

Humility, “our Greatest Friend”

James 4:7-12

Many years ago John Stott wrote this:

“At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”

John Stott

This statement is based on Scriptures such as James 4:6 (which we studied last week):

6 . . . “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Since the primary relationship in our lives is our relationship with God, and since God opposes/blocks/fights against those who walk in pride, then there is a sense in which pride really is our greatest enemy. We would therefore be smart to confront and renounce our own pride when it surfaces - for our good and for God’s glory.

And since God gives grace/help/favor to those who walk in humility, then there is a sense in which humility really is our greatest friend. We should therefore cultivate humility in a very intentional way.

Last week we saw how James applied this perspective about pride and humility to the issue of unity in the church. The conclusion we drew from James 4:1-6 was that ***Our only hope for genuine unity is to walk in humility so that God lavishes His grace upon us.*** Our hope is not in our giftedness or our strategic planning or our personalities or our knowledge of the Bible. Our only hope is to walk in humility so that God lavishes His grace upon us. We have to have God’s grace if we want genuine unity.

In verses 7 through 12 James tells us ***how we walk in humility (and therefore how we pursue unity)***. James gives a series of rapid-fire commands in these verses. As we consider these commands, I’ll try to show how interconnected they are and how they promote genuine unity in the church (not merely getting along, but genuine peace/shalom in our midst). Ultimately I hope to show that walking in humility is essential for our mission of making disciples.

A Pattern of Humility (and therefore how we pursue unity in the Church) James 4:7-12

Since God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble, James tells us:

7 Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

To submit to God means to recognize His rightful place of authority in your life. Instead of ignoring God’s will or rejecting God’s will, you say to God, “I want Your will to be done in my life.” I want to pause and ask, When was the last time you expressed to God, ‘I submit whole-heartedly to You and Your will. . . You are Lord of my life. . .’?”

The rest of this passage explains specific ways we can submit to God and humble ourselves before Him.

The first way that we submit to God and humble ourselves before Him is to “resist the devil,” knowing that “he will flee from you.” In the Bible, the devil is an intelligent, powerful spiritual being who opposes God. We’re told in Isaiah 14 and Ezekial 28 that his pride/arrogance prompted him to rebel against God. Instead of submitting to God, he rejects God’s authority and His ways. And he tries to influence humans to do the same (as in the Garden). When we resist the devil, we are siding with God and saying, “I do not want to imitate the pride of the devil.”

The promise is that when we resist the devil, “he will flee from us.” In other words, his power over us is broken. We cannot take this promise out of context; it is only as we submit to God and walk in humility as described in the rest of this passage that we can resist the devil and find that he flees from us. This was Jesus’ experience in the wilderness. We read in Matthew 4 that after being tempted for 40 days, “the devil left Him” (Matthew 4:11).

The first half of verse 8 gives the “obverse” of the second half of verse 7 (Blomberg, p. 194). Whereas if you “resist the devil and he will flee from you,” James says:

8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. . .

James uses the same verb to describe our drawing near to God and His drawing near to us. The term simply means to *approach* someone. We can approach God because the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus make Him approachable. Drawing near to God isn’t primarily an emotional experience; we’re not primarily talking about getting to the place where we *feel* near to God. Feelings are often a byproduct of being near to God. But drawing near to God means moving nearer to God in our thoughts, words, and actions. Instead of keeping our distance from God and His ways, we decide to move closer.

For example, in James 1:27 we read that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God” is to “visit widows and orphans in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Widows and orphans would represent the most vulnerable and “the least of these” in that culture. As a way of drawing near to God, you might allow God to break your heart for the least of these in our community. This will take an investment of time and energy. But it’s well worth it because once you have the mind of Christ and the heart of God toward specific people, then you have compassion that you can express in tangible ways: you can mentor a kid who needs a stable adult in their life (get in touch with me if you want details on this), you can be part of an effort to feed the hungry (we’re still doing a weekly lunch that’s distributed through another church in town), you can befriend an international student who’s new to our culture. These are ways to draw near to God. (Remember how Jesus said that if you give a cup of cold water to the least of these, you’re doing it “unto Him.”)

In response, James writes that “[God] will draw near to you.” The father in the parable of the prodigal son illustrates this in a powerful way. His younger son had taken his inheritance, gone to a land far away, and squandered it all through “loose living.” The boy finally decided to come home (in a sense “draw near”). While he was still a long way off, the father saw him (he must have been in the driveway looking down the road), felt compassion, ran (God runs!), embraced him, and kissed him. Then they celebrated. The father welcomed the son back into healthy relationship with himself.

Jesus’ point is that that’s what our heavenly Father is like. James’ point is that when we move back toward God He will move toward us. Drawing near to God results in an ongoing relationship in which we allow Him to parent us - teaching, correcting, training, and encouraging us. Imagine what the church would be like if each of us does this - if each of us welcomes God’s parenting. We will have an extraordinary type of unity, a unity based upon our common nearness to God.

In the second half of verse 8 James gives yet another aspect of submitting to God.

8 . . . Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James is using categories found in the Old Testament (Exodus 30:17-21, Psalm 24:4, etc.) when he speaks of “clean hands” and “pure hearts.” James is urging us to repent from sin and double-mindedness in a very decisive way. In an ultimate sense, God has cleansed and purified us; those who trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection are cleansed and given a new heart. Here James is talking about the ongoing need to deal with specific sins and double-mindedness when they surface in our lives.

“Cleansing our hands” involves confessing sin to God (and to one another as we’ll see in James 5), turning from that sin, and positively following a new way of living. If we’ve learned anything during COVID 19 we’ve learned that after we wash our hands, we don’t grab a dirty doorknob, right? We wash our hands as often as necessary and we try to keep from getting dirty/germy as much as possible. That’s a good picture of how we deal with sin in our lives. (See 1 John 1:7-9.)

James also mentions, “Purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Pure is the opposite of contaminated. To have a pure heart means to be single-mindedly devoted to God. In Psalm 86:11 David prayed, “Unite my heart to fear Your name”; he knew the freedom and fruitfulness of having a united (as opposed to a divided) heart. We purify our hearts when we repent from our desires and attitudes and ambitions are not aligned with God’s. This is possible because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In verse 9 James employs more OT terminology to urge us to lament our sinful pride and the fallout it’s caused in relationships.

9 Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.

James echoes the OT prophets (see Joel 2:12) and Jesus (Luke 6:25) when he speaks about misery and gloom and of mourning and weeping. You might hear this language and wonder, "Aren't we supposed to be joyful and rejoice?" Yes, we are told over and over to "rejoice in the Lord" and to cultivate "joy." This obviously isn't an absolute prohibition against laughter and joy. It's a call to mourn and lament over our sin and its consequences. Such mourning is an aspect of genuine, heartfelt repentance and can be a prelude to true, lasting joy.

If we are led by the Spirit, we won't drift into self-condemnation and thoughts of worthlessness. No, the Spirit will lead us to lament as an expression of repentance so that we might live differently.

When was the last time you were so broken up over your own sin (not someone else's but your own) that you wept? Depending on the nature of our sin and how deeply entrenched it is, we might need a **season** of lamenting for genuine repentance. Sometimes we need more than a quick confession of sin; we need to sit in the presence of God and feel His sorrow over our sin. The goal is to have the type of "repentance without regret" that Paul discussed in 2 Corinthians 7 (verses 5-13).

Verse 10 forms an inclusio (a bookend) with verse 6. In verse 6 James writes that God gives grace to the humble; here in verse 10 he returns to that thought.

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

We humble ourselves in all the ways described in verses 6 through 9: submitting to God, resisting the devil, drawing near to God, cleansing hands and purifying hearts, weeping in repentance over our sins. In these ways we humble ourselves before God.

The promise is that "He will exalt you." This reality is taught throughout Scripture. After teaching the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus said (Luke 18:14):

14 ". . . everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

In Philippians 2 we're told that this was Jesus' experience. After Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death, God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name above all names. (see also 1 Peter 5:6). As with Jesus' experience, this doesn't usually happen in this life. But in the next life "the last will be first" and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In verses 11 and 12 James returns (AGAIN!) to the dangers of the tongue. Apparently he does so because slander and judgmental speech are a destructive form of pride (and the opposite of humility). Here's what he says:

11 Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver

and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

Basically James is saying that there is only one Judge and it's not you or me. God is the Judge and He doesn't delegate that function to anybody. We are arrogant to speak against and judge each other. It's not our responsibility; and we aren't qualified (for many reasons, but primarily because we simply don't know the motives of another's heart).

James isn't implying that we never confront offenses and sins in the lives of others. In several places, we are told to help others navigate their way out of sin (e.g., the last two verses of the book of James). But we are consistently told that before we can help others avoid sin, we have to deal with the sin in our own lives (as James is advocating). Otherwise there's about a 0% chance the other person will receive our correction.

For example, in Matthew 7 Jesus taught that we shouldn't judge each other lest we be judged. Judgmental people will be judged harshly. But that doesn't mean that we don't care about and ignore the sins and deficiencies we see in other believers. Here's the pattern Jesus teaches:

5 "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

When I was in seminary, a professor told us, "Whenever you critique another person's position, do so as if that person were sitting in the front row. Critique that person's position so that their comment afterwards would be, 'That's accurate; that's fair.'" I think that's a wise standard to which all of us should hold ourselves. If you for some reason you are talking about someone with whom you disagree, do so as if they were standing there in your presence; do so in such a way that they would say, "That's accurate and fair." I'll be the first to admit that this is a high standard. It's much easier to badmouth other people and not think a thing about it.

But remember what's a stake: our unity and our influence in the lives of people who need Jesus. As I mentioned last week, people are supposed to see a type of supernatural unity that convinces them that 1) God sent Jesus, and 2) that God loves them! This was a risk that God gladly took.

Dorothy Sayers wrote that "God underwent three great humiliations in his efforts to rescue the human race" (Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, p. 147). The first was the Incarnation, taking on the limitations of a human body. The second was the Cross, dying as a criminal in public. The third was the Church. "God entrusted His reputation to us."

God basically says to the world, "If you want to know what I'm like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what Jesus is like, look at the Church. The Church is the body of Christ, His physical representation on earth." Since unity is essential, humility is essential (not optional).

On the screen you will see a summary of the commands we've discussed. As you look them over, ask God to highlight one (or maybe two) of them that you need to pursue.

Submit to God. . . Humble yourself in the presence of God:

Resist the devil

Draw near to God

Cleanse your hands. . . purify your hearts

Be miserable and mourn and weep

Do not speak against (and judge) one another