

23. Living by the Grace of God

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 4:7-10)

Abundant Grace

In the previous verses, James warned against friendship with the world, and emphasized that God gives grace to the humble. It is not easy to deal with the temptations and trials that we face in this world, but God gives us grace that is greater than the weight of our burdens. In writing this, James comes to the wondrous heart of the Gospel: we must live by grace alone.

One commentator writes about the flow of grace, comparing it to a river that always heads to the lowest point. We all know how water flows: the waters of mighty Niagara Falls find their way into Lake Ontario and from there into the St. Lawrence, until they hit sea level, the lowest point. Just so, God gives grace to the humble, to those who take the lowest position, and not to those who elevate themselves.

James continues with this important truth in 4:7-10. Look at verse 10: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” The Lord takes those who are bowed down and elevates them to a place of favor. Abundant grace is only for the lowly; it runs off those who are high and mighty in themselves.

The knowledge of abundant grace, however, should not make us lax and lazy in the spiritual struggle we must fight. We retain our calling in the struggle of life. God’s grace does not remove our responsibility, but mobilizes us to

go forth in his strength. We should not think that living by grace removes the mandate to do good works.

In this light, we begin to understand James' words in 4:7-10. This passage contains nine commands, each very strict and terse. Earlier, James had addressed his readers as "adulterous people". That was quite a change from the friendly "my brothers" used throughout the first three chapters. Now James continues with a rather brusque tone, calling his readers "sinners" and "double-minded". Adulterers, sinners, and double-minded — he certainly is not afraid to use strong language.

Why does James employ such strong language? It is because he wants to prevent or abolish the thought that Christians would ever despise God's grace. This is a very real danger, and so, through the writing of James, the Lord shows us what it means to live by the grace of God. We must urgently seek the fellowship of God and deeply respect the holiness of God.

Resisting the Devil

James begins 4:7 with the words, "Submit yourselves, then, to God." Notice the little word "then". Since God gives grace only to the humble, we had *then* better submit ourselves to him. We may not rebel against him or come into conflict with his sovereign will. The word translated as "submit" means that we totally surrender to the Lord, and obey him in all things. Unless we are prepared to do this, and actually do it, we will curb the flow of God's grace towards us.

There are various factors that could hinder us from complete submission. There is our own sinful nature, of course. There are the many temptations and cares of this world. Perhaps one of the most powerful factors is the devil. He certainly would like to lead us to rebellion against the Lord, as he did with Adam and Eve in Paradise.

How can we ever stand against the devil? James writes, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." This is easier said than done. The devil does not let himself be pushed away easily, and he always returns with new plans and revised strategies to find a way into our lives. Resist the devil? Some of us may even have the idea that the devil is irresistible, and that we cannot really stand against him.

It is true that we must never underestimate the evil one. The apostle Peter writes in his first letter, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (I Pet 5:8). That is a very realistic statement. Peter certainly does not underestimate Satan, but he, too, adds in the

following verse, “Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” The roaring lion can indeed be resisted, if we stand firm in the faith.

The original of the word “resist” has a military ring to it. It means standing up against something. We must stand firm, also together, against the devil. The verb tense indicates that this must be a very conscious act. We cannot stand against the devil without all of our faculties intact, and we need to use all the weapons that the Lord has given us.

How To Resist

Peter also writes that we must be “self-controlled and alert” (I Pet 5:8). Battle requires discipline, also self-discipline. We have to learn to control ourselves, or else Satan will control us. We must be very watchful that we are not suddenly overtaken by surprise. We must think things through carefully to determine if there is danger ahead. Being self-controlled and alert is certainly of great importance for us all.

I am reminded here of what we read in Ephesians 6, the well-known chapter about the armor of God. We cannot deal extensively with that part of Scripture now, but this passage makes clear that we are not to be strong in ourselves but in the Lord. He is our strength and our salvation. He is our refuge, a mighty fortress, and he has given us what Paul calls “the full armor” (Eph 6:11). Paul tells us why this is so true. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual powers in this dark world and in the heavenly realms. Satan and his demons have their origin in heaven and their territory is now on earth. He is a very powerful adversary. In order to fight against him, we need the full armor of God.

“Resist the devil,” writes James. How can we do so? One of the most important things we learn from our Lord Jesus Christ is that the devil can only be resisted by full acceptance of the Word of God. In his temptations, our Lord Jesus had one answer to give to Satan: “It is written” (Matt 4:4, 7, 10). Even when Satan came with selected Bible passages and slightly twisted their meaning, the Lord corrected him by quoting another relevant passage. The great weapon we have is the Word of God, explained properly in context and maintained in entirety. All we have to say is, “It is written,” and act accordingly.

James adds that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us. Is this not too much to expect? No, for it is exactly what God says. The devil has no weapon

against the truth. He cannot break through the protective shield of the Word of God, which is like a fiery wall around us.

Seeking the Fellowship of God

James then writes, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” We must go to the Lord in our battle against the devil, and he will come to stand beside us. We need to seek fellowship with the Lord in order to repel the attacks of Satan. This element of “coming near to God” has an Old Testament ring to it. The priests in Israel were the only ones who could “come near” to God. They would do so after the sacrifice was brought, and would enter the holy place with the blood of atonement.

We know today, however, that the great and final sacrifice has been brought. We have full access to God, in Christ, by his one sacrifice on the cross. He has opened the way for us, and has gone before us into the heavens. In Christ, we may come near to God, have close fellowship him, and then resist the devil. We have come much farther than the Israel of old, for we may go directly to God in Christ, who has secured an open door.

That is why 4:8 also says that God will come near to us. Going to God is not a one-way street. We draw near to God in faith, through Christ, and he comes near to us, in love, with his Word and Spirit. This is not a status quo, but an ongoing activity, an exercising of fellowship, a growing in communion, and a maturing in faith. Those who are mature in faith know their own weaknesses, but also depend on the strength of the Lord and seek his fellowship unceasingly.

I said previously that we must *urgently* seek the fellowship of God, and I base this on the terse and strong commands of James. There is a sense of urgency in his words. We must come near, now and always. We should not put it off, thinking that we can make it on our own or that we will seek him later. We must not walk on the edge or seek to have the best of both worlds, for we cannot. The Lord has given everything for us, and now we must give everything to him. Those who postpone coming near to God will not find him later.

There is also a great comfort here. When we come near to God and seek his fellowship, he will not draw back and turn away from us. This happens with people sometimes. A person may say, “Whenever you need any help, just let me know,” but when we ask for it, there are all kinds of excuses. The bottom line is that they do not really want to help. With God, however, we

have a surety: we draw near to him (obligation) and he will come near to us (promise).

We must understand that the Lord does not come near to us because we first come to him. The basis is always Christ's sacrifice, but it is through our coming to him that he comes near to us. He involves us in this process of fellowship.

And so the devil can be resisted. This is truly comforting, because we know how often Satan does get the better of us. This is not because he is so strong, for he is not. Rather, it is because we are so weak and do not stand in fellowship with God, with the sword of the Word and the shield of faith. If we use what God has placed at our disposal, we can conquer and be more than victorious.

Purification and Sanctification

James adds another element, that of washing and purification. I think that this addition is connected to the idea of priests coming near to God. They had to wash their hands, for purification and sanctification were required. James writes, "Wash your hands, you sinners." Again, we might wonder about the tone of the words. They seem rather harsh, even condemning. Is James overdoing things here by calling his readers, "you sinners"? Would we be pleased if our ministers greeted us with, "You sinners", instead of, "Beloved congregation"?

Does James go too far? From his letter, we have already learned that there was much sin in the churches, sin that was going unchecked. There was unbelief, favoritism, lack of love, cursing of one another, ambition, disorder, fighting, and quarreling. James therefore does not hesitate to use the general qualification, "you sinners". The maturity of faith means breaking with sin and living in holiness. Sanctification is required so that the fruits of faith become evident, therefore he writes, "Wash your hands."

Of course, this is only an outward matter. James does not want us to think that merely washing our hands is sufficient, so he adds, "and purify your hearts." The washing of the hands points to a greater need, the cleansing of the heart. Purifying means to take away all elements that do not belong. Sin does not belong in the Christian life, so we must never leave it in our lives, but consciously clean it up.

James follows this with the phrase, "you double-minded". This reminds me of what Elijah said to the Israelites on Mount Carmel: "How long will you waver between two opinions?" (I Kgs 18:21). We cannot have the mind of

Christ and the mind of Satan. We cannot mix all sorts of pagan rituals and practices into the Christian life. We cannot stand with one foot in the world and one foot in the church, just for good measure. Thinking this way shows that our faith is not mature and that we have not come to a proper level of understanding.

Respect for the Holiness of God

James does not mean a superficial repentance or a formal adaptation to certain rules. Unfortunately, Judaism, from which many of the first Christians came, fostered that kind of superficial piety. James therefore adds, “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” Again, there are those who feel that James goes too far in 4:9. He describes an Old Testament style of mourning that was characterized by loud clamoring and wailing.

“Laughter to mourning” and “joy to gloom”? What about the glad tidings and the good news? Where is the Gospel in this? I think that James is simply saying here that our repentance must be sincere and our sanctification must be deep. We should never think lightly about sin. The appraisal of our life must be honest and true. Are we really showing a deep respect for the holiness of God?

It is God’s holiness that is at stake. Whoever is justified by faith and enabled by grace cannot lead a life of sin anymore. We live before a God who is holy, and who, rather than let sin go unpunished, has punished it in his only-begotten Son’s bitter and shameful death on the cross.

Must we then preach only doom and gloom? No, for the Gospel is a glad tidging indeed. Yet, at the same time, the Word of God is a double-edged sword that cuts deeply, separating bone and marrow. The preaching of grace also means the preaching of holiness, without which we cannot see God. And that is a very serious matter.

James sums this up with the words, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” Note that he writes, “humble *yourselves*.” Humbling is a self-directed activity, something in which we must be engaged. It is very hard for us to humble ourselves, and mostly we need to be humbled, by outside factors, circumstances, and developments beyond our control. The Lord can do this, and he does do this, for we have to learn what humility means.

If we do not humble ourselves, the Lord will humble us. Then it can be quite difficult for us to accept. One of the great themes of the Gospel is humility in all things, for only then do we truly become fruitful in the Lord’s service.

Perhaps James is so keen on this theme of humility because he saw it firsthand in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There is no other person who was as humble as our Lord Jesus Christ. He deeply respected the holiness of God. As a perfect high priest, he sacrificed himself to turn God's wrath away from us.

James also saw how the Lord God lifted up the humble. He met the resurrected Lord and Savior. He knew that Jesus Christ has a name that is above every name, and that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. Those who elevate themselves do not need God to lift them up. Instead, they will be humbled by God. But those who humble themselves may look to the Lord for vindication. The "lifting up" is ultimately a granting of glory with Christ. When we respect the holiness of God, he will grant us to dwell with him. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," said the Lord in the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt 5:8). Whoever is holy may dwell on God's holy mountain. He may ascend the hill of God.