

Ash Wednesday

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[0 : 0 0] Would you pray with me? Heavenly Father, we recognize that it's you alone who knows the depths of our hearts. It's you alone who knows all of our actions, our thoughts, and our words.

And so we do ask that you would search, that you would speak a word of conviction, and that you would speak a word of healing grace. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. You may be seated. Well, it's good to be here with you. You guys are the faithful, faithful few.

A lot of people show up to Christmas. A lot of people show up to Easter Sunday. But not as many come to Ash Wednesday. And I suspect it has something to do with the Ash in the title.

The title. Because if I was unsure of what that meant, I wouldn't want to find out exactly what that meant. But that's right. That's right in a sense.

[1 : 0 6] Because when we come to Ash Wednesday, we're confronted with things that we really don't want to be confronted about. We're confronted with our sin. That we're desperately helpless.

And we need help. We're confronted with God's grace. Which means he's our only hope. And we're confronted with the fact that we actually need to turn from our sin and humble ourselves before the living God in repentance.

And so that's what Ash Wednesday is about. And that's what we're going into here at the beginning of Lent. We're going into a time where we're confronted with our sin.

We see God's grace. And then we're called to repentance. So let's begin with sin. I'm going to be in James chapter 4. So it'd be good to have your Bibles open there.

I'm going to be focusing on verses 4 to 10. 4 to 10, right in the heart of the passage that was read. And James starts pretty intensely.

[2 : 0 9] You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

And so right away, Lent is about recognizing our sin and idolatry for what it really is. It's adultery. It's friendship with the world. And it's hostility towards the living God.

The fact is that you and I don't like to face our sin that much. In fact, we do a whole lot to ignore it or avoid it in any way possible. And one of the ways that looks in modern society is really through busyness.

If we just have a lot of busyness, we won't ever have to stop and look at ourselves in the mirror. But that's what we're doing now. We're stopping and we're looking. But even when we think about our sin, there's always the temptation for us to minimize it and trivialize it.

Well, it's not really that big of a deal. It didn't hurt anybody. It was just me. I'm not really different from anybody else. Or at least I didn't do what that person did.

[3 : 1 7] But even if we get to the point of admitting our sin, we somehow want to detach it from who we are. We somehow want to say our actions don't really reflect our character.

Our hands don't really reflect our heart. What we do with our body doesn't reflect the depths of our soul. And so we can admit that we've sinned, but we rarely want to call ourselves sinners.

We can admit that we're messed up, that we messed up once or twice, but we rarely want to be called adulterous people. Another thing we can do is that even if we come to the point of admitting that we are sinners, we can somehow want to detach the fact that we're sinners from our relationship with God.

Somehow we don't want to believe that our sin is really that big of an offense to the living God. Somehow we want to believe that our sin is really not a rejection of his love, and it's really not hostile towards him.

But in verse 4, James says a radical no to all of our self-deception. He says a radical no to all of our pride. And he says, you adulterous people.

[4 : 29] And that language is really strong language. It comes from the Old Testament prophets. They love to describe sin as adultery against the living God.

Sin is equivalent in this image to turning your back on your spouse and sleeping with somebody else. I mean, that is really intense imagery.

But it's even more intense than that because it's turning your back on the living God and seeking after other gods. It's deeply personal. It's deeply offensive to God because it's a rejection of his love and his grace and of his covenant.

So he says, you adulterous people. But James goes even further. He says, do you not know that if you wish to be a friend of the world, then you are an enemy of God?

And James is speaking here of the world not in terms of created material stuff, or not in terms of your neighbors or all the people of the world. But James is speaking of the world in terms of its values and priorities and loyalties.

[5 : 41] So to value what the world values, to prioritize what the world prioritizes, and to love what the world loves is to make ourselves an enemy of the living God.

You adulterous people, says James, don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity towards God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

And so this is the great truth of Lent. This is the first great truth of Lent. Is that we are sinners before Almighty God. That I am a sinner.

That you are a sinner before the Lord. But the good news is, brothers and sisters, is that James spends one verse talking about our sin.

And he spends two talking about God's grace. So God's grace, look at verses 5 and 6 with me. Or don't you suppose it is to no purpose?

[6 : 43] Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says, He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us. But he gives more grace.

Therefore, it says God opposes the proud. But he gives grace to the humble. And so we see in these verses that God responds to our sin with quite amazing grace.

And this is so important for us to remember as we go into Lent. Because it's really easy for us to look at our sin outside of the context of God's grace. It's really easy for us to try to deal with our sin outside of the context of God's grace.

And that's a temptation for us. For us to do so much navel gazing that we lose sight of the living God. And that he responds to our sin in grace.

And two things happen if we lose sight of this context. It leads to pride and it leads to despair.

Because if we lose sight of God's grace, then we're going to try to deal with our sin by ourselves.

[7 : 51] We're going to take the road of self-help and technique. And what's going to end up happening is we're going to become rigorous legalists and moralists. Our pride's going to take over. But really quickly, we're going to come to the end of ourselves.

And it's going to lead to despair. Because wherever there is great pride, despair lurks right around the corner. Because eventually we will come to the end of ourselves.

And eventually we will know that we cannot deal with our own sin. And so we'll just give up. And we'll give in. And we'll take the road of slavery and self-indulgence. And we'll become supposedly helpless and hopeless.

When we try to deal with sin outside of the context of God's grace, it only leads to self-inflicted punishment. Attempting to save ourselves.

And indulgent and self-indulgent despair. But James points us to God's grace. And God's grace is seen first in the fact that God is a jealous God.

[8 : 54] Look at verse 5. He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us. All throughout the Bible, this is an astounding attribute of the living God.

He is a jealous God. In Exodus chapter 34, God actually gives this name to himself. He says, I the Lord am jealous. My name is Jealous.

But God's jealousy is in no sense like human jealousy. God's jealousy is not rooted in insecurity or need. His jealousy is rooted in the massive intensity of his love for his people.

And we see this all throughout the Bible. It's God's jealous love for his people that causes him to pursue them over and over again. Every time they reject him.

So that he can win their faithfulness back to them. It's God's jealous love that though his people are adulterers, he still stays faithful to the marriage covenant with them.

[9 : 56] So brothers and sisters, we need to see that God yearns jealously that your heart be turned to him. He deeply desires your faithfulness and your love and your unwavering commitment to him.

He yearns jealously. But there's even more. Verse 6. God is tremendously gracious. I know how we need his grace to transform our hearts.

It says, But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. He gives more grace.

If it's your own Bible, underline more grace. Lent is a journey towards God's more grace. At the end of Lent in 40 days, we will come to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, where we will celebrate the cross and the resurrection, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is the more grace of God. Where the fullness of God's redeeming love was poured out for us. The cross and the resurrection, where we discover that the horrifying depths of our sin is actually no match for God's victorious grace.

[11 : 13] And where we realize that where sin abounds, grace abounds so much more. God gives more grace. And that is good news for us.

He gives us more grace. But what James goes on to show us is that inherent to the very nature of grace, is that it can only be received in humility.

God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. And this is because grace is a free gift of God. We can't grasp it. We can't possess it.

We can't earn it. We can only receive it as humble children with open arms and open hands. We can only receive it through repentance. We can only receive it when we come to the point where we see you, oh Lord, and you alone can save me.

So James takes us to just that repentance that brings us to the place of receiving God's wonderful grace. And he does this in verses 7 to 10. He calls us to the humility of genuine repentance.

[12 : 18] And brothers and sisters, this is what Lent is about. Lent is about repenting in response to God's grace and repenting as we look forward to his grace.

In verse 7, we see that repenting is fundamentally an act of humbling ourselves. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Submitting to God means putting ourselves in proper relation to him, putting ourselves under his loving lordship, aligning our lives with his gracious will and his heavenly wisdom.

It means throwing ourselves on him in utter dependence. And what this humbling leads to is the next line in verse 7. It leads to repentance as an act of resistance.

Resist the devil, says James, and he will flee from you. And so we're shown that what we're dealing with here is not just us, but it's a spiritual battle that's going on.

It's a spiritual battle. And part of humbling ourselves is realizing that Satan is at work. He wants to deceive us. He wants to condemn us. He wants to tempt us.

[13 : 28] But God says we can resist him and he will flee. Because he has no ultimate claim over our lives. Only Jesus does. James goes on in verse 8.

Repentance is an act of drawing near. The flip side of resisting is draw near to God. And he will draw near to you. I know how good news this is.

During the season of Lent, as we reflect on our sin and we try to draw near to God, God doesn't recoil from us. He doesn't withdraw from us.

He doesn't leave us to ourself. Rather, when we draw near to the living God, he draws near to us. And he comes to us. And he's with us. And he's in us.

The author of the Hebrews loved this fact. And he said, therefore, let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[14 : 27] Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. And James goes on and talks about repentance as an act of cleansing. Cleanse your hands, you sinners.

Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Hands and hearts. External actions. Internal attitudes. Hands and hearts.

God wants all of who we are to be handed over to him in repentance. He wants all of our hearts, all of our hands, all of our head to be attuned to his glory and his grace and fully devoted to him.

Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. And then verse 9, James says, repentance is an act of mourning. Be wretched, or you could translate that grief, and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. That's pretty intense. You're not supposed to laugh for the next 40 days. So, just keep it quiet.

[15 : 33] Laughter in the Old Testament wisdom literature is an image for the fool, oftentimes. Old Testament wisdom literature, the wicked or the fool are those that go about life with a sense of careless laughter because they have no sense of the seriousness of the dark path they're going down in their sin.

And so, what James is saying here is he's saying, mourn. Grieve your sin. Take it seriously. It's not to be lightly handled. Grieve and mourn and weep and let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

And then verse 10, James ends the same place he started. Humble yourselves before the Lord. And then here's the promise he gives us.

Here's the promise. If you humble yourselves before the Lord, then he will exalt you. Brothers and sisters, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

[16 : 37] Just as the Father exalted the Son, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ humbled himself before his Father on the cross. And three days later, the Father exalted him in the glory of the resurrection.

And we, through faith, get to share that with the Lord Jesus Christ. When we humble ourselves before the Father, we get to share the Son's humility before him. And then we also get to share his resurrection.

Christ's exaltation. We get to be a part of his kingdom. We get to be a part of his newness of life. We get to be a part of his fellowship. A part of his joy.

A part of his freedom. And a part of his righteousness. And so, brothers and sisters, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.