

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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James 4:7-12

Let Go of Ego!

- 1. The way we do this before God**
- 2. The way we do this toward our fellow man**

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All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

James 4:7-12 –

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 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.

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Have you ever learned Latin? If not, you are going to learn a Latin word today! The word is EGO.

We get a number of English words from this original Latin word:

- Ego
- Egotistical
- Egomaniac

What does this word mean? It is the simple word for “I.” An egotistical person is one who is focused mainly on himself. And an ego-

maniac? Well, you can certainly guess what that means!

As we continue our sermon series in the book of James, we need to discuss “ego” today. James has much to say to the Christian about his ego, his view of himself. In fact, James will tell us, **“Let go of ego!” He will show us two ways that we do this in our reading today:**

- 1. The way we do this before God**
- 2. The way we do this toward our fellow man**

1. The way we do this before God

Our reading today says, *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 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.”*

These words have much to say about our ego and our attitude before God. Let’s briefly look at each thought that James writes:

1. Submit yourselves to God – You might immediately recognize the word “submit” here. The word means that a person voluntarily submits their agenda and their will to another for a bigger good. The Bible instructs believers to submit in many ways:
 - We submit ourselves to the governing authorities.
 - Christians submit to their called workers who are leading their congregation.
 - Children are to submit to their parents.
 - Christian wives submit to their husbands.

And notably here, sinners submit themselves to God. They believe and accept what he tells them about their sinful condition and need for a Savior. They bow their will and their ego to

Scripture's instructions for their lives. They put themselves under God's leadership, direction, and protection.

We had an example of the reverse happening in our OT reading today. Can you remember the two parties who did not submit to the Lord? The children of Israel had been receiving manna, honey bread, every morning from the hand of God. Out of his mercy, he provided for them as they journeyed through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. In the OT reading, how did they feel about that manna that God was continuing to give them? They were dissatisfied with it, and with their station of life at the moment! They were not submitting. The other party involved was Moses. What was his God-given role? He was the leader of that large nation. And how did he feel about his assignment from God at the moment? He was fed up and dissatisfied! He was not submitting to God either.

May God lead us to submit to his message and his leading in our lives!

2. Resist the devil – Literally, it says “stand against” the devil. Take your aggressive and open stand against what he is tempting you with.

When we were camping with my parents-in-law this summer, I learned something I hadn't known. Someone told me that if a black bear came by, the best thing a person can do is stand up, make themselves big, and loudly proclaim your presence to the bear. I was told that the bear will be intimidated and confused and will not pick a fight but will go away.

James tells us that the devil must do the same. He will flee from you. What a comforting fact this is for the sinner with a sin that torments them, which they fight against. Stand up to the devil!

3. Come near to God – This phrase almost sounds as though a person can make their “decision for Christ” to “choose”

Christ and come near to God and believe. However, this section of Scripture is not talking about conversion (coming to faith). James' audiences are longtime believers whose new man inside of them is being called to come back to God. By his power and by faith that the Holy Spirit has already worked, their new man can come to God! And comforting fact here is that God will not cast any away that come to him, but will draw near to them also.

4. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded – Cleansing is needed. A cleansing is needed both of outward actions and of the inward heart. Those who are double-minded – meaning they have a “mixed allegiance” to both the world and to God – need to wash their hands of the world and their sinful ways in the blood of Christ's sacrifice for the world, and be clean. These last two items are what the pastor invites you to at the beginning of our worship services when he announces that we'll confess our sins. “Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins to God our Father...”
5. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change laughter to mourning and joy to gloom. – This is one of the more vivid sentences in this whole section. Literally, it says, “Be miserable, grieve visibly, and cry. Let your laughter change into grieving and your joy to depression.” What is this talking about?

It's talking about the repentance that we must have before God. The book of Ecclesiastes says, “*There is a time to weep and a time to laugh.*” God isn't telling us here that Christians have no time to laugh and be joyful. He is saying that there is a proper time to be broken up over our sins and to confess them in sorrow. In James' day, his audience needed to be reminded of that!

6. Humble yourselves before the Lord – Literally, “make yourself low” before

the Lord. It's interesting that the way "up" to God is "down" for the Christian.

What do all of these phrases and thoughts mean? **They really are different ways of saying the same thing: Repent sorrowfully of your sins before the Lord. Let go of ego!**

How do you feel after looking at that list? Did your ego take some hits? If so, it was a fitting exercise. We see serious warnings here for our attitude.

For example, what attitude do you have as you simply enter God's house? It's not uncommon for a mother to have to tell her children, "Don't run in church" or "Don't be shouting and horsing around in here." Such reminders are a good thing, not because there is no joy in God's house and his presence, but because we approach it with reverence and proper humility.

With what attitude do you come into God's house? Do you have a gasp on your lips as you approach this sacred sanctuary? Do you enter God's presence like Moses at the burning bush, figuratively taking off your sandal because this is holy ground? Or do you need to be reminded of this? Are you even absent from worship often? Or do you enter pretty casually, not thinking about such reverence? Might you be tempted to be habitually late for the worship service, not giving it the respect and preparation it deserves?

Also, what about your attitude toward sin?

- Might we be dulled to the seriousness of sin because it is so common around us and in us?
- Do you think some days that some sins are pretty hilarious?
- Do we make light of sin instead of being dejected by it?
- Might we be dulled to the graphic content on the Internet? Or the filth on many TV shows?

What about your attitude toward yourself?

- Might you fall into the trap of thinking that we're "better than most?"
- Or that your sins are "minor infractions" compared to other real sinners?
- Or that you simply have some "character flaws," rather than seeing

how far gone you are and deserving of God's punishment in hell?

- Or that there's forgiveness, so you surely can live (and sin) however you want?

May God keep us from such thoughts!

The beauty of all this is when we come near the God of heaven and earth in the way he has enabled us to by baptism – in contrition and repentance – he lifts us up. He does this out of his grace and mercy in Christ. He lifts us up with the good news that the blood of Jesus Christ his Son purifies us from every sin. Think of how Jesus did not consider himself to be above coming to earth as our Savior to die for us on the cross. Think about how Jesus submitted himself perfectly to his Father's laws and obeyed them for you and me. Think of how Jesus was obedient to his Father's plan as our Savior.

What grace! And what motivation to let go of our ego before our good Father in heaven!

2. The way we do this toward our fellow man

Our reading has one other thought today about our ego. Our sermon text closed with a thought about our fellow man and our relationship toward him: *"Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"*

James identifies two things that the Christian will leave behind as they "let go of ego." First, a Christian will not slander his brother (fellow believer). Slander is a vivid, nasty word but is a common sin in our day and age. The concept is simple. Dragging someone else down for revenge, for satisfaction, for winning a power struggle, or simply for fun is never God-pleasing. Lying about someone else to get the advantage is never God-pleasing. These are often sins of the ego, and we need to let them go.

In our times slanderous talk is indeed a serious temptation. We live in a “talk radio” type of world where you speak your mind quickly and harshly in 10 second bytes, and banter back and forth. And in our day and age this can be frighteningly easy. By hitting “Reply all” on e-mail, you can set your words in motion quickly and in a widespread way. And after waiting for what the other person says as they “Reply all,” you can send their next arrow out to everybody immediately. Or, with your network of friends on Facebook you can air your unsanctified opinions about others very quickly and let people chime in on the subject as well. Or, as Christians learn how to Twitter it will be another way of quickly airing your opinionated messages against your brother. **God keep us from committing such slander!**

James also mentions improper judging as a way our ego might show itself. This also is to be avoided. Note that “improper judging” is the way we need to put this, for God does not condemn all judging done by Christians. After all, listen to these other Scripture verses about judging:

- *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15).*
- *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1).*
- *“My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:20)*
- *“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17).*

What kind of judging is improper and inappropriate?

- Hypocritical judging – Matthew 7 tells us to remove our “planks” from our

eyes first, and then we are fit to remove the “specks” from our brother’s eye.

- Hasty judging that has not cared to get the facts straight.
- Unloving judging that simply wants to be in someone else’s business.
- Judging that claims to read a heart, as when a person says “I’m sorry,” and you say, “No, you’re not.”
- Judging done with an air of superiority
- Judging done to divert attention from our own sins

May our judging not be done by ego, but by true Christian love and concern for our fellow man!

Finally, we can recognize today that James has not given us difficult concepts to follow:

- 1. Humble yourself before God in true repentance**
- 2. Treat your fellow man respectfully by avoiding slander and improper judging**

Not difficult words, but quite a difficult assignment. Today, may we thank our Savior that we have the forgiveness of sins for the sins of the past in these areas through his death and resurrection. May we also thank God that he has called us from the error of our ways to faith in him. And may God give us the power to follow his commands given through James today, as we let go of ego! Amen.