

James 4:7-17 — Submitting to God

We continue our study through the book of James, covering James 4:7-17.

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Revision

Last week we learned that the only cure for our sinfulness and worldliness is the grace of God. But before we talk about the grace of God, let's remember God's mercy.

What is mercy? Mercy is *not* receiving from God something bad that we *do* deserve. The obvious example is that we do *not* receive the penalty of sin that we *do* deserve. We all deserve to be punished for all the times that we have broken God's perfect law, but Jesus took our punishment instead.

What is Grace? Grace is receiving something good from God that we don't deserve to receive; we receive His unmerited, underserved, and unearned favour. So what are some of the good things that we receive from God that we don't deserve, what are some examples of the grace of God?

— **justification**: forgiveness and right standing with God (I am justified; declared righteous and not guilty before a Holy God - Romans 3:21-26, 5:9)

— **eternal life**: the privilege of knowing God - eternal life starts the moment a person is saved (John 17:3)

— **power to overcome sin**: the old man or sin nature or human nature has been rendered powerless to control us anymore (Romans 5:17-6:14, 1 Corinthians 10:12-13)

— **sanctification**: the process of becoming holy in God's sight; God changing us to become like Him (Philippians 1:6, 2 Corinthians 3:18)

— **adoption into God's family**: we become royalty, sons and daughters of the King of Kings (Ephesians 2:19, Romans 8:14-17)

— **glorification**: one day, starting at the Rapture, all believers will receive their new glorified, sinless, immortal body (1 Corinthians 15:35-56)

One of the main themes or contrasts running through the book of James is the contrast between what it looks like, feels like, and sounds like to be dominated by our sinful nature, compared to what it looks like, feels like, and sounds like to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the difference between how we think, speak and act. We either produce bad, hurtful, and destructive fruit if we obey or submit to our sinful human nature. Or, we produce good, productive, and blessed fruit (the fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of righteousness), if we obey or submit to the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:5-6).

James is showing us that all we need to do to live a life that pleases God, a life free from the pain and suffering that comes from following and obeying our sinful nature, is to ask God for His grace, His favour, His help, His power, His strength, His desires, His intervention in our lives — all undeserved, unearned, and unmerited, but all ours for the asking nonetheless. The only restriction that God places on us receiving His grace and favour is that we humbly ask.

What stops us from humbly asking? Pride. Pride is the attitude that thinks, “I can do it on my own, so why do I need God’s help. I’m going to do or get what I want, when I want it, and how I want it.” We might say outwardly, “well I’m not proud, of course I need God’s help.” Well, just remember that if we are not stopping and making the time to seek God and ask Him for His help, then by default we are prideful, living by our own strength, intellect, and resources. No matter what we say or proclaim outwardly, the fact of the matter is that if we are not taking the time to seek God, then we are not depending on God, and we are not being led or empowered by the Holy Spirit. *How much time we spend seeking God’s will, is a good measure of how much we trust Him.* Not spending time with God, seeking Him and asking Him for help, is proof positive that we are choosing to rely on our own human strength, energy, wisdom, and resources; we are living a life dominated by our sinful nature.

What is the problem with living according to or being dominated by our sinful nature? When we live according to our sinful human nature, we are driven by motives that are opposite to God’s. Our old nature is proud, selfish, and full of sinful desires; God is completely humble, selfless, and perfect in every way. Because of this we make ourselves enemies of God. We are thinking, speaking, and living like Satan and not God. We are not in a place where we can receive God’s grace and His blessings; instead we receive His loving but painful discipline. Remember that God will destroy the pride in us so our pride won’t destroy us. We can choose to willingly humble ourselves by submitting to Him and drawing near to Him, or God will do whatever it takes to humble us. It is inevitably a very painful process, one that is best avoided. Also, remember how we learned last week that our disobedience hurts God more than it hurts us. Why? Because His love for us is so much greater than our love is for Him.

Let’s start this week by reading all of James chapter 4:

James 4:1-17 NKJV

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do *they* not come from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:
***“God resists the proud,
But gives grace to the humble.”***

⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

¹¹ Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; ¹⁴ whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead you *ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

¹⁷ Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.

Submitting to God

Now we come to the part where we must do something — surrender. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is the application of what James has been describing; victory over the devil and our sinful nature only comes when we choose to humble ourselves and submit to God.

James 4:7 NKJV

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

v **7 Therefore:** When you see the word “**therefore**”, you should ask “what it is there for?” This is the logical conclusion of the argument, the natural response to what has been previously stated. What argument or point has James just made?

James 4:6 NKJV

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

*“God resists the proud,
But gives grace to the humble.”*

v **7 Therefore submit to God:** Because grace is only offered to the humble, there is only one thing to do to receive God’s grace; **submit to God**. This means to make Jesus Lord, ruler, or master of my life, to surrender to God’s kingship over my life. We must say like Jesus, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as You *will*” (Matthew 26:39 NKJV), or “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine” (Matthew 26:39 NLT). It’s only then that I will start to receive the benefits of His reign in my life.

Why should I submit to God?

Spurgeon: “If [God] were a tyrant it might be courageous to resist, but since He is a Father it is ungrateful to rebel.”

Spurgeon says it well. God is not a tyrant, someone who is using and abusing us to their own advantage and ends, like many in power are doing to us today. Rather, God is our Loving Heavenly Father who has demonstrated His love and concern for us beyond any doubt. Therefore, rebelling against God is simply being ungrateful, hard hearted, and selfish. This hard heartedness is a result of sin:

Hebrews 3:13 NLT

You must warn each other every day, while it is still “today,” so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God.

Here are some reasons why we should **submit to God** with a grateful and thankful heart:

- We should submit to God because He created us — He owns us.
- We should submit to God because His rule is good for us.
- We should submit to God because all resistance to Him is futile.
- We should submit to God because such submission is absolutely necessary to salvation.
- We should submit to God because it is the only way to have peace with God.
- We should submit to God because it is the only way to experience the peace of God.
- We should submit to God because it is the only way to be free from the power of sin and the devil.

This verse begs the question, “if I am not submitted to God, then who am I submitting to?” Spurgeon gives us the answer:

“I desire to whisper one little truth in your ear, and I pray that it may startle you: *You are submitting even now*. You say, ‘Not I; I am lord of myself.’ I know you think so, but all the while you are submitting to the devil. The verse before us hints at this. ‘Submit yourselves unto God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.’ If you do not submit to God you never will resist the devil, and you will remain constantly under his tyrannical power. Which shall be your master, God or devil, for one of these must? No man is without a master.”

v 7 **Resist the devil and he will flee from you**: To escape the effects of our sinful nature and the strife it causes, we must also **resist the devil**. This means to stand against devil’s deceptions and his efforts to intimidate. As we **resist the devil**, we are *promised* that **he will flee from you**.

David Guzik: “Significantly, James does not recommend that demons should be cast out of believers by a third party. Instead, James simply challenges individual Christians to deal with Satan as a conquered foe who can and must be personally resisted.”

David Guzik: “**Resist** comes from two Greek words: *stand* and *against*. James tells us to *stand against* the devil. Satan can be set running by the resistance of the lowliest believer who comes in the authority of what Jesus did on the cross.”

v 7 **And he will flee from you**: this does not mean that satan will only attack you once. Indeed, he will come back again and again. But as long as we stay submitted to God and continue to resist Satan, Satan will always have to flee.

A famous ancient Christian writer named Hermas wrote, “The devil can wrestle against the Christian, but he cannot pin him.” (Cited in Barclay)

James 4:8-10 NKJV

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

v 8 **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you:** This is both an invitation and a promise. God **will draw near to** us as we draw near to Him.

Clarke: “When a soul sets out to seek God, God sets out to meet that soul; so that while we are drawing near to him, he is drawing near to us.” This reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son, where the father is always looking for any sign of his lost son’s return and runs to meet him when he sees him.

Drawing near to God is what follows after we have humbled or submitted ourselves to God. It is the evidence that we have truly submitted ourselves to God.

Spurgeon suggests a few ways of how we can draw near to God:

- It means to draw near in *worship, praise, and in prayer*.
- It means to draw near by *asking counsel of God*.
- It means to draw near in *enjoying communion with God*.
- It means to draw near in *the general course and tenor of your life*.

David Guzik: “In one way, this text illustrates the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. In the old covenant, God told Moses to not come any closer to the burning bush and take off his shoes. Under the new covenant, God says to the sinner: “Draw near to Me and I will draw near to you.” Now the ground between God and the sinner has been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, and we can come close to God on the basis of that blood.”

v 8 **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you:** These words also reveal God’s heart toward us. What He wants most is to simply be near us, to enjoy relationship with us. This is the fundamental reason as to why God went to so much effort and endured so much pain and agony — God was reconciling us back to Himself.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21 NLT

And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. ¹⁹ For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. ²⁰ So we are Christ’s ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, “Come back to God!” ²¹ For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

The rest of the chapter shows the results of drawing near to God. We know if we are really drawing near to God if we are:

- Resisting the devil.
- Mourning and sorrowing over our sin.
- Becoming pure.
- Speaking well of other people.
- Thinking of eternal things.
- Enjoying sweet communion with God on a regular basis.

v 8 **Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep!** One effect of drawing near to God is becoming more aware of our own personal sinfulness. As we get closer to God by spending more time in His word, the light of His word shines brighter on our lives, and our sin is exposed. As we are convicted of our sin, impurity, and double mindedness, it brings sorrow to our hearts and so we **mourn** over it and confess it to God, seeking His forgiveness at the cross and also His strength to repent and change. Hebrews 4:12-16 describes this process well. Remember that joy follows repentance and the resulting obedience to God.

Hebrews 4:12-16 NLT

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.

¹⁴ So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. ¹⁵ This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Notice the two stages here. Firstly, the word of God makes us aware of our sin. Then we are encouraged to come boldly to the throne of grace where we find both forgiveness and the power to change when we repent.

v 9 In using terms like **lament and mourn and weep**, “James speaks in terms of the Hebrew prophets’ language about the anguish of repentance.” (Moffatt). The Jews James was writing to would have easily understood the old testament description of repentance James was referring to. Here is an example:

Ezekiel 6:9 NLT

Then when they are exiled among the nations, they will remember me. They will recognise how hurt I am by their unfaithful [adulterous] hearts and lustful eyes that long for their idols. **Then at last they will hate themselves for all their detestable sins.**

These passages accurately describes what repentance both feels like and looks like:

— **True repentance feels like:** godly sorrow, a humbling of ourselves, mourning over and hating sin because of how it breaks our relationship with God and so breaks God’s heart

— **True repentance looks like:** a changed life, a surrendered life, a pure life, a person growing in their love for the Lord, a life controlled by the Holy Spirit

2 Corinthian’s 7:10-11 NLT

For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience [godly sorrow] leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There’s no regret for that kind of sorrow. *But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.*

¹¹ Just see what this godly sorrow produced in you! Such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such longing to see me, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. *You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right.*

There are other reasons aside from genuine repentance or heart change that can cause people to change their behaviour. Here are some examples:

- to avoid the practical consequences of sin
- to protect our reputation as a good christian or a good person
- to avoid the pain our bad choices cause us (e.g. lose job, jail, fine etc)
- to get something that we want (e.g. a person get off drugs in order to get a job)

However, none of these non-genuine reasons to change will result in a changed or humbled heart. Instead, they will only result in an even harder heart and spiritual death (2 Corinthians 7:10-11).

v 10 **Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up:**

Jesus explains what it means to come humbly to the Lord in:

Luke 18:9-14 NKJV

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself*, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

To come humbly before the Lord means we see ourselves as sinners before a holy God, and not as self-righteous. Then by His grace, God lifts us up.

What does it mean for God to **lift you up**? The Greek word translated **lift** means: to lift up, to exalt, to raise up, to raise high, to lift high, to raise high, and to elevate.

There is an important principle here; *the more we humble or lower ourselves, the more God can raise us up. Why?* Because **God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble**, and grace—the unmerited favour of God—always results in God lifting or exalting us.

Remember that God’s kingdom is an upside down kingdom. The kingdom’s of the world operate on the principle of pride: people exalt themselves and put others down. But God’s kingdom works on humility; only the person who humbles or lowers themselves, and who esteems others better than themselves, is lifted up by God.

Humility results in good relationships with other people

James 4:11-12

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

v 11 **Do not speak evil of one another: Speak evil** means to gossip. It translates the ancient Greek word *katalalia*. Barclay: “*Katalalia* is the sin of those who meet in corners and gather in little groups and pass on confidential information which destroy the good name of those who are not there to defend themselves.”

David Guzik: “Humbling ourselves and getting right with God *must* result in our getting right with other people. When we are right with other people, it will show in the way we talk about them. So we must **not speak evil of one another** and not judge our brother.”

Why is gossip or speaking evil of one another so evil? First, it breaks the royal law that we should love one another (James 2:8). Second, we take the place of God when we judge others, something that we have no authority to do.

v 11-12 **He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law... there is one Lawgiver—so who are you to judge another?**

v 12 **Who are you to judge another?** If we are humble and esteeming others as better than ourselves we will not judge others with a critical, harsh, unkind, and fault-finding spirit.

Burdick: “This is not to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with others.”

Humility causes us to depend upon God

James 4:13-17

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; ¹⁴ **whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ **Instead you *ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.****

v 13 **You who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”:** This is a rebuke of when we make plans and live our lives *without actively seeking God’s will*. This is living independently of God. This is our pride making us think that we are clever enough and strong enough to run our own lives without seeking God’s help or guidance. I think we are all guilty of doing this to some extent. Again, humility and repentance is the cure for this display of our pride.

v 14 **you do not know what will happen tomorrow:** this is so true, yet we are so prone to live as though we do know what will happen tomorrow. We can so easily fall into the trap of overestimating our own strength, intellect, and resources. The fact is that we don’t know what the future hold, but God does. How much better to trust in and be led by the one who holds the future in His hands.

Spurgeon: “Notice, that these people, while they thought everything was at their disposal, used everything for worldly objects. What did they say? Did they determine with each other ‘We will to-day or to-morrow do such and such a thing for the glory of God, and for the extension of his kingdom’? Oh, no, there was not a word about God in it, from beginning to end!”

v 14 **For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away:** We don’t like to admit it, but our lives in this mortal body are so fragile, so temporary. We all have a used by date on our bodies; we just don’t know when it is. Remember what Paul said in Acts 17:28, “for in Him we live and move and have our being.” God is in control, not us, even if we think we are.

James isn’t telling us not to plan for the future, but just to remember to humbly ask the Lord for His wisdom and guidance as we make our plans, so they really are His plans and not ours.

There are several verses in the Old Testament that compare our lives to a shadow or a vapour. The idea is like that of a fog; when the sun comes up it disappears. The idea that our life was a **vapour** or shadow was a frequent figure of speech in the Old Testament (Psalm 102:11; Job 8:9; 1 Chronicles 29:15).

Psalm 102:11 NLT

My life passes as swiftly as the evening shadows.

I am withering away like grass.

Jesus told a parable that illustrates the temporary nature of this life extremely well.

Luke 12:16-23 NLT

Then [Jesus] told them a story: “A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. ¹⁷ He said to himself, ‘What should I do? I don’t have room for all my crops.’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘I know! I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. ¹⁹ And I’ll sit back and say to myself, “My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!” ’

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?’

²¹ “*Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.*”

²² Then, turning to his disciples, Jesus said, “That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing.

v 15 **Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.”**

We see this principle of humility expressed by dependance on God and seeking the will of God modelled by Paul: “I will return again to you, God willing (Acts 18:21). But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills (1 Corinthians 4:19). I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits (1 Corinthians 16:7). Paul was submitted to the will of God.

v 16 **All such boasting**, when life is so precarious, is worse than absurd, it is **wicked**, a positive sin, a specimen of the ungodly haughtiness (James 4:6) of which men should repent.” (Moffatt)

v 16 **You boast in your arrogance**: “The word is *alazoneia*. *Alazoneia* was originally the characteristic of the wandering quack [or doctor]. He offered cures which were no cures and boasted to things that he was not able to do.” (Moffatt) This is like the salesman selling snake oil.

David Guzik: “It is nothing but sheer **arrogance** that makes us think that we can live and move and have our being independent of God. This boastful **arrogance** is the essence of sin: a proud independence, the root of all sin, as was the case with Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12–15) and Adam (Genesis 3:5–7).”

Greater light or revelation brings greater responsibility

James 4:17 NKJV

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

David Guzik: “James knows that it is far easier to *think about* and *talk about* humility and dependence on God than it is to live it. Yet he makes the mind of God plain: as we know these things, we are accountable to *do them*.”

Remember what one of the main themes of the book of James is; our faith is proved by our action or works — faith without works is dead. As we have stated it, “living faith produces living works.” If we say that we know something, but don’t do it, it can only mean that we really don’t care about it or it’s simply not important to us.

v 17 **To him it is sin**: Jesus told a parable that makes a similar point.

Luke 12:42–48 NLT

And the Lord replied, “A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. ⁴³ If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. ⁴⁴ I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns. ⁴⁵ But what if the servant thinks, ‘My master won’t be back for a while,’ and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? ⁴⁶ The master will return unannounced and unexpected, and he will cut the servant in pieces and banish him with the unfaithful.

⁴⁷ *“And a servant who knows what the master wants, but isn’t prepared and doesn’t carry out those instructions, will be severely punished. ⁴⁸ But someone who does not know, and then does something wrong, will be punished only lightly. When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.”*

Again: Greater light means greater responsibility. Now we know what to do, we need to do it. The sermon is said, but not yet done. Let us resolve this week to submit the areas of your life that are dominated by our sinful nature to the Lord as we draw near to Him. God has made time for us. Will we make time for Him? The more we abide, the greater the joy, love and peace of the Lord we will enjoy, and the greater victory we will have over sin. Stay in front of the mirror of the word of God and don’t be a forgetful hearer.