

# The Downward Path Up

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, if you're visiting with us this evening, welcome. It's lovely to have you. My name is Aaron, and I'm the minister here for this service. And you're joining us sort of about two-thirds of the way through the book of James, which we've been looking at for this last sort of four weeks or so.

And one of the things we've been saying every week is that James is a very practical book. He says, Our life is a community. I mean, look at the sins that Ross preached on last week, right? Jealousy, selfish ambition.

And this week, he talks about in verse 1, the quarrels and fights among you. So it's in the context of Christian community that James is talking, and he's addressing things which poison that community.

Jealousy, self-centeredness, fights. These are community-killing things. And that's pretty much what kind of verses 1 to 5 are about. And he's not messing around here.

I mean, the language he uses is the language of war when he describes the divisions in churches. Verse 2, I mean, he's saying that the divisions in Christian community are so bad or can be so bad that they can only be described using the most violent of language.

[ 1 : 51 ] And he doesn't just describe what's happening. He diagnoses it. Let me read the first few verses all together and you'll see what he's doing here.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? It's a good question. What causes that? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

You desire and you do not have, so you murder. You covet and you cannot obtain, so you fight and you quarrel. It's heavier, right?

I don't know how to kind of like polish this up nicely. The thing is though, we could read that. I'm not sure we would want to believe it because it's quite damning.

Which is why James uses such extravagant language. He's trying to shock us into sort of admitting this. He's shocking us into the realization that this actually, this kind of stuff goes on. Because we do naturally want to minimize this stuff, I think.

[ 3 : 15 ] We want to sort of minimize our particular part in it perhaps. You know, thinking that our tensey-weensy bit of bitterness directed towards someone else is okay.

It's not too bad. It's just a, you know, a little bit of bitterness. Folks, this stuff is too important to minimize and to sweep under the carpet. So I'll say this as plainly as I can.

Using the sort of the timber of James here. It's not okay to maintain petty jealousies amongst us. It's not okay to harbor dark thoughts about other Christians.

It's not okay to fight amongst ourselves. It's not okay to resent someone because we think they are more attractive or more successful. or sort of lucked out somehow to have greater status in us.

Bitterness is not okay. Gossip is not okay. These things destroy God's primary work in the world. Which is what? It's making a people for himself.

[ 4 : 24 ] So we can't, we can't diminish the importance of right relationships in a community like this. And we need to get to the root of the problem. And what is the root of that problem?

Well, the passage uses several words. Here's one of them. Pride. And the foil to pride is humility. And those ideas come right in the guts of our passage in verse 6.

We see that. It says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Goodness me. So, because those words are so important, I want to spend a chunk of time talking about pride and humility. Firstly, pride. Pride.

There's a great cost to pride. It's a relational cost. It's a vertical cost.

[ 5 : 22 ] It's a horizontal cost. What I mean is this. We see it affecting our relationships with other people. And it affects our relationship with God. Let's talk about this one first, okay? Verse 3 is so sad.

You ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly. To spend it on your passions. James is accusing here Christians of praying for things that will just give them satisfaction and glory and power.

He's saying that our pride can pollute our prayers. And it's tragic, isn't it? Because prayers, this should be part of a solution. Something that should be part of a solution can be kidnapped. Can be taken hold of by our hearts. And just can become another avenue for our own desires. I think it would be very challenging. I think I would find it very challenging if I catalogued my prayers. And began to think about the things that I pray for. What would that reveal about my heart? So it's this vertical relationship. Pride hurts this vertical relationship.

[ 6 : 33 ] And the horizontal relationship. Well, I've kind of talked a bit about that already. But in summary, it's we don't realize community. Christians don't realize community like we should because we put our individual comfort ahead of others.

This is what James is trying to say. And we probably do it 100 times a day in small ways. And it damages the church. And you could say it like this.

The big problem here is caused by all the... It's all about me attitude. The passage sort of summarizes that attitude in a couple of different ways.

We've mentioned pride first. It also uses the word passions. Passions is a great word, actually. Passions. The Greek word is hedone. Hedone.

Which is where we get the word hedonism from. Hedonism is the desire for pleasure. And it's the avoidance of pain.

[ 7 : 38 ] So it's this. This is the passion idea, right? It's my needs are more important than your needs. And I will not suffer or sacrifice for you.

I mean, if you're trying to describe something that was the opposite of the cross, you mean, that's it. That's it. George MacDonald was a 19th century fantasy writer and minister.

Some of you may have heard of him. Some of his theological ideas are a bit unorthodox. But, so this is not a carte blanche kind of like George MacDonald. Everything he says is amazing. However, some things he says are incredible. And here's one of them. This is a quote on the subject of pride and self-centeredness.

He's right on the money here. This is what he says. It's a reasonable long quote. Reasonable long quote. Here we go. The one principle of hell is I am my own.

[ 8 : 43 ] I am my own king and my own subject. I am the center from which go out my thoughts. I am the object and end of my thoughts. Back to me as the alpha and omega of my life.

My thoughts return. My own glory is and ought to be my chief care, my ambition. To gather the regards of men to the one center, myself. My pleasure is my pleasure.

My kingdom is as many as I can bring to acknowledge my greatness over them. My judgment is the faultless rule of things. My right is what I desire. The more I am all in all to myself, the greater I am. The less I acknowledge debt or obligation to one another, the greater I am. When we live out of our passions, which is the accusation here that James is making.

When we live out of our passions hedonistically, privileging our desires over other people's desires and needs. Whether that relationship is with others or God.

[ 9 : 45 ] When we do that, we bring hell into the church. Now have a look at verse 6 again. But he gives more grace, it says.

God opposes the proud. It's very strong language, isn't it? God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

So I've been talking about pride here. Let me talk about humility for a couple of minutes. Humility is something that can be very easily misunderstood.

Here's some misconceptions about humility. Humility is attached to a particular personality trait. That's wrong.

You can have very humble extroverts. And you can have very prideful introverts. I was speaking to somebody recently who is a quieter person. And they said the other day to me, they go, you know, people often come up to me and say, Oh, you're so humble.

[10:50] And he said, they have no idea. I'm filled with such pride. First misconception. Humility is attached to a particular personality trait, like quietness or something.

Second misconception. Humility is passivity. No. Humility is not passivity. It's not weakness. It's not quietness. It's not shyness. The Bible describes Moses as the most humble man who ever lived. And yet, he went to Pharaoh and said, Let my people go. So, he went to the most powerful figure in the world and said, Give up the cornerstone of your economy, which is, you know, a million free people, like free labor.

Give that up. Would you? Moses wasn't passive or timid. He was described as humble. Moses was very courageous.

And he was courageous because he was so humble. I'll explain that more in a moment. Third misconception. Humility is bad self-esteem. No.

[12:01] It's not bad self-esteem. It's not thinking you're awful. Humility is not, and this is important, listen to this sentence. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less. So, a humble person is confident in their innate value because they know they're made in the image of God and that God is sovereign in taking care of their life circumstances.

So, a humble person can be more hopeful, can see beyond their circumstances much easier than a proud person. A humble person can forgive when attacked verbally, when assaulted, and people say, Oh, you're awful.

Because they know they have value. Humility is, in this sense, it's not, people go, Oh, humility is kind of like, it's a bit cowardly or something. It's the opposite of cowardice, actually.

Because cowardice is still, you're still turned in on yourself when you're cowardly. It's still all about you. When your self-esteem is really low, it's still all about you. That's just another kind of weird version of pride.

[13:13] Humility looks beyond yourself. It looks past yourself. Which is why humble people can be the most courageous, the easiest to get on with, the most productive. It's the proud who are curved in on themselves who are always so easily offended and thinking about their rights and so sensitive to being snubbed.

So, humility is not attached to a particular personality trait. It's not bad self-esteem. It's not passivity. It's an honest assessment of your value before God, who you are before God, and thinking about others more than you think about yourself.

Let's define this even more because I think this is really important. If this is right in the guts of this passage, we've got to get this right. Jonathan Edwards was an American Christian preacher in the 1700s, regarded as one of America's greatest intellectuals.

And he witnessed a lot of revivals and he saw them often peter out. And so he wrote a book called On Revival and he sort of talks about why he thinks this happened. And he points to these community-killing traits in James and saying, here's why these revivals peter out.

It's proud and self-centeredness. Now, I'm going to paraphrase six differences between pride and humility. So define pride, define humility. We're going to smash them up together and show them right up close beside each other, how they relate on a relational level.

[14:35] So here's six things that Jonathan Edwards said about pride and humility. This is extremely paraphrased. One, a proud person is more aware of others' faults than their own.

A humble person is more aware of their own faults than others. It's an easy one. It's a good one, right? You got that? Here we go. Number two, this is a good one. Pride leads to speaking of others' faults with an air of contempt.

Humility, the humble, when you do speak of others' faults, you only ever do it with grief and mercy. Mark Driscoll.

He's a guy. So he's a pastor in Seattle, very successful pastor in Seattle.

Huge church. He has been very humbled recently. Maybe you've caught up on this. He's written quite a few books and has been caught out plagiarizing. And I think it's a bit of a storm in a teacup.

[15:40] I think he didn't reference stuff really well. Anyway, he's a polarizing figure. And many people of my Facebook friends really dislike him and unfortunately have been reveling in his exposure and seem delighted about his failure because they just sort of don't really like him.

And I think it's so brilliant he's failed. Driscoll published a letter of apology about a week ago and weekend just gone.

Again, my Facebook feed was filled with mocking voices, tearing the apology apart. This is not really an apology. Correctionology, correcting some of the grammar of it, talking about misplaced commas, saying, I wish you'd apologize about this or that, my individual personal kind of thing that I'm into, you know.

And I wrote on some of these feeds and told people I thought what they were doing was appalling and possibly the most anti-Christ-like thing, the most anti-Christ-like response you could make to somebody who has been humbled.

Folks, if you have participated in that kind of thing, you need to repent. That comes out of a dark place in your heart, a place of pride. So Jonathan Edwards, too, he says, pride leads to speaking of others' faults with an air of contempt, which is what these folks are doing.

[17:15] Humility. When you have to speak of others' faults, you only ever do it with grief and mercy. Three. Three. These last three I'll do very quickly.

Pride leads to separating from those who differ. Humility sticks with other people. Four. Pride. A proud person is dogmatic. Every point of faith is major.

Everything's major. If you want to see examples of this, there's like the kind of the new Calvinist, hyper-Calvinist, the kind of everything's kind of major all the time kind of thing. Five. A proud person loves to confront.

A humble person confronts necessarily. Six. This is a challenging one. A very challenging one. A proud person is unhappy and filled with self-pity.

Why? They're so sure they know how life should go and so sure they deserve the good life. A humble person knows they should be cast off, but for the grace of God and the humble, there is no self-pity.

[18:14] This is what Jonathan Edwards has to say. Now, if that was a checklist, an inventory, how would you go? Are you quick to speak of others' faults or only do so with grief?

Do you stick with difficult relationships? Are you out to win arguments, get your opinion heard? Are you filled with self-pity about your lot?

Do you quickly see the faults in others? Folks, you can see here how pride hurts the family, how it hurts the church, and I hope you can also see how humility strengthens it, how it holds it up, how it beautifies it.

Now, close to the end here. Me just saying to you, go be humble. Stop being stupid.

Go be humble. Come back to me. That's probably not that helpful because you know your heart. I know my heart. It's like when somebody says, you know, do you believe it, people?

[19:33] Not really, I don't know, maybe. You know, like, give me a while to work, think about it. I don't know. Like, it's, it's, it's, here's the truth, you know, like, we need grace in order to be humble.

I can't just tell you to be humble. We need grace in order to be humble. And we receive that grace after we're humbled as well. It's a wonderful part of the good news.

We're hemmed in on all sides by grace. So grace draws us in, humbles us, and grace helps us respond to it. So in verse four, when James calls us an adulterous people, the Greek is literally, literally, you adulterousses.

I might've added an S on that, but it's you adulterousses, right? I definitely added an S, but you know what I'm saying? It's a, it's a, it's a lady adulterer, right?

So, so he's invoking this Old Testament picture of God being like a husband with an adulterous wife. And even though her affections have wandered, he's determined to woo her back.

[20:36] It's a, it's a beautiful picture of, of great love in action, of determined love. God's grace means, no matter how dodgy your heart is, he wants to woo you.

His grace wants to draw you in. His patience will never be exhausted. His grace will not run out. He will draw you, and I want you to be encouraged by that. If you're at the pride end of the spectrum here, he's working on your heart.

He's working on your heart. And he'll bring you to a place of humility, but it doesn't end there. His grace will continue to work, because he'll give you the grace to respond to his grace.

And what does that look like? It looks like this ongoing humbling, this lovely, wonderful humbling. And what does that look like? Humbling and repentance?

What does that look like? Well, it looks like verses 10, seven to 10. See all the imperatives there? Like, doing things? Submitting to God. It looks like resisting the devil. It looks like drawing near to God.

[ 21 : 44 ] It looks like cleansing your, your hands and your heart. In other words, your whole self, cleaning up your whole self. It means verse nine, being brought very low, so that you can be lifted up.

Verse 10. Let me finish here. This sermon's been a bit all over the show, I realize that.

But the basic structure of the passage is very, very simple. It's this, the first half, this damning diagnosis of your hearts. Hearts that ruin community.

And the second half, amazing hope. Hope. So it ends on the hope. Hope in a God who pursues us, who is pursuing you. Hope in a God who changes us, who teaches us to submit, to resist, to draw near, to cleanse, to be real, to humble ourselves before him.

Folks, if there's an application here, let's ask God to make you aware of what he is doing in your heart. the quiet work of the Holy Spirit in a heart that a hundred times a day looks after itself.

[ 23 : 00 ] Ask God to make you aware of that, aware of the work he's doing in your heart. And ask God to help you respond to that work, to lean into it, to work with it.

Because unchecked, well, these hearts, you know, they do a lot of damage. Amen. Amen.