OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

How to Beat the Devil

David Anguish

Do you remember the Nationwide Insurance company's "life comes at you fast" ad campaign? One spot featured a boy who had accompanied his parent to the bank for a bring-your-child-to-work day. Fascinated with the vacuum tube that returns the containers to customers at the drive-through, the boy loaded it with a mug full of pens, several packages of rolled coins, a hamburger, drink, desk name plate, and so on, and sent it on its way. Of course, the container did considerable damage to the customer's car, necessitating a call to his insurance agent. It was a humorous reminder (for the viewer at least) of how life sometimes spins out of control.

While some chaotic events happen to us because of the way the world is, at other times, we reap the consequences of our own behaviors, whether innocent or malicious. Other cases of misfortune occur because of what others do. Perhaps, as with the boy at the bank, they are outcomes of innocent curiosity or inexperienced behavior. But at other times, the causes are more sinister in their motivation and severe in their outcome.

James 3 and 4 deal with the latter kind of out-of-control circumstances. The inability to control the tongue, coupled with jealousy and selfish ambition, had led to fights and quarrels that James used the word "murder" to describe. Their problems had their origins in unchecked pleasures, pursued without reference to God; when they did think to ask God, they asked for selfish reasons (3.1—4.3). In 3.15, James named the real cause of the trouble as a type of wisdom that was

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earthly, unspiritual, and demonic; and in 4.4, he identified the cause as friendship with the world that amounted to practical idolatry. Because of their misplaced loyalty, they had become God's enemies. But there was good news: God still desired their friendship and was willing to give them more grace to resolve the problem—if they were willing to receive it (4.5–6). Verses 7–10 get more specific about what receiving that grace will entail.

Don't Complicate the Situation (4.7a)

Verses 7a and 10 form a literary bracket around James's solution and show that it's not really all that complicated: submit to God's authority in humility. Given the emphasis in verse 6, this should not surprise us; from Proverbs 3.34 (LXX), James emphasizes that God gives grace to those who are "humble," or "lowly" (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*; cf. 1.9–11). The logical result of humility is declared in the command in verse 7: "Submit [ὑποτάσσω, *hypotassō*] yourselves *therefore* [οὖν, *oun*] to God."

In one sense, of course, this is a straightforward, simple solution. But we know well that we tend to complicate it. We look for all kinds of solutions, anything, it seems, except submission; anything except placing ourselves under God's lordship and committing to obey him, whether or not it makes sense to us or fits with our desires. That James understood this tendency is evident from what he goes on to say in verses 7–10 where he uses a series of imperative verbs that call us to demonstrate by our actions that we are humbly submissive.

Get to a Safe Place (4.7b–8a)

Beginning in verse 7b, James employs a series of couplets, similar to the form of Hebrew poetry, to make his point: resist—draw near; cleanse—purify; be wretched—turn laughter to mourning (Davids 1982, 165). Behind all of them is his assumption that the ultimate cause of failure to submit is temptation and sin (for a similar emphasis, cf. 1 Pet 5.8–9; Eph 6.11–12; 2 Cor 11.14); he has laid the foundation for this assumption earlier in the letter, noting how our desires make us amenable to the devil's influence (1.13–15) and calling attention to the way "suprapersonal forces of evil are behind personal evil" (3.6, 15; cf. Matt 4.1–11; Luke 22.31; John 13.2, 27) (Davids 1982, 166).

It's not surprising, then, that he begins with the command, "resist the devil" (v. 7b). The word (ἀνθίστημι, *anthistēmi*) tells us that we cannot be passive; when the devil tempts, we are to fight back. Significantly, this is the same way (using the same word) God responds to the proud: he "opposes" them (v. 6). The sense is, "if you resist the devil—and you should—then he will flee from you" (Blomberg and Kamell 2009, 193; cf. Wallace 1996, 491).

James then commands us to "draw near [ἐγγίζω, *engizō*] to God" (v. 8a). Used with "resist," this command reminds us that our allegiance to God is not a both-and matter (cf. 4.4); in fact, "submission is itself an act of resistance to the devil" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 193). Our aim is to "cultivate his heart in ourselves," a course that will lead us to "begin to see the world through

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God's eyes and be humble" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 194). For examples of what that looks like in practice, we need only recall James's instructions elsewhere in the letter: to control our tongues (1.19, 26; 3.2); to care for the poor (1.27; 2.16–17); to grow in wisdom and peace (1.5; 3.16–18); to interact with God in prayer (4.2–3, 15, 5.2–3).

Be Serious about Sin (4.8b–9)

But submission is not all about good deeds and devotions, as the last two couplets show. The couplet in verse 8b essentially tells us to treat life like the best church service. The idea of having "clean hands" has its roots in how Israel's priests were to approach the altar to offer sacrifices (Exod 30.19–21) (cf. Davids 1982, 166–167). From this expectation, a moral imperative emerges: the cleansing is to be applied to the inner man, to the heart (Isa 1.16; Jer 4.14; Ps 26.6). It's natural, then, that James will continue with the command to "purify [ἁγνίζω, *hagnizō*] your hearts."

Something of the urgency James attaches to these twin commands is evident in the fact that he does not address his readers with the endearing term, "brothers" (cf. 2.1), but says they are "sinners" and "double-minded" (v. 8b). "Sinners" act contrary to God's nature and laws; the "double-minded" (δίψυχος**,** *dipsychos*) try to have it both ways, seeking to please both God and the world (notably, the REB translates this phrase, "you whose motives are mixed"). We fully appreciate this point only when we recall the "two-natured person of 4:4" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 194). The cumulative effect of the command is that we learn to treat life generally with the reverent seriousness we associate with services of worship. In short, this is a call to his readers to focus, to remove "everything from their thoughts and actions that show them not single-mindedly pursuing God and his will in the world" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 194–195).

The final couplet calls for the humble to be urgent about repentance: "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" (v. 9). As an echo of Jesus (Matt 5.4), these commands caution against the attitude that treats sin lightly and repentance casually. Once again, James's background is important, for "'laughter' in the Old Testament and Judaism is often the scornful laughter of the good (Ec. 7:6; Ecclus. 27:13) who blithely refuse to take sin seriously. It is the mark of one who prospers in this world, without regard to the world to come" (Moo 1985, 149). In short, James's point is that "the inner attitude is to be matched by outward expression, i.e., mourning and weeping … This is the language of the preacher of repentance: judgment is coming; therefore mourn now (repent) so that you do not mourn then" (Davids 1982, 167).

Be Actively Humble (4.10)

Although verse 10 summarizes the point, we are still challenged by it, for it reverses the world's popular call to self-assertion, autonomy, and power. That reversal was as unpopular in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural milieus as it is in ours; in other words, the way to which James calls us is designed to correct a course that didn't work then and won't work now. As we

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consider the challenge, we should note that, while some of our resistance to the different way stems from our tendency toward pride, some of it also results from false views of humility. Humility does not amount to merely declaring our worthlessness, but involves "simply accepting truth about ourselves, our condition, and our abilities. Humility is not passivity, but receptivity" (McDonnell 1986, 30–31; in Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 196). It is active submission to God and his ways, a reversal of the world's values and priorities. It is the way that imitates Jesus, who was "meek and lowly [*tapeinos*] in heart" (Matt 11.29).

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Additional Thoughts on James

"For James, then, there is no such thing as a true and living faith which does not produce works, for the only true faith is a 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6). Works are not an 'added extra' any more than breath is an 'added extra' to a living body. The so-called faith which fails to produce works (the works to be produced are charity, not the 'works of the law' such as circumcision against which Paul inveighs) is simply not 'saving faith.'"

~ Peter H. Davids. 1982. *The Epistle of James*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 122

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