

Humbling Ourselves

James 4

We are in the midst of a sermon series entitled “Desperate.” We’re looking at healthy, God-honoring ways to respond when we are desperate for God to work. 2 Chronicles 7 mentions a response that is found frequently in Scripture. God is talking with Solomon after he had finished building the temple. God anticipates the day when the people are disobedient and come under His judgment - whether drought or locust or pestilence. He makes this promise to His people when they are desperate for relief:

14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

God promises relief when they humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways. The rest of 2 Chronicles records example after example of people doing just that. When they humbled themselves God relented and gave them relief (see 32:26, 33:12). When they refused to humble themselves things got worse (see 33:23).

The Scriptures consistently tell us that a healthy, God-honoring way to respond when we’re desperate is ***to humble ourselves***. Instead of walking in pride, we can intentionally humble ourselves before God. Today we are going to consider a passage of Scripture that gives a very direct challenge for each of us to humble ourselves before God: James 4:1-10.

Of course “humbling ourselves” is appropriate whether we’re desperate or not. If you ***are*** desperate, humbling yourself should make perfect sense. Desperate people need grace; God gives grace to the humble; therefore desperate people should humble themselves. The logic is pretty tight: desperate people should humble themselves.

But this may not sound like good news to you. You might hear that you need to humble yourself and think, “Oh that’s great. I already feel crummy and you’re telling me I need to feel crummier!” I’m actually suggesting the opposite because ***proud people are miserable and humble people are joyful***. The pockets of pride in your life are only adding to your misery. The best thing you can do is to humble yourself in the presence of God. When you do that, you put yourself in a position to experience His grace and you experience a type of joy/satisfaction that comes from being right with God.

If you ***aren’t*** particularly desperate right now, humbling yourself in the presence of the Lord can make you desperate (in a healthy sense). Humbling yourself can awaken your conscience to areas of disobedience that you don’t notice anymore. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago in Isaiah 6, when we step into the light of God’s holiness and encounter God directly we notice things about ourselves that are imperceptible when we stay in the shadows. Instead of being complacent, humbling ourselves can make us hungry for God to work in our lives.

Whatever your condition this morning, consider how **desperate people humble themselves**. As we work our way through this passage, don't be afraid of discovering ways that you're walking in pride instead of humility. James begins by painting a picture of people whose lives are in turmoil.

1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. . .

Instead of being pure and peaceful, their pleasures were “wag[ing] war in [their] members. If you have a war of passions raging within you, it will eventually show up in your relationships - quarrels and conflicts with others.

Instead of being content with the abundance God had given, they had an intense desire for more (James writes, “You lust and do not have”). Lust isn't always sexual; it can be an inordinate desire for things or power or status. And so, James writes, “You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.” He probably isn't saying that they were physically murdering other people; he is probably describing the type of escalation that commonly happens in society and in the church when people are carried along by their passions.

Instead of experiencing joy over the good fortune of others, they were “envious.” It's been said that envy is one of the only sins that brings no pleasure/satisfaction. Envy only makes people miserable and bitter. Not surprisingly, James writes, “so you fight and quarrel.” Content people don't often fight and quarrel; envious people find themselves in conflict often.

James skillfully describes a progression that begins with words and can end with violence. The root of the problem was a lack of some basic, foundational virtues such as purity, peace, contentment, and joy. Such deficits can keep our lives in turmoil. That's the bad news. The good news is that such turmoil can make us desperate for God to do a deep work in our lives and in our relationships.

In verses 2 through 4 James describes people who seem oblivious to how unhealthy their relationship with God really is. This lack of health shows up in their prayer life and in their motives.

2. . . You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

In some cases they lacked what they needed simply because they didn't ask. Maybe they didn't think God was a good Father who loves to give good gifts to His children. Maybe they were uninformed about prayer, thinking that God is only interested in “spiritual things” and not in everyday life. Whatever the case, they did not have because they did not ask. And when they **did** ask, their motives were wrong. Their prayers weren't driven by, “Your kingdom come and Your will be done.” They were driven by their pleasures.

In verse 4 James diagnoses their condition using a category that is found throughout the Bible: spiritual adultery.

4 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.

By addressing them as “adulteresses,” James is basically accusing them of being like a wife who is cheating on her husband. If you’re not familiar with this imagery it might seem harsh (or at the very least melodramatic). But this imagery is developed extensively in the OT (see, for example, Isaiah 54, Jeremiah 2, and the book of Hosea).

This imagery is rooted in a deep theological reality, namely, the new covenant. When you trust in Jesus, you enter into a covenant relationship with God. (A covenant defines a relationship between two people/parties.) The new covenant in Jesus’ blood is **an exclusive relationship** between the one, true living God and all those who believe. In the new covenant God declares, “I will be your God and you will be My people.” Being His people involves siding with Him (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in a very comprehensive way. To do anything less is to be unfaithful to God, to cheat on Him.

Therefore James writes that you can **either** be a “friend of the world” **or** you can be faithful to God; you cannot be both. As we saw earlier, siding with the world manifests itself in strained relationships with people and with God. He reinforces this by asking a very pointed question in verse 5:

5 Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”?

[The NIV and a few other translations understand this verse quite differently. I agree with the translation reflected here the NASB and in RSV and others.] James is basically saying, “Did you think there was no reason God told the nation of Israel that He was a jealous God? Was He not serious? Was He only kidding?” (See Exodus 20:5, 34:14, Zechariah 8:2.) Jealousy is **wrong** when it’s an expression of insecurity. But jealousy is **right** when it’s an expression of commitment in an exclusive relationship. For example, a husband is right to be jealous if his wife is flirting with another man. In Exodus 34:14 the children of Israel were told, “You shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. . .” Being “a friend of the world” was tantamount to cheating on God. This realization should have devastated James’ readers and made them desperate for God’s power to live differently. A disciple of Jesus won’t yawn and say, “Well, everybody has their flaws.” A disciple of Jesus will say, “Since He died for me, I should live for Him!”

What is the remedy? Is there even a remedy? Yes, **the remedy is God’s grace**, His favor and power to live differently.

6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Lest we despair and think that there's no way we can be faithful to a God who is jealous for our exclusive devotion, James tells us that God "gives greater grace" - grace that is greater than our sin, grace that gives us the power to be faithful to God. The requirement for experiencing this grace is humility. He makes reference to Proverbs 3:34 when he says that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

If you are proud, you don't really care what God thinks; you are "lord" over your own life. If you are humble, you acknowledge that God has every right to be "a jealous God" and deserves your exclusive devotion. Throughout Scripture we're told that God notices humble people. In Isaiah 66:2, for example, we read:

2 ". . . But to this one I will look,
To him who is humble and contrite of spirit,
and who trembles at My word."

God looks favorably on the one who is "humble and contrite of spirit," to the person "who trembles at [God's] word." Humility isn't feeling terrible about myself; being humble involves acknowledging that since God is God I should take seriously what He says and what He wants. In verses 7 through 9 James gives a series of commands that explain the way a humble person responds when s/he has become a friend of the world.

7 Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humility and submission to God go hand-in-hand. Humility involves saying to God, "Since You are the Creator and I am the created, I submit to You and Your ways." A proud person says, "I don't care what God thinks; I'll live my life the way I want." James gives three pairs of commands that describe the attitude of a person who submits to God. Next week we'll talk about this in more depth when we see that ***desperate people repent***.

First, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." The devil (or Satan) only has the power that we give him. As believers we are raised up and seated with Christ far above the evil powers and principalities of this world (such as Satan). If we resist the devil, he has no choice but to flee from us; he only has the authority we give him. As we draw near to God, God draws near to us. There is nothing standoffish or stingy about our heavenly Father. He gladly reciprocates when we draw near to Him.

Second, James writes, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." We remove anything that might pollute our lives and make us anything other than single-minded in our devotion to Christ.

Third, “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.” Instead of wandering through life oblivious to the ways we’ve cheated on God, we become broken over our unfaithfulness. A healthy person’s emotions mirror his/her true condition. If we use the terminology of this sermon series, we would say that James is telling us to become desperate for God through repentance.

James returns to the topic of humility in verse 10:

10 Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

Sometimes we will be humbled by our circumstances. But James challenges us to **humble ourselves** in the presence of the Lord. When we do, we experience the pattern that we see throughout Scripture. God exalts those who humble themselves. For example, in Genesis Joseph went from being imprisoned to being second-in-command over all Egypt. Sometimes God reverses our circumstances in this life; other times we don’t experience this exaltation until the resurrection from the dead. Either way, God gives grace to the humble.

Again, the logic is rather straightforward: desperate people need God’s grace; God gives grace to the humble; therefore desperate people should humble themselves. In our time remaining let’s consider ways that we can humble ourselves. This list isn’t exhaustive, but representative of ways that Scripture tells us to humble ourselves.

Submit every area of your life to God. This is the emphasis of James 4. It is arrogant to cheat on the God of the universe (who sent His one and only Son to die for our sins) by being a friend of the world. And remember that the worldliness James described showed up as strife in relationships with people and self-centered prayers.

Have you settled in your mind and heart that God deserves every single area of your life? Or are you “lord” over an area or two of your life? When you think about it, it’s arrogant to tell God, “Thanks for sending Jesus to die for my sin, but I’m not really letting you in to this area of my life.”

I know first-hand that it’s possible to submit some areas of my life to God and then to give myself a pass in other areas. There is usually a good explanation for why we do this: sins that have become addictions, sins committed against us in the past, deficiencies in our childhoods, etc. But it is arrogance when our explanations become excuses for not submitting to God.

Next week we’ll discuss in depth how desperate people can respond with repentance - true godly repentance. The first step of repentance is submitting every area of our lives to God. Even though you have failed a thousand times, say to God, “Because I have been bought with a price - with the blood of Jesus - I submit my thought life to You. . . my words . . . my finances. . . my marriage . . . my future . . .”

Receive the help of others in the body of Christ. This point is simply an acknowledgment of how God has designed the body of Christ. Each of us needs what

others in the body of Christ can offer us. Certainly God gives us directly as we seek Him. But He also gives to us through other believers. Sometimes our pride keeps us from admitting that we need other people.

One way you can humble yourself is to reach out to someone else for help, for encouragement, for counsel. If you're desperate for God to do something in your life or in the lives of those you love, you probably need what someone else has to offer.

A few weeks ago we commissioned our first Stephen Ministers. This is a team of people who has received extensive training in caring for people who are hurting in some way. One way you might humble yourself is by letting your need be known and allowing someone like a Stephen Minister to come alongside you. Take one of the brochures and contact one of the persons listed on the back.

Dwell on the humility of Jesus (especially the cross). Dwelling on the humility of Jesus can give us a vision for humility like nothing else. The New Testament stresses that Jesus has always been humble. He has never been arrogant toward God or toward people. Philippians 2 makes the point that Jesus was humble even before becoming one of us: humility prompted Jesus to lay aside His heavenly prerogatives and take on flesh and blood.

We read in Philippians 2:8 that He humbled Himself while on earth:

8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Humility and obedience went hand-in-hand for Jesus. He humbled Himself by submitting to the Father's will, going to the cross as our substitute. Paul continues:

9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

John Stott wrote:

Every time we look at the cross Christ seems to be saying to us, "I am here because of you. It is your sin I am bearing, your curse I am suffering, your debt I am paying, your death I am dying." Nothing in history or in the universe cuts us down to size like the cross. All of us have inflated views of ourselves, especially in self-righteousness, until we have visited a place called Calvary. It is there, at the foot of the cross, that we shrink to our true size. (*The Message of Galatians*, p. 179)

Carl Henry asked, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" One of the most practical ways to learn humility is to dwell on the cross of Christ.