

## **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

October 1, 2017

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

**James 4:7-10** 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.

### **“Humble Hearts Blessed by God”**

Your friend has strong feelings about the protests taking place on the sidelines of NFL games and decides to share those feelings on Facebook. Immediately a respectful and courteous conversation breaks out. Responses go back and forth expressing gratitude for helping them see the other side of the issue and prompting them to think about the issue from someone else’s perspective.

Cable news panelists analyze the latest tax cuts proposal in Washington, D.C. Experts from various backgrounds weigh in on the merits of the plan while their counterparts wait patiently for them to finish and then give their own opinions. They speak. They react. They discuss ways people from other political persuasions have given them new insight into this complicated issue and given them opportunity to reevaluate their own positions.

Unrealistic? Improbably? But wouldn’t it be refreshing?

We understand words are powerful. Actions are meaningful. And in our age with today’s technological advantages, anything that happens can be broadcast and shared and seen around the world. Anyone who learns about it can interpret those events for themselves and offer up their own reaction.

It’s not just people who are into politics or current events. It could be a really outspoken Dallas Cowboys fan or someone who is adamant about the correct foods to eat for a healthy diet or who has strong opinions about Pumpkin spice and the timing in which it should be introduced into the collective bloodstream. We have something that is stronger than where you grew up or who your family is or who the people are who live next to you. We have our opinions and our way of looking at the world. We have such strong, emotional reactions, because these matters really reveal what a person is all about, what makes them tick, their beliefs at their very core. And when someone contradicts what we hold dearly, it feels like an attack on my person, like they are attacking the core of my being itself.

It’s not really about words. It’s a matter of the heart. And your heart is what matters most to God. So in James chapter 4 God speaks to our hearts. More than anything else, God wants us to have humble hearts. God promises that humble hearts are blessed by God.

Last week we heard about wisdom from James. This week James is addressing humility. James was written for people who felt adrift. Bible scholars think James may have been one of the first books written in the New Testament period after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. James is most likely the half-brother of Jesus who was the leader of a church comprised mostly of Christians from a Jewish background. They had Moses and the prophets. But now the Messiah has come and things have changed. That means people were living in God's grace, but uncertain about what it meant for them. You could say they were living in unprecedented times. They were adrift in the uncharted cultural waters of their day.

When people are confused about what to do or have unconsciously developed some unsavory habits, behavior isn't the biggest issue. The heart is. Yes, James addresses our hands and our practices. He talks about our emotions and reactions. He gets our attention about our words. But all of these are symptoms of something wrong inside. They flow out from our hearts. It starts with a humble heart.

So let me ask you a question this morning. In the way you react to what is going on in the world, do you reveal how thoroughly your heart has been infected by the world? When you respond to someone, even someone who is being negative about Christianity, do you show just how much you are a product of your times?

The enemy in all these cultural battles isn't the person on the other side of the battle line. The enemy is the one lurking inside who has sneak attacked and seized control of your heart. More important than the words you say or the reactions you give is what those responses reveal about your heart. In the way you deal with other people, too often you show yourself to be an ally of than world. James calls this being "**double-minded.**" (James 4:8) You can't have it both ways. You can't have an allegiance to this world at the same time as you claim an allegiance to God.

So James sits us down the way a coach would enter a locker room after a lousy first half of play. He isn't yelling or cursing or kicking over chairs. But he is firm and adamant. He insists this can't continue. Here's what he says: "**Submit yourselves, then, to God.**" (James 4:7) Sounds like a challenge. Submission isn't something that comes easily to anyone. Basically, submission means following in the proper arrangement. For a Christian's life, that means arranging everything I think and do and say under God's will. It's a heart adjustment.

For me, one of the most frustrating things to do at home is put together store bought furniture. Not because it's so complicated. But because it was designed in Sweden and made in Sri Lanka and so the directions are just these hieroglyphics. And the tools and hardware all come in these plastic baggies. And I'd just rather figure things out on my own and do it my way. And then when I'm all done, there are still pieces left over. And I have to take everything apart and start over and this time do it following those frustrating directions.

Submission is one of the scariest words in the Bible because it requires letting go and giving up control. To someone who isn't a Christian yet, submission is silly. It puts you at risk and makes you vulnerable. Even for Christians it is scary. It feels like we should be standing up

for ourselves instead of getting trampled on. Submission seems self-defeating. We should be using the power God has put into us to win the world over for God. But this is the solution to the divided allegiances in our hearts. Give up all control to God. Bring everything in life under the proper arrangement under God. It starts with a humble heart.

Humility recognizes my life has gone off track and my mind is out of harmony with God. It happens. It comes naturally. I start to rely on myself. I want to have control over my life. And I find I am out of alignment with God. I've gotten out of a proper arrangement with his ways.

A recent poll of young people who aren't Christians revealed their perceptions of Christians. Now, we understand that a lot of times non-Christians don't really understand Christianity or have an accurate picture of who we are or they form all their opinions about us based on one Christian friend. But for many people they view Christians negatively because they see us as too political. But the ones that ranked higher aren't any better. 87% viewed Christians as judgmental. 85% viewed Christians as hypocritical. We can debate the methods and the validity of those results. But it should be a wake up call when God's grace isn't the number one thing we are known for. When God's forgiveness and mercy don't make the list. The essential things that make us Christians aren't getting across. We are known more for our allegiance to ourselves and this world, rather than our allegiance to God. And that's humbling.

James has a solution to this. He instructs: **"Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom."** (James 4:9) Basically, he's calling us to repent. Repentance requires change. But it's not primarily about doing something, like paying a fine or offering up community service. It is a change of heart and a change of mind.

And it is a focus on one particular humble heart. These verses from James call to mind the conflict between Jesus and Satan in Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus was tempted to take the easy way out, give in to his ego, and do what would come naturally to human hearts. Saying no to turning rocks to bread, bowing down to Satan and tossing himself off the pinnacle of temple required submission to God. There was no divided allegiance in the heart of Jesus. And by his perfect obedience, he became the solution for hearts today struggling with humility.

Philippians chapter 2 reminds us Jesus humbled himself just by leaving his throne in heaven. He humbled himself taking on human flesh. He didn't insist on his own rights, but instead humbled himself to death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8) And because of that humble sacrifice, because of his submission to the divine rescue plan, Jesus was exalted above every other name so every person everywhere can give him the glory he deserves. (Philippians 2:9-10)

Now Jesus invites every human heart struggling to come to him. He invites: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."** (Matthew 11:28,29) By baptism and by faith you have the humble heart of Jesus as your own.

Every single one of us knows someone who struggles with addiction. The person may be the one who greets you in the mirror each morning. And if you share the struggles of someone battling addiction, you know how foolish it is to tell them to trust in themselves and find confidence in themselves. It might work for a while. It might be successful when things go well, according to plan. But when they stumble, when they fall, it puts all the blame squarely back on their shoulders and destroys the confidence that is supposed to get them going back in a positive direction.

The most foolish thing a Christian can do is to thank Jesus for his work of suffering, dying, and rising for us and then put all the emphasis on themselves. Thanks God, I've got it from here. Just to live the Christian life, just to battle against our constant and persistent spiritual enemies requires a nonstop humble heart. That's why Martin Luther described the Christian life as one big effort at repentance. On October 31st we celebrate 500 years since Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. The very first of those theses says when God told us to repent, he meant the entire life of a believer is a life of repentance.

Returning to our identity as baptized children of God in repentance allows us to come before God with confidence. Purified by the blood of Jesus poured out innocently and humbly in submission to his divine rescue mission, God's children may come before him with clean hands and pure hearts. Without guilt or shame holding us back, we are free to come near to God, knowing God is always near with us. That allows God's people to stand our ground against the attacks of the devil. With your Savior fighting your battles for you, the devil stands no change. He will flee away in fear.

CS Lewis has a memorable quote about humility. It doesn't mean thinking more of yourself or thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. That's what we saw when the Cajun Navy drove to Houston to help with rescue efforts. It's what drove first responders and anonymous neighbors to wade into deep and dangerous waters to rescue perfect strangers. They weren't thinking of consequences or glory. They weren't thinking of themselves at all.

Christian, rest in Christ instead of relying on yourself. Rest secure with Christ in control of your life rather than struggling through a need to stand up in conflict. Rest secure in the victory of Christ in a battle for other hearts rather than putting pressure on yourself to win cultural battles on God's team.

One of my favorite sights at a playground is seeing a toddler on a swing. They can't do it themselves. They don't know how. But they know how to hold on tight as they get pushed. And they can't contain the joy and the giddiness. Christian, that's the joy you get with a humble heart. Just hang onto your Savior in joyous submission and let him take you on a ride. Amen.