

Let the Lord Do the Heavy Lifting

James 4:7-12 • 2021-10-03



Did you catch that seemingly out of place comment last week from Numbers 12?

Moses' brother and sister were envious of Moses' position. They saw him standing in the spotlight every day while they remained in the background. Finally, they had enough and complained about it. Then we read one of the most seemingly out of place sentences in the Bible. *"Now the man Moses was very humble, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."* Just let that phrase sink in for a moment. Moses wrote the book of numbers. Moses boasted about his great humility. Granted, someone like Joshua or a scribe for Moses could have added that phrase for him. But Moses' book describes Moses as more humble than anyone on earth. I don't dispute that comment. But doesn't it make you wonder, "What does it mean to be humble?" Today we look once again at James' epistle and find in chapter 4 some instructions about humility. There we learn that humility involves neither lifting ourselves up nor tearing others down. Instead, the humble let God do it all.

James sets the stage for us by reminding us that the book of proverbs says, *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* (James 4:6, Proverbs 3:34) It's not our job to balance the scales of the proud and humble. God does it. He tears down the proud and lifts up the humble. We need to be humble before God. How do we do that?

James says, *"Submit yourselves to God."* Humility begins by recognizing God is in charge and letting him be in charge. The humble person yields to God's will and prays, "Your will be done, not mine." And when it comes to a clash of what they desire and what God desires they say, "What you desire is far better!" We struggle with this aspect of humility, don't we? If it is God's will that we set aside regular time for gathering around his Word, why do we sometimes think we're better off not making the time? If it is God's will that we honor our parents and all those in authority, why do we sometimes fail to honor them? If it is God's will that we help and defend our neighbor in every need, why don't we? If it is God's will that husband and wife love and honor each other why doesn't every husband and wife do it? If he wills the single person to lead a pure and decent life honoring marriage, why don't they?

The believer struggles with this conflict. The devil would have us think it is impossible for us to resist temptation and submit to our God. And it is true that those who are without Christ cannot. Submission to God is impossible for the unbeliever. By nature, we are slaves to sin and cannot help but turn against God. By nature, are led astray and under the rule of the devil. But brothers and sisters in Christ, we are no longer under the rule of the devil and his schemes. Our sinful flesh, the world, and the devil are no longer our master. We belong to Christ. We are freed from the power of the devil. It is still a struggle for us. But it is no longer impossible. We are freed from guilt, freed from death, and freed from the devil's power. James reminds us of this truth. *"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."*

The devil tries to convince us we can make our own lives better and lift ourselves up. His lies tell us to, "Just ignore the opportunity to gather for worship or Bible study. And forget about authority. They don't deserve your honor, go ahead, and mock them. And you know how your neighbor brought that struggle on themselves. It's not your problem. Go ahead and turn towards fantasy novels and pornography. Let it rule your heart and mind. It will make you happier than God's plan for a pure marriage." All are lies. Resist his lies. Don't submit to the devil. Resist him and he must flee. He knows that he has lost the control over you which he once had. He knows you belong to Jesus. The hymn "A Mighty Fortress" is right to say we can fell the devil with a single Word, namely, Christ.

"Come near to God, and he will come near to you." Once again, James is speaking to believers. They have already been brought near to God by the blood of Christ. But they continue to draw near to God as they stay in contact with the means of grace. As they pour out the water and speak the name of their triune God, he pours out his Holy Spirit. As two or three of them gather around the gospel in Word and sacrament God promises he is with them. As they partake of his gifts at his table, he promises to be with them with his own body and blood. And as they seek to live under him and according to his will he will strengthen and bless them in their efforts. You want to be nearer to God? Come near to him! Enter his house, come to his table, listen to his Word. He will be near you always!

But how can we dare approach the house of the Lord? How can we dare to claim a place among his people? And who are we to say that he would give us a seat at his table? James makes it clear how we can come near to a holy God. He invites the humble sinner to come near with repentance. *"Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded people. Lament, mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy into gloom."* James is saying, "Don't come before God with a proud heart that goes on laughing off sin. Come grieved by sin." We do this in our own personal life of repentance, and we do it often as we gather together. We, of course, still have great laughter and joy as God's people. But never any laughter over our sin. We grieve over our own sin. For all the times we were double minded and proud before our God we must come in sorrow. We enter his house saying, "I've sinned against heaven. I've sinned against my neighbor. Father, I'm no longer worthy to be called your child." We admit our guilt which has brought us down into the depths of sorrow. Our pride has ruined our relationship with our

God and our neighbor. Dare we ignore that pride? Or do we acknowledge it and make ourselves low and humble before our God? Come near to God, but come near in sorrow over sin.

Does that sound hard to do? Take heart! James gives us the courage to confess our sins in loneliness. He promises mercy and grace to lift us up! *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up."*

It is hard to lift yourself up. In fact, those who seek to lift themselves up will only end up under the heavy weight of sin. Their laughter will turn to sorrow when their guilt catches up to them. When they go down to the grave there will be no one to lift them up. It will be too late. They will rise on the day of judgment to the heavy weight of the curse of sin. And instead of submitting to God's will and his great mercy they will be forced to submit to his everlasting punishment on the proud sinner. We cannot lift ourselves up!

That's why we must let God do the heavy lifting. *"The Lord lifts up the lowly."* He sent his Son to carry our burdens and our guilt. Moses may have been more humble than any other man on earth. But he was surpassed in humility by the man Jesus. Jesus came in such great humility that he placed himself lower than all of his creation. He left the high throne of heaven and all its glory and was born a lowly man. He truly became the most humble man who ever lived.

He came to bear the load of sin for you and every proud sinner. It wasn't his own load. He was the only man who could ever claim to be without sin. Yet he took our sin and took our place. In willing submission, he bore the fearful punishment that every sinner deserved. But he trusted this truth, *"The Lord lifts up the lowly."* That's exactly what Jesus was doing. The Lord himself came to lift up the lowly by taking away their sin.

And just as James says, *"God lifts up the humble."* He lifted up his Son who suffered hell on the cross. He raised him from the lowly depths of the tomb. Jesus rose from death and is now our living Savior and King. Jesus is both the humblest and the most exalted man who ever lived.

Because he did this for us, we now have the confidence and courage to humble ourselves before our God. He will lift us up as we trust in him. That is how James describes humility before God. It involves repentance over our sins and faith in Jesus. It includes trusting that our God will give us grace, draw near, and lift us up.

But the Christian who humbles themselves before God isn't done with humility. Humbling ourselves also involves your heart towards your neighbor. Do you recall how we read earlier about Joshua? He couldn't accept that God would lift up other men to the same degree of honor which he had. And remember how Jesus' disciples responded when another man outside their circle carried out gospel ministry? In pride they put a stop to his work and put him in his place -under them. Joshua and the disciples struggled with humility towards other believers. Each of them struggled with this aspect of Christian living. When they heard that God was lifting up someone outside of their circle, they became jealous. They didn't think others deserved the same treatment from God which they had graciously received. They were quick to judge their neighbor as not deserving God's grace -quick to tear others down.

Humility includes lowering ourselves before God *and* our neighbor. That's the full equation. But don't we like to take just half the equation? We like to think that because we have humbled ourselves before God that we are better than our brothers and sisters. The Christian who has made time for worship is quick to judge those who have failed. We might look at our brother or sister and think, *"They missed another bible study! They don't deserve God's gifts!"* or *"How can they go on disobeying those in authority? What kind of Christian are they?"* Or we might reason, *"Clearly the rest of Christendom doesn't get it like I do. I really help the poor."* Or we might think in pride, *"I've kept my marriage together. That other Christian must be inferior because theirs fell apart."* Pride finds its way back. If we are humbling ourselves before our God, how can we fail to humble ourselves before our brothers and sisters?

James says, *"Do not speak against one another, brothers."* Don't misunderstand. James and the rest of Scripture tell us to hold fellow believers accountable when they sin and are unrepentant. Pointing out unrepentant sin is an act of love. But there is a difference between calling someone to repentance and judging the repentant sinner. If a fellow believer has humbled themselves before God, it is not our place to judge their hearts. It is not our place to put ourselves above them. *"There is one lawgiver and judge. He is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"*

I think we can all answer that question: *"I am nobody. I am not God. I am a redeemed sinner who just like my brother had to stand before God in full humility."* If you know a brother or sister who has fallen into some sin, don't stand in judgment. They are just like you, a lowly sinner. They are also one who had to have their hands cleansed and their hearts purified. They have dealt with the temptations of the devil. They know what it is like to live double-minded and struggling with sin. So do you. So do I. There is one judge. And he is Jesus Christ, the same one who is able to save us.

We are such a fallen race that we could never lift ourselves up. We can only toss heavy weights of judgment on others. But we know that the Lord will do the heavy lifting. What does it mean to be humble? Don't try to lift yourself up before God or put your neighbor down. Humble yourself, and let the Lord do the heavy lifting. He will lift you up.