



## “Strategies for Exaltation”

(James 4:5-10)

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### **INTRODUCTION: GOING THROUGH LIFE WITH A MAD ON**

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For our ministry of the word this morning, we are going to flesh out just a bit the teaching of James in chapter 4. There he traces the hostility that sometimes rears its head in local churches to a surprising source. Most hostility does not come about because some people are wise and others foolish. Hostility in churches comes from worldliness—having the wrong internal cravings; or, to use his word, coveting. Instead of being content with asking God for things, believers tend to fall back into sinful patterns brought forward from their pre-conversion experience.

We become worldly people. We adopt the world’s attitudes, longings, and actions. Part of that is due to what we perceive to be competition. That’s how the world operates. Every other human being is a potential obstacle to our goals, because they have the same goals. We all want the coin of the world. We want wealth, or fame, or pleasure and they do, too. So, we learn how to achieve those same goals and it’s usually through conflict with other people.

Now are people conscious of these inner drives? For the most part, no. We adopt them by sheer force of habit. If you want to know something about water, don’t ask a fish. Because if you ask a fish to describe water, the fish will say, “What’s water?” A fish is so constantly surrounded by water that he is unconscious of it. He lives in it and adapts to it without thinking about it. He knows nothing else.

But James has written a short paragraph in chapter 4 that tells us that we should be thinking about it. Our cravings get us in all kinds of trouble. Let’s see how he puts in beginning a James 4:5.

### **SCRIPTURE: JAMES 4:5-10**

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5 *Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “THE SPIRIT WHO DWELLS IN US YEARNs JEALOUSLY [FOR US]”? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it 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.*

### **A JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE HUMBLE BELIEVER**

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#### *The structure of the passage*

Let me first say a word about the unity and structure of this passage. At the time the New Testament was written, chapters and verses were not a part of the text. They were much later developments, and the earliest manuscripts that we have exhibit no divisions. Most of them don't even put spaces between words. This continuity poses quite a challenge to the reader.

But James, like most New Testament writers, knew how to work around this, and so he left structural markers in the text itself to help us out.

So what we have in this little paragraph is a set of instructions in how to humble oneself before the Lord. You see that in verse 6: God gives grace to the humble. Humility is one of the biggest themes in Scripture. It is, as he says, the key to personal success. Humility is how to receive grace from God. Humility is how to avoid resistance from God. Humility is how to be great in the kingdom of God. Nowhere is that made clearer than it is here.

And then in verse 10 he repeats himself to show us that his discourse on humility is finished. Specialists call this an *inclusio*, using repetition to indicate the extent of a subject:

*“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (4:6).*

*“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up” (4:10).*

In between these two verses, in verses 7-9, he tells us how to humble ourselves. He has to do this, because we never will learn this from the world. The devil has no use for humility. He hates it. We have to learn it from the Scriptures. Fortunately, it isn't hard to find in Scripture. In fact, it is in a sense...

#### *The message of the Scripture: how to be great*

Jesus spent a lot of time telling his followers how to be great. Have you ever noticed that? Over and over again the issue came up. They all wanted to be great people. Jesus never rebuked them—never—over wanting to be great. In fact, he encouraged them to be great repeatedly, and he told them exactly how to do it. In Matthew 20:25-28, he said to the Twelve, *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

And there you have it. To be great, humble yourself. That means, “Turn loose of all pretense of authority.” The pagans are always looking to have people regard them as authorities. Instead, be a servant. In fact, if you want to be more than great, if you want to be first, then go further; be a slave. And that is precisely...

*The message of this passage: how to be great*

What we see in verses 7-10 is a set of ten consecutive imperatives: ten commands that tell us what humility requires. They tell us how to be servants and slaves and as a result, how to be great as far as God is concerned. Did you notice that that is how this passage ends? “*He will lift you up.*” The word means *exalt*. He will exalt you only after you humble yourself.

Notice: three verses, ten commands:

*Therefore **submit** to God. **Resist** the devil and he will flee from you. **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 [**be turned**] to gloom.*

### **Where it starts**

So if you want to be exalted, if you want to be honored by God (and, by the way, by other people), where do you begin? James says that the first objective is to submit to God.

The task: submit

“*Submit to God,*” he says in verse 7. What is that? Don’t we submit to God when we believe? Well, yes. But he isn’t really talking about that. He is talking about the daily necessity of submission, because the Christian life starts there and never goes very far away from it.

The suitability of the imperative

Why is it suitable and proper for James to tell Christians to submit to God? Because that is really the lifestyle that sets us apart as his disciples. Servants don’t argue. They do what they are told because they recognize that what they are told is aimed at their welfare.

Now this is way up at the head of this list because if you flop here you’re done. You will never be great if you treat God’s word as a set of suggestions. This is where repentance comes in. This is moving us out of our element. We have to think differently, and we have to keep it up every day until it becomes a natural thing for us, which it will.

The Reformation really hinged on this issue. When Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the very first item on the list was this: “*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*”

Why is submission a part of the cure for worldliness? Because when you submit you admit that there is someone greater than you who has the right to make that demand, and you admit that you don’t really want to do it. Submission is not necessary when there is agreement. Submission implies disagreement. Submitting to God, you say, “Lord, I really don’t want to do your will. But I believe that you have my best interests at heart,

so I'm going to obey. I hope that I will learn to love your truth one day; but today I'm going to obey because I love you."

In effect, we are saying, "Lord, I don't want anything the world has to offer if it means driving a wedge between you and me. I am willing to be as poor or as wealthy as you decide to make me. I am willing to be as well-known or as obscure as you want me to be." That is humility at its most basic. It starts with submission.

#### *The appeal of the imperative*

So the road to greatness begins with this critical imperative and then moves on to the nine that follow. The appeal of the imperative is to the will. Will we or won't we bow the knee to the commands of the eternal God?

#### The decision: place yourself under orders

There is a decision that has to be made. Will we place ourselves under his orders, or continue to do what we want? We have everything to gain by submission except comfort. It isn't natural to us, but if we do it regularly it will become so. The best demonstration of this in the Bible is the Lord Jesus himself.

#### The example: Jesus

Hebrews 5:8 says that Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered. Though he had no sinful nature, he was like us in that obedience was a learned practice. And he got it. In John 5:19, Jesus said, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do; for whatever he does, the Son also does in like manner.*" Then again in John 8:29, he explained that he was consistent in doing the will of God: "*He who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please him.*" So when Jesus told the Twelve to become servants, the primary characteristic of which is obedience, he was already doing what he told them would make them great.

But before he moves on too far from this imperative, he gives another that is often used to sidestep it. He tells them what submission precludes.

#### **What it precludes**

Verse 7 continues with the command, "*Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*" Here he anticipates what some will use to avoid submission. Specifically, they will appeal to the reality of the devil's interference in their plans. They want to submit, but the temptations of the enemy are too great; they just can't do it.

#### The prohibition: buck passing

But the devil can't make you do anything if you don't cooperate with him. Just resist, James says, and he will flee from you. That's an awful lot of power you have; but he says you have it.

#### The insight

Why is this next? Because there's a long history connected with it, going all the way back into the garden of Eden. Adam blamed his sin on his wife. That's buck passing. Eve blamed her deception on the devil. Another example of buck passing. But James says that you can't do that. All you have to do is resist, and the devil will leave you alone.

### The tools

And again, the Lord showed how it was done in his own temptation. After being in the middle of a wilderness for forty days, the devil attacked him in his weakened condition, and he passed every test. How did he do it? He did it by using the tools of resistance: basically Scripture memory. Three times the enemy offered him things that were so appealing. He offered him bread. Nothing wrong with bread; quite the contrary. But the temptation wasn't really the bread. The temptation was to get the bread outside the will of God. Commanding stones to become bread was not the prescribed way of getting it. "Just submit to me," the devil said, "and I'll see to it that your every want is satisfied." The temptation was a temptation of means not ends.

But three times Jesus turned him down flat by telling the devil that his life was ordered by the word of God. Three times Jesus quoted Scripture. He told the enemy, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In other words, I don't take orders from you. I make my decisions on the basis of God's truth as it is revealed in Scripture.

### The example

The passages were things that Jesus had memorized in the same way that we do. But he had personalized them so effectively that they were there on the tip of his tongue when he was under attack. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks in about 1800 verses. Of these 1800, in about 180 verses he is quoting Hebrew Scripture, the Old Testament, which was his Bible. If that proportion was normal, then about ten percent of what Jesus said during his ministry came out of his memory. As far as we know, he had no Bible to carry around. He knew it. He had internalized it. And after he quoted it at the temptation, the devil fled. "Resist the devil, and he will leave." So, what else has to be done to humble yourself?

### **What it involves**

What does humility involve? What do we have to do? James gives us a series of things in the rest of this passage, this time in pairs.

### Drawing near

He says, "*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*"

We are to draw near to him. Aren't we near to him already? In one sense we are. We know the Lord. We are in his family. We are in Christ.

But in another sense we need to know him much better than we do. He is an infinite person there for us to get close to and know far better. You see many examples of this in Scripture. For example, right before Jesus was arrested, as the disciples were with him in the upper room, Jesus said to them, "*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; and from now on you know him and have seen him.*" Philip said to him, "*Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.*" Jesus said to him, "*Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*"

Philip had been converted for at least three years, but his knowledge of Jesus was not what it should have been. He needed to draw near to him, and I'm sure he did that. If we

do it, then God will draw near to us. We will experience his closeness. There will be a distinct comfort that comes from his presence, especially as we apply the next two imperatives, things that go together...

#### Cleansing and purifying

Verse 8 tells us, "*Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*" Now I hope the terminology doesn't offend you. It certainly shouldn't. Christians don't lose their identity as sinners just because they are converted. Nobody ever ought to be offended when they are accused of being a sinner. The fact that we may sin less than we used to may be evident to us, but nobody else cares much about that.

When we are converted, we experience an addition to the part of us that no one can see. The Holy Spirit moves into our lives. We are born again and obtain new life from God. But all that is added to us. It doesn't replace the old man that we were born with. The old man is still around. He will be as long as we are in these bodies. We don't lose him, but we can in varying degrees subjugate him, and we do that when we please God by righteous conduct.

But when we don't please God, we need cleansing.

Now it's important to realize that these two imperatives go together. Cleansing is about actions. Our hands need cleansing because they are dirty with sinful actions. God is always ready to cleanse us when we confess what we have done.

But if we never address the inside, we will not make much progress toward Christlikeness. So he echoes the reference to cleansing, which is an external, with a command to purify at the level of the heart. We need to address ourselves at the deepest level, the level of the heart. What do we want? Do we want God? Do we want, really, to be his? To know him closely and well? That's part of humbling ourselves.

Or, as he says, are we content to go on being double-minded? Sort of wanting pure hearts but not quite sure?

Well, there is one more avenue down which we must go to humble ourselves. The last four imperatives all have to do with...

#### Godly sorrow

Verse 9 says, "*Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*" What we have here is a tacit recognition that this decision to humble yourself is a lot more jarring—or it ought to be—than we are usually inclined to admit. Learning humility and adopting it as a lifestyle is not simply something that we add on to our busy schedules. It calls for a realistic self-appraisal and a recognition that going on as we have been simply is not acceptable. It is best accompanied by sincere, godly sorrow.

Worldliness is a lethal condition that will wreck your discipleship and ruin your testimony. So James says, you need to look at it frankly and if you are guilty of it, mourn over it: "*Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*"

Now let me assure you that there is no contradiction between what James says here and the many exhortations to joy that fill the New Testament. James has some of those, too.

But godly sorrow has an honored place, especially when a life change is in the process of being made.

The Christians that James is writing, of course, knew exactly what he meant. They knew Hebrew Scripture. They knew that celebration and joy were supposed to be a steady part of their lives. God told them to take off work many times during the year and gather with the people of God in joyous celebration. At a minimum, they were to celebrate festivals about six weeks in the year.

But there was one day a year that they had to set aside to mourn. In spite of all their good days, and in spite of all their blessings, they were to dedicate one day to fasting and mourning and prayer. That day was the Day of Atonement.

These were the directions for it: *“Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord. And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God. For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people. And any person who does any work on that same day, that person I will destroy from among his people”* (Lev. 23:27-30).

I find it interesting that you could skip some of the parties, but if you didn’t observe the Day of Atonement, you were guilty of a capital crime and deserved the death penalty.

So James’s readers knew that there was a place in the Christian life for a frank assessment of ourselves that would keep us mindful that even though we have an eternal place in the family of God, godly sorrow can be a good thing, especially if it grows out of that repentance that is always necessary when a major life change is being considered. Shifting from worldly living to distinctive, holy living is nothing if not an upheaval.

Mourning and gloom are not intended to be the normal daily perspective of a Christian, but when you’ve been living a worldly life and you want to humble yourself as part of the change to living God’s way, what could be more appropriate?

As we take these steps, we always have to keep in mind...

### **What they accomplish**

What humbling yourself accomplishes is your exaltation. Do you want to be great in the kingdom? Humble yourself. If you do, God will lift you up. That’s what exaltation is. There’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, there is everything right with it as long as you follow directions for how to get there.

The Christian life at its heart is paradoxical. Jesus was exalted and given a name that is above every name because he humbled himself and became obedient. That’s our model. We don’t follow the world. We follow the Lord.

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