

James 4:7-12

⁷So, submit yourselves to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded people. ⁹Lament, mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy into gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹Do not speak against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother is speaking against the law and judging the law. But if you judge the law, you are not one who does the law, but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge. He is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

The Lord Will Lift You Up

I.

It's that time of the year again. Artprize has come again to Grand Rapids. The city is swarming with people checking out the various entries for this year. As always, some pieces are uplifting while others present a dark side of human existence.

Art has always done that. There is a painting by Sir Joseph Noel Paton from 1855 called: "The Pursuit Of Pleasure — A Vision Of Human Life." The bright figures at the bottom of the painting have all died—their struggle is over. Their pursuit is over. The bright figure floating on gossamer wings is the pleasure the living continually pursue.

People of every kind join in the pursuit. There are people in rags as well as those in fine clothing. Soldiers and merchants. Some seem to be nearing the end of their struggle, but still insist on reaching out for pleasure. Those coming from farther back have no remorse in shoving aside and even trampling over those standing between themselves and pleasure. Look closely and you will see that there is not a smile on a single face. Pleasure is elusive when it is all about a worldly existence.

The painting tells the story of the world's pursuit of joy and pleasure. The Bible tells us joy is not to be found there.

Isn't it sad that so many people live in such a pursuit of pleasure that they fail to see what is really important? "Do not speak against one another, brothers" (James 4:11, EHV). James has consistently focused on sins of the tongue. Many of the verses between the readings of the last few weeks, as well as the readings themselves, have continued to focus on sins of the tongue. Clearly, sins of the tongue were a problem at the time James wrote his letter.

Things haven't changed all that much with regard to human behavior in all the centuries between James and us. In today's postmodern culture, people will use their tongues to say whatever they need to say to achieve the desired outcome. Their own pursuit of pleasure trumps truth and justice and anything else that stands in their way.

The words spoken by people across the political spectrum in the last days and weeks have been vicious and slanderous. It seems that the only emotion *not* shown is kindness and compassion.

II.

Of course, the problem of sins of the tongue doesn't exist only in the public square, does it? The tongue is so easy to use wrongly. Everyone misuses the tongue.

Proverbs speaks of our use of the tongue many places, like this one: “Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows ¹⁹ is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, ‘I was only joking!’ ²⁰ Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down... ²² The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts” (Proverbs 26:18-20, 22, NIV84). Stories that may or may not be true tear down the good name and reputation of another person. The old saying goes: “The pen is mightier than the sword” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton). Many people today have learned that their words have consequences. A few choice words in a Facebook post can change your life. Since everyone carries around their own personal video recorder today, the vitriolic spoken word goes viral and destroys lives, too. Have *you* been caught up in such difficult situations?

The Psalmist David echoes the sentiments of James when he says; “Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:13, EHV). Sins of the tongue go well beyond gossip and destruction of someone else’s reputation. Do you use your tongue to boast and brag about yourself? Lying about your own achievements and falsely building up your own reputation are just as wrong as gossiping about others and tearing them down.

“Do not speak against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother is speaking against the law and judging the law. But if you judge the law, you are not one who does the law, but a judge” (James 4:11, EHV). Many people might think that in this verse James condemns any and all criticizing of another person. That is not the case. In fact, in the last verse of his letter James writes: “Let it be known that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death” (James 5:20, EHV). Certainly pointing out someone’s sin so that they turn from the error of their ways back to the Savior is not only right, but desirable. We don’t want people to suffer in hell eternally because we failed to warn them that their sin is in danger of separating them from God eternally.

So what does he mean when warns against judging? The sinful judging James speaks about is criticizing without love and painting a picture of yourself as morally superior to another person. When you set yourself up as the judge of God’s law, you usurp God’s position and authority. It means that you imagine *yourself* as somehow better able of understanding what is acceptable than God, who is the very Giver of the law.

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord” (James 4:10, EHV). When you speak evil of another person or judge another person, you show a lack of godly humility.

III.

“So, submit yourselves to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God, and he will come near to you” (James 4:7-8, EHV). James calls us to repent of all these sins of the tongue and the lack of humility we show in our lives and return to God.

Submit to him. After all, it is our Savior-God who designed and carried out the plan to rescue us from these and every other sin. God sent his One and only Son, Christ Jesus, to fulfill all righteousness for us. He kept his tongue in check for us. He utterly refused to boast and brag about himself—though he had every right to do so as the Mighty One of the universe. He humbly bowed his head in the face of the most humiliating persecution at his unjust trial before Pilate and Herod and the religious leaders of the Jews.

The Lord Jesus was humbled in our place, being lifted up on the cross in an unjust execution in our place. Then Jesus suffered the greatest humility of all when the Heavenly Father abandoned him on the cross to suffer the eternal consequences *our* sins deserved.

“Lament, mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy into gloom” (James 4:9, EHV). James calls on sinners to recognize the utter lack of ability

we have to do anything about the sad state of affairs of our sin. James called us to repentance, saying, “Submit yourselves to God.... Come near to God, and he will come near to you” (James 4:7-8, EHV).

The only reason James can so confidently call us to repent is the fact that Jesus has already done it all for us. God himself has accomplished what is necessary for us to be pulled closer to him. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross when the work of salvation was done for us. Come near to him, because he is already waiting for you.

“Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts” (James 4:8, EHV). The work has already been done by the Lord Jesus. Stop rejecting him, and cleanse your hands and purify your hearts daily by going again to the cross where you find the forgiveness Jesus has won. You have no ability to come near if *he* doesn’t give it to you.

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10, EHV). The Lord has lifted you up. He has lifted you up by the fact that in his undeserved love God sent Jesus and accepts the payment he made on your behalf. The guilt is gone. The judging of your neighbor has been paid for. The death penalty has been paid. The Lord has lifted you up also in crediting you with Jesus’ righteousness and perfection. The price for heaven is still perfection. You have perfection because Jesus gave you his. You are not an outcast, but a privileged member of God’s household and God’s Kingdom. God has made you his own dear child by faith given as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Your hands are cleansed; your hearts are purified.

IV.

“So, submit yourselves to God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7, EHV). Because you have been cleansed and purified by Jesus’ blood you are willing, as a child of God, to submit to God, who loved you more than anyone else.

Because the Lord Jesus now lives in you, you have been given the power to resist the Devil. As Luther said in the famous reformation hymn “A Mighty Fortress,” “one little word can fell him.” Use the Word of God as your defensive weapon to fight back against him. Learn and know what God has said so that in any and every temptation you are able to unleash the power of God’s Word to remind yourself of what Jesus has done, and to remind Satan that he cannot control you or rule over you any longer.

Because the Lord Jesus now lives in you, you have the power to resist by speaking well of your brothers and sisters in Christ, rather than speaking against them. You have the power and the confidence to defend others and speak well of them when you hear attacks against their character.

Because the Lord Jesus now lives in you, you have the power to confront your brothers and sisters with their sins of the tongue—not standing in judgement of God’s law, but warning the sinner, just as James did, to resist the Devil and submit to God and his grace.

The Lord has lifted you up. Because the Lord Jesus now lives in you, the lamenting and mourning and weeping that consumed your conscience because of your sin have been lifted as if a burden was removed from your shoulders. Hold your head high as a Christian living in the newfound joy of forgiveness and peace in Christ Jesus. The Lord has lifted you up for rejoicing. Amen.