

**Introduction:**

- A. Did you ever hear of the mourners' bench? The famous revivalist, Charles Finney, called it the *anxious bench*. Two hundred years ago camp meeting preachers started to use them. It was a pew or a low bench at the front of the tent. As the preacher warned against sin and God's judgment those who were under conviction would come to the front and sit there. The preacher might preach right at them till there was some kind of breakthrough. No churches have these now. I couldn't even find a picture. I did find this interesting quote where a minister named Barton Stone remembered them many years later. He said, "*We had mourner's benches in those days, and they were things unauthorized by the Word of God. We long since abolished them, and we did right in so doing; but I almost fear that we did it in such a way as to abolish the mourners too.*"<sup>i</sup>
- B. If we were ever to have a mourner's bench here, today might be the day. When I read James I wonder if he wouldn't have appreciated having a mourner's bench right close to his pulpit. I don't think there's any book in the Bible that pounds away so hard on the sin in our lives as believers. I have a prayer for the preacher by James Weldon Johnson on the wall of my study. One line asks God, "*Make his words sledge hammers of truth-- Beating on the iron heart of sin.*" That's how James is going to preach to us this morning. This is sober stuff.
- C. James wrote to Christians under pressure. As believers, our greatest problem with pressure is not the suffering itself but the way it tends to bring out the worst in us—especially in our relationships. It is not the trial that hurts us in the long run. It is our sin. Status seeking, hypocrisy, the terrible things we say, and the way we fight and wound others in order to get what we want. **Thankfully, James' main point is not to hammer on our sin but to point us to God's grace.**
- D. Today we come to the heart of how that happens. Turn to **James** and listen again to **3:13ff.** so we remember the

context... [3:13-4:3]. So we have a choice between the wisdom God gives which carries humility into every relationship and thus produces righteousness in us, or we can invade relationships with envy and selfish ambition in a vain attempt to seize what we want from others. That doesn't work and it leaves terrible damage. Even if we pray, God won't indulge such behavior. And that brings us to 4:4, "*You adulterous people!*" We shift uncomfortably. *Do you mean me?*

## I. **WHEN WE WAR AGAINST OTHERS TO SATISFY OURSELVES WE BECOME SPIRITUAL ADULTERERS (4:4-5)**

- A. As Christians, we are the bride of Christ. He has fixed his love on me and on you. He bought us out of slavery by dying for us. He gave us a bridal gown of pure white righteousness. He is preparing a place for us. He loves us with the passion and delight of a bridegroom. He wants us to walk with him but to let him take the lead, to be submissive to him. But when we give ourselves over to envy and selfish ambition in our relationships we are two-timing Jesus. We cheat on him with the devil himself. We betray him and disregard his love.
- B. James continues: "*don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*" Remember **3:15-16...?** When we war with others we have God for an enemy. When our envy and ambition assault other people *that is* friendship with the world. We've just switched sides. We've become a turncoat.
- C. **James 4:5** is notoriously difficult to translate and understand... Your Bible probably has a footnote with alternative ways to read it. Rather than sort through that today, the flow of James' thought is obviously that friendship with the world is utterly inconsistent with Scripture and the spiritual life God gives us. I think his point is don't think for a moment that God the Holy Spirit is on your side when your jealousy stirs up trouble with others.

D. **In my heart I was stunned, “But I don’t want that! My problem is with this other person. This isn’t even about God. I love God!”** But James won’t have it, “*It is about God and when you hurt your brother or sister you betrayed your Bridegroom. You took his enemy’s side. This is not something God’s Spirit in you would ever do.*”

The Pharisees caught the woman in the very act of adultery and then dragged her, disheveled and humiliated, into the street in front of Jesus. “*The Bible says to stone her,*” they taunted Jesus. “*What do you say?*” **And there we are.**

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, **C. S. Lewis** says, “*The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and back-biting, the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.*”

And there we are, caught in the act of our liaison with the devil, with no excuse. *Illus.:* Many years ago, I was preaching one Sunday morning, on the story of the prodigal son, if I remember right. I think I was talking about the son’s desperation when all of a sudden a woman near the front let out an agonized cry—the outburst of a tormented heart. We all looked with wide eyes. She was a woman we knew to be as steady as a rock, whose sense of humor delighted us all. But now she got up from her seat, right there in the middle of the sermon, oblivious to everyone else, and came down to the front and fell weeping on the platform steps. It seems strange to me that I don’t remember much more than that but this I know. God met her there and she went home restored. James says, “*But he gives us more grace.*” Look at it there in **v.6**,

## **II. “BUT HE GIVES US MORE GRACE.”**

A. James says this and then points immediately to Scripture. “*That is why Scripture says, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble,’*” a quote from Prov. 3:34.

**There is a great sense in which our *sin* stirs God’s compassion.** “*While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*” **But what stirs God’s opposition is our pride.** He will not tolerate it, not only because he and he alone is the King, but also because he loves us too much to let us continue in such self-indulgent, diabolical folly unhindered.

Surely you have known times when your pride—your jealous selfishness—created terrible trouble and God just brought you low. He is our Father and he does that because he loves us.

Illus.: Awhile back I sat at a dinner table with several professors. They got talking about students who complain about their grades. One told about a young woman who came to him because she’d failed her exam. “*Can’t you show a little grace,*” she whined. “*Young lady,*” he replied, “*for you an F is grace.*” I suppose he might have meant, “*I’d give you a Z if it was possible,*” but I took it to mean that sometimes facing our failure is the best thing that could happen to us. So it is when God opposes the proud me.

- B. But the good news is in the alternative—“*but [God] shows favor to the humble.*” Not only *mercy*, but *favor*! Perhaps you’ve heard someone say that *mercy* is *not* getting what you deserve, and *grace* is getting what you *don’t* deserve. It would be enough if God would only forgive us, but he *gives more grace* than that.

The prodigal son abandoned his father, thinking he was being deprived of the good life, and it was only when he had nothing left, least of all self-respect, and no one who cared, that he trudged home. All he hoped for was mercy enough to eat. But as Jesus told it, his father saw him while he was still a long way off and ran to him and was filled with compassion for him; he threw his arms around him and kissed him. The very picture of grace! Then, more grace, for his father said, “*Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.*” That is **favor**. And that’s how your heavenly Father meets our broken humility.

So just what does it mean to humble myself? **Vv.7-10...**

### **III. GOD MEETS OUR HEARTBREAKING WORK OF REPENTANCE WITH HIS GRACE (4:7-10)**

- A. **V.7...** I was surprised to see that these two commands are linked into one sentence. Submit to God and resist the devil. They go together. I also learned that this word, *submit*, is not passive. James isn't saying only, "*Let God do what he wants,*" but "*enlist in doing what God wants.*" Or as James put it earlier, *Show your wisdom by your good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*"

*And* at the same time, "*resist the devil and he will flee from you.*" When we let our envy and ambition wreak havoc with our relationships **the devil was the provocateur.** When you're under pressure Satan is nearby. He is the one putting ideas in your head and weapons in your mouth. He's the seducer. Do you remember how James says that our false wisdom is "*earthly, unspiritual, and demonic*"? Part of submitting to God is to actively say no to the devil. Remember when Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Each time he resisted the devil by quoting Scripture. "*It is written... It is written... It is written...*" Illus.: A friend told me how she's been trying to apply James' words at work, where she hasn't always felt like she was a model Christian. She has James' words pinned up several places: "*Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.*" God has changed her and her relationships but, she said, "*I just feel Satan making it so difficult. Even physically, sometimes. Just this pressure.*" Satan does not like to give up his hold on us. But resist him as Jesus did and he will flee. He cannot do battle with the Word.

- B. **V.8a,** "*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*" If submitting is the work of the will, this coming near is the work of the heart. "*Lord Jesus, I've missed you. I want to see you again. Create in me a clean heart.*" We read our Bibles as someone far from home reads a love letter. We

worship. Receive Communion. And God, like the father, sees you a long way off and runs to meet you.

- C. Then there is also the heartbreaking work of facing our sin. **Vv.8b-9... We don't do this so that God will forgive us. We do this so that we learn not to sin.** Jesus has forgiven us completely but if we don't face this filth and adultery in our hearts we will never take sin seriously. Especially in relational sins, we hardly ever grasp at first just how arrogant and selfish we've been. We deny it, or worse, we think we were actually wise somehow. So God says, *Look at your bloodstained hands! What have you done!* Where do I wash them? In the mercy of Jesus.

*"Purify your hearts, you double-minded."* In ch.1 James told us to ask God for wisdom when we don't know how to handle trouble, but if we ask we must do what he says in the Bible or we will show ourselves to be *"double-minded and unstable in all we do."* Well, here we are on that very shaky ground. So we face how two-faced we've been. We look dead-on at the God-betraying adultery in our heart. Look till it gets to you; till it grieves you. I can tell you from my own experience that that can take some time because we are so loathe to look at what we are.

- D. And that brings us back to the heart of Christian wisdom: *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up"* (v.10). You come to that place where you know you can do yourself no good. You can't shake it off; can't just turn over a new leaf. You are broken-hearted, embarrassed and ashamed; aghast at the damage you've done to another person, at how easily Satan seduced you away from Jesus. You are helpless. Not just humbled, but broken. **And the very thing you realize is beyond your reach happens. He will lift you up.**

We sing and speak of grace so often. But we are not so familiar with mourning, with facing our sin. And without that—without a kind of mourner's bench—our knowledge of grace is anemic. It draws almost no one to Jesus.

No believer knows what a gift God's grace is like the person who has been so stricken with regret only to be

lifted by the Lord. No believer is so clear on the heart of theology, so humble and wise, so life-giving and kind to others; none is so rich in peace or joy or love, so full of hope and homesickness, so beautifully crowned and brightly adorned as the broken-hearted believer whom God has lifted up.

## Conclusion

So we come to this table. The Bible warns us against coming unworthily but Paul was speaking of those who take it lightly, who are spiritual adulterers when they come.

Illus.: Years ago a couple started attending our church who were also seeing me for counseling because of a great grief they had suffered. They had another church home but it had become a very toxic place and they were taking a kind of sabbatical. They had been hurt by harsh accusations and they were bleeding from their grief. One week when they came to see me she said, “I didn’t like what you said before Communion last Sunday.”

What she meant was part of the warning I typically gave. “If there are people whom you haven’t forgiven,” I had said, “you should not take Communion because it is a celebration of forgiveness.”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, “That’s why I *need* it. That’s why I *need* to take Communion, because they are so hard to forgive.” [*Pastoral Graces*, pp.70-71]

I’ve changed the way I invite people to Communion. **No one is worthy for this meal but Jesus.** But this is the sinner’s meal. This is where mourners meet the Lord. This is where we remember, “*He gives us more grace.*”

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<sup>i</sup>[http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration\\_quarterly/archives/1960s/vol\\_5\\_no\\_1\\_contents/olbricht.html](http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1960s/vol_5_no_1_contents/olbricht.html)