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Sermon Summary #14

The Decalogue of James 4 James 4:7-10

Perhaps *the greatest sound and light show in the history of God's people* took place in conjunction with the giving of the Ten Commandments. We are told in Exodus 20:18ff. that after God had spoken what are known as the Ten Words that "all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking" (Exod. 20:18a). Their response was anything but surprising: "the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off" (Exod. 20:18b).

This was no ordinary display of divine power and majesty. Don't even think of trying to compare it with the presence today in some churches of strobe lights and fog machines. The giving of the Ten Commandments was an event of tremendous importance in the revelation of God's will for his people and justifiably called for frightening and overwhelming manifestations in nature. If I had been present at the time, I'm quite sure I would have reacted precisely as did the people of Israel.

Today, we are going to talk about the *Decalogue*. The term "Decalogue" is Greek for *Ten Words*. But it isn't the Decalogue of Exodus 20 that concerns us but rather the Decalogue of James 4. You probably weren't counting when we read our passage today, but there are 10 commandments or 10 "words" here in James 4:7-10. I'm sorry that I didn't arrange for the reading of this text to be accompanied by thunder and flashes of lightning or the sound of a trumpet or a smoking mountain. My guess is that if we had you would not have been impressed. *Technological fabrications in churches today of what were obviously supernatural displays of divine holiness and power in the OT and NT just won't cut it.*

That being said, the Decalogue of James 4 is not nearly as momentous as that of Exodus 20. But that doesn't mean it isn't equally inspired and equally authoritative over the lives of God's people. So let's look closely at the Ten Commandments of James 4.

Before we do, it's important to know that this entire paragraph, these so-called Ten Words, are *an appeal to God's people to repent*. Although the word "repent" is not itself present, one can easily see that this is what James has in mind. You'll recall that in James 4:1-6 he charged his readers with worldliness, that is to say, with having become "friends of the world" (v. 4) and by doing so having put themselves at "enmity with God" (v. 4). He then opens v. 7 with the crucial connecting word, *"therefore"*, indicating that the exhortations or commandments that follow are prompted by the sinful behavior outlined in vv. 1-6.

The First Commandment (v. 7a)

I wonder sometimes if we are sufficiently honest with ourselves when it comes to this first exhortation: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God"* (v. 7a). Honesty requires that we confess we are not inclined to do this. We are predisposed to submit to no one other than ourselves. We are by nature and choice independent and autonomous beings. We want no one telling us what to do or not to do. We want to be ruled by no one other than "self".

But God has created and organized this world and especially the church to operate on the basis of a certain *hierarchy of authority*. Again, I know that many have a knee-jerk reaction to this. But there is no escaping the fact that God has commanded that we be submissive.

- In the sphere of the state, all of us are to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13).
- In the context of the home, children are to be submissive to their parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20).
- In marriage, wives are to be submissive to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1).
- When it comes to our jobs, employees are to submit to their employers (Titus 2:9; 1 Pt. 2:18; Eph. 6:5-9).

- And in the church, all are to be submissive to the Elders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13).

Perhaps this doesn't set well in your soul. If it doesn't, you need to ask yourself if you truly believe in the authority of Scripture to set the agenda for all our relationships.

In saying this, of course, let me remind everyone that, except in the case of our submission to God, ***our submission in other contexts to other people has nothing whatsoever to do with the issue of equality or worth.*** Whereas God is of infinite worth and immeasurably more glorious than all of his creation, such is not the case in these other instances. Those who govern the state are not of greater value or worth than those whom they govern. Parents are not superior to children in value. Employers are not more important to God than employees. Husbands are not of greater worth than their wives. And Elders are not more valuable or in any way superior to those whom they lead in the local church.

Now that we're clear on that, what does it mean for us to "submit" to God? I'll only mention two things. **First**, it means to acknowledge that his written Word, the Bible, is the highest authority over our lives. To submit to God means that we believe all that it says and we obey all that it commands. We aren't free to pick and choose what feels good or right or fair. ***We are subject to every syllable of Scripture.*** **Second**, it means we make the glory and honor and praise of God the highest aim or goal of all that we do. The apostle Paul was describing our submission to God when he said in 1 Corinthians 10:31 – "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

The Second Commandment (v. 7b)

James next commands us to "resist the devil" and promises that if we do "he will flee" from us (v. 7b). So let it be said right up front that "the devil" or Satan is a very real and very cunning and very powerful enemy. This is not a figure of speech, although Satan would love nothing better than for you to dismiss him as such.

Satan is a fallen angel. All angels were created (Col. 1:16; Jn. 1:1-3). Therefore, Satan was created. He is, therefore, ***God's Devil.*** Satan is ***not*** the equal and opposite power of God (contra *dualism*). ***He is not eternal. His power is not infinite. He does not possess divine attributes. In sum, he is no match for God!*** The word of God is clear that whereas Satan is *powerful*, he is not omnipotent. Whereas he is *intelligent*, he is not omniscient. Whereas he is *active*, he is not omnipresent.

To place ourselves under God's authority necessarily entails resisting and turning from Satan's. "Resist" means to stand against or oppose. Here we are assured that ***whatever power Satan may have, ours in Christ is greater. Never forget that spiritual warfare is not a horizontal tug of war; it is a vertical chain of command.***

So what does it mean to "resist" or to "stand against" Satan? I don't think he's suggesting we go outside and shout loudly: "Satan, get the hell out of our lives!" Forgive my French! Rather, we resist Satan by submitting to God. We stand against Satan by aligning our hearts and minds with the truth of what God has revealed in his Word. We resist Satan by living in obedience to all that God has commanded. We resist Satan when we worship and adore Christ more than anything Satan brings before us. We resist him when we love God above all else, when we prize Jesus as our supreme treasure. Are there other specific things we can do to "resist" the Devil? Yes.

We must be faithful to put on the armor of God as outlined in Ephesians 6.
 We must pray (both our own and that of others on our behalf).
 Worship. Satan hates to hear your songs of adoration and exultation.
 Study and meditation on God's Word.
 Verbal rebuke.
 Obedience and purity of life.
 Standing firm in the faith.

I take this last point from 1 Peter 5:9 where we are told to resist Satan, remaining ***"firm in your faith"*** (v. 9a). What Peter has in mind is our on-going confidence and trust in the greatness and power and faithfulness and goodness of God to do all for us that he has promised he will do. ***It is faith in the truth of the gospel!***

In Colossians 1:23 Paul speaks of “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” What Satan wants more than anything else is to shake your confidence in God, to instill doubt in your heart about whether the gospel of God’s saving grace in Jesus is really true or not.

The solution, the response that will send him running from your presence, is unshakeable faith in the gospel! Unyielding confidence that Christ’s atoning death for your sins has forever secured your acceptance with the Father. Persevering trust that all God has accomplished for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will forever keep you safe in the loving arms of your heavenly Father. When this grips your soul and warms your heart and energizes your mind and spirit, Satan doesn’t stand a chance!

By the way, never forget that you can successfully and faithfully “resist” the Devil and he might still kill you (see Rev. 2:10)! Think for a moment about all the martyrs in church history who have lost their lives but never lost their faith. What the Scriptures tell us is that Satan can do no ultimate or eternal harm to us, though he may inflict physical harm. And even then, he can’t do it without God’s permission.

The Third Commandment (v. 8a)

We are next told to “***draw near to God, and he will draw near to you***” (v. 8a). Is this not one of the greatest and most comforting and reassuring exhortations and promises you’ve ever heard? If you can’t say yes, you don’t understand what is being said.

How is this done? In the first place, he’s not talking about making a physical or geographical journey. In the Old Testament, when God’s people were subject to the Mosaic Law, one literally had to travel to Jerusalem and go to the Temple to “draw near to God.” God’s presence was uniquely manifested and limited to the Holy of Holies behind the veil of the temple. See Exod. 19:22; Lev. 21:21-23; Ezek. 44:13.

But in the New Covenant God’s presence is here, within our hearts. Thus to “draw near” to God is not a spatial movement but a posturing of the heart in which we repent of our sins, cry out to God for his sustaining strength and help, and seek the joy of his love. The author of Hebrews put it this way: “***let us draw near*** with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22). Consider three other occasions in Hebrews where our author encourages us to draw near.

- “Let us then with confidence ***draw near*** to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).
- “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who ***draw near*** to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).
- “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would ***draw near*** to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

There are several other NT texts that affirm the same thing, two of which are:

- “For through him [i.e., through Christ] we both [i.e., believing Jews and believing Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18).
- “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18a).

In our society there are all sorts of barriers to prevent or hinder access to certain people and places: whether they be Hollywood actors or professional athletes or the President of the United States; whether it be the Mona Lisa in the Louvre in Paris or the gold currently housed in Fort Knox in Kentucky.

All these people and places and events combined that limit access are nothing in comparison with God. ***He infinitely transcends in value and glory and honor and power all such big-shots on earth. But the Bible tells us that he has made the greatest imaginable sacrifice precisely to open up to himself free and unhindered access. And you never need an appointment to draw near to God. There is never an inappropriate time to visit God. You will never, ever be turned away if you draw near to him through faith in Jesus Christ.***

So what does it mean to “draw near”? Since God is a spirit and is everywhere present, you don’t need an airplane or automobile to draw near to him. You don’t even need legs! No physical movement is required. No financial payment is needed. No connections are required. You can be lying in a hospital bed, driving in your car, sitting at your desk, running around Lake Hefner, or even attending a service like this and you can instantly and always draw near to God.

Perhaps the most common mistake people make is to think that if I am going to draw near to God I have to visit some physical structure that is regarded as holy and sacred. The result is that people think God “lives” here in this building and that if I am to encounter him it can only be on a Sunday morning. Now certainly it is crucial that we gather corporately on a weekly basis to seek God and to engage him in life-changing ways. But we can draw near to God 24-7, anytime and everywhere. Thus, contrary to what many of our church traditions have suggested, you don’t have to walk down one of these aisles to draw near to God. God is equally present to you where you are sitting as he is when you kneel in front of this platform.

Drawing near is an invisible act of the soul. It is that spiritual movement of the heart of a man or woman by which we cry out to God for help, by which we express our trust in his goodness, by which we lay hold of his promises, by which we believe him to be all that Scripture says that he is, by which we proclaim that he is great and beautiful and praise him for all he is and has done, and by which we say “You alone are my hope and my joy and my salvation and I refuse to trust in another.”

And what makes this commandment so precious and dear is that ***it comes with a guarantee***: if you draw near to God ***he will draw near to you!*** He will satisfy your soul in ways you can’t even begin to fathom (Ps. 16:11). He will fill you with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8). He will flood your soul with the peace that “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7) and guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). He will live in you and walk with you and talk to you through every minute of every day. He will fill you with power to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. He will awaken your heart to the height and depth and width and breadth of the love he has for you in Jesus (Eph. 3:14-19). And he will do “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph. 3:20).

The Fourth and Fifth Commandments (v. 8b)

The fourth commandment in the Decalogue of James 4 is that we “cleanse” our “hands”. The fifth is that we “purify” our “hearts” (v. 8b). “Hands” and “hearts” here refer respectively to our deeds and our thoughts or affections. That is to say, James has in mind the need for repentance both in terms of our external behavior and the internal attitude that leads to it.

But wait a minute! I thought we had ***already*** been cleansed by the blood of Christ. I thought our hearts had ***already*** been purified. Isn’t that what we learned in Hebrews 10:22? There we are told to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Yes, of course. But ***there is a difference between the once-for-all-time cleansing or purification that comes when we first put our faith in Jesus and the on-going, daily, experiential cleansing that comes when we fall into sin in the course of routine life.***

If you have trusted Christ as Lord and Savior you have had the righteousness of Jesus himself imputed or reckoned to you. You are in that sense perfectly clean and pure. We call this ***justification***. But experientially, as we live each day and wage war against the power of our fallen flesh, we stand in need of regular cleansing and purification. We call this ***sanctification***. And it is sanctification that James has in mind in this exhortation.

Let’s not lose sight of the context. James probably has in view those particular sins that he’s just noted in vv. 1-6 – quarrels, fights, covetousness, friendship with the world, etc. So his point is that if you desire to draw near to God and enjoy the depths of his intimacy and love you must confess and repent from the sins of both the “hand” and the “heart”. His description of them as “double-minded” is likely a reference to their delusion that it was possible for a Christian to be simultaneously both a “friend” of the world and a friend of God. As we saw last week, this is a conflict of allegiance that our jealous God will not tolerate.

The Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Commandments (v. 9)

It is quite clear from the way James strings together these next four commandments that he wants us to treat them as something of a composite whole. They all pertain to the flippant and careless disregard with which we often treat our sin.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that this is how God wants us always to live our lives as his children. ***James is directing these exhortations to those among his readers who had befriended the world and treated it as if it were no big deal.*** They were insensitive to their sin. They had grown somewhat indifferent, even whimsical, to what it means to defy and dishonor God and his grace. Their sense of the gravity of sin had been somewhat blunted. James is thinking in the same terms as Solomon in the book of Proverbs when he said: ***“Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool”*** (Prov. 10:23a).

James is calling them to a sober reassessment of their souls. James is certainly not opposed to joy. After all, he told us back in James 1:2 to rejoice even in the midst of trials. His point here is simply that ***sin is no laughing matter.*** Rejoice in holiness. Find in Christ and his beauty a reason for joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8). But don't delight in your worldliness.

Some of you who are calloused and careless about your sin need to mourn and weep and exchange your laughter for heartfelt repentance. But others of you who are burdened by your guilt and saddened by your failures need to rejoice with joy inexpressible that your sins are forgiven!

So, James is not condemning all laughter, but thoughtless, hard-hearted laughter that makes light of sin. I'm certain that James would have happily echoed the sentiment of the psalmist when he said: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad” (Psalm 126:1-3). And he would certainly agree with Paul that we should “rejoice always” as we find delight in the sweetness and freedom of forgiveness (Phil. 4:4).

The Tenth Commandment (v. 10)

The tenth and final commandment is something of a re-affirmation of vv. 6-7. There we were told that God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble and for that reason we should “submit” to him. Here we are told, similarly, to “humble” ourselves “before the Lord, and he will exalt” us (v. 10).

Perhaps the best way to get hold of what James means by telling us to “humble” ourselves is by thinking about the nature of pride. I'll be brief. Simply put: ***pride is when all of life is all about self!*** I unpacked this in detail when we studied 1 Peter 5, so here I'll simply summarize.

- (1) ***The proud person is self-satisfied.***
- (2) ***The proud person is self-sufficient.***
- (3) ***The proud person is self-congratulatory.*** Pride takes credit for what only God can do.
- (4) ***The proud person is self-referential.*** That is to say, the proud person loves being praised, loves it when the attention is pointed in his/her direction, loves to be the topic of everyone's conversation. Be very careful and cautious around people who make much of their humility! ***Such folk loudly proclaim their lowliness and then expect others to praise them for it!*** They are quick to make known their failures and their humility but react with strong protest if someone in private should suggest that their claims to humility are feigned and superficial.
- (5) ***The proud person is self-reliant.*** *Pride cannot trust God.* Trust feels too weak. It feels too dependent. It redirects too much attention away from oneself and to the strength and wisdom of another. Trusting God is the heartbeat of humility, the opposite of pride.
- (6) ***The proud person is self-defensive,*** especially when it is suggested he might be proud! When persecuted or crossed or slandered or attacked, the proud person is angrily defensive of his actions and largely oblivious to all personal failures.
- (7) ***The proud person is self-righteous.***

So when we ask, “What does James mean by humility”, the easy answer would be to embrace the opposite of each of the seven characteristics of pride. Yes, by all means do that! But let me put a bit more substance into the concept of humility. Again, let me mention 7 features of true humility.

(1) An essential element in humility is ***the willingness to allow others to say about me in public the very things I readily acknowledge before God in private.***

(2) The key to humility is ***a sincere and passionate acknowledgement of and submission to the sovereign grace of God.*** In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul writes: “For who sees anything different in you? ***What do you have that you did not receive?*** If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Humility should always be in direct proportion to one’s grasp of grace. Pride is the fruit of the lie that what I have I didn’t receive. Humility is the fruit of the truth that everything is of God (see also John 3:22-30, esp. vv. 27 and 30).

(3) Perhaps most of all, ***humility is being like Jesus:*** “I am gentle and lowly [or humble] in heart” (Mt. 11:29; Phil. 2:5-11). The measure of Christ’s humility was his “compassion” (Col. 3:12a). ***Proud people don’t love the unlovely very well.*** The measure of your humility is the degree to which you happily embrace the unembraceable, touch the untouchable, and love the unlovable. ***Humility is measured by how you treat those who can do nothing to advance your cause.***

(4) The truly humble person is ***devastated by the smallest expression of depravity but nearly oblivious to great progress in goodness and obedience. The truly humble person is always looking not at what he/she has attained, even if it be by divine grace, but at the goal for which his/her soul is striving.*** The truly humble person does not evaluate himself by what he has already achieved, but by what he is still aiming for. Therefore his holiness and maturity will always appear small because it is compared with where he’s going, not where he’s been.

(5) ***The truly humble person does indeed make great progress in the knowledge of God, but with that spiritual growth comes an increase in our knowledge of our sin and how vast is the discrepancy between what we know and what we ought to know, between what we love and ought to love.*** The point is that as we grow in grace and knowledge and love of God it simply serves to shine an even brighter light on our corruption and failure to properly honor God. When the humble person does recognize progress and purity in his life, he’s truly stunned by it.

(6) ***The truly humble person will never consider any act to be beneath his dignity.*** Even if the act brings him lower than he has ever experienced before, he will always regard it as ***higher than he deserves.***

(7) ***True humility is never noisy,*** especially about itself. If you are inclined to say, “No one is as sinful and depraved as I am,” be careful that you don’t think yourself better than others on this very account. Be careful lest you develop a high opinion of your humility. In essence, if you find yourself thinking often of your humility, it is likely that you have little of it.

Such is pride. Such is humility. But why should we care? We should care because as James said back in v. 6, ***“God opposes the proud.”*** We should care because he also said that God ***“gives grace to the humble.”*** We should care because he tells us here in v. 10 that if we do turn away from pride and humble ourselves before the Lord, ***“he will exalt” us.***

James is talking about what will happen on the day of final judgment when the humble will be rewarded and the proud will be put down. The truly humble will receive praise and honor from the only One who matters!

Humility can be very costly in the present. Humility requires that you openly and honestly acknowledge your mistakes, your shortcomings, and your sins. It means being willing to do tasks that others regard as beneath them. It means serving without expectation of acknowledgment or praise or reward or even being noticed. It means living in such a way that you are always exposed to the possibility of being looked down upon. As someone has said, ***“the truly humble person always runs the risk of losing face.”***

So there you have the 10 Commandments of James 4. No thunder. No lightning. No trumpets blaring. No mountains billowing smoke. But not for that reason any less the word and will of God for you and me!