



Catalog No. 1059

James 4:7-12

Tenth Message

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January 5, 1997

THE HARD WORK OF HUMILITY

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

Dave Karnes and I went to the same high school and we were fraternity brothers in college. Dave was a great swimmer; he went to college on a scholarship. He became fraternity president and was deeply involved in student government. He was good-looking and very popular. After college, he went on to law school. He did quite well, working for a big law office in Omaha. Later, he was appointed to a White House Fellowship. His wife worked for Barbara Bush when George Bush was Vice President. In 1988, when a senator from Nebraska died, Dave was appointed to the United States Senate. At 38, he became the youngest member of the Senate. Over the years, my mother would send me newspaper clippings that kept me abreast of the career of Dave Karnes.

Subconsciously, I was always comparing myself and my career path with Dave Karnes. After graduating from college, I moved here to the Bay Area and took a job as an engineer. I worked for a couple of years, but then I too wanted to go back to college and study law. I had grown discontent with my job. I was looking for a position that would give me more status, something that might make me look more like Dave Karnes. I hid my selfish desires by saying things like, "I want to be a Christian lawyer." There is nothing wrong with wanting to become a lawyer; what was wrong was my motive. Shortly after I began law school, however, I began to see that what I really wanted was to exalt myself, acquire a title and stake my claim in the world. I was miserable. I quit school and, somewhat chagrined, began working again as an engineer. The experience showed me how prideful I was and how painful it is to be humbled.

Humility is a wonderful quality. We are drawn to people who are humble. We say of someone who demonstrates humility, "I like him. He is a humble person." No one feels drawn to prideful and arrogant people. When we meet them, we say things like, "I can't stand that guy. He is arrogant and pompous." Or we say, "She is so filled with herself."

Humility is a wonderful quality. But it is a quality that one does not come by easily or quickly. Most people tend to try and exalt themselves. Ironically, when they do this they become like the people they are not attracted to. If we are convinced that we are humble, then we probably are not. On this point, C. S. Lewis wrote:

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

Pride is the topic under discussion in our study this morning in chapter 4 of the New Testament book of James. Up to this point in his letter, James has had a lot to say about trials and suffering. According to the apostle, trials are events and circumstances that we encounter which produce suffering and hardship. Strictly speaking, trials are not the result of our sin, rather they are part of the maturing and perfecting process that God orchestrates for our lives. Trials

produce pressure, and we are tempted to sin in response, but this letter instructs us how to respond wisely to such pressures.

In our last study, we saw that anger is one of the ways we respond when we come under the pressure of trials. Suffering unmasks the deep needs of our hearts, and we try to satisfy those needs through acquiring possessions, by placing expectations on people around us, and by trying to make life go according to our agenda. We try to get the world to love us, and when we fail, we become angry, jealous and less dependent on God.

Our angry responses reveal the deeper issue of pride. We forget that "friendship with the world is hostility towards God," because God opposes the proud. Our efforts to get what we think we want are blocked by God. He is ready to give us life and joy and peace, but in order to have these things we must become humble. As James will say, "God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble." Humility, then, is the solution to the anger we sometimes feel because of the pride that lies beneath the surface.

Let's look now at humility from James' perspective, beginning in chapter 4, verse 7:

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:7-10 NASB)

James is commanding the action required based upon what he has said previously: "Therefore, since God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble, then submit, resist, draw near," and so on. I like the way Eugene Peterson puts this in his book, *The Message*:

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

We don't understand humility, really. Being humble doesn't mean you have to be a doormat, that you can never win at anything or that people are free to take advantage of you. Being humble does not mean that you can't have opinions. It doesn't mean that you have to look like a bum. It doesn't mean that you can't aspire to be a lawyer.

The word "humble" means "to make low." Humility is the opposite of pride, which seeks to exalt itself by making comparisons with others. The essence of pride is seeking to put yourself above others and regarding yourself as superior. Humility, in contrast, eliminates comparisons and competition, because your identity and your feelings about yourself are not determined by such things as how you

look, how much money you have, what kind of job you hold, or how difficult your circumstances are in comparison to others.

This is the context of our study. In the midst of the trials which these brethren were suffering, pride was causing them to compare themselves with the rich and beautiful; their wanting to make friends with the world was causing tension among them.

The main thrust of these verses is summed up in verse 10: "humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord." All the other commands given describe what it means to be humble before God. These eight or so commands are gathered up around two basic ideas: one has to do with how we view God; the other with how we view ourselves.

The first three commands, submit, resist, draw near, deal with our relationship with God and whether or not he is in control of our lives. When we are proud and arrogant, we imagine that we ourselves are in control and that the results are up to us. We are unwilling to submit our lives to God, let alone to people. But if that is how we feel, we are deceiving ourselves. We were created to worship and to serve. If we do not worship God, then we will worship and serve everything that the devil places in our path. If we do not give God control of our lives, then we will abdicate that position to the devil, either directly or indirectly.

Humility demands that we are aware of this truth and that we stop trying to run our own lives. Humility involves giving God control. We must submit to him, sell out completely to him, and give him the right to do with us as he wills, not as we will. Becoming humble, therefore, involves a choice. We have to decide whose camp we are in. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. We can't straddle the fence and procrastinate. We must pick whom we will align ourselves with, who will receive our affections.

There are two aspects to this choice: resisting the devil, and drawing near to God, saying no and saying yes. First, humility involves resisting the devil and saying no to the pleasures that entice us, holding out the hope of satisfaction and fulfillment. This is hard work. On all sides we hear the world saying to us: "Touch me, love me, feel me. If you taste me, all the pain of your trials will be relieved. If you follow me, you will be exalted and lifted up." We must see that if we do not stand against evil, then evil will overrun us. We will be unable to withstand the subtle temptations and deceptive maneuvers of the devil, especially when we are under the pressure of a trial. If we are truly humble, we will not try to short-circuit what God is doing in our lives by reaching out for counterfeit promises. We will endure, trust, and wait for God.

James offers a wonderful promise here: If we resist the devil, the devil will flee from us. The opposite is true too, of course. If we do not resist him, he will not depart from us. But when we are willing to say no, then the devil will learn that we have chosen to let God have control of our lives. All too often our problem with sin and evil is that we haven't really decided to say an emphatic no to temptation. Instead, we say things like, "I wish the devil would leave me alone." This is why we struggle, because we haven't decided ahead of time to truly resist.

The second aspect of this choice is that we must draw near to God. This is the saying yes part. The trials of life can devastate us and drain us of all our resources. When that happens, our tendency at times is to blame God for our woes and seek our own solutions. But James commands us to draw near to God, to believe that he is in control no matter how hopeless things appear. At such times we must cling to God and place all our hopes in him. The kingdom of

God is drawing near to us, therefore we need to draw near to God. This promise is very real to James. If we give God control in the midst of our circumstances, he will keep us safe; he will be close to us. Even when times are difficult, the promise is that we can experience intimacy with God. "The nearness of God is my good," says the psalmist.

Jesus is our ultimate example of choosing, trusting, and resisting. He was "meek and humble in heart." He stood against the schemes of Satan. In the wilderness, the devil made a number of seemingly attractive offers to Jesus. He told him, in effect, that he could have everything he wanted, without any suffering. But Jesus said no to every offer of the devil. In the garden, our Lord was in agony to the point of sweating blood. He was tempted to flee, but he resisted. He submitted his life to the Father. He said yes to God, to his Father's will, even though that would cost him his life. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:8: "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Humility demands that we follow in the steps of Jesus. We must let God call the shots, no matter the cost. We must choose to let God have control of our lives.

The second idea that James presents here is that we must have a realistic view of ourselves and the sin that is in our lives. We can't become humble unless we deal ruthlessly with the desires and pleasures that wage war within our members.

James calls us to purity. The simple truth is that we are sinners, we are double-minded. We try to both please God and indulge our sin at the same time. Pride has convinced us that we deserve good things, not the bad things that have happened to us

Humility demands that we see ourselves as who we are, not who we think we are; that instead of gloating over our achievements we should look at the depth of our depravity and weep. "Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom." We have to take the appropriate action, cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts. The reference to "hands" has to do with actions; the reference to "hearts" points to internal attitudes. The extent of purification here is severe. It is a serious issue. We must not pacify our selfish desires. "Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out."

Jesus illustrated this truth very well in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, from Luke 18:10:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:10-14)

Looking at our own depravity has the effect of correcting our wrong attitudes. When I became a Christian, I was on a downward spiral. It scares me when I reflect on where I would be without God. I might well have ended up in the gutter, holding a bottle in a brown bag. I cringe when I think about some of the things I did. When I

realize what I am capable of doing, I weep. When I see where I am today, by the grace of God, I am humbled. This is what forces me to my knees and draws me closer to God.

Why do we think that we deserve anything? Why do we think that we should come out on top? Why do we expect that life should go our way? The fact is, if God were to give us what we deserve, and deal justly with our sin, it would not be a pretty sight.

James is saying, “Stop worrying about what is happening to everyone else and purify your own heart. Get down on your knees and be cleansed, through the blood of Christ.” When we do this, God is faithful. His grace and mercy will wash over us, and the rage, resentment, envy and the desire for conflict will be flushed away. We will become grateful and content people, agents of grace towards others.

The choice in humility is letting God have control; the action of humility is purifying our hearts.

If we follow James’ words, if we humble ourselves before God, he will exalt us. Jesus refers to this same truth several times. Peter makes reference to it in his letter. It’s ironic to think that when we are controlled by our own pride and selfish interests, we try to lift ourselves up, but the result is that God will oppose us and humble us. But when we are willing to do the hard work of humility and making ourselves low, then it is God who will lift us up. God does it, not ourselves.

Now, this may not happen exactly according to our time frame or in the way we desire. We may have to wait a long time. But of this we can be certain: God will keep his word.

The proof of this is what God did for his own Son. Listen to the words of the apostle Paul, from the book of Philippians:

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:8-11)

The one who humbled himself the most has been exalted the most.

But then Paul informs us in Ephesians that we too will be exalted with Christ: “He made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.”

God will exalt those who believe in him, even as he exalted his own Son.

Isaiah 58:13-14 describes this promise very beautifully in these words:

**“If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable,
And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways,
From seeking your own pleasure,
And speaking your own word,
Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isa 58:13-14)**

God gives a greater grace. And even while we wait for this final and complete exaltation, he pours out his riches upon us in Christ Jesus. We can rest and wait upon him.

I can attest to this myself. When I quit law school, I was a broken young man. I started working and raising a family. I told the Lord that if he wanted me to be an engineer for the rest of my life, then that was fine with me. Gradually, I began to get more involved in ministry. In amazing ways, God provided people to help me learn how to study. He introduced me to people who taught me languages. I made seemingly bizarre choices to turn down promotions so that I could spend time in ministry. I loved teaching. But I knew my own heart. I had tried to make my own way once before. So I told the Lord, “If you want me go into ministry, then I will. But I am not going to try and make it happen.” Eventually, the call came, and I began a new career at Peninsula Bible Church. When I look back now, I’m glad I didn’t finish law school. I am so excited about what I am doing now. When I tried to get my own way, God blocked it. But then he gave me everything I desired. When I moved into ministry, I took a big cut in pay, but I have never lacked. I am amazed at the grace of God in my life.

The things that God does are the best things.

Finally, James addresses the practical application of humility in the body of Christ. Verses 11-12:

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor? (4:11-12)

James commands that we not speak against each other and that we not judge our neighbor. This brings us back to the conflicts and quarrels mentioned in verse 1. It is pride that leads us into conflict. Pride makes us point out other people’s faults. Pride gets us involved in petty arguments. Pride wants to make people feel guilty and condemned.

The reason we are not to judge others is that if we do, we are regarding ourselves as outside the law. We become a judge of the law rather than doers of the law. But there is only one Judge and Lawgiver: God himself. It is our pride that makes us want to take his place. But we are not able to save or destroy; only God can do that. Therefore, we are called to not condemn others and pronounce sentence. We are called to judge sin, but not to judge people. We are to see ourselves as no better or no worse than anyone else. This does not mean that we are not to be involved in other people’s lives and hold one another accountable. What it means is that we must not try to act like judges and exalt ourselves at the expense of others; we recognize that we are sinners and that there is plenty of work to be done in cleansing our own hearts. There is one God; we are all brothers. If we are helping others deal with areas of sin, we must do so with grace and humility.

Truly humble people desire purity in their hearts. They do not try to control God, their own lives or the lives of others. They respond to trials with grace and do not become angry. They do not point out the faults of others, but rather lift them up and encourage them. They do not compare themselves with others and compete with them. They are content with who they are and what they have. They can befriend those who have much more than they and still not

feel that they lack anything. Humble people are grateful for the grace of God working in their lives.

Humility requires that we have a proper estimation of ourselves in the sight of God. We must see God for who he is, and ourselves for who we are. This is not a course for the fainthearted. We cannot do this in our own strength. But God promises that he will work with us. He wants to be God in all areas of our lives. That is why he humbles us, often through pain and disappointment, but only because he wants to give us a greater grace. He gives us what we don't think we want, but what in the end turns out to be everything we really desired.

One by one He took them from me
All the things I valued most;
'Til I was empty-handed,
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highways, grieving,
In my rags and poverty.
Until I heard His voice inviting,
"Lift those empty hands to Me!"

Then I turned my hands toward heaven,
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendent riches,
'Til they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended
With my stupid mind, and dull,
That God cannot pour His riches
Into hands already full.

— Source Unknown

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