

Submit Yourselves to God

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Tom, and I'd love for you to keep that open as we spend time in God's words together.

One author has described the good news of Jesus in this way. You are simultaneously more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope. You're simultaneously, at the same time, more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope.

Or to put it another way, as followers of Jesus, we are sinners and saints at the exact same time.

We are sinners because we are sinful and flawed. And we are saints, not because of how good we are, but because of how loved we are in Christ.

We are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope. We are sinners and saints at the same time. And you can see this in, for example, the apostles in the New Testament.

[1 : 16] You think of the apostle Peter. And you see in him a flawed individual, to say the least. On a number of occasions, a very public fall or sin was found in the life of Peter.

And he recognized himself his sinfulness, and yet at the same time recognized that he was loved by Jesus. And you think of the occasion when Paul, one of the other apostles, rebuked Peter for Peter's sin.

And yet Paul wasn't doing that because Paul thought himself any better. Paul describes himself as the worst of sinners. And here in the letter of James, James is writing, as we've seen, to what he calls the 12 tribes in the diaspora.

So believers who have been scattered as a result of attack or persecution in Jerusalem. And as he writes to them, he speaks to them in such warm, glowing terms.

He speaks to them as beloved brothers and sisters, dear brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And yet here in this same letter, he refers to them in verse 8 as sinners and double-minded.

[2 : 37] And so these people that James is writing to are saints. They're loved by God, set apart by God, made holy in Christ. And yet at the same time, they are sinners.

And James wants them, God wants them, to move closer to it not being sinners and closer to being like Jesus.

James pleads with them to, in one sense, be who they are. He wants them to be who they are. They are brothers and sisters in Christ. Well, live like this.

They are believers in Christ. Well, live like this. They are forgiven in Christ. Well, live like that. They are children of God.

Well, live like that. And for us here this morning, if you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, it is true that we are saints because of what he has done for us.

[3 : 41] We are set apart and loved by him. And yet at the same time, it is true that we are sinners. And you know that, right? You know that you are loved.

And yet you know the sin that bubbles away in your mind and your heart, like me. James wants to move us towards being what we are.

And so, as he does that for these first century Christians, and as God will do that for us as we spend time on it, the two questions that James really asks us is, how do we get into fights as Christians?

And then how do we get out of them as Christians? And so, let's think first of all about how we get into fights as Christians. In verse 1, James says, what causes fights and quarrels among you?

And again here, James is inviting us to reflect on this question. He's writing to these churches dotted around the place. And so, he's writing to them as bodies of God's people, in a sense, groups of God's people.

[4 : 52] So, he's not writing to them as individuals, primarily. He's writing to them as local churches. And he wants them to realize that, as local churches, they have a shared responsibility for the fights and quarrels that bubble away among them.

In other words, James is asking them this question. And you know, as they listen to this in the first century, James now is going to be getting real again with us.

He's not going to pretend that everything is perfectly fine in these local churches that he's writing to. But he longs for them to live who they are, to be who they are.

They're brothers and sisters, loved in Christ. And he's calling them to live like that. It's bad enough that you're being attacked by the Roman authorities. Don't attack each other as well, James is saying to them.

And you know, if you've been with us in this letter that James writes, there were conflicts between rich and poor. There were teachers who were tempted to grasp after greatness.

[6 : 04] There was the danger of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. There was disorder and the potential for vile practices. They praised God and they cursed people. And James says, this shouldn't be so.

Or in verse 11 here, James says, don't slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it.

James asks, what causes fights and quarrels among you? And I know we've read on already, but I wonder how you would answer that. And I wonder how you'd answer it in the heat of the moment.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? James says, I was cycling into town recently. And there was two cars, one in front of the other, driving the opposite direction.

And one of them wanted to pull in and park. And so he indicated pulled in. But he wasn't parking where he pulled in. He wanted to reverse into a space. Now, Cork streets are tight, as you know.

[7 : 05] And so the car behind him couldn't pass him. So she was right up close to him, his bumper. And so he was trying to reverse. She was wondering, what is he doing? And as I passed, her window was open.

And you could hear some words being said that I won't repeat. So her answering that question in that moment, she would say, well, what causes fights and quarrels here is that guy's driving.

And, you know, that is the temptation for us in the heat of the moment when we say, well, it's their fault. It's his fault. It's what she said. It's because I stubbed my toe this morning.

It's because I'm late for work. All these external reasons. And interestingly, the lady who was in the car behind, she was driving along with a bar of chocolate in her hand on the steering wheel and her other hand on the gear stick.

And it wasn't one of those bars of chocolate where you can just bite it off. You have to break it off with the other hand. And so it's hard enough driving through Cork streets in normal circumstances.

[8 : 03] But she's taken on herself to eat a bar of chocolate while she's doing it. And surely you would think she has some responsibility in this situation to be causing the fight and the quarrel that's going on.

James wants us to realize, actually, it's not the other person. It's not out there. It's in here. It starts in us. Sometimes it is genuinely the case that we have done everything we can to keep the peace.

But sometimes James wants us to realize it starts in here. Or it starts in the heart of somebody else. He says that in verse 1, So they're coming from within believers, within Christians, within us as individuals.

And it happens because we want more than we have. James says you desire but do not have. You want, we want more than we have.

We live in a culture that tells us constantly, you need more. And the reason that works in the advertising is because we agree with it.

[9 : 20] Yes, we do need more. And James says if that's our heart attitude, then it does lead to fights and quarrels. And not only when we want more than we have, but when we want what the other person has, what they have.

In verse 2, you covet, but you cannot get what you want. And so James wants us to understand how we get into fights and quarrels.

It's not primarily out here. It's primarily in here. And he says this to the church as a body of God's people.

And the reality is that if it was just out there, if it was just circumstances around us that caused these quarrels and fights, they would be easy enough to deal with.

Because then you just remove yourself from the circumstance and the situation is sorted. You just avoid the people who annoy you. Or you avoid the ads that tempt you.

[10 : 23] And then everything's good. But because it's in here, it's because it's in here that we want things that we don't have. Or we want what others have.

That it's not so easy to deal with. If you've ever dealt with hardwood floors, you'll know that a good sanding of a hardwood floor will remove the surface imperfections.

It'll remove the blemishes and the rough bits and everything. And what you end up with is a lovely, pristine, hardwood floor after you've sanded it. And if the issue is just a surface issue, then it's easy.

But if there's woodworm after getting into the floor, if it's in the wood, or if there's rot after getting into the floor, then it's a bigger problem. And James wants us to realize that what causes quarrels and fights among us as a church is what goes on in our hearts.

It's in here. We want more. We want what the other person has. And we would do anything to get it. James says in verse 2, You desire but do not have, so you kill.

[11 : 34] You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. And James here is using strong language. You kill, you quarrel, you fight.

James isn't saying that we literally are physically killed. But he's saying when we fight and quarrel, there is violence going on.

It may be emotional violence. It may be spiritual. It may be relational. James wants us to realize the power of our words to do damage.

And of course, James here is just building on Old Testament wisdom in the book of Proverbs. The words of the reckless pierce like swords.

A harsh word stirs up anger. With his mouth, the godless man would destroy his neighbor. Or with this one, without wood, a fire goes out.

[12 : 33] Without a gossip, a quarrel dies down. James is in agreement with the Old Testament wisdom. He's in agreement with Paul's wisdom. Paul says to Timothy, Remind them of these things and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

And of course, this is Jesus' teaching too. Jesus says, I tell you, anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, Racha is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, You fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell. And so Jesus and James and Paul want us to realize that what causes quarrels and fights among us is what goes on inside us.

And what that leads to is doing things that are violent. It tears down. It ruins. It destroys. And maybe you have seen this in churches.

Maybe you've seen the destruction that words can do. A harsh word or a criticism or a slander. Or even a polite word. But it's a word that is designed to harm.

[13 : 53] I watched a movie years ago, which wasn't a violent movie. But in the movie, there was an act of violence. And what happened was two men were standing looking at each other quite intently.

And they were keeping eye contact with each other. And then one of the men realizes that something has happened. He looks down to his torso. And everything goes quiet and silent.

And he realizes that the other man is after putting a knife in him. And what's so shocking about it is the subtlety of it. The silence of it. The quietness of it.

The politeness of it. In a sense. James says when we quarrel and fight. When we want what others have.

And when we do anything to get it. What we're doing is harm. We're doing great harm. As we do it, we turn our backs on God, James says.

[14 : 59] He speaks to these first century Christians. He says, you adulterous people. Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity with God in verse 4? You know, James is speaking to these people who have God as their father.

He loves them. And he longs to give them good gifts. And in a sense, James is saying, if only they would ask God. Doesn't Jesus say that God is this father who is far kinder, far better than any earthly father?

And which one of us would give a snake or a stone to a son who asks for bread or for fish? How much more will God give good gifts?

But James says, if we don't turn to God for our needs to be satisfied. Instead, if we try to have our needs satisfied elsewhere. We are turning our back on him.

It is spiritual adultery, James says. And of course, James here is again picking up on Old Testament imagery. Where God speaks about his people as a bride.

[16 : 11] As a wife who he loves. Who he would do anything for. Who he would die for. And James is pleading with these brothers and sisters.

Fighting and quarreling in this way. Taking matters into your own hands in this way. Rather than asking God for what you want. Or asking God for things that aren't good for you to have.

James says is adulterous. And so God yearns jealously.

Verse 5. Do you think scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

Like a husband rightly yearning jealously for his wife. God yearns jealously for his people. He wants them back.

[17 : 17] He wants them to be his. And he wants them to be his alone. That we would come to him for our needs to be satisfied. That we would ask him for the good things that we want.

And not ask him for the things that we would want selfishly for ourselves. And James says to these believers.

He wants them to remember to know that they are saintly sinners. He wants them to understand what gets them into fights and quarrels.

And as we listen to it this morning. We are given the tools that we need to recognize the patterns that lead us down this road. And so maybe it is the case that you find yourself in a similar situation to what James describes here.

Where there is a quarrel or a fight. And the first question to be asked in that situation is. Is this as a result of me wanting something more than what God has given me?

[18 : 23] Is it me wanting what that other person has for myself? Is it because I haven't brought this to God and asked him for what I want or need?

James wants us to reflect and to work through these questions if we find ourselves in a quarrel or a fight. Of course he is speaking to all of God's people in this way.

And so he wants them too to realize that in good conscience if we have done everything we can to be at peace with others. He wants us to realize that maybe there is something going on in that person's heart.

That is causing the quarrel. That is causing the fight. James gives us the tool to recognize that as well in the life of another. If you have not traveled down this road or if you are not on this road of quarreling or fighting, James wants us to recognize the warning signs so that we can turn back before it is too late.

To ask of ourselves, are there things that I am wanting that I don't really need? Are there things that someone else has, whether it is material things or career or family things or relationships, that I want for myself and I will do anything to get?

[19 : 43] James wants us to realize that God is like this loving husband who yearns over us to come to him with what we want.

James wants us to trust him that if he doesn't give us what we want, then maybe or certainly it is not for our good. James asks this question, how do we end up in fights and quarrels?

Well, because we are more sinful and flawed as God's people than we dared believe. But then he asks the second question, how do we get out of fights and quarrels?

Which is a good question to ask. And the simple answer to this is by God's grace. James says to us in verse 6, he gives us more grace.

God gives us more grace. Isn't it amazing that if you find yourself having fought and quarreled and selfishly wanted what the other person has and done anything to get it, isn't it amazing that James says there's a way back from this?

[21 : 08] That God doesn't leave us to that? That he gives more grace? Yes. And of course, James knows and his first hearers know and we know that it is through Jesus and his finished work on the cross that we receive the grace of God.

We want what we don't have. We want what the other person has. We do anything to get it except return to God. And what does God do? He gives us what we actually need, which is his own son to save us from this.

He gives us more than we could ask or imagine. He gives us his son so that we are forgiven. It's amazing that James can use such strong language to speak of these believers.

They are killing each other. They are adulterous people. And yet God's grace is more. James plunges us down to the depths of our hearts so that we can realize the further depths of God's grace to us.

And James says the way in which we get back from this place of fighting and quarreling and turning our back on God is by submitting to God.

[22 : 29] Verse 6. He gives us more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourselves then to God.

And part of submitting to God is acknowledging, God, I've got it wrong. I've got it wrong. I wanted things that weren't good for me. I was jealous of what that other person had.

I have gone about getting these things in a way that has not been pleasing to you. I've not turned to you, God. And do you know what happens when we submit ourselves to God?

When we humble ourselves before him? He gives us more grace. More grace. Lavish grace, James says. He gives us grace to resist the devil.

Verse 7. Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Isn't that amazing? You think of the battle that Jesus undertook with the devil in the desert.

[23 : 32] And it took the savior of the world to overcome the devil in the desert and on the cross. And then James says that we can resist the devil.

Not in our own strength but by the grace of God. And so the devil comes and tempts us and said, you need what they have. You need to cut them down. You need to get what they have.

Or the devil says to us, I can't believe you behaved like that again. That dear brother and sister. And you murdered them with your words. And we can resist the devil by saying, it's true.

I'm a sinner. But I have a great savior. And for every accusation you bring against me, Jesus has dealt with it.

He has dealt with it perfectly and fully. And we can resist him so that he flees from us. And he is far from us. God gives us grace to resist the devil.

[24 : 35] He gives us grace to draw near to him. Come near to God, James says, and he will come near to you. And you wonder how in the wide earthly world can sinners like us come near to God?

It shouldn't be. And the answer is the grace of God. That through the cross of Jesus, he has opened up the way for us to draw near to God.

And when we do that, we are not consumed. God comes near to us. We can come near to God.

And you know what that feels like, don't you? You know the difference between when you're keeping God at arm's length, a brief flurry through the praises of scripture, a quick prayer, and out of his presence.

The difference between that and when we have the motive, the attitude, I'm here, God. In your word, in your presence, by your spirit, through Christ.

[25 : 44] And I'm praying and I'm not going anywhere until I taste and see that you are good. Until I experience again the joy of God. Until I experience again the joy of sins forgiven.

Until I know again the joy of salvation. And when we draw near to God, he draws near to us. And you walk out of that meeting with God, a changed person.

And you walk in heavy laden, burdened down. And you walk in with your spirit lifted. And the joy of salvation.

God gives us the grace to draw near to him. He gives us the grace to change our actions and our attitudes. Those things that apart from Christ, we could never change in ourselves. James says, wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

And you think, how can a sinner wash their hands? How can a double-minded person purify their heart? And the answer is through the grace of God. That he gives us the grace we need to do what he has called us to do.

[26 : 52] And the joyful reality of seeing change in our actions and in our attitudes is a beautiful thing to experience. And we long for more of it because it is making us more like Jesus.

Paul calls us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And I can tell you, if it depends on us to work out our salvation, there is no doubt that there would be fear and trembling.

But that isn't the fear and trembling that Paul is speaking about. The fear and trembling that Paul is speaking about is the fear and trembling that goes along with knowing that it is God who works in us.

We work out our salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in us. According to his good purpose. His good pleasure.

James calls us.

[28 : 18] James calls us by the grace of God to grieve and to change. In verse 9, grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom and your thinking.

I thought being a follower of Jesus was a joyful thing. Why is James calling us to grieve and to mourn and to wail? Well, the reason is because the joy and the laughter that James is speaking about here is a joy and a laughter that is separate from knowing our sins forgiven.

It is a joy and it is a joy and it is an unrooted laughter. James calls us to grieve over our sin. Not just to grieve over the consequences of our sin.

But to grieve over the sin itself. That it cost Jesus' life for me to be forgiven. And he calls us to do that not because we are to remain in mourning and gloom.

But because it's on the other side of that genuine grief over our sin. That there is this deeper joy. This richer laughter.

[29 : 30] Like the psalmist says, our mouths were filled with laughter. Our lips with songs of joy. Why? Why is that? Because God has revealed to us the darkness of our own hearts.

But he has done that in order to show us the depth of his forgiveness in Christ. That is where true joy and true laughter lives.

And so there is, as one author puts it, this gospel waltz. Where we repent and receive and recommit.

We repent of our sin. That's part and parcel of this life following Jesus. We receive the joy and the forgiveness that comes with knowing our sins are forgiven.

And we recommit to living for him again in this and every area of our lives. And we need each step in that waltz. The repentance and the receiving and the recommitting.

[30 : 29] Sometimes we try to receive the joy and the peace of God without first having grieved over our sin. When I start waltzing, I can end up anywhere on the dance floor.

But with a gospel waltz, where do we end up? We end up with the devil far away from us. We end up with God near to us.

We end up with our actions changed, doing good things. We end up with our attitudes, our hearts changed. Good motives, good desires.

And we end up with our desires. And we end up not in gloom and mourning and the depths of the spear. We end up lifted by God. In verse 10, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

What a wonderful promise. And you know, don't you, that being lifted up by yourself just does not work. It's like that guy in my physics book in first year who was trying to lift himself up by his shoelaces.

[31 : 44] And he was trying as hard as he could. And he couldn't get his feet one inch off the floor. But when God lifts us up, that is a joyful thing.

And he does that for us through what Jesus has done on the cross. He does that for us through this deep love that knows greater the depths of our sin.

But deals with it far more thoroughly than we could ever do ourselves. And so James' honesty in these verses, they can surprise us.

They can shock us. We want to shy away from them. But he wants us to know this. How we as followers of Jesus can end up in fights and quarrels. And he wants us to know how we can get out of them.

And as we thought at the start, he wants us to know we are more sinful and flawed than we ever dared believe. And yet we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope.

[32 : 45] Let's pray and ask God to help us as we respond to him. Heavenly Father, we pray that you allow your word to sink deep into our hearts.

Lord, we pray that you would help us if there are those who we are at odds with. Even brothers and sisters in Christ who we are fighting with or quarreling with.

Lord, even if it is internal, bubbling away within us. Lord, forgive us. Lord, help us to turn back to you.

Help us to know again the grace of the gospel. Lord, that there is a way back. And there is a way forward. Lord, that there is this joy that comes with allowing you to lift us.

And so help us to humble ourselves before you. That we might know your closeness. That we might know the devil fleeing from us. That we might know our hearts and our lives made more like Christ.

[33 : 50] Father, we pray this in your powerful name. Amen. Amen. Amen.