

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

*Pursuing Holiness, Part 5**Humility*

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We are in week 5 of our Lenten study Pursuing Holiness based on the book of James. James has taught us and teaches us today that we can consider it joy in our times of trial, we can ask for, receive, and apply God's wisdom as we endure, we can accept God's Word as truth and obey it to the letter, we can treat all people with dignity and respect by not showing favoritism of any kind, and we can speak or text or post only those words that display the grace of God – but as we will hear today - if we're lacking humility, our pursuit of holiness is going to fall short of making an eternal impact in the lives of others for the cause of Christ.

The fourth chapter of the book of James, this letter that he wrote to the Church, is about telling people to get off their high horses and stop pushing their way to the front of every gathering because they've decided they are more important and influential than the next person. Maybe they think this because they have more money or gave more money, they wear the best clothes, they have a higher IQ score, they've been there longer, or they can perfectly recite Psalm 23, 24, and 25. There is arguing and jostling for power and position in the early Church and James has had it! Let's listen:

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴You adulterous people, 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. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." ⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. ¹¹Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? ¹³Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."

Last week we studied chapter 3 which was all about the words we choose to use. James reminded us that the words we use are an overflow from our hearts. If our words are unkind, gossipy, slanderous, sarcastic, judgmental, or cuss words, they reveal a darkened heart; they reveal a heart in desperate need of renewal, of healing – in desperate need of a reminder of God's mercy in our own lives. They reveal a pride in ourselves, an inaccurate assessment of our own importance and influence, rather than a submission to God who alone is worthy of all praise.

Humility takes us to the core of what we think about God and what we think about ourselves in light of what we think about God. That's why James ends this section as he does. Let's look at how the paraphrase of Scripture called The Voice presents verses 13-17. *"¹³Listen carefully, those of you who make your plans and say, "We are traveling to this city in the next few days.*

We'll stay there for one year while our business explodes and revenue is up." "The reality is you have no idea where your life will take you tomorrow. You are like a mist that appears one moment and then vanishes another. "It would be best to say, "If it is the Lord's will and we live long enough, we hope to do this project or pursue that dream." "But your current speech indicates an arrogance that does not acknowledge the One who controls the universe, and this kind of big talking is the epitome of evil. " So if you know the right way to live and ignore it, it is sin—plain and simple."

It was John Riskin who said, *"I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a ... feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."* South African pastor from the 1800's Andrew Murray said, *"The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised while he is forgotten because he has received the spirit of Jesus, who pleased not Himself, and who sought not His own honor."*

Pride is all about me, myself and I. It is easy to spot - yet hard on the eyes, hard on the ears, and hard on the heart. False pride is equally hard on the eyes, the ears, and the heart. False pride needs to present a superior front for others because there is a need in this person's life for outside confirmation or approval to cover up an inner feeling of inadequacy. The answer to both is an accurate understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to God. William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell this story about Teddy Roosevelt. At Sagamore Hill, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite: *"That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun."* Then Roosevelt would grin and say, *"Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."*

The answer to both real and false pride is an acceptance of this truth taught by Jesus found in John 15:5, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* The Message puts it this way, *"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing."*

Now, you may hear that and think, *"That's not true. I can do a lot. I do a lot. I work hard, I study hard, I practice hard, I play hard, I serve hard, I give hard, I parent hard, I pray hard."* I do a lot on my own. But friends, men and women, boys and girls, apart from God, living our lives as if we have no responsibility towards the One who put us here, thinking that what we do tomorrow, and the the vacation we're going to take this summer is all about what I (we) can make happen, all of it ultimately means nothing when we get to the end of our day and the end of our days. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

God has seen how we dismiss him in favor of something or someone else on the Lord's Day. God has heard the words we have said and felt the impatience of our hearts because He has not done for us what we wanted. He sees how we have put ourselves on the throne of our lives, making all the calls, and dishing out all of the rewards and punishments according to our prideful rule of law. And do you know what else he knows? He knows how tired we are.

And God, at just the right time, perfectly and mercifully, provided the way out for us, the way out of thinking so much of ourselves that we have to plan and run and control everything. He provided the way out for us. He perfectly and mercifully rolled out the carpet made red by the sinless, saving blood of Jesus Christ, and called us to come. Come. Come to me, all you who are overextended in commitments, weighed down by loneliness and worry, and compulsively telling everyone your story to make your name and your ever-present, 'it's not fair' problems greater than anyone else's . . . come to me – and I will give you rest. Come, meaning, get down on your knees and admit that you are but a mist, a vanishing mist in this world. Allow God to take hold of you, put to death all that is not from him inside of you, and breathe new life into you. Come, grateful that the world does not revolve around you or your children or your spouse or your boss or your girlfriend or boyfriend. Come, grateful that the God of all Creation, the God of

the Universe, sees you and knows you and loves you so much that he could not let you endlessly bob around on the sea of purposeless pursuits and platitudes. “Oh, isn’t your house lovely.” “Wow, your family is so intelligent.” “I love your hair.” “An 8-point, fantastic!” “I know if I called you, you’d be there in a heartbeat.” It’s empty, folks. It’s a vanishing mist. It’s all for nothing apart from Jesus.

Again, Andrew Murray said, *“Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is for me to have no trouble; never to be fretted or vexed or irritated or sore or disappointed. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord where I can go in and shut the door and kneel to my Father in secret and be at peace as in a deep sea of calmness when all around is trouble. It is the fruit of the Lord Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on Calvary’s cross, manifested in those of His own who are definitely subject to the Holy Spirit.”*

God gave us the answer through his beloved servant James. Here is the answer: *“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil [who tells you that all those things matter more than God matters], and he will flee from you. “Come near to God and he will come near to you... “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*

Let us pray: *Gracious God, forgive us. We have made so much of ourselves. We have put stock in our achievements. We have pridefully recounted them. We have boasted, maybe not overtly, but we have put ourselves above others. Help us to remember that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. You are looking at our hearts. You are calling us to come, to reject the sin that so easily entangles, to renounce its evil ways, and let your remaking, perfect healing begin. Holy Spirit, bring to our minds those things we have done, those words we have said, those thoughts we have allowed to take root that are evil in your sight. Bring us to true confession this day – and most especially bring us to confess our faith in you. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Jesus said, “I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.” The only way that happens is when we submit our lives to him, acknowledging that we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. And when we do that, the work of Christ becomes real for us, as real as the person sitting next to you – and as his forgiveness washes us, he cleanses us, and makes us new from the inside out. Know that you are forgiven, and may you live, from this moment on, at peace with God, with others, and with yourself. Amen.