



In Spirit and Truth

Kicking It Off

If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about letting go of control, what would it be?

Read

James 4:7-17

Summary

We always think about ourselves. We go to church and even then we're wondering what we're going to get out of it. The songs, the message, everything gets filtered through this lens of "what's in it for me?" We all know that's not the point, but we can't seem to help it. We're just wired that way. Real humility isn't about beating yourself up or thinking you're terrible. It's more like understanding your place in the bigger picture. Think of it like a military structure, there's a chain of command. God's at the top, and we need to fall in line under His authority. That's what submission really means, recognizing that His plans and His ways rank higher than ours.

The tricky part is that the devil actually wants us to follow our own will. That's his whole game plan. He's not trying to get us to follow some evil master plan, he's just whispering "do what you want, follow your heart, make it all about you." And honestly, that sounds pretty good, which is why so many people go for it. But when we actually draw close to God, something shifts. We start seeing other people the way He sees them. That judgy attitude we carry around starts to fade because we realize God loves them too. Sure, we still need to speak truth when someone's headed for disaster, but there's a massive difference between warning a friend out of love and judging them from some high horse.

At the end of the day, we don't even control how long we'll live. We're here for a brief moment, like a breath of air that vanishes. So the question becomes, do we want to spend that time building our own little kingdom, or do we want to submit to something way bigger than ourselves? Stop trying to be in charge of everything and just follow where God's leading.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. We often come to worship with expectations about what we'll receive rather than focusing on what we can give to God. What does it look like in your daily life when you shift from asking "what do I get out of this?" to simply submitting to God's will?
3. The devil's primary strategy is convincing us that following our own will is the path to fulfillment. Where in your life right now are you most tempted to believe that your plans and desires are better than God's?
4. When we draw near to God, we begin to see others through His eyes of love rather than through a lens of judgment. Think of someone you've been critical of recently, how might your perspective change if you truly believed God loves them as much as He loves you?
5. Speaking truth to someone headed toward disaster looks very different when done out of love versus judgment. Can you share about a time when someone corrected you in a way that felt loving, and what made it feel that way?
6. We have no control over how long we'll live, yet we often make plans as if we're guaranteed tomorrow. If you fully embraced the reality that your life is brief and uncertain, what would you do differently today?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"The devil's will is for your will to be done, your kingdom come. And this is where people eat it up and they're like, 'Man, the devil's not so bad of a guy because if I do what the devil is telling me to do, my life's going to be great.'"

"The church isn't a place where when we see someone with food in their teeth, we see someone with an observable sin. The part of the church is not to judge. It's just to be like, 'Hey, brother, you got a little food in your teeth.' But even as I say that, it's not that kind. There's a point where you draw that brother out to the side and be like, 'Hey man, you got some food in your teeth.'"

"I would rather be a servant in your kingdom. I would rather be a servant in your kingdom than be king and ruler over mine. And you see, this is humility."

"We don't improve our worship because we have better songs or we have better sermons or we have better announcements, we have better sanctuary. That's not how we improve it. How do we improve our service? We do it in spirit and in truth. And so, how do we do it in spirit and in truth? We submit everything unto God."

Sermon Notes

James 4:7-17

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

11 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. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

13 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Outline

1. HUMILITY BEFORE GOD (vv. 7-10)

- a. Understanding Submission
 - i. Military term: falling into rank under God's authority
 - ii. Submitting means His will, His way, His glory over ours
 - iii. Battle is about who gets the glory in our lives
- b. Resisting the Devil
 - i. Devil's strategy: convincing us our will should be done
 - ii. We must resist the voice that says "your kingdom come"
 - iii. Submission doesn't destroy personality but aligns our will with God's
- c. Drawing Near to God
 - i. God draws near when we draw near to Him (James 4:8)
 - ii. Parable of prodigal son: father runs to embrace repentant son
 - iii. Process involves cleansing hands, purifying hearts, mourning, weeping
- d. True Repentance and Humility
 - i. Recognizing our current situation needs the Father's redemption
 - ii. Coming to God not with life together but acknowledging we don't have it together
 - iii. Rather be servant in God's kingdom than ruler of our own
 - iv. We approach throne of grace with confidence through Christ's blood (Hebrews 4:16)
 - v. Old Testament priests risked death entering God's presence with sin
 - vi. Christ's blood gives us eternal access without fear

2. HUMILITY TOWARD OTHERS (vv. 11-12)

- a. God as Judge and Lawgiver
 - i. Only God holds rank of judge, not us (James 4:11-12)
 - ii. Question: who are you to judge your neighbor?
 - iii. Still about rank and proper alignment under God's authority
- b. Truth and Humility Together
 - i. Truth is important but humility is equally important
 - ii. Must be led by Spirit when sharing truth
 - iii. Fruit of Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control) is about character, not just content
 - iv. Correction for sake of relationship, not just correction for correction's sake
- c. Speaking Truth in Love
 - i. Difference between warning someone and judging them
 - ii. Warning: "don't drive off cliff, I love you, don't want you ruined"
 - iii. Judging: "you'll burn in hell, God will hate you, I'll never forgive you"
 - iv. Church should share truth but done in love, desiring relationship

- v. More you draw to God, more you realize He loves others too
- d. Building Up, Not Tearing Down
 - i. Ephesians 4:29: no corrupting talk, only what builds up and gives grace
 - ii. Corrupting talk includes gossip with no intention for edification
 - iii. Litmus test: is it for their edification and growth, or to make you look/feel good?
 - iv. Titus 3:1-2: submissive to authorities, speak evil of no one, be gentle
 - v. Written during persecution, yet instruction remains: speak no evil
 - vi. God will judge them, our judgment is unnecessary

3. HUMILITY ABOUT OURSELVES (vv. 13-17)

- a. Recognizing Our Mortality
 - i. We are mist that appears briefly then vanishes (James 4:14)
 - ii. No control over today or tomorrow
 - iii. Even living to 100 is just a speck in human history
 - iv. Limited to singular perspective, limited intelligence, limited lifespan
- b. The Root of Arrogance
 - i. Judgmental arrogance begins with lack of humility about ourselves
 - ii. Uncomfortable existential reality of uncertain lifespan
 - iii. Modern worship of technology as idol: searching for immortality
 - iv. We should lean into discomfort of mortality
- c. The Joy of Submission
 - i. Salvation not just ticket to live forever
 - ii. Living forever based on your kingdom would be hell/chaos
 - iii. Joy: when you submit to God, He gives purpose and marching orders
 - iv. Following God's orders leads to eternal life with Him
- d. Parable of Rich Fool (Luke 12)
 - i. Rich man planned to tear down barns, build bigger ones, relax and enjoy
 - ii. God called him fool: "this night your soul is required"
 - iii. Point: he lived for himself, never sought God's plan or will
 - iv. In ranking, man placed himself at top
 - v. God from infinity looks down and asks: "what have you done with your life?"

Notes

There's a peculiar phenomenon that happens when you watch a television show with well-developed characters. You start the series hating someone, convinced they're irredeemably terrible, only to find that by the end, they've become your favorite. This isn't because the character has fundamentally changed who they are at their core. Their personality remains largely the same. Rather, you've gained perspective. You've seen their full story unfold, understood their struggles, and witnessed their growth. The character who seemed purely evil at the beginning now appears complex, nuanced, and ultimately redeemed. This experience of shifting perspective offers a window into something much larger: the way we approach conflict in our own lives. When we encounter people who frustrate us, challenge us, or oppose us, we tend to see them as the problem that needs fixing. We view ourselves as the heroes who must defeat the villains. But what if the real conflict isn't between us and them at all? What if the most significant battle is happening inside us?

The question at the heart of human conflict is deceptively simple: why do we fight? Why, even among people who share the same faith and values, do quarrels and disagreements persist? The answer, uncomfortable as it may be, points inward rather than outward. Conflicts arise not primarily because of external circumstances or other people's failings, but because of a war raging within each of us. This internal war has a specific anatomy. At its core is the feeling that we're not getting what we want. In any given moment, when our expectations clash with reality, frustration builds. We feel control slipping through our fingers. We sense that we don't have it all together, that we lack a full grasp on things. This loss of control, this gap between what we desire and what we have, generates anger. And anger, as history and scripture remind us, is the seedbed of violence, both literal and metaphorical. When we don't get what we want, we fight for it. The mechanics are straightforward: we desire something and we don't have it, so we become willing to destroy to obtain it. We covet what we cannot get, so we quarrel and fight. Sometimes we don't even ask for what we need. Other times we ask, but our asking is twisted by selfish motivation, a desire to spend what we receive on our own pleasures rather than in alignment with any higher purpose. The root issue in every case is selfishness, that tendency to place our desires, our perspectives, and our wills at the center of the universe.

Here's where the deeper issue reveals itself. Many people have genuinely placed their faith in something larger than themselves. They've made sincere commitments, declared their allegiance to God, and mean it when they say they want to follow a higher path. Yet despite this genuine faith, they lack a crucial element: perspective. Perspective means understanding how the story ends. If you truly grasp that the ultimate outcome is

secure, that you'll spend eternity in perfect unity with God not because of your own righteousness but because of what was accomplished on the cross, then you can live with an extraordinary freedom. When you know the end of the story, when you're confident that God has already secured victory, you can face the chaos and conflict of the present moment without desperation or panic. The problem is that most of us don't live this way. We look around and see chaos, conflict, injustice, and brokenness. We conclude that this cannot possibly be part of God's plan, that if we don't personally fix these problems, no one will. Of course, intellectually we might acknowledge that God is capable of handling things, but our actions betray our real beliefs. We're frustrated because we're not seeing perfection. We're not seeing our desires come to fruition, our ideal world materialize before our eyes. Naturally, this creates a response: "This isn't how it should be. I'm angry. I'm frustrated because I want things a certain way." True perspective means knowing the end and recognizing that it's God who brings us there, not our own efforts. God is writing your story and the stories of everyone around you. So why are you angry at your neighbor when God is writing their story? God wants you to love them, yet often we choose hatred instead.

In life, we regularly encounter people who seem like villains. They look the part, act the part, and create problems. Our instinct is to identify them as bad guys we need to defeat, people we must fix or make right. But what if God has a different approach? What if God is saying, "I've already written this person's story. I know their path of redemption. I've known them since before they were born, I know them outside of time, and I know exactly how their story unfolds"? When we respond with "But I can fix them, I can defeat them," we're essentially saying we don't trust God's authorship. We think that if we rally enough strength, enough resources, enough popular support, we can fix evil and make everything right. But this attitude shifts the story from being God's to being ours. God's story is characterized by peace, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, faithfulness, and self-control. Often our response is, "Yes, God, I appreciate those qualities, but that's not how I want to deal with this particular conflict." This applies directly to our most intimate relationships. When you fight with someone you love, there's a spiritual dimension at play that goes beyond the surface disagreement. The real war isn't between you and them. There may be internal struggles happening in the other person, but those battles are between them and God, not your concern. Your battle is internal: you want to express your desires and make them the top priority. That's why fights happen. You want what you want, they want what they want, and these desires collide. The spiritual warfare in these moments isn't mystical or spooky. It's the voice that whispers, "You're so right. They're crazy, wrong, evil, selfish. They're looking out only for themselves and not thinking about anyone else." That voice wants you on the throne of

your own life. But what God wants is for you to step down from that throne, to surrender and submit to him.

The resolution to every conflict follows a consistent pattern: you surrender to God's will, and the conflict inherently improves. This works because you're aligning yourself with the relational perfection that exists within God himself. Within the Trinity, there's no conflict, no quarreling, no friction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They exist in perfect harmony because humility is part of God's very character. This solution sounds simple, and it is. But it's also incredibly difficult because we're selfish and we resist submission and surrender. This is where grace becomes essential. Being a person of faith isn't about making yourself more humble through sheer effort. It's not about attending more studies or gaining more knowledge to somehow earn humility. It's about laying down your life and saying, "Lord, take it all. It's all yours. None of this is mine. This is a sacrifice I'm making to you." Think about the tension in something as simple as dedicating a child to God. In the moment, parents genuinely mean it: "Yes, Lord, this child is yours. Do whatever you want with this child." But the moment they return home, the internal war begins: "But they're mine. They're my child. I have dreams for them. They're going to be successful and do amazing things and get married and give me grandchildren." The child is both God's and mine, yours but mine. We do this not just with children but with everything in our lives: our jobs, our families, our homes, our reputations. God responds to this divided loyalty with a jealousy that differs fundamentally from human jealousy. God isn't trying to control us. Rather, he's saying, "You're claiming to be mine, saying I can embrace you and love you and be with you. I want your attention, your life, you." Meanwhile, we approach God like children who want to be picked up and held, but after a brief moment of worship and praise, we squirm away saying, "Get away, I have places to be, things to do, money to make, a reputation to manage, friends to see." God's response is, "I'm jealous for you. I want you. And all you want is to have me when convenient, while I simply want you."

The reality is that you can't win this internal war through your own strength. You're going to lose that battle. The sooner you accept this, the better. But here's the crucial point: he already won, now and forever. This recognition is what makes worship meaningful. We acknowledge the torn nature of our hearts. We want to worship God, but we're selfish. We want to give him glory, but we're depraved. We dedicate our lives, yet still clutch them tightly as our own. You'll deal with this internal war for the rest of your earthly existence because your human nature constantly tries to make everything yours. But the key is maintaining your perspective on Jesus, keeping your eyes focused on the cross. Consider Peter walking on water. He didn't succeed because he understood swimming or the physics of water. He walked on water because he kept his eyes focused

on Jesus. This is how you solve conflicts in your life: you learn to surrender your will and keep focusing on Jesus. When arguments arise, even in your closest relationships, if you pause and genuinely ask, "Jesus, what do you think about this person? What's your opinion?" the answer is consistent: "I love them deeply. I care about them intensely." When you engage with that reality, suddenly the things you were fighting about seem insignificant. God's love for that person, and for you, dwarfs the immediate concerns. What matters is understanding that you're here by grace.

The application comes down to humility and submission. It's learning that success isn't about being right, being smart, or being vindicated. It's about knowing how the story ends. When you know the outcome is secure, when you understand that Jesus has already won, you can live differently. It's like knowing the score of a game before you watch it. The tension is different. You're not desperately worried because you know your team wins. That's how you're meant to live. Jesus won. The game is over. Your whole life, you already know you're victorious. This creates a confidence and freedom that allows you to submit and surrender to imperfect leaders, to broken governments, to flawed systems. Why shouldn't we fight? Because we've already won. So it's not about fighting; it's about submitting to God and his character. This becomes a witness to the world. While the world says, "We need to fight," we say, "We need to submit." When the world says, "We need to rally together," we say, "We need to surrender to Jesus." People will respond in one of two ways. Either they'll hate you and demand, "Why aren't you playing the same game I'm playing? Why aren't you worried about the things that worry me?" Or in those moments, you can honestly say, "I care about you. God loves you. I know you care deeply about these issues and opinions, and you think you're absolutely right. I'm not even here to prove you're wrong." Many followers of Christ need to learn this: it's not your job to always prove people wrong. Sometimes, and really all the time, your job is to love people. When they see you're not trying to prove them wrong but trying to introduce them to someone who has solved their problems, that's when real connection happens.

Seeing an angry Christian strikes me as deeply paradoxical. When someone who identifies as a follower of Christ displays true anger and frustration, it raises a fundamental question: do you actually believe he won? Do you genuinely believe he has the power to save? Do you truly believe he's the savior of the world? Because if you're consumed with anger about how things are going, frustrated with how bleak everything looks, then I have to wonder about the depth of your hope that he will return and make all things new. If you have the perspective that Jesus is the savior who will ultimately defeat all injustice and evil, then and only then can you live in the freedom of loving your neighbors and one another. You can love because you know God is the one who will bring justice, and you're called to love, not to be the dispenser of that justice. This perspective

becomes particularly challenging when applied to authority. Consider the early Christians living under Emperor Nero, who burned believers alive, fed them to lions, and tortured them for entertainment. Yet the message to those Christians was to honor the emperor, to submit to governing authorities. This seems impossible, even offensive. How could anyone suggest submitting to such obvious evil? The answer lies in perspective. When you're under worldly governance, it's easy to lose sight of the ending. You see the government above you and it makes you angry and frustrated. But the reason early Christians could honor even leaders like Nero wasn't because Nero was secretly good. Nero was genuinely terrible. They honored him because they knew who was truly in charge. They knew who wins the game. There's a witness in how we react to the world's chaos. The world is chaotic and quarrelsome, and that's exactly what we should expect. The world is broken and doesn't have a savior. But if we're a community that proclaims we have a savior, a king, a leader, then any earthly leader isn't really a threat. Why? Because we know who's on the throne, and it's not us, thank God. It's Christ. When someone is placed in authority over us, it doesn't change our eternal reality because our eternal king is on the throne. Peter lived under Nero for approximately eight years. His ministry was constantly attacked, his friends murdered. Yet he didn't call Christians to take up arms and fight. He could have easily rallied believers and said, "We're going to fight against Nero because he's evil we must defeat." But Peter didn't do that. Why? Because Peter had the perspective of knowing they had already won. They didn't need to defeat Nero because the victory was already secured.

This perspective of already having won changes everything about daily life. It means viewing your work, your relationships, your possessions, and your time through the lens of surrender. When you catch yourself in the internal conflict, the "it's yours but it's mine" tug of war, the answer isn't to try harder to win that battle yourself. The answer is to recognize that you can't win it, but he already did. This doesn't mean becoming passive or being a doormat. Surrendering to God's will is an active pursuit. You follow his words, his ways, his character. But you do so without selfishness or self-seeking. You act with patience, gentleness, and kindness. The character of God becomes your calling. Meanwhile, the opposing voice wants you to focus on being right, being correct, making sure your way prevails and your needs are met. There's a beauty in surrendering to the Lord in faith. When you say, "I surrender to you," you're also saying, "You will take care of my needs. You will fight my battles. You will defeat my enemies." This echoes throughout the ancient stories that shaped early believers' understanding. How do you win a battle? Trust in the Lord. It's remarkably simple. When you read those old accounts of victories and defeats, the pattern is clear: trust and surrender led to victory, while self-reliance led to failure. You could win every conflict in your life, and that's not hyperbole. The method

is straightforward: trust in the Lord and give him authority over your life. The complication is that when you give him control, it may initially look like you're losing. This is actually what makes the story beautiful, what allows God to demonstrate his power. The ultimate example is Jesus himself, whose story was one of the Son of God surrendering to the Father's will. By worldly standards, his earthly life ended in complete failure. He was defeated by his enemies, hung on a cross, murdered. His enemies looked at him and said, "Look at what submission to the Father gets you. It gets you killed." That's exactly what the voice of opposition wants you to believe: don't surrender to God's will or you'll lose, you'll be destroyed. But Jesus demonstrated something essential. When you surrender to God and let him write your story, he performs miracles. He does miraculous things because that's his nature. In the modern Western world, we often don't see miracles because we maintain control over everything. There's something powerful about entrusting God with your entire life, not just portions of it, because then God does what he does best: miracles.

The internal war ultimately comes down to a choice. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot be fully devoted to both your own way and God's way. The discomfort many feel with this message stems from our desire to have it both ways. We want to submit to God's word and will while still figuring out how to get our way, how to work our preferences into the equation, how to gradually ease into full submission. But the call is starker than that. Choose a side. It's either your way or God's way. This isn't about gradually working toward submission. It's about recognizing that the equation is simple: if you surrender to God, God will make you victorious. That victory might look different from worldly success. It might look terrible by certain standards. But he will do remarkable things in your life. When you surrender your will to God, he raises you up, and you witness his power and awesomeness firsthand. The alternative is trying to be friends with both God and the world, claiming full allegiance to the Lord while in the background constantly calculating how to get more money, more influence, more of your own way and opinions validated. This divided allegiance, this attempt to love both God's ways and the world's ways (which essentially means loving yourself and your desires), is what creates the unbearable tension. The remedy isn't complicated, but it requires something that goes against every instinct of self-preservation and self-promotion. It requires humility. Not a humility you manufacture through effort, but a humility that comes from laying everything down and recognizing that none of it was yours to begin with. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourself under God's mighty hand, and at the proper time, he will lift you up.

This perspective transforms how you view everything. It changes how you interact with neighbors who have different beliefs or lifestyles. Rather than approaching them

with an agenda to correct or condemn, you approach with genuine care. Your calling isn't to condemn but to submit to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the one who brings conviction. When you're led by the Spirit, you speak truth in love. You speak truth in a way that communicates care and concern, where your words come from a desire for their wellbeing, not from what you've accomplished but from what God has done. Imagine a community where people with different values, different ethical frameworks, different backgrounds all gather together. Not because everyone agrees on everything, but because everyone is together submitting to the Lord. When we submit to the Lord, he leads us toward his will, his truth, his way. The joy comes in being part of that process. We continue loving each other because we recognize we're all works in progress, all engaged in this dynamic of loving God while still wanting our own way. The witness to the world isn't found in angry Christians fighting to make things right. The witness comes when people see believers who aren't consumed with worry, who don't share the world's panic, who respond to chaos with peace. When they ask why you're not worried about the same things they worry about, you can answer honestly: "I care about you. I care about you deeply. God loves you. I'm not here to prove you're wrong. I'm here to love you and introduce you to the one who can genuinely address your concerns." The story has already been written. The ending is secure. The battle has been won. Living in light of that reality means you can lay down your weapons, release your need to control outcomes, and trust that the one on the throne knows exactly what he's doing. The conflicts that seem so urgent, so critical, so worthy of your anger and frustration, they all pale when viewed against the backdrop of eternity and the certainty of God's ultimate victory. Your life, with all its tensions and struggles and internal wars, is held securely in hands far more capable than your own. The invitation is simply to believe that, to live as though it's true, and to watch what happens when you finally stop fighting and start surrendering.

Blog

James continues to confront us with the harsh truth. We're really good at dividing our loyalties. We want God's blessing, but we also want the world's approval. We desire spiritual depth, but we chase material success. We claim to follow Jesus, yet we live as if we're the ones in control. This double-mindedness, as James calls it, isn't a minor character flaw. It's spiritual adultery. The opening verses of James 4 paint a picture of believers who've become friends with the world and enemies of God. In verses 7 through 17, he offers the path back to authentic faith. He shows us what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

The passage begins with a word that carries military weight. "Submit yourselves therefore to God." The Greek word here, *hypotagete*, was used to describe soldiers voluntarily arranging themselves under the authority of their commanding officer. This isn't coerced obedience but closer to a willing surrender. We choose to place ourselves under God's command because we recognize His rightful authority over our lives. Using the word "therefore," James is building on what he's just said about God giving grace to the humble. Submission flows from grace. We don't submit to earn God's favor. We submit because God has already shown us favor through Christ. This should impact the way that we approach spiritual disciplines and obedience.

The call to submit comes paired with another command. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We can't resist the enemy in our own strength. That's the crucial connection. Submission to God precedes effective resistance against Satan. When we're under God's authority, we have access to His power. The devil must flee when confronted by someone who's aligned with God. This isn't complicated spiritual warfare theology. It's practical reality. The Christian life involves real spiritual opposition. But we're not left to fight alone or in our own power. We stand firm in God's authority, and the enemy has to retreat. He has no choice in the matter. Then James gives us this beautiful promise. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." This is the language of the temple, of priests approaching the presence of the Lord. But under the new covenant, all believers have access to God's presence through Christ. When we move toward God, He moves toward us. This is relationship, not ritual. The question is whether we're actually drawing near. Are we spending time in prayer? Are we reading Scripture? Are we worshiping? Or are we treating God like a cosmic vending machine, approaching Him only when we need something? Drawing near means cultivating an ongoing relationship with the Lord. It means making space in our lives for Him.

But drawing near requires honesty about our condition. James doesn't mince words. "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." He's addressing the external and the internal. Our actions need to change. Our motives

need to change. We can't clean ourselves, but we must come to God for cleansing. That word "double-minded" appears only in James. It literally means "two-souled" or "two-minded." It describes someone trying to serve two masters, attempting to have God and the world simultaneously. Jesus said this is impossible. You'll love one and hate the other. You'll be devoted to one and despise the other. Double-mindedness produces instability and spiritual disaster. The call to repentance intensifies. "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." This sounds harsh to modern ears. We live in a culture that avoids guilt at all costs. We're told that any negative emotion about our sin is unhealthy. But Scripture presents a different picture.

Godly sorrow over sin is the path to genuine joy. When we truly see our sin for what it is, when we understand how it grieves God and damages our souls, appropriate grief follows. This isn't morbid introspection or self-hatred. It's honest assessment. It's taking sin seriously because God takes it seriously. The world offers a different kind of laughter and joy. It's the celebration of rebellion, the pride of self-sufficiency, the arrogance of thinking we know better than God. That laughter needs to stop. That false joy needs to be exposed for what it is. Only then can we experience the deep, lasting joy that comes from right relationship with God.

James concludes this section with a promise. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." This is the great reversal of God's kingdom. Down is the way up. Death leads to life. Losing yourself means finding yourself. It's counter to everything the world teaches, but it's the consistent message of Scripture. God lifts up those who humble themselves. We see this pattern throughout the Bible. Joseph went from prison to palace. David went from shepherd to king. Mary went from obscure virgin to mother of the Messiah. And ultimately, we see it in Jesus. He humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place. The passage shifts focus from our relationship with God to our relationships with others. "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." James has already addressed the destructive power of the tongue in chapter three. Here he applies it specifically to how we talk about fellow believers.

The Greek word for "speak evil" carries the idea of slander and defamation. This is malicious gossip. It's tearing others down with our words. And James says it's incompatible with being part of God's family. Notice he calls them "brothers." He's emphasizing the family relationship that should shape how we speak about one another. We're remarkably creative at justifying our gossip. We call it "venting." We frame it as "sharing concerns." We disguise it as "prayer requests." But if we're honest, much of what

we say about others is simply slander dressed up in Christian vocabulary. We need to guard our speech because our words have power to build up or tear down.

When we judge and slander our brother, we're actually speaking against God's law and setting ourselves above it. The law he has in mind is what he earlier called the "royal law" of love. When we slander others, we're essentially saying that the command to love our neighbor doesn't apply to us. We can violate it with impunity because we've appointed ourselves as judges. There's one lawgiver and judge. Only God has the authority to make laws and to judge whether people have kept them. When we take it upon ourselves to judge and condemn others, we're usurping God's role. We're saying we're qualified to sit on the throne and pass final judgment.

James asks the obvious question. "But who are you to judge your neighbor?" The implied answer is nobody. You're not qualified. You don't have all the information. You can't see the heart. You don't know what factors have shaped this person's life and choices. And even if you could see everything, you're not the judge. This doesn't mean we abandon all discernment. Scripture calls us to evaluate teaching, to exercise church discipline, to help fellow believers recognize sin in their lives. But there's a massive difference between humble, loving correction and self-righteous judgment. One flows from genuine concern for another's spiritual welfare. The other flows from pride and the desire to feel superior.

The test is simple. When you talk about someone else, are you building them up or tearing them down? Are you expressing genuine concern or rehearsing their faults? Are you hoping for their repentance and restoration, or are you enjoying their failure? Your answer reveals whether you're exercising biblical discernment or engaging in sinful judgment.

James then turns to a third area where humility must shape our lives. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.'" He's addressing the merchant class of his day. These were traveling traders who moved from city to city, buying and selling goods. They made detailed plans with complete confidence in their ability to execute them.

The problem isn't the planning itself. Planning is wise. God gave us minds to think ahead, to prepare, to make provision for the future. The problem is planning without reference to God. These merchants speak as if they're in complete control. They determine where they'll go, how long they'll stay, what they'll do, and what profit they'll make. God doesn't factor into the equation.

James exposes the foolishness of this approach with a simple question. "You do not know what tomorrow will bring." We don't control the future. We can't guarantee outcomes. We don't even know if we'll be alive tomorrow. The COVID pandemic reminded

us of this reality in dramatic fashion. Millions of carefully made plans were canceled in an instant. We were confronted with our lack of control. Then James asks an even more penetrating question. "What is your life?" His answer is sobering. "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." Your life is vapor. It's here for a moment and then it's gone. This isn't meant to be depressing. It's meant to be clarifying. When you understand how brief your time on earth is, it changes your priorities.

The wise response is to plan with humility. "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" This isn't a magical formula. You don't have to say these exact words every time you make a plan. But your heart needs to have this posture. You need to acknowledge that God is sovereign over your future. You need to hold your plans with open hands.

This affects everything. Your career plans. Your retirement strategy. Your children's education. Your investment portfolio. All of it needs to be submitted to God's will. You can make wise plans. You should make wise plans. But you must do so recognizing that God may have different plans. And when He does, you need to be willing to change course. James calls the alternative what it is. "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." Not foolish. Not misguided. Evil. When we plan as if we're in control, when we boast about what we're going to accomplish, when we live as if God's will is irrelevant to our decision making, we're engaging in evil. That's strong language, but it's biblical language.

The passage concludes with a verse that applies to everything James has just said. "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This is the sin of omission. It's not just doing wrong things. It's failing to do right things. And the "right thing" James has in mind includes everything in this passage.

You've heard the call to submit to God. Failure to submit is sin. You've heard the command not to slander and judge others. Continuing to tear others down with your words is sin. You've heard the instruction to plan with humility, acknowledging God's sovereignty. Arrogant planning is sin. Knowledge increases responsibility.

This is where the rubber meets the road. Most of us know far more than we obey. We've heard countless sermons. We've read numerous books. We've studied Scripture. But how much of that knowledge has translated into action? How much of what we know has actually changed how we live?

The gap between knowing and doing is the measure of our spiritual integrity. And James says that when we know what's right but fail to do it, we're sinning. We can't claim ignorance. We can't plead that we didn't understand. We know what God requires. The question is whether we'll obey.

This passage calls us to authentic faith, to worshiping God in spirit and in truth. It demands that we examine our lives for areas of double-mindedness, for places where we're trying to serve two masters. It exposes our tendency to judge others while excusing ourselves. It challenges our illusion of control over our futures.

But it also offers hope. God gives grace to the humble. When we submit to Him, when we draw near to Him, He draws near to us. When we humble ourselves before Him, He promises to exalt us. The path to genuine spiritual life runs through humility, through acknowledging our desperate need for God and our complete dependence on His grace.

The question each of us must answer is simple. Will we continue in double-mindedness, or will we pursue wholehearted devotion to God? Will we keep judging others, or will we extend the grace we've received? Will we cling to our carefully constructed plans, or will we hold them with open hands, submitting to God's will?

James isn't offering suggestions. He's issuing commands. Submit to God. Draw near to Him. Stop slandering your brothers and sisters. Plan with humility. And above all, close the gap between what you know and what you do. Your knowledge of these truths means you're now accountable for living them out. The choice to obey is yours, but the consequences of disobedience are real.

This is the call to authentic Christian living. It's not easy. It requires constant vigilance against the pull of the world and the pride of our own hearts. But it's the only path to the life God intends for us. It's the way of true worship, of giving God what He deserves, of living as creatures who recognize their Creator's rightful claim on every aspect of their existence. May we have the courage to walk this path, the humility to acknowledge our need, and the faith to trust that God's way is always best.