

A Humble Submission (James 4)

Join me in prayer:

Most high and holy God, we come to you, today, aware of our need to seek you. We pray that we would have the hearts and minds that conform to you, your word, and to live lives that are honourable in your sight. We pray that we would gain hearts of wisdom and submit to the call you have on our lives. We pray to be reminded of what Jesus did for us, and we pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to sanctify and transform us to become more and more like your son. We ask all this in his name. Amen.

(Tell people they may be seated)

I need to start this week with an apology for last week. I was given the privilege to lead in hosting the Lord's Supper. There's an element of church togetherness and unity that I've seen and comments about communion that have concern me. There are certainly ways that churches have problems, and though I think there is some truth in what has concerned me... Sometimes our grievances build up in us and it leads to begrudging frustrations, anger, or even conflict. In my zeal to correct, I believe I over-corrected, which isn't good or true correction, and I need to ask forgiveness. I wish to apologize to you and repent of my failure to administer our time of communion, the Lord's Supper, correctly.

If we leave our pride unchecked, as I was so tempted to do, it can and often does lead to infighting. It can, if left unchecked, lead to divisions. It can even, at times, grow to affect a whole church and cause them to split. Church splits are a devastating and destructive force that leaves everyone, on both sides, hurt and broken. I've seen the effects of it firsthand. We are a people who are called to humble submission, but often are a people who, due to our sinful nature that wars within us, act pridefully, arrogantly, and refuse to submit to wisdom and godly correction.

I use my apology, which I truly offer to you today, as an illustration of our text this morning. Please turn with me to the book of James, chapter 4. When we were last in James, we talked about the danger and power of the tongue. It, like an ambassador, represents us. We

speak from the overflow of our hearts. Chapter 4 continues that theme and displays the consequences of poor conduct that come from an unchecked tongue. Listen, and hear the words of the Lord from James 4:1-5.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 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. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 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. 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"?

James is a book filled with wisdom. It's a highly practical book with many instructions, with a common theme, in this chapter, of humble submission. **True religion is humble submission**. Again, **true religion is humble submission**. James is, yet again, showing us that our faith in God demands a living and active faith. In these verses, verses 1-5, I believe James is first teaching us to **resist our passions**. Resist our passions. It's really hard to resist our desires. I don't know about you, but I can *physically* feel the pain that comes with denying myself something I really want. Self-control is something that needs to be built up over time, and with persistent dedication. The entirety of chapter 3 was warning against the dangers of, and teaching us to fight against, our heart's deepest wants. We must tame our whole bodies to live lives that are pleasing to God, or we will stumble. That's why James is, again, warning us to **resist our passions**.

James starts this chapter off with an immediate rebuke. He does it in the form of a question. "What are you doing? Why are you fighting?" James knows the answer. In the same way a parent asks a child a leading question when they're doing something that they know they shouldn't be doing. But even deeper, he's asking them to reflect: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" It's the same things that cause quarrels and fights among us

today! It's not *really* our politics that causes fights, usually. It's not *really* our theology that causes fights, usually. What primarily causes quarrels and fights among us is our passions.

Now, passions aren't just the things you love. I imagine many of you would think of passion like an emotion. But that's not, technically speaking, what passions are. Passions run much deeper than that. They're often uncontrolled, intense, feelings. They're the deep driving force in us that compels us to action, but not the actions themselves. You can think about them as the involuntary gut reaction that wells up inside you. The Greek word here is ἡδονή, where we get the root of the word hedonism. It's the idea of self-pleasure and unsanctified carnality.

Passions aren't necessarily what you do, but your unmeditated thoughts. It's your instincts burning in you that, often, get the better of you. Things like lust, anger, or jealousy. Things you experience and often only catch *after* you've started to act upon them. The contrast to that would be affections, or sentiments. Whereas affections and sentiments are rational and measured, passions are irrational and impulsive.

James is telling us that we are at war with ourselves. When he says, "**you desire and do not have, so you murder,**" it's unlikely that most were guilty of murdering a person, but hatred in the heart would be. The quarreling and fighting would indicate anger and strife. And Jesus taught the idea behind the commandment, "**you shall not murder**" in Exodus 20:18 is meant to include hatred in our hearts. Matthew 5:21-22 says,

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Just like hatred in our hearts, covetousness, selfishly desiring to take from others, wrongly stores up treasures for ourselves on earth, rather than storing up treasures in heaven as Jesus taught just a few moments later:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where 5
thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither
moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your
treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The common theme among these outbursts James addresses is the selfish, self-seeking, motivations that place ourselves as most important, rather than considering others more significant than ourselves, and rather than putting God in his rightful place at the centre of our lives. Even in our interactions with God, we miss the mark.

How are we supposed to pray? Have you thought much about that question before? How do you pray correctly? It seems like there are a few warnings about our prayer lives here. First, we sometimes don't receive from God because... well... We don't ask. If I asked you right now, "how's your prayer life," I imagine almost every Christian in this room would answer, "...not as much as I should." On one hand, prayer really isn't difficult. You can do it, anywhere, at any time, freely. Yet it's hard to pray for a long time and admit to the almighty God of the universe all your faults, failures, and needs. Especially when we we pray with bad motives, which is the second issue James notes.

We sometimes don't receive from God because we ask wrongly and spend our prayers on our passions. Praying sinfully. Sometimes people ask "can I pray imprecatory prayers?" Prayers where we ask for God to bring down judgement against our enemies. Though there is a place for godly pleas for justice, we must pray with a focus on the good and just God who will do right and not with vengeance. Vengeance is for God to distribute, not us. Other times, people are tempted to pray for things they know would be wrong. Whether that's revenge, or anger, or spite, or praying for something bad to happen to others, our sinful prayers are not considered by God.

It's appropriate for the following rebuke to come, "**You adulterous people!**" They're aligning themselves with the way the world works. Their actions show who they seek. And they're not aligning themselves with God. They're seeking after themselves. They're acting like the world, living like them. That's not the kind of friendship we should have with the world. Brothers and sisters, we are called to be light in the darkness. We represent God. If we befriend the world and live the way they live, instead of showing them the greater way of the gospel, declaring to them the glorious gift of God through Jesus Christ for us, we've missed the plot.

If we're nice to people, but don't warn them of the judgement that's coming, we aren't representing God. We not only hate the world, but we're at enmity with God. By doing that, *we hate God*. And God is displeased and at odds with us. Claiming to be Christians, but acting like fools. Exchanging the glory of God for... What? Avoiding a few awkward conversations? Our passions drive us but amount to vanity. Striving after ourselves, but... really... striving after nothing.

But God, here at the end of verse 5, "**yearns jealousy over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.**" Huh... Considering the rebuke just before this, I wouldn't have expected James to remind us of the kindness of God here. It's still God correcting us, but there's a deep kindness that swells here. I'll return to this passage later. But consider even in our failures to resist our passions and humbly submit, we see God offers grace to us and reaches out to us.

If you would please jump down to verses 11-12 with me, there's another caution for us. True religion is humble submission. Therefore we should **renounce our judgements**. Renounce our judgements. We're quick to judge, but we often judge wrongly. It's a tricky thing, judging is. Much like our passions, which are immediate internal reactions, our judgements are

what we deem as right and wrong over others. But in order to live godly lives in this area, we must **renounce our judgements**.

James 4:11-12 says,

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. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Something that's difficult to talk about when it comes to judging and not judging others is that we all make judgements. And it's not necessarily wrong to make judgments. Judgements sometimes keep us safe. It's good, for example, to judge who you would and wouldn't leave your kids alone with. It's good to require police checks to protect the vulnerable. It's good to, as a church, recognize and judge when someone is acting contrary to the gospel and correct them through loving discipline. And it's good to weigh your options when trying to make wise and informed choices about any and everything!

Denying any kind of judging would be misunderstanding our text. The judgement James is talking about isn't about that. It's talking about presiding over others in ways that we do not have the right to do. It's a warning against setting ourselves up as the judge, which only God has the right to do.

James warns us about the wickedness of speaking evil. It's malicious. It's slanderous. It's false. The quarrels and fighting were, evidently, enough among the scattered Jews that they were willing to spread lies, tear one another down, and oppress each other as we learn in chapter 2. Chapter 2, if you'll look with me for a moment, says this right at the beginning:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. If a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

This is not a picture of a people who are united. This is a church divided. They make judgements based on factors that don't ultimately lead them to their shared love for the saviour. They judge. Not with the intent to warn sinners of their sins, but to get in good standing with the rich and powerful among them. Their judgements lead to divisions.

And this didn't even benefit them! It backfired. It says in verse 6, “**you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?**” Their judgements were for selfish gain, yet it backfires and leads to division. It's every man and woman for themselves.

I hope, church, this isn't what becomes of us. It's easy to have divisions, which leads to quarrels. It can become such a dangerous thing when we assume the motives of others and judge them. As people of the Word, my deep hope would be that you can take time to investigate and draw out the needs and hearts of others. We aren't a church that all share one mind. We're a diverse and multifaceted community that has all kinds of views about any given topic. But we share one thing in common. We share a love for our saviour. As you ready your judgements and how you look at others who may not agree with you, consider the God that saved you and what he has first done in you.

Consider that *he* is the judge. And he is good. Genesis 18:25, “**Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?**” Why would we want to take that job away from him? If we judge, then we put ourselves in the place of the judge. But we're not God and we'll never do right the way he perfectly does. He delivers true justice. And he does it with such compassionate mercy by giving us hope and life, even when we're found guilty. He is, as our text reminds us in James 4:12, the judge that is able to save and destroy. So why should you? Why should I? Why

should *we* be the ones to judge? We shouldn't. We should **renounce our judgements** so that we may, instead, trust God and humbly submit to his ways, and his judgements.

So we ought to **resist our passions**, and **renounce our judgements**, as neither of them are instruments of grace, nor are they beneficial to us. They tear us down. They tear others down. They steal our joy. They steal joy from others. They harm us, and they harm others. And as we move to verses 13-16, we'll see that our lack of humble submission puffs ourselves up and harms our future.

True religion is humble submission, therefore we should **remove our presumptions**. Remove our presumptions. Presuming is a dangerous thing, you know. Acting with the assumption of authority, and taking your life for granted. There's a certain kind of pride that comes in knowing things. But when we assume we know more than we really do, well... We start to presume and often it's *right here* that we make a mess of things. So if we want to live like the wise and be marked as a person of true religion, we must **remove our presumptions**.

Here's what the ending section of James 4 says to us:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

I think that most of us would ask, "**what's wrong with someone making plans?**" This sounds like a pretty trivial thing for the text to be complaining about. How does it fit into the rest of the chapter? How does making plans presume?

It's a presumption because it's done without consideration for God and his plans. What reasons do we have to believe we can do whatever we want? James is speaking against the assumption that we have autonomy over our lives. We belong to the Lord. We are not our own.

That's one of the foundational beliefs throughout church history. The Orthodox Catechism, one of the main two Baptist catechisms of history, starts with this question: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" This is the answer:

That both in soul and body, whether I live or die, I am not my own, but belong wholly unto my most faithful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. By His most precious blood fully satisfying for all my sins, He has delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me, that without the will of my heavenly Father not so much as a hair may fall from my head. Yes, all things must serve for my safety and by His Spirit, also He assures me of everlasting life, and makes me ready and prepared, that from now on I may live to Him.

This is the first question for good reason. It is an immediate admission that our lives are not in our hands, but in God's. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. Our best made plans can be taken away in an instant. We could get sick, or die. But God is in control of all things, and God knows what's best for our lives.

And for all of us who sometimes question what God's next step is for us: know that his plans are always perfect. They're good for us. Every good and perfect gift comes from God. He doesn't *just* do the best for the world. He does the best for us. And that may not feel like a comfort when we're in the throws of life and feel down and out... But God never fails us. So when you're tired, and worn, with heavy hearts, or feel like you can't properly breathe, know that he sees you. Even when you have the worst weeks, or months, or years of your life... He knows you. He loves you.

"What is your life?" I don't want to bring a damper on you, especially when I just spoke to many of our insecurities, but James is drawing to his readers the theme of Ecclesiastes. Our life is a vapour. A mist. It's a pleasant and good thing that's here for a moment and gone the next. We, in our lives, are only here for a short time. The days feel long, but the years are short.

Instead, our brother encourages us, we ought to orient ourselves with God's sovereignty over us in mind. "If the Lord wills" is a humble recognition that God is present over all. It's a

submission to give over our lives to God and trust that God knows best. When we remove our presumptions, we can avoid arrogance, which is the warning we're given here.

“As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” If we put our warnings from James together, we see how humble submission blesses us. Resisting our passions allows us to live with understanding, clarity, and offer holy requests that God will answer. When we renounce our judgments, we get to live at peace with one another, knowing that God will deal with all injustices. And when we remove our presumptions, we can rest in his plans knowing that he is good, cares for us, and never fails.

I skipped over verses 6-10. I think these verses amplify this chapter in ways that make it stand out as a focal point. I think it would be an ideal passage to unpack with your brothers and sisters, either at home or in small group. Verses 6-10 speak to our common joy and delight which deters our desires to quarrel or fight.

Here's the final point this morning. When we live a life of humble submission, we get to **rest in grace**. We get to rest in grace. Here's what James says in verses 6-10:

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves 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.

I said I would return to verse 5, about yearning jealousy. God has made you to be his own. God is jealous for you, dear Christian. Dear saint. A great gift of grace is that when God takes hold on your life, you are never alone. He's with you. The Holy Spirit is there watching over you and dwelling in you and does not share you with any evil or unbelieving spirit. Christians cannot be overtaken by the darkness and wickedness of the world. They can experience dark and painful

times in their lives. I believe Pastor Kenny is speaking about that very thing next week. But God still has dominion over you.

In God's dominion, you are given grace. And more grace. And grace upon grace. Grace greater than all your sins. Grace greater than ALL sins! That grace we've first been given was delivered up to us through the hands of wicked men. Evil unbelieving hearts that betrayed our Lord. That delivered up Jesus to be crucified. The holy Son of God who hung on a cursed tree instead of us and took upon himself the punishment the Father rightly set against all evil and wickedness of *everyone who has ever come to recognize that they are guilty sinners*. And in his punishment of sins... He gives more grace.

How could you not celebrate the opposition God has towards the proud when we, who have been humbled by the greatest news we could ever receive and the greatest freedom we could ever experience, see that? Saints, rest in that grace. Feel that grace. See that grace. Believe that grace.

Friends who have come to visit today, who do not yet know this grace we're speaking about... Look to Jesus. Seek Jesus. Find rest in Jesus. Give up your passions and submit yourself to God. Don't let the devil and the world that entangles you overwhelm you. Turn to the Lord. Submit to him. Reject your pride. Christians aren't better people. We fight and quarrel just like everyone else. But Christians are people deeply blessed to know a saviour who came to rescue them.

And when we know we're rescued, brothers and sisters, it's a lot easier to humbly cleanse our hands, and purify our hearts. Submission to God lets us lay down our duplicity (our double-mindedness). And that's what allows us to admit our wretchedness. It's what allows us to weep over our sins and mourn our wickedness, our selfishness, and our pride. Submitting to

God allows us to mourn and feel the gloom that comes from our sins. “**Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.**”

Recognizing this allows us to not only resist our passions, renounce our judgements, and remove our presumptions, but it brings us into harmony with our brothers and sisters. Resting in grace allows us to consider, with godly sentiments and measured affections, how much we share with one another. It turns our natural bent to judge each other with a new motive to understand each other. It gives us the freedom to know God is the one who has everything figured out and that we don't have to put that pressure on ourselves. Not only does living in humble submission mean we've been set free from our sins and pride that tells us that we need to do everything our way... But it also gives us the chance to breathe, rest, and gaze upon the light of God's glorious beauty. It's a tough journey. It's a journey that will take the rest of our time here in this life. But it's a journey well worth it.

The embarrassment of an apology, admitting when we've stumbled in one of our many ways, stings. It doesn't feel good in the moment. But the lasting reward of living a life of repentance is so worth the trials of this life. “**So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.**” As we grow, we will learn about some of the many ways we sin against others. Whether it's against another culture, or against a person, or against God himself, we know that God, the God who gives more grace, will not forsake us. And when we serve a God like that... Who in their right mind wouldn't want to live in humble submission under him?

Our beloved God who is kind to us even when we are unkind to everyone around us, we pray that you overtake our hearts, and make them clean. That you cleanse our hearts, and give a heart of flesh to those who have hardened their hearts. That you would renew our minds and give us the clarity to acknowledge you as our Lord and God. We pray that we would all look to your Son as the Saviour who gave his life for us when we were rebels against you. And we pray that we would be humble to seek you and submit to your will for our lives, whatever that may be and wherever you may send us. We pray all this in the mighty and merciful name of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Amen.