

## Desperation: Navigating Our Way to Dependence

### Self-Sufficiency – The Barrier of Desperation

James 4:1-10

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<sup>1</sup> *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* <sup>2</sup> *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.* <sup>3</sup> *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* <sup>4</sup> *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* <sup>5</sup> *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?* <sup>6</sup> *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* <sup>7</sup> *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* <sup>8</sup> *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.* <sup>9</sup> *Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.* <sup>10</sup> *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (James 4:1–10).*

Over the last few summers, I’ve enjoyed doing something that a fair number of people consider crazy. I think it is fun to participate in various triathlons. A few years ago, I completed an Olympic Triathlon, which was a mile swim, a 21-mile bike ride, and a six-mile run. Normally, however, I only compete in Sprint triathlons, which are much shorter.

However, while I generally enjoy the event, there is one aspect of a triathlon that is the most challenging. Can you guess what it is? The swim. The most challenging aspect of this portion of the race is not the actual swimming. It is the mass of splashing, swinging body parts that are all around you as you swim. Now, my problem is not that I’m a bad swimmer. My issue is that I easily default into panic mode. No matter how hard I’ve trained, I have to fight—almost the entire swim—against the tendency to “freak out.”

I’ve come to learn over the years that panicking in the water, for me, is not only the hardest part of the swim, but it is also the easiest place for me to go. I don’t have to work hard to panic. My default is internal “freak out” mode.

Understanding this tendency and barrier has been incredibly helpful. It has adjusted how I prepare for a triathlon. But perhaps more practically this “panic-awareness” has changed my posture as it relates to how I think about competing in a triathlon.

Knowing the greatest barrier really helps.

## **The Barrier of Self-Sufficiency**

We are in the middle of a four-week series on the subject of desperation. We are trying to learn how, by God's grace, to be the kind of people who cry out to God and who live dependently upon Him. And today we are going to explore what I believe to be the greatest barrier to desperation: self-sufficiency.

In the same way that "panic-mode" is my default during a triathlon, I've come to understand that if I'm not very intentional, self-sufficiency will be my default mode when it comes to following Jesus. In other words, I have to battle my natural tendency—even after becoming a Christian—to trust in myself.

That's what I mean by self-sufficiency: rather than having our first and most meaningful step be toward seeking God's help, we tend to look toward ourselves. This can happen in a crisis, but it is also simply part of the air we breathe in our culture.

Last week, we learned that desperation is a gift, as God meets us in our wrestling. I heard a great story from one of our church members about how he applied the sermon to his life while in the midst of crisis.

Now as we start this series, can I just remind you that the devil and your flesh do not want you to be desperate for God. So, as we tackle this topic, just know that there will likely be some additional opposition—even spiritual warfare.

What does James 4 tell us about the issue of self-sufficiency?

### **The Problem(s)**

To understand the solution to self-sufficiency, we need to start at a basic level by understanding the nature of the problem within us. James chapter 4 is one of the best and most clear texts that peels back the layers of our lives to help us see some things.

Now, you need to know that James is not specifically addressing the topic of desperation. However, you'll see that theme emerge rather quickly. In context, James is speaking into some problems that were apparently plaguing Christians at the time. His book is not written to one specific church, but to every church—especially those who are Jewish Christians (1:1).

That's why this section is so helpful. James addresses some common issues that every person and every church will face or is presently facing. In other words, there are some basic problems or barriers that are historic and systemic to our humanity.

In particular, James is trying to answer an important question: "What causes quarrels and fights among you?" (1:1). Who hasn't asked this question? But underneath this question about quarrels and fights is really a more fundamental question: "What is wrong with us?" James is attempting to help us understand our natural bias.

You could think of these like layers. He identifies five basic problems.

**1. Self-centered passions** – James identifies that there is an internal war taking place inside every human being—even those who are committed Christ-followers. The key word in the text is “passion.” It is the Greek word *hedone*, from which we derive the word hedonist. It means self-centered pleasure seeking. The word consistently has a negative application in the New Testament (Luke 8:14, Tit. 3:3, 2 Pet. 2:13).<sup>1</sup> Love for oneself lies at the core of the human heart.

**2. Ungodly desires** – In verse two, we see the problem of ungodly desires. Self-centered love expresses itself in desires that are strong and are often frustrated. Notice the progression because it is instructive. Once you see this, you’ll start to see it in your life and elsewhere. You want something, and when you don’t get it, you are willing to do outrageous things (even murder). Inside the human heart is an ever-churning caldron of wrong desires. The conflicts, fights, and quarrels come from here.

**3. Prayer-less living** – A significant symptom of the broken desires is a lack of prayer. Here we are getting closer to our theme. Self-centered people who are filled with ungodly desires are marked by prayerlessness. James says in 1:5 that if we lack wisdom, we should ask God for it. The problem is that simply seeking God’s help is not their first step. Self-sufficient people do not pray. And even if they do, there’s another problem.

**4. Selfish prayers** – Tragically, our selfish passions can infect our prayer life. Verse three indicates that when prayer does happen, the motivation for seeking God’s help can be self-focused. This would sound like the parable Jesus told in Luke 18. After just imploring people to have persistent faith in their prayers like a woman who keeps coming to a judge for justice, Jesus tells a parable about “some who trust in themselves . . . and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). We don’t have time to explore this text, but listen to his self-righteous prayer:

<sup>11</sup> *The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ (Luke 18:11–12).*

Oh, let us be careful—even fearful—of prayers that use God as our lackey. Be careful of prayers that sound religious and spiritual but are really just the gross expression of our proud and covetous hearts.

**5. Cultural drifting** – James concludes his cautionary words with some very strong words. He calls this orientation of the heart spiritual adultery and friendship with the world (4:4). Further, he says that this puts God’s people on the wrong side of God—“makes himself an enemy of God.” Meanwhile, the heart of God is grieved and provoked. That’s what verse 5 means. God did not intend for His children to follow the current of the culture. So, after explaining all that is potentially wrong with the human heart, James cautions us that the entire system in which we live is characterized by self-oriented, self-trusting living.

Do you resonate with these five basic problems or layers? Do you see them in yourself? Do you sense them in the cultural air you breathe? Did you see any of these issues emerge in your life last week? The point of this text is to raise our awareness level as to how much self-focus and self-sufficiency is a part of

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter to James*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 181.

the typical way in which we operate. Understanding this is part of the battle and is an essential part of the path moving forward.

Let's ask the Lord even now to show us the subtle ways that a self-sufficient mindset can set in. Last week the staff of North Indy gathered for about six hours of discussion and planning. But before we started talking to each other, we got on our knees to pray and seek God's face first.

We have an opportunity for about 100 people to put this into practice over the next 20 days. We are dreaming about what God might do in our church if we have people praying 24 hours a day in 15-minute increments. The time slots are going fast, and we'd love to you join us in intentionally pushing against the problem of self-sufficiency by a concerted effort of prayer.

Thankfully, there is more in this text than a list of problems.

### **The Promise**

This passage turns a corner in verse 6. And praise God it does! James moves from the deep surgery of the previous five verses to a beautiful promise that is at the heart of how we overcome the self-sufficiency barrier. Here is how it happens: We look to God for the grace we need.

The first step is realizing that I have a need or that I have a problem. The second step is turning to Him for the solution to that need.

Here's what the text says: But He gives more grace.

The point of this short phrase is critically important. It shows that there is an antidote for everything we just listed. The disappointing and grievous self-centeredness has a remedy. We are not without hope. There is a divinely-given path.

For some of you, this may be the first time that you've fully understood what has been happening inside of you. It may be that you've blamed the circumstances of life or the other people around you. But this text is helping you see there's another layer here that you now know you need to deal with. Well, the great news is that there is a solution. The answer is God's grace. You need to know that no other system of religious thought, past or present, contains an emphasis on divine grace comparable to what you'll find in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> And this grace comes to us through a relationship with Jesus Christ, the son of God, who died for our sins. I hope that today you come to a point where you'll become a follower of Jesus by trusting in Him.

Now, the word "grace" is probably too familiar to us. It can lose its meaning in its commonality. The word grace can mean favor, the kindness of God, or the forgiveness of God. One of my favorite definitions of grace is the power and ability to be pleasing to God. In Christ, God "graces" us with forgiveness. He pours out our judgment on Jesus so that we can be treated with mercy.

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, "Grace," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 898.

Romans 3:23-24 summarizes this so well for us:

<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . .”

But God doesn't stop there! The wonderful hope of the Bible is that God keeps giving grace. It's not just that He offers His favor, help, and mercy to us through Jesus. That's only the beginning. God is able to supply grace for "gaps" in life. A few examples:

When Paul faced an intractable problem in his life that wouldn't go away (his thorn in the flesh), he heard Jesus say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). When Peter was encouraging a people facing persecution and suffering, he said, "<sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10). And when the church at Corinth was nervous about the "gap" that would be created by their sacrificial giving, Paul said, "<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

So, the battle with self-sufficiency comes down to which promise we are going to believe. In a crisis, are we going to live as if we can "fix it"? Are we going to live as if we can figure out what to do on our own? For some this leads to anxiety as they invest emotional time and energy living as if it's up to them to figure things out or to control the future. Others run to anger. They try to use the force of their will and impose it on others in order to chart a path forward. Do you know that anxiety and anger come from the same kind of heart?

Therefore, self-sufficiency is a belief problem. It places our trust and hope in ourselves and not in God's ability to give us more grace. In small and large ways, we need to embrace a grace-breathing, God-trusting mindset as we trust the promise of God to give us more grace.

By the way, that's one of the reasons why a regular pattern of giving is so important in your life. By regularly and consistently giving money away, we exercise the muscle of belief in God's grace. Through generous giving, we affirm that we trust in God's grace more than we trust in the security of what money brings.

The power of self-sufficiency shrivels as we live by the promise of God's grace. For those of you who are Christians, the same God who granted you grace in leading you to Jesus is the same God who has grace for you even now. The implications of this are amazing! Let me put some words to this truth to show you how it should sound in your life:

- "I don't know what the future holds for me" – But He gives more grace
- "I'm so disappointed with my life right now" – But He gives more grace
- "I don't know how to reach my kids' hearts" – But He gives more grace
- "I'm not sure I want to live anymore" – But He gives more grace
- "I'm so hurt by what they've said and what they've done" – But He gives more grace

- “My life is full of blessings. I’m on top of the world right now” – But He gives more grace
- “I’ve blown it big-time. I’m so ashamed” – But He gives more grace

Desperation is not always living in crisis mode. It is just believing that the biggest crisis would be trying to live without God’s grace.

So, if that is true (and it is), how should we respond or live?

### **Our Posture**

In the final verses (vv. 7-10) we get a clear sense of what our posture needs to be. By that, I mean the kind of attitude, orientation, and practical steps that should mark our lives. James gives a series of short statements, reflecting our need to live in a particular manner. Whether you are under the weight of a crisis that has awakened you to your self-sufficiency or whether you are under conviction right now because you are seeing a concerning pattern start to emerge, here are six steps of repentance you can take:

**1. Submit to God.** The first posture is simply acknowledging God’s rightful place in your life. Or to say it another way—“stop resisting.” The specific situation in James 4 was the conflict among people which were coming from their desire for what they wanted. James seems to ask, “Have you ever considered what God wants?” Embrace a posture of a willing heart under His rule.

Self-sufficiency not only cuts us off from God’s grace as God allows us to go our own way, but it also puts us in a position where we are acting like we are God.

**2. Resist the devil.** James is acknowledging here that there is a real spiritual battle that is taking place. We’ll look at this more next week when we explore 1 Peter 5. For now, I just want you to realize that Satan doesn’t want you to be desperate for God. He doesn’t want you to be dependent on God’s grace. He wants you lulled into thinking that you can make it on your own. In small or big ways, he doesn’t want God to be your life. He hates God, and he hates those who love and depend upon him, so resist him by submitting to God, by doing what follows in this text. Realize that you are in a battle—a fight.

**3. Draw near.** This word, and how it used, has an Old Testament worship context. The idea is connected to the way in which Israel would gather at the temple or at the base of Mt. Sinai to meet with God (Ex. 19:22; 34:30; Lev. 10:3; Ps. 148:14; Isa. 29:13).<sup>3</sup> Prayer, worship, and reading the Scriptures are all part of the context here. Central to the strategy of stepping out of self-sufficiency is a regular reminder of what God is like. Drawing near is a weekly or daily exercise in desperation. We gather because, more than anything else, we need God. And notice the promise! As we draw near to Him, He draws near to us.

**4. Reflect.** In the text, we find phrases like “cleanse your hands” and “purify your hearts.” These were the kinds of activities which were part of the preparation to meet with God. And in the context of the

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<sup>3</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997).

New Testament, James is calling upon believers to reflect on what God has done for them, to confess their sins, and to realize how far they are straying from God's purposes for them. As you think about the last few days, weeks, or months, how much self-sufficiency do you see? Much like pride (because they are so closely connected), self-sufficiency grows in the soil of an unexamined and non-reflective life.

**5. Lament.** James turns the tables on our natural penchant for laughter and light-heartedness. He calls for moments where we are to "be wretched," which means expressing sorrow for what we've become. To mourn, to weep, and to turn laughter and joy into mourning and gloom is not an encouragement for us to be depressed. But it is a moment for us to mourn how easily it is for us to take over our lives and allow the negative effects of sin to bring about all kinds of destruction.

**6. Humble Yourself.** This is the final step in our posture before God. It is not only the last one, but it is basically a summary of everything in this text. Self-sufficiency is a pride issue. And the hope in this passage is that those who acknowledge their need for God's help are the ones whom God exalts.

This is the upside-down logic of the Christian life. Listen to me carefully: Those who exalt themselves are humbled, and those who humble themselves are exalted. And the greatest barrier to God's grace and the outpouring of His help is our belief in ourselves.

So today, if the circumstances of your life have made you realize you cannot make it on your own, be thankful! Use the brokenness of your life as a platform to reaffirm your trust in God's grace. Tell God you need Him. You know you do. Tell Him.

And if you find yourself in a position where you are consumed with anxiety or anger, would you consider if self-sufficiency is at the root? If you find yourself with dry eyes, a cold heart, and a stubborn will, why not sever that pattern today. Resist the devil! Submit to God. Lament your sins. Run to Jesus.

Because in so doing you'll discover how true the promise really is: "He gives more grace."

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