Legacy Church

James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Ten

The Path of Repentance

Responding Rightly When the Truth Hurts

James 4:7–11

Good evening! We are in our study of the book of James, a series we are calling Truth That Hurts, and if you were with us last week, that title crescendoed right before our eyes. James got more clear, more intense, and more offensive in his language than at any other point in his letter. The whole book has been exposing the gap between what we believe and how we actually live. For 77 verses he has been dealing with the fact that his audience is double-minded and half-hearted rather than single-minded and wholehearted.

And remember who he is talking to. These are not elementary Christians. These are not people we would call lukewarm or nominal. This is the group that refused to recant, that refused to deny Jesus when it cost them everything. They fled their homes, their families, and their friends, paying a price many zealous Christians today would struggle to pay. Yet these battle-tested believers had lost so much ground in their own souls that it warranted an intervention from the very brother of Jesus. He rebuked them for blaming God for their temptation, for hearing the Word but not doing it, for failing to control their tongues and the heart those words came from. He rebuked them for favoring the rich and powerful while neglecting the poor, for wanting the platform to teach without the responsibility, for bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, for coveting, fighting, and praying with selfish motives.

It all culminated last week in the first six verses of chapter 4, where James got to the hardest truth of all. All that compromise, all the sin stirred up by double-mindedness and half-hearted devotion, had turned them into adulterers. They had become friends of the world and therefore enemies of God. They had broken their vow and their covenant. Outwardly they would never deny Jesus. Inwardly they were all too happy to.

You see, they were tricked. They were blinded by the ways they were faithful and unwilling to see the ways they were not. And if we are going to run our race well, we need both kinds of eyes. If you think you are the only one who hears from the Lord, the most faithful person in the room, you need a reality check and eyes to see where you have been unfaithful. But if all you ever see is how much you fail and how horrible you are, you need eyes to see where you have actually been faithful.

So James hits them with the truth: they are not who they think they are, and their condition is worse than they think it is. He uses negative, painful, even divisive language to communicate how severe the situation is. But understand this. James is not a prophet thundering from heaven. He is a pastor contending for the souls of his people. This isn't the Old Testament. He isn't pulling a Jeremiah. He is pulling a Jesus. And right in the middle of their false reality shattering, right as they are confronted with the truth that they have been unfaithful to the God they love, James gives them my favorite line in the whole book.

> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
>
> James 4:6, ESV

He. Gives. More. Grace. The point is simple. You can humble yourself and accept the truth, or you can bow up with pride and deny it. If you refuse to believe you have done anything wrong, if you file this rebuke away under the category of an accuser of the brethren, if you meet truth with pride, God Himself will oppose you. But for those who will take the rebuke and humble themselves, there is grace. So tonight we are asking how to respond rightly to the truth that has been confronting us for nine weeks. What does it look like to humble ourselves and repent? What would James have us do now? Open your Bibles to James 4.

i.

Submit Yourselves to God

> Submit yourselves therefore to God.
>
> James 4:7a, ESV

The first step in rightly responding to truth is this: submit yourselves therefore to God. What does that mean? It means you have to give up lordship. James's audience ended up where they were because somehow, somewhere, they had handed lordship over to something or someone else. They weren't submitted to God. They were submitted to themselves: their desires, their dreams, their preferences.

And this transfer of lordship is subtle. It rarely announces itself, and it rarely sets off any alarm bells in your soul. It's not like you wake up one morning and make a conscious decision to say, "You know what, Jesus, I'm going to take the reins for a while. I'm the captain now." No, it comes slow and subtle. It starts by confusing your desires with the Lord's, assuming He wants what you want, or assuming you want what He wants.

They were in the mess they were in because Jesus hadn't been getting the final word. So the answer is that He gets the final word. Our job as Christians is to yield, to stop fighting and embrace His lordship. It doesn't

matter how uncomfortable or hard it is. Either you agree with His lordship and submit to it, or you don't and you rebel against it. If you are humbling yourself and wanting to repent, this is step one.

ii.

Resist the Devil

> Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
>
> James 4:7b, ESV

If you are going to submit to God, it is going to require you to resist the devil. These two commands are written together for a reason. The original hearers had been living it backwards. They resisted God, but they submitted to the devil, and James is untangling that mess. You've been resisting the wrong person. Stop resisting God, and start resisting the devil.

The Greek word for resist here is *antistēte* (aun-te-stay), and it carries a different weight than our English word. In English, resist sounds defensive, like bracing yourself against a blow. But *antistēte* is offensive. It means to take a stand against, to oppose. This reads like a command, not a principle. You must oppose the devil. You must draw a line in the sand and say, no more. It's not just gritting your teeth and refusing to give in during a moment of temptation, though that is certainly valid. It's returning to the guttural conviction that I will stand in opposition to the devil.

And this one comes with a promise: he will flee. You draw the line, and he will flee from you. Nobody talks about this when we talk about spiritual warfare. It's always fast, pray, give, and worship. Nobody is preaching, "You want breakthrough? Draw a line in the sand and refuse to do things the devil's way." Nobody is singing, "This is how I fight my battles: I submit to God, I live in truth, and I oppose the devil."

Before You Turn the Page

Who have you been submitting to? It could be you and your own will. It could be another person and theirs. Be honest about who has been getting the final word, because it hasn't always been Jesus.

And have you drawn the line in the sand? Have you formed the conviction that you are going to oppose the devil, not just survive him? Do you know the Word well enough to even tell the difference between what is the devil and what is the Lord?

iii.

Draw Near, Cleanse, and Purify

> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.
>
> James 4:8, ESV

Resist, and the devil runs away. Draw near, and God runs toward you. We submit to God, saying You get to be Lord. We resist the devil, saying no more. And now we draw near to God, cleanse our hands, and purify our hearts. These three belong together for a reason: they are priestly language. This is temple language, so let's take them one at a time.

Draw near is clear as day in the Old Testament. It is the language for approaching the presence of God. Which tells me this: in the middle of their shame and remorse over having failed miserably, James still wanted them to approach God. He didn't want them pulling an Adam and hiding. He wanted their response to be drawing closer, and he promises that God will come close to meet them. So if you are trying to respond rightly and humbly to your sin being exposed and called out, the answer is to draw near to God. You may say, I can't. I feel too dirty, too jacked up, too guilty. James would say, yes, but He gives more grace. It's the same language as Hebrews 4, that we would draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Drawing near looks like coming to Him in prayer, worship, and communion, and living with eyes locked on Him.

But as we draw near, there is something for us to do, just as there was something for the priests to do as they drew near to God in the temple. Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. James seems to be pulling straight from Psalm 24.

> 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.
>
> Psalm 24:3–4, ESV

When James says cleanse your hands, he means stop sinning. Stop actually doing the thing. But cleansing your hands is not merely stopping; it's making restitution. James just spent four chapters outlining how they were sinning against each other, and you can't just repent before the Lord, feel bad, and move on. Biblical repentance produces something concrete. It goes back and makes right what it can with those it has wronged. If you steal, it's not just feeling bad about it and asking for forgiveness; it's returning what you stole. If you've sinned against someone, it's doing what you can to restore what was lost or broken.

This, by the way, is where we are most apt to go astray. Repentance isn't just admitting you were wrong and feeling bad about it. That's confession. A lot of Christians think they've repented when they've merely confessed. Biblical repentance brings together confession, restitution, and reorientation. I own what I did. I make right what I can. And I turn from the heart that produced it and back toward God.

We often think we've repented,
but really we've just confessed.

Cleansing your hands is dealing with the fruit of your sin. Purifying your heart is dealing with the root of it. When James says purify your hearts, he is speaking to motives and desires, the very thing that makes us double-minded. It's getting to the bottom of it. Why did I do that? What is in me that caused it? How do I keep from letting it happen again?

iv.

Mourn and Weep

> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.
>
> James 4:9, ESV

James has shown us how to respond in humility and repentance. Now he tells us what it should look like. When we see ourselves honestly for what we are, when we realize we have been unfaithful to the One who is faithful, when the magnitude of our sin finally lands, this is the correct response: be wretched and mourn and weep.

This is the proper emotional response when a believer is confronted with the harsh truth that they have been living in deep delusion. It means to feel your wretchedness and misery, to grieve and to cry. You have spent a lot of time laughing in your compromise, and now it's time to stop.

If I were to put this verse in today's language, I'd say it like this. It's time to feel the weight of your sin. It's time to look at the fruit of your sin in its ugly fullness, and you must not minimize it. You cannot justify it, soften it, or give yourself the benefit of the doubt. This isn't the time for that. Feel the intensity of your sin, and sit in it for a bit. You can't stay there forever. But you should for a moment.

v.

Humble Yourselves

> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.
>
> James 4:10–11, ESV

You need to trust that if you humble yourself now, God will exalt you in the future. If you respond rightly to this moment, a day is coming when God will look you in the eye and exalt you before many. And that day is worth the pain of today.

The Path of Repentance

Submit › Resist › Draw Near › Cleanse › Purify › Mourn › Humble

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Then James closes the section with this: do not speak evil against one another, brothers. He started this passage with everyone fighting out of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, so in one sense he is circling back. But I don't think this is simply a repeat. In this moment of mourning and weeping, of drawing near, cleansing your hands, and purifying your heart, do not speak evil against one another. In other words, don't blame anyone else for your sin.

Your sin is yours alone.
Your sin is your fault.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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