

James: The Practical Christian

The Way Up Is the Way Down

James 4:6-10

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Scripture

I once read a *Peanuts* comic strip where Lucy told Charlie Brown that she would hold the football for him to kick. But when he ran up to kick the ball, she pulled it away. Charlie Brown went flying through the air and fell flat on his back.

Well, one day Lucy went up to Charlie Brown and offered once again to hold the ball for him.

“No thanks!” said Charlie Brown. “Every time you say you’ll do it, I fall flat on my back.”

As soon as Charlie Brown accused Lucy of this, she began weeping and sobbing, “Oh, you’re so right. I admit that in the past I’ve played cruel tricks on you. But I’ve seen the error of my ways! I’ve seen the hurt in your eyes! Won’t you give a poor repentant girl another chance?”

Charlie Brown said, “Okay.”

So he backed up, started running at the ball, and just as he was about to kick it, Lucy pulled the ball away. Once again Charlie Brown went flying through the air and ended up flat on his back.

As Lucy walked away, she commented to a friend, “Unfortunately, recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things.”

An astute observation, Lucy! It’s not enough for us merely to recognize our faults. We must also change our ways!

But, how? In the passage before us, James teaches us how to change our ways. So, with that in mind, let us read James 4:6-10:

**⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:
“God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble.”**

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts,

you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:6-10)

Introduction

Samuel Johnson was a Christian and noted literary author of the 18th century. He wrote the first major English dictionary.

In his prayer diary he recorded his personal struggle with learning to discipline himself and to pray.

In 1738 he wrote, “Almighty God, enable me to shake off sloth and redeem the time misspent in idleness and sin by a diligent application of the days yet remaining.”

In 1759—21 years later he wrote, “Enable me to shake off idleness and sloth.”

In 1761—23 years from the beginning, he wrote these words, “I resolve until I am afraid to resolve again.”

In 1764 he noted: “My indolence since my last reception of the sacrament has sunk into grosser sluggishness. My purpose from this time on is to avoid idleness and to rise early.”

Five months later—still in 1764, he entered in his diary, “To rise early, not later than 6:00 if I can.”

In 1765 he wrote, “I purpose to rise at 8:00 because though I shall not rise early, it shall be much earlier than I now rise, because I often lie till 2:00.”

In 1769 he said, “I am not yet in a state to form many resolutions. I purpose and hope to rise early in the morning at 8:00 and by degrees at 6:00.”

In 1775 he wrote, “When I look back on my resolutions for improvement and amendments which have been broken year after year, why do I yet try to resolve again? I try because reformation is necessary and despair is criminal. I now resolve to rise at 8:00.”

Finally, in 1781 he wrote, “I will not despair. Help me. Help me, O, my God. I now resolve to rise at 8:00 or sooner to avoid idleness.”

That's a record of 43 years of failure! When you hear this you nod your head because you identify with Samuel Johnson. That's because you have all had times in your lives when you tried to make a basic change but you could not do it. The more you try to be different the more you seem to stay the same. And soon you just give up. At least Samuel Johnson kept plugging away!

But the age-old question remains: *how do you change your ways?* You want to grow in your personal relationship with God. You want to love God and to love others more than you love yourself. You want to be a person of high moral integrity. You don't want to be stained by all the ways of the world. But let's face it. That's really easy to say but not so easy to do.

The usual prescription given today is, "Just try harder!" It's the American way! Just suck up your gut and keep going. And so you try harder the next time. But soon you fall flat on your face again. You become discouraged and return to the bench. Then some spiritual coach tells you what you did wrong and sends you out again with a new vision to make it happen this time. And you do okay for a while, but then you fail again.

Lesson

If you were truly honest, many of you would have to admit that you really don't see any substantive change taking place on the inside. There seems to be little or no true experience of God's power at work in your life. And so, what should you do about this dilemma? James answers that question in James 4:6-10. And instead of just telling you to just try harder, James calls you to take a radically different approach.

I. The Root Problem: Pride (4:6b)

First, James teaches that the root problem is pride.

In verse 6b James writes, "**God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**"

According to James, the root problem, at the very core of our lives, is *pride*.

I believe that very few of us even know the depth of the sinful pride in our lives. The reason this is such a serious problem is because our proud self-sufficiency can become the greatest barrier to our experience of God's presence and power in our lives.

According to James, one sure sign of pride is what he calls worldliness. Almost subconsciously we can become what James calls in verse 4, "a friend of the world."

I remind you that worldliness is not merely doing something someone says you shouldn't do. Worldliness is adopting a philosophy of life that says that true fulfillment and happiness in life can be found apart from a relationship with God. It is a spirit of self-reliance rather than reliance on God.

Being trapped by worldliness can be a very subtle thing. You can be very moral and very religious, and still be very worldly. You can use all the Christian code words and make sure you go through all the right religious motions. You can go to church, have a consistent, daily prayer time (unlike Samuel Johnson), and even have a ministry. But if someone were able to look past all those externals and peer deep into your heart, they could find very little difference between your core perspective toward life and that of a good, moral, unbelieving, non-Christian neighbor next door.

The hard truth is that Christians today seem to have almost abandoned the pursuit of Christ as our means of finding fulfillment in life and we have substituted for him the pursuit of things that are temporal rather than eternal—things that are created rather than the Creator himself. We're not really looking to his love and acceptance of us for our true sense of security and significance in life.

Instead we are daily pursuing the approval and love of others, or the accomplishment of personal goals, or the attainment of a position of prestige or power, or the accumulation of certain possessions as our means of finding happiness in life. We will go to great lengths to defend our reputation, and to gain the admiration, acceptance and respect of others.

James teaches that God is the active antagonist of those who set themselves up in such proud self-sufficiency and who seek to change their own lives and satisfy their own desires by their own efforts. He is opposed to you trying to find fulfillment in temporal things, whether they be religious or non-religious things.

The main reason why God opposes our proud self-sufficiency is because he knows that it always leads to the glorification of man and his abilities rather than of Christ and his transforming work for us on the cross. And so God opposes pride by withholding his grace and power from such people.

The Bible is full of the records of those who in their proud self-sufficiency have tried to exalt themselves above God and meet their own needs apart from him. We know of Lucifer whom God cast down into hell. We read of Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Simon the Magician and the religious Pharisee in the temple. Even the apostle Paul tried to climb a ladder of religious merit and good works only to be brought down to the Cross.

In one sense, it's all the same story! All who seek to exalt themselves through pride, in either a religious or non-religious way, will be brought down by God. Why? Simply because there is only One who is worthy of the highest place, and that is Christ. All that exalts itself above him will be brought down.

So then, what are we to do? If we can't meet our own deepest needs by our own abilities, how then do we appropriate the grace and power of God into our lives? What is the proper response to the root problem of pride? In these next few verses James tells us the secret.

II. The Proper Response: Humility (4:6b, 7-9)

Second, the proper response to the root problem of pride is humility.

James writes, **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God”** (4:6b-7).

Notice that the word **“humble”** is the last word in verse 6 and the first word in verse 10. The technical term for this is “inclusio,” which means that everything between the two words relates to the same topic.

Therefore, verses 7-9 should be seen as a detailed description of what it means to **humble**. It is a description of what it means to submit yourself before God in order to receive his grace.

James writes in verse 7, **“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”** Too often we rip this verse out of its context. Humbling yourself has to do with resisting Satan’s desire for you to assert yourself. You see, Satan’s strategy has always been one of self-centered assertion for the meeting of your needs and the protection of your reputation rather than humble dependence on God.

In verse 8 James calls you to **“come near to God and he will come near to you.”** The idea is that when you are up against the wall and you find yourself in desperate need of courage, strength and power, don’t try to handle it on your own. Instead, humble yourself and draw near to God for help.

As you would expect, James goes on to say that such a humbling of yourself before God must include dealing with your sin. In verse 8b James writes, **“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”** Coming to God in humility means learning to come to him through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Coming to the cross is not just a one time thing but an ongoing process. As God progressively shows you your sins, you must resist the temptation to protect yourself or try to change yourself by your own strength. Instead, you must learn the secret of coming in humility again and again and again to the cross of Jesus Christ. For it is only there that the streams of God’s transforming grace will begin to flow into your life.

The grieving, mourning and wailing in verse 9 give reference to the seriousness of this moment before God. This is not a laughing matter. In fact, James says you are to **“Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom”** (4:9).

I'm afraid that most Christians today have never learned to weep over their sin. We are by nature and culture a proud people. I am convinced that is why we see such little display of God's presence and power in our lives. The Bible teaches that God's presence and power does not dwell in any place except in a humble and contrite heart. God says, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

The paradox of grace is that the way up is the way down! Like water, God's grace and power always flows to the lowest place.

In the Old Testament we read that Joseph reached the place of glory, not by going up but by going down. As he walked the way of rejection and humiliation he never realized that every step brought him nearer the fulfillment of his glorious dreams. Throughout the Scriptures we find that the prophets and apostles never found the fullness of God until they found themselves lying prostrate before God in brokenness and shame. The prophet Isaiah said, "Woe unto me for I am unclean" (Isaiah 6:5). The apostle Peter fell at the feet of Jesus and cried out, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," (Matthew 5:3) and, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). He also said, "To find life, you must first lose it" (Matthew 10:39; 16:25).

To humble yourself before God is one of the hardest things a person can ever do. It is so hard in fact that many never do it at all. Others, having done it once when they were "saved," choose in their proud self-sufficiency never to return to the cross again.

But the apostle Paul writes that "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him" (Colossians 2:6). In other words, you received him through repentance and faith in his shed blood for your sin. That is also how you are to walk in him daily humbling yourself before him in repentance and faith, and thereby appropriating the cleansing power of his blood in your life.

When confronted with your sin, resist Satan's temptation for you to protect yourself or just start trying harder. That is the way of pride. Instead, humble yourself, and draw near to God through Jesus Christ. Otherwise you are destined to an empty, weak life that will never know the transforming grace and power and presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if you will adopt a lifestyle of humble repentance, James tells you the good news that God promises to give you his grace.

III. The Glorious Result: Grace (4:10)

Third, the glorious result is the grace of God.

In verse 10 James writes, **“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”** James is saying, “If you will turn from your pride and self-sufficiency, and if you humble yourself before God, God promises to lift you up by giving you his grace.” He promises to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. And the end result of the change that then takes place in your life will not be to your credit but to his glory.

The key to living the Christian life is not learning to try harder in your own proud self-sufficiency but it is learning to humbly submit yourself to God. The key is to acknowledge your total inability to make it on your own, and your utter and complete dependence upon him. It is learning to develop what we might call a lifestyle of repentance and faith in Christ. The key to victory in the Christian life is learning what it means every day to draw near to God through the cross of Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 6:14 Paul wrote, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Paul's use of the word “world” here is often misunderstood. He is referring primarily to a spirit of boasting or pride or glorying in your own achievements. It is looking to the power of your own will to fulfill your life. It is trying to live the Christian life out of your own strength. Paul says, “I am crucified to that. I am dead to that.”

You are destined to be powerless if you do not allow the gospel to go deep into your life to influence your core character so that you renounce the spirit of boasting in the world and learn what it means to glory only in the gospel. What you glory and boast in is what you really are.

If you are not boasting in the cross, then you are boasting in your own abilities and self-achievements—with the tragic result that you will never know the presence or the power of God in your life. For God is opposed to the proud. You will become nothing more than a performer, someone who increasingly externalizes every part of your life. You will spend your life boasting of and increasing your reputation, with the result that you will become increasingly weaker and shallower at the very core of your being.

David Seamands ends his book *Healing Grace* with this story:

For more than six hundred years the Hapsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When Emperor Franz-Josef I of Austria died in 1916, his was the last of the extravagant imperial funerals. A processional of dignitaries and elegantly dressed court personages escorted the coffin, draped in the black and gold imperial colors.

To the accompaniment of a military band's somber dirges and by the light of torches, the cortege descended the stairs of the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna. At the bottom was a great iron door leading to the Hapsburg family crypt. Behind the door was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna. The officer in charge followed the prescribed ceremony, established centuries before.

"Open!" he cried. "Who goes there?" responded the Cardinal. "We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styrgia. . . ." The officer continued to list the Emperor's thirty-seven titles.

"We know him not," replied the Cardinal. "Who goes there?" The officer spoke again, this time using a much abbreviated and less ostentatious title reserved for times of expediency.

“We know him not,” the Cardinal said again. “Who goes there?” The officer tried a third time, stripping the emperor of all but the humblest of titles: “We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!”

At that, the doors swung open, and Franz-Josef was admitted. In death all are reduced to the same level. Neither wealth nor fame can open the way of salvation, but only God’s grace, given to those who will humbly acknowledge their need.

Conclusion

The good news of the gospel sets you free from performance and merit and self-centered legalism. You can be set free from your destructive drive to perfectionism and success. You can be set free from always having to defend your reputation or needing to measure up to a host of unrealistic standards that either you or others have placed on your life.

The good news of the gospel is that God has the power to set you free from being in bondage to all your fears, your anxieties and your depression. All he asks of you in these verses is that you come to him in humble submission, resisting Satan’s temptation to assert yourself, and simply draw near to him in brokenness through the cross of Christ.

This has been called the “sinner’s place.” For it is here that you cast away all your pride and self-sufficiency and say with the hymn writer, “Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to Thy Cross I cling.” Here you admit what you really are to God. It is here that you come to Jesus Christ and find cleansing for your sin through his blood.

Instead of joining Samuel Johnson and just trying harder in your own strength, you must learn, as a way of life, to keep coming, again and again and again, in humble repentance and faith, to the cross of Jesus Christ. For it is only in that low place that God has chosen to pour out his grace and lift you up in a way that glorifies his Son. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

O God, we acknowledge before you our pride and self-sufficiency. We confess to you our vain attempts to bring change in our lives by our own power. We admit our attempts to find fulfillment and happiness in life in people and things other than you. Forgive us, O God, for we are a worldly, sinful people who care more about our own reputation and praise than your glory. We come now, having heard your voice, to the sinner's place. We come to you through what Jesus Christ has done for us by shedding his blood, and we ask you to cleanse us anew from our sins. We ask you especially to cleanse us from the sin of pride. We thank you for the free gift of forgiveness and righteousness you have given to us in Christ.

And as we humble ourselves now in genuine repentance and faith we ask you, by your Holy Spirit, to pour out on us a new measure of your grace and power. We admit to you that we cannot change ourselves. You know the bondage that many of us are in today. We are in the bondage of fear, worry, depression, chemical dependency, bitterness, and many other sinful and destructive things. O God, change us more and more into the image of your Son, not for our sake but for your glory. Amen.

CHARGE:

The way up is the way down! John the Baptist understood that. When people around him tried to exalt him, he refused the praise of men and instead said, "He (speaking of Christ) must increase and I must decrease." That's why there was such power in his life. Today I want to encourage you to follow in his steps. As you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.