

JAMES: FAITH THAT WORKS

Embracing Humility

James 4:1-17

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Good morning. I've asked Anna Ellis to read these verses from James chapter 4, because they're foundational—not only to this chapter—but to James' entire letter.

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

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." James 4:6-10 selected Anna Ellis

Those verses have special meaning for our church family here at McBIC, because in the mid-1990s—I know that was a long time ago—God used them to form and shape what became known as our church's Healing Prayer Ministry. I've asked Doris Barr, who was a pastor at McBIC at that time, as well as a key leader in our Healing Prayer Ministry, to share the impact these verses had on our church family and on her personally.

Back in the 90's, Pastor Ken Hepner preached a lot from James 4:6-10, and later taught from this scripture as a model for what we began to call Healing Prayer Ministry. During those early years, I began my own personal healing journey, and then for about 20 years I led this ministry here at McBIC. It's a ministry that continues to be part of McBIC's DNA. But I'd like to suggest that James 4:6-10 is much more than a pattern for a ministry. These verses are an invitation and a guide to a way of life that enables us to live in freedom and wholeness. Before I comment on verses 4-10, I want to back up to verse 5 because I think it informs it. I'm reading it from the passion translation. "Does the scripture mean nothing to you that says, "The Spirit that God breathed into our hearts is a jealous Lover who intensely desires to have more and more of us?" James 4:5 Passion Translation God loves us so much and longs for intimacy with us. That's the heart of the gospel, and that's the starting point. God is a jealous lover who longs for us to love him in return with all of our hearts.

At the heart of our healing prayer ministry is the truth that God gives us more grace. We experience God's grace when we first receive the gift of salvation, but that's only the beginning.

As we walk with God, he gives us more grace. It's not a one-time gift that we receive and then we're good to go for life. The more we grow in intimacy with God, the more we become aware of our sin and our need for Him and we realize how much we need his grace.

For me, and for many others here at McBIC over the years, my journey began with deeply receiving and experiencing the love of God. We have all heard and been taught and would say we believe that God loves us. But for some of us who grew up in the church, we lived as if God was harsh and demanding, with lots of rules and regulations, and we acted as if God's love was conditional and we could please him by being 'good.' This only leads to failure and to judgment of ourselves and others. When we begin to really live in the love of God, we are free to confess the hidden sin in our hearts – whatever it is – and the sin God exposed in my own heart was the sin of pride and self-righteousness. When I tell my own story, I sometimes describe myself as a recovering pharisee.

The path that leads to more grace is humility. "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Humility begins with honest confession. "Submit yourselves then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We resist the devil by confessing the ways he has worked in our lives, and exposing the work of the enemy. Pastor Ken used to say that we need to tell on the enemy. The promise is that he will flee. The beauty of confessing to God and to others in a safe setting is that we have others to come alongside of us in our journey to pray, encourage and guide us.

There is another promise here...."Come near to God and he will come near to you." All of us have experienced pain, disappointment or trauma in our lives that has led us to respond in harmful and sinful ways – leading to anger, defensiveness, fear, or perhaps addiction. One of the important things we need to understand is that Jesus died not only for our sin, but for every sin committed against us. Sometimes we need to lament – James 4 says 'grieve, mourn and wail' – in order to release the pain, grief or trauma. And when we do, God comes near. As we humble ourselves before the Lord, he lifts us up.

God is a jealous lover who longs for more and more of us. As one who has been on a James 4:6-10 journey for many years, I can testify to the freedom, the beauty, and the joy of the journey. I certainly don't always get it right, but I keep coming back to this guide and practice, and every time God comes near. I have also had the holy privilege of praying with many people over the years and bearing witness to the beauty of their journey. When we have shared deeply

our journey with others, we become part of a spiritual community that gives us a taste of heaven on earth. Your kingdom come, your will be done. My prayer, my dream for McBIC for years to come is that we would continue to be a safe place for people to experience more grace and grow together as a spiritual community.

Our posture—how we position ourselves before God—is absolutely central to our relationship with God. Specifically, embracing humility, rather than pride, is foundational to being shaped by Jesus to become the people He wants us to be. I have a simple image I want to share with you that helps us visualize pride and humility. Humility is placing ourselves under the umbrella of God’s authority and those He places in authority over us: our parents, our bosses, leaders of our church and government leaders—mayors, governors and presidents—to name a few. While pride, in contrast, leads us to remove ourselves from the umbrella of God’s authority. It’s when we move out from under the authority structures God has established and elevate ourselves above them or above God—thinking that we know better or that we’ll do better on our own. Humility stays under God and his authority structures. Pride moves out from under the authority structures and places ourselves outside or above them.

There are times when leaders who have been placed over us misuse or abuse their authority and disqualify themselves from being worthy of submitted to. In those situations, we may need to distance ourselves from their authority, but throughout the New Testament we’re taught that God has established authorities over us to do his work of leading, protecting and caring for us and submitting to their leadership is ultimately acknowledging his leadership over us. *“God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourselves to God. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*

Keeping the concept of our correct posture before God in mind—how we position ourselves in relationship to Him—I want us to more deeply explore James chapter 4. In verses 1-3 we read,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:1-3

Fighting, quarreling, disagreeing and division are part of the human condition. Where there are people, there will be disagreements, arguments and quarrels. In these verses James

points out like he did in chapter 3 that what comes out of us is a direct result of what is inside us. Like produces like. Beyond that, I had some questions that I looked for answers for in a commentary I've been using.

In my study of James for this sermon series I have a handful of Biblical commentaries I've referred to. Generally, I use commentaries in two ways. First, I find commentaries very helpful in getting the background behind books, particularly New Testament letters—who the author is, when the letter was written, what the circumstances of the readers were, and details about the city or area of the world the letter was written to. Secondly, I go to commentaries when I can't figure out the point an author is making or why the author felt the need to address something specific. As I read these verses I was asking myself the question, "What was going on with these people that caused James to write like this? Were they experiencing a lot of internal conflict?"

In his commentary, The Early Christian Letters, N.T. Wright shared an insight that connected dots for me in this passage. Wright highlighted James use of the term "*adulterous people*." We're all familiar with the term adultery. Adultery occurs when a husband or wife is unfaithful to their marriage covenant by engaging in an inappropriate relationship with someone other than their spouse. The word *cheating* is commonly associated with adultery. Listen to verses 4 & 5 where the phrase *adulterous people* is used.

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. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?
James 4:4 & 5

In stark words James points out that friendship with the world is hatred toward God—choosing to be a friend of the world is choosing to be at odds with God. When I read this, I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 6 verse 24, where He says, "*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*"

You've often heard me say that as followers of Jesus we live in two kingdoms—the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. We live in two kingdoms, but our primary allegiance is to God. In Jesus' well-known prayer in John chapter 17, He says this as He prays for his disciples. "*The world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the*

evil one.” As Jesus’ followers you and I live in the world and we’re placed here to engage with the world and its people, but our primary allegiance and love is to God. When our allegiance shifts toward the world and its ways our desires and motives will be off kilter, but when we’re focused on loving and following Jesus, the life of Jesus will flow out of us. James closes this section with a reminder that God is intensely jealous for us—He wants our allegiance, not because his ego needs it or because his pride will be hurt, but because He knows what is best for us.

And that leads into the verses I referenced at the beginning of the message and which Doris spoke about.

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

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4:6-10

I won’t spend a lot of time here, because Doris did a great job with these verses, but I want to focus on verse 6. I love the 6-word statement, “*But he gives us more grace.*” It’s God’s grace that draws our hearts in relationship to Him and it’s his grace that saves us. Apart from his grace, none of us can approach God. But here’s the good news, no matter how much of God’s grace we’ve received, we’ve never exhausted it or reached our limit. No, He always has more grace for us. In other words, we never need to be embarrassed or tentative about asking God for more. He gives us more grace. And James continues, “*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.*” Using the image I spoke to earlier, when we move out from under God’s authority, He opposes us, but when we remain under Him in humility, He showers us with his favor. The word *favor* shows up repeatedly in the Christmas story. It simply means that God is for us and that He pours his blessings upon us. When we embrace a posture of humility, God promises to lift us up and favor us. In verses 11 & 12 James gives more detail about what it looks like when we embrace the way of the world...

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. 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 4:11 & 12

Those verses speak for themselves and don't require a lot of commentary from me. James makes it clear that slander, speaking against others and judging people, isn't of God. I also want us to note that again in these verses James challenges us to remain humble—under God's authority—rather than usurping his authority by either judging the law or by judging our neighbor—responsibilities that are for God alone. And the thread of humility under God, rather than embracing pride is hit upon again in the closing words of this chapter...

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. James 4:13-17

Have you heard people who add the words, "*Lord willing*" or "*If it's the Lord's will*" or "*Lord willing and the creeks don't rise,*" to many of the statements they make? My sense is that it's often older followers of Jesus who do this. Honestly, at times I find that a bit annoying, because I think at some level we all understand that our plans are just plans that could change and that we don't ultimately have complete control over. I'm guessing that some people say this as kind of a clever thing to say, but for some, it serves as a reminder that we're ultimately not in control of our lives and what we do nearly as much as we think we are. Rather than thinking it odd to say, "*Lord willing,*" at the end of statements I make, perhaps I should incorporate that phrase into my thinking when I'm making plans. In these verses James again emphasizes our tendency toward pride and he challenges us to assume a posture of humility under God and his authority.

I mentioned at the start of the sermon today that embracing a posture of humility and resisting pride is a thread that runs throughout chapter 4. To recap, James tells us that our tendency to fight and quarrel come from the prideful desires within us. He points out that friendship with the world equals hatred toward God. He emphasizes that God in his grace opposes the proud, but lifts up and shows favor to the humble. James urges us not to take the place of God by slandering, speaking against and judging others, but instead to leave the judging to God. And James wraps up chapter 4 by pointing out how little control we have over our lives and over what we do from day to day—that our destiny lies in God's hands.

James encourages us to embrace a posture of humility and resist the pull of pride each of us feels drawn toward. In other words, we're encouraged to humbly remain under God's umbrella of authority, rather than pridefully stepping out from under God's protection and assuming we can take care of ourselves.

Once again this week, I'd like to close the sermon by encouraging us to focus on the words and images Eugene Peterson used in his paraphrase, *The MESSAGE*...

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.

You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way.

You're cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way. And do you suppose God doesn't care? The proverb has it that "he's a fiercely jealous lover." And what he gives in love is far better than anything else you'll find. It's common knowledge that "God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble."

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud *no* to the Devil and watch him make himself scarce. Say a quiet *yes* to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. God is in charge of deciding human destiny. Who do you think you are to meddle in the destiny of others?

And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, "Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money." You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, "If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that."

As it is, you are full of your grandiose selves. All such vaunting self-importance is evil. In fact, if you know the right thing to do and don't do it, that, for you, *is* evil. James 4 *The MESSAGE*

Time of Singing & Response

I'd like to share Jesus' words from Matthew chapter 6 verses 33 & 34 as we leave today...

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Matthew 6:33 & 34