



Sermon – “Submit Yourself to God”

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I. Introduction

Truthfully, how difficult is it for us to serve everyone and to not show favouritism? It's so normal to our experience in the world! We shouldn't ask if we do show favouritism, but rather, how can we stop! By example, I started following Jesus in my 20s and my first church was called Hawaii Kai Christian Church. One of our elders of the church was a man named Hal Jones. He became a follower of Jesus as a University student through Campus Crusade for Christ. He later became a real estate agent and through his character and leadership ability became a very wealthy person.

Two times he left his work to go out in the mission field in the Middle East. Later in his life he started a missions agency called Global Hope Network International with the mission of “Bring(ing) Help and Hope to the Hidden and Hurting...Village Transformation...Disaster Relief...Slavery Prevention...(and) Leadership Impact.” Hal made an impact for Jesus wherever he went.

In my church in Hawaii, was I called to treat Hal as I would any other person in the church? Certainly, we all favoured Hal and when he walked into the room, many of us would watch him, waiting to see what he would say or do. To some degree, Hal had earned our respect through his humility and willingness to serve. The challenge for us was whether we would honour and respect others as well. Would we honour and respect those who may not have done all that Hal did, but because they were created by God, were worthy of our respect and service?

II. Context

This is the challenge that James is dealing with in the various church gatherings in the neighboring regions. Remember how he was writing to new followers of Jesus who had escaped persecution in Jerusalem and in their fear neglected God's leadership in their lives. They had neglected the word of God planted in their hearts and the guidance of His Spirit. In their fear, they clung instead to the rich and powerful to keep them safe. Neglecting God, they worshiped people! They worshiped specific people, the rich and powerful. All others they started to treat with contempt.

III. Unpack

Let's unpack today's passage!

1.) Problem: Desire Your Own Pleasure

¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

In James 4:1–3, we see the problem the new followers are facing. Rejecting their union with God through the Spirit, they are living their lives on their own, in the flesh. No longer resting in the eternal life of the Father, they start to show the effects of walking in the incomplete life of the flesh. They are fighting and quarrelling with each other. They are doing this because they are no longer guided by love. Their desires are more like the desires of Cain who had contempt for his brother and killed him.

They desire to have peace and safety because they no longer have it. They desire to control. They need! And because nothing will satisfy them, they are constantly unsettled. And so they quarrel and fight. They ask God for help, but they don't ask in submission to God and His Word. They ask God in order that God would satisfy their own pleasures. This is a prayer God will not answer. Why would God submit to wickedness? Why would God bless those who were mistreating and treating with contempt those they should be serving with God's love?

Through this letter by James we see something of our nature. We see that when we're not filled with God's eternal life, not filled with God's Spirit, how we ultimately desire to satisfy only ourselves. As an example, I remember as a new follower of Jesus, someone about my age had attended a presentation of some pyramid-scheme business opportunity. They were promised big paycheques if they could recruit others to join the company as well.

He was told that he could purchase products from the company and sell them to make money, but the real money wasn't in selling the products to individuals but in recruiting others, like me, to join the company as well and purchase their products through him. The money wasn't in helping individuals with products but in recruiting more people to move products through you. I felt manipulated to join.

When I questioned his motives, he said he wanted to use the money to help his family and to support the church. The problem was that he wasn't doing either of those things but seemed convinced helping others was his motivation for getting rich. In James 4:1–3, James is pointing out a similar problem in the new followers. Their prayers to God aren't being answered because they are asking for wrong reasons. Their asking God's blessing through the rich.

2.) Result: Enemy of God

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

In James 4:4–5, James tells the new followers what the result is for resisting the work of the Spirit in their lives. He tells them the result of trying to please themselves and for showing favouritism. They have become friends of the world and enemies of God. Strong words! What does it mean that they have become friends of the world? It is the world of humanity that is separate from God and attempting to hide its sin and live in moral darkness. Those that hide from the truth. By supressing the word planted within them and resisting the work of the Spirt, the new followers of Jesus have reverted back to a life in the flesh that they had before they placed their faith in Jesus.

They have become again enemies of God. By no longer trusting in God's provision, they are not acting just as confused followers of God. They are acting as enemies of God. There is a difference between a follower of God who is imperfect and someone who follows the world who is imperfect. Both are in development. Both are imperfect. But one is set to follow their Heavenly Father's every word and the other is like Adam and Eve at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They "saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" and so they ate even when God had told them not to.

James also points out that God is jealous for us. Like a parent, he longs to provide and develop us. Those He loves, He disciplines so that they would be made into His glorious image. He desires that we would inherit His Kingdom. And so He is angered when others would put a stumbling block in the way of His children's growth. He is angered when these new followers of Jesus would inflict harm on the very children God desires to develop and strengthen. It is dangerous to attempt to destroy what God is trying to build.

3.) Solution: Submit to the Truth

⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble."

⁷ 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.

In James 4:6–10, James ensures the new followers that God's anger is withheld because of His grace. His gracious patience is extended that these new followers would humbly receive His words, repent and receive God's own eternal life in Jesus and to walk by His Holy Spirit. God is gracious so that these new followers would return to faith in their Heavenly Father and no longer trust in their own never satiated flesh.

James tells the new followers to resist the ways of the devil, resist temptation, and the devil and his temptations would flee. They are to draw near to God as the Spirit leads them and to restore the walk with Jesus they had at Pentecost. No longer were they to feel laughter as they did when they mistreated God's children. Now they would feel deep sorrow and mourn their behaviour. They would no longer feel joy in their attachments to money and power. Now they were called to feel regret for the destruction they caused.

And as they humbled themselves by receiving and obeying the truth of God, God would exalt them. God's design is not that these new followers of Jesus would always be gloomy or without resources to help others. His plan was for their joy in seeing that in any situation, God would provide for their every need. Hadn't God taken slaves in Egypt, those without money or power, and taken them across a wilderness in order that they would inherit a land "flowing with milk and honey?" God desires to exalt them so they might see that they are co-heirs with Christ in His Kingdom.

4.) Solution: Obey the Truth

¹¹ Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?

In James 4:11–12, James brings the new followers back to God's word planted in their hearts. They had been ignoring it. Maybe they thought they were a community founded on God's Word. But James disabuses them of this belief. He says that by speaking against the poor brothers and sisters in Jesus, the new followers were now judges of God's Word and not followers of it. They knew the word because it was in them and the Spirit was endeavouring to guide them in it, but they weren't submitting to the freedom of the Word. Instead, they were judging it.

What does it mean that they were judging it? By ignoring God's Word, by ignoring the truth that God shows no favouritism, the new followers were dismissing this truth. It was judged to be irrelevant to their situation!

Maybe it was a nice thought that God shows no favouritism. Maybe it made them feel good that they were associated with religious belief that advocated for all. Maybe this made them feel more religiously progressive than their peers. That God showed no favouritism was a truth that they did not wish to follow. It was good as an idea, but not as a way of life!

To be fair, these new followers were people ripped from their homes, escaping into neighbouring regions to protect their families. They were desperate, just as desperate as the Israelites were when they were ripped out of Egypt and made to journey out in the wilderness with no resources! It is not surprising then that we find the new followers being just like us, fearing for their lives and families, and wandering back to habits they had before they came to an initial trust in Jesus. So we shouldn't see in James' letter a rebuke to destroy these vulnerable communities. James' letter is a rebuke, to be sure, but one that a father would give to their children in order to protect, restore and build. God, through James, wants to strengthen the faith of His children. He wants them to learn obedience through what they suffer, so that they will become more like Himself; a king over Creation.

IV. Application

What is our application for today?

1.) Reject Our Own Pleasures

What does it mean to reject our own pleasures? Certainly some of us with the gift of hospitality feel a sense of pleasure when they get the opportunity to serve others. Others of us with the gift to mobilize others to serve the most vulnerable, get a similar feeling of pleasure when they are using their gifts for the Lord's glory. But in both of these examples, hopefully the pleasure comes from their desire to please the Lord and the Lord's desire to encourage and love us as we serve. In both examples given, the goal isn't or shouldn't be just to please ourselves.

Why is this important? If I reach out to someone with hospitality and they reject it, does their rejection change my feelings for them? Or do I become upset and angry that they rejected my hospitality? Do I think their rejection is a rejection of me and not just my service? If my service of others causes me to fight and quarrel, if it causes me to be angry and unforgiving to others, it's likely my service was for my own pleasure and not the Lord's.

We must remember that God desires to fill us with His love when we are guided to serve by His Spirit. That love will cause us to be patient, kind, not envying or boasting, not easily angered, not keeping a record of wrongs...not self-seeking. We cannot serve in that way by ourselves, but only through our union with God through His Son and by the power and guidance of His Holy Spirit. With God we will not be seeking our own pleasure, but the Lord's. And the Lord's pleasure is that we would all have life overflowing, life to its full.

2.) Realize God's Jealousy For Us

For those of us, like myself, who tend to think of God in abstract ideas, this statement takes your breath away. God jealously desires to know us and interact with us! He pursues us! God is a passionate Father who is led by holy and pure emotions. He isn't just correct and logical!

One of the things I loved the most about Jo was how I could see God's passion to serve those who were ignored or marginalized. When we first met, I had been interested in serving the church in Hawaii where I started to follow Jesus. I thought it made sense for me to return after years of serving in Japan to help the church there with their missionary efforts. I had been praying for an opportunity to serve there for years; all

through my theological training in the States and then Canada. I took two summer breaks to intern in Hawaii while studying as well.

I met Jo and could sense God's zeal to continue serving the unreached. I could sense God's passion that made the unreached a priority to Him. After years of struggling, years of praying to serve the church in Hawaii because it made sense, I found myself caught up in God's passion for the unreached. I found myself following Jo to serve with Pioneers in Thailand. Let's remember, especially for those like me, that God's holy and pure emotions drive what He does in the world. May God's holy emotions motivate us as well.

3.) Humble Ourselves to Truth

Lastly, we should encourage one another to be humble. We should be humble because of our humble beginnings. We were made from the dust of the earth and we ultimately return to it. All good gifts come from God to us so none of us ought to think that we, by ourselves, generate the good that God does through us to others. We are dust, but dust that a Great and Gracious God has made to be His children. He has made us to be His children so that we might inherit eternal life with Him and serve in His Kingdom.

But does being humble mean we have no worth or value? No, of course not! Being humble means we have the opportunity to know that God and His Word is good and glorious and worthy to follow and trust. If I'm not humble, I may ignore God and His Word, but by knowing the truth of our humility, we can know what to cling to, we can know what is worthy of our devotion.

V. Conclusion

1.) Reject Our Own Pleasures

2.) Realize God's Jealousy For Us

3.) Humble Ourselves to Truth