

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (NIV84)

Theme: Submit Yourselves to God

1. He will help you overcome the devil
2. He will lift you up

Submit. That is almost a bad word nowadays; it certainly has a negative connotation. It conjures up thoughts of some hateful, unloving dictator who forces his people to follow him or else. And there have been and still are such people today that lead us to think of the word submission in this way.

Our Old Adam certainly doesn't want to submit. We don't want to be under anyone's control—we don't want to answer to anyone except ourselves. We want to be the boss of ourselves; no one can tell you what to do. But when you think about it, you submit to others all the time. You submit to your bosses at work, police officers, or the government who sets up rules and regulations. If no one submitted to anyone, then this world would be nothing but chaos—full of murder, rape, and every other horrible act under the sun. So even though you may not like the word, submission is a good thing.

Especially when it comes to submitting to God. But our Old Adam particularly rebels against submitting to God, we don't want to serve him or obey his Word by nature. But the Lord promises us not just a better life here on earth but a perfect life forever in heaven. So God isn't just a tyrant who demands that we submit to him or else, he is our loving Father who wants us to join him in heaven forever. And so James says to us as Christians, **submit yourselves, then, to God.**

In the first part of this chapter James addresses fighting and arguing among the Jewish Christians who were scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. They were acting like the people of the world instead of Christians. And yet, James points out, they didn't get what

they wanted. All the fighting and bickering and caring only about themselves did them absolutely no good because they embraced the ways of the world and rejected God.

Isn't that what we often do? Not necessarily the fighting and bickering among our fellow members, although there may be some of that; but the embracing the ways of this world, and rejecting of God. We often submit to our sinful nature, going along with what the world thinks is good and right. We are often double minded, trying to serve both the Lord and the world, keeping faith compartmentalized. As if you only have to act like a Christian on Sundays—leaving worship and living like an unbeliever the rest of the week, or doing what you want to do even if it is against God's commands. Or only embracing the Lord with half our heart, simply going through the motions as if we can trick God. That is being a friend of the world and rejecting God; and to this James says, **don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.**

The Lord is a jealous God. He doesn't want to share our hearts with anyone or anything. He wants to be first place in our lives, front and center. He doesn't want some obedience, he wants complete obedience.

And so, we humble ourselves before him. We confess who we are and what we do. We know that we deserve eternal damnation and that we can't save ourselves. So we go before God in full repentance, seeking his forgiveness.

The four verses of our text today contain 10 imperatives, 10 commands for us to follow. These aren't self-help commands, these don't promise us a better life on earth, rather these commands are what Christians do when they no longer friends of the world but live in submission to God.

As you reread this section of Scripture again, you will notice that, depending on how you interpret some of them, at least seven of these commands have to do with repentance. **Wash your hands; purify your hearts; Grieve, mourn and wail; change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom; and humble yourselves before the Lord.** We wash our hands, turning away from our sins and making them clean before the Lord. We turn away from our sinful actions, not wanting anything to do with what we used to do. We

purify our hearts—our whole selves are then dedicated to God. We obey him, not just with our outward actions, but with our hearts and minds, completely committed to the Lord and his will. We grieve, mourn, and wail—not in the sense that we can never be happy or celebrate. Rather it's our reaction to sin—a deep felt sorrow and angst over our actions, that we have failed God. We don't rejoice in the sins of the world or take pride in any of our sinful actions. In the same way we change our laughter into mourning and joy to gloom—not taking pleasure in sin, but repenting of them in full contrition. And finally we humble ourselves before the Lord, acknowledging who we are and what we deserve—that we are not worthy to be called his own. Seven commands about repentance. The life of a Christian is a life of repentance. That is what we do.

These seven commands teach us what repentance is. But notice what isn't a part of repentance—our good works. The word repent means a change of mind, a turning away from. It indicates that what you used to do is no longer okay in your eyes; you turn away from your sin instead turn away to God. But our good works do not play a part in our repentance, they never have and they never will. If they did then we'd contribute our own good works to our salvation. So how do good works play in with repentance? They are a result of repentance, they are a fruit of repentance, but they are not part of repentance. They flow out of our heart in pure joy knowing that we are forgiven in Christ. Paul told the Christians in Damascus that they should **prove their repentance by their deeds**; John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees, **produce fruit in keeping with your repentance**. In other words, our works show that we are truly sorrowful over our sins and that we believe that Christ has paid for all of them. And since we can't read each other's hearts, we show them what is in our hearts by what we do and don't do. This all has to do with submitting to God.

And again, the Lord isn't some sort of ruthless dictator who demands obedience and submission, in this case repentance, with the only motivation being to avoid punishment. No, the Lord uses his grace and love to motivate us.

There are three specific promises that God gives to us in these verses. The first, **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you**. The devil tempts us to sin; the devil tries to get us to doubt God's Word and his love for us. He is our enemy and accuser, a liar who prowls around

looking for someone's soul to devour. He is smart and powerful and we often fail to resist him. But as we saw a few weeks ago at the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the devil is powerless against the Lord. He is defeated again and again. Christ has complete control over the devil and so when he tempts us all we do is flee to the Lord in his Word and we know that we stand forgiven. It reminds me of stanza three of Luther's great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*. There Luther writes, "this world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him." What is that one word? I always thought it was Christ or cross, or resurrection, or something of the sort. Luther was asked that question once and the word he had in mind was "liar." When the devil accuses us of sin, when he claims that God doesn't love us and that Christ couldn't have possibly paid for our sins as horrible as they are, we can call the devil a liar on the basis of God's Word and he must flee from us!

Which leads us to the second promise of God in these verses, **Come near to God and he will come near to you**. You come near to God when you take his Word to heart, when you submit to him and his will through faith. And when you do so, he will not fail you. As you cherish and cling to the grace and promise he gave you at your baptism—that your sins were washed away and clothed with Christ's perfection; as you kneel before the altar and humbly receive his true body and blood together with the bread and the wine, then the Lord comes near to you. He forgives you and reminds you of his love and mercy. We could not defeat the devil so we flee from him and run toward God, who saves us. Again we may think of his temptation in the wilderness, but also the agony he endured in the garden, at his trial, on the cross, but especially his resurrection. His victory over the devil is now ours! Again from *A Mighty Fortress*; this time from stanza two: "With might of ours can naught be done; Soon were our loss effected. But for us fights the valiant one Whom God himself elected. You ask, 'Who is this?' Jesus Christ it is, The almighty Lord. And there's no other God; He holds the field forever"

And the third promises from God, **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up**. When we go before God in humbleness and full repentance, what does he do? He lifts you up; he exalts you. That is, he forgives you. The Lord will lift you up out of the depths of your sin, out of the muck and gloom of despair. Through

the blood of Christ, he washes you clean and makes you holy. He replaces the mourning and wailing of repentance, with the joy and celebration that only free forgiveness can bring! So when we submit ourselves to God, he forgives us and lifts us up to heaven.

Think of the parable of prodigal son in our gospel for today. He was friends with the world, not caring about God or submitting to his will. And what did that get him? After he went out and wasted all of his inheritance and woman and booze, he was left with nothing—destitute and alone. He got a job feeding pigs and soon came to the realization that they were eating better than he was. So he came crawling back home to his Father, in humbleness and full repentance.

And what did the Father do? He threw a party for him. He didn't punish him, he didn't make him pay for his past mistakes. He embraced him and celebrated that his lost son had returned. We are the prodigal son and God is the father. When we humble ourselves and turn to him, he freely forgives us and rejoices that we have returned to him!

Our Lord is not some ruthless dictator whose only goal is to find reasons and ways to punish us and make us suffer. Rather he is a loving and forgiving God who comes near to us with the comfort of his gospel; he defeats the devil for us, and lifts us up out of the despair and gloom of sin.

And so what do we do? Motivated by God's grace and love for us, we repent before him. We no longer want to follow the ways of the world, but we want to submit to God. To submit, then, is not a bad word, but to submit yourself to the Lord is an act of faith knowing that he freely saves us from eternal death and lifts up the humble with his forgiveness through the death of Jesus. Amen.