



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

How To Beat the Devil

James 4:7-10

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Introduction

1. You have probably seen at least one of the “life comes at you fast” commercials. One features a boy at a bank on a “bring your child to work” day. Fascinated with the vacuum tube that sends the containers back to customers at the drive through, he loads it with a mug full of pens, several packages of rolled coins, a hamburger, drink, desk name plate, etc. All do considerable damage to the car of a customer who must call his insurance agent. It’s a humorous way of reminding us that life sometimes can spin out of control.
2. Sometimes, such situations are traceable to sin. We are victims of someone else’s evil – or reap what we have sown.
3. In chapters 3-4, James is dealing with such “out of control” circumstances.
 - a. The inability to control the tongue, coupled with jealousy and selfish ambition had led to fights and quarrels that James describes with the word “murder” (3:1-4:2).
 - b. Their problems were rooted in their desires, or pleasures (ἡδονή, *hēdonē*). Even when they bothered to ask God, they asked for wrong reasons, to focus on those desires.
4. He mentioned the cause in 3:15 (“earthly, unspiritual, demonic”), but elaborated in 4:4.
 - a. Their problems were caused by disloyalty to God, a “practical idolatry”.
 - b. Thus, they were at enmity with God because they were friends with the world.
 - c. The good news is that God will not give up on us, but will give what we need to deal with the problem if we are willing to receive it (4:5-6).
5. How we do that and thus beat the devil is our focus.

Body

- I. Don’t Complicate the Solution (4:7a).
 - A. Verses 7a, 10 bracket James’s solution and show that it’s not all that complicated: bow to God’s authority in humility.
 - B. Given the theme of v. 6 and its connection with v. 7, this should be no surprise.
 1. From Proverbs 3:34, he stresses that grace is given to those who are “humble” or “lowly” (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*; see 1:9-11).
 2. The logical result: “Submit yourselves *therefore* (οὖν, *oun*) to God.”
 - C. In one sense, this is not simple, of course, but we do have a tendency to complicate it.

1. We look for all kinds of solutions when all it takes is to “submit” (ὑποτάσσω, *hypotassō*), placing ourselves under God’s lordship, committing to obey him in all things, not just our “desires”.
2. This points to the theme running throughout vv. 7-10, stressed with a series of imperative verbs: only if we demonstrate by our actions that we have submitted to God do we show that we really are humble before him.

II. Get to a Safe Place (4:7b-8a).¹

- A. Like Peter (1 Pet. 5:8-9) and Paul (Eph. 6:11-12; 2 Cor. 11:14), James affirms that the ultimate source of temptation and sin is the devil.
 1. He has previously said that our desires make us amenable to the devil’s influence; we certainly should never blame God (1:13-15).
 2. He states what he implied in 3:6, 15 – “suprapersonal forces of evil are behind personal evil” (cf. Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 22:31; John 13:2, 27) (Davids, 166).
- B. So, James says, “resist the devil.”
 1. We are not to just accept the devil’s pull, but are to fight back.
 2. What’s expected of us is the same as God’s response to the proud (v. 6).
 3. The sense is, “If you resist the devil – and you should – then he will flee from you.”²
- C. We must replace the devil’s influence, accomplished when we “draw near to God.”
 1. This reminds us that this is not a “both-and” matter (cf. 4:4).
 2. “[S]ubmission is itself an act of resistance to the devil” (Blomberg & Kamell, 193).
 3. The aim is to “cultivate his heart in ourselves” leading us to “begin to see the world through God’s eyes and be humble” (Blomberg & Kamell, 194).
 4. Part of what this means is seen in the things James stresses; to draw near to God is to want the things of God, such as (Blomberg & Kamell, 194):
 - a) Controlling one’s tongue (1:19, 26; 3:2).
 - b) Caring for the poor (1:27; 2:16-17).
 - c) Growing in wisdom and peace (1:5; 3:16-18).
 - d) Communing with him in prayer (4:2-3, 15; 5:13-18).
- D. But, it’s not all about good deeds and devotions, as the next two couplets show.

III. Be Serious About Sin (4:8b-9).

- A. Couplet 1: treat life like the best church service (4:8b).
 1. The idea of having “clean hands” has its roots in how Israel’s priests were to approach the altar to offer sacrifices (Ex. 30:19-21).³
 - a) A moral imperative resulted from this: the cleansing would be applied to the inner man, the heart (Isa. 1:16; Jer. 4:14; Psa. 26:6).
 - b) It’s natural, then, that he would say, “purify your hearts.”

¹ Beginning with v. 7b, James employs a series of three couplets, similar to Hebrew poetic form, to make his point: Resist . . . draw near; cleanse . . . purify; be wretched . . . turn laughter to mourning.” See Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, 165.

² Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 193, citing Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 491.

³ For more complete discussion of this point, see Davids, 166-167.

2. The urgency of this is seen in the fact that James replaces his endearing “brothers” (cf. 2:1) with “sinners” and “double-minded.”
 - a) “Sinners” act contrary to God’s nature and laws; they disobey God.
 - b) The “double-minded” (cf. Jas. 1:8) are those who try to have it both ways, committed to God and the world (“you whose motives are mixed”, REB).
 - c) We fully appreciate the idea only in light of “the two-natured person of 4:4” (Blomberg & Kamell, 194).
 3. The cumulative effect is that we ought to treat life generally with seriousness in search of the attitude of reverence we reserve for the best church services.
 4. This is a call 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 & Kamell, 194-195).
- B. Couplet 2: be urgent about repentance (4:9).
1. James echoes Jesus (Matt. 5:4) and so cautions against the worldly attitude that treats sin lightly and repentance casually.
 2. Again, the OT background helps, for “‘laughter’ in the Old Testament and Judaism is often the scornful laughter of the fool (Ec. 7:6; Ecclus [Sirach] 27:13) who blithely refuses to take sin seriously. It is the mark of one who prospers in this world, without regard to the world to come.”⁴
 3. “Appreciate your wretchedness, and weep for it in misery” (NJB).
 4. “The inner attitude is to be matched by outward expression... This is the language of the preacher of repentance: judgment is coming; therefore mourn now (repent) so that you do not mourn then” (Davids, 167).
- IV. Be Actively Humble (4:10).
- A. Though verse 10 is a summary of his point, we are challenged by it, for it reverses the world’s popular call to self-assertion, autonomy and power.
1. This idea was as unpopular in the ancient Greco-Roman world as it is in ours.
 2. This way is designed to correct a way that didn’t work, and still doesn’t (Jas. 4:1-3).
- B. Some of our resistance comes from our tendency toward pride, but some stems from false views of humility.
1. It’s not a false pronouncement of our worthlessness, but “simply accepting truth about ourselves, our condition, and our abilities.
 2. “Humility is not passivity, but receptivity.”⁵ It is active submission to God and his ways, a reversal of the world’s values.

Conclusion

1. It is the way of Jesus, who was “meek and lowly (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*) in heart” (Matt. 11:29).
2. James reminds his readers, including us, that it remains the best and most hopeful life.

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⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 149.

⁵ Rea McDonnell, *Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, 30-31, in Blomberg & Kamell, 196.