

## “Draw Near to God”

*Texts: James 4:4-12; Malachi 3:6-12*

### *The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James*

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When people cite verses from the Book of James, often times they cite them from our text—the middle portion of James chapter 4. Not only do we often hear the words of James 4:8, “draw near to God and he will draw near to you,” used as an evangelistic appeal (incorrectly, I might add), but many Christians are familiar with the verses, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6) and “resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). It is remarkable how often these verses are lifted from their context and used in ways in which James likely did not intend. Therefore, it is important to treat these verses in the overall context of James’ epistle, so as to understand them correctly, because these verses not only warn us of the danger of allying ourselves with the world, and judging others, but these same verses also direct us to seek the grace of God, which he has freely promised to give us in the person of his son.

We continue our series on the Book of James and we are working our way through James chapter 4. Since we have much ground to cover—even though there are only nine verses in our passage—I want to briefly put this section of James into context before we get started. If you were not here for the first sermon in this series, I would encourage you to pick up a copy in the bookstore. With the Book of James context is everything. It is very important that we understand the background to this letter as we work through it. We need to keep in mind the purpose for which this letter was written, as well as the date and background of the author, who in this case, is the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who is writing to persecuted Jewish Christians scattered throughout Palestine and Syria.

Based upon the various exhortations we find in the Book of James, we can see some of the issues which were troubling the congregations to which he is writing. James recounts how professing Christians were discriminating against the poor, and showing favoritism to the rich. James tells us why it is so important for us to tame our tongues (because our words can be so destructive), as well as explaining why we must seek wisdom from above (so that we do not rely upon the wisdom of this age). James has warned us of the dangers of worldliness, which is thinking and acting like those non-Christians who were persecuting the churches. In chapter 4, James addresses the question of Christian behavior in terms of considering our fundamental alliance with God and his saving purposes in Jesus Christ. If we are allied with God through faith in Christ, we cannot behave as though we were allied with those who hate the gospel.

As James has already established in chapters 1 and 2, good works are the fruit of saving faith. While God has brought us forth from death to life through the preaching of the gospel (James 1:18), and then implanted that word within us (1:21), James has also pointed out how evil passions remain within every Christian even after they come to faith in Christ (4:1). Christians must continue to struggle against these passions and strive to obey the commandments of God (4:1 ff). While the law of God exposes our sins and demonstrates that we are law-breakers (2:10), once we trust in Jesus Christ (who has died for all our sins and whose own perfect law-keeping is credited to us through faith), the commandments of God reveal to us those things we must do, now that we are Christians (2:12). This is what James means when he exhorts us to be doers of the word, and not mere “hearers” only (1:22). Christians must strive to obey the commandments of God, and in doing so, we “do” those good works which are the proof that we have placed our trust in Christ. This is what James is getting at when he says that we are not justified by faith alone, but that our faith in Christ is completed by our good works.

So, keeping all of this in mind, we now turn to our text, James 4:4-12, where we find a number of familiar biblical passages.

In a number of places earlier in this epistle, James has spoken of his readers and hearers as either “brothers” or even “dear” brothers. But suddenly in verse 4 of chapter 4, James abruptly speaks of his readers as “*You adulterous people!*” In speaking in such a direct and confrontational way, James is directing his largely Jewish audience back to one of the major sub-plots of redemptive-history. Throughout the Old Testament, YHWH is described as Israel’s husband. Take, for example, a passage such as Isaiah 54:5-6. “*For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.*”

Since YHWH is Israel’s husband (in a spiritual sense, prefiguring the relationship that Jesus Christ has to his church, which is his bride), and since the nation of Israel is YHWH’s wife, whenever Israel disobeys YHWH, or engages in those idolatrous practices typical of the pagans around them, the people of Israel are charged with engaging in spiritual adultery. This is major theme in the writings of the prophets, and comes to the fore in the prophecy of Hosea, in which Hosea is commanded to marry an unfaithful prostitute (Gomer), whose behavior serves as an illustration of Israel’s own spiritual condition at the time of the Babylonian Captivity.

During his messianic mission, Jesus uses this imagery, and in several places in the gospels Jesus speaks of unbelieving Israel as an “adulterous” generation. In Matthew 12:39 we read, “*But he answered [the scribes and pharisees], ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’*” And then in Matthew 16:4, Jesus says the exact same thing in reference to the Sadducees and Pharisees. Upon hearing James read aloud, members of these churches would have understood James’ reference to “you adulterous people” to be a reference to all those who—despite their profession of faith in “the Lord of Glory”—were nevertheless cheating on YHWH by allying themselves with those persecuting believers. To use the language of James, those who were hearers of the word only, are accused of spiritual adultery just as the prophets had charged Israel.<sup>1</sup>

No doubt, James’ readers would certainly make the connection between the conduct James was condemning in the churches (discriminating against the poor, favoring the rich, speaking ill of each other, fighting, quarreling, and allowing their sinful passions to run unchecked) and the behavior of Israel which brought down the covenant curses upon the nation from YHWH. In using this imagery of spiritual adultery, James is making sure his readers understand the gravity of continuing on without heeding his warning to seek wisdom from above so as to stop behaving in such a sinful and self-centered manner. When God’s people leave him for the affections of another (the world), they are committing spiritual adultery. Such people risk coming God’s covenant curse.

James’ reinforces his point in the last two clauses of verse 4, when James connects his reference to “spiritual adultery” to the worldliness found throughout these congregations. “*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*” The serious charge (spiritual adultery) now comes into even sharper focus when we consider the role that friendship played in the ancient world. To be “friends” in our culture simply refers to a casual/informal relationship between people who have common interests. But

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<sup>1</sup> Moo, The Letter of James, 186-187.

to be friends in James' day and age meant that the two parties (professing Christians and the non-Christians were persecuting them) were ideologically connected, and share a deep and abiding unity. Someone who professes faith in Christ, but who is friends with the world (those who hate the gospel and persecute the church of Jesus) has made himself an enemy of God. Those who profess faith in Christ, but manifest the same kind of behavior as that shown by those persecuting the faithful, have made friends with the world, risk becoming enemies of God, and may find themselves coming under the covenant curses just as with Israel. Let me put it yet another way. Those who profess to have faith in Christ, cannot live like pagans without risking becoming an enemy of God.

Obviously, James is speaking rhetorically here. This is clear from the context. There is no evidence that anyone in these churches was actively working with those who were persecuting Christians. In fact, the evidence seems to show that the people whom James is calling spiritual adulterers, who risk becoming enemies of God, were professing Christians—people who were themselves suffering persecution from those outside the church. The issue is that these people were acting like those outside the church who hate the gospel. To be very specific, James is referring to those were not struggling to tame their tongues, whose sinful passions went unchecked leading to jealousy and quarrels, and who were openly discriminating against the poor while favoring the rich. In other words, to remain a hearer only, to have faith but no works, to allow our sinful passions to go unchecked, is to ally ourselves with God's enemies and engage in spiritual idolatry. Such people are "friends of the world."

In the fundamentalist circles in which I was raised, worldliness was often defined in terms of humanly-devised blue laws, which changed from church to church, and which usually had very little to do with Scripture, specifically the Ten Commandments. According to many fundamentalists, "worldly" people smoked and drank, they went to movies, they had non-Christian friends, poor quiet-times, etc. But for James, worldliness is a much more comprehensive category than acting in a way which offends those who invent their own rules of conduct.

For James, a "worldly" person is someone who hears, but does not do. A worldly person is someone who does not tame their tongue, nor make any effort to control their sinful passions. A worldly person is someone who discriminates against the poor and who favors the rich. For James then, worldliness is a term used of someone who make no effort to conform their behavior to the law of God. Someone who professes faith in Christ, but then is characterized by jealousy, bitterness, lack of concern for the poor, self-interest, etc., is "worldly." If true, this means that the struggle against worldliness is something in which we all must engage as part of the on-going process of sanctification. We cannot reduce worldliness to a list of "blue-laws" or to a label we throw at people whose conduct we don't approve. No, the sinful passions within us all manifest themselves in the sins which James has described. And for James, those sinful passions, if left unchecked, result in "worldliness."

Having invoked the image of YHWH as Israel's husband, and having made the point that to behave as a non-Christian is to open the door to spiritual adultery and become a friend of the world, in verse 5, James now invokes the image of God's righteous jealousy. "*Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?'*" Here, we must be very careful not to understand jealousy in the sense of a sinful human passion, arising from our own insecurities and anger. When the word jealousy is applied to God, as it is here, we must understand the word in the sense that God demands complete and total allegiance from his people, those whom he has sovereignly brought forth through the preaching of the gospel, and in whom he has implanted his word,

and who profess faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Having done all of this for his people, God desires our loyalty. In fact, he demands our loyalty. James can appeal to the entire Old Testament (i.e., the *graphe*, “Scripture”) in support of his main argument that when our spirits (our person and orientation) turn away from him toward the world, his holy jealousy is aroused.<sup>3</sup> Because God has called us forth from death unto life, he also calls us to be faithful to him and his revealed will. God is grieved when we turn away from his word, and make friends with those who oppose his gospel and his purposes. And we make friends with those who oppose him, by engaging in that conduct which James has exhorted us to cease.

Christians will strive not to commit spiritual adultery, and we will wage war against the passions of the flesh. But while we struggle against our sinful passions, James now gives struggling sinners a word of hope in verse 6. “*But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’*” Because God is jealous for our spiritual allegiance, he is willing to give us grace, indeed more grace. This is but another way of saying that in the gospel, God freely gives to us what he demands of us under the law. God has called us to “do” not just “hear.” God calls us to control our sinful passions. God calls us to be faithful to him and not to become friends of the world. And because God calls us to do these things, he is always willing to give us *more* grace.

In fact, James cites from Proverbs 3:34 when he states God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. The proud are people who don’t think they need God’s grace. These are folk who think they are fine just as they are. These are people who hear James’ exhortations and then say to themselves, “that applies to so and so, but not to me . . .” God opposes such people. These are the folk who risk becoming God’s enemies. These are people who hear but do not do, and who see no reason to tame their tongues or control their sinful passions. The proud do think they need grace. But God opposes them. Yet to the poor struggling sinner, who sees their need for grace and who act in true humility by seeking the grace of God, God will give them all the grace they need. God does not call us to “do” without giving us the grace which enables us to do. God does not call us to control our sinful passions and then leave us to our own devices. God gives grace to the humble. While James does not go into the specifics as to *how* God gives us grace, since James has already told us that God brings us forth through the word, it is not a stretch to conclude that God gives us grace through the preaching of the gospel, and through the administration of the sacraments (the sign and seal of what is promised in the gospel).

Having reminded the struggling sinner of God’s willingness to give us grace, James gives us a series of commands which flow out of James’ citation of Proverbs 3:34. Since God gives grace to the humble while opposing the proud, Christians are to humble themselves.<sup>4</sup> As James puts it in verse 7, “*Submit yourselves therefore to God.*” The logic of this is easy to follow. God gives grace to the humble. This grace is God’s means of enabling us to “do” the word. Therefore, we need to submit to God, so as to receive the grace we need to do what God requires of us. Submission, in this case, is an act of acknowledging God’s authority over us, along with a renewed commitment to accept the grace offered to us, with the goal of being more than a mere “hearer” of the word, but “a doer.”

The second clause of the verse is the familiar exhortation, “*resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*”

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<sup>2</sup> Moo, *The Letter of James*, 188-190.

<sup>3</sup> Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 164.

<sup>4</sup> Moo, *The Letter of James*, 192.

Grammatically, James is telling us that we submit to God’s authority, in part, when we resist the devil.<sup>5</sup> Practically speaking we are exhorted to *resist* the devil, who is the father of lies and the source of all heresy. Understand that the devil does not make us sin. Whenever you see the image of the devil whispering something in someone’s ear, while an angel whispers something else in the other ear, this completely misses the mark. We sin because we have sinful passions. We sin because we are sinners. We whisper evil thoughts in our own ears! The “devil made me do it” defense is not only unbiblical, but people who think this way are setting themselves up for a tragic fall. Since the devil is the author of all falsehoods about God (and is heresy anything else but a falsehood about God?) we must resist him with the truth (correct doctrine). When we resist the devil’s purposes with sound doctrine and biblical truth, Satan will flee. This is why we must know the truth, and need not fear the devil.

Yet many Christians confuse James’ counsel about resisting the devil, with the struggle against sin and temptation. The Bible never exhorts us to *resist* temptation. In fact, throughout the New Testament we are repeatedly exhorted to pray that we be delivered from temptation—which is a plea that God not allow us to be tempted in the first place. The Bible also repeatedly exhorts us to flee from temptation. Why is this? As James has so clearly pointed out, because we have sinful passions (i.e., a sinful nature), we are weak and prone toward giving in to sin when we are tempted. So, given how weak we are (because we are sinful), we must pray that we not be tempted, and when we are tempted, we must flee. The Christian who attempts to resist temptation almost always gives in. But when confronted by the lies of the devil, we are clearly commanded to resist him, and he (hating the truth) will flee from us. We must be very careful to have the right remedy against sin (we flee from temptation), and the devil (we resist him).

In verse 8, we come to the familiar command, “*draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*” Often times this verse is used as an evangelistic appeal—as though non-Christians have the ability to draw near to God, so that God sees their good efforts and responds by drawing near to the non-Christian who has taken the necessary first step toward God. Again, the passage has nothing to do with evangelism, nor is James saying that non-Christians have the ability to approach God on their own terms. In context, James is telling Christians that just as God gives grace to the humble, so too, if Christians draw near to God (the verb here is used throughout the Old Testament when God’s people approach God in worship), he will draw near to them.<sup>6</sup> This passage is a word of comfort to Christians, not an evangelistic appeal.

Such language is also used throughout the Prophets when God calls Israel to repent and “return” to him. This can be seen in a passage such as Malachi 3:7 (part of our Old Testament lesson). “*From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’*” This is much the way James speaks here. Christians who are struggling with their speech, their sinful passions, etc., need to draw near to God, with the hope and expectation that God will draw near to them. This is covenant language and is directly tied to the preceding, God’s promise to give grace to the humble. Again, the basic point is that God calls us to “do” and will not leave us on our own. All he asks of us—those whom he has already brought forth through the word—is that we draw near to him so that we receive more grace.

In light of the grace God freely gives us, and in light of God’s promise to draw near to us when we return to him, James now commands us, “*cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-*

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<sup>5</sup> Davids, The Epistle of James, 165-166.

<sup>6</sup> Moo, The Letter of James, 193.

*minded.*” Having called his readers “adulterers” now he calls them “double-minded,” (literally “double-souled”), which is a reference to someone who is torn between conflicting allegiances. This flows out of James’ earlier assertion that those who make no effort to restrain the flesh are acting like friends of the world. Using language which echoes Old Testament passages about the ceremonial preparations made by Israel’s priests, Christians (whom James calls “sinners”) are to cleanse their hands (external) and purify their hearts (internal). We find similar language in Psalm 24:3-4, which is a reference to Christ’s sinless obedience. “*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.*” James’ point is simply that those who draw near to God, must do so with the same attitude as Israel’s priests—with reverence and awe. God welcomes us into his presence. We can approach him without fear. And yet we must do so with a humble spirit. We do this by realizing that the only way our hands can be clean and our hearts be pure is through the blood and righteousness of Christ.

In verses 9-10, James uses a lament taken from the prophets, before returning to the subject of humility by repeating his previous comments. “*Mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*” Those who mourn and weep are those who have suffered God’s judgment (cf. Isaiah 15:2, Jeremiah 4:13). Those who do not repent and seek grace and wisdom from above, be warned. God will not allow this sinful behavior to go on with impunity. Believers must heed these warnings before it is too late. We must humble ourselves, return to the Lord, and receive grace. We do so by remembering that in Christ our sins are forgiven and that in Christ alone we find the wisdom which God has graciously offered to us, his people.

Once again, James returns to the reason why we must tame our tongues. In verses 11-12 James tells the congregations, “*do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*” One of most tangible signs of sinful human nature is the ease with which we speak ill of others, and then self-righteously judge them using the same commandments which we ourselves cannot keep. Not only is this the very height of hypocrisy—who are we to judge anyone else?—because when we do so, we place ourselves above God’s law, rather than submitting to it. When we speak evil of our brothers and sisters, we have placed ourselves in a position of authority which belongs to God alone, and which we have no right to assume. We set ourselves up as judge, and then in self-righteousness condemn others. But, as James points out, this role belongs to God alone. The law is designed to expose our sins and to reveal to us what God expects of us now that we are Christians. The law was not given so that we can use it to make self-righteous pronouncements and judgments about others. Sinners must stop seeking to judge others, and instead humble ourselves before God, earnestly seeking that grace he so willingly and freely gives us in the person of Jesus Christ.

What then, do we say by way of application?

**W**As we read through this section of James we tend to be overwhelmed with the commands “to do” and the warnings about becoming an enemy of God. We are crushed by these words since all of us remain “friends of the world” to some degree. All of us are spiritual adulterers at heart. Not a person here has not sinfully judged some else using one of God’s commandments, the whole time we are breaking that command ourselves. We are all self-righteous hypocrites at heart. Human sin is not something which just goes away when we become Christians. James exposes our sin, he exhorts us to deal with it, he warns us of the seriousness of sin, and he tells us that we must cease from our sinful behavior.

Because James' words here are so direct, we may miss the fact that this section of James is really all about grace. If only we humble ourselves, God gives us what we need—grace. In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven, we are reckoned as righteous, and God enables us to fulfill what he has commanded of us. The whole point of this section of James is to remind us that God gives grace to sinners! So let us humble ourselves before God, and draw near to our Creator-Redeemer with proper reverence and awe. Let us never forget that in the person of Jesus Christ, God has given us wisdom and grace, and in because of Christ's death for us, and because his righteousness is imputed to us, we can freely enter God's presence, where we are given everything we have ever needed. All we need do is humble ourselves, draw near to God, and there we will receive grace—indeed more grace!