



8. Submit to God (James 4:7-10)

We come to Another installment of James. If there is any word I could use to describe James, I think that would be sin. *A church had a new minister and it was quite clear that his teaching was making an impact on the congregation. At one church meeting, one member expressed the feelings of many: "Pastor, until you came to this church we didn't know what sin was. We do now!"*

As we have passed through five weeks worth of James we see how the Jewish Christians he was writing to had fallen into a pattern of sin that they didn't even recognize as sin. Like Jesus before him, James shows us the purity of a holy God by showing them that behaviour they thought was OK was something that fell short of God's standards. Discriminating against someone, or just refusing to help someone in need is as bad as murder in God's eyes. By the way they used or misused their tongues, they bore false witness and they murdered people with their words. By trying to get what they wanted in life, they coveted. Their unfaithfulness to God was a form of adultery. Their lives just didn't reflect the purity of God.

They loved the word of God, they upheld the law as they saw it, but James' words cut deep. Faith without works is dead. They had the words but their lives were not reflecting the purity of God. Religious they were, but spiritual they were not.

And we have been encouraged to reflect on our lives over these weeks because we are guilty of the same sins in the same way. We're religious, we come to church on Sundays, we go to Christian activities, maybe we serve, we read our Bible and pray every day. But our attitudes towards others, our words and our thoughts condemn us. And sin brings death and destruction into our lives.

"It's only a little sin". "Just a little white lie". "Surely God understands how I is". Yes He does understand. And He calls on you to turn away from it and follow Him! If we are going to make a difference here in Swaffham, then the words and lives have to match. Let me give you a couple of verses from James from the Message:

1:22 Don't fool yourself into thinking you're a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in through one ear and out through the other. Act on what you hear! (MSG)

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

We need to act wisely. How do we do that? We found last time that it is achieved in three ways:

- »» By making Number One Number Two
- »» By thinking in Community
- »» By fearing God and not flirting with the world

We need to understand, that we don't make a difference in our lives or in Swaffham by simply going to church, or even by doing new outreach activities or by well-planned programmes. They can help but it's a whole change of heart and attitude that God requires of His people. We need to live an act in the way God desires us and for all of us that means being different.

And in the letter of James that transformation is helpfully summed up in chapter 4 verses 7 to 10. If you never remember anything else from James, remember these. It's an unusual list in that it kind of resembles OT wisdom.

Some commentators think that these were sayings the people were familiar with. Each of them build on what we discovered last time – make number one number 2, think in community, fear God and

don't flirt with the world. These sayings consist of the principle involved – *submit yourselves to God* and then three related couplets of ideas: *resist the devil and draw near to God; purify yourselves, turn your laughter into sorrow and then humble yourselves and be lifted up.*



SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO GOD

The logical course that the whole letter of James leads us to is if we want to follow a true path then we submit ourselves to God. The word use in the Greek submit has the sense of subordinate. He is the Master, the Leader, the King, the General. We place ourselves under His command. It's a word that appears in other places in the NT, Rom 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, 1 Pet 2:13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, Col 3:18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. The idea is having authority. We allow God to have authority over our lives. Not a bit. Not as it suits us, but as He wants it. What does submission to God mean?

- *Resist the devil*
Come near to God

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you

I find that Christians in this country can be very ambivalent to the devil and demons. Either they dismiss it as some past thing which in an age of reason we don't worry too much about, or we have an almost pagan fear of not dabbling in things we don't understand. There are two things that the Bible is clear about. First of all, in submitting to God we make a whole load of enemies. Paul says: *Eph 6:2 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* Secondly that satan is a personal enemy to us and seeks our personal downfall. Peter says: *1 Pet 5:8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.* Satan is a real adversary and we are called not just to recognise the fact but to act on it.

My African friends see the satanic in a quite different way to UK believers. Because of the prevalence of paganism on many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, they can see the devil more clearly in action in society. Their problem can be a reverse one – some blame satan for things that are their responsibility.

On the other hand we don't often see satan behind things we should, preferring to blame just about everything else. In one sense that's true. Someone once said – if the influence of satan was withdrawn from the world, would most churches notice the difference? Satan is prowling and will exploit our weaknesses, our unfaithfulness and our own desires to bring us down. If we are not in submission to God, then we are vulnerable to satan's wiles. And he'll get us. He'll exploit every weakness in our personal lives and our church lives and he'll destroy us and he'll destroy the church. You don't have to look far to see that destruction. And that could easily be you and it could easily be me if we are not in submission to God.

But what do we do when satan is trying to devour us? The message of James and of Peter is simple – resist him and what promise do we get? He will flee from you. He won't go away reluctantly and only after a fight. He will FLEE. Look in scripture. When Jesus rebuked demons they fled and did not resist. The name of Jesus is a powerful name. Use it in your life and when praying for others. Ask God for that discernment to see where satan is trying to wreck your life and witness – and tell him to clear off! Sometimes it's pretty clear when people are affected by the occult. I was contacted by someone this week who has come under the influence of a medium who says they are in grave danger from evil, but of course the medium would rescue her for a small fee! I told her that the danger she was in was from the medium and dabbling with what is the occult. I've put her in touch with a local pastor who should be able to help and a very useful book called Steps to Freedom in Christ.

If we are not in submission to God we are in danger from satan but if our desire is submission then we can resist him. James gives us the opposite too. Draw near to God and He'll draw near to you.

It's the reverse. God is just as quick to draw near to us as the devil is to leave. How come God is far from us? God is as only as far away as we make Him. Calvin said *"James meant no other thing in this passage than that God is never wanting to us, except when we alienate ourselves from Him."* If God seems far away from you then which one of you moved? You did. Draw near to Him this morning. We may not be like the prodigal who went afar. Maybe we realize we are out of fellowship with Him this morning. He seems far off. If the devil's in the way, tell him to push off in the name of Jesus and call upon God and He's there. All these statements are promises:

Resist the devil and he WILL FLEE
Draw near to God and HE WILL DRAW NEAR TO YOU

Take them, claim them and submit to God.

- *Purify yourselves*
Turn your laughter to mourning

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.

So we want to draw near to God? We want to make the devil flee? Good. But we need to be people that are fit for God's presence. We will get around to the last installment of the Tabernacle in a couple of weeks but one of the most important features of the Tabernacle was the Laver – or perhaps in modern terms – the Wash Basin. The priests purified their hands and feet before coming into the presence of God. This is what we are being called to do. Not to make sure we've had a bath before coming to church!

But realizing that if we come into the presence of a holy God, we need to deal with our sins. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In a few moments we are going to be around the Lord's table. We are calling on His presence to be with us.

Are you clean? Or is there sin in your life, dominating, knowing away at you? Maybe it's bitterness or unforgiveness. Maybe it's something you've done you need to face up to. Maybe it's you that needs to ask forgiveness. All these things give us dirty hands and impure hearts. We're double-minded.

We want the things of God but we want our sin. We can't have both. God wants clean, pure people. And we have the cheek to come into the presence of a holy God. Dirty hands are all about outward acts; pure hearts are all about our inward state. There are Christians that go through years of unforgiveness and bitterness and wonder why God seems so far from them. You can't be double minded – just single-minded.

The James goes on to say: *9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.* Pretty gloomy eh? Why mourn? Because your sin will wreck you. Strong stuff. Why grieve, mourn and wail? This letter has been about sin and its consequences. If we allow sin to continue to have any part of our lives, then it will wreck us and it will deprive us of all the blessings God wants to pour out on us. So many Christians go short of God's blessings through sin and unbelief.

It gets worse. What about the laughter to gloom bit? Doesn't God want us to be happy you may say? Yes, but that isn't what James is trying to say. Mitton says this *"Here the laughter which is rebuked is not indecent or cruel laughter, but the flippant laughter of careless unconcern in the presence of facts which more properly should induce grief or remorse."*

We have looked a lot at sin and the effects of sin in this series. Perhaps you are fed up of me preaching about it. You may be a little depressed to be reminded of just how much of a sinner you are! It's supposed to depress you! Sin destroys. Without Christ you would be lost! Your friends, neighbours and families that don't know Christ are lost because of sin unless they turn to Him.

Sin in your life wrecks the relationship you have with God and because of it you may be far away from him this morning. Is that you? The mourn, grieve and wail. Wipe the smile off your face because your sin is eating you away and you need to do something about it!

- ***Humble yourselves before God
He will lift you up***

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

The whole purpose of this passage is not to leave you in the depths of despair but to bring you to the foot of the cross and to remind you again that Jesus died for you. His blood was shed that you may have forgiveness of sin. He died to bring you into a relationship with the living God. He died so that God could pour out His blessings on you. And it starts with humility: when you recognise that you are a sinner and you cannot help yourself.

Have you never trusted Christ before? Then look at your life and see how far you fall short of God's glory. Jesus died for you and you can know that forgiveness and presence of God in your life today.

Maybe you have been a Christian for a long time. You've taken God for granted. You've allowed sin to creep into your life and thought it would be OK or tried to massage it away from your conscience. But sin is sin and you can't come into the fully into blessings that God wants to pour out on you.

And we have arrived around the Lord's table.

God is pure and holy, Jesus died for our sins, so let's come before Him this morning. ***Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves before the Lord.*** If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let's come before Him now in a prayer of confession.

Prayer of confession

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. I finish with a promise. Humble yourself – and He will lift you up. God wants to pour out blessings on His children. I don't know how many sermons I've preached on that. Receiving them comes when we are lifted up. It starts when we humble ourselves and accept who we are before God. That isn't something we did in the past, but something we need to do when we realise that as believers we so often fall below the holy standard God requires of us. But the promise is there. ***Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.***

