

## **Pursuing Humility Before God** *James 4:1-10*

Some of you probably know the name Chan Gailey. He is currently the Buffalo Bill's head coach. Before that he was the offensive coordinator for the Chiefs in 2008 before being relieved of play-calling duties by Todd Haley in 2009.

Even though it didn't go well in KC, he has had success as a coach. In 1984 as the head coach of Troy State he lead them to a 12-1 record and a Division II championship.

Some time back Gailey told of how he learned a lesson in humility during that championship run. The week before they played in this National Championship game he was headed to the practice field when a secretary called him back to take a phone call.

Somewhat irritated, Gailey told her to take a message because he was on his way to practice. She responded, "But it's Sports Illustrated."

"I'll be right there," he said.

As he made his way to the building, he began to think about the upcoming article. It would be great publicity for a small school like Troy State to be in Sports Illustrated. As he got closer, he realized that a three-page article would not be sufficient to tell the whole story. Coming even closer to his office, he started thinking that he might be on the cover. "Should I pose or go with an action shot," he wondered. His head was spinning with all of the possibilities.

When he picked up the phone and said hello, the person asked, "Is this Chan Gailey?"

"Yes, it is," he replied confidently.

"This is Sports Illustrated, and we're calling to let you know that your subscription is running out. Are you interested in renewing?"

Coach Gailey concluded the story by saying, "You are either humble or you will be humbled." He's right. How much better to simply be humble, right?

Today, we are continuing our Advent series on humility. Last week Steve talked about the humility of Christ that was revealed in His incarnation. No greater demonstration of humility has ever been made than in Jesus becoming a man and then ultimately dying on the cross.

Today, we are going to look at the idea of pursuing humility before God. My hope is that each of us will leave convinced that we must pursue humility before God. We are going to look at James 4. In this passage, James lays out the foundational theological truth that God gives grace to the humble.

## I. **A Foundational Theological Truth: God Gives Grace to the Humble (James 4:1-6)**

James is writing to a group of believers who are experiencing all sorts relational problems. He starts in verse 1 by saying:

*<sup>1</sup> 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. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.*

The reason they are experiencing all of the relational conflict is the *pleasures that wage war in your members*, James says. They had made pleasure the highest thing that they sought after. They lusted for it. He says:

*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.*

This striving to have pleasure satisfied at all costs led to envy, fighting and quarreling. And they got so mixed up in their interactions with God about it. He says, at times they didn't even ask for these things and then when they did ask they didn't received because they asked with wrong motives. You get the picture that this is a group of people who is focusing on themselves and the pleasure that they seek and out of this all kinds of relational conflicts are occurring.

They had made pleasure their highest desire. They had placed it above God. And because of that, in verse 4, James calls them:

*<sup>4</sup> You adulteresses, . . .*

In placing pleasure above God, they were spiritually unfaithful to God. They were *adulteresses*.

*<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.*

God is the one who deserved their love and devotion, but they gave it to the world. James then asks them a question:

*<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"?*

In the NASB, the Scriptural phrase is put in quotations. But there is actually no direct Old Testament statement that says this and so commentators believe that this is a sort

of summary statement on passages that speak of how God jealously longs for the full devotion of His people (e.g. Ex. 20:5; 34:14). And so if I were to summarize what James is saying here in verse 5, he is saying that God has a high demand for full devotion from his people. He is to come above pleasure.

This is a high demand to love God in this way. But they can live this way because, verse 6:

*<sup>6</sup> But He gives a greater grace.*

They can meet God's demands to love him first and foremost because of the grace of God. He gives a grace greater than the demands. And so the role of grace is critical, which lead James then to come to his foundational theological point about grace. He says:

*Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

This is a theological point that is found over and over again in the Scriptures. God is opposed to the proud, but to the humble . . . grace. God gives grace.

Before we look at the rest of this passage, I want to push the pause button and examine a little closer what this theological truth actually means.

## **II. The Foundational Theological Truth Examined**

First of all, what does it mean that God is opposed to the proud? This word, *opposed*, can mean, "to resist"; it can mean "to be hostile towards." It is a strong term. In some uses of this word it has the sense of coming against another in battle. The point is that God is not just a little put off by the proud. No, He is resolutely opposed to them.

Proverbs 16:5 says it this way:

*Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.*

In Zephaniah 3, in speaking to Israel about the day when He would restore them from exile, God says this:

*<sup>10</sup> "From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My dispersed ones, Will bring My offerings. <sup>11</sup> "In that day you will feel no shame Because of all your deeds By which you have rebelled against Me; For then I will remove from your midst Your proud, exulting ones, And you will never again be haughty On My holy mountain. <sup>12</sup> "But I will leave among you A humble and lowly people, And they will take refuge in the name of the LORD. (Zephaniah 3:10-12)*

God says that when He restores Israel to their land after their captivity that He will *remove from your midst Your proud, exulting one* (v. 11). The proud, the arrogant, will never worship on God's holy mountain. Instead, He says, He will leave *a humble and lowly people* (v. 12). God is so opposed to the proud that He will remove them.

Let me give one other example of God opposition to the proud. There was a king named Nebuchadnezzar who ruled in Babylon from 605-562 BC. Babylon, of course, was an enemy nation of Israel. In Daniel 4:30, it says this:

*<sup>30</sup> "The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'*

In other words, "Look at how great I am. Look at what I have done." Verse 31,

*<sup>31</sup> "While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, <sup>32</sup> and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes.' <sup>33</sup> "Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws.*

Nebuchadnezzar's was proud and God opposed Him. God humbled him by taking away his sovereignty and by driving him out into the fields to live like an animal. He lived with a kind of dementia for seven years until his reason returned to him (v. 34) and he finally appropriately worshipped God. He ends up saying this:

*<sup>37</sup> "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride."*

Even Mary, after the angel came to her and told her that she would bear a child, speaks of God's opposition to the proud. She says in Luke 1:51-52:

*<sup>51</sup> "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. <sup>52</sup> "He has brought down rulers from their thrones,*

We could look at dozens of other passages, but I think you get the point; God is opposed to the proud. He is opposed to the believers to whom James writes who love pleasure more than God. He is opposed to the proud.

Are you proud? Is there any way in which you are living with a sense of, "I'm going to do this my own way, God. I know best." Is there any way in which you are lifting other things above God? Do you place yourself and your desires above God? If so, that is an expression of pride and God is opposed to you.

Now, let me make one point of clarification. I believe that for the one who has not come to personal faith in God, for the one who has not trusted in Christ's death and resurrection for forgiveness of sins, which is really the ultimate expression of pride, that God's opposition means eternal separation from God. It's not so much that God sends to hell the one who is proud, but rather the proud person chooses to go there because he or she has said, "God I don't need you. I will do this on my own." And on our own, none gains eternal life. And so God's opposition to the proud has eternal consequences for the unbeliever.

For the believer, on the other hand, he/she will never experience this kind of eternal opposition from God. But God is still opposed to pride in the life of a believer's. James speaks this warning to believers. And so, we too, need to be warned that if we walk in pride, God is opposed to us. This is not a good place to be. God is opposed to the proud.

Well, let's consider the other part of this truth. What does it mean that God gives grace to the humble? I want to mention a few things the Scripture states that it means.

First it means that **God is relationally near to the humble.** Isaiah 57:15 says:

*<sup>15</sup> For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.*

God is *high and exalted* and though He is *Holy*, He dwells *with the contrite and lowly of spirit*. He dwells with the humble. This passage also adds that **God breathes life into the humble.** He revives the spirit of the lowly.

Third, **God pays attention to the humble.** Isaiah 66:1-2 says:

*Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?" <sup>2</sup> "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.*

To say that God "looks" means that He cares for; He tends to; He notices. It is a statement of loving involvement. This is God posture to *him who is humble and contrite of spirit*.

Fourth, **God hears the prayers of the humble.** Psalm 10:17 says:

*<sup>17</sup> O LORD, Thou hast heard the desire of the humble; Thou wilt strengthen their heart, Thou wilt incline Thine ear*

God hears the desire of the humble. He inclines His heart to them. **He also strengthens their heart.**

Sixth, **God leads and teaches the humble.** Psalm 25:9 says:

*<sup>9</sup> He leads the humble in justice, And He teaches the humble His way.*

Seventh, **God exalts the humble.** Again, in Luke 1:52, which we looked at earlier it ends this way:

*<sup>51</sup> "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. <sup>52</sup> "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble (Luke 1:51-52).*

Job says it this way in Job 5:

*<sup>11</sup> . . . He sets on high those who are lowly, And those who mourn are lifted to safety.*

God raises up the lowly. He sets them on high.

We could go on, but you get the point . . . God gives grace to the humble. He is relationally near to the humble. He renews and breathes life into the humble. He pays attention to the humble. He hears their prayers. He strengthens them. He leads them. He teaches them. God exalts the humble. God gives grace to the humble.

Do you want to be on the side of God where this is how He relates to you? James, is clear, this is the experience of those who are humble. Are you humble?

As we come back to James 4, in the remaining verses James applies this theological truth to his readers and urges them to pursue humility before God.

### **III. The Foundational Theological Truth Applied: Pursue Humility Before God (James 4:7-10)**

In verses 7- 9, he says that since it is true that God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble, they need to pursue humility. Listen to what he says:

*<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.*

If I were to summarize these commands, I would say that it is about pursuing humility before God. And ultimately then he says in verse 10:

*<sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

Since God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble, the only logical thing to do it so *humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord.*

Sometimes, people think that there is nothing that they can really do to grow in this virtue. Either I'm humble or I'm not. But, the fact that James commands it means that there absolutely is something that we can do. We are to intentionally seek to grow in humility.

How do we do that? How do we work on this area? Well, let's look a little bit about what James says. There is direction here.

First, we **submit to God** (v. 7). We bow the knee to Him. If you are here this morning having never trusted Jesus to be your Savior, then this is the place to start. You need to come to the place of ultimate submission to God where you acknowledge that He is God and you are not. You need to yield your life to Him acknowledging that Jesus came to be your Lord and you Savior - that He died on the cross for you and your sins. If you have never done that maybe this Advent season would finally be the time where you bow before the one who was born in a manger.

But even for those of us who have yielded to God in this ultimate way, we still need to continue to submit to God. One of the best ways is to continually grow in our understanding of who God is. Jerry Bridges says this:

*Humility toward God is akin to the fear of God: it begins with a high view of God's person. As we see God in his majesty, awesomeness, and holiness, we are humbled before him. In every occasion in the Scriptures in which man was privileged to view God in his glory, he was brought low or humbled in the presence of God." (Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness*, 91).*

One of the reasons that gathering to worship corporately is such an important thing for us is that it helps us reverence Him. In our worship we are reminded of who He is and His greatness.

Personally, I also find that contemplating the world that God has made helps me submit to him to. To behold the grandeur of mountains, or the vastness of a night sky or the power of a lightning strike, it helps me see God's greatness. It helps me see who I am before God in a right way and that helps with submission.

Second, James says we need to **understand the battle** (v. 7). There is a devil to be resisted. This struggle with pride is not happening in a vacuum. The devil is real. And if you remember, his core sin was pride. He wanted to lift himself up above God. And God opposed His pride and threw him out of heaven. This same spiritual being, though a defeated foe is still working in this world. He seeks to woe us to prideful ways. We need to resist him.

Third, we need to **confess and repent** (v. 8-9). All of these instructions to *cleanse your hands*; to *purify your hearts*; to be *miserable and mourn and weep* is about repentance and confession. When you see pride in your life, confess it. Acknowledge it to God. Confess it to a brother or sister in Christ. Get real about it. And then choose to turn; to repent. Choose to stop walking in a prideful way.

God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. And so pursue humility. There are things we can do. In fact on the sermon post on the web this week, I'm going to include a link to an article called *Twelve Ways to Humble Yourself* that has a lot of other helpful ideas.

One other thing we can do is what Steve suggested last week. We can  ***dwell on the humility of Jesus (especially the cross)***. Today we are celebrating the Lord's Supper. This is one of those opportunities to dwell on the humility of Jesus. This is a reminder that Christ went to the cross because of our sin. It was our debt that He paid by dying on the cross. The bread reminds us that Jesus' body was broken for us. The cup reminds us that His blood was shed for us. This is an opportunity to stand beside the cross. Remember Steve's quote from Carl Henry last week? "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" And so this morning as we celebrate communion let me encourage you to stand besides the cross. Jesus humbled himself by becoming a man, taking on human flesh, that He might die for us.

For additional thoughts on developing humility read, <i>Twelve Ways to Humble Yourself</i> . You can find it here: <a href="http://www.billygraham.org/articlepage.asp?ArticleID=1745">http://www.billygraham.org/articlepage.asp?ArticleID=1745</a>
--