

Grace to the Humble, James 4:1-12
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This is a powerful passage we're going to study this morning. It may seem harsh on first reading. What I love, though, about this passage is that it does contain the strongest rebuke in the letter, but it also contains some wonderful promises. We are rebuked for our spiritual adultery, and we are also assured of God's grace for those who humble themselves before Him and submit to Him and draw near to Him. So let's allow the Word of God to do its work in our lives today. May the Word bring us to our knees in repentance, and may it then lift us up in the knowledge of God's marvelous grace.

I've entitled the sermon, "Grace to the Humble," getting that from verse 6, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." My hope and desire for each one of us this morning is that we will be humbled by the strong rebukes in this passage, and that we'll receive much grace from God and rejoice in His grace as we let go of our insane arrogance, as we mourn over our sin, and as we bow ourselves before God and submit to Him.

We'll look at this passage in 3 sections. Prideful passions in verses 1-3. Spiritual adultery in verses 4-10. And evil judging in verses 11-12.

Prideful Passions (verses 1-3)

1) Prideful Passions Produce Quarrels (verses 1-2a).

Verse 1 and the first half of verse 2 show us that sinful passions produce quarrels. The word "passions" is used in verse 1 and verse 3, and the Greek word is *hēdonē*. From that word, you might guess, we get the word "hedonism." Pleasure-seeking. This hedonism, these pleasures, are a shriveled up confined pursuit of pleasure in wanting to make myself comfortable, and make myself look good, and get my way. These are prideful passions.

These passions, it says in verse 1, are at war within you. Literally, it says, "at war within your members." This is a war that is going on inside of us. Within each of us is an ongoing and fierce battle between the flesh and the Spirit, between the old self and the new self, between our sinful passions and our holy passions.

The first part of verse 2 explains how these internal sinful passions produce quarrels. Basically, they are selfish, prideful desires that are frustrated. They are cravings that are unfulfilled. There are others who stand in the way of what we sinfully desire. So there's murder and fighting and quarreling. When we're so wrapped up in ourselves and so controlled by selfish desires, there

can be an intense hatred toward those who have what we want. Frustrated selfish desires will produce all kinds of conflict and hatred and division, or as James said it in 3:16, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

2) Prideful Passions Produce the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency (verse 2b)

In the last sentence of verse 2 we see a second point about these prideful passions, namely, that they produce the illusion of self-sufficiency. In our rebellion against God, we think that we can make it on our own. Therefore, we do not ask, and do not receive what we truly need. Verse 2 says, at the end of the verse, “You do not have because you do not ask.” There are all of these unfulfilled desires and cravings, and James says you murder and you fight and quarrel. But what should be done? You should ask. These sinful passions produce fighting and quarreling. And they also produce an illusion of self-sufficiency, because we think we can get what we want on our own. We think we can fulfill these passions by stepping on other people and arguing with other people to get our own way. That is the arrogant way. That is the prideful way. Instead, we need to be humbled. We need to be brought to our knees to see that we are not self-sufficient. We cannot make it on our own. We are needy. We are desperate. And instead of going on in arrogance thinking that we can provide for ourselves the things we want, we need to come to the end of ourselves and ASK. We don’t have because we don’t ask.

3) Prideful Passions Produce Ineffective Prayers (verse 3)

A third thing about prideful passions, that we see in verse 3, is that these prideful passions also produce ineffective prayers. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” Some, in their arrogance, won’t ask. Others, also in their arrogance, will ask, but they ask wrongly, to spend it on their passions. Here’s that word, *hēdonē*, for the second time in these verses. These hedonistic, self-serving passions / desires / pleasures. In verse 1 these passions are the cause of quarrels and fights. And in verse 3 they are the reason why prayers are ineffective.

How does this verse relate to James 1:5, where it says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, *and it will be given him*”? Or what about Matthew 7:7, where Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you . . .” What’s the difference between those verses and James 4:3? Why does it say in certain places, “Ask, and it will be given to you,” and here James says, “you ask and do not receive”?

James explains very clearly in the second half of the verse. It's "because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." The question is: what are your motives when you go to God in prayer? Are you asking Him for wisdom in the hope that other's will think highly of you? Are you asking for money so that your life can be more comfortable? Are you asking for success so that you can be recognized in the eyes of the world? Or are you bringing your petitions to God with a Kingdom perspective and with a humble heart? We should ask for wisdom, and ask for God's provision, and ask for God to bless our work, not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify God. We should pray, not according to our will, but according to His will. 1 John 5:14 says, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." The key phrase there is, "according to his will." And the more we study the Holy Scriptures, and the more we meditate on the truth revealed here, the more we will know His will and the more our prayers will be in line with His will. We'll be convicted of how shallow and how self-serving many of our prayers are.

I remember seeing a guy wearing a T-shirt that said, "I'm your Dad, not an ATM." Many parents may feel that way. And that also may characterize the way we approach God all too often. We come to Him like He's an ATM machine. We come to Him for His money, for His gifts, for His ability to get us out of tough situations, instead of coming to Him because of who He is.

This ought to challenge each of us to ask: Why do I pray? What do I pray for? What is it that I'm seeking in my prayers? Is it God whom I desire? Or am I just looking to Him to give me the earthly pleasures and comforts that I desire?

Well, in verses 1-3 we've seen the destructive power of these sinful passions, prideful passions. In verses 4 and following James talks about spiritual adultery.

Spiritual adultery (verses 4-10)

Adultery is the violation of a marriage covenant. The love that has been pledged to a spouse is given to someone else. And as devastating as that is, it's clear from the context that James has in mind something even more significant. He's speaking of spiritual adultery. In the Old Testament the relationship between God and His people is often portrayed in terms of a marriage union. God is the husband, as it were, and Israel is His wife.

We see this parallel portrayed in the book of Hosea. God told Hosea to marry a prostitute in order to serve as a picture of God's faithfulness to His promiscuous people. Just as Hosea's wife went back to other lovers, the Israelites were committing spiritual adultery with other gods, with idols.

The rebuke in James 4:4 draws on this Old Testament background, and James identifies very clearly what this spiritual adultery involves. The adulterous relationship is with the world. God is the faithful husband. And the world is the illicit lover.

This is related to the previous verse, which says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (verse 3). In light of verse 4 we can understand this as an adulteress going to her husband to ask for money only to turn around and spend that money on her adulterous relationship. Let that image burn into your mind so that you can see how appalling our sin is to God.

This severe warning should serve as a wake-up call to anyone who is flirting with the pleasures of the world. It may mean that you are merely a hearer of the word but not a doer, that your faith is a dead faith, that your wisdom is not from above, but from below. If you come to church thinking that you’re a friend of God, but your real passion is for the things of this world, then I pray this verse will show you your dire situation. You are not a friend of God. In fact, you are His enemy. There needs to be repentance in your life, which James will describe in verses 7-10.

For all of us, this verse should spur us on toward greater holiness. This is a warning that should keep us from drifting into a worldly lifestyle. We’re all susceptible to this, and we need to be on guard. We need to check our hearts. What is it that you desire? What do you find yourself thinking about most often? What kind of thoughts fill your mind when you wake up in the morning and when you’re falling asleep at night. What drives the decisions that you make? When you decide what to listen to, what to watch, where to go, what to wear—what shapes those actions? Is it a love for God, or a love for the world?

Verse 4 refers to spiritual adultery, drawing on the theme of God’s covenant relationship with His people. And verse 5, then, refers to God’s jealousy for His people. In a covenant relationship there’s an appropriate jealousy that is felt, one for the other. It’s a desire for the relationship to be absolutely exclusive—forsaking all others. And in this way, God yearns jealously over us. It grieves Him to see us committing adultery with the world. He wants us to be faithful to Him.

Verse 6 is such a wonderful and timely word at this point in the passage. I love it that the strongest rebuke in the letter is followed by this statement about God’s grace! Have you committed adultery with the world? Are you now living in the world? Is your life drifting more and more toward worldliness? Know this: God gives more grace! You’re not a lost cause. However great your sin is, God’s grace is greater! His grace is more than enough to overcome our rebellion and change our

desires so that we follow Him and obey Him and seek our joy in Him. This is an invitation to repent and be forgiven.

In the second part of verse 6 we learn something very important about God's grace. James quotes from Proverbs 3:34, saying, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God's forgiving grace and enabling grace is not bestowed on everyone. And this shows us our responsibility to humble ourselves before the Lord. God doesn't give grace to the proud. He opposes the proud. Those who think they don't need God, those who think they can make it on their own without God, they don't receive grace from God. In verse 2 it said, "You do not have because you do not ask." That's the predicament of those who will not humble themselves before God, those who will not plead for help. God will oppose you. Human pride is fundamentally at odds with God's grace.

There's a fundamental opposition between our pride and God's grace. You see, God does everything He does in order to glorify His Name. His supreme purpose is to show the splendor and power and goodness of who He is. And therefore He does not exalt the proud. He's not going to bestow honor upon those who just want to soak that up for themselves.

But those who are humble to ask for help, those who understand their need—it's in their lives that God shows His power and goodness and glory. He showers grace upon the humble, and that spotlights His wonderful mercy. He is glorified in helping those who know their need.

Following the quotation from Proverbs, James expands on this mention of humility in verses 7-10. In verse 7 he exhorts us, "Submit yourselves therefore to God." Don't resist Him in pride. Humble yourself and submit to him. This is very similar to the concluding command in verse 10 to "humble yourselves before the Lord," and the two commands serve as book-ends for this section. Submit yourselves, verse 7. Humble yourselves, verse 10.

We must come to the Lord in humble submission, not prideful rebellion. He is our Lord. He is our Master. And He commands and deserves our complete submission to His will. In what areas of your life are you refusing to submit to God? Is it in the area of finances? God is calling you to be more generous, but you refuse. Maybe it's your marriage. God exhorts husbands to be the sacrificial loving leaders in the home, and maybe you, husband, are neglecting that responsibility. You find it easier to be passive and irresponsible, and thus you are refusing to submit to God's design for manhood. Wives, God commands you to submit to your husband—to respect him and support him and follow his lead as he follows Christ. And maybe your pride causes you to strongly resist

your husband's leadership. In doing so you are not only refusing to submit to your husband, you are refusing to submit to God.

Maybe it's sexual immorality of some kind that you're struggling with, and you refuse to give it up. You have a secret sin that you won't turn away from. You're refusing to submit to God.

Whatever it is in your life, you need to know and you need to continue reminding yourself that there's such misery in resisting God's commands, and such joy in submitting to Him. Let go of those prideful passions that will destroy your life. Humble yourself, repent, submit to God.

The next command is, "Resist the devil." And then a promise is connected to it, "and he will flee from you." Submission to God entails resisting the devil. Looking at it from the opposite perspective, when we refuse to submit to God we are giving the devil a foothold in our lives. We're opening the door to the devil and saying, come on in. The devil is opposed to God and everything God does and everyone who belongs to God. Therefore, we must resist the devil. He will seek to attack us and destroy our faith, and we need to be alert and on guard against his schemes.

How do we resist the devil? By faith. Faith in the truth of the gospel, which is revealed in the word of God. When those flaming darts come our way, the lies of the devil seeking to entice us with worldly pleasures, we need to resist those temptations with the knowledge of a far superior pleasure. We need to trust that God is better than sin. Communing with Christ is far more satisfying than the short-lived delights of the world.

And, by God's grace, the devil will flee from us. Not because of our strength. But because of the Lord's might. The Lord has defeated the devil, by dying on the cross and rising from the dead on the third day. And in the end the Lord will utterly destroy the devil so that he can no longer attack us. It's with this confidence that we can resist the devil and know that he will flee from us. For we belong to One who is far greater and far more powerful than him.

In verse 8 comes another command, also with a promise. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." This is an amazing statement, and an amazing promise, especially as we consider the majesty and holiness of God, in contrast to our utter depravity. God's perfect holiness does not allow that anything impure or unholy enter into His presence. In our sin, we cannot draw near to God, or God to us. There's a great chasm that separates us, and it's called sin. Because of our sin, we deserve eternal punishment. We deserve to go to hell, to be cast out of God's presence permanently.

The precious news of the Gospel is that God has made a way to uphold His justice and holiness, and also extend grace to sinners. He did this by sending His Beloved Son into this world to live a sinless life and then to die a sinner's death, and then to rise on the third day. Jesus did this for His chosen people, for His sheep, for those who repent of their sin and trust in Him. It's because of Jesus that we can draw near to God, and God will draw near to us.

Now, the only way we can draw near to God is by repenting of our sin, turning away from our sin, mourning over our sin, and trusting in Jesus Christ. And these next verses make a powerful statement about the depth and significance of real repentance. Look at how James describes this, beginning in the second half of verse 8, "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."

All of this is a vivid picture of what true repentance should look like. We need to cleanse ourselves and purify ourselves, both outwardly and inwardly. Our sinful deeds have to change, and our sinful hearts have to change. And accompanying these changes will be great sadness and pain. "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." There's a mourning over sin that every true believer will experience. The realization that I have been so foolish to pursue sin. The feeling of anguish over the sinful things that I have done. This is what Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 7:10 when he says, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret . . ." There's a godly grief that we should all experience in our lives that produces repentance. We look back at past sins and look into our hearts and see sinful attitudes that are still present in our lives, and we weep over these sins. We don't minimize them. We don't joke about them. We mourn over them.

Verse 10, then, continues this theme in the passage about humility. It's the humble who will receive grace, and who will be exalted. There is great reward in humility. There is the reward of seeing God. The proud are too busy looking at themselves to see God. The humble, though, look away from themselves, and thus experience the joy and peace and hope and freedom of fixing their eyes on the One who is truly the greatest Being in existence.

Evil Judging (verses 11-12)

In the final verses of our passage for this morning, verses 11-12, the discussion returns to where the chapter began, with conflict among one another. These verses mention speaking evil

against one another and judging your brother, judging your neighbor.

So let's conclude our study this morning by considering this matter of judging.

Judging, as we see in these verses, involves slandering others, speaking evil against one another. And this may happen for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Maybe the person has done something to hurt us, and we want to get back at them. Maybe the slander is a result of favoritism—in James 2:4, as he gives the command to “show no partiality,” he says, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” Or maybe there are differences of opinion that cause us to judge others. Paul addresses this in Romans 14. “One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables,” (verse 2). “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike,” (verse 5). And then he writes in verse 10, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

There are various types of judging. Ultimately, our judging of others results from our prideful assumption that my sins are very small in comparison to the sins of others. Jesus points out the hypocrisy in this, when he says in Matthew 7, “Judge not, that you be not judged . . . Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” When we are judging others, despising others, speaking evil against others, we hypocritically focus on their faults while ignoring our own faults.

I think we can understand the nature of evil judging even better when we contrast this evil judging with the appropriate kind of judging that the Bible calls us to. There is a kind of judging that is right and good and necessary, and it's important that we understand the difference.

Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:1-3, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.” He says in verse 12 of that passage, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” Judging in this context means confronting and disciplining those who are professing believers but who are living in sin. And this kind of judging is absolutely necessary for the purity of the church. It's also for the good of the person being

disciplined, in hope of them repenting and returning to the straight and narrow path. So we have a good and necessary judging, on the one hand. And we also have an evil and harmful judging, on the other hand.

The kind of judging James talks about is the kind that arises from an attitude of jealousy and selfish ambition, and it is intended to tear other people down for our benefit, to our advantage somehow. This includes gossip and the spreading of rumors. It includes repeating again and again the faults of others. It includes making false charges against a person's character, but it also includes highlighting negative things about a person that are entirely true.

This is an interesting thing to recognize, because there are certainly plenty of bad things that could be said about each and every one of us. And it's so easy to justify our negative words by thinking to ourselves, "I'm only telling the truth," whether it be to the person's face or to someone else. "I'm only stating the obvious." The question is, when you know of someone's faults or failures, how do you respond? It's so sickening that our pride can cause us to actually take pleasure in the faults and failures of others. And there can be further satisfaction in speaking evil against them and judging them. Instead, we must humble ourselves with the knowledge that we are sinners, too, and we have not been assigned the role of lawgiver or judge. We must come alongside one another for the purpose of building up, not tearing down.

I want to close with just 4, brief, practical applications—a few suggestions for killing this tendency to slander and judge others.

1) When tempted to slander or judge an individual, instead pray for that person. When you're tempted to speak evil against a brother or sister in Christ, instead begin to pray very specifically for that person's needs. Pray for that person's sanctification. Whatever fault or failure that you're aware of in that person's life, instead of using it as an occasion for slander, use it as an occasion for intercession.

2) The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear. Charles Spurgeon has a chapter in his book, *Lectures to my Students*, entitled "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear." He's making the point that there are many things that are said to us or around us, or about us, that we simply need to ignore. There are many things to which we must simply turn a deaf ear. And certainly one of these things is slander, back-biting, gossip. When you are within earshot of these things, do you gravitate toward it or away from it? Take Spurgeon's advice,

and turn to it a blind eye and a deaf ear. At the end of that chapter Spurgeon writes, “I have one blind eye and one deaf ear, and . . . they are the best eye and ear I have” (*Lectures to My Students*, 335). When you hear slander, don’t listen—don’t take it to heart.

3) Be willing to overlook offenses. Proverbs 19:11, “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.” When we’re offended, when we’re slandered or mistreated in some way, what is our natural reaction? We want to slander in return. We want revenge. But it is to our glory to overlook an offense.

4) Finally, trust in God’s Sovereignty. Remember that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28), and that includes even the person whom you’re tempted to slander. That person is in your life by God’s design. So instead of speaking evil against that person, ask God, “What are you trying to teach me in this situation? How are you wanting to refine me and sanctify me through this?”

I hope that these things are helpful, and I pray that we will all fight against the sinful tendency to slander and judge one another. This command is founded upon the truth that God is the only lawgiver and judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy. So let us humble ourselves before God and before one another. May God grant us increasing humility, that we may receive more and more grace from Him.

We’ve learned in this passage that God gives more grace, that there is much grace that comes to the humble. We need to repent of our prideful passions, spiritual adultery, evil judging. We need to humbly repent of these things, and submit ourselves to our wonderfully merciful God, who gives more grace. He opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.