

“The Valley of Vision”

James 4:1-10

August 20, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to the heart of James’ letter. To review once again, he is writing to oppose the error of easy-believism, the error that understands faith in Christ to be nothing more than mental assent. It’s the kind of faith sufficient to allow a person to *profess* salvation through Christ, but not enough actually to *possess* this salvation. It’s the kind of faith Chuck Colson describes in his book *Who Speaks for God* when he speaks of Mickey Cohen, a famous gangster in California in the middle part of the last century. Cohen excited interest among Christians when he once attended an evangelistic meeting and appeared interested. Many Christian leaders began visiting him as a result of this, urging him to open his heart to Jesus. At the urging of one of them, he finally did so. But as the months passed, it was evident he had not left his life of crime. When confronted about this, his response was that no one had told him that following Jesus would require him to give up his work as a gangster. After all, he said, there were Christian football players, Christian cowboys and Christian politicians—why not a Christian gangster?

James is opposing the kind of faith that leaves our sinful impulses unchallenged and unchanged. While a true Christian is never sinless, he or she will experience a radical redirection of the heart toward God. Today’s passage is something of a climax to the whole letter, describing the central mark of authentic Christianity. It is humility. I love the paradox in the title of the book of Puritan prayers that we use so often in our corporate worship. It’s called the *Valley of Vision*. Do you perceive the paradox in that title? It’s normally on the mountaintop that we see most clearly. But the Bible teaches the opposite, that it is only in the low place of humility that you come to see the beauty of God’s grace. That’s what James is talking about in this passage.

I. Descending to the Valley – v. 1-5

A careful reading of these first five verses reveals that James is being just a little rough with his readers. He’s taking the gloves off and hitting them pretty hard. For example, throughout the letter he has been addressing them as “my brothers.” But now he refers to them as **“You adulterous people”** (v. 4) and says that they are making themselves to be enemies of God. Why the harsh language? I sat at the hospital this week with someone whose son was having brain surgery to remove a tumor. There had been many tests leading up to the surgery, some of which were not particularly pleasant. But the time eventually comes when the surgeon has to take the necessary step of taking the saw to

the skull and opening it up in order to remove the tumor. I think James is doing something similar to that here. After much preparation, he gets down to business and goes for broke with those who have fallen victim to this cheap grace error. He does so by giving them the one thing they most need—humility. The Bible teaches that it is humble faith that saves. It is not that good people are in while bad people are out, but rather that humble people are in and proud people are out.

So James, though he appears to be treating his readers roughly, is actually seeking to help them by giving them this wonderful gift of humility. He goes about doing so by giving them the hard news that they have pretty much ruined all that is precious in life through their proud and self-centered sin. First, their pride has ruined relationships within the church. **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?”** (v. 1). He’s not talking about fights among unbelievers outside the church, but among those within the church, those who have been placed under the law of love by Jesus. Instead of loving one another, James describes their situation like this: **“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel”** (v. 2). I don’t know if he meant that there were literal murders within the church, but he at least meant that there was such hatred and animosity that people were murdering one another in their hearts.

What does James say is the origin of this hatred? **“Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”** The word translated “passions” is actually a word that means “pleasures.” This leads us to a second thing that our pride ruins—God-given desires. All pleasures and our good desires for them are gifts from God. But in our pride, we grasp for these pleasures and demand them apart from God’s giving of them. Like Adam and Eve eating of the forbidden fruit when God had given them all the other fruits of the garden, we run roughshod over God’s law and simply steal whatever we want. I like what C.S. Lewis says in *The Screwtape Letters* about this. The senior devil is teaching his Wormwood how to tempt and destroy his assigned believer:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden... An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula [a good description of addiction].

This helps answer a common question asked by people who are considering coming to Christ. What must a person give up when coming to Christ? The answer is a bit of a paradox: nothing and everything. We give up nothing of real value, only those pleasures which end up destroying us anyway. Mickey Cohen

would have to give up gangster activities to become a Christian, but in doing so he is giving up nothing of any real value. But we also give up everything when we come to Christ, in the sense that we give up all efforts to run our lives without God. It is a death to selfish agendas to have life work out as we want it to. The failure to do this is what gives rise to anger and to the destruction of our relationships.

So pride ruins our relationships and it ruins our desires. Next, James says it also ruins our prayers. When our hearts are full of the kind of pride that leads us to think that we know best how to run our lives, we are not likely to pray. That is because prayer is all about surrendering our lives to God, because we pray as Jesus taught us and say, **“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”** Proud people do sometimes pray, but James says that their prayer requests will not be granted. The reason is that their prayers are attempting to manipulate God to get him to give them what they want. There is no humility of surrender to God. This kind of humility recognizes that maybe we don't even know best what we need. But the humble person is confident that God knows, so even when we ask for things, we do so with a heart of submission to God.

Finally, and most tragically, pride ruins our relationship with God. Verse 5 is difficult to translate for reasons we don't have time to explore. I believe that it is talking about God's jealousy for the hearts of his people. He is like a husband who loves his wife and is jealous for her affections. How would you husbands respond to a man who started calling your wife and trying to pursue her love and steal it from you? I am confident that such efforts would be met with the strongest opposition, and rightly so. God's heart for his people is the same. He is a passionate lover who wants our hearts. But there is another suitor seeking our hearts. It is **“the world,”** by which James means the values of this sinful world. The world is viewed as a competing lover, wanting to capture our hearts to love it instead of God. To allow this to happen, James says, is to be guilty of adultery and to make God our enemy. Pride has thus ruined all that is precious.

II. The Vision in the Valley – v. 6

Verse 6 is the climax of the entire letter. **“But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”** God gives more grace. More than what? He gives more than is needed. Whatever has been ruined by our pride can be restored by God's grace. Has your pride made of you an angry person? There is more than enough grace from God to forgive you and to heal you of your anger. Has your pride led you to the spiritual adultery of loving the world instead of God? Have the things of the world captured your heart, making you God's enemy in the process? There is enough grace with God to forgive and heal you of that.

Who receives this abundant grace from God? It is only the humble, and all the humble. Our need, then, is to humbly confess our sin to God, to come to him with empty hands. As the hymnwriter says, we are naked and come to him for dress, helpless and look to him for grace, foul and to the fountain fly crying, “Wash me, Savior, or I die.” There was a very capable evangelist whom God used in a significant way in the British Isles. But he lost his interest in spiritual things and drifted into a life of sin for a number of months. Eventually, though, he came back to God, who forgave him and strengthened him. After a period of waiting, he felt pressed back into a public ministry for the Lord. So he went back to preaching, rejoicing in the forgiveness of God. But one night, just before the service began at which he was to preach, he was given an unsigned letter which described a shameful series of events he had been engaged in. His stomach churned as he read it. The letter said, “If you have the gall to preach tonight, I’ll stand and expose you.” He took that letter and went to his knees. A few minutes later, he was in the pulpit. He began his message by reading the letter, from start to finish. Then he said, “I want to make it clear that this letter is perfectly true. I’m ashamed of what I’ve read, and what I’ve done. I come tonight, not as one who is perfect, but as one who is forgiven.” Then he began to proclaim powerfully the forgiveness of Jesus. You see, it was through his honest and humble repentance that God exalted him.

III. Staying in the Valley – v. 7-10

Once we humble ourselves and receive the grace of God, we are not done with humility. We journey to the valley, but then need to continue walking there. That’s what these last four verses are about. To motivate us to this walk of humility, James closes with a promise that I would like to start with. **“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”** This promise is one half of what Jesus taught. **“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”** (Matt. 23:12). Both the choices and the results of those choices are stark. Exalt yourself or humble yourself. Put God in the position of humbling you or put him in the position of exalting you.

Let’s think some about God exalting us. What does that mean? A synonym for exalting is glory. There is something deep within each of us, put there by God himself, that longs for glory. I would like to apply this to the idea of white supremacy that has been in the news so much lately following the tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia a week ago. There has been a great deal of condemnation of white supremacy, and rightly so. But there has not been enough talk about the origin and cure for the hatred and anger accompanying white supremacy. The origin of it is this search for glory outside of Christ. The glory of the white supremacist is in his race instead of in Christ. God will humble that, along with all other attempts to find glory outside of Christ. But when we humble ourselves and trust God, he will exalt us. That exaltation

takes the form of being lifted up to fellowship with God himself. So that is the choice before us, and it is vitally important. So James describes what this walk of humility looks like in verses 7-9.

The walk of humility begins with submitting to God. We submit to God's rules found in the Bible and we submit to his control of our lives. We stop trying to change others to cooperate with our agenda for life, and instead begin to love them. In doing so, we find our anger shrinking away.

The next two commands should be taken together. We resist the devil and we draw near to God. The walk of humility requires us to fight the devil and his desires for us. What are his desires? They are the same as his desires for Jesus at the temptation. He wanted Jesus to take control of his own life rather than submit to God. Satan wanted Jesus to embrace power instead of weakness. We are called to fight that. Humility is not passivity, but fighting. And then we draw near to God, which speaks of coming to him in prayer and by faith. I believe we are called to do this multiple times throughout the day. When we are tempted to anger, it is a call to resist the devil's efforts to get us to take control of our lives and instead to draw near to God and trust him. Any challenge encountered through the day is the same.

Then we are told to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Someone might object and say, but isn't it the case that only God can do that? I put this in the same category of Jesus commanding Lazarus to come forth. Isn't it the case that only God can raise the dead? Of course, but he also commands Lazarus to get up and walk. So when we are told here to cleanse our hands and heart, we need to remember that the power for doing so belongs only to God. But in his command he gives the power. Is there an area of your life where some cleaning is needed? Perhaps it's a problem of dirty hands, which speaks of our outward behavior, something like sins of the tongue or your use of money. Maybe it's a sin of the heart, something like anger or sexual lust. Trust in God and take steps to address that sin.

He then closes this section on the walk in humility with a command to mourn and weep. He's not telling us to go about with a sad face all the time. Rather, he is urging us to mourn for our sins. It is the same thing Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"** (Matt. 5:4). It is a command to repent in sorrow.

CONCLUSION:

Then he closes with that wonderful promise we've already talked about. **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."** May God help us all to walk in humility!