

The Virtue of Humility

James 4:5-10

Of all the insidious ways in which the world seeks to have its influence upon our lives, our subject this morning is perhaps the greatest. Of all the diverse ways that the world tries to squeeze you into its own mold, the call to pride is perhaps the most comprehensive. It is a call we hear often, in a multitudinous variation of forms. It is a call that resonates within our own hearts, for it appeals to the most basic instinct and desires of the fallen human nature which we inherited from Adam. It is the call to self-exaltation. The call to self-advancement. The call to autonomous self-rule. It is the call to pride.

Our subject today is clear. James' purpose is clear. He has in mind the pride of man and paints a picture of that which absolutely and irreconcilably opposed to it--namely the virtue of godly humility. His message is one which we ignore only at our own grave peril, yet it is a message ignored by all too many professed Christians. And perhaps it is not proclaimed faithfully enough or plainly enough in the church because those who are called by God to preach are in no way immune from this affliction we call pride. In fact, it may well be even more prevalent in those who are ordained, the very intention of Satan himself in order to bring harm and disorder to the body of Christ on earth. Thus, one important qualification for those ordained to the office of elder or deacon is, as Paul writes to Timothy speaking of those officers, that such a man is...

1 Tim. 3:6 "not a novice [or new believer], lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil."

So what is pride? Simply, the spirit within the heart of a man that seeks its own advantage. And so there remains a great problem.

I. THE PROBLEM OF PRIDE.

I'll start in our text today with one of the hardest verses you will find in the Bible to translate and interpret.

v.5

The first difficulty is that we don't know what Scripture James is quoting. The most obvious answer to me is that he is combining several different verses into a single thought. Perhaps including,

Gen. 6:5 "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

Further, James' thought itself is hard to figure out, from the language of the actual Greek words used. The questions are these: is "the spirit" the spirit that is within us or the Holy Spirit of God. The NKJV has Spirit capitalized, referring to the Holy Spirit. The ESV has it with a small "s," referring to our spirit the spirit of man. And then, when you answer that question, next comes the question is the "spirit" the subject or the object of the sentence. Does "the spirit" yearn jealously" or does someone else "yearn jealously" over the spirit. And then, a third question, is the "jealous" a good thing, such as a zeal for something that is good, or is it an evil lusting within the sinful heart of man.

All those questions are obviously related. I read the NKJV: "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? There the Spirit is God, it is the subject, and it, the spirit, yearns jealously." If you have the ESV, it reads: "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us" There God is the subject and the spirit, which is our spirit, is the object. God is still the one yearning jealously. The NASB is similar. The original KJV and the NIV, however, have it best, I believe. In the NIV: "the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely." Or in the language of the original KJV, "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy." In those

translations, the spirit is our spirit, and it is the subject. Our spirit is jealous—our spirit lusts to envy.

That's all pretty technical, but the idea is this. The word for "jealous" is a word always used in the Scripture as a sinful lust, which is why I find that translation the best. God is zealous for many things, but that is a different word. Here it a word for malice and ill will, a sinful lusting unto envy. It is not a word which I believe ought to be attributed to God's Holy Spirit. So James is not referring to the yearning of God or his Spirit, but to the sinful propensities of the spirit implanted in man by virtue of the fall. And that follows what he has just written, which we studied last week,

v.4

Friendship with the world is giving free reign to the lust of the flesh! So we are the lustful and the envious, which is related to this overall subject of pride, and with the recognition of this sinful lusting in our spirits, the contrast of verse 6 makes perfect sense,

v.6a "But he gives more grace."

Greater grace. Stronger grace--stronger even than the jealous lusts of the sinful heart. The idea is that by his grace, he overcomes our sinful lusts. But not without making the pointed reminder of,

v.6b Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

We do know where that comes from,

Prov. 3:34 "Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble."

Simply put,

A. Pride is a prohibitive barrier in our relationship w/ God.

A prohibitive barrier. It prohibits the relationship. Because God opposes the proud. Strong language there. "God stands against the proud." It is in the present tense--something always true. God stands against you, God opposes you, if you retain the seed of pride within your heart.

Think about that, beloved. In your pride, God sets himself up against you. What a hopeless condition that is! Though that is exactly the danger of pride, thinking even if it is subconscious, thinking that you can stand up to God! Indeed, the spirit of man longs for the pleasures of this world and perversely seeks its friendship! That's James main point in this whole book.

How proud that is! How proud and arrogant to think that you can look out for your own interests and seek your own glory, instead of seeking the interests and glory of God! So we read in,

Prov. 6:16 "These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him [and first on the list...]: 17 A proud look." [Haughty eyes.)

Prov. 16:5 "Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Though they join forces, none will go unpunished."

And, Prov. 16:18 "Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall."

You cannot nurture a relationship with God while at the same time giving refuge to the sin of pride. It cannot be done. God himself will erect the barrier. For this is what we read about God,

Is. 66:1 "Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? 2 For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist," Says the LORD. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit,

And who trembles at My word.”

So it is that,

B. Pride is an obstacle preventing the reception of God’s grace.

This obviously flows from I have just said. If God erects a barrier, if God stands against you, how could you possibly expect to receive from him what you need the most--his grace! So it is the humble who receive the most! It is the humble who receive his grace.

v.6

This is what we know,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

The proud exalts himself, lifts himself up. He thinks himself above and beyond what is proper, more important and of greater significance than others. And he receives no grace! The humble casts himself down. The word means “lowly.” Lowliness of mind. Without which no one will obtain grace! It is just that simple!

People of God, wherever and however pride might make itself known in your life, seek to identify and eradicate this destructive evil. This prince of worldly values is the demon of biblical vices. This thing which the world says ought to be yours, this self-advancing, self-exalting, self-sustaining wickedness we call pride will shut down any fellowship and communion that you wish to have with God. You who come to God on your own terms, beware. You who approach God with the arrogance of self-satisfaction, beware. You will be denied the grace which God reserves for the humble.

On the contrary, consider Christ Jesus,

Phil. 2:6 “...who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

With those words, Paul address the dear people in Philippi,

Phil. 2:1 “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”

But how? How can you do as Peter says,

1 Peter 5:5 “...be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.””

What do those clothes look like, the clothes of humility? And how can you make them fit? James doesn’t leave us wondering. Instead he describes,

II. THE DEATH OF PRIDE.

That death, of course, is easily defined and here it is put into an exhortation.

v.10

Humble yourselves. That’s a command. That’s a call to you. That’s how you put to death pride. Now, the specifics.

v.7-9

Let's look at those things one by one. First, "submit yourselves therefore to God." The idea there is a voluntary commitment of placing yourself under the authority of someone else, in order to show him respect and obedience. To put pride to death, you must, therefore,

A. Submit yourself to the authority of God.

There are a number of human institutions which oblige us to this sort of submission--children to parents, wives to husbands, servants to masters, citizens to the civil government, and the members of the church to the ordained Elders. In the form of an exhortation, it is an obligation that you assume yourself, willingly, not merely by forced coercion or threat of punishment. Those things may well come into play in the case of your own disobedience, but this is not a text on the exercise of parental discipline or church discipline or husbandly leadership. This is a text on submission. Submission is what you give. Submission is the commitment you make. A commitment to obey, for if you are under the authority of someone else, you are obligated to obey.

I believe that I can rightly say this, that if that whole concept of submission is hard for you, if you chafe under it or even worse, rebel against it, the root cause is pride! If the obedience of submission is not something in which you delight, then your battle against pride is not over. And all these areas of submission are joined together, for if you resist the calling of submission within earthly relationships, then you are resisting the calling of submission to God who has established those earthly relationships.

1 Peter 2:13 "Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake."

One explicit example,

Rom. 13:1 "Let every soul be subject to the governing

authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves."

Whoever resists the authorities indulges pride! So submit to God, verse 7. Secondly,

B. Actively resist the influence of the devil.

Again verse 7.

Again notice this is given as an exhortation. God gives more grace. God gives grace to the humble. But we when you receive that grace, you are not passive. It is not something that simply comes over you, as a great overwhelming sensation. Resist means to offer opposition. It means that you take a stand against the devil.

Grace comes in the form of means, means of grace, the way in which God gives us his grace. Paul identifies those means by which we resist Satan in,

Eph. 6:10 "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

There is no mystery in that. That is nothing philosophical or hypothetical about it. How do you resist the devil? Paul continues in that passage to identify truth and righteousness. Faith, the gospel, salvation. The word of God and prayer. So do

you want to put to death the pride of your own sinful indulgences and rebellion against God's authority? Do you want to resist the devil in all the variety of temptations he brings to you? Then make use of the word of God and prayer. The best way to resist the Devil is to quote the Bible to him! Try it, next time you are tempted. Just quote Scripture. That means memorizing it. Or getting out your Bible quickly. And pray.

Pray as a warrior. Pray as Moses did. Pray earnestly and fervently. At all times and in every way. And beloved, do so with this great encouragement, "he will flee from you." Engage yourself strenuously in the battle, using all the weapons at your disposal. And do so with confidence not the hopelessness of defeat so often accomplished by Satan when we are entrapped by some besetting sin, "for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

It is such a simple concept, isn't it? "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Don't forget the first part, and your responsibility that is required. But don't forget the second part either. "He gives greater grace!"

Think about the ways in your own life where this is necessary, and declare war. Submit yourself to the authority of God and, therefore to the authority of his law. And then, whenever and wherever Satan tempts you to cross over the line, resist him. You are not helpless! You are not a victim. Neither are you sick with some incurable disease over which you have no control. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

I've known people who would even verbalize this. When tempted they would speak audibly, "Satan, go away!" "Get away from me." And lest you think such people are the ones who are crazy, consider Jesus, who once said,

Mat. 16:23 "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Surely you can do no better than follow that example! Resist the devil, and then,

C. Draw near to God in personal fellowship.

Not just mechanical duty. Not simply routine, outward forms. But notice the intimate language,
v.8a

Again James writes as an exhortation. "Draw near to God." This is hard, for we struggle even to draw near to one another, whom we can see with our eyes. We struggle sometimes to engage in deep, whole-souled fellowship with one another, contenting ourselves with surface level acquaintances. And we are often content with that sort of relationship with God.

We wonder why we don't feel very spiritual. We wait for some feelings to come upon us, and we drift away like many a husband and wife over time, drifting apart over years of familiarity simply because they haven't taken time to cherish that most blessed relationship. So is the danger in our relationship with God, requiring us to pursue the intimacy of a close relationship with him. "Draw near to God."

Surely, you can't do it without the outward means he gives you, such as the delightful sabbath day! Oh, this day above all others, set aside for your soul to have a day to meet with God. Surely you can't pursue this intimate fellowship if you don't communicate with God--listening to him as he speaks by his Holy Spirit through his Word. And speaking to him as you pray, undistracted from all the other things going on all around you.

That's hard, isn't it? Sure it is. James says, "draw near to God." With a similar encouragement, that your suitor will not keep himself aloof and at a distance, "he will draw near to you." What a blessed encouragement! Your bridegroom really will pay you attention. You need only to seek him out.

Then we come to a warning. A condition, if you will.
v.8b "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

Hypocrites, beware. This encouragement is not for you. If there is open and unconfessed sin, this whole process falls apart. It's like a husband going to marriage counseling with his wife, while continuing an affair with a mistress. It just doesn't work. Outwardly, you must clean your hands. You must wash the sin off just as the Old Testament temple worshipper had to wash himself at the laver immediately upon entering the outer court. Wash up, put away those sins that so easily beset you. And do it sincerely, from the heart.

D. Pursue outward purity and inward sincerity.

We read in,

Ps. 24:3 "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully. 5 He shall receive blessing from the LORD"

That's why we have a confession of sin early in the worship service every Sunday. That's why there is this reminder of on-going sin in the life of Christians, even in the midst of the promise of forgiveness. Because with that promise, with that assurance that we are freed from the condemnation of God's wrath and justice, comes this exhortation. "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?...He who has clean hands and a pure heart."

And that cleansing must not merely be outward, but it must also be a reflection of the heart. Cleanse your hands AND purify your hearts, we read in verse 8! With James' warning, "you double-minded." That's the hypocrite--says one thing over here and doesn't something completely different over here.

And how can you be sure that such a description doesn't apply to you? James makes that clear.

E. Repent of your sin with grief and hatred of it.

v.9

That's a strange exhortation, isn't it? Be wretched. Lament, mourn and weep. Stop laughing. Turn your joy to gloom. Now what does he mean by that?

Surely, the exhortation is not to a life of morbid sadness. But rather, what must be put away is the superficial and frivolous silliness that so many people call life. Life is not a game, and a lighthearted, careless response to the affairs of life might be normal for an immature and unstable teenager, but it is wholly inappropriate for a godly Christian.

Specifically, the seriousness of life requires a serious and sober reckoning with sin. The language of James is very similar to Old Testament language of the prophets calling the people of God to repentance. As one commentator says so well, "the prophets demanded outward expressions of grief as tokens of penitence, not substitutes for it."

So take your sins seriously. Grieve over them. Weep over them. Surely this is the godly sorrow which Paul identifies in 2 Corinthians 7, praising the people for the sobriety with which they dealt with their own sins.

2 Cor. 7:10 “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”

A godly seriousness. That’s the call of Scripture. It is not at all opposed to a deep seated joy, and in fact, that’s the source from which joy springs. Not light-hearted frivolity, but deep wonder and amazement that the God of all grace would bestow that grace upon you, a miserable sinner. And so our prayers of repentance might include words such as this,

Ps. 51:5 “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. 6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.”

In other words, hate your sin. So much so that you weep over it. That’s the idea here.

v.9 “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”

And if you can’t? Or won’t? If you refuse to be sober when confronted by your own sins, then the problem, says James, is pride. And so we come back to where we started.

v.10

I’ll end with that final encouragement, he will exalt you. He will lift you up. Remember how I defined pride--with the repeated emphasis upon the “self”. Self-advancement. The pursuit of your own advantage. And humility is the very opposite--putting those things to death. James reminds us about,

III. THE REWARDS OF HUMILITY.

And that reward is simple. If you would humble yourself before God, God will lift you up.

It might not happen according to your own timetable. It might not happen in the way you would expect it. And it might not even happen at all in this life. But beloved, it will happen. God’s promises are yes and amen. What God has promised he will fulfill.

v.10 “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”