James Lesson 6 (2022)

**HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE THE LORD**

James 4:1-17

Key Verse: 4:10

“Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

I am so glad that we could start the year with the book of James, which teaches us mature faith. We’ve learned so far many things, such as perseverance during the trials (1:18), the blessedness of obedience (1:19-27), victory over favoritism (2:1-13), good deeds complete our faith (2:14-26), and controlling the words of our mouths (3:1-18). Pastor James’ instructions are precious and timeless, like a jewel. How would you feel if you possessed precious gems, like pure gold or diamond? (pic#1) You would be elated, right? What would your life be if you kept heavenly treasures? (Pic#2) Undoubtedly superb. Having heavenly treasures means that you can experience God’s kingdom in your hearts now and forever. That’s why we should aim high and become mature in faith. In last week’s passage, James concludes his teaching by saying, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (3:17)

Pastor James continues to speak of heavenly wisdom in the following chapters (Chapters 4-5). He says many things in a small space, so it’s hard to follow them up. To understand this chapter better, we might have to divide it into smaller parts. But it would take another month if we did that. Reading this chapter repeatedly, however, it’s clear to me that James draws our attention to a deeper level of understanding of our spirituality, taking the spiritual CT-SCAN of our soul. According to today’s passage, the leading cause of our conflicts with other people is within ourselves. So, we might have to look into ourselves more honestly. So, this morning, can we ask God to help us be open and honest before him. Relax and pay attention to what the Lord seems to tell us.

Pastor James starts this section with a rhetorical question again. Look at verse 1. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” This verse shows James’ assumption that our interpersonal conflicts have intrapersonal roots. **Interpersonal** is between two or more people, and **intrapersonal** is between you and yourself. (Pic#3) In other words, conflicts with other people originate from conflicts within the person. It’s a psycho-spiritual perception.

Verse 2 elaborates on his assumption. Look at verse 2. “You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.” We see the words James uses in verses 2 and 3 are very strong: “fights, quarrels, battle, kill, quarrel, and fight.” It may be proper to translate the word “kill” as “become angry.” In the previous passage, James talked about the problem of poisonous words that come out of our untamed mouths (3:1-12). In these verses, Pastor James speaks that when our desires are not controlled properly, they create many internal and external problems in our lives.The New Living Translation phrases verse 2a, “You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can’t get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them.” We don’t need a long explanation of how true this statement is. If our neighbors, friends, close relatives, or our close siblings have more or better things than us, we become jealous of them. Our desires cause bitter envy and self-ambition. In the previous passage, James talked about it by saying, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” (3:16) The history of humankind is full of wars, conflicts, tragedies, and injustice, and it’s because someone wants a higher position, better recognition, more power, money, pleasure, etc. James was concerned that Christians also do the same things, with bitter envy and selfish ambition.

They even pray to God based on their selfish ambition. Look at verses 2b-3. “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.” It’s sad that Christians also quarrel, fight, and slander other Christians because of selfish ambition, bitter envy, or other unfulfilled desires. They even pray to God to get what they want, “Lord, do this and do that for us!” But by doing so, we must know that we are not praying but ordering God to do what we want. I don’t think they are intentional but habitual. Yet, that’s not what Christian prayer is supposed to be. Instead, we should pray, “Lord, Father! Not my will, but yours be done,” and seek God’s guidance and wisdom on how we can obey his will. The problem is that we put our desire first before God’s will.

Look at verse 4. “You adulterous people, do 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.” Pastor James uses an extreme term by calling them, “You adulterous people!” The meaning of the word “adulterous” includes “impure.” Pastor James speaks that adulterous Christians choose to be friends of the world. What does it mean to be a friend of the world? It means to be impure in our desire and lifestyle. For example, if you are a college student, you will have to study hard, learn science, math, language, humanity, etc. Being a good student is not being a friend of the world. But if our life is motivated by envy, greed, and selfish ambition, we are impure and have become enemies of God. If we are Olympians, we should practice good sportsmanship, following the rules. But if we are driven by our selfish ambition and break the rules to get the gold medal, we are adulterous, whether we claim to be Christians or not.

Our hidden desire and selfish ambition are hard to control. But we must. Otherwise, we grieve God our Father and become a mockery to non-believers. Look at verses 5-6. “Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. This is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes this proud but shows favor to the humble.’” Knowing how vulnerable, impure, and compromising we can be, the Lord God our Father didn’t leave us on our own, like spiritual orphans. He endowed us with the Holy Spirit to dwell in us so that we may not live by the sinful tendency of our nature but by the will of God, which reminds us of Galatians 5:16, which states, “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desire of the flesh.” And it’s always God’s untiring desire to show mercy to us, through the grace of forgiveness of sin; as the Scripture says, “God opposes the proud but show favor to the humble.” It’s good that God opposes us when we are proud and arrogant. Otherwise, we will not repent of the sin of pride and remain hopeless.

Pastor James highlights the importance of humility in verses 7-10, and he also gives practical tips on how we can act humble in our daily lives in verses 11-17.

***First, we have to be deliberately humble (7-10).*** Look at verses 7-10. “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.” I said we should be deliberately humble. Do you know why? It’s because nobody can be truly humble unless we struggle to be humble intentional. As we read from these verses, we’ve got a lot of things that hinder us from becoming humble.

First of all, we, as humans, have a strong ego or giant ego. By nature, we are ego-centric and not God-centered. We can see ego-centric tendency even in babies when they fight over attention and power. Although they are cute, their ego-centric trend is unhealthy. What about ego-centric grown-ups? It’s very harmful to everyone. Therefore, we should deny our self-centered ego to submit ourselves to God, accepting God’s sovereignty over our lives.

Pastor James said that we should resist the devil. Why? It’s because the devil who rebelled against God also tempts us to rebel against God’s will. So, who is most vulnerable to the devil’s temptation? They are those who are proud and self-righteous in their inmost thoughts. But the problem is that it’s not easy to know that we are proud and self-righteous. Especially those who think they work hard for God consider themselves better or superior to others. Unless we intentionally humble ourselves, we become arrogant and remain self-righteous. As a result, we often reveal our hidden pride by becoming bossy and domineering. We need an anti-pride device in our internal system. I wish I had an inbuilt pride detector (pic#4).

Well, we do have an inbuilt pride detector. Do you know what it is? It’s our self-awareness. It’s God’s gift to us as humans. I don’t think animals have inbuilt self-awareness. But the problem is even though we have it, we often turn it off. We should turn it on and be deliberate in humbling ourselves before God.

Pastor James gives more valuable tips on how to become deliberately humble. In verse 8, he said, “Come near to God, and he will come near to you.” What does it mean to come near to God? It means seeking God from where we are now in whatever circumstance we may be in. 2 Chronicles 15:1-2 states, “The Spirit of God came on Azariah son of Obed. He went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Listen to me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.” God is not far away from us. He is always with us. Yet, he wants our attention. God never rebukes us when we come to him just as we are.

We can also come near to God through our sincere repentance. Read verses 8b-9. “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.” Again, Pastor James’ language is harsh. “You sinners… You double-minded!” But his point is that we should repent in our day-to-day life and bear the fruits of repentance. The words “grieve, mourn, and wail” sound negative and sad, but it underlines the importance of sincere repentance. Those who mourn and grieve for the right reasons will not remain in sadness. They will be comforted.

It reminds us of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, the Constitution of the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” How paradoxical truth it is! ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn!”*** Wow! We have to be deliberately humble always. That’s why James concludes this section by saying, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” Humbleness before God is the solid foundation of the Christian faith. James was saying, *“My dear brothers and sisters! Be humble, be humble, and be humble in all do!”*

***Second, Practical instructions on acting humble (11-17).*** In verses 11-17, Pastor James adds more advice to his audiences on what they should avoid the most. There are two things that James warns against.

***(#1) We Should Be Non-Judgmental (11-12).*** Look at verses 11-12. “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 the 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?” One of the most dangerous sins that most Christians commit is judging others, including other believers. I once read an interesting phrase on Facebook. It said, *“Real friends don’t judge each other. They judge others together.”* (Pic#5) But I don’t think it’s a healthy friendship. Instead, judging others is a grave sin before God. Why? It’s because by passing judgment on other Christian brothers and sisters, we are acting as if we are God. It does not mean that we should not lack discernment. Of course, we should distinguish right from wrong and truth from false. Yet, we should not judge others because if we are judgmental, we act as if we are God, crossing the boundary between God and us. Judgment belongs only to God.

Why are we so judgmental? It’s a sign of spiritual immaturity, not maturity. And it also reveals our pride, a lack of self-awareness, or spiritual blindness before God. Jesus said to people who were always judgmental of other people in Matthew 7:3 and 5, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eyes and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eyes.” We should discern everything, yet we should not be judgmental. We should be deliberately humble.

***(#2): We Should Not Be Self-Reliant (13-17).***  Read verses13-16. “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.”In these verses, Pastor James warns against the danger of self-reliance. As human beings, we need healthy and good self-confidence. A lack of self-confidence can cause unnecessary problems. Having good self-confidence is different from being self-reliant. There is boasting in self-reliance, ignoring the truth that God is sovereign overall. We should not boast about our ability, possession, experience, or knowledge. That’s the pride God dislikes. God opposes the proud and gives favor to the humble. It does not mean that we should make any solid plan. We should be flexible and ready to follow God’s guidance in all circumstances, even when God’s leading seems conflicting with our schedule. We should rely on God always.

Let me close the sermon. When we have conflicts among believers, it’s easy to blame one another. We tend to think that the problem will be resolved if the other party repents and is changed. Yes and No. According to today’s passage, it’s crucial to acknowledge that our interpersonal conflicts have roots in others and ourselves. However, it’s a humbling experience to admit that we are also wrong. A mature Christian would not act in pride but humility. Pride is the cause and root of all sins. It’s poisonous to our soul and our relationship with others. God opposes the proud and exalts the humble. Therefore, we must be deliberate in humbling ourselves before the Lord in all we do. We have to be open, honest, and ready to change ourselves. And the Lord will lift us up. And we will be delighted and experience God’s kingdom now and forever.