

At the Crossroads: 4. Ten Commandments of Pride

James 4:7-10

September 12, 2021

Pastor Steve Richards

This is the season when college students head back to school – and for most schools, once again, in-person classes. One student was sharing how last semester he signed up for all of the courses necessary to complete his major and all he needed was one more elective. So, he signed up for what he thought would be a fairly easy course – ornithology. How hard could it be to study birds? Well, it turned out that what he thought would be easy was the hardest class he had ever taken. There was a lot of outside reading required; there were papers and book reviews; he had to go to a three-hour bird observation lab every Thursday. It was tough! And it began to get to this senior. He had counted on this being an easy class, and it turned out to be very difficult.

One day he walked into this ornithology class, and all around the room there were stuffed birds, but each bird had a little cover over its body so that all you could see were the birds' legs. The professor said, "Class, today we're having a quiz. As you can see, each bird is numbered. You are to walk around the room and by looking only at the legs of these birds, you are to write down that bird's name." Well, that did it! This graduating senior had had enough. The idea that he should know the names of all these birds just by looking at their legs! So, he grabbed his textbooks, walked up to where the professor was sitting, slammed them down on the desk and said, "I quit! I am dropping this class! This is ridiculous! The idea that we should be able to name these birds just by looking at their legs! I can't do it! I quit!" And he turned and walked toward the door. The professor called after him and said, "Wait a minute! You can't just walk out! What's your name?" The student stopped, put his leg up on a chair, pulled up his pant leg, pointed to his leg and said, "You tell me!"

I share this bit of college class humor, because there is a sense in which the more we study the book of James, the more challenging it gets. James is speaking to Christian, first century Christians and twenty-first century Christians: Life is a test. We want to pass. We want to graduate. We stand at the crossroads, and we want to be Christian disciples, but which way should we go? Here's what we've learned from James. Christian can rejoice over trials, because the trials build up our faith. Christians can stand up to temptation because all good gifts come from God, *"the Father of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all."* Therefore, temptation cannot come from God. Christians do not turn away from human need because whenever we come face-to-face with human need, it is an opportunity to put our faith to work. And now, today, we hear that Christian do not arrange their lives as if we are the masters of our own destiny, as if God does not exist.

There is a problem. It's called Pride. It is a huge theme throughout scripture. Early on, the church identified it as a deadly sin. Pride is deadly enough to kill the soul, and the book of Genesis tells us it is the starting place, the root of all other sin. Remember how Adam and Eve were in the Garden. It was paradise. God told them they could have everything just stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because God wants them to have everything that is good, and at the same time God wants to keep them from evil. But then the serpent plants the seed of pride. The serpent says to the woman: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden.'" And the serpent still asks us this question. Surely you can have it all! The woman knows what God really said. This was not an attack on her beliefs about God but her trust in God. Remember what she does? She eats. She does what she wants. "I can do what I want." And there in the Garden of paradise with everything at her disposal, the focus of her life shifts from God to "me" by casting doubt on the goodness of God. That's pride.

Do you like dandelions? When the Mayflower landed in North America in 1620, there were no dandelions on this continent. The Europeans brought them to this continent as a good thing. They were food, and they were medicinal. But that's not what most of us are thinking when our next door neighbor sprouts a large crop of dandelions. It's not that dandelions are bad, but they can take over. *"Pride is the dandelion of the soul. Its roots go deep, only a little needs to be left behind and it can sprout again. Its seed can lodge in the tiniest crack. It flourishes in good soil. The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness."* Pride is that subtle. It starts out as something good. In 2 Corinthians 7:4, Paul says to the church in Corinth, **"I take great pride in you."** We are meant to be proud of our children. We all need that encouragement. We are meant to take pride in our work. We are meant to be proud of the best of this country. God gave me certain gifts; it's okay to be proud of what God gave me. The problem is when pride is not counter balanced by humility. Without humility, our focus shifts from God to "me."

A few years ago, I received a letter from the bishop selecting me to attend a meeting in Chicago with our United Methodist seminary. And I felt honored. Of all the pastors in Minnesota, she chose me. I recommended others, and she extended an invitation to them, and the group of us flew to Chicago. The first night we were there one of the others began asking how everyone was selected, and each person said it was a letter from the bishop. And as they were talking I could barely hold my tongue because I knew the truth. I was the one who gave their names to the bishop. I was the only one the bishop had really asked. "If it hadn't been for me none of you would be here." It was on the tip of my tongue. I don't know. Maybe I wanted them all to thank me. I don't know why, really. The next morning as I was walking from the hotel, one person in our group remarked how glad he was that I was there. He had hoped the bishop would ask me. "Oh," I said. "Yes," he replied, "she asked me who I would recommend, and I recommended you."

A seed had taken hold in my soul, and all I could see was ME. James says: **What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?** Proverbs 13:10 says, **Where there is strife, there is pride.** When pride moves to sin, we start shaming or putting others down. We want to show that we are better than others. (Have you seen the bumper sticker? My child is an honor student. It is one thing if we put the bumper sticker on the car to say to our own child, "I'm proud of you." But it is quite another is the reason is so we can tell everyone else that "my child is better than your child.") Motive matters. And we all struggle here. A husband and wife argue over who is in control. Parents and children do this. It's time for bed. No! Eat your vegetables. No! Brush your teeth. No! Was it only in our home that we discovered our kids would go into the bathroom, run the water, even get the toothbrush wet but not brush their teeth! Here's how subtle pride can be: I could preach sermons so that you would tell me what a great sermon, what a great preacher I am. Never challenge, never push your comfort zone. To be honest, I hope you will like me, but I'm not preaching here today so you will. As I prepared to preach today, I was asking, "what does God want to say through me to this congregation?"

Who is in control of my life? When the seed of pride grows inside, we forget who we are. James says, **Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.** We are God's creation, but we go through the day relying on ourselves, trusting in ourselves. "God, I know you created me and gave me life, and I really appreciate it, Lord. But most things I can handle on my own. I know the difference between right and wrong. I read the Bible. I go to church. I know what God wants me to do. I can do it myself!" Maybe we don't say it aloud, but we're living like that. "And God, if any big problems come along, God trust me. I will come to you and depend on you. But most of the time, I trust me. I follow my gut, I use my head." And that's where we get into trouble. We don't have the ability, the power to be like Christ. And when we think we do, we will fail every time.

From Adam and Eve to each and every one of us, we are broken. James is saying we can sound like believers, but if you have faith – not just thoughts, not just beliefs, not just good ideas, but faith – then we will act like it.

Each week, I look for a memory verse, and here' the verse for this week: **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.** We need this one. Let's say it together. **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.** At the crossroads, which way? Pride? Or, humility? God wants to help us. God wants us to walk in close relationship every day. How do we do this? James offers ten commandments. We find them in James 4:7-10.

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 heart, you double-minded. (If an important guest were coming to your home, you would clean up. Jews practiced rituals of purification and washing; be single-minded, not double-minded. In other words, don't multi-task! Give God your undivided attention.) **Grieve, mourn, and wail.** <slide> **Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.** (That's how the prophets described the people's response when they suddenly knew God was near. Like when I was a child at home alone with a few things my parents expected me to do, and when I heard them coming through the door and realized I had one none of those things. Grieve, mourn, wail – my joy changed to gloom.)

What are we to do? Let's say it again: **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.** Christians do not act as if we are the masters of our own destiny. To do that is to act as if God does not exist. God is in control. In every situation, what does God want me to do? Every time we listen, we humble ourselves. God gives you grace, and God will lift you up. What we are doing in worship today is like a booster shot. We sing praise to God, not ourselves. We take time in prayer and acknowledge our relationship with God. In your prayer, you prayed – *not my will, but thy will be done; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.* What we do here is not about us. It is placing our focus in God's direction. What God wants is for us to walk in close relationship every day.

And there's second thing. When we trust in God, we put others before ourselves. That's humility. We are no longer indifferent to the needs of others. Two weeks ago, I was contacted to see if I would be willing to be interviewed by one of the local television stations about this church's experience sponsoring a refugee family. With all of the flights out of Afghanistan and the tens of thousands of refugees now needing resettlement, the report said it was a timely story. But a few days later, I was told the interview would not happen because it was no longer a compelling story. The news cycle had already moved on to other things.

There's this expression that we sometimes hear: compassion fatigue. Earthquake in Haiti. Forest fires that continue to burn. Refugees from Afghanistan. Hurricane and flooding in Louisiana and then the Northeast. And in our own communities, we still have food shelves to fill and homeless to house. There is so much! And we don't have the time, but our time does not belong to us. We don't have the resources, but our resources don't belong to us. Let me take of me first.

We've got to name the demon. It's called Pride. Every day, we stand at the crossroads. Either we are led by the Spirit of humility, or we are driven by our appetite. We've got to nail our pride to the cross and leave it there or it will kill our soul.

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

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 12, 2021

Weekly Prayer: God, you call me to trust you and your plan for my life. Help me put aside my own prideful planning to seek your will and your wisdom. Help me give myself completely to you so you will be glorified in every aspect of my life. For I know that my help is in you, through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, September 13

Scripture: James 4:1-3; Genesis 3:1-6

What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings.

The snake was the most intelligent^[a] of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say that you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?" The woman said to the snake, "We may eat the fruit of the garden's trees but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, 'Don't eat from it, and don't touch it, or you will die.'" The snake said to the woman, "You won't die! God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Observation: Just as there are physical diseases that if untreated will kill us, there are also deadly sins that are terminal to our souls, destroying character, esteem and relationships. One of the deadliest, and root of all the other sins, is pride. The serpent tempted Eve not in belief of God but in terms of trusting in God. The serpent's agenda was to get Adam and Eve away from God by believing in self-trust and total self-dependency. This deadly sin of pride says we know best, can make our own decisions and destiny, and ultimately put us in the place of God.

Application: Believing in God and trusting in God are two very different things. Trust comes when head and heart are connected. What area in your life do you struggle the most trusting in God? In your daily life are you more God-dependent or self-dependent? How does pride keep you from hearing God and receiving what God wants to give?

Prayer: Faithful and loving God, you patiently wait for me to trust you completely. Give me the wisdom to know when I am leaning on my own understanding and the courage to lean on you. Amen.

Tuesday, September 14

Scripture: James 4:4; Genesis 3:7-12

You unfaithful people! Don't you know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy.

Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves. During that day's cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God in the middle of the garden's trees. The LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" The man replied, "I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because

I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree, which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman you gave me, she gave me some fruit^[2] from the tree, and I ate.”

Observation: Although we were created to be interdependent with God and each other, the first thing that pride causes is independence and isolation. Not only did Adam and Eve try to isolate themselves from God, they also began isolating themselves from each other. This attitude of independence and self-sufficiency leads us to selfishness and indifference where our lives become too busy to be concerned for others and meeting our own needs outweighs all other things.

Application: How do you define dependence? Name people in your life in whom you depend. Name a time your self-sufficiency isolated you from deepening a close relationship with another person. Can you see how self-dependence makes you indifferent to the plight of people around you in need?

Prayer: Lead me, Lord. Lead me in your righteousness. Make your way plain before my face. For it is you, Lord, you, Lord only, that makes me dwell in safety. Amen.

Wednesday, September 15

Scripture: James 4:5-6; Hebrews 12:1; Proverbs 16:18

Or do you suppose that scripture is meaningless? Doesn't God long for our faithfulness in the life he has given to us? But he gives us more grace. This is why it says, *God stands against the proud, but favors the humble.*

So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up,

Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall.

Observation: Self-sufficiency caused by our pride is really only a delusion of being in control when in actuality we are not. In fact, we are really either led and empowered by the Holy Spirit or driven by our own appetites and desires which we cannot control. And when pride meets hunger and desire, we will end up doing things that are unthinkable.

Application: When has pride kept you from seeking the help you really needed? Have you recently experienced a battle between being led by the Spirit or driven by your appetite or desire? How is the Holy Spirit leading your life on a daily basis? What is one thing you could do today to acknowledge the guidance of the Holy Spirit? (This GPS is a good start!)

Prayer: God, you know how easy it is for me to be led by my desires. It happens so quickly that I often fail to notice until I end up where I did not want to be. Help me to pause before I act or speak to seek you first. Amen.

Thursday, September 16

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1; Deuteronomy 8:10-11

Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease.

You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he's given you.

But watch yourself! Don't forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commands or his case laws or his regulations that I am commanding you right now.

Observation: The antidote to pride is humility and everyday dependence upon God. We are not as self-sufficient as we like to think. Just as Naaman was a valiant soldier yet had leprosy, we need to remember that we are still weak and very much in need, even when we experience God's success and blessing. We must remain God-dependent and put our trust in God, not forgetting who it is that has brought us this far.

Application: How has God blessed you? Consider a time you forgot God while living in the blessings of God. How will you fight the deadly sin of pride in your life and maintain your dependence upon God?

Prayer: Ever-present God, I am grateful for the ways, seen and unseen, that you are at work in my life. Just the fact that I have this day to live and breathe is an indication of your gracious work. And so, I offer my praise and thanks to you. Amen.

Friday, September 17

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:1-7; James 3:13-15

Therefore, I have a request for the elders among you. (I ask this as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings, and as one who shares in the glory that is about to be revealed.) I urge the elders: Like shepherds, tend the flock of God among you. Watch over it. Don't shepherd because you must, but do it voluntarily for God. Don't shepherd greedily, but do it eagerly. Don't shepherd by ruling over those entrusted to your care, but become examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive an unfading crown of glory. In the same way, I urge you who are younger: accept the authority of the elders. And everyone, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. God stands against the proud, but he gives favor to the humble. Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you.

Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom. However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic.

Observation: Peter asked early Christian converts (and us) to find the freedom that comes from humility with each other and to trust in God. Often, we are tempted to link freedom with "I always get my way." But Peter tells us to relate to each other humbly and trust your anxieties to God. That kind of freedom is worth pondering.

Application: How have you seen pride produce bitter envy or selfish ambition in you or people you know? How does humility guard your heart from these hurtful ways of thinking? Is it possible to act with confidence (in a church ministry, your work, your family, or just your own life) out of humility rather than pride? What attitudes or actions do you need to make that a reality?

Prayer: O God, I want to succeed. It feels so good when I am on the winning side. And yet, I recognize that attitude can lead me to see myself as better than others. But we are all your children – no favorites, just love. Help me to humble myself so that you can lift me up. Amen.

Saturday, September 18

Scripture: James 4:7-10

Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Cry out in sorrow, mourn, and weep! Let your laughter become mourning and your joy become sadness. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Observation: Submit it all—every thought, every feeling, every cruel intention, every ignoble desire, and holy aspiration. Don't be afraid to present anything to God. In his comprehending and compassionate love, God knows how to heal so that we can live in the freedom of humility.

Application: Have you ever won a prize or an award? What was God's role in the process of achieving that prize or achieving an important goal in life? How can we feel good about reaching goals while embodying a spirit of humility? Remember our memory verse: "Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

Prayer: Loving God, your son, Jesus, humbled himself, became a servant of all, and was lifted up. Help me give myself completely to you so you will be glorified in every aspect of my life. For I know that my hope is in you. Amen.