

“More Humble, Less Stumble”

James 4:1-12

Series: Faith that Works Week 5. Submitting to God

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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Well it was a great ride! The Phillies deserve a lot of praise for getting into the World Series. Let's not be too hard on them. Over the forty years I've lived near Philly I've noticed a common practice of Philly fans. Whenever a Philadelphia team loses, the fans shout, "They stink!" But when a Philadelphia team triumphs, fans shout, "We win!"

I saw this in action at a bar recently. Some people were shocked when I said a few weeks ago that I was in a bar. Actually the bar is the VFW hall in Yardley where, I'm told, a lot of Woodside members hang out. So the only reason I was there was to find and bring home my lost sheep. At any rate, I was at the VFW hall and the Phillies were playing the Padres in Game 4 of the National League Championship Series. In the first inning, the Padres jumped out to a 4-0 lead. Well the guys sitting in front of me shouted, "They stink!" But he used much more colorful language than that. Suddenly, the man turned around and said, "I'm so sorry for my language pastor." I said, "I forgive you my son. Don't let it happen again." In the bottom of the inning, the Phillies responded by getting three runs. The same guys shouted, "We did it!" This time they turned around and shouted, "You did that Pastor Doug. You brought us good luck." I replied, "But of course my child." The Phillies went on to beat the Padres and advance to the World Series...with my help of course. So when Game 1 against the Astros played the following Friday, I just had to be in the VFW hall to make sure "We win!" Which, of course, they did. So how come they lost? Last night I took my attention off the Phillies to use all my special powers to help Michigan beat Rutgers. So it's all my fault.

It feels good when the world polishes your pride and feeds your ego. This world knows we like acceptance, affirmation, applause, approval. It's a weakness that's hard to resist. So advertisers use it to entice and tempt us. "You've earned this. You deserve this. You should get this." Politicians tell us they are on our side, they are fighting for us. Peer pressure – whether it's in the school, at work or in the family - pushes us to do things we know are not right. Yet we do it to fit in, to belong, to be loved. We want to be a winner. But ego can set us up for a fall.

Over his forty year career, Chan Gailey has been the head coach of the Dallas Cowboys and the Buffalo Bills. Early in his career, Gailey was the head coach of Alabama's Troy State and they were on fire. With a 12-1 season, Gailey led the Trojans straight to victory in the NCAA Division II National Championship game. During the stressful week before the big game, Chan was on his way to the practice field when his secretary told him to come back for a phone call. In an irritated voice, Chan said, "Take a message." She responded, "But it's Sports Illustrated." "I'll be right there," he said.

As he made his way to the building, he began to think about the upcoming article. It would be great publicity for a small school like Troy State to be in Sports Illustrated. As he got closer, he realized that a three-page article would not be sufficient to tell the whole story. Coming even closer to his office, he started thinking that he might be on the cover. "Should

I pose or go with an action shot," he wondered. His head was spinning with all of the possibilities.

When he picked up the phone and said hello, the person asked, "Is this Chan Gailey?"

"Yes, it is," he replied confidently.

"This is Sports Illustrated."

"What can I do for you?" asked the coach.

"Sir, what we want to know is: do you want to renew your subscription?"

Coach Gailey concluded the story by saying, "You are either humble or you will be humbled."¹

In other words: the more you are humble, the less you will stumble.

Coach James uses his toughest words on this topic.

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 4:4

Ouch! That's harsh. Why is James so extreme? Can't I be friends with the world and God? Why must I choose? Doesn't the Lord want us to be friendly toward all people and love our neighbors? And don't I have to live in this world? Does James want every believer to be a monk? No.

Three words need some explanation. "Friendship" is the word *philia* which is one of the words the New Testament uses for love. You hear it in Philadelphia – "brotherly love." So James is describing someone who is not just friendly with the world but who has fallen in love with the world. What kind of love? That's the second word: *moichalides* which is "adulteress." The picture here is of a wife who left her husband to have an affair with someone else. James follows in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. When the people of Israel worshiped idols and other gods instead of the Lord, the prophets described their idolatry as spiritual adultery. They broke their vows to God and broke God's heart. James says this is still going on. The believers in his churches are breaking God's heart and getting in bed with the world. What is the "world"? It's the Greek word *kosmos*. When we think of the cosmos we picture the stars and galaxies. Yet *kosmos* in the Bible refers to the spiritual forces which work against God. The *kosmos* tempt us, tease us and trap us. The *kosmos* takes us away from our first love.

What's so wrong with loving the world? For one thing, the world doesn't love you. It's using you to sell products and make money. It tells you what you want to hear and feeds you what you hunger for. The world will dump you. It will eventually say, "You stink" and move on to someone else. Singer-songwriter Christopher Cross was loved by the world for a moment. In the early '80s he earned an impressive list of accomplishments: five Grammy awards, one Oscar, and one Golden Globe award. He won them all back in 1981 and 1982, based on his debut album which included hits like "Ride Like the Wind" and "Sailing." But Cross's sudden rise to fame came to an abrupt halt after 1983. Cross continues to sing and perform but he doesn't receive the attention he once had. In one interview he says,

¹ Chan Gailey speaking at a dinner in Dalton, Georgia (4-20-04)

I had a nice 15 minutes of fame. My fall from grace was traumatizing, very hard to deal with and very disappointing and disillusioning. Success is like money—it's much harder to have it, then not have it, than never to have it at all.

Now, Cross says, his reminder of past fame comes when some "sweet young thing" asks him for an autograph ... for her grandmother.

And the world will never be enough. Taylor Swift is one of the best-selling musicians of all time. She has sold over 200 million records globally, received 11 Grammy Awards, including three Album of the Year wins; 34 American Music Awards, 29 Billboard Music Awards, the most for a woman; and an Emmy Award. She is on Rolling Stone's 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time, Billboard's Greatest of All Time Artists, the Time 100 and Forbes Celebrity 100. Forbes says she is worth \$570 million. If worldly success brings happiness, she should be the happiest person on the planet. Yet happiness is fleeting even for her. I give Taylor a lot of credit for being open and honest about her struggles with depression, anxiety and eating disorders. In a recent song, "You're On Your Own, Kid" she sings,

I gave my blood, sweat and tears for this, I hosted parties and starved my body, like I'd be saved by a perfect kiss.

The perfect kiss cannot save you. Nothing the world is selling can save you. We are so starved for love we will even starve ourselves.

You don't have to. There is Someone who can save you who loves you freely and forever. James says,

Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James 4:5-6, Proverbs 3:34

God created your life. The Lord placed your spirit in you. He longs to get you and me back. Like the prodigal son, God runs to us with love and unconditional grace when we humbly turn toward Him. It's a matter of direction. Every day, ask yourself, which way am I headed – toward God or the world? With every decision ask yourself, is this what my pride or ego wants, what the world wants or what God wants? In some cases we are so entangled with the world, so tempted by desires, it's hard to break free. James gives us a helpful process for how to move away from the world and toward God.

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. James 4:7-8

I like to call this the 4 Rs:

1. Recognize Your Weakness – You begin by submitting and admitting you need God's help. Proud people don't have problems and don't need help. This is why the Bible says "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" Proverbs 16:18 The less you are humble, the more you will stumble. Those who are humble realize they need help. What James says next sounds negative but is necessary.

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. James 4:8-9

When you have a problem you can't control, you might deny it, joke about it, minimize it, avoid talking about. Yet it doesn't go away. You can even be double-minded – one minute hating what you do and the next indulging it. Years ago, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous discovered the first step to sobriety, freedom and recovery is

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and our lives had become unmanageable.

If you don't recognize you have a problem you can't solve, if you don't admit you need God's help, if you don't grieve over what you are doing to yourself and those around you, if you don't realize the damage it's doing, you will never be free. You will keep boarding the runaway train to destruction. What tempts others may not tempt you. But each of us is weak in some way. The first step is to recognize you need help and submit to God.

2. Resist the Devil – The devil does not want to lose you. He will push against that weakness. He will scratch that itch. He will feed that craving. James does not tell us to fight the devil. He says to move away from the devil. Identify and avoid those situations which trigger you. Stay far away from people, places and things which tempt you. Do not listen for a minute to that lying snake. By the power of Jesus tell Him to get lost.

3. Receive Power from God – James says it's not enough to deny the devil. We also need to draw near to God for His help, power and protection. Jesus knows how to beat temptation.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Hebrews 4:15

It's not enough to ask God for help once. Every moment we can receive His power and peace to face our trials and temptations. Don't listen to the world. Let Him love you. Let Him give you your true identity. Let Him fill you with His unconditional grace and love.

4. Rely on Others – One of the biggest mistakes I see is when we keep our troubles just between me and God. AA will tell you this is a “we” program. The only way to recover is together. The same is true in Christianity. You do not have to tell everyone your problems. But if you keep them to yourself I guarantee you will still keep them. This is why James says,

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16

Whatever your struggle is, choose one or two trusted believers who will listen to you, be honest with you, and help you draw near to God.

As recently as five years ago, author and speaker Doreen Virtue was the world's top-selling New Age author. She claimed to be able to communicate with guardian angels and read tarot cards. She wrote numerous books which were translated into 38 languages. This led to a phenomenally lucrative lifestyle, living on a 50-acre ranch in Hawaii. Her publisher treated her like a rock star,

flying her and her husband first class to give sold-out workshops across the globe. She rubbed elbows with celebrities. Virtue described her life and teaching this way:

During my 20 years as a New Age teacher, I promoted techniques like “positive affirmations,” believing and teaching that “your words create your reality.” We held up our wealth and fame as evidence that our principles were true and effective. Yet despite this worldly success, we were unrepentant sinners with lives marred by divorces and addictions. Having sold-out workshops, standing ovations, adoring fans, and celebrity friends gave us swollen egos. I remember believing my every thought was a message or a sign from God or his angels.

In January 2015, she was driving along a Hawaiian road while listening to pastor Alistair Begg giving a sermon called “Itching Ears” He said in the end times, people will want their itching ears tickled by false teachers who offer false hope.

I could tell he was describing people just like me. God used Begg’s sermon to convict me for the first time in my life. His words pierced my stony heart, and I felt ashamed of my false teachings. Then when I read Deuteronomy 18:10–12, I encountered a list of sinful activities that included several I was practicing, such as divination, interpreting signs and omens, and mediumship. I was broken, deeply shamed, and humbled. I dropped to my knees in shame and sorrow. “I’m so sorry, God!” I kept wailing in repentance. “I didn’t know!” On that very day I gave my life to Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The decision had far-reaching consequences. Doreen and her husband left their fancy Hawaii home. Her New Age publisher ended their professional partnership. New Agers treated her as an object of scorn.

Having to admit that I was wrong to the entire world has been deeply humbling. Even so, I needed that humility to better learn how to lean upon God. After seeking but never finding peace in New Age, I have finally found it in Christ.²

² Doreen Virtue, “Please Don’t Read My Books Anymore,” CT magazine (March, 2022), pp. 87-88