

Humble Yourself

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[0 : 00] In James chapter 4 and verse 6, we read these words, God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. When you hear these words, you are hearing both a warning and a promise. The warning is that God stands opposed to the proud. That if we should be the kind of people who are always fighting and quarreling because we are torn apart by our sinful passions, then God stands against us.

The promise is that God gives grace to the humble. That God encourages and empowers the humble Christian to pursue the wisdom which comes from above, which James talked about at the end of chapter 3.

Purity, gentleness, reasonableness, mercy, good fruits, impartiality, unsincerity.

[1 : 08] I think it was a cartoon with the cat Garfield which coined the phrase, humility is my strong point. As they'd say in Glasgow, maybe it's aye and maybe it's not.

It all depends on what you mean by humility. If you mean groveling, then aye. But if you mean godliness, then no. To go back to this fundamental point, it is to the humble Christian God gives grace.

That which qualifies us to receive God's grace as Christians is that we walk in humility just like Jesus himself, according to Matthew 11, 29.

In other words, you are never more like Jesus than when you are walking humbly with your God. You are never more qualified to receive the grace of God than when you're living in humility before him.

Now, in these verses, James 4, 7 through 10, James defines what genuine humility is. That humility which both makes us like Jesus and qualifies us to receive his grace.

[2 : 21] Having in the previous verses warned us against worldliness, that which he sums up in verse 6 by saying, God opposes the proud, worldliness being associated with pride.

He now moves on to encourage us toward single-minded godliness. That which again he sums up by saying, God gives grace to the humble.

If after James' challenges in these verses, you can still say with Garfield, Walter's accepted from this because he really is a humble man. If you can still say, humility is my strong point, then I rather think you've missed the point.

According to James, humility isn't groveling. Humility is godliness. Using a series of imperative commands, James describes humility in the Christian life as being composed of four virtues.

Loyalty, verse 7. Proximity, the beginning of verse 8. Purity, the end of verse 8. And lament, in verse 9.

[3 : 36] Humility is first of all, in verse 7, loyalty. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Now in verse 4, if you go back to verse 4, in the context of warning God's people against that pride which God opposes, James says, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world, makes himself an enemy of God.

And it's almost like James is saying to us, you need to make up your mind. Do you want to be a friend of the world or a friend of God? One you can be, but both you cannot.

It's like he's standing in the place of Joshua. When in Joshua 24, 15, he challenges the Israelites saying, choose this day whom you will serve. You cannot have a foot in both camps.

Imagine trying to cross from one field to another and the fields are separated by a barbed wire fence. If you've got a foot on one field and a foot on the other field, it's going to mean that you're sitting on the spikes of a barbed wire fence and that's going to be painful.

The unhappiest Christians I know are those with a foot in both camps. But those who can't work out who they're choosing to follow or whose friend they really are, the world's or God's.

[4 : 58] By contrast, true humility in the Christian life is found when you make the choice, the intentional, active, deliberate choice to submit yourself to God and resist the devil.

True humility in the Christian life is found when you can answer Joshua's call and say, as for me, I will follow the Lord. I will be loyal to him.

Now, when we think of the word submit, we're often thinking of passive acceptance. Someone takes you prisoner and you passively accept their authority over you.

But submit is actually not a passive word at all. In 1745, at Glenfinnan in the Western Highlands, Bonnie Prince Charlie raised the flag of rebellion.

Thousands of Jacobites flocked to his cause and declared their allegiance to him. And that's what the word submit means. To flock to God.

[6 : 00] To declare one's allegiance to God. God has raised his flag. It is shaped like a cross and it carries the slogan for the glory of God and for the good of humankind.

And James is calling us as the first condition of humility, that which makes us like Christ and qualifies us to receive the grace of God to further encourage and empower us.

But we flock to that flag and declare our undying allegiance to it. You cannot have a foot in both camps or you'll end up sitting on a barbed wire fence.

And the question is this. To whom are you ultimately loyal? Who are you choosing to follow? Make sure you've made up your mind good and proper.

If you've chosen loyalty to God, then by definition, you have chosen against the devil. It's not just that you've actively chosen to flock to God's flag. You are actively resisting the devil and his.

[7 : 11] You've entered into what John Bunyan called the Christians' holy war. Your enemy will come and sometimes you'll be disguised as an angel of light and he'll try to persuade you to compromise your loyalty to God.

The best result for him is not that you jump over the fence to his side. The best result for him is that you keep a foot in both camps. Because then he can use you to sabotage God's work by causing quarrels and fights among God's people in the church.

At the very same time Charles Stewart was raising the flag of rebellion in England, Finan, the chief of my own clan, the Southernns, called the clan to meet together at a standing stone just outside my home village of Galsby.

There, on behalf of the clan, he declared his loyalty to the king and swore to resist the Jacobite claim to the throne. On a recent village to my home village of Galsby, I stood beside that standing stone.

It's just beside the A9 as you go out to the village where the Earl of Sutherland and the clan Sutherland gathered there declared their loyalty to King George II and to resist the Jacobite claim to the throne.

[8 : 31] And I stood there and I placed my hand on the stone and I redeclared my loyalty to King Jesus and swore to resist his enemies at work in my heart and in my mind.

James is calling us today to put your hand on the stone and declare your loyalty. Redeclare for Christ. Single-mindedly follow him. The devil hates it when we do this and no doubt he'll make it difficult for us.

But I encourage all of you here and on Zoom this coming week to do this very thing. Take half an hour out of a busy day.

Intentionally redeclare your loyalty to God and swear to resist the devil. For we're promised in God's word. It's such a beautiful promise, isn't it?

That in standing with God and receiving his encouraging and empowering grace, the devil will flee from us.

[9 : 40] He hates it when we declare for King Jesus. But ultimately, though he may bark, he can't abide because Jesus is King.

And as James says in verse 6, he gives grace to the humble. Humility means loyalty. But then in the second instance, humility means proximity.

Beginning of verse 8, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Humility means proximity. In words of incredible comfort and promise, James writes, draw near to God and he'll draw near to you.

The humble Christian lives near to God. He draws near God. Back in Genesis 27, Jacob is busy deceiving Isaac into blessing him with the birthright rather than his brother Esau. You all know the story. In verse 21 of Genesis 27, a blind Isaac says to a dressed-up Jacob, please come near that I may feel you.

[10:51] Isaac wants Jacob to come close. So that he may range his hands across his son's face. He may touch his son's hair.

Feel the contours of his skin. Even though it makes the betrayal of Jacob so much more sinful, it really is a beautiful picture of what it means to draw near to God.

It means not to know him from a distance. It means to know him up close and personal. To reach out and range our spiritual hands over his divine face.

To touch his hair. To feel the contours of his skin. To listen to the beating of his heart. And to feel the breath of his mouth upon us.

It's that wonderful picture of intimacy intimacy and proximity. A child curled up on his mother's lap. He smells his mother.

[11:50] He touches his mother. He feels his mother. And he feels so loved by his mother. So secure and so safe. One of the many reasons why Christians are addicted to the writings of the Scottish Puritan Samuel Rutherford is because of the way in which Rutherford uses this language of love and proximity to describe his relationship to Christ.

For him, Christ wasn't so much Lord as lover. Not so much saviour as husband. Such intimacy with Christ was fostered over the course of many years by a consecrated devotional life of fasting, prayer, and Bible study.

In his devotions and evidently from contemporary reports of his preaching, it was as if he was closer to Christ than Isaac was to Jacob.

So close when he preached that it was said Rutherford could reach out and range his spiritual hands across Christ's face, touching his golden hair, feeling the glorious contours of his skin.

Is there such a thing as a language of love in your relationship with Christ? Is there such a thing as a language of love in your relationship to Christ?

[13:21] Or is it all clinical? Is it all dutiful? Is it all legal? In one of his letters, Samuel Rutherford wrote these words.

I've kind of modernized them a bit. He says, Christ's arrow has pierced my heart. Love would have the company of the one it loves. And my greatest pain is that I don't have enough of Christ.

My greatest pain is that I don't have enough of Christ. Yeah, I know these are words of piety, sentimentality, and perhaps hagiography. But let me ask you this question.

Has Christ's loving arrow ever pierced your heart? The humble Christian, the one to whom God gives grace, is the one who longs for a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

She'll do what it takes. She'll get rid of what she must. She'll embrace what she must just to get closer to him. If her temper is getting in the way, she'll pray for the grace of peace.

[14:33] If her envy is getting in the way, she'll pray for the grace of contentment. I think we all know Christians who we consider to be close to Jesus.

And if we're being honest with ourselves, we envy them, the intimacy they have with their Lord. Theirs is the path of humility because the closer they get to God, the closer he gets to them.

Are there any this evening who will choose the path of intimacy with Christ? Who will choose to draw near to him? Are there any who, having redeclared their loyalty to him, will go the full mile with him and for him?

When was the last time that Christ felt so close to you that you felt that if you could have reached out your hand, you'd have touched him? By the grace he gives, it can be this way again for you. and having drawn near, you'll hear his heartbeat of love. The third pillar of humility is in verse 8, second part of verse 8.

[15:48] It is purity. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and putify your hearts, you double-minded. Notice the order of James' commands. This is very important here. In the second part of verse 8, he calls us to cleanse our hands and to putify our hearts.

But the call to cleanse and putify comes after the call to draw near to God. This is the gospel way. We do not clean up our lives before we come to God.

Rather, we come to him and then by the power of his spirit at work in us, we cleanse and putify our hearts. We come first and we clean up after.

In fact, unless we come first, we'll never be able to clean up after because we'll neither have the motive nor the ability for doing so. It is only God's Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, only through that, that purity and cleansing are at all possible.

Now, the word cleanse is one which would have been very familiar to the Jewish Christians to whom James was writing here. It's most frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to the removal of uncleanness.

[17 : 07] For example, the removal of the uncleanness of leprosy or other skin conditions. In Mark 1, 42, in the account of Jesus' healing of the leper, we read, immediately, the leprosy left him and he was made clean.

Same word, he was cleansed. Likewise, the word purify was familiar in the Jewish context. It corresponded to the ritual washings a Jewish person was required to undertake before they participated in one of the festivals.

If cleanse corresponds to the removal of uncleanness, purify corresponds to intentional steps taken to make oneself clean. True humility consists in this, in taking active steps in your life to get rid of sin.

Taking active steps in your life to get rid of sin means washing yourself from all double-mindedness and spiritual indecision. Don't show it any mercy.

Our responsibility as the children of God is to strain every sinew of our spiritual muscles to cleanse ourselves from sin and purify ourselves from any double-mindedness. Don't play with sin.

[18 : 29] Don't toy with it. Don't sit in it or it will come back to bite you. You'll know that throughout lockdown doctors have tried to persuade us that if we're aware of any worrying physical symptoms, anything which may be a symptom of a more serious disease, that we should get in touch with them straight away.

Don't sit on your symptoms, they say. Get them dealt with as soon as you can before they get to the stage where they can no longer be treated. Don't play with your sins.

Deal with them straight away. Don't sit on your sin and your spiritual indecision. Deal with them now.

So suppose you know of an area in your life where you're giving in to sin. No one else may know about it but you do and that's all that's important. Perhaps you've been looking at things on the internet that you know you shouldn't be and you've been indulging it now for too long.

Deal with it now. Get rid of it this minute. Don't wait because the longer it's hold on you the more difficult it will be for you to get rid of it.

[19 : 54] Motivated by the gospel empowered by the Holy Spirit cleanse yourself of that uncleanness intentionally take steps to get rid of that sin. James here refers to sins both of the hands and of the heart.

The sins we commit outside and in, in private, in public, external and internal sins. Sins that others can see, sins that only we can see, the things that we do, the things that we say, the things that we feel, the things that we think.

And he says to us by the use of these imperative verbs you have to do this. things that we do. You have to cleanse your hands. You have to purify your hearts.

No one else will do these things for you. Paul says in Romans 8, 13, by the spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body.

By the spirit put to death the misdeeds of the body. The Puritan John Owen based a whole book on this verse. A book which has a major influence upon the piety of the reformed world.

[21 : 09] It's called the mortification of sin. Putting sin to death in your life by the spirit. After all, for what purpose do you suppose God gives grace to the humble?

Is it not this? Single-minded pursuit of holiness. It's as we draw near to God and pursue holiness that God gives grace.

Or to put it another way, God will give you grace for this great task. The pursuit of purity and holiness.

The humble Christian is a holy Christian. The humble Christian is a holy Christian. Groveling, no. But holiness, yes.

Let me ask you this evening. Are you intentionally cleansing your hands and purifying your hearts of all that you know to be wrong in your life?

[22 : 17] Is this kind of humility your strong point? And then lastly, the fourth pillar, the fourth element of the definition of humility, according to James, is verse 9, lament.

Lament. The language of this verse is that of the guilty, ashamed, and repentant Christian who knows that sin is an offense to God and has grieved his father.

The closer he gets to God, the more he recognizes how incongruent his sin really is. He is no longer able to pander to it.

He is no longer able to be satisfied living in it. Rather, he becomes deeply repentant. He mourns over his sin. He weeps over his sin. It is no laughing matter.

It is deeply shameful to him. It is his greatest shame that no matter how fiercely he fights against sin in his own life, he doesn't always have the victory.

[23 : 22] You know, things might be different now. After all, it's been a long time since I worked for a living. But when I did used to work for a living, on a Monday morning, the office gossip would center on how drunk everyone got at the weekend, or how many one-night stands had taken place.

And everyone laughed. The reality is that man's sin is no laughing matter. Another notch in the bedpost isn't a cause for joy, but a cause for shame.

Here we have the language of confession and repentance, of recognizing just how exceedingly sinful sin is, and how ugly and pervasive its influence can be.

And so the humble Christian is a repentant Christian, treading carefully. She's got a sensitive conscience. She's quick to confess her sins to God and repent of them.

Again, for what do you suppose God gives us grace if it's not this? That like a search and rescue bloodhound, we're going to have a sensitive nose for sin in our own lives.

[24 : 44] In our own lives, notice. Our own lives, not those of others. Especially the sins of bitter envy and selfish ambition. Those sins which cause all the fights and quarrels among the people of God.

the humble Christian is a repentant Christian. So, God gives his grace to the humble Christian so that he or she may be loyal to him, may desire the experience of the closeness of his presence, may cleanse and purify themselves of sin, and may be repentant and tread carefully.

Is humility still your strong point? This kind of humility? Well, I'll let you answer that one for yourself. But if humility is the path downward, and it is, it does have an upward focus, namely what we read in verse 10.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. What causes fights and quarrels among the people of God is their desire to lift themselves up, to get their own way, to control others.

So they do what they must. They step on whatever heads need to be stepped on. They manipulate things behind the scenes to lift themselves up into that place of power.

[26 : 26] Filled with bitter envy and selfish ambition, they go to war against other Christians, and all because they want this place of preeminence and exaltation.

James tells us here, the way upwards is the way downwards. That humbling ourselves before the Lord will result eventually in God lifting us up.

That being loyal to him, living near to him, being holy and repentant Christians may seem to be the downward step, but in fact it's the path to true greatness in the Christian life.

God's love. How like his brother Jesus, who once said, and I wonder whether James heard him say these words, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave.

And again when Jesus was asked, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he took a child in his arms and he said, whoever humbles himself like this child, he's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

[27 : 43] God gives us grace that we may be humble and God lifts up the humble. See the sequence? Grace first, glory then.

God gives grace to the humble now, God lifts the humble to glory then. Grace now, glory after, grace to be humble, glory for the humble.

It may not be easy to be humble, well according to James' definition of humility anyway, it may be hard to have your head stepped on by others who want to get where they want to go.

But listen, it's worth it. It's all worth it. As we close, I want to go back to an illustration I used earlier.

On one side of Scotland, Charles Edward Stuart raised the Jacobite flag of rebellion against the king and many clans gathered to his cause.

[28 : 48] On the other side of Scotland, the Earl of Sutherland raised his flag of loyalty to the king and many clans gathered to his cause. Now, we don't live back in 1745.

I'm not asking you to say what side of the fight you'd be on, just in case anyone wondering, if anyone thinks the Jacobite fights were about Scotland versus England, they need to read their history books again. But what I'm asking you about is this.

Are you with God? Or are you against God? Or do you have a foot in both camps? Whose side are you on? Answer the question for me right now.

Whose side are you on? Will you not just make up your mind, rather like Joshua and say, as for me and my household, we'll serve the Lord.

Amen.