

Prayers

To God

Praise God for His world, His Creation and everything within it you can see or experience today. Praise God that you are His creation and belong in His world.

For myself

Lord Jesus, You have filled my life with so many things. You have given me my friends and relatives, my country, my place of birth, my work, my likes and dislikes, my body, my features, my sensibilities and opinions, and so much more. And more than this, You love me as I am, and as You created me! May I learn to use all my gifts and faculties in Your service, Lord Jesus, and for Your greater glory. **AMEN**

For others

Weekly theme: Travel

Pray for those who travel today, on road or rail, or by sea or air.

Meditation

There is no life essentially better than yours
For the Lord to use for His will:

There is no time better than here and now
For deciding to do what is right:

There is no finer place than the place you stand
For beginning the walk of discipleship:

There are no superior circumstances than your own
For a new work to begin in God's Kingdom:

There is no greater potential in anyone else
For Christ to prefer him or her, not you;

There is nothing greater than the things you do
For God's glory to be broadcast to the world.

Alleluia!

Bible Passage

James 4:7-12

⁷ Therefore, submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹ Do not find fault one another, friends. Whoever finds fault and judges others, finds fault with and judges the law; and if you judge the law, you will not obey it, because you regard it as faulty! ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to both save and destroy. So, then, who are you to find fault with your neighbour?

Review

Up to this point, most of the letter of James has been about individual faults and other problems within the Christian church, both of practice and of doctrine. After reading it, we will either feel thoroughly reprov'd and challenged or at least be uneasy at the implications of all James says. But now, although he does not stand back from his penetrating analysis of church difficulties, James begins to offer us more positive advice about how to deal with these things. While we all need to hear just challenges to our deeds and godly criticism of our faith, we find it easier to read about solutions than about problems.

In this passage, James outlines the principles of faith that enables men or women of God to rise above worldly problems and demonstrate the Kingdom of God in their lives. He begins with a call to holiness, which is summarised in verse 8, '*draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*' He then calls for repentance, by asking those who have assumed that all is well to come in '*mourning*' to their God and seek His blessing (4:10). These are the foremost elements of revival in any church. When God's people accept that they have sinned and turn to their Lord in genuine and demonstrable repentance, then He can do a 'new' work in them. As has happened so often in history, He will revitalise their ministry of both worship and service, and extend the cause of His Kingdom.

All this can start with what is described here in James' letter, and the simple instruction, '*therefore, submit yourselves to God ...*' (4:7). This simple piece of advice is more profound than we imagine; it is an obvious Christian responsibility, but it is extremely difficult to do. Most of us try to submit to the Lord in all things but find that doing this is far harder than merely believing it to be right! Remember however that James does not tell us to submit to church authorities or leaders, but to God. God has always exercised authority through anointed leaders, but individual Christians must always insist that their allegiance is to the Lord first and foremost. Leaders must earn the trust of people through godliness and right leadership, as did David in the Old Testament, and without submission by both people and leaders to God, the church of God never moves forward.

James does not stop here, he goes on, and gives wise counsel about holiness, the pathway of true discipleship that does indeed '*take up a Cross*' to follow Jesus. To begin with, he says that to submit to God means to turn away from His enemy, the Devil, '*resist the devil and he*

will flee from you ...' (4:7). Of course, the two go hand in hand, for how can the devil be resisted without drawing near to God, who has defeated him 'in Christ'? Verse 8 then calls on God's people to purify themselves, because those who come close to God expose themselves to God's purity which shows up all unworthiness.

In the midst of this, James calls his readers '*you double-minded*'. It seems a harsh rebuke, but his words are not without reason. Too often, Christian people want to be able to both live as they please and worship God on Sundays as if the two worlds of religion and daily life are entirely separate. Throughout his letter, James insists they are not. The Christian is either wholly and completely committed or not, and a Christian must in this respect be 'single minded', not 'double-minded'. In Christ, there is no religion that comes near to God separate from daily life in all its complexity.

James' call to Christian holiness is then accompanied by a call to repentance. Although the word 'repentance' does not appear in verses 9 and 10, this is clearly what is meant here. True humility before God means to cease blind ignorance of the spiritual and practical consequences of faith and show genuine remorse for sin. This is what James means by these words '*let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy to gloom*' (4:9). He is not calling on Christians to be glum or be dismal company with each other, but rather to be honest about sin before God. There is no place here for those, and I have met many, who say, 'well I can't think of anything I have done wrong for which I need to repent.' This is a surprisingly common attitude in church, and one that needs to be challenged strongly. In contrast, however, where a whole community of God's people repent of their sins in spirit and in truth, then God's Spirit is released in great power!

Yet as James illustrates here, there remains a stubborn streak of judgementalism within many of God's people, which can be resistant to appeals to holiness and godliness. We have all known what it is like when in a house group or a meeting, someone feels it is necessary to be critical of others in a way that destroys fellowship and common grace. The points made may be worth raising, but when put inappropriately, they destroy common faith.

So here, James urges Christian brothers and sisters, '*do not find fault with each other*' (4:11), but his argument sounds rather odd. Basically, he argues that those who find fault with others do the same with God's law, and this is to hold God in contempt (4:11,12)! But how does this argument work?

James' point here is that because we are all found guilty before the Law, and this is a standard feature of the Gospel of Grace (see Romans 3:9-16), we cannot be found to be fault finding of others. This demonstrates an attitude of critical negativity which cannot be sustained by anyone before Almighty God and His revelation of the Law (4:12). When James says '*so, then, who are you to find fault with your neighbour?*' (4:12), his point is similar to that of Jesus, who gave the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35). He teaches about the need for all servants of God to be people who forgive first and ask questions later. His advice is essential for all disciples of Christ, and for all the church.

This passage is powerful advice for God's people. It encourages them to focus on God and His Christ, and to accept their place as sinners who are in continual need of forgiveness. With this approach to faith and discipleship, there is no need for people to be constant critics of each other's behaviour before God or others. The true disciple is one who knows that their role is to help not to condemn, and to bless, not to curse.

Discipleship

Application

Applying the rule of forgiveness

I have seen people follow the advice of James' letter here with powerful spiritual consequences, but few embrace a wholly forgiving attitude towards all people, in order to reflect the Gospel. I have also been rebuked for suggesting that James' advice about forgiveness might form the basis for church policy on things like marriage, divorce, the Sabbath and more. Unfortunately, it is my observation that where critical attitudes persist in the life of the church, the devil has a great opportunity to peg back the life of a Christian fellowship. The consequence of applying this, however, is the liberation and salvation of God's people in Christian life, worship and service, no less

Repentance at church

Yes, I was once publicly rebuked for suggesting that the advice of James' letter be accepted by a church, which needed to repent of the sins of criticism that were destroying its fellowship! How hard we make it for ourselves when we become governed by gossip and criticism, and when people refuse to be specific and open about the problems they have with each other! God help us all speak with care, and be honest, truthful and open.

Ideas for what to do

- Discuss in any house-group you may have whether it is practical for people to make a general confession of sins, and mean it.
- Write down any criticisms you have of other members of your church and its leaders. Resolve to speak to them appropriately about what you have written.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How is it that we all become trapped in the critical spirit of our age and times? Try to be specific.
2. How do you feel about the idea that the devil is at work in our midst because of our own judgemental attitudes? How does Christ deal with this?
3. Do you have any experience of God's people collectively confessing their sin and consequently being blessed? If not, why do you think this has not happened?

Final Prayer

Dear Lord. You have seen everything that has happened to us, and You are gracious to us still. Receive our confession of wrongdoing, and convince us about how we should change our behaviour for the better. Keep us in Your will, we pray, and keep us close; AMEN