

## James 4:6-17 Grace & Humility

In the film Saving Private Ryan, Tom Hanks' character led eight men into battle to save just one. In a scene towards the end of the movie, as he lays dying in the field of battle, the platoon leader tells a young Private Ryan that he'd better live a life that makes it all worthwhile and breathes his last. In Many years later when Ryan returns to the gravesite of the one who saved him from certain oblivion, Ryan turns to his wife and says "Have I been a good man?" He'd lived his life under the constant pressure of not knowing if he'd adequately lived up to the expectation of others. Those who had searched for the lost man and saved him had left a terrible burden on his shoulders.

It's important when we read to the letter of James we remember from the Gospel accounts that Jesus did not say to his followers, "Earn this". In fact, Jesus said the opposite, uttering the words "Forgive them".

This is a vital distinction between the expectations of most others and the expectations of God. When we come to the commands of the Apostle to do this and do that- to live a good life- he is not saying "earn God's favour." His assumption is that people who faith in Christ not need to do that. It's not to repay God that we live a good life. If that's true, then what are some alternative motivations that God might have for calling Christians to be obedient to God's Word?

# the letter of james



James 4:6-17

- 6 *But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*
- 7 *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*
- 8 *Come near to God and he will come near to you. 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.*
- 10 *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*
- 11 *Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.*
- 12 *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?*
- 13 *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."*
- 14 *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.*
- 15 *Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*
- 16 *As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.*
- 17 *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

In Chapter 4, James acknowledges that life in the real world can be like a war; full of conflict and temptation. In verse 6 he makes it clear that God gives abundantly of what we need to live for him. In essence he says, if you're in the midst of conflict and temptation, "God gives more grace". But this does not mean the Spirit simply sweeps us along the road to maturity and peace without effort from us. Verses 7-10 spell out our responsibility; what we must do in response to God.



In verses 7-10 there is no less than 10 commands that tell us to **"Go hard."**

In this section let's look at just three of the hard disciplines for living humbly for God in our daily situations:

## In Groups

- Share a story about a time you were faced with a temptation to give up on some pursuit or responsibility? What was it that helped you to stay true? Alternatively, what might have helped you if you failed?
- What other teaching from the Bible do you know that might have something to say about being obedient to God when temptation would have you go the other way?
- When have you been most assured that God was present? What were you doing at the time; who were you with? How helpful was that knowledge?

## Concluding Words

Looking back at the problems in verses 1-4 reminds us that many Christians seem thoroughly unsatisfied with church and overcome by conflict themselves. If they were to look to James for advice, Would he say, "Here's 50 cents, call someone who cares". I don't think so. James was a well respected pastor of the church. However, neither would he say, "Oh, you poor things, here let me make it all better."

Rather, he would point to the things Christians should already know, and tell them to act on them and do them. Of course he would expect them to draw on all the grace that God so generously has to give. Perhaps I can be so bold as to summarize his commands here to Christians in times of conflict:

"Humble yourselves (that is, recognize that God is probably correct in his commands and we should do what we know), and God will lift you up".

iii) **Come Near** - Come near and God will draw near to you (vs. 8)- If “resisting the devil” means standing firm, then the next command tells us to be on the move...

Most Christians want to reverse this order. Many people say to me that they’d come to church more or read their Bible more, or offer for ministry more, or sacrifice more if only they could experience the presence of God more vividly. But the experience and wisdom of James tells us that the order of things is not that way.

Maybe you know of **Lauren Burns**. She’s the Gold Medal winning Australian in the Martial Arts discipline of Tai Kwon Do. Lauren is not a very big and frightening person to encounter. Her victory was not about power, size, and strength. Apparently, the difference between to fit and strong opponents is the ability to keep one’s center of balance. Being centred is everything, so as not to be knocked down.



The parallel for Christians is seen here in James 4. When we are deliberate about prayer (especially prayer with others), when we regularly attend church meetings, when we focus on the death of Christ in Holy Communion, when we subject ourselves to the wise teaching of the Scriptures and when we engage in sacrificial acts of service with others and for others- the experience often gives tangible proof of the presence of God. This is how we remain centred (verse 9 has commands that fall into that realm of “fellowship” activities: cleansed by repentance etc., and God will “lift us up”).

### 3 Commands:

Three of the key verbs in verses 7 and 8 give us our teaching tonight: **submit, resist, come near.**

i) **Submit**- What do you think of when you hear the command “Submit”?

**Robert Chesebrough** is not very well known to you but he’s a guy who truly believed in his product. He’s the guy who invented household petroleum jelly- **Vaseline**. It’s refined from the ooze that forms on the shafts of oil rigs. He so believed in the healing properties of Vaseline that became his own guinea pig. He burned himself with acid and flame; he cut and scratched himself so often and so deeply that he bore the scars of his tests the rest of his life. But he proved to others that his product worked. People had only to look at his wounds, now healed, to see the value of his work- and the extent of his belief. This is an illustration of the word submit in James 4. It means active allegiance.



Mike Slaughter, an **American preacher recalls a financial parallel** to the meaning of this word submit: A financial advisor in his congregation came to him one service and said "Mike, you have to take \$5,000 right now and invest it in Chrysler stock. It is not going to get any lower than \$3 a share. The government will not allow one of the major automobile manufacturers to go under. You have to do it right now. It will pay for your children's college education." Mike was, at the time, a young dad with two babies. He was driving an old 1966 Volkswagen, one with flames painted on it. He said to his parishioner "I don't even have one



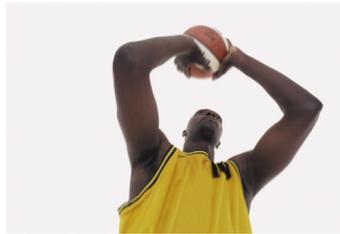
thousand dollars!" The guy said, "Borrow it! This isn't like going into debt, believe me it will pay for your children's education." Mike regrets painfully now not acting on what he knew. In the past 10 years he has paid \$76,000 for his daughter's education. That \$5,000 invested would have paid for it all. He was not courageous enough to take the risk though the information was good. In what sense, faith and action in the Christian life involves a sense of risk and reward?

In elite running competitions it is unlikely that an athlete like Hiram Elgarouge is able to claim a long distance running medal without having first submitted his body to hours of pain. The meaning of James 4:7 seems hard to sell at first. If it is personally painful, you are probably doing the right thing.

Is it emotionally painful? You are probably doing the right thing. Why do we quit growing in our relationships? Because when it begins to hurt, we pull back, and when we pull back we fail to be intimate. If it is spiritually painful, you are probably doing the right thing. Submit yourself to God. Act on what you believe. It can be hard!



Some young teenagers on the street once saw famous NBA star **Michael Jordan**, just before he retired, shooting hoops before a game. Clearly Jordan was then regarded as the world's best basketball player. The boys reportedly said to him, "Michael, I wish I could shoot like you." He looked over and said, "No you don't. If you did, you would be out here on the court 12 hours a day practicing."



As is consistent throughout the letter to James, **being a Christian is not merely being able to state what you believe, it is a matter of living what you believe.** If we look back to the first verses of chapter 4, it's as if James is saying, "You wonder why you don't have a life of peace and harmony with others in the church and in your neighbourhood? You've got to live harder, the way God wants life to be lived. You say you believe in God- **live his commands.**"

**In groups**, come up with some of the commands in the letter of James (and elsewhere in the New Testament) that would address the problems referred to in James 4:1-4.

**ii) Resist** - James tells us two hard commands which promise to deliver great results. In verses 7 & 8, he tells us to resist the devil and come near to the Lord.

If the word "submit" is too passive in English, the word "resist" is too active for what is suggested in the Greek in verse 7. Another way to illustrate submission in James is to think of "enlistment". The enlisted men in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* give us the idea. By signing up with the U.S. military the eight soldiers submitted to the cause of the army- thereby being obliged to fulfill the orders to find Private Ryan on the front line. This necessarily brought them into the line of fire.

James pictures the Christian who enters into God's active service as someone who will necessarily be exposed to temptation and sin at every turn. To be enlisted with God is to face difficult temptations. James isn't telling Christians to go on the attack and wipe out the devil in the world. When he says "Resist the evil one" he is calling us back to the original command- submit to God- stand your ground.

I like chocolate éclairs. I particularly like chocolate éclairs with coffee. I weaned myself off sugar in coffee just a couple of years ago. I like to have the chocolate éclair after I've drunk my coffee so that the sweet thing follows the bitter- it's called delayed gratification. But I fail most of the time to finish the coffee before the éclair- do you find that? It's so true in much more serious matters in my life. Resisting temptation, and retaining a humble and sacrificial attitude is hard work for me.

C.S. Lewis, in the preface to his book "The Screwtape Letters" mentions two equally unwelcome errors common to Christians where the devil is concerned - either they are too fascinated by him or too ignorant of him. In this passage, James' emphasis is on the provision God has made: submit to God well and the devil will have no ground for success.