

## God Shows Favor to the Humble

James 4:1-12

Key Verse: 6, "But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'"

In the previous passage, James talked about wicked tongues and heavenly wisdom. He said heavenly wisdom is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, fruitful, impartial and sincere. He also said that peacemakers reap a harvest of righteousness.

In this passage, James begins by talking about the opposite of peace, which is war—quarreling, fighting and killing. Then he rebukes adulterous people who are being friends with the world and gives 11 exhortations to live as Christians. As Christians, we are called to be peacemakers in God's house, not troublemakers or war-makers. We have all been guilty of causing strife among God's people and in our own families. Right? Why is that? Of course, it's because we are sinners and that's what sinners do—sin. They fight, they argue, they cause trouble, because they—we—are all self-centered and proud. Let's be quick to listen to James and learn what to do about this sin-tendency in us.

First, God opposes the proud (1-6).

James begins this part saying, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup>You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight."

What are the desires within us that cause fights and quarrels? I can think of a few things in my own experience. For one, I have the desire to be right, or to prove that I am right. Why? Because I don't like to be wrong. In my sinful nature, I don't like to be corrected. This comes from pride and self-centeredness. Another thing that causes contention is I want to be respected. No one wants to be disrespected or treated like dirt or garbage or like a useless or evil person. Everyone likes to be praised, honored and appreciated. Don't we? Why? Well, it could be again that we're proud and self-centered. But it could also be that God made us to be praised, honored and appreciated, as children of God. But the devil and our own sins have messed everything up and hindered us all from achieving God's intended goal for us. It is good to think about and to desire what is good for us: things that are noble, pure, right, true, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy (Php 4:8). It is good for us to desire the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23a). These things are all good to have and God wants us to have them. But one problem is we try to get them from the world, rather than from God. We cheat, steal and lie to get them. And sometimes we work hard to get them. But if our hard work is not enough, then we slander, accuse and blame other people. That was Cain's problem. When he could not get God's favor, he blamed his brother Abel, and then killed him.

There are so many other things we want that we do not have and we quarrel about: I already mentioned the desire to be right and the desire to be respected. I also want to be heard; I want

to be included, I want to be appreciated, I want to be thanked when I help someone. There are so many things we want that we sometimes do not have.

So why do we not have what we want? Is it because others are so evil? That's what we often think. But that's not what James says is the problem. Ok, is it because we don't have the skill or we haven't worked hard enough? Maybe sometimes. But that's not what James focuses on. James says, "You do not have because you do not ask God." James says we don't pray for what we want. That's why we don't have. Asking God is praying. If we can't pray for something, it could mean that we know God doesn't want us to have what we have prayed for. So, we would be, in effect, praying for something that God does not want us to have. If we ask God for something, but it will hinder our faith or spiritual growth, God will not give us what we ask for. James says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." That would be selfish prayer for my own pleasure or glory or gain.

Then how should we pray, or what should we pray for? 1 John 5:14 tells us: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Jesus said in John 15:7, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Again, Jesus said in John 14:14, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." To ask in Jesus' name is not magic. It means to ask according to his will, character, and spirit. Recently I entered 12 people in a sweepstakes with the purpose and agreement of helping one person afford a place to stay. At the same time, I've been helping this person to get a job. For him to get a job is not only good, but it is necessary. Still, it would be pretty cool to win the sweepstakes to help him out as well as the winner, since 10 of the 12 entrants are in pretty dire financial need. Who knows: maybe God will let me win. Whether he does or not, we all must seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all our needs will be provided, according to his promise.

When any of my sons asked for a video game, and that has happened many times with four sons, I usually struggled wondering, "Is it good for them?" I actually wasn't sure. But God knows what is best for us. If we really believe that, we should always include in our prayers, at least in spirit, "Lord, your will be done. You know what's best."

Our hearts so easily pursue the things of the world. James understood this. So he rebuked his listeners. I believe he could rebuke them because he loved them, and because they trusted him as an apostle and shepherd to them. So he said to them in verse 4: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

James called them adulterous people. James says they were adulterous because they were friends of the world. Here James uses the Greek word "philia" for friendship, which is one of the Greek words for "love." To be a friend of the world is to be a lover of the world. That's why James called them adulterers. They were guilty of spiritual adultery. They were loving the world rather than God. James is saying that we cannot love God and the world at the same time. Why not? Because God is jealous for our love. If we give our first love to anything created, it takes

the place of God. It becomes an idol in the place of God. God jealousy longs for our love. This reminds me of our 2020 Chicago key verse about giving our first love to Jesus (Rev 2:4-5). God is worthy of our first and best love. It is the greatest commandment that I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second, which James called the “royal law,” is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Apostle John said essentially the same thing about not being a friend of the world: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. <sup>16</sup> For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. <sup>17</sup> The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

James has essentially called his listeners murderers for their quarreling and adulterers for their love of the world. We are also guilty. We are all indeed sinful, adulterous, idolatrous creatures. We must look so pitiful and wretched to God. Sometimes we look pitiful and wretched even to one another in our sinsickness. Yet despite this, God is so merciful, patient and gracious toward us. See verse 6. “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’” God gives us more grace. Grace upon grace. His grace is amazing, marvelous and wonderful.

The thing we should most fear is being an enemy or opponent of God, for to be cut off from God is hell. So what is it in us that opposes God. It is pride. Pride causes us to be self-centered and egotistical. Pride deludes us to think that we don’t need God or we are better off without God. That is the sin of the devil, who rebelled against God. Pride makes us defiant, rebellious and foolish. God opposes the proud. But God shows favor to the humble.

There are so many people in the Bible and in history whose pride and defiance of God destroyed them. But there are also many people in the Bible and in history who humbled themselves before God and were shown favor. I pray that all of us and our children are among those who are shown favor from God through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Second, God shows favor to the humble (7-12).

After warning his listeners about fighting rather than praying and about the folly of being a proud friend of the world, James gives 10 successive exhortations to his Christian brothers and sisters in rapid succession in verses 7-10 and then one more in verses 11-12.

The 10 imperatives are: Submit to God, resist the devil, come near to God, wash your hands, purify your hearts, grieve, mourn and wail, change your laughter to mourning, humble yourselves. Let’s think more carefully about these commands.

Submit to God, resist the devil. “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” Here the word submit means to “put oneself under the authority, admonition or control of.” We are to submit to God, that is, to put ourselves under God’s authority and control. That is not easy, not natural and not automatic. It requires the grace of God and the help of the

Holy Spirit. We already thought about how rebellious, proud and self-centered we are by nature. Do you know the Greek word for “I”? It’s ego. We have giant egos. We are usually ruled by the unholy trinity: I, my, me. We must get off the throne of our own lives and give God the throne. I am not God. You are not God. We must submit ourselves first of all to God. I believe that is what Apostle Paul meant when he said, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (Col 3:5).”

James then says, “Resist the devil.” Resisting the devil goes along with submitting to God. We are in a spiritual war with battles waging day by day. But we often don’t realize that because we don’t see the devil with our physical eyes. But there is a devil, who work and aim is to oppose God and destroy our relationship with God and with other believers. James promises that when we resist the devil, he flees from us. 1 Peter says the same thing: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...” (1Pe 5:8-9).

Come near to God. Verse 8 begins, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” God does not delight in making it difficult for us to come to him. But we must come to him the way he has given us to do so. We come to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and Mediator. James tells us how: “Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” To wash our hands, means to come clean with God through confession and repentance. Trying to hide our sins from God is like putting dirty hands being our back. They are still dirty. Psalm 28:13 says, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” If our hands represent our deeds, our hearts represent our desires. We purify our hearts, again, by confessing and repenting our sins, and giving our first love to God.

Grieve, mourn and wail. James says in verse 9, “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Here James is talking about grieving over our sin. Godly sorrow brings repentance. King David knew how to grieve over his sin. When is the last time you grieved over any sin? When we do not confess our sins to God and grieve over them, our hearts can easily get hardened and our relationship can become cold and distant. God hasn’t moved, but we have. We can move further away. We must come near to God through repentance, confession and faith.

Verse 10 comes full circle to where James began in verse 6: “but [God] shows favor to the humble.” Verse 10 connects: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” To be humble before the Lord is to submit to God and to obey him and his word. To be humble is exactly opposite of being proud and rebellious. To be proud is to exalt ourselves. To be humble is to exalt God and to admit that “I am nothing but dust and ashes,” just like Abraham prayed (Gen 18:27). Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

James has one more command which has to do with our words and our attitude. Look at verses 11-12. “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup> There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”

James says, “Do not slander one another.” Slander is to speak evil of someone with the intent to hurt or damage their reputation or to create opposition against them. Politicians from all parties do this frequently to make their opponent look bad and to win more votes for themselves. Christians are not to do that. When we speak against someone, we are playing the judge and claiming to be better than the one we are speaking against. In fact, by wielding the law against others, we falsely pretend to be above the law ourselves. This echoes once again Jesus’ teaching: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Only God is qualified to Judge. There is only one true Lawgiver and Judge. Only God is able to save and destroy. We don’t have that power or right. So we must leave all personal judgment to God. This doesn’t mean we should ignore sinful behavior. We must speak the truth in love as our prayer to turn people from sin. But we must not judge people’s motives or intentions or assume that we know this. It means we must forgive one another in the name of Jesus, and, according to Jesus, we must do so too many times to even count. Why? Because God has forgiven our countless sins again and again.

In today’s passage James reminded us that we must humbly submit to God and resist the devil. We must pray and forgive our fellow Christians instead of quarreling and slandering. When you find yourself bad-mouthing a fellow Christian, even if it is in your own mind, stop, repent, ask God’s forgiveness for your own sin and pray for wisdom to build up your brothers and sisters in Christ. Turn away from prideful thinking and feeling and ask God’s mercy and grace. Turn away from loving the world and following the way of the world and earnestly pray for God’s grace and mercy in Christ to deliver you from the devil. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up.