgers and Padres showed how important it is to mourn. As a player, the media called Garvey "Mr. Clean." His teammates called him "Mr. Phony" and eventually people knew why. Garvey, the father of two by one marriage, divorced his first wife and became engaged to a second woman who claimed to be pregnant by him. Just before the wedding day, Garvey married a third woman. When that became public, a fourth woman asserted that Garvey had fathered her child. Garvey denied none of it. He said, "If the children are mine, I'll live up to my moral obligations, which I feel strongly about because I am a Christian." In a television interview, when asked why he did not seem embarrassed or disturbed by these affairs, all Garvey said that God has a purpose in everything that happens to us. This fatalistic shrug toward his sin shows he knew not how to mourn. His indifference brings shame to the name of Christ.

For example, you have a minor quarrel with someone, with witnesses. You say, "What's wrong with him, so touchy and irritable" and the witnesses say, "We thought it was you." What do you do with that news? Deny or examine yourself and mourn *your* blindness?

King David knew how to mourn. He said, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed" (Ps 119:136). James says, "Wash you hands, you sinners, and purify your heart, you double minded. 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" (Jas 4:8b-10). Such mourning is blessed, for it leads to repentance. It is right and good to mourn over sin than to be indifferent to it.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up (4:10)

The prophets declare that the Lord humbles the proud (1 Sam 2:7, Isa 2:11-17, 26:5, Ezek 17:24, Lam 1:5, Hos 14:9). Yet James does not say, "The Lord will humble you," he says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord."¹ Therefore we do not wait for God or circumstances to humble us. It is our duty to humble ourselves. James does not specify how we do this, but he does drop a hint in the phrase "before the Lord."

If we remember that all we do is "before the Lord," if his holiness is our standard, then it is easier to humble ourselves. On the contrary, if we compare ourselves to others, it is far easier to avoid humility. If a parent chides a child for a messy room, the child replies, "If you think my room is bad, you should see..." The child then names the messiest child he knows, so he looks good.

¹ The Greek has the passive voice not the middle. But every translation renders it as a middle "Humble yourselves." Why? 1) the passive can have reflexive sense (Zerwick, Grammatical Analysis, 699. 2) if James meant "Be humbled" there must be an agent – God. But "God" is already the object of the prepositional phrase, "before the Lord." Cf. Daniel Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, 440-1.

Adults do the same. We think, "I have a problem, but I'm not nearly so bad as so-and-so." When we compare ourselves to others, we can always find someone who is worse. But if we compare ourselves to the Lord, who is perfect, that excuse disappears and it's clear that we should humble ourselves. When he stood before the Lord, even the prophet Isaiah confessed declared "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). When he saw God, he could not excuse his sin. When God is the standard, humility comes easily.

If we humble ourselves, we admit that we sin, and that we are sinful, and that we cannot reform ourselves. Then, James promises, the Lord will lift us up. This is the gospel according to James. He does not mention the cross of Christ, or the resurrection. He states the gospel his way, a way influenced by the teachings of Jesus. He says there is a choice between two ways of life, a way of grasping and selfish ambition or a way of purity and peace (3:13-18). We can be a friend of God or a friend of the world (4:5-6). We can be proud or humble and repentant. Jesus says, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11, 18:14). James says "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up." When we grieve over our sins and turn to him in faith, seeking forgiveness, he offers his redeeming grace. He will forgive us and lift us up.