




THE COMMUNITY

Humbly Submit | HUMILITY AND SUBMISSION

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

James 4:1-17

Introduction (James 3:13-18)

The purpose of the introduction is to place our passage within the context of the theme of the book. James' discourse on wisdom (3:13-18) is a unifying hinge of the book. It connects what comes before and after it to the theme of maturity – wholeness, wisdom (they are synonymous).

In 3:13-18, James describes godly wisdom as being “pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere”(3:13-18). James' description of godly wisdom is – ironically enough – what his readers are lacking in each of the issues he's previously addressed. It is their lack of maturity, or godly wisdom, that has led some to show favoritism (the opposite of being impartial), separate faith from works (lacking mercy and good fruit) and speak with a polluted tongue (the opposite of pure).

The further description James gives of godly wisdom (peace loving, considerate and submissive) corresponds to the passage that follows (4:1-12), the subject of this study. There is bitter rivalry in the church along with arguments, envy and selfish ambition. What they are lacking is godly wisdom (maturity). As I reread this summary I think it's good. You should read it again, too.

The Sickness (4:1-4)

4:1-4 describes the mess that exists in the church. At the core of it is a worldliness that surfaces its ugly head in envy, rivalry and selfish ambition. Worldliness is an appropriate label; this is precisely how the world carries on its affairs. But all sin has a relational component: we've not only “done wrong” but “we've done someone wrong.” James warns that to make a friend of the world is to act like an enemy of God. James 4:5, though worded awkwardly, shows this relational breach from God's perspective: due to our friendship with the world, God's Spirit in us jealously longs for our devotion and return to Him – reconciliation after our adulterous affair.

The Cure (vv. 6-10)

The cure for this worldliness is stated right up front in 4:6: we are to humble ourselves before God. The couple verses that follow help us to understand what is involved in humbling ourselves before God.

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What's the Big Idea?

Foundational to much of our relational conflict is worldly envy, rivalry, selfish ambition and pride. Our response to this should be to repent, humble ourselves before God and submit our selves (our desires, ambitions, future, control) to Him, allowing God to decide when and how to lift us up.

What's the Problem?

The human spirit is tirelessly seeking after anything and everything that can feed its envious desire to be its own God (Pride).

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We need, first and foremost, to repent of our worldliness, forsake our current affair and return back into the arms of God.

For such a love-rich word-picture of marriage, this passage has some of the tersest rebukes found in the New testament with phrases like, “you adulterous people” and “wash your hands you sinners.” This requires some explanation. James is one of the earliest New testament books and, therefore, bears similarity to the Old Testament in tone and genre. As you read through the Old Testament, you’ll see that these were somewhat common phrases used by the prophets of Old to call Israel to repentance (see Jeremiah 3:20). James assumes his readers will get the inference and so calls them to return to God using language they’ve traditionally associated with a call to repentance.

A second part of “humbling ourselves before God” is to “submit” ourselves to Him. As humility is the opposite of pride, submission is the moral opposite of selfish ambition. to “submit” literally means “to order oneself under,” meaning to willfully put ourselves under the leadership and authority of another.

So, God’s people are to repent of their love affair with the world. They are to grieve and mourn over leaving their first love, fully embrace what they’ve done and re-embrace the lord. Instead of selfishly and ambitiously vying for what they want, they are to humbly receive only that which God gives, being thankful and content with what He provides. They are to cease striving to “get ahead,” and instead live to love and glorify God.

Some Specifics (vv. 11-17)

It’s much easier dealing with – and admitting for that matter – our worldliness as long as things stay in the abstract – “yes, generally speaking I suppose I can be worldly.” But it’s a lot tougher to swallow when it’s broken down to the very specific, “stop doing this” and “don’t be like that.” But you can’t truly repent of worldliness in a vague generic sense; you need specifics. We get two of them in these verses.

First, the judging and criticizing of others has got to stop. They need to be recognized as the gross sins of pride and arrogance that they are, not simply being “negative” or “critical.” And if those people are in positions of authority, it further demonstrates a lack of humility and submission. The reason that this all smacks of pride is that only God has the right to judge others and we’re really not just criticizing others. We really think we’re better, smarter and righter – ouch! It’s this over-inflated sense of self that demands repentance, humility and submission.

This second example gets at the heart of worldliness. Just to listen to James’ sample conversation, you’d swear you were listening to a conversation on the elevator going up the corporate ladder, “we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” We are not to live with this sort of “master of our own fate” – “I’ll have my secretary call your secretary” – kind of nonsense. And it’s not just arrogant to herald what we’re about to do. It is boasting and bragging of what we’ve done.

Rather, we are to humbly seek to discern God’s will for our lives, order ourselves under it and to see any blessing in our lives as unmerited and coming from God, not the work of our hands.

Well, that is certainly enough to chew on.

What’s Our Response?

The application questions drive in three directions:

It’s important for your group to know how to repent and how to humble themselves. You may need to share what that looks like in your life, but make sure they have a picture of it.

Second, they need to see how connected submission to God is with submitting to others and those in leadership or authority. We show our submission to God by submitting to others.

Last, in seeing how Jesus humbled Himself for us, a heart response of the study is to express – in some way – our love and gratitude for what Christ has done for us.

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What Are the Questions?

James 4:1-17

Launch

Describe the last relationship conflict that you had. Who was it with? What started it? how did you respond? As you reflect on it, how would you say that pride fueled the conflict, and how did you respond to it?

Explore

Introduction

1. Read James 3:13-18. This passage is the hinge to the book of James, connecting what comes before it and after it. Summarize the two different types of wisdom.

Godly wisdom:

Worldly wisdom:

2. As James describes the different facets of godly wisdom, we see it's really the answer to all the problems he's previously addressed: favoritism, faith and works, and taming the tongue. Match the description of godly wisdom to the issue(s) it would resolve: "pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

The Study

3. Read James 4:1-5. It could be said that earthly wisdom comes from our desire and Godly wisdom comes from God's desire. how does your desire manifest itself?

4. How have you experienced envy, rivalry, competitiveness, and ambition in the body of Christ?

5. Why do you think James talks about this behavior as friendship with the world and adultery? In what ways would you say you are friendly or friends with the world?

6. Verse 4:5 is awkwardly stated. What is it saying?

7. Read verses 4:6-10. Verse 6 says that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." What is this grace we need and must humble ourselves to get?

8. The prescription to the problem seems to be to "humble ourselves," "repent," and "submit ourselves to God" (4:6-10). how would you define each of these?

9. What does it look like when this kind of humility is present in a person's life? Who – besides yourself – would you say is a humble person? how do you know it's humility and not just a low self-esteem?

10. In verse 7 we're told to resist satan. Why bring up satan here and how are we supposed to resist him?

11. From what you know of the Old Testament, why do you think James uses such harsh phrases like "you adulterous people", "wash your hands, you sinners", "grieve, mourn, and wail"?

12. In verse 10, James says that if we humble ourselves, God will lift us up. If our goal is to be lifted up, why isn't this prideful and selfish ambition?

13. Read 4:11-17. In what way do these verse relate to what James has been talking about?

Apply

14. how do you personally find your heart resisting complete and humble submission to God?

15. Practically speaking, how do you humble yourself before God? how do you repent?

16. A major way we exercise submission to God is by submitting to anyone in authority over us. How do you do with submitting to others? Why?

17. In what ways did Jesus manifest submission and humility? how might you express your submission to him today? this week?

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What Are the Answers?

1. Godly wisdom: pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Worldly wisdom: bitter envy, selfish ambition, boastful.
2. Faith and good works: full of mercy and good fruit. Favoritism: impartial. Tongue: pure.
3. Allow the group to discuss.
4. Allow the group to discuss.
5. This is the way the world conducts its business. Adultery in the sense that it is to the world that we turn for life, purpose, direction, approval, etc.
6. Due to our friendship with the world, God's Spirit in us jealously longs for our devotion and return to Him.
7. God's favor in our life. God's empowerment. God's blessings. God's presence.
8. See notes under "The Cure."
9. Discuss the question about self-esteem is to raise awareness of the difference between submitting to someone out of a love for God and submitting because you think they really are better than you
10. Pride really gives Satan a foothold in our life. Resisting him involves humbling ourselves before God.
11. James is using a prophetic genre. This phraseology is found throughout the Old Testament. See notes under "The Cure."
12. We are wired to seek blessing, the problem is how we go about getting it, and what we find to be a "blessing."
13. These functions as more specific examples of pride and worldliness.
14. You want the group to really probe their hearts to see where they are sinfully resistant to God.
15. We all know what we mean by these phrases, but there is an experiential aspect that is good to hear articulated from others.
16. It's important to make this connection. A major way we show our submission to God is by submitting to others, particularly those in leadership over us.
17. Examples abound in the gospels but obviously the "Cross." You want people to creatively think how they might respond to God.

Memorize

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

James 4:7



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