
“Submit Yourselves Therefore to God”

JAMES 4:7-10

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

God gives grace to the humble, so humble yourselves before the Lord.

James said in 4:6 that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. We covered that last week. Since that is true, what follows in this week’s passage seems like a statement of the obvious: if you want His grace, humble yourselves before the Lord. But what does it mean to humble yourself before the Lord? In a word: repent.

INTRODUCTION

Last week we ended with James’ statement in 4:6, **But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

If God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, this next part seems like an obvious statement. But you know that obvious statements are stated because there’s always someone who doesn’t connect the dots. Like “Caution: Hot Drink” on a McDonald’s coffee cup, James wanted to prevent anyone in his church from getting burned. If you want God’s grace, humble yourselves before the Lord. But what does it mean to humble yourselves? In a word: repent. Let’s read James 4:7-10.

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

REPENTANCE BEGINS WITH SUBMISSION

Verse 7 says, **Submit yourselves therefore to God. Repentance begins with submission.** The word **submit** is a not a word we like to hear. We like to feel a sense of control; but submission means giving up control. This is a term familiar to the military, literally meaning to voluntarily “rank under” someone.

Contrary to what is taught in some evangelical churches, no one comes to faith in Jesus Christ without submitting to Him as the *Lord* Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as trusting in Him as Savior without submitting to Him as Lord. That’s a false concept of salvation meant to appease the carnal minds of people who respond to emotional appeals at crusades and youth camps but who refuse to surrender their lives to Jesus.

The life of a person before Christ is characterized by slavery to sin and obedience to the lordship of Satan. At conversion, she is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into God’s kingdom, where Jesus is ruling and reigning as King of king and Lord of lords. This is how the bible speaks of salvation. Christians are the happy and loyal subjects of a new, gracious, loving, and holy king.

James says submit yourselves **therefore**. Why? Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Before that he said God gives more grace. Thus, the invitation is to come and find grace, not condemnation. You might imagine that submitting to God means giving up control of life; it might come with a sense of being conquered by Him.

The reality is that He is *already* in control, as the reigning King of the Universe, and what little control we imagine we have is exactly that, the product of our imaginations. God is sovereign and He's welcoming you into joyful participation with Him as friends. This **God** is who we're called to submit ourselves to. This God is the God who created us and redeems us and fills us with His grace. He is our Father and our friend.

What are you to submit? **Yourselves**. All of you. Not just the parts of your life in which you're ready to let go of the reins. Not just areas in which you're frustrated. Not just areas that don't matter to you. James calls you to submit yourselves to God. Will there be things the Lord wants to deal with decades from now that He's not dealing with right now? Probably so. But, we're talking about a fully surrendered heart here. A willingness to submit anything and everything He asks for.

Some people think they **submit to God** without understanding what submission means. One commentator noted that we *obey* God when we do what He commands. But we *submit* to Him when what He asks is uncomfortable or we don't want to do it but we do it anyway. It's only submission when the will of God crosses our own. Otherwise, it's just doing what we want to do. A life characterized by doing whatever we want without regard to God's will is not a life submitted to God even if we occasionally do things that resemble obedience. James said **submit yourselves to God**. That's a radical reorientation of our entire lives.

Salvation means we belong to a new kingdom, have a new Lord, and a new Father. We go from serving our father Satan (cf. John 8:44) to serving our Heavenly Father, which is why James says **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you**.

REPENTANCE LEADS TO RESISTANCE

Repentance begins with submission and repentance leads to resistance. **Submit to God and resist the devil**. Both are important. Most people do exactly the opposite. They resist God and in doing so are submitting to the devil. In our former state as unbelievers, Paul says we used to follow the devil. *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."* Ephesians 2:1-3

The devil, or Satan, is the accuser and tempter who stands opposed to God and God's will. This is why John said, *"Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning..."* 1 John 3:8 It is for this reason, we must not only **submit to God**, but also by nature of the relationship, **resist the devil**.

When a person is born again, he or she is for the first time ever *capable* of saying no to sin and resisting the devil. It is only in our new nature that we have the capacity to choose not to sin. I heard a pastor say, "Before Christ your freewill meant you were free to choose to sin however you wanted." That was the nature of your free will: you got to choose how you would sin against God: external sins like evil practices, or sins of the heart like selfish ambition and self-righteousness.

But, Paul says in verse 4, God made us alive together with Christ! We are redeemed by His blood and made new creations with a new will. This means we now have a choice. Only in Christ do you and I have the ability to say no to sin and **resist the devil**.

Once again, let's define the term here. To **resist** means to oppose or fight back. This is another military term that means to stand against in combat. Have you ever noticed how much military there is in the Bible? Notice there's no Switzerland status, there's no spiritual neutrality. We either submit to God and resist the devil or vice versa. But there's no neutral.

James tells us that if we resist the devil **he will flee from us**. Nowhere in scripture that I can recall are we told to fear the devil. We're told to be aware of him, to resist him, to not let our guard down because he's prowling around looking for someone to devour. We're told to prepare for and engage in spiritual battle.

But one thing is abundantly clear, the devil has no power over a Christian that the Christian does not give him. He's the deceiver and his power is in his deception. To the extent you believe his lies, you give him power. So, stop believing his lies! Stop believing that what you don't have is better than what you do. Or that if you had something else in life you'd finally be happy. Or that God is withholding something good from you. Or that God doesn't love unless you perform. Whenever Satan speaks, he lies, so stop believing him.

The truth is James has already told us that we are tempted by our own sin nature. (cf. James 1:14) Don't blame the devil every time you stumble. He's a finite being, limited in space, power, and knowledge. He's roaming around like a lion ready to devour, but he's not invincible. He's a dog on a leash and he's already defeated! You, however, are more than conquerors through Him who loved you. (cf. Romans 8:37)

If that were not so, Paul wouldn't have said in 1 Corinthians 10:14, *"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."* and 2 Timothy 2:22, *"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."* Sometimes resisting the devil means fleeing our own sin nature, but it's within our ability to do it!

Speaking of sin, we're going to...**but God gives more grace** (4:6). The devil wins twice when we sin and it's good to resist him both ways. The first is when we are being tempted. We should resist the devil when we're being tempted; say no to sin.

The devil also wins, though, when we have given into temptation, and we remain sullen and ashamed and we isolate from God and His people. He wins when we get stuck in our shame. When we sin and we feel the shame that comes with it, and when that shame causes us to sideline ourselves, we're playing right into the devil's hand.

Have you ever noticed how much harder it is to pray, gather, serve, fellowship with your Christian friends when you know you're not living right? Satan's got you right where he wants you; down and out.

I've said this before but it bears repeating: God loves you as much today whether you're hours or minutes removed from the sin that's caused you shame as when you're 10,000 years removed from it. That's unconditional love.

REPENTANCE IS TURNING TO THE FATHER

It is to the Father of unconditional love that James calls us to⁸ **Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.** Repentance is turning to the Father. We imagine that God is repulsed by us in our sin, especially when we've just committed it. We imagine He is exasperated by our failure. But James tells us that if we'll humble ourselves and submit, what we're going to find in drawing near to God is Him graciously drawing near to us.

Don't get it twisted, though. This is hardly a license to indulge our sin nature. James has already exhorted us to pursue wisdom from above and not just hear the Word of God but do it. He continues here, **Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.** Repentance addresses our hands and our hearts.

This is a bold call to recognize your sin and repent. Notice the bluntness of James' titles **sinners** and **double-minded**. James is pulling no punches with his church. God is holy and James addressed his audience as **you sinners** and **you double-minded**. In the bible, **sinners** is always used to describe unbelievers.

"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;" Psalm 1:1 Sinners will meet God as judge, not as Father. "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;" Psalm 1:5

And Isaiah says, *"But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed."* Isaiah 1:28

and *"Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it."* Isaiah 13:9

That's pretty difficult to hear. Sinners are going to be destroyed. That's true, but thank God it's not the end of the story. God's wrath burns against sinners and those who forsake the Lord will be consumed by it. *"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Romans 5:8

♪ My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!— My sin, not in part but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! ♪

Praise the Lord! Jesus said, *"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."* *Luke 5:32* It doesn't help anyone to sugar-coat the truth. Sinners will not stand in the judgement, but Jesus took our place when He went to the cross; and He now calls sinners to repentance, offering them grace and forgiveness of sin.

James is writing to his church, and I believe we've well established that he knew there were unbelievers among them. I sense this is James making an all-out pitch to those whom he calls **sinners** and **double-minded**, which in 1:8 he said were those who ask for wisdom without believing it will be given them. These, he said, were unstable in all their ways.

He said, **purify your hearts, you double-minded**. Not only was this a call to repentance for the sins of the hands, the things they did that people could see, and the words people hear. It was also a call to repent of the hidden sins of the heart. **Double-minded** literally means two-souled. He is describing a person who lacks integrity. He claims one thing with his mouth, goes through certain motions around people, but when no one is around to impress, he lives a different life. He's a hypocrite.

This adds further proof that James is speaking to unbelievers. Jesus said no one can serve two masters, therefore double-mindedness is essentially unbelief. The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. (cf. Matthew 22:36-40) John MacArthur states it bluntly, "A double-minded person...could not possibly be a Christian."

James is imploring these **sinners to cleanse your hands...purify your hearts**. Can we cleanse ourselves? Can we purify ourselves? All I can do is repent of sin; God has to cleanse me and purify me. Sinners and the double-minded must be cleansed and purified by the blood of Jesus and given the righteousness of God.

Only Jesus can cleanse us and thankfully he does so when we confess our sin in repentance, for as John says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* *1 John 1:9* Isn't that a beautiful promise? Cleanse us from all unrighteousness!

Notice the urgency in James' words. James is wrapping up the letter and issuing a series of short exhortations. Having already established that the human spirit is envious, which is analogous for sin in general, James now calls us to repentance.

James' message is this: rather than run from your father, draw near to Him and He will draw near to you. As I've said before, "Religion says, 'I've messed up, my dad's going to kill me.' The Gospel says, 'I've messed up, I better call my dad.'"

REPENTANCE PRODUCES GENUINE SORROW OVER SIN

This is the last outright plea from James for the reader to examine their hearts and give themselves fully and finally to God. Who knows whether this might be the final opportunity for *you* to humble yourself, submit yourself to God, resist the devil, and draw near to God? This is no time for games. James said in **verse 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom**. This is what repentance looks like, **be wretched**, or grieve your sin. Repentance produces genuine sorrow over sin.

Rather than laughing it off or silencing your conscience with entertainment, repent. James is calling for a genuine sorrow over sin. This is a deep grief like you experience when you lose a beloved family member or friend, not merely an emotional response in the moment.

Francis Fuller, in his book *Behavior of Belief* describes repentance like this, "To repent is to accuse and condemn ourselves...to be ashamed and confounded for our sins; to have them ever in our eyes, and at all times upon our hearts, that we may be in daily sorrow for them...For we naturally love and think well of ourselves, hide our deformities, lessen and excuse our faults, indulge ourselves in the things that please us..."

This is a far cry from feeling bad about our circumstances and hoping to get out of them. It is a heart that **mourns and weeps** over our sins. It turns our **laughter and joy to gloom**. **Laughter** in the Old Testament is usually associated with a flippant, ignorant, self-centered, sinful pleasure. It is the sort of response a person has as they revel in their sin. But James calls for contrition and seriousness as it relates to our sin. After all, Jesus said, *"Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."* *Luke 6:25*

That's a warning to the scornful, the arrogant fool who mockingly laughs when she ought to be weeping over her sin. James calls for both **mourning** and **weeping**. Kurt Richardson notes that "there is a close relationship between mourning and moaning...Externalizing grief through mourning now takes on its full expression in production of sound in loud crying and exclamation. Weeping then is the full expression of sorrow over human sin."

Let me ask you an honest question: Do you ever weep over your sin? Do you ever take inventory of your sin and consider just how grievous it really is to God?

What is apparent in scripture is that when the truth of the Gospel penetrates a sinner's heart and the glory of God is made manifest, their response is humble contrition and brokenness over their sin. They echo Isaiah who said, "*Woe is me! For I am lost...*" *Isaiah 6:5* As they grow in the faith, they continue to mourn and weep over their sin as it is revealed to them over time and find relief in their repentance.

Those whose sins have been forgiven and have been made clean have great reason to rejoice! But those who have failed the tests of faith James has supplied in this letter, do not. They need to **mourn and weep**.

REPENTANCE TAKES YOU LOW, BUT GOD LIFTS YOU UP

If you exalt yourself in foolish pride now, when the time comes you will be humbled. But if you heed James' final words in **verse 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord...He will exalt you. Repentance takes you low, but God lifts you up.** When you get low before the Lord and acknowledge there's nothing good in you, God will lift you up at the proper time.

Be like the tax collector Jesus spoke of in Luke 18. In that parable, a religious and prideful man, a Pharisee, and a broken, sinful man, a tax collector went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee bragged about how good he was, thanking God that he was not like the tax collector. The tax collector stood far off, and wouldn't even raise his eyes up to the heavens. He beat his chest and begged God to forgive him, saying, "have mercy on me, the sinner."

Luke records that Jesus told this parable to people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. They exalted themselves. But it was the tax collector Jesus said who went home justified before God. "*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,*" Jesus said, "*and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" *Luke 18:14*

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble...so humble yourselves before the Lord. "*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him...*" *Isaiah 55:6-7*

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