

HUMBLE YOURSELVES



James 4:7-12

This Study Paper contains the following :-

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- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Things that are opposite that Christians hold together
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Introduction to the passage

As we have seen, James’ teaching has led us to realise that unspiritual conduct within the church arises from the poor relationship with God of those involved, so we are not surprised that he now turns to that theme. The poor conduct James has been describing is, among other things, an evidence of pride, for which the best cure is to realise what we are in God’s sight.

What these verses mean

Verse 7

Submit yourselves, then, to God.

It follows from verse 6 that if we are serious about the Christian life and desire God’s blessing, then we will seek to be humble. An important sign of humility is a life of submission to God. But a warning is necessary. It is possible to be submissive to God’s way for us with a reluctant spirit and at the same time be persuaded that his way is wrong and our way would be better. The attitude James requires is certainly based on confidence that God’s way is right and therefore best, and based on a cheerful readiness to

obey him. In practice submission to God means submitting to his doctrines, disciplines and demands. Many find the teaching of the Bible hard and try to reason with their corrupted, limited minds. See John 6:60-66 for an example where many found the teaching of Jesus hard. God uses the hard things of life, such as pain and sorrow, as disciplines to bring about his own glory. Many think that God should just provide pleasure. They ignore the teaching of the Bible on this subject (Deut. 8:5; Job 5:17; Heb. 12:5,6). Submitting to God is a recognition of his right to deal with us as he wishes and of his rightness to do so. God knows what his will is and demands submission from us so that we conform to that will. When God reveals these things through his Word, by his Spirit, through the fellowship and counsel of other Christians, we are to submit to these demands.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

The word “resist” is a military term, which means to “take your stand against”. It requires action to take up a defensive formation. Part of this action is the submission to God, resisting the devil’s arguments, knowing his tactics and putting on the armour of God. From the time when Satan tempted Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen.3:1-12; John 8:44), his great aim has been to prevent people from submitting to God’s will for them. When we know that, the moment we realise we are being drawn away from obedience to God, we will recognise what is happening to us and the source of the temptation, and in the Lord’s strength we will resist it. This is the use of the “shield of faith” which Paul explains in Ephesians 6:16. Satan does not like being exposed; he hates the light. The great purpose of the devil’s tempting of our Lord in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11) was to divert Jesus from submission to the Father’s will. Jesus resisted him and the devil left him. (See also 1 Peter 5:8-9).

James is saying that the devil will flee from the ordinary Christian if the particular requirements of this whole verse are met.

Firstly we must submit to God
Secondly we must resist the devil, being aware of his tactics and taking decisive action

then

the result will be that the devil will flee

Verse 8

Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Some people see the Christian life only in terms of the evils that they avoid and the temptations they overcome. This is morality, which is good so far

as it goes, but it is not necessarily Christian. The Christian life is, first of all, a life lived in fellowship with God. Jesus said, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In salvation, it is God who first comes to us, but in the Christian life, it is our responsibility, through Jesus Christ the Mediator, to seek the Lord, encouraged by the promise of his ready response. Coming near to God is the work of our whole Christian life. We do this continually because we are involved in a lifelong battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. As the Christian continually comes near to God, so God continually comes near to the Christian. The coming together in communion of the Christian with God will be in the spirit of what James is about to expand upon further, namely the continual cleansing from sin and genuine concern to be right with God.

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts,

Here are echoes of Psalms 15 and 24:3-6. James’ Jewish readers would also be familiar with the requirement that the Old Testament priests had to wash themselves before offering their sacrifices (Ex. 30:20 – 21). This was teaching them and us that cleansing is necessary before we can enter God’s presence. In the New Testament this is the privilege of all believers; we are all priests now (1 Pet. 2:9). James addresses Christians as “sinners” because, although our sins are forgiven and we are no longer under God’s judgement, we still have a residue of sin within us. So much so that Paul the apostle cried out, “What a wretched man I am!” (Rom. 7:24). The cleansing called for has to be thorough: hands and hearts, outward and inward. We are not to leave any sin unconfessed (inward). Our confession is through prayer (outward – for use of hands when dealing with prayer see 1 Tim. 2:8).

you double-minded.

James also calls Christians “double-minded”. It would seem that there were professing believers in the churches who were only half-hearted in their commitment to the Lord. Often Christian believers struggle because their problem lies in the unspiritual attitude in the depths of their heart. Outwardly they may deal with specific sins, but inwardly they have two souls (that is the meaning of the word “double-minded”). Such a Christian is constantly torn in his affections between God and the world. Someone has described this as being two-faced with God. This has got to be rooted out, the heart cleansed and consecrated.

Verse 9

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

James intends the process of cleansing to be serious and thorough, and it is then that the feelings of grief described here will come to the surface. There

can be no possible progress in the Christian life if we know little or nothing of this grief, or maintain a flippant, carefree attitude. David, the Psalmist, said, “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). This contrasts with a modern view in some Christian circles where joy, peace and happiness are emphasised, where singing is seen to be the main part of worship in its length and importance. James does not intend that a mournful spirit is to be the only thing that is true of us. He wrote of joy in the midst of suffering (1,2), and Paul immediately followed the words about his wretchedness with “Who will rescue me...? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24-25; see also Matt. 5:4).

Verse 10

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The kind of conduct James is condemning (3:13-16; 4:1-4) is full of self-esteem and self-promotion, so he calls for humility. An evidence of this is glad submission to God and his will for us. Another evidence is waiting his time and place for any praise or promotion he may see to be fit for us. We must wait for him to lift us up, as Peter says “in due time” (1 Pet. 5:6). The perfect example of this is Jesus Christ, who “humbled himself” (Phil. 2:8). Paul continues, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place” (Phil. 2:9). The way up must first be downward!

Verse 11

Brothers, do not slander one another.

To slander someone means to talk against that person in an unfriendly way, with the intention of putting that person down. This can be done in many ways. Usually we do not defame fellow-Christians in loud, public announcements, but we do so in the course of gossip and behind the backs of those we talk about. We can also do so indirectly by half-truths, exaggeration or sly hints. (See Proverbs 6:12-14.) We either do this because of envy or hatred, or because we think undermining the reputation of someone else promotes our own position in other people’s eyes. James reminds them again that they are brothers; how can those who belong to the same spiritual family, having been saved through the same precious blood, speak so ill of one another?

Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it.

Notice the use of “brother” for the second time in this verse. James is setting before his readers the fact that they are in a spiritual partnership and therefore should always aim for harmony. If we slander or defame others, we are not only causing conflict and friction, but we are putting ourselves in the place of the law. This means that we are despising the law which, for

the health of society, should always be honoured. Not only is the slanderer breaking the law (Ex. 20:16): he is putting himself in the position of saying what the law should say – he has therefore also become the law-giver.

When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

The law itself condemns sitting in judgement on others. It requires us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Rom. 13:9), so if we accuse someone else of not obeying God, we are doing the same thing ourselves. Not obeying a law ourselves means that we think it is a mistaken law, or that it does not apply to us. Paul was aware of this kind of thing in Romans 2:1.

Verse 12

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge,

The word “one” is important for modern societies, where the tendency is increasingly for each person to determine what is right or wrong for him or herself. Also national governments regard it as their right to set their own standards. We need to be reminded that God alone, as our Creator, has the authority to determine right and wrong, and to judge all people on that basis. God is the point of reference for all things from which we measure everything in life.

the one who is able to save and destroy.

People who persist in slander raise the question of whether they are born again Christians. Because of that it is appropriate to remind them that God is not only the Saviour, he is also the Judge. As always, James compels his members to examine themselves to see if they are true believers. If all judgement is in the hands of God, then who is man to go around choosing which parts of God’s laws he will obey? Such arrogance God will judge.

But you – who are you to judge your neighbour?

Not only is James showing man’s foolishness in questioning God’s laws, but he now goes on to point out man’s ability to judge his neighbour. If we are Christian believers then we are sinners saved by grace. Since we are totally dependent on Jesus Christ for our salvation; since we are beset by failure and many shortcomings; who are we to criticise others, much less to condemn them? Everything about us points to our need to humble ourselves!



Summary

In the opening verses of chapter 4 James addressed the effect of uncontrolled desires amongst believers. They disturb the relationship between believers and between that person and God. Having exposed the problem, James, in the verses of this study, writes about how to deal with it. The key is humility, which is the opposite to pride. We have seen that humility is very desirable especially within Christian fellowship. The evidence for humility in these verses is found in glad submission to the Lord. When we submit willingly to God, we will find that the devil can be resisted and he will flee. Humility also involves an admission of our need of cleansing in both our conduct and our inner being; a grieving over our failures and shortcomings; a reluctance to promote ourselves and a readiness to speak well of others rather than demean them.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Humility

Introduction

Humility is difficult to speak about because we can easily give the impression that we are claiming to be humble ourselves – which is not a humble thing to do!

Humility is not easy to achieve because if we think we have achieved it, we most probably have not done so!

But the Bible says that we must humble ourselves – so how can we do it? Humility will come to us indirectly as we think seriously and deeply about the following –

I The greatness of God

When we think of God as infinite in his power and wisdom seen in his creation, we realise how puny and insignificant we are.

II The depth of our need

Our sinfulness was so profound that there was no other way for God to save us apart from sending his Son to die on the cross. Pride cannot live with that.

III Our total dependence on God's love in Jesus Christ

This dependence continues through the process of preparing us for glory up to the moment of departure from this life. Dependent people have no reason to be proud. As we dwell on these things, pride will fade away and we will not realise what is happening to us.



Focus Point:

Things that are opposite that Christians hold together

It is characteristic of the Christian faith and experience that we are required to hold together things that, in themselves, seem to be contradictory. This is not easy, but it is evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in our minds and hearts that we can do so fairly successfully.

In our understanding of Christian doctrine, one example would be the twin truths of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Another is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. In both of these examples we err if we emphasise one side more than the other. We also fail if we try to explain the relationship between them.

James and Paul represent two aspects of Christian experience that some people have thought to be contradictory. Paul dwells much on the work of the Holy Spirit within us and our need of faith. James stresses our personal responsibility. They are not in conflict. We are to trust the Lord at all times and in everything, and at the same time, we are to strive to please God as though this depended on our own efforts. Paul puts the two together in Philippians 2:12-13 and James does so in James 2:18. We can experience both joy and sorrow, and both grief for sin and assurance of salvation, at one and the same time. When we approach God in prayer, we are to be reverent and relaxed. As with doctrine, maturity is in holding both sides in each case with equal diligence; otherwise we will go astray.



Over to you

In view of Matthew 23:8-12, do you think we rely too much on titles and position and not enough on the quality of our lives to make an impact on our community?

How do you help your people to submit to and humble themselves before God? Is it something you can tell them to do and they will do it obediently? The way you answer this may well be an indication of the way you preach and teach.

After studying this passage, how would you deal with gossip in your church?