

It's Hard to Be Humble

James 4:1-12

Rev. Brian Bill

March 16-17, 2019

Mac Davis recorded a song in 1980 that became an international hit called, "It's Hard to Be Humble."

*Oh Lord it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
Cause I get better looking each day*

One of the things I like most about Edgewood is this church is filled with people who know they're *not* perfect. I love how you pursue our perfect God through your commitment to gather, to grow, to give and to go with the gospel. Your deep devotion to the Word of God is incredibly encouraging. One example of this is we have received 96 questions for our upcoming "Glad You Asked" series!

Thank you for wanting to hear God's Word, even when it hurts. Last weekend we were challenged with this truth: *A worldly person breaks peace, while a wise person makes peace.* I heard from several about how God used His Word to bring conviction in this area. If you'd like to have a copy of the Peacemaker's Pledge that was read during the sermon, it's now posted on Sermon Extras on our website and app.

Our passage today is hard-hitting and stands in stark contrast to the easy-believism and syrupy spirituality so prevalent in our culture today. Grab your Bibles and turn to James 4:1-12. These words follow the warning against worldly wisdom. Here's what we're going to learn: *God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty.*

Please stand and follow along as I read: ***"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ 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.***

⁵ 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”? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

I see three main truths in this passage.

- The problems *among* us are rooted *within* us (4:1-4)
- The promises *to* us come from *above* us (4:5-6)
- The prescriptions *for* us must be taken *by* us (4:7-12)

1. The problems among us are rooted within us. Instead of blaming outside factors or other people when we encounter problems, we must identify the forces at work on the inside according to verse 1: “*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?*” Specifically, when we are in conflict with another Christian, we must examine our own lives and admit there’s a war going on within us. The commentator Barclay points out the war within us is a “*constant warring campaign.*”

Specifically, it’s our passions and the pursuit of pleasure that put us at odds with one another. The word “*passions*” is the same word used by Jesus in Luke 8:14 in the parable of the soils when describing the seed that fell among the thorns: “*...they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.*”

We must admit our main problems are rooted within us. A newspaper once sent an inquiry to several famous authors, asking this question, “*What’s wrong with the world today?*” One author quickly replied: “*I am. Yours truly, G.K. Chesterton.*”

James drills down in verses 2-4 to help us identify four battles going on inside of us.

- **Unfulfilled desires.** Verse 2: ***“You desire and do not have, so you murder.”*** The word desire is *“lust or longing.”* When our longings are unfulfilled, we’re prone to take others out. When David’s desire for Bathsheba led him to adultery, he then murdered her husband Uriah. The verse continues, ***“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”*** To ***“covet”*** means, *“to boil with envy.”* When our insides are stirred up we’re miserable and go into attack mode by fighting with others. If unsatisfied desires lead to deep resentment, then the key to avoiding conflict is contentment.
- **Unasked prayers.** According to the last part of verse 2 sometimes we don’t have what we really need simply because we’ve not told God about our needs: ***“You do not have, because you do not ask.”*** The real reason behind prayerlessness is often proud self-reliance. When I don’t pray, I’m saying I can handle things on my own. The reason for unanswered prayer may simply be because your prayers have gone unasked.
- **Underlying motives.** According to verse 3 another reason we’re discontent might be because we’re praying with wrong motives: ***“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”*** The word ***“spend”*** has the idea of *“squandering and wasting.”* The word ***“passion”*** is the word for hedonism, which is *“the pursuit of pleasure or sensual self-indulgence at all cost.”* Psalm 66:18: ***“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”*** When I pray selfishly it shows I am trying to use God for my own purposes, rather than seeking His purposes.
- **Unmasked affections.** Next, James uses some spiritually charged language in verse 4 to jar us out of complacency and compromise: ***“You adulterous people!”*** In the Greek it literally reads, *“You adulteresses!”* He’s picking up a common image from the Old Testament that depicts God as the husband and Israel as His wife. One example is Isaiah 54:5: ***“For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name.”*** Speaking through the prophets, God accuses His people of committing spiritual adultery. In the Book of Hosea, He instructs the prophet to marry a prostitute to demonstrate God’s faithfulness to us, even when we are unfaithful to Him.

In the New Testament, passages like Ephesians 5:22-33 picture Christ as the bridegroom and the church as His bride. When confronting unbelief, Jesus called out religious leaders in Matthew 12:39: ***“An evil and adulterous generation.”***

How is it that we commit spiritual adultery? Look at the rest of verse 4: ***“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.”*** The word **“world”** refers to the world system. When we have a growing fondness for the world we will have friction with God. A.W. Tozer once lamented: *“A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to accept Christ without forsaking the world.”*

The word **“enmity”** is actually, *“hostility or hatred.”* Romans 8:7 says, ***“The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God.”*** Some of us have become so cozy with the world that we’ve compromised our convictions and are thus in conflict with God. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus says it is impossible to serve two masters. If the problem in the American church in the past was legalism our problem today is license, where too many of us are in love with the world. I’m reminded of what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:10: ***“Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.”***

God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty. Let’s pause at this point and allow the Spirit to do His work. Are you humble or haughty? Do you have some unfulfilled desires? How many of your prayers have gone unasked? Are there any underlying motives or unmasked affections going on? Are you seeking to find satisfaction apart from Christ? Do you find yourself turning to the pleasures of the world instead of allowing God to satisfy you?

The problems *among* us are rooted *within* us. Secondly, the promises *to* us come from *above* us.

2. The promises to us come from above us. Unless we admit our problems, we won’t be in a place to receive God’s promises.

- **God yearns for your holiness.** Look at verse 5: ***“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’?”*** While this is not a reference to a specific

passage, Exodus 20:5 is certainly in view: “...**For I the LORD your God am a jealous God.**” The word “**yearning**” has the idea of “*longing for*” or “*desiring earnestly.*” My guess is most of us don’t think of God as “**jealous**” but He earnestly desires the undivided attention of His people. Since God the Father has placed His Holy Spirit within born again believers, God longs for the Spirit to communicate with Him. Romans 8:16 says, “**The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.**”

If you struggle to have a daily time in God’s Word and in our prayer, contemplate this truth: *God wants to meet with you more than you want to meet with Him.* Instead of thinking you *have to* do this, think instead of how much God is longing for a relationship with you!

I appreciate how the Westminster Shorter Catechism captures what God longs for: “*The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*” Psalm 16:11: “**In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**” Listen. Until you are satisfied in God alone, you will never be satisfied. Dissatisfaction is designed to lead you to find satisfaction in God alone.

- **God gives grace to the humble.** Not only does God want to meet with you more than you want to meet with Him, verse 6 tells us He is a grace-giving God: “**But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’**” One translation says, “**He gives a greater grace.**” God’s grace is greater than whatever gross sin you have committed. James then quotes part of Proverbs 3:34: “**Toward scorners He is scornful but to the humble He gives favor.**” The word “**oppose**” was used of “*setting an army against.*” Proverbs 6:17 says God hates “**haughty eyes.**” The only way to receive God’s grace is by being humble. If God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble, we better make sure we’re not making ourselves opponents of the Almighty.

God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty. We must first admit the problems among us are rooted *within* us. We can then claim the promises *to* us that come from *above* us. That leads to the third truth from this passage: The prescriptions *for* us must be taken *by* us.

3. The prescriptions for us must be taken by us. God calls us to intentionally engage in 10 actions. We can't just sit passively and wait for things to get better or for conflict to suddenly resolve by itself.

- **Submit to God.** The first prescription is found in the beginning of verse 7: ***“Submit yourselves therefore to God.”*** This is a military term meaning, *“to subjugate by placing under.”* We're called to put ourselves in rank under God. Are you ready to cease fighting and subordinate yourself under His sovereignty? Hudson Taylor once said, *“God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to lean on Him.”*
- **Resist the devil.** Next we're to ***“resist the devil and he will flee from us.”*** To ***“resist”*** is also a military term and has the idea of *“standing against.”* Paul says something similar in Ephesians 6:11: ***“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”*** This prescription involves a promise – when we fight, Satan will take flight! Keep this in mind: we're to *flee* temptation, but we are to *fight* the devil.
- **Draw near to God.** The third prescription found in verse 8 also comes with a promise. When you draw near to God, ***“He will draw near to you.”*** Psalm 73:28: ***“But for me it is good to be near God.”*** In his classic book, *Enjoying Intimacy with God*, J. Oswald Sanders said, *“Both Scripture and experience teach that it is we, not God, who determine the degree of intimacy with Him that we enjoy. We are at this moment as close to God as we really choose to be.”*
- **Cleanse your hands.** When we submit, resist and draw near, we become acutely aware of our sinfulness. We're called in verse 8 to be free from any outward filth – ***“Cleanse your hands, you sinners.”*** Is there some activity or behavior or habit you need to stop? 2 Corinthians 7:1: ***“Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”***
- **Purify your hearts.** We must also actively engage in inward purification because we are double-minded and distracted. A good example of this is found in David's prayer found in Psalm 51:7, 10: ***“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”***

- **Embrace brokenness.** In a world that overly focuses on one's happiness, while "Christian" books call us to have "our best life now" and to "stop apologizing," God calls us to embrace brokenness in verse 9: "***Be wretched and mourn and weep.***" We must see our wretchedness and weep about it. Our sins should cause us sorrow. James develops this further in 5:1: "***Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.***"

Instead of focusing on laughter, God calls us to lament: "***Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.***" I'm reminded of Lamentations 5:15-16: "***The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned!***" Jesus said it like this in Luke 6:25: "***Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.***"

- **Humble yourself.** *God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty.* Until we embrace our brokenness, we will persist in our pride. Look at verse 10: "***Humble yourselves before the Lord...***" Someone has said if we don't humble ourselves now, the Lord will do it later. The phrase "***before the Lord***" is the picture of standing before the face of God. I'm reminded of Isaiah 66:2: "***But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.***" This prescription also comes with a promise. The lowly one becomes the lifted one: "***and He will exalt you.***"
- **Refuse to judge others.** If we sincerely and intentionally obey the commands in verses 7-10, we should be gracious with other people. Check out verse 11: "***Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law...***" Once again James is appealing to family relationships by using the term "***brother***" three times in this verse. This word literally means, "*from the same womb.*" We can see from the tense of the verb that He is correcting something that is happening frequently: "***Stop speaking against one another, my brethren.***"

To judge means to sift out and analyze evidence and is also in the present tense indicating they were continually passing judgment.

Someone has written this satirical poem, which sadly is not too far from the truth in many churches:

*Believe as I believe,
No more, no less;
That I am right,
And no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel,
Think only as I think;
Eat what I eat,
And drink but what I drink;
Look as I look,
Do always as I do;
Then, and only then,
Will I fellowship with you.*

I've said this before but it bears repeating. We need to stop looking down our noses on those who sin differently than we do. You are not perfect so stop demanding perfection from those around you. And let's stop standing over others in spiritual judgment.

When we speak against a sister or blast a brother, we are speaking ill of the law. James 2:8 defines the royal law this way: ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*** This is a quote from Leviticus 19:18. Listen to this text in context as we pick up verse 17: ***“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”***

- **Let God be the judge.** When we stand in judgment of others, we're really standing in the place of the ultimate Judge. Look at the last part of verse 11 and the first part of verse 12: ***“But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge...”*** When we judge others, we're actually claiming to have a better standard of judgment than God does. Remember this truth: He's God and you're not!

Dewitt Talmage once remarked, *“Without exception, the people who have the greatest number of faults are themselves the most merciless in their*

criticism of others.” It’s like the guy who explained to his coworkers what happened while he was driving to work: “I noticed a woman driving 65 mph with her face up next to her rear view mirror, putting on her eyeliner! I was shocked that she would do something like this! She scared me so much that I dropped my electric razor, which knocked the donut out of my other hand. In all the confusion of trying to straighten out the car using my knees to steer, it knocked my cell phone away from my ear, which caused it to fall into the coffee between my legs. All because of that crazy woman driver!”

When we criticize or put down or judge a brother or sister, in essence we’re saying, “*I know better than God does.*” In Romans 2:1, Paul points out the absurdity of judging others because we tend to do the same things:

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”

Here’s a helpful paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 5:10: ***“Eventually, we’re all going to end up kneeling side-by-side in the place of judgment facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren’t going to improve your position one bit.”*** Listen. If God is going to judge others, why do we need to help him out? He knows them better than we do and He certainly loves them more than we do.

It was F.B. Meyer who said, “*It is a terrible thing for a sinner to fall into the hands of his fellow sinners.*” That reminds me of what David chose when God gave him an option for his punishment in 2 Samuel 24:14: ***“I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.”***

- **Receive the one who was judged for your sins.** Notice how verse 12 ends. There is only one lawgiver and judge and He: ***“...is able to save and to destroy.”*** Check this out. We are all guilty before Jesus, the ultimate Judge of the universe. We have broken His laws and deserve justice. As a result, Jesus said these strong words in Matthew 10:28: ***“Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”***

Aren’t you glad Jesus came to save us from the judgment our sins deserve? He died in our place as our substitute and was raised from the dead on the third day as the conqueror over death, Satan and our sins. You have a choice

to make today. You either receive Jesus who satisfied God's justice through his death, burial and resurrection, or you will face the lawgiver and Judge and receive the just penalty for all your sins by spending eternity in hell. What will it be? If you are not delivered you will be destroyed.

I've been contemplating a post by Kevin DeYoung: "*The good news of the gospel is not, 'Relax, you rock!' The good news is this, 'You deserve to be humiliated and condemned for your sin, but God sent his Son to be humiliated and condemned in your place.'*"

I love the good news found in Hebrews 7:25: "***...He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.***"

This passage ends with a probing question: "***But who are you to judge your neighbor?***"

If you're ready to be saved so that you don't come into judgment, please pray this prayer with me right now.

Lord, I admit I am a sinner and deserve your just judgment. I repent from how I've been living and turn to you. I believe Jesus died in my place on the cross and rose again on the third day and now I receive Him into my life. Please save me from my sins and from your righteous wrath. I want to be born again so I place all my trust in you and you alone. If there's anything in my life that you don't like, please get rid of it. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Song: Give us Clean Hands (Part 1)

Please close your eyes and place your hands on your lap with your palms up as I guide us through a time of inventory and self-assessment.

God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty.

1. **The problems *among us* are rooted *within us*.** Confess your unfulfilled desires, your unasked prayers, any underlying motives and your unmasked affections.
2. **The promises *to us* come from *above us*.** And now claim the promise that God yearns for your holiness and will give you grace when you are humble.

3. The prescriptions *for us must be taken by us.* Is I read the 10 prescriptions, would you intentionally engage right now?

Submit to God
Resist the devil
Draw near to God
Cleanse your hands
Purify your hearts
Embrace brokenness
Humble yourself
Refuse to judge others
Let God be the judge
Receive the one who was judged for you

Closing Song: Give us Clean Hands (Part 2)