

My friends in Christ, I'd like to read these few verses from James 4 once again as we prepare to look more closely at them. Listen with this thought in mind: **THE LORD REWARDS REAL REPENTANCE.**

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.**

This is God's Word.

I have this pretty slick little app on my phone—don't get too excited, young people, it's not cool, just useful. It lets me put all the loyalty cards from grocery stores, office supply stores, hardware, auto parts, and sports stores. There's one here for PetsMart and a music store—so many cards. I could put them all on a ring like this and carry them around, but that's definitely a hassle.

The phone, however, is so much easier. I just pop up the right store, the cashiers scan my phone like they would the card and depending on how much I spend, I get points. For Best Buy RewardZone, I rack up enough points and I get a certificate for \$10 or \$20 to spend there. You know how those reward programs work. Maybe you like the Fry's program where you earn a gas discount as a reward for shopping there and scanning your card each time. At any rate, you know that if you use a loyalty card, they will reward you somehow.

Would it surprise you to know that something like that happens where faith is concerned? We find a description of that in the words of James chapter 4. And what is explained in these words is that **THE LORD REWARDS REAL REPENTANCE.**

It is important to know what James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader in the Jerusalem church, wrote just prior to the words of our text. He says that love with the world leads to dissatisfaction and an antagonistic relationship with God. He says that a person can't love the world and its ways and also love God and his ways. They are two very different things. So the one way—the sinful, worldly way—leads away from God. But as Christians, we realize that we have received much grace from God. And it is on this basis that he gives the instructions that follow—the words of our text.

And these encouragements really have to do with repentance—repentance that indicates a continued relationship with God and brings the Lord's rewards. During this season of Lent, it is appropriate that we look at our sins which moved Jesus to go to the cross for us. As we see his great love for us, we are moved to repent. It would be enough to simply know that our repentant hearts find forgiveness in Jesus, but God actually talks about rewards related to repentance as well.

Before we start looking at those though, we must remember that repentance is not simply sorrow or guilt over sin. It is admission of sin and a trust in Jesus to forgive AND lifestyle changes that show God that you think like he does, that you want to stop those sins. James pictures repentance well here.

First he says, **Submit yourselves, then, to God.** This is really where faith starts and must return to. Faith in God means recognizing that you are accountable to him. You have to answer to him for the way you think and the words you say and things you do. Christian people know this and know that there is no way to stand up under the scrutiny of the holy God who demands perfection like his from every person.

We also know that Jesus was able—as his life came to an end—to stand unashamed before his Father because no errant thought had ever crossed his mind. No loose or careless word had ever fallen out of his mouth. No action he took ever transgressed God's holy expectations. It is in view of Jesus and his love for us, and by the power of the Holy Spirit's converting our hearts to faith, that we now willingly place ourselves under God's direction for life. We listen to his Word. We understand that he sets the boundaries for what is right and what is wrong. We want to do what he wants us to do. We want to talk the way he wants us to talk. We want to think the way he wants us to think. That's what it means to submit ourselves to God. Out of thankfulness for his grace in Christ, that's what we do.

You and I don't see the devil but God tells us that he is working on us from the spiritual realm. That he seeks to devour us, to remove faith in God and to win us for hell. Like he did with Adam and Eve, he whispers lies into our ears and makes things seem so great when they really aren't. And we sometimes listen.

For example, he whispers that you should have everything you want and easy credit allows you access and soon you have mismanaged God's gift to the point that you are swimming in debt and your gifts to the Lord are tiny or sporadic and neither generous nor proportional to what God has given to you.

He whispers that your body is yours and you can do what you want with it—and that sounds kind of right to you. But he fails to mention the awful side effects of substance abuse or the guilt over sexual sin or the mental pain and anguish that comes with abortion.

This is how the devil works. In ways like this or others, we've sinned as we've listened and given in and angered the holy God. But there is hope! Jesus died for those sins and he forgives them. The repentant Christian hears these words and finds a way to live: **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.** We actually have the capacity to say no! Understand where the temptations come from and resist! The reward of repentant living for God is that the devil will run away! You, as God's child who has the Holy Spirit living in you, have the ability to make Satan run away! That is powerful and a welcome reward!

Have you ever felt—or maybe you're feeling it now—that God wouldn't want you? That you just are not worthy of his love? That you've done something pretty bad and at some point God just won't forgive you? We alone know the full extent of our personal sins. We don't want everyone else knowing them, but we realize that God does. He knows all of it! Why in the world would he love me? I've abused our relationship; there's got to be a limit.

But what does the God of all grace say here to the sinner? **Come near to God and he will come near to you.** Look at the reward of repentance offered here! We know the truth—we feel it: sin separates us from God. But there is a way to be reunited! Come near to God and he will reward that by coming close to you. God will NEVER move back from you as you make efforts to live more closely with him. He will ALWAYS make those moves toward you too! How comforting is that?!

I suppose the question though is, *“How do I make a move toward God?”* It's not complicated. He's sitting there waiting for you to listen to him. Your Bible is on your shelf or your nightstand or your table. Make the move. Open it. You can't get much closer than asking God to talk to you. And what wonderful opportunities exist for this also when you attend a Bible study with other Christians.

You can also talk to him—that's what prayer is. God promises to listen to your prayers and act on them, always doing what is best for you and for others.

If you're not baptized, talk to one of the pastors about what baptism is and be baptized. God says he wants everyone to be baptized just like Mindy will be baptized/was baptized this morning.

How can you get closer than receiving the very body and blood of Jesus your Savior to eat and drink in the Lord's Supper? If you're not regularly doing that, you should ask why since Jesus commands and invites Christians to do that. One word of caution though—our Savior gives some instruction about who may receive communion and a warning too—that it is possible to receive it and God's judgment instead of blessing. Just as God wants you to move closer to him and not farther away so do we. This is why we practice Member Communion. If you are not a member of Grace but you're hearing what I'm saying about Holy Communion being a way to move closer to God, you should speak to one of the pastors about it.

As long as you are alive, it is never too late to get closer to God. A repentant heart has that desire and does the things that will cause the Lord to inch closer too. And there are blessings too many to count when this relationship is strengthened. This is the miraculous grace of God.

God continues to urge repentance—serious repentance. Listen to how he speaks to us: **Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.**

Do you think of your sins that way—as things you should be so upset by? Has your guilt ever brought you to tears as you asked God to forgive you? Have you taken your sin that seriously? But see that it's not just that we should be truly upset over our breaking of God's will. God is looking for disassociation from sin. He also wants us to put the sin away.

Do you remember how the Roman governor Pontius Pilate's wife told him to have nothing to do with the innocent Jesus? Do you remember how Pilate, unable to find that Jesus did anything wrong, tried to disassociate himself from any guilt where Jesus was concerned as he washed his hands in front of the angry crowd and said, **"I am innocent of this man's blood."**? That's what I think of when God tells me, a sinner, to wash my hands of my sin. I am to have nothing to do with my sin. I am to get rid of it, to wash myself clean from that sin and not dirty myself with it again. I can do that only by looking to the perfect blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross as Pilate handed him over to crucifixion anyway. I humbly bow before the cross of Jesus knowing that my sins are forgiven in him...and then it happens. I receive the reward promised here. God lifts me up.

With the blessing of sins forgiven, my mind is cleared, my heart is strengthened and I am lifted up. I am free from the guilt of that sin and empowered by God's love and strength, I can stop that sin. And even at the times when there is a consequence, I still find the reward of the Lord as he lifts my spirits. Because no matter what happens in this world, the weight of my sin has been lifted, I am at peace with God, and my place is saved in heaven. There is nothing more important. And God wants this for every one of us. He's reaching out to us today, reminding us of the need to repent and revealing his **REWARDS for REAL REPENTANCE**.

God is looking for a loyalty that surpasses our allegiance to a grocery store which promises to give us something if we'll just shop there and scan the card. God desires a devotion to the One who lived and died for us. He scans the heart in hopes of seeing a real repentance and trust. And he rewards faithful dependence by coming near to us and lifting us up. Eventually the day of final reward will come when we will be lifted up to heaven and live in the presence of our Savior for all eternity. As God's people, we look forward to that day. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.