'The blessing of humble submission'

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[0:00] Now, it's not only us who are in the church that find adultery abhorrent. Even in wider society, when, for example, there's news of adultery that breaks out among the celebrities,! There's always a scandal that follows, isn't there?

And you have to ask why that is the case, because if society by and large, not that I approve, are rather blasé about sexual promiscuity, why do they care about adultery?
And I think that's because when it comes to marriage, even the world sees that this relationship now has gone up a notch. Vows and promises now have been made, and so fidelity is required. Otherwise, trust is broken, and the bonds of a relationship undermine. And this breach of faith matters because betrayal is hurtful.
People get angry and fearful when they have been betrayed. And if you think about it, trust is actually what enables society to function.
[1:12] Because if you imagine children not trusting their parents, or parents, their childcare providers, or students, their teachers, as some of you have been, the lead up to your major exams, or citizens, their governments.

And you know, we've seen around the world, haven't you, when trust in government breaks down, what happens? So this idea of fidelity in marriage is something that I think we need to hold on to as we understand our passage today.
Because James characterizes our relationship with God in these terms. And in the Bible, from the very beginning, in the Old Testament, there has been a thread going through Old and New, which portrays God's relationship with Israel, and then later on with His people, the church, in terms of a marriage.
So yes, the metaphor of Father, God as Father, and then Israel as Son is used. But when it comes to adultery, the image of Israel as an unfaithful wife is the one that's painted.
In worshipping idols, Israel isn't just running off with one man, that's bad enough, but prostituting herself indiscriminately to any God that comes along the way.
[2:38] And so things get so bad with Israel that God has to demonstrate this graphically through His prophet, Hosea, whom He instructs to marry a prostitute, who then proceeds to run off and sleeps with other men.

And that's essentially what the prophecy of Hosea is all about. But in summary, beginning in chapter 1, this is the instruction from the Lord. Go marry a promiscuous woman, he says in verse 2, and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife, this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.
See the connection there? Go marry because the land, Israel, is unfaithful to the Lord. Now, there is nothing sexual between the marriage of God and Israel, but the analogy is being used because marriage is, like in marriage, God's covenant relationship with Israel is created through promises and vows.
First, God making promises to His people, then afterwards, His people returning promises in exchange. And that's what essentially a covenant is, a relationship that is established by mutual promises.
But unlike the marriages of today, God's covenant with His people came at a price. He had to buy back His people, buy them back from slavery and bondage to sin.
[4:12] And so, Hosea has to do this as well later on with his marriage by buying his wife back when she runs off again after he has married her.

Now, this image then of a covenantal relationship or marriage continues with Christ and the church in the New Testament. There, or in the New, Jesus purchases His bride, the church, with His own

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blood, dying on the cross, freeing us from the bondage of sin.
So, this is the backdrop then to our passage today. It helps us to understand the language that's being used in this passage. And James is trying to impress on us the reality that unfaithfulness to God is tantamount to spiritual adultery.
God has made promises to us as believers, and we too have done the same in return. So, for example, when we make our baptismal vows, some of us being baptized, when we then fail to uphold our faithfulness to God, then it's equivalent to being adulterous, which is how James now begins to address the people in verse 4.
You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.
[5:42] Here, it's very strong language, isn't it? But we have to understand that James is not saying that believers can't be friends with unbelievers. It's not about physical isolation from the rest of the world.

Rather, it's about how we relate with the world that undermines our promises of faithfulness to God. disobeying His word, compromising on our worship to Him.
And so, I think we think more in terms of friendship, not with the world, but with the world's values, buying into its philosophy or worldviews.
And that's connected, if you remember, with our passage from the previous, not last week, but the week before, where earthly wisdom, if we follow it, it's almost friendship with the world.
And that's contrast with wisdom from above. Godly wisdom. Now, we have to realize that, by and large, in James' day, the believers, just as it is today, were no longer worshipping physical idols.
[6:47] There wasn't statues that they were bound to, unlike in Hosea's time. These Jews were largely monotheistic. That is, they were turning up at the sanctuary and praying and worshipping the God of Israel.

And yet, James sees evidence of them flirting with the world. And perhaps, he's following the wisdom of the age, living for selfish ambition, as he writes about in the letter.
You know, buying into methods of self-advancement, getting ahead in life, succumbing to greed and envy. And perhaps also engaging in moral filth, which he talks about in chapter 1.
That could include sexual immorality, but its filth includes other things like lying and cheating, exploiting the poor, favouring the rich. On the one hand, praising God with their lips, and then cursing their brothers and sisters in their hearts.
Now, you might think, okay, well, this is not perfect, it's not good, it's hurtful to people, but why would we call it enmity with God? After all, you know, they're coming to church every Sunday.
[7:58] They're praising God, they're confessing the faith, you know, maybe the Apostles' Creed, or something like that. They might even be paying their tithes. Why would you call it enmity with God? Well, because, if I come back again to that image of the marriage, they were bought with a price.

The price of God's Son dying for them in order for them to live as God's people, to be holy, set apart, that's the idea of holiness, just as God is holy.
And the church, as we know Paul says, is married to Christ. And this union then requires the church to reflect Jesus as Lord and Savior, to be like Jesus, to be Christ-like, pure, just as He is.
So, God cannot stand idly by because His name and the name of His Son, His reputation is tied up with His people. It's a bit like how marriages do work, isn't it?
You often find that a wife is embarrassed by the silly behavior of her husband, kind of, you know, a bit cringy kind of thing. On the other hand, you know, if the wife, you know, does something really admirable, you know, the husband's really proud of the wife, isn't it?
[9:12] I mean, it works the other way too, of course. It's not always the man's fault. And that's the same thing, isn't it? God's reputation, like a husband, is tied up with His people. And our, you know, just as His husband and wife, and our reputation is tied up with God's as well.

God makes us look good, doesn't He? But sometimes, we make God look bad. And so, verse 5 goes on to say that that grieves the Spirit that dwells within us.
Or do you think, Scripture says, without reason, that He jealously longs for the Spirit He has caused to dwell in us? It's almost as if the marriage is sealed, if you like, by the blessing of God's Spirit given to dwell in us.

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You know, when we believe in Jesus, we're united to Him by His Spirit, and we're given this Spirit as a union, kind of union, uniting us to Christ. And so, God jealously guards His Spirit that is right now dwelling in us.
Right? If God, if you believe in Jesus, you have God's Spirit with you, in us. And so, God is jealous for this Spirit not to be, in one sense, compromised in adultery with the world.
[10:28] And again, I don't know whether you've sort of watched TV or kind of K-drama, but you often see this scenario of a husband flirting with a work colleague, SMSing, right? In his home, in his bedroom, in the middle of the night, even while the wife is sleeping next to him.

Yes? K-drama? Yes? Yeah. I've seen it, so it's true. It's the same thing with the Spirit, isn't it? The Spirit is right here with us, dwelling in us, and here we are flirting with the world.
That's why many of you who have been married, you remember your marriage vows as Christians, that we are to commit to forsake all others, right? and being faithful only to the one that we're marrying.
And yes, that's a sacrifice, in a sense, because we're called to reject, to not even entertain some of the kind of, oh yeah, kind of the pleasure that comes with flirting and all that kind of stuff. But God actually has made the same sacrifice for us, firstly, by giving us His precious Son to die for us, but then secondly, to commit exclusively to His people, in His Son.
And so it's only right that we reciprocate, isn't it? By not flirting with the world, which really is a proxy for flirting with the devil. Now sadly, of course, we do lapse from time to time because we are still weak and sinful, but every time we act selfishly or we choose comfort and pleasure over God and obeying His will, we've let Him down.
[12:08] But I think given the strength of James' words here, he's warning against something even worse, I think. It's bad enough that we lapse, but here I think he's asking them not to allow such occasional weaknesses to turn into a full-blown, sustained adultery with the world.

And perhaps the people in James' day, the Christians, believe that, you know, they can have the best of both worlds. They can get away with it. They can have their cake and eat it. I can chase success the way the world does and still remain a committed Christian.
But James has already said that is being double-minded, isn't it? Seeking after the pleasure of the world, avoiding suffering and trials, while on the same time still thinking that they can reap the blessings of eternal life.
And again, if you look on the slide, James has warned them by saying, blessed is the one who perseveres by avoiding trials because that person will receive the crown of glory, crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.
Sorry, did you pick up that I just misread that? Yeah. It's not avoiding trials, is it? But persevering under trials. And so sadly, some of the Christians, the believers in the church at the time, may have fallen for this.
[13:34] And you know, I'm pretty sure that some believers today have done the same. And so the question is, are you one of them? Have you been tempted to think you can have the best of both worlds?

That yes, you can come to church, you can say you're Christian, but then, during the rest of the week, with your time, your money, with your relationships, you can still get along and, you know, get ahead in this world.
Not that getting ahead is wrong, but it's the motivation, the desire, making it something you want to seek out as a primary goal, that is the flirtation with the world.
Now, here's the good news, though, because even though we may fail, God's first response to us is actually not retribution or punishment. But because of His abundant love, it now says, in verse 6, that His response is more grace, actually.
But He gives us more grace, it says, in verse 6. That is, He responds to our unfaithfulness not by withdrawing His covenant, but actually by extending it with more grace.
[14:46] And to me, that's reckless love, isn't it? If you ask me. It's like pouring good money after bad, if you're an investment, a guru. Continuing to love even when your trust has been broken.

sin. But, God is grace upon grace. That's His nature. He loves us to that extent that He would give us more grace in spite of our failure.
And that's the same picture that if you go back to Hosea, is being asked by God of Hosea because He instructs him to go and buy back his wife who has run off to show her more grace even though

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she has sinned.
And He's asked him to do that because that's a parable of His own relationship with Israel to restore them even though they have failed Him repeatedly. And so, in that earlier reading in Hosea again in chapter 2 later on in verses 19 and 20 God says this, I will betroth you to me forever.
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness and you will acknowledge the Lord. Then later on in verse 23 He says, I will plant her for myself in the land.
[16:01] I will show my love to the one I call not my loved one. I will say to those called not my people, you are my people. And then they will say, you are my God. So, God actually commits never to give up on Israel.

Grace upon grace. He takes the initiative to woo them back by promising even though Israel has been unfaithful in the first place to bring them back to Him.
Now, notice as well, this is Hosea chapter 2 not Hosea chapter 11 or 12 or 13. In other words, God is promising even before Israel has had a chance to repent.
He's holding out grace in the hope that they will actually respond willingly. And this is now what James says exactly is what we are to do as New Testament believers when we fail.
In response to God's grace, the rest of verse 6 says, that is why Scripture says, God opposes the proud but shows favor or shows grace to the humble.
[17:05] That is, the way back to God is not pride but humility. Humble submission. God shows favor, yes, more grace, yes, but to those who are humble.

Those who recognize that they have befriended the world and they need to turn back. And how does this entire process of humble submission work? Well, that's point 2 of the outline and verses 7 to 10 in our passage.
The first step is to submit yourselves then to God, verse 7. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Two things, submit to God, resist the devil.
Both of them go hand in hand. And it's clear what God is saying, isn't it? James is not saying negotiate yourselves with God, argue with God, bargain with God.
No. Submit yourselves to God. And the word submit implies that we recognize who's the one in authority, who's the one in the wrong, us.
[18:09] God shows us grace grace, but we respond not in bargaining with Him, not in negotiating, but in humble submission. And it's also clear here that we are able to choose whether we are proud or humble, isn't it?

Because submission has to be a willing act on our part. We have a choice. God is not going to drag us like this picture of this young little boy here, like a naughty child, back to him.
No. Submission has to be done willingly on your part. Because in a covenant relationship, like in marriage, both parties have to be willing participants in that relationship.
On God's side, He has given us freely grace. On our side, we have to come back to Him genuinely, voluntarily, in humble repentance.
Faith cannot be forced. faithfulness has to be voluntary. And while all this is playing out in your life as you're grappling with submitting to God, what is also going on at the very same time in your hearts and minds is that the devil keeps gnawing at you.
[19:26] Right? He's still in your ear. Alright? Whispering. Trying to entice you. Casting doubt on God's goodness.

You know, why does God need to be so jealous, really? He's God. You know? Does He really need you to be so loyal to Him? Why so demanding?
Are you sure what He's asking you is good for you? Right? It's exactly what the serpent put into the year of Eve, isn't it? Did God really say whatever?
And friends, when you wrestle with sin, that's what's going on, isn't it? You know what God needs you to do, and yet you still hear that thing, oh, yeah? Maybe we can negotiate with God, right? Maybe we can bargain and kind of pull it back a bit. Well, James says, resist the devil. Right? Do what Jesus Himself did.
[20:26] Remember? When Peter came up to Him and said, look, Lord, you're not going to the cross. You know, you're too important for that. What did He say? Get thee behind me, Satan.

And we can say the same thing to Satan. Get thee behind me. And the promise here is that He will flee from us. Now, He's going to keep trying, alright?

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He's going to come back and have another goal because He's going to test your resolve. But every time He does, you can resist Him and He will flee from you. His advances can be and will be rebuffed by the power of the Spirit.
And then verse 8, James then says, come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Now, some people read this and go, wow, you know, God is saying, I actually have to make the first move.
I need to come near to God and then He will come near to me. Right? But actually, if you say that, you have forgotten the context because verse 6, we have already been told that God has given us more grace.
[21:35] Right? His hands are outstretched. So the picture is not that He will only come to you when you come to Him. No, God has already made the first move.

It's a beautiful image, isn't it? Holy though He is, and sinful though we are, He's eager, He's waiting for us to come back to Him and receive that grace.
And mind you as well, He's not aloof, right? He's not sort of waiting for us, kind of, and then we have to make that long, slow walk of shame down to the corridor, you know, to your principal, kind of thing.
No. He's like the father of the prodigal son, remember? Who runs out to meet the son the moment he sees him from afar, right?
If you think about it, he's walking, the father is running. Who's covering more distance? The father, isn't it? He's going the long way to the son rather than the other way around.
[22:39] And mind you, when the parable says, or Jesus says, that the father runs, that is scandalous in the time of the Romans because any respectable man in those days does not run, all right?

They walk, all right? So for the father to run is a picture of how much the Lord loves us and is so willing for us to make that first move of humble submission to come near to him and he will come near to us.
Now by drawing near to God, as the verse says, requires a bit of soul-searching as well, isn't it? Because as we come closer to God, we realize just how clearly our failure is.
For those of you who do a bit of cleaning at home, dirt becomes more obvious the closer it gets to light. Hence, the command to wash our hands, get rid of the filth, whatever it is in your life.
Is it gambling? Is it pornography? Is it lying? Is it cheating? Stop it. Wash it off your hands. And then next, purify our hearts.
[23:53] That is, search and examine what our motives are. Are we doing these things because we don't trust the Lord? Are we doing these things out of pride?

not only are we to stop doing things, we are to understand why we've succumbed to the temptations in the first place so as not to repeat it, so as to ask God to purify our hearts so we're not motivated into these things.
Right? And then, of course, when we realize how much we've fallen, verse 9, we grieve and mourn and wear. We change our laughter to mourning and our joy to gloom.
And that's because even though God is ready to forgive, we need to just see the gravity of our sin and to lament it, to see how much it cost God in a broken relationship and how much it cost His Son through His death on the cross in order for God to extend His grace to us.
So you can see from the outline then, the process that James has set out in these verses, which I call the response of humble submission. And so on the slide, the first step is to submit to God and resist the devil.
[25:08] Then that's followed by drawing near or coming near to God, firstly, through washing of hands and purification of hearts, and then through grieving and mourning over our sin. All of this is humbling, but God is not making us do this to humiliate us.

Humility is not the same as humiliation. Right? That's a big difference. God's requirement for humility is not to rob us of dignity or to rub our nose in the dirt.
Instead, as the next verse says, His end goal is actually to lift us up. Isn't it? Verse 10. How beautiful it is. Humble yourselves therefore under God's hand and He will lift us up.
raise us up in glory because really, the church is betrothed to Christ His Son, isn't it?
The image here is that the church really is God's, the Son's royal wife almost, pure and blameless, seated at His right hand of majesty, radiant in glory.

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[26:17] That's where God wants us to be. Our humbling and our submission is not to put us down, but actually to lift us up so that we can then sit with Christ in glory.

And so that's why the sermon's title today is The Blessing of Humble Submission. I know nowadays that humility and submission is sort of like weak.
You do that if you're weak. You do that and you lose your worth as an individual. No. When it comes to God, to humble ourselves and to submit to Him is ultimately the way to blessing.
It's the only way to blessing. So, if you're here today and you're looking for, I don't know, recognition, joy, satisfaction, identity in life, well, the answer is to come near to God in humble submission because then He will enter into relationship with you and lift you up to be in His church, royal wife of His Son.
But it requires humility because the relationship is not one of equals, right? It's Creator and us creature. It's Saviour and us who are helpless and need saving.
[27:30] It's Redeemer and the ones that need to be bought back from our sin. The authority rightly lies with God, our Master. But what a blessing it is to submit to Him because when we humbly come to Him, He raises us up in glory and He makes us a shining light for Him.

His bride, the beauty of God in relationship with Him. Now, there's verse 11 and 12 to end the passage.
I'll read it and then I'll tell you my struggles with it. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one lawgiver and judge the one who is able to save and destroy, but you who are you to judge your neighbor.
Now, my struggle with it is that I'm not sure at first how these verses connect with the ones before. James' train of thought is not very clear, I have to say. It's probably my fault, not his.
[28:41] But I think there might be a connection here when we realize that the word slander that James uses or speaking against others is the idea not just about false accusation but about generally not talking down to people.

That is what it means to slander, to denigrate them and speak ill of them. And I think then it is contrasted with the fact that we are to lift them up with our words.
Just as we've just seen the Lord lifting us up as humbled believers. Because if we don't do that then we're almost no longer humble, are we? But sitting in judgment over them which in turn puts us over the law.
Because when you judge, you yourself don't subject yourself to the law, do you? But again, as I've said, how can this be when we are not God's equal? James says that there is only one lawgiver and judge, that is God, the one who can save and destroy.
So who are we to judge our neighbour? Now, that's not to say that in our society there shouldn't be judges or there shouldn't be leaders to administer justice in the church, but all these are sort of formal appointments by people who then are working under the law or working under God's word.
[30:02] What James is talking about here is more in our day-to-day interactions where with a callous word or a cutting remark or something like that, we put people down. And so easy to do that, isn't it?

It's so easy to judge people when we don't understand that situation. We jump to conclusions they've done something and without really understanding any background to it, we ascribe ill motives to them.
Well, James is saying when we realise how prone we are to weakness and to failing, then actually what we need to do is help other people rather than to put them down.
encourage them to submit to God, to draw near to Him, repent, so that they too might be lifted up just as we have been when we do the same.
So I think that's the connection, but come and tell me if you think that there's something else that I've missed. Thank you.

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