

## How to Center Yourself in God’s Grace – James 4:6-10

My name is Jason Taylor. I am the Biblical Soul Care Pastor here at Coram Deo. It is my privilege and joy to share the Word of God with you today.

Please turn with me to **James 4:6-10**.

If you need a Bible, the ushers are walking up and down the row and are happy to give you one of ours.

While you are looking up the passage, let me remind you of a few background details. This book was written by the half-brother of Jesus. James became a leader in the church in the city of Jerusalem and is widely known to have been a martyr. He writes this book to all Jesus Christ followers. In a direct, powerful, and practical manner, James shows that true wisdom is found in loving God and others. We are jumping into the last half one of James’s separate but yet connected wisdom speeches.

**James 4:6-10. “But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”**

### Intro

There is both bad news and good news for us in this passage. The bad news is that we humans are naturally self-centered, but the good news, the part that makes me want to worship, is that because of Jesus, we all can overcome this natural bent and center ourselves in God.

We are talking about progressive sanctification here. This passage is written to believers in Christ. We all fall back into patterns of sin. The gross biblical illustration is that a dog returns to its vomit. Gross. We all return to sinful and worldly patterns of living. But, there is freedom, life, safety, and peace for a person who centers themselves in God.

Leslie Vernick writes, “As Christians, many of us think God is our center. But, truth be told we center ourselves in other things—even good things like a satisfying marriage or personal happiness. Although these other things are not sinful, if they remain at our center, we will never be able to act right when that center is threatened...our center is where we go to find peace, happiness, and refuge. It is what we anchor ourselves to in the midst of a

storm. It becomes our rock, the belief we stand on, the hope we cling to, the ‘defining sphere of our existence.’”<sup>1</sup>

James is passionately calling us to center ourselves in God with five key principles and a humble spirit.

Notice the first word in verse 6, “**But**”. This is one of my favorite words in Scripture! It signals a contrast, a change of thought, and in most cases, it offers hope when things are dark.

The previous five verses of this chapter outline how it is common for man to have conflict with one another, and most of the time these arguments are not because we are being sinned against, but because we are sinning against the other person and most importantly against God!

Our arguments are not necessarily because of a practical problem, but because of a spiritual problem in us. The conflict exposes our self-centeredness and the passions deep within our heart that are prideful, unloving, and anti-God!

God uses strong language to describe what our sinfulness is like to him. He says it’s like when one spouse cheats on the other. That’s the language used, “**You adulterous people!**” (v. 4a) God feels our sin very intensely. That’s how deep our betrayal to God is.

“**But**”! Even though this is how we are, “**God gives more grace.**” He is consistently loving and good and kind, even when we are knuckleheads—self-centered and self-focused and self-absorbed people who violate God because we choose to follow the world’s way of living, rather than God.

“**But.**” (v. 6) James now takes a different direction in his text. He begins to point to the graciousness of our loving God. <sup>2</sup> “**But he gives more grace.**” (v. 6)

“God’s grace means God’s goodness toward those who only deserve punishment.” He doesn’t just give grace at salvation when we were his enemies. He gives, “**More grace**” as we choose to love the world rather than him. He extends to us his kindness and shows us his mercy. He will always extend more grace to the sinner who chooses to humble himself. I agree with R. Kent Hughes, “This is without doubt one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

It is comforting because God is so gracious! He gives us gifts that we don’t deserve or haven’t earned.

<sup>1</sup> Vernick, Leslie. *How to Act Right When Our Spouse Acts Wrong*. New York, NY: Waterbrook Publishing, 88, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 239.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *James: Faith That Works. Preaching the Word Series*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 158.

“Therefore”, (v. 6) because God is so good to us and continually offers us more grace, we must humbly abandon all the heart passions, attitudes, and behaviors that put us at odds with God and center our lives in him.

The passage starts with what God does for us, then it focuses on how we can learn to center ourselves in his amazing grace.

We cannot be passive in our response to God’s grace. To center ourselves in God’s grace takes a high level of intentional action. It is purposeful and meaningful. It is the perfect response to our gracious God.

So, the first step to centering yourself in God’s grace...

### 1) Confess your self-centeredness (v. 6b)

“God opposes the proud,”

Not only is our God a gracious God, but our God is a hostile God. He is a warrior. He fights with those who oppose him! The greatest conflict of a self-centered person’s life is with God!

When a self-centered person exalts himself (i.e. the desires of their own heart) they are at odds not only with humans but with the Creator. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (v. 4)

But “James is not saying friendship with people in the world is hatred toward God or makes anyone his adversary.”<sup>4</sup> He is saying that living under the control of the world system that is under the power of Satan, is functionally living as God’s enemy. Making oneself a friend of the world is to chase after selfish and unbiblical passions and desires.

Warning...Be careful of pop-psychology because it is guilty of promoting a world system that is anti-God. The self-help movement is focused on manifesting or actualizing self, especially above others. It emphasizes individual empowerment, personal feelings, and the ability to achieve happiness or success through self-help tips found in books, blogs, and on social media. This focus on self in this way is prideful and worldly.

Notice how the passages reads, “God opposes the proud.” (v. 6) The word “proud” is the Greek word, “huperephanos” which means “appearing above others.”<sup>5</sup> It carries the idea of self-exaltation as one is seen by others.

When we fulfill our self-centered desires, felt-needs, or interests it is with the underlying goal of exalting ourselves in the eyes of other people.

Beware of self-exalting behavior that can be seen in the following ways:

- 1) Has a grandiose sense of self-importance.

Ex. Someone who needs to be right in an argument will fight until the other acknowledges that they in turn are wrong. Unity, peace, and love are not the goal of that conflict. Self-exaltation is the goal. The other person must affirm that they are right. I confess. To my shame I have told my wife, “I appreciate when you say, ‘I love you’, but I would rather you say, ‘You are right.’”

- 2) Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.

Ex. People stand in the way because they don’t realize how great we really are. My parents don’t see me. My spouse doesn’t see me. My boss doesn’t see me. My friends don’t see me. If only they would recognize me...then I would be whole.

- 3) Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people.

Ex. Do country club and Walmart people ever hang-out? When is the last time we felt comfortable in each other’s homes?

- 4) Requires excessive admiration.

Ex. Every January, Karla and I watch American Idol. Just the name itself speaks to how we think of these entertainers, these stars. The nation worships them.

- 5) Has a sense of entitlement.

Ex. Turning left on red light—3 or 4 cars deep.

- 6) Is interpersonally exploitative.

Ex. Are our relationships more about what people give us or what we give to other people?

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *James: Faith That Works*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Strong, James. *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 74.

7) Lacks empathy.

Ex. Highly critical people fall into this category. They are constantly critical of others, bringing them down. It is a way of exalting self.

8) Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.

Ex. A competitive drive to outdo the other.

9) Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

Ex. Old school term for this...Don't be a diva. In my day this was meant to say, "Don't be entitled, high-maintenance, or overly-dramatic." Today Gen Z has reclaimed the word, diva, to be a compliment that means you are "highly confident, unapologetic about your personal style, and in control of your own destiny."

We all can be self-centered, but it can also go to an extreme. The American Psychiatric Association has described "narcissism". "A pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy."<sup>6</sup>

While the APA provides a helpful description that is consistent with the pride seen in James 4, it falls short of understanding the cause of these behaviors and attitudes. The source is not a personality disorder, but the evil passions of the self-centered heart.

Many think someone they know is narcissistic, but that is often a wrong label. I recommend you focus on whether or not you individually display self-centered thoughts, attitudes, and actions:

- Do these nine behaviors apply to me?
  - Right now in this message you are thinking, "I hope so and so is listening."
  - If you are arguing in your heart and saying, "I am not self-centered."
  - Then you might have an attitude of self-centeredness right now.

**"But (God) gives more grace...(He) gives grace to the humble."**

So confess it, and surrender it.

## 2) Surrender to God (v. 7a)

***"But gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God."***

The self-centered must re-center themselves in God's grace. What does a self-interested, self-exalting, self-dependent person who has made God angry do? The answer to the question comes with the word, **"Therefore."** It acts as a bridge connecting the practical instructions of verses 7-10 to the theological truths already presented in the chapter.

Self-centered people are in a fight with God that cannot be won. So be humble and surrender.

It is possible to confess self-centeredness and never center yourself in God's grace. One must also surrender.

Surrender is a word that no man or woman wants to do. It is against our nature. We typically view surrender as losing. It means that someone is more than we are. Fact—God is more than we are.

Men and women of all ages and stages of life must surrender their selfish ambitions and passions to the glory of God. Much like the commanding officer of a losing army must offer complete and unconditional surrender so must we. This is counter-cultural. It is against our nature. But, God will have no competition, so James pens, **"Submit yourselves therefore to God." (v. 7)**

"Yet many of us have made an exchange. We have devalued living for God's glory and have valued living for something else as our ultimate satisfaction in life."<sup>7</sup> **"But (God) gives more grace." (v. 6)** We deserve punishment, but God offers grace, so surrender is the only posture by which one can humbly come to God and worship.

Surrender is not about performance or earning a status that makes us worthy. God's grace is less about what we do and more about what Christ has done. Matthew West sums it up well.

[Verse 1]

I used to think grace was a ladder  
Every sinner had to climb  
If only I could just do better  
I could earn it over time  
Tried to work my way to good  
Trouble is I never could  
But then You showed me  
Just exactly how grace works

<sup>6</sup> American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.* Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 669, 670.

<sup>7</sup> Vernick, Leslie. *How to Act Right When Our Spouse Acts Wrong.* Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 100.

[Chorus]

I'm good at always falling down  
You're good at never giving up  
I'm good at getting turned around  
You're good at saying I'm still loved  
And I was wrecked by mercy  
The day I understood  
I'm not loved because I'm worthy  
I'm loved because You're good

If we choose to confess our self-centeredness and surrender to God's grace, then our war is now fought on a new front. We no longer are God's enemy. We are Satan's enemy. So be humble and...

### 3) Resist the devil (v. 7b)

*"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."*

Self-centered pride is a temptation from Satan. It is clear and explicit.

When a person surrenders to God, they disarm the power of Satan in their life. It is the main way we **"Resist the devil."** (v. 7b)

It's not mystical. Not dramatic. Simply resist through surrender and trusting God.

When an individual befriends the world, they also befriend the devil. They choose to submit themselves to all manner of passions and self-centered attitudes and behaviors. While "humans are responsible for their wicked actions, there is a demonic element underlying (or sometimes explicitly present in) all human rebellion."<sup>8</sup> Satan is the father of lies. Surrendering to God is turning your back to the ongoing temptation and deceit of the devil. Therefore, **"he will flee from you."** (v. 7)

After confession, surrender, and resistance come repentance.

### 4) Repent humbly (v. 8, 9)

Centering yourself in God's grace brings you to repentance. "Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."<sup>9</sup> This definition implies that a person who has faith in Jesus Christ and repents of their sin must turn to God, change their behavior, desire God more than anything, and grieve their sin.

### o Turn to God (v. 8)

- o **"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."** (v. 8)
- o "Repentance, like faith, is an intellectual understanding (that sin is wrong), and emotional approval of the teachings of Scripture regarding sin (a sorrow for sin and a hatred of it), and a personal decision to turn from it (a renouncing of sin and a decision of the will to forsake it and lead a life of obedience to Christ instead.)"<sup>10</sup>
- o At minimum, this means the following:
  - The self-centered individual who repents and turns to God will do so in response to the Bible. God uses the special revelation of himself in Scripture to call believers to repentance.
  - No one can turn to God prior to God convicting him. God is jealous of his Spirit and will draw the pridefully self-centered to himself.
  - By turning to God, the repentant person turns away from the devil.

### o Change your behavior (v. 8b)

- o **"Cleanse your hands, you sinners."**
- o When a person repents there should be a change in behavior.
- o "True repentance involves a change both in the inner disposition and outward behavior tied to that new disposition."<sup>11</sup>
- o It should not be said however, that a self-centered person must live a completely changed life before repentance is completely true and genuine. Humans in a sin-cursed world will struggle with the temptation toward self-centered ambition and passion and thereby must make a habit of turning to God in repentance.
- o Those who turn to God will make efforts to change their sinful desires, attitudes, and behaviors.

<sup>8</sup> Plummer. *Expository Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem. *Systematic Theology*, 865.

<sup>10</sup> Grudem. *Systematic Theology*, 866.

<sup>11</sup> Plummer. *Expository Commentary: Hebrews-Revelation*, 270.

### ○ **Desire God more than anything (v. 8c)**

- “Purify your hearts you double minded.”
- God must be the greatest affection of our life. Loving him requires that we lift him up and pursue his glory, not our own. “We need to begin living at the point where everything, and nothing short of that, is about the glory of God.”<sup>12</sup> This is what it means to “Purify your hearts, you double minded.” (v. 8)
- An individual cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve our own self-glory and the glory of The Only Begotten who is full of grace and truth. Therefore, we are transformed as we renew or purify our mind. (Romans 12:2)

### ○ **Grieve your sin (v. 9)**

- “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.” (v. 9)
- A key marker of repentance is a grief that leads to godliness. This verse is not saying that the Christian should live in a perpetual state of sadness. Rather this grief is an attitude that is in response to selfishness.
- We must grieve our violation of God and choose to trust him. One way to grieve is through lament. The Scripture is full of lament, even in the psalms (which were sung regularly in the tabernacle.) A heart that is sad, not in self-pity, but in humility, is one that centers itself on the grace of God.

### 5) **Wait for God to exalt you (v. 10)**

Centering yourself in God’s grace helps you patiently wait for God to lift you up. It is the humble whom God will elevate. “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.” (v. 10) The proud, self-centered person will work to make sure they are recognized before others. In contrast, the humble will prayerfully run to God who will lift them up in due time. This may come after the return of Jesus in eternity future. This lifting up could also come in present day relationships. The timing is not as important as the certainty. God will exalt the humble.

Let’s pray—Lord God thank you for giving us eternal life that in hope we know will come if we have repented of our sins and believe in Jesus. Also Lord, thank you that will will commend faithfulness. We can wait on You, we can trust You, and You will not disappoint. We don’t have to let the opinions of others discourage us. Rather we can have confidence in You and Your approval. Not only will we be approved one day at the Judgment Seat of Christ, but right now You have given us Jesus Christ’s righteousness. You have already spoken Your approval of us. Now we don’t have to let failure or success drive our self-worth. Our confidence is found in Your approval.

#### Benediction

- Text Talk
- Guest Central
- BSC Room
- Danielsons available for prayer
- You are Loved!

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<sup>12</sup> Vernick. *How to Act Right When Our Spouse Acts Wrong*, 100.