



James 4:1-12
 FaithWorks: The Book of James
 Pride, Pain, and Prayer

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 Pentecost Sunday

Probably all of us have been stung by our own pride: Maybe a prideful attitude toward another person that came to light; perhaps we thought we could just skate through an exam without studying for it, and we failed; Perhaps we thought we could get away with something but eventually we were caught. Proverbs 16:18 says, **“Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit – or “haughty spirit” – before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).** Oftentimes it is simply truncated to: Pride goes before the fall. Biblical purists will say that’s a misquoting of it, but it doesn’t change the point of the verse, so I’m good with it. Pride leads to a person’s undoing. The list of people who have experienced the truth of Proverbs 16:18 is long – from Presidents to pastors, from CEO’s to stay-at-home parents. Pride is a problem.

There’s a story about a man who smelled like a distillery and got onto a subway car one afternoon. He flopped onto a seat next to a priest. The man's shirt was stained, clothes unkempt, and a half empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened a newspaper he’d pulled out of the garbage and began reading.

But the priest became uncomfortable at the smell and appearance of his seatmate, and had a growing contempt for him start to well up. After a few minutes the disheveled guy turned to the priest and asked, "Say, Father, what causes arthritis?" In his annoyed state, the priest retorted, "Mister, it's caused by loose living, casual sex, too much alcohol and a contempt for your fellow man."

"Well I'll be....." the drunk muttered, returning to his paper. The priest, realizing the prideful, judgmental error of his comment, apologized. "I'm so very sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. How long have you had arthritis?"

"I don't, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does."

Pride doesn’t go just before a full-scale destruction...it goes before even just

a brick being removed from the house of our lives. And today, James has some wisdom for us about our pride, the pain it causes, and the antidote to it that we find in prayer. We're in James 4:1-12 as we continue our series in this letter that I've titled "FaithWorks," and we'll read the whole 12 verses in one shot this morning. This is God's word to you and me today... (**James 4:1-12**).

The crux of this passage is the second half of verse 6, and I want to start there. It is a quote of Proverbs 3:34 – "**God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble**" (**Proverbs 3:34**). You may recall that at the start of this series I mentioned that James is like the Proverbs of the New Testament. This is true to a certain degree in its structure, but also in its content – there are Proverbial kinds of themes and statements that we see throughout this letter. In this section, however, we see that clearly as James quotes the book of Proverbs. It's the only direct quote in the letter.

And this last half of verse 6 really is the crux of this passage, and perhaps the whole letter, because: **Our pride gets in the way of our relationship with God and with other people.** It prevents us from having empathy because pride says we're better than them; it prevents us from being unified with other people – particularly those who are different than ourselves – because pride says we don't need other people; similarly, it prevents us from knowing God because it says we don't need God...we're good enough on our own; it prevents us from deeply knowing ourselves because it won't acknowledge our faults; and lastly – at least for this list – it leads to our downfall because of all these other things that pride does.

The story I shared earlier is actually a good example that we all can probably identify with in some way. **Like the priest in the story, every single one of us has had prideful, judgmental thoughts toward someone.** If you haven't then you must live in a cave and never interact with anyone...like you've lived in the Coronavirus era your entire life. And that has GOT to present a whole different set of problems I would imagine.

We all struggle with pride at some level, even in small things. Even if we haven't had a great fall. And if you go back and look at everything in James

we've been in the last few weeks, you'll see that "pride" is a lot of what he's getting at. Sometimes it's explicitly called out or the antidote to it is encouraged...at other times you have to read between the lines just a bit, but it's not that difficult to see. So **"pride" is all over the first few chapters, as if the whole letter is building up to this moment.**

And the final ramp-up to it in the first few verses of today's passage gets down to the nitty gritty of some tough stuff that's going on in the church he's writing to. They've got fights and quarrels. He says so twice – in verse 1 and again in verse 2. This isn't the first time he's dived into some of their challenges...he's mentioned some things earlier...but now you get the sense that he's really getting into it. He really lays into them because they've got some problems that need to be addressed. There's stuff that needs to get "up and out" as one of my pastoral colleagues like to say. If stuff stays "down and in" it won't get dealt with.

Now, if you've always thought that churches were these perfect, idyllic places where there never was any interpersonal conflict and we just sit around listening to the Beatles' "All you need is love" all the time, then you've got another thing coming.

The people of any given church, and the Church worldwide (Capital "C")... **The Church is filled with people who struggle with pride.** From pastors and staff like worship band leaders, choir directors, treasurers, children's directors...to the soprano choir member who always wants the solos (and I have NO idea if that's true at our church!) to the drummer who of course always wants a solo...and why not? There probably ought to be more drum solos if you ask me... I mean, churches are not filled with perfect people. It's been said, that if you find a perfect church: don't join it. You'll ruin it!

And James makes that clear right here. Christians are not perfect. And not just in our church relationships...as a group called "a church"...You've probably experienced some of that imperfection in your household lately. I know we have. My family is *clearly* not perfect. There are lots of issues for them to work on. ☺ And they would say the same about me...and so would I. That's why we need a word in our lives like James gives here: **"What causes**

quarrels and fights among you?” (James 4:1).

And he unpacks that more in the next few verses. But the point he’s making is that pride leads to pain. It leads to quarreling, fighting, even killing. It leads to pain in our relationships with people and in our relationship with God. One of the roots of this pride is something he’s been hammering home throughout this letter is when he writes in verse 5, “...**anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God**” (James 4:5). He’s hit on this topic a number of times: about the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God. And following the ways of the world feeds the pride. Pride pulls us away from people and away from God. And God longs to be in relationship with us, which is the point of verse 5.

And then that leads to the crucial verse 6 about God’s grace that is shown to us, but it takes humility to receive it. If we think we’re “all good” on our own without God in our lives, then we will never receive his grace. We’re too prideful. We’re too stuck on ourselves and thinking that we’re “all that and a bag of chips.”

The ironic thing in all this is the Biblical and Christian claim that out of the entire universe God loves you and me. It could lead to a certain pride on our part. Think about this: out of the entire universe, which is some 93 billion light-years in diameterⁱ – and don’t even try to calculate how many miles that is, but I will tell you that one light year is 5.88 trillion miles, so the universe is “93 billion X 5.88 trillion” miles in diameter – out of all of that, God is most focused on *you!* On us! Humanity! Yes, you. And that could lead to greater pride: Look how special we are and I am! But the Christian response is the opposite: it’s humility. It’s a humility that’s born out of a response that says: “who, me? Really?” David puts it really well in Psalm 8: “**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them?**” (Ps. 8:3-4).

And that’s why James then continues to write, “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. 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” (James 4:7-10).

And let’s be honest, most people can’t just flip a switch and say, “I’m going to be humble now.” **Not many people wake up one day and say, “I think I’ve been too prideful and pushing God out of my life. I’m gonna humble myself and submit to Him.”** It doesn’t usually just happen like that, randomly. It takes some event. It takes something happening where you realize: “Holy crud! I’m a wreck, my life is out of control and I can’t do anything about it.” It usually takes an event...a catharsis...it takes getting things “up and out” and realizing our own frailty and our lack of control over life.

The coronavirus is like that. This last January or February, did you make plans for the spring or summer? How are those coming along for you? I’ve got two pastor friends who had sabbaticals planned this summer. I’m working on one for next summer, as you know...my pastor friends had to postpone theirs for a year. My kids had plans for camps this summer. My cousin and her family were supposed to go to Japan. The Summer Olympics were supposed to happen for crying out loud. I mean, they’re only every four years, and we can’t even get them going. I guess a rocket was supposed to launch this last Wednesday and it was kind of a big deal. Maybe you heard about it? Well, it got postponed due to weather, as you probably know. What makes us think we can control anything of significance and have any pride about it? And then there are systemic issues like racism, divorce, addictions to alcohol, drugs, video games, pornography...I mean: **Why do we have any sense of pride? It only leads to pain.**

I read an article in the Economist this week about Dr. Francis Collins, who is the Director of the National Institute of Health, which according to the article, is the largest supporter of biomedical research in the world. He is leading the Institute’s efforts to find a vaccine for Covid-19. Dr. Collins got his PhD from Yale at age 24. In 1989, he led the team that found the gene that causes cystic fibrosis, and led another team that announced in 2003 it

had sequenced the entire human genome. I don't even know what that means, but I know it was groundbreaking and the dude is really smart.

And at age 27 Dr. Collins became a Christian. He was struck by patients he was caring for who turned to God for comfort. So he "...began reading C.S. Lewis and, [as he says] 'seeking to dismiss the faith perspective, I was stunned to discover a rich vein of philosophical and theological thinking.'"ⁱⁱ It took something in his life – in this case the prayers of people who trust God in the midst of their own pain...it took that to turn him toward seeking God – even though he was actually seeking to disprove God at first.

So maybe you don't just randomly wake up one day and humble yourself before the Lord, but maybe coronavirus or something else is an eye-opener, a bottom-of-the-barrel moment when you realize how much pain our pride causes. It's humbling to realize that. And: **It's in that moment when we see the pain that our pride has caused that we can turn to God in prayer.** We can humble ourselves and submit to him – if for no other reason than, "what else are you going to turn to?"

It need not be a theologically rich, long, articulate prayer. You can simply say: "Dear God, my life is out of control. My plans aren't panning out, my pride has caused pain in my relationships and it's blinded me to you. I realize at some level that I need you in my life and I want to know you and your grace and love. Please help me to know you more from this day forward. In Jesus' name, Amen."

That's where James is leading us to here. He wants us to see that pride only leads to pain. But we aren't left hanging in never-never land. **There's a way through that pain to the other side, and it comes when we humble ourselves and turn to God in prayer, submitting ourselves to him.**

For those who are new to this, it's a first step; it's a beginning of understanding who God is and being in relationship with Him. For those who have been following Jesus for some time, this is still just our second step. You just keep repeating those two steps over and over, staying in relationship with God your heavenly Father, humbling yourself before Him, turning to

Him in prayer for His will and His way. We do this because it's the way God created us to live, and because it's how God has shown his love for us. Jesus humbled himself, becoming human like us, and then further humbled himself to the point of death on the cross where he bore all of our sins, including our pride. Jesus knows what it is to live with humility. God doesn't ask us to do something he hasn't done himself, in Jesus. So, on this Pentecost Sunday, God's Spirit is inviting you to turn to him in your own humility through prayer, so he might transform your pain and your pride into something beautiful. It's a much better way for our pride to go, rather than having it go before our own great fall. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ This is quite a bit larger than what might naturally think, because by the measurement of light, the universe is a little under 14 billion light years old. How could it be bigger than it is old, when using the same metric? It's confusing, but apparently true, according to several sources online:

<https://www.space.com/24073-how-big-is-the-universe.html> - which actually says 92 billion, but who's going to quibble over 1 billion?;

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observable_universe

<https://www.russellmoore.com/2020/02/24/the-gospel-and-an-atheists-joke/>

ⁱⁱ The Economist, May 23, 2020.