

**1** Today we're wrapping up our study of James, the book in the Bible with the big idea that unless our faith is resulting in good works that change the world, then the heart of our faith is in need of a defibrillator. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, something we are called not only to hear, but also to live out in the communities where we live and work and go to school, as well as in the wider world around us. So put your faith into action. One way to do that is to grab one of these blessing bags in the lobby and share it with the next homeless person you meet or see at a highway intersection.

Last week we studied James 3 and we were challenged to "tame our tongues" by using our words in healthy, holy ways that bring blessing instead of cursing. I have really tried hard to be especially mindful of my words this week, and especially the heart behind my words. I hope you also took a small step to tame your tongue. Today's message from James is equally challenging, shifting our attention from the wagging of our tongues to the humility of our hearts. In our first reading this morning, James messed with us where we really don't want him messing, calling us to humility of heart in our attitudes about our plans for the future. In this next reading, he goes even further and hits on something we hate talking about even more than the taming of our tongues and our time: our wallets! I'm reading now from the first five verses of James 5 in the New Living Translation. {Read James 5:1-5, NLT}

**2** I had a humbling experience when I first sat down to do some background research for this message. I came across a proverb on a Google search that goes with this image, variously attributed to the Chinese, the Japanese, and even to Bruce Lee! The proverb reads, "Be like the bamboo; the higher you grow the deeper you bow." I like that sentiment, and I think the inclination of humility of heart is entirely consistent with what James would have us practice, but I wanted to track down the origin of the proverb, so I did another Google search. In the results of my search, I noticed a link to our church web site. I was surprised and intrigued, so I clicked the link, which launched me into a copy of a sermon I had written two and a half years ago from the Beatitudes on humility, featuring the very same image and proverb. I had forgotten completely about it, all the while thinking I had come with a new sermon illustration. There truly is nothing new under the sun! I suppose that you've

forgotten it as well I have. The timeless truths of God's Word do tend to repeat, both in the Holy Scriptures and in our own lives, as we seek to live out the Word of God.

**3** Many notable people have offered their thoughts about humility.<sup>1</sup> Mother Theresa offered some practical tips on practicing humility, including: "To speak as little as possible of one's self. To mind one's own business. Not to want to manage other people's affairs...To accept contradictions and correction cheerfully...To pass over the mistakes of others...[and] To be kind and gentle even under provocation." I also like this quote from author H. Jackson Brown, jr. "Every person that you meet knows something you don't; learn from them."

Martin Luther said humorously, "True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue." But my favorite quote outside of the Bible is this, erroneously attributed to C.S. Lewis and others: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." That's a definition of humility that both Jesus and James might have approved of. It seems close to what Jesus meant when he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me."<sup>2</sup>

**4** It shouldn't surprise us that James doesn't settle for writing some abstract platitudes about humility. He dives right into application, and in our first reading his concern is our casual attitude about our plans for the future and our failure to acknowledge that only God really knows what tomorrow holds for us. Acknowledge your humble dependence on God in all things, James warns, otherwise we're basically boasting that we're in charge.

We know in our heads that when we say, "Jesus is Lord," that means that Jesus is also the Lord of all time, including our past, present, and future. Jesus calls himself the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.<sup>3</sup> But while we sometimes seek God's leading in prayer for some of life's bigger decisions, we tend to take the routine stuff of tomorrow and the next week and month somewhat for granted. There are plenty of people sitting here this morning who could give a testimony about how quickly all that changed when they received a cancer diagnosis, lost a loved one, found themselves in intensive care, or suddenly lost

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/humility>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:24. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 22:13.

their job. We imagine that our schedules belong to us and that we are the masters of our time and our futures. God did give us the ability to plan and understand time, at least in a limited way, but God never intended that we forget that each day is a precious gift for us to enjoy and then pass on that joy in a blessing to someone else, always remembering that the blessing came first from our Lord.

**5** I don't believe that God wants to micromanage our schedules and choices, but God does want to shape our hearts. For example, just because Jesus washed the feet of his disciples after supper in the Upper Room doesn't mean that literal foot washing has to be a part of every communion service. The point behind foot washing is that we are called to have humble hearts that lead to humble service, always remembering that we are loved and sent by Jesus, who served us in love by first remembering from whom He had come and then becoming something less than what he was entitled to be. In a similar way, James is telling us that when we make plans, we should always be mindful that we belong to Jesus, and then seek to make plans that are consistent with what Jesus would do, humbly serving others in love. Doing what Jesus would do doesn't require us to imitate his every action, like walking on water, but we are called to choose attitudes and actions that reflect his heart and mission.

**6** Now about those words of warning to the rich. There are at least three evils that James is critiquing: the social injustice of the wealthy mistreating those who serve them, the broader social injustice of the wealthy hoarding the blessings of God while so many others go without the basic things needed for living, and the heart issue that underlies both problems: By relying on our wealth instead of God, we fool ourselves into thinking that we created it ourselves, trading spiritual humility for prideful arrogance. While money is not the root of all evil, the love of money certainly is a root of evil, which is why Jesus speaks so much about the hazards of handling wealth.

This is a really difficult picture for me to look at. Not only is it visually grotesque, it's offensive because it's a personification of a kind of gluttony and lust for money and power that all too often resembles our own hearts when we forget that we belong to God, we abandon our humility of heart, and then we ravenously feed ourselves by gorging on consumption of stuff. It's ugly because it's so often true. I wonder if my spending choices would change if I taped a copy of this picture to my credit card.

**7** Each generation of Christians takes a look at the world around them and is tempted to despair that the gap between the heart of Christ and the heart of humanity is an ever-widening chasm. Many have been tempted to retreat from the world, thinking that the best way to foster a humble heart. This is Saint Benedict,<sup>4</sup> who inspired a monastic order in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and developed a strict set of rules and twelve steps whereby monks were to increase their humility. Another monk, Brother Lawrence,<sup>5</sup> found his path to humility by serving in the monastery kitchen. While I value and learn from the writings of both these spiritual giants, as a United Methodist, I completely reject the impulse to find humility exclusively in seclusion. United Methodists are on a mission, just as Jesus was on a mission, just as James was on a mission. It is hard to have a humble heart when we're living in the middle of a culture that marches to such ungodly values, but do you imagine it was any easier for Jesus or the first disciples in the middle of a Roman occupation? Jesus didn't hide from the world, he engaged it, and in the hardest times and places. Humility of heart comes for us when we wrestle with what we know to be Godly and what we see in our own lives to be ungodly. Growth in humility of heart comes from living in that tension and putting what we learn into practice, not from avoiding it. In other words, humility of heart without humble service to others is dead.

**8** 1Corinthians 10:24 sums up the matter nicely. "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others."<sup>6</sup> That intersects nicely with that quote we started with: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." Perhaps that's what James is really trying to tell us, with his strong words about our schedules and our money. We need to get our minds off of ourselves and out into the lives of others, using whatever blessings God has given us, whether time, money, or anything else, to bless others. And once again it all comes down to our hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to operate on our hearts, to remind us that we are God's children, sent with God's humble heart. And then we need to get off our couches and into the world to train up those new hearts through a thousand reps of humble

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule\\_of\\_Saint\\_Benedict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_Saint_Benedict)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother\\_Lawrence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother_Lawrence)

<sup>6</sup> New International Version (2011)

words and deeds, glorifying God, making disciples of Jesus, and making the world a better place to live. We have to start sometime. Why not today?



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