

January 13

Lesson 7 (NIV)

SUBMIT TO GOD

DEVOTIONAL READING: Proverbs 3:27–

35

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 4:1–10

JAMES 4:1–10

¹What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

²You 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. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴You 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.

⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

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

“God opposes the proud

but shows favor to the humble.”

⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

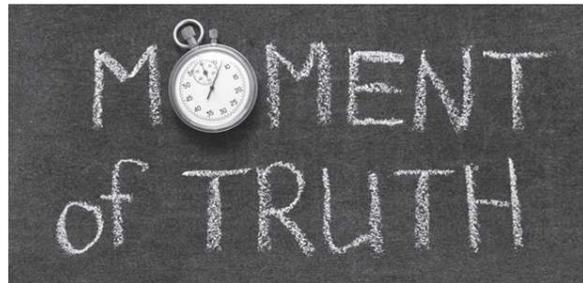


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KEY VERSE

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.—James 4:8

OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Unit II: Loving God by Trusting Christ

LESSONS 6–10

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize James's view on pride.
2. Explain why pride and humility are opposite realities.
3. Pray a prayer of humility and surrender that reflects his or her relationship with God.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Pride and Arrogance
 - B. Lesson Context
 - I. War with Covetousness (JAMES 4:1-3)
 - A. The Battle Within (vv. 1, 2a)
 - B. The Battle of Prayer (vv. 2b, 3)
 - II. War with Pride (JAMES 4:4-6)
 - A. Friends with the World (v. 4)
 - B. Grace for the Humble (vv. 5, 6)
- Escaping from Pride*
- III. War with the Devil (JAMES 4:7-10)
 - A. Submission to God (vv. 7, 8)
- Clean Hands*
- B. Lifting by God (vv. 9, 10)

Conclusion

- A. Proudly Humble
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

epitaph	eh -puh-taf.
Hosea	Ho-zay-uh.
Josephus	Jo-see-fus.

Introduction

A. Pride and Arrogance

We are told that pride is an essential element to making things better. We should have school pride, community pride, and personal pride.

In the Bible, however, pride is often seen as a corrosive personality trait, something to be avoided. What the Bible means by pride (when seen negatively) is similar to boastful arrogance (James 4:16). It can also be likened to vanity or vain-glory, a distorted sense of one's value and importance in the world (Philippians 2:3). Pride can even be related to envy, covetousness, or greed—the belief that your desires are more important than those of others (Romans 1:29).

Those to whom James wrote apparently had problems with pride; they lacked humility. Many Christians and churches today suffer the same malady, so James's words are timely and vital to us.

B. Lesson Context

There are at least four and possibly five men by the name of James in the New Testament. The one who wrote the book of the New Testament that bears his name was the brother of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3).

James was not a disciple of Jesus during his ministry ([John 7:5](#)), but after the resurrection he became a believer ([Acts 1:14](#)) and a leader in the Jerusalem church ([Acts 15:13](#); [Galatians 1:19](#)). Yet James humbly describes himself as a “servant of God” ([James 1:1](#)), seemingly reluctant to use his family credentials.

We do not know when the letter of James was written. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) notes his death about AD 62 at the hands of Jewish opponents in Jerusalem. This makes it likely the book was written sometime in the AD 50s, thus reflecting an early stage in the history of the first-century church.

The recipients of the letter are evidently Jewish believers, as indicated by the reference to the scattered “twelve tribes” ([James 1:1](#)). Perhaps they were members of the original church in Jerusalem who were forced to flee due to the persecution spawned by Stephen’s martyrdom and thus were no longer centered in one location ([Acts 11:19](#)). It would be natural for James, were he their former spiritual leader, to encourage them in the midst of their trials ([James 1:2–4, 12; 5:7–11](#)).

James held very high expectations for his readers. He specifically wanted them to tone down the rivalries in their communities, some of which involved conflicts between rich and poor ([James](#)

[2:5–7](#)). This fits well with the theme of humility to which James turns in chapter 4.

I. War with Covetousness ([JAMES 4:1–3](#))

A. The Battle Within ([vv. 1, 2a](#))

1. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?

James begins this section with tough language, noting the internal disputes within his addressees’ fellowships. There are *fights and quarrels*. The first term implies strong adversarial relationships of a confrontational nature; the original Greek can signify battles between armies. The second term has the sense of verbal spats, nasty exchanges between rivals (compare [Titus 3:9](#)).

James points to the root cause of these troubles: *your desires that battle within you*. This battle originates internally, inside the hearts of the combatants. Church fights often result from personal, individual issues, from the strong-willed individual who has selfish motives and tolerates no other opinions. Rather than forbid fighting, James goes after the root causes behind these struggles.

2a. You desire but do not have, so you kill.

The evil, lustful desires of some adver-

saries are so strong that their outcome might be murder, although the use of *kill* may be figurative for hate (compare [Matthew 5:21, 22](#); [1 John 3:15](#)). Whether the animosity among believers has escalated to the point of murder, which is unlikely, James's warning is on target. This is a dangerous and regrettable situation.

B. The Battle of Prayer (vv. 2b, 3)

2b, 3. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

James shifts his focus from the contentious and destructive desires of the adversaries to another aspect of the problem: lack of prayer. The readers' personal rivalries are not getting them what they want. So they fight over a pie without enough pieces to satisfy everyone. We can interpret this to mean that envy and greed are the root problem. This might indicate quarrels over the funds of the congregation. Such battles can be the nastiest of all church fights.

James teaches them that the underlying problem is to be found in their prayer practices. Their prayer requests are made *with wrong motives*, reflecting envy and jealousy. Their requests in prayer are for

things that they can consume to satisfy their *desire for pleasures*.

God will not honor prayers made from evil desires or selfish motives. To pray correctly, effectively, means the selfishness that is fueling the fighting must be quelled. Aligning prayers with the will of God will remove the motives tearing apart their community.

What Do You Think?

What can you do to make your prayers more effective?

Digging Deeper

In what ways, if any, do [Jeremiah 7:16](#); [11:14](#); [14:11](#); and [1 John 5:16b](#) help inform your answer?

II. War with Pride (JAMES 4:4-6)

A. Friends with the World (v. 4)

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.

James moves from conflict caused by envy to another problem: pride. Just as we should not be at war with fellow church members, we must be at war with the pride in our own souls.

James begins this line of thought by introducing a stark choice: his readers

must choose between *friendship with the world* and friendship with God. They cannot have both. If they choose the world, they choose to be *an enemy of God*.

Is James calling for a radical, thoroughgoing purge of everything “worldly” from our lives? Should we withdraw into separate communities so that we have no worldly temptations to entice us? Some believers have understood the Christian life to be a call for such separation, but this does not seem to be James’s intention.

James begins this verse with an epithaph for those who have fallen into conflict: they are *adulterous people*. Although it is possible that the churches James addressed were wracked with sexual immorality, this does not seem to be the problem (although see [James 2:11](#)). Instead, James uses “adultery” in a way common for the prophets of the Old Testament. They often used adultery as a metaphor for unfaithful Israel, the bride of the Lord (see [Hosea 1:2](#)). For James, to choose the world over God is to commit spiritual adultery.

This verse is subject to misuse and misinterpretation. Christians will find it difficult to win the world for Christ if they withdraw from the world completely. Community participation and having non-Christian friends and neighbors is not spiritual adultery. The danger lies in allowing one’s love for God to be

eclipsed by one’s love for the world. Our loyalty and commitment must be to God and to him alone.

B. Grace for the Humble (vv. 5, 6)

5a. Or do you think Scripture says without reason

James loves the Word of God and is a master of using it to add context and authority to his teaching. First, he asks the readers if they think *Scripture* speaks *without reason*. No faithful Christian of Jewish descent would doubt the efficacy of Scripture, for it speaks with the power of God behind it ([Isaiah 55:10, 11](#); compare [John 10:35](#)).

5b. that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

It is unclear what Scripture James now refers to. Some students see general references to [Genesis 2:7](#); [Exodus 20:5](#); and/or [Proverbs 14:30](#). At any rate, James asks if the readers think *the spirit* God has caused to dwell within them is naturally prone to *jealousy*. Was God negligent or inept in creating us? As with the first question, the answer is a clear no. God did not make men and women to be driven by envy, thereby destroying the unity of the church.

6. But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

James answers the second question and then provides a *Scripture* quotation. The possibility of God's misbegotten making of us as designed to be controlled by envy is countered by James's assertion that God has given us *grace*. We are vessels of grace, not envy. Our envy and pride issues do not have their source with the Lord. Our problem cannot be pinned on God, for he has shown more than enough grace and mercy to us to make our envy obsessions seem out of place.

James's choice for Scripture, [Proverbs 3:34](#), is well known to his readers (compare [1 Peter 5:5](#)). God's resistance to pride and prideful people is a theme in Jewish teaching. Human pride kindles the wrath of God (see [2 Chronicles 32:24-26](#); [Job 40:11](#)). Pride is self-exalting, but only the Lord is to be exalted ([Isaiah 2:17](#)).

The flip side of the coin is that while God brings down *the proud*, he does not ignore *the humble*. Those who lack the pride that God abhors will be given the sustaining grace of the Lord to get them through their difficult circumstances.

Thus does James condemn the most worldly thing of all: pride. Pride is warped self-love. Pride is a type of self-worship, allowing our personal selves to become idols. This is every bit as much spiritual adultery as the love of money or power. God does not call us to hate ourselves, but our sense of self-worth has

limits.

ESCAPING FROM PRIDE

Throughout history, the church has seen numerous movements intended to help its members avoid the allure of the world. Some of these movements become cultish as they begin controlling their adherents' lives in terms of dictating employment, living arrangements, friendships, etc.

I have had friends who became part of such groups. In every case, the group started with good intentions: a desire to provide more fellowship, better (or more relevant) biblical teaching, and an escape from prior experiences in churches that were lacking in Christian love and evangelistic spirit. In each case, I observed some members exhibiting what seemed to be inappropriately high levels of satisfaction with how they were "doing church" compared with the fellowships from which they came. From what James says, we might even question whether their satisfaction bordered on pride.

How do we escape from the insidious, ever-tightening grip of pride when we are trying so hard to follow the Lord? As James reminds us, we can escape pride only by recognizing we are saved by God's grace. We are not saved by how much better we are than others at figuring out how to live the Christian life. See

also [Ephesians 2:8, 9](#).

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

How can we successfully control our pride without losing self-confidence in the process?

Digging Deeper

How do [2 Corinthians 7:4; 8:24](#); and [Galatians 6:3, 4](#) influence your attitude about the type of pride you may have?

**III. War with the Devil
(JAMES 4:7-10)**

A. Submission to God (vv. 7, 8)

7a. Submit yourselves, then, to God.

James moves into a writing style that has drawn comparisons with the book of Proverbs: short, pithy statements that stand well on their own. He begins with a command: *Submit ... to God*. This is the opposite of pride. Pride is self-exalting. Submission is self-lowering, self-yielding, self-denying. The word James employs has a military background, used to describe the submission of a soldier to his superior officer. It means you take orders from someone higher, and that when you receive an order, you obey it.

What Do You Think?

Considering Jesus' submission in [Luke 22:42](#), what plan can you make to

overcome the conflict between pride and submission?

Digging Deeper

What role should prayer play in overcoming this conflict?

7b. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

The other side of our submission to God is our resistance to *the devil*. There is another who seeks to be our master, our partner in spiritual adultery. James uses the word *resist*, which is similar to “opposes” used in the previous verse to characterize God’s actions toward the proud. Here it is the opposite of *submit*. Resistance to the devil is refusal to submit to his temptations or his influence.

This command comes with a promise. The devil can be a persistent adversary, but James promises that if we resist him, he will abandon us as a target. We must remember that while the devil is a powerful spiritual being, he is not all-powerful or in any way equal to God. As a created being, his power and influence are limited and must be employed strategically. When we keep resisting the devil, he will redeploy his evil assets to a more productive target.

What Do You Think?

What strategies you can recommend to resist the devil?

Digging Deeper

In that regard, which techniques of Jesus' resistance of the devil in [Matthew 4:1-11](#) and [Luke 4:1-13](#) serve as a model for you? In what ways does it not? Why?

8. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

The previous verse tells us that our lives are best lived when we are in submission to God and resist the devil. James returns to our relationship with the Lord, refining his command to submit and offering a promise for those who do so. If we *come near to God*, James promises us that God will meet us. We are reminded of Jesus' words, "Seek and you will find" ([Matthew 7:7](#)). God is already *near to* us and meets us when we seek him (see [Lamentations 3:57](#)).

This is the opposite of the devil, who flees when we resist him. God will never flee, even if we neglect our relationship with him.

How do we come near to the Lord? The rest of the verse gives us these directives: we must have deeds that honor God (clean *hands*), and we must have the proper commitment to him (pure *hearts*). These qualities define the proper worshiper of the Lord.

In [Psalm 24:3, 4](#), the clean hands and pure heart are associated with the one

who refuses to worship idols, akin to the resisting of Satan for James. Worship is to focus on God and no other. There can be no *double-minded* approach to worship. We must worship "in the Spirit and in truth" ([John 4:23, 24](#)).

CLEAN HANDS

I was recently in a doctor's consultation room in which a sign was prominently displayed regarding how to wash hands. It read something like this:

1. Wet hands with water
2. Apply enough soap to cover hands
3. Rub hands palm-to-palm
4. Rub hands on top of each other, interlacing fingers
5. Rub palm-to-palm with fingers interlaced
6. Interlock fingers
7. Rub with back of fingers in opposing palms
8. Twist thumbs with opposing fingers
9. Rub palms in a circle with opposing fingers
10. Rinse hands
11. Dry hands with a single-use towel
12. Use towel to turn off faucet

Whew! Aren't you glad Mom didn't go into that much detail? The medical profession treats cleanliness seriously (as the sign in the doctor's office indicates),

especially in flu season. Doesn't it make even more sense to be serious about cleansing ourselves spiritually?

Given the moral pollution of our world, how should we go about getting the clean hands of which James writes?

—C. R. B.

B. Lifting by God (vv. 9, 10)

9, 10a. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord,

James presents this cleansing of the heart in terms associated with repentance. When we repent, we do not laugh and rejoice. We have a deep sorrow that brings *mourning* and a heavy heart. Times of repentance are not celebrations. They are funerals in which we put our pride to death, smother our envy, and swallow our stubbornness. To jest about sin or wink at wickedness is contrary to any sense of repentance. This is a root problem among James's readers. They have become comfortable with sin among their members and have failed to repent.

Repentance is related to self-humbling. When we repent, we do not justify our wrongs, but admit them. Admission of wrongdoing is never easy, and some people seem nearly incapable of this simple act, preferring denial or excuses instead. We should notice that James is

not talking about being humbled by other people or unfortunate events. He advises us to *humble* ourselves, to lose our pride and arrogance.

What Do You Think?

What practices can you adopt to ensure you don't become comfortable with sin?

Digging Deeper

Considering [Matthew 7:1-3](#), how can a church encourage its members to live godly lives without such encouragement becoming legalistic?

10b. and he will lift you up.

That command comes with a promise too. Our self-humbling will not go unnoticed by God. He will *lift* us *up*. This has been connected by some to events in our lives, as if to say, "If you deny yourself, God will reward you with happiness, material blessings, and a better position in life." This may be, but it is not what James intends here. The "lifting up" is to rescue our souls from the mourning and weeping we have entered as an act of repentance.

When we truly repent, God lifts our hearts by forgiving us and restoring our joy ([Psalm 51:12](#)). We do not humble ourselves to be rewarded, but our humility will be blessed by the Lord—an oft-repeated principle in the Bible ([Matthew](#)

23:12; Luke 14:11; 1 Peter 5:6).

Selfish pride and arrogance risk everything if they characterize our relationship with God. Pride of comparison falls flat when applied to us versus the Lord. We can never compete with the one who created the universe. The Bible teaches that God's intolerance for human pride is consistent and unyielding (see [Proverbs 8:13](#); [Isaiah 13:11](#)). Only by laying aside our arrogance are we fully able to be lifted up by the Lord.

Conclusion

A. Proudly Humble

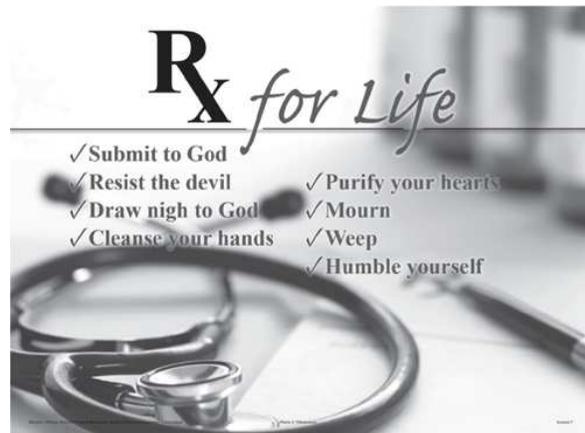
Can you imagine a humility contest in your church? If we are told to practice humility, shouldn't we honor the humblest among us? This could include nominations and campaign-style speeches where candidates tout their humility credentials to garner votes from the congregation. Then we could be proud of our humbleness. We could crown the king and queen of humility, the humblest people in our church!

This is ridiculous, of course. Humility and pride are strange bedfellows indeed. Humility, by its nature, is a private act, a personal practice. Drawing attention to our humility is like a peacock strutting after its tail feathers have been plucked.

How can we practice humility? Here

are some suggestions. First, meditate on the greatness of God. Realizing the vast expanse of God's creation—its beauty and intricate design—should make you feel very small by comparison.

Second, remember the undeserved love God has lavished upon you. Paul said that while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us ([Romans 5:6-11](#)). Our love is almost always tinged with selfishness, but God's love never is. His great love outshines anything we can claim (see [Ephesians 2:4, 5](#)).



Visual for Lesson 7. Start a discussion by pointing to any two items and asking how they relate to each other. Repeat as appropriate for your class.

Third, let us find ways to serve that are unrecognized. I recently helped serve a meal at a homeless shelter. I made some new friends and received a hearty "Thank you," but I wasn't paid or otherwise rewarded. The people I served were often unresponsive and ungrateful, even

greedy. I stayed to help clean the kitchen, and that was nasty work. I got a good dose of humility, remembering that there are those who do these jobs every day.

God is great. God is loving. I serve God by serving others. These are lessons of humility that will serve us well. May we lay down our crowns, our claims to greatness—and pick up our crosses, our submission to God’s will, so that God may lift us up in his perfect timing.

B. Prayer

Lord God, may we humble ourselves with sincere love for you. Knock the pride out of us. Let us love others without guile. We pray in the name of the one who humbled himself on the cross. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Our job is humility. God’s job is lifting us up.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#)

Into the Lesson

Write the following on the board:

It doesn’t matter what people think or do, as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else.

Ask learners why they agree or disagree with this statement; jot responses on the board. Explore whether it is possible to know for certain if the statement is true. Ask learners to describe outcomes on occasions when they were personally harmed by someone else’s sense of freedom.

Now write this on the board:

“Humility is the first of virtues—for other people.”

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841–1935)*

Ask, “In what way, if any, is this second statement a good gauge of pride and humility?” List suggestions on the board. Explore relationships learners see between the two statements. Say, “Let’s see what James tells us about these issues.”

Into the Word

Read [James 4:1–10](#) aloud. Then divide

the class into three groups; designate one as *Wrong Desires*, another as *Wrong Friendships*, and another as *Right Solutions*. Give each group one or more handouts (you prepare) of the below, according to designation. (Larger classes can form more groups with duplicate designations.)

Wrong Desires Group(s): Read [James 4:1-3](#). 1-What does the text say about the source of disagreements? 2-In what ways do people try to achieve their desires? 3-What is lacking in the solutions people choose?

Wrong Friendships Group(s): Read [James 4:4-6](#). 1-What to James must be *either/or*, not *both/and*? 2-Why is the analogy to adultery appropriate for what James has to say? 3-How does God's response differ to the proud and to the humble?

Right Solutions Group(s): Read [James 4:7-10](#). 1-What actions are we to take? 2-What will be the results of those actions? 3-What characterizes the humble person?

When the groups have completed their questions, interrelate their summations in whole-class discussion. Pose one or more of the following questions at appropriate points:

1-Is it possible to please ourselves without affecting others? Why, or why not?

2-What blinds people to the devastat-

ing pitfalls of exalting self and selfish desires?

3-How do we rid ourselves of prideful hearts? (Expect students to give the answer James does: via humility, which includes contriteness and sorrow for sins.)

4-What Bible examples can you give of those who humbled themselves? What was the result? (Possible responses include Pharaoh [temporarily], [Exodus 10:16-20](#); Ahab, [1 Kings 21:27-29](#); Josiah, [2 Kings 22:11-20](#); and the king of Nineveh, [Jonah 3:6-10](#).)

Option. Take the discussion of question 4 deeper by using the "Prideful Bible Characters" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Assign one Bible character to each group, pair, or individual learner to summarize for the class as a whole.

Into Life

Present the following case study.

Sharing was mandatory in Mark's family while growing up. So Mark grudgingly shared his prized scuba-diving equipment with his older brother. One day the brother sold the equipment and kept the money. The resulting estrangement is now in its third decade. Convinced he is "in the right," Mark refuses to take any first step toward reconciliation.

Pose this question for whole-class discussion: What role is pride playing in this situation?

Option. Use the “Prideful Heart vs. Humble Heart” activity from the reproducible page as a closed Bible post-test.