

James 18 – Wisdom Brings Repentance
Pastor Deborah Oakley – GFC – 9/24/23

We are continuing our journey through the book of James in a series entitled Wisdom for Everyday Life. Today I'm preaching a message called Wisdom Brings Repentance. Our text for today is James 4:8-10

Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

I don't know about you, but these verses are kind of shocking at first. We're more used to verses like "put on a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness." Verses like that are dealing with depression or grieving a loss. But James is talking about grieving over our sin and double mindedness.

If you think about it – **James deals with sin all through His book.** In chapter one he deals with temptation, double-mindedness, anger, sinful words, and not being a doer of the word.

In chapter two James deals with the sins of discrimination and lack of mercy. He also addresses those who think their sin is no big deal by saying that if you keep the whole law except for one, you are still a sinner.

By the way – this whole idea of minimizing sin is huge today, even in churches. Hyper-grace teaching causes some people to not see sinning against God as that big of a deal. But **if you see your sin as something small – you will see Jesus as a small Savior.** And your sorrow for sin will be small or non-existent!

In chapters 3 and 4 James deals with the sins of worldliness and selfishness. James tells us to submit to God and then resist the devil. I believe that the verses we are covering today show us how to submit to God. First, in verse 8 James tell us:

Come near to God and He will come near to you.

One of the saddest verses in the Bible is found in Exodus 20. The presence of God came down with smoke and fire at Mt. Sinai. Verse 21 says –

The people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

The difference between Moses and the people was that he drew near to God, but they stood afar off. Moses always drew near to God. We see an example of this in Exodus 3:1-4. Moses saw a bush on fire, but it did not burn up. *Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn."* So,

when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Right now, God is calling our name.

Deborah, Deborah - Joe, Joe - Anthony, Anthony -Mary, Mary

Not just once but again and again He calls to us.

May our response always be... Here I am.

There are things that happen in our lives that look strange. There are things we see that we don't understand. At those times we can choose to walk on by or turn aside. But if we walk on by, we miss out on what God is doing.

When did God speak to Moses? When Moses turned aside to look – then God spoke. God didn't yell at Moses as He was passing by, "Hey, Mo! It's the Lord speaking. Come on over here and let's talk." No, Moses drew near first.

God responds when we draw near. We enter a greater dimension of God's presence when we draw near. To get into God's presence, we must draw near, AND we must respond to the voice of God. **How do we draw near to God?** Obviously through spiritual practices like prayer, worship and Bible study. But we do all that through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Hebrews 10:19-22 says:

Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...

We draw near in confidence, a sincere heart and faith. And when we draw near God will draw near to us. However, there's another thing we must do if we want to be near to God. Verse 8 continues:

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

We cannot approach God with unconfessed sin in our hearts. Isaiah 59:2 says:

Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

If we are going to draw near to God and grow spiritually, we must repent of our sin and constantly plow up the fallow ground of our hearts. Fallow ground is ground that nothing can grow on. It's been left uncultivated and packed down from people walking on it.

The ground of your heart might be fallow because you've not plowed it or planted seed. Or it might be because people have walked all over you. Whatever the reason, you must plow up the ground to prepare your soil.

How do we do that? We wash our hands and purify our hearts. Here's two ways we do that: The first is through repentance, which is more than just confessing sin.

Too many people don't understand deep repentance. **How do you know if you have truly repented? By the godly changes in your life.** 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 tells us what those are:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There is no regret for godly sorrow, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such deep longing, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right.

We must understand this: the Bible teaches that there is a difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. **You can tell the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow by their results.** Godly sorrow leads to repentance. But worldly sorrow just leaves you sorry for what you've done.

Godly sorrow lays the ax to the root, but worldly sorrow just deals with outward behavior. Godly sorrow leads to repentance and change, but worldly sorrow leads to death – emotional, spiritual death and sometimes even physical death. That's because **worldly sorrow is sorrow without hope.** 1 Thessalonians 4:13 says:

Now also we would not have you ignorant, brethren, about those who fall asleep (in death), that you may not grieve (for them) as the rest do who have no hope.

When you lose hope, that's when you know you need to lay the ax to the root of worldly sorrow.

We have some great biblical examples of godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. For instance, both Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus. They were both sorrowful for what they did. But Judas had a worldly sorrow that leads to death, and he committed suicide by hanging himself. Peter had a godly sorrow that led to repentance that led to him reconnecting with Jesus.

Worldly sorrow drives you away from God, but godly sorrow draws you closer to God! Godly sorrow leads to true repentance and life, but worldly sorrow results in death. True repentance leads to true change. 1 John 1:9 tells us:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.

That's an awesome promise, but **don't deceive yourself into thinking you've repented because you confessed your sin.** Many people confess their sins fully intending to sin again. And they do not change because they have not repented. And they have not repented because they have no godly sorrow for sin.

Godly sorrow leads to true repentance which results in life change. You don't repent and stay the same!

Don't deceive yourself into thinking superficial confession will open your heart and change your life! **Don't confuse just being sorry with true repentance.** Being sorry means feeling sorrow or regret. Repentance on the other hand is the action or process of repenting -especially for misdeeds or moral shortcomings.

Did you notice repentance involves ACTION? It's more than just a feeling of regret. Repentance isn't just guilt. It's a change of mind and behavior.
Repentance means we turn from going one way and go the other way.

You see, freedom is more than freedom from. It is freedom to. I must not only turn from my way I must also turn to God's way. We can be sorry for the consequences of our actions, but not change our heart or examine how we think and believe. This only results in regret without true repentance.

When Jesus began His ministry, the first verb He put in front of His followers was "repent." How do we repent?
 Admit we're wrong.
 Try to make it right.
 Don't do it again!

I'm not saying we won't ever fall again. But if we do we repent again and get back on track. Proverbs 24:16 says:

Though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again...

We must rise again and draw near to God. Genuine repentance, motivated by a desire to please God and turn away from sin, will bring change. Genuine repentance is about changing our minds, moving away from thinking that leads to sin and moving toward thinking that lines up with the Bible.

Repentance causes us to learn from mistakes so we're less likely to repeat them in the future. Too many people are sorry, but they don't do anything about it. That's the difference between worldly sorrow and Godly sorrow.

Another way we break up fallow ground is probably not what you think. Hosea 10:12 says:

Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, till He comes and rains righteousness on you.

Okay – but how do we break up that fallow ground? The answer is in verse 11 which says: *Judah shall plow.*

The name Judah means praise.

One of the ways to break up the fallow ground of a hard heart is to put the plow of Judah to work by praising God.

You cannot praise the Lord with your heart and not be changed.

You cannot praise God and stay mad at God.

You cannot simultaneously praise God and blame God.

Oh – you might be able to go through some motions and say some words, but when you really praise in spirit and in truth – that will break up your fallow ground.

It might be hard at first. It might sound like this:

“God, I praise You – but LIFE IS HARD RIGHT NOW & I DON’T UNDERSTAND! But Lord, I praise you. STILL don’t understand, but I choose to praise you. Yes, it might be hard, but I’m gonna praise You anyway!”

If you keep going – Judah will plow! Praise will start breaking up your fallow ground and eventually it will sound like this:

“God, I praise You no matter what. You are good all the time. It doesn’t matter what I’m going through, I’m gonna praise You anyway. It doesn’t even matter if I understand. Your word is true and Your ways are right and You are good all the time. So, I will praise You no matter what!”

Now your heart’s plowed up to receive God’s Word. So, plant it. If you want to prepare your soil for the seed of God’s word, plow up your fallow ground. Let repentance and praise open your heart for God’s Word.

Let me also say that you can have true repentance and godly sorrow and still have temptation. **Temptation isn’t a sin.** Giving into temptation however is sin.

Not only does James tell us to cleanse ourselves of sin, but he also says to purify our hearts of doublemindedness. The New Living Translation says:

Purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

To be double minded is to vacillate between faith in God and unbelief. It causes our hearts to be divided. A divided heart causes people to want to serve the Lord and themselves. To walk in the spirit and still walk in the flesh. David understood this. That’s why he prayed in Psalm 86:11

Unite my heart to fear and honor Your name.

When we confess our sin to receive forgiveness, we should also pray for God to unite our hearts so we will bring honor to Him. James 4:9 says:

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Most of the greatest times of repentance in my life were accompanied by gut wrenching weeping and wailing. I particularly remember a time when I was so broken by my inability to live the life I knew God desired for me.

I felt so inadequate (the truth is I was inadequate.)

I think God was trying to show me that all along.

I remember feeling like I was never going to be free.

I had prayed, worshipped, and devoured the word, but I still had so much bondage in my life. I was double minded. I knew I wasn't living the godly life God's word described.

So, one day I went into my bedroom to pray and to repent. Then, I just began to weep. I was crying so hard that I could hardly breathe. Finally, the tears subsided, and I lifted my hands to cover my face.

I wasn't sure why I did this except for what happened next. Before my hands even covered my face, tears began to fall from the back side of my hands. They were not my tears. There was no way my tears could have been on the back of my hands.

At first, I was startled. It took me a second to realize what happened. Then, it hit me: Jesus was weeping with me. I could feel His love and compassion. I just sat there for a long time soaking in His presence. I felt so cleansed and forgiven. Afterwards, I experienced a whole new level of freedom. Then shortly after that I came across this scripture. Psalm 84:6-7 says:

As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength.

"Baca" is a Hebrew word meaning "balsam tree," and the sap of this tree oozes like tears. The "Valley of Baca" was a waterless place, but the meaning here implies that because of tears it became a place of springs.

It is implied that our tears turn our dry places into a lifegiving spring. So, as we pass through the Valley of Baca... which implies difficult and painful places in life, or times where our sins have kept us in a wilderness... our tears turn it into a place of springs.

Some commentators believe that the Valley of Baca means Valley of Weeping – and is found in Judges 2:1. The KJV translates it as: make lamentation, mourn, with tears and weep.

Also, I want you to notice that we pass through this valley ... we don't stay there. And as we pass through, as we weep before the Lord, as we shed tears of brokenness... we turn the dry places of our soul into a place of lifegiving springs. As Psalm 30:5 says:

Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Lastly, James says in Verse 10

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.

First let me say that **repentance isn't possible without humility**. The opposite of humility is pride and pride will prevent us from true repentance.

Pride prevents us from understanding the truth. Humility requires agreeing with the truth. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:25-26

...repentance leads us to know the truth so that we can come to our senses and escape from the trap of the devil.

Satan's pride caused him to exalt Himself and he was cast out of heaven, yet he tries to trap us to do the very same thing!

The world says, "Promote yourself." But God says, "Humble yourself."

Your fleshly pride wants to exalt yourself, but God says to repent of that.

But James powerfully describes both the duty and the blessing of humility and repentance. And as we humble ourselves before God and truly repent of our sin... THEN He will lift us up.

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble, and grace — the unmerited favor of God — always lifts us up.

So humble yourself under the mighty hand of God and He will exalt you in due time in Jesus' name!!