

Drawing Near to God

James 4:7-10

If you read the gospels you quickly discover the bold and absolute claims Jesus makes to be God and know God through Him: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). He calls the rich and poor, educated and ignorant, reputable and disgraced, everyone at every stage of life to draw near to God by dealing with the sin that separates us from Him. Man-centered preaching focuses on us (“He gets us”) and minimizes our sin. But God-honoring preaching exalts Him and calls us to humble ourselves so that He can lift us up.

Summary of the Text

The recipients of this letter had coveted and murdered (4:2), but they were not beyond the grace of God: “But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (4:6). James applies this quotation from Proverbs 3:34 to explain what humility looks for his recipients. Since this is the way it works, Christians should submit to God and do what He says (v. 7a). James offers three couplets of imperatives: 1. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (v. 7b); 2. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, double-minded (v. 8); 3. Lament, mourn, and weep; change laughter into mourning and joy to sadness (v. 9). Finally, he concludes by repeating and elaborating on what he started with: humble yourself in God’s sight. He will not leave you low but will lift you up (v. 10).

Submit to God

Because we are fallen, we must retrain our instincts by steeping ourselves in Scripture, praying to God, and seeking wisdom from those who know Him: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12). It made sense to these persecuted people to curse instead of bless, to show partiality to the rich, and to return evil for evil (cf. 3:15). Suffering brings temptation to blame and abandon the Lord. Following Him requires submission, to pray as Jesus did, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Lk. 22:42). Scripture talks this way rather than “Go with God!” because our fleshly desires must be mortified and our will submitted.

Resist & Draw Near

Mention of the devil causes moderns to think of pitchforks and horns and guys with eye makeup on hailing Satan. The Bible says Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). He works through false apostles who sound so winsome and nuanced as they slander Paul’s character. Satan tries to derail Jesus by offering Him bread, encouraging Him to test God, and promising Him all the kingdoms of the world if He would just worship Him for a moment. Jesus is starving, alone, and wants to rule the world, but He won’t give in: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him” (Matt. 4:10-11). Resist the devil, and he leaves. There’s no formulaic prayer or procedure other than to say no to whatever hell he is using to bait you. Remember the temptation will not always be as strong as it is in the moment, and more importantly, you will be stronger for having resisted. Resisting the accuser goes together with drawing near to God. The verb “drawing near” is used of priests who would approach Yahweh, offer sacrifices, and serve at the tabernacle (Ex. 19:21-22, 24:2, Lev. 10:3; 21:21). Because Jesus has come, resisted temptation, died, risen, and ascended to the presence of God in heaven, you have everything you need to overcome sin and draw near to God.

Cleanse & Purify

James doesn’t heal the wound lightly. If he is only talking about inner temptations, then he wouldn’t be addressing hands. Psalm 24 asks “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy

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place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully” (v. 3). To cleanse their hands and purify hearts means to confess the wickedness of their words and actions, receive God’s forgiveness, and go and sin no more (v. 8). Repentance and belief (trust) go together in the work of the Holy Spirit. We don’t repent before we believe, but as a part of our coming to God. Receiving full forgiveness through honest confession sets us on the rock of Christ, able to weather storms and the consequences that may result from sin. Name the sin like God does. Confess it on your knees. Ask forgiveness. Thank Him for His grace because you have it, and don’t confess the same instance of the sin again. The double-minded man doubts that God is faithful and will do what He says (cf. 1:7-8), but the pure in heart trust Him to purify.

Lament & Mourn

Adulterous spirituality, covetousness, bitter envy, fights, and murder dishonor God and tear people apart. Real grace abounds even greater than our sin, but it does not leave us unchanged (cf. Rom. 6:1ff.). These believers were convinced their actions were virtuous. James thunders to reveal how twisted they became. It’s like learning that what you think is good parenting is actually graceless fussing and bossing your kid; that your attention to detail at work is really nitpicking and being obnoxious to your boss and co-workers; that your insight into political matters is really gratifying the flesh by indulging anxiety, flattering yourself, and wasting time on stuff that doesn’t matter; that your prayer, as James says, are really to get stuff to spend on your ungodly desires (4:3). Every person has more than enough sin to tell the most cynical story, which we should not do. But we really should do something about our grievous and threatening sins. The Jews were required to fast once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, afflicting their souls (Lev. 16:29). When Paul repents of his murderous rage against Christ and the Church, he fasts for three days (Acts 7:9). Fasting focuses the heart and mind, and it’s good to think and pray hard about how evil and stupid our sins are. Every last one has been paid for by Christ, and so mourning, weeping, and fasting must never be thought or felt to atone for them—this would be a serious sin to repent of as well. Jesus also forbids doing any of this publicly (Matt. 6:16-18). But if the works of the flesh are manifest in your heart or life, meditating on the consequences and misery of sin all while rooted in the knowledge hope of the gospel, will bear great fruit.

The Way Up

The Puritans said the same sun which melts the wax hardens the clay. The message of the *good* news hardens some people’s hearts. Let it melt yours. Why not be forgiven for your sins? Why not be washed clean and adopted by God the Father almighty? The blame for our sins—not the sins of others against us, but ours—is all on us. By definition sin is utterly inexcusable, and so we mourn in order for God to comfort: “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says, “for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). The Spirit was upon Jesus to “to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified” (Is. 61:2-3).