

James writes in 4:1, “*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?*” James suggests that *worldly* wisdom leads to exactly what you might expect—namely, fighting. Have you noticed that when politicians say, “I’ll fight for you,” all we seem to get is more fighting? When we fight for what *we* want, we’ll more times than not get fighting everywhere—from bloodshed in the Middle East and Ukraine, to the infighting of company boardrooms, to the cruelties of the elementary school playground that often leave lifelong scars. “*What causes fights and quarrels among you?*” James asks. “*Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want...you covet...you quarrel and fight....*”

There’s an entirely different way to get what we want—the way of *heavenly* wisdom, and the way to get that wisdom is to ask God for it. That may sound like superstitious foolishness to the worldly wise, because the way of prayer is so counter-intuitive that we can only live that way if God gives us the gift of wisdom. True wisdom “*comes down from heaven*” and is totally unlike the prevailing wisdom of this age. James expands on that thought in 3:17, “*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*” Rather than being characterized by “*every evil practice,*” it is “*first of all pure.*” The word *pure* is usually a description of how God is completely separate from our moral imperfection, but here it is the primary characteristic of those who have received *heavenly* wisdom. Rather than adopting the desire-driven lifestyle of our fellow humans, the wise will adopt the holy life of God.

Would you agree that humility is essential to Christian discipleship? Jesus spoke about the importance of humility on a number of occasions, including the time he called a child to him and said, “*Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” in Matthew 18 v. 4. Jesus also said, “*For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*” in Matthew 23 v. 12. Following in the

footsteps of his Master, in the last verse of today's reading James says, "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*" (4:10).

OK—confession time. From the very first time I read this verse as a teenage believer I have been convinced that it will be less painful for me to humble *myself* than to wait for the Lord to humble me. Can you follow my thinking? James shares our Lord's deep concern that his followers walk humbly before God. In the most practical and helpful way, James tells us not only that we should be humble, but also how to do it. In this passage James gives us three "how to" steps that will enable us to walk humbly with God.

After submitting ourselves to God the next step is to "resist the devil" (4:7).

The apostle seems to suggest that we can never be truly humble if we are not willing to actively resist the devil. Back in verse 4, James says that "*friendship with the world means enmity against God.*" The Greek word for "enmity" is a very strong word—*échthra*—which is sometimes translated as "hatred." If this is so, James is saying that anyone in love with the world, who is a friend—a *philos*—of the world, hates God. The natural consequence of friendship with the world it seems is summarized in the second line of verse 4: "*Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*"

I was watching a short biography of Denzel Washington recently and besides being an Oscar winning actor he is a very popular commencement speaker. The one thing he consistently says in college commencement addresses is this: **Put God first in your life.** That's powerful. It's the same thing that James is saying. James proceeds to substantiate this thought by presenting strong supporting evidence from Scripture. His first statement has caused some discussion among biblical scholars since it seems to be a "paraphrase" of biblical truth.

Some scholars relate the question in verse 5, "*Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?*" to Genesis 6 while others think it refers to the Lord's vow in Genesis 8:21, which says, "*never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.*" It

seems even more likely that James is referring to the understanding of God as a *jealous* God who will not share allegiance with any other little “g” god, stated in the Ten Commandments. In other words, we cannot divide our allegiance and serve two masters. **We must put God first!** Then in the sixth verse, James quotes directly from Proverbs 3:34. “*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.*” Simple enough. You cannot be a person who relies on your pride and be a person who trusts in God. God shows favor (i.e. grace) to the humble.

It was that same promise that Christ made to the Apostle Paul that is recorded in his second letter to the Corinthians, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9). The grace of God is readily available to all who trust in the Lord and follow him. But God opposes the proud. We must submit ourselves to God and resist the devil. We cannot be a friend of Christ and a friend of the world simultaneously. Those two ways of living are diametrically opposed.

In addition, James gives some specific suggestions regarding how we should submit to God and resist the devil in verses 8 and 9. He enumerates four specific steps to follow. They are:

1. *Wash your hands, you sinners.* This is an appeal to our outward lifestyle. Our conduct must be clean—made clean by God’s grace and love.
2. *Purify your hearts, you double-minded.* This is another reference to our motives. Our spiritual lives and our motives must be pure before God. We must allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives—single-minded, not double-minded (1:8).
3. *Grieve, mourn and wail.* This refers to the classic Jewish practice of the act of repentance; not only acknowledging the existence of our sins but feeling sorry that we have sinned against God; shedding tears of repentance.
4. *Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.* James continues his call to godly repentance. He is not commanding us to forsake the joy of the Lord. Instead, he is asking us to depart from the shallow laughter and temporary joy that often fills a life of self-centered sin.

The application of James' teaching is that we need to quit playing games with the devil (and with sin) and become serious about *submitting and resisting*. Instead, resist the devil. Don't play with fire, James says, or you'll get burned. We cannot please God while playing around with evil. We need to remember there is a war going on—both in heaven and on earth between good and evil.

And, as we engage in this war, a promise is made that the devil will flee from us. Through Jesus Christ, we are assured of victory over the devil. We cannot always resist him in the flesh, but we can resist him in the Spirit! For example, we should use the Ephesians 6:16 shield of faith to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. Verse 7 says, "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*"

The next step toward the life of humility is to "*Come near to God*" (v. 8), who is of course the source of all authentic faith and humility. We begin our relationship with God by submitting to God (v. 7) and that is how we walk with him day by day. He is the Lord—the Master—and we are his servants. To follow him, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross daily (Luke 9:23). I know of no other way to live an authentic Christian life. Commit to know the will of God and then do it. Submitting to God might come off sounding cold and nonrelational, but it's not! God calls us to a growing relationship of love, trust, grace, forgiveness, openness—all the marks of a loving relationship. And yet, God will never force his love on us. C. S. Lewis once said, "*There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'*" God does not coerce or manipulate. God loves, invites, and responds to any and all of us.

That is the context of verse 8: "*Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*" What a wonderful invitation and what an incredible promise! It takes risk to reach out to another or to attempt to draw near to someone else. God has promised never to back away from us. God is always ready to respond appropriately to us with his love and grace. As we come near to God and allow God to come near to us, a wonderful thing takes place. Jesus refers to this phenomenon as "*remaining*" ...in him and he in us in John 15:4-5.

When we are possessed more and more by Christ himself; his character increasingly supplants ours. As we come near to God and allow him to come near to us, this happens. Possessed more and more by Christ himself, his character becomes our character. We become more like him. When we die to self and are filled with the Holy Spirit, the “fruit of the Spirit” flourishes in our lives and flows into the lives of those we live with, work with, and worship with. We become more and more like Jesus—more and more humble. His humility becomes our humility. That is also when we realize how near God has come to us, so we feel like singing, “I in my Savior am happy and blest” (a line we sang in Blessed Assurance earlier today)!

The last step to take is to “*humble ourselves before the Lord*” (v. 10). The steps are clear. If we are to be humble, we begin with **submitting ourselves to God**, emptying our lives of self and sin. Then our emptiness must be filled by God’s Holy Spirit as we **resist the devil and come near to God** so God can fill us with **himself**. Which reminds me of another C.S. Lewis quote I’d like to share with you: “**God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.**” The only way we can accomplish what James urges is to admit we cannot do it by our own efforts. It’s impossible for us to humble ourselves on our own strength of will or ingenuity. We need the power of God himself. Authentic humility comes from God. A humble person is one who has seen him or herself as they really are in the sight of God, while confessing their sin and professing Jesus as Lord.

But let’s remember that the promise to each of us is clearly spelled out. When you humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, “*He will lift you up.*” Unlike my adolescent thought about choosing between humbling myself or waiting to let God humble me, letting God “*lift me up*” sounds way better than trying to lift myself up. The Lord said, “*For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*” (Matthew 23:12). Wise words to live by. Surely, it is never God’s desire to put us down. So “*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*” The Lord delights in lifting us up! Glory to God! Amen.