

## SPECIAL MESSAGES

### LIVING IN GOD’S BLESSING: PART TWO

James 4:1-10

I don’t think our experience is necessarily unique. The divorce rate is very high. The enemy attacks families. So, I don’t think our experience is unique, but if you’re not experiencing some difficulty or some challenge in your marriage, wonderful! That’s great! God bless you. But you are going to have to live by faith. And God has called you, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, into the restoration business. Right?

Here’s what we learned last week. Let me go through and give you those first four truths again. We will build on those.

- I. God gives grace to the humble.

That is taken right out of James 4. Let me give you a couple of verses from James Chapter 4. “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” This was a verse that God used in the darkness of struggling with the possibility of divorce and our marriage not making it, before we had any children and it was just us. God gives more grace, God gives his strength, God gives his favor, God gives his help. He used the power of this truth – that God opposes the proud -- to reveal massive pride in my own life.

In my case, that pride was expressed most often in anger, and that anger was very destructive in our relationship, in our marriage. I would say that it’s one of the besetting sins that I’ve struggled with in life. At the root of it is really pride and selfishness. In our marriage that began to be revealed, and God used this promise to begin to renew hope in my heart. I’ll just go to another verse here in James Chapter 4 that we looked at last week. James 4:10: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” It’s not about you being lifted up; it’s really about God giving you success.

One of the reasons why this is so powerful in my own experience is because I’ve seen the transformation that God has done in our relationship and in our family. I’m very aware of how imperfectly I’ve lived out this truth, but how powerful it is. When we come before the Lord and say, “God, I need you, I can’t do this, I need your help,” how quickly he sweeps in to help us. This applies

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to parenting, to friendships, to team building, to being a boss, to being an employee, to all areas of our lives. God gives grace to the humble.

### II. Get the log out of your own eye first.

Of course, this is taken, as we saw last week, from Matthew 7. Read verse 5: “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” The Lord instructs us to deal with ourselves first. He tells us that there is a log in our own eye, yet we are constantly bringing judgment to the other person.

### III. Your assessment cannot be trusted.

In other words, it’s not that your perspective is always incorrect. But when we are exalting ourselves and we are found in conflict, we haven’t yet addressed in gospel humility the need of our own lives. We have this log in our own eye that so skews our vision.

It’s interesting. I didn’t wear glasses until I was 40. Just a few months ago I got my glasses. I put them on and looked in the mirror and went, “Wow! You’re gray!” I had no idea what I wasn’t seeing until I could see. We are just so confident in our own perspective. We are so confident in our own position and unaware of how pride (in my case, and I think it’s at the root of a lot of our separation from God, and the root of conflict in situations) blinds us to the situation.

### IV. Only God is God.

This is where we ended last week. All of these truths can be traced back to James Chapter 4.

What I would like to do now is walk through James Chapter 4 really quickly, with a brief explanation. So, if you would open to James Chapter 4, let’s take a moment and look at it, starting with verse 1: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” Hold your finger right there at the end of verse 2.

James is writing wisdom literature. His style is a little bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs. There are powerful, impacting, short phrases. They shock us and they alter our perspective. They help us to see important things from an angle, in a way that we haven’t seen them before. So don’t be put off at all by the jolting nature of what we read here. It’s the style of literature. James is

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saying, “Listen, you can’t get along. There is this murderous spirit that is at work, where you are fighting and you are wanting to destroy the other person.” It’s very simple. You are not getting what you want. You are not getting your way, so you are angry at the other person.

Then he makes an interesting statement. He ends with: “you don’t have because you don’t ask.” At first glance, this passage would look like it’s saying to us, “Well, the real problem is that you’re just not praying. You are just not asking God.” But he goes forward with a further explanation in verse 3. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” Pause right there at the end of that verse.

He is saying that you don’t ask, you don’t have, but you do ask and you don’t get it because your motives are not right. In fact, you are asking God to give you something that is really (the image he uses is) spiritual adultery. You are not in love with God and his kingdom and his will and his purpose and his glory. You are asking him to give you what you want, to pursue worldly passions.

Think of it this way. This helps me. My wife is an amazing cook – very talented in so many areas. For our entire marriage, every morning, I get fresh-squeezed orange juice – yes – and she makes breakfast. She actually turns on the oven and the stove, has home-made stuff, and grinds her own wheat. This is a beautiful, amazing woman I married, right? She is just dying right now to take the mike and say how good it has been to be married to me. So imagine me saying to Beth: “Listen, you know those cinnamon rolls that you make? That certain kind? They are so amazing. Well, I met this woman a block over, and I want you to bake some of those up so I can run those by her house and we’re going to spend a little time today.” How do you think that would go over? Do you know my wife?

We go to God and say, “Listen, I have this other lover over here. Answer my prayer!” And then we have the audacity to tell God why it would be good for our relationship with God. That’s the image that James is using to provoke within us, to explain why we are living embroiled in conflict. You understand how we have a propensity to always be looking and blaming circumstances and people, but James is adjusting our focus.

Back to verse 5: “Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?” God’s love for you is passionate! There is

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a jealous aspect, a holiness, a fervor, a purity of God’s love for you. Then here is our theme verse: “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” Right there in the middle of that verse, he is now pivoting and turning and saying, “If you will come to God, if you will draw near to God and humble yourself, and not just admit the surface sins up here, but look at the idolatry of your heart, how you have sought after created temporal things instead of the one true living God -- open your heart before God and he will pour out abundant grace on your life.”

For me, it was easy to identify expressions of anger and how that would come out in my relationship with Beth. But it was more difficult, as you’ve heard me confess here even today, that at the root of that was a desire for me to get my own way, always have the last word, exalt myself, for me to be at the center of my life. That deeper sin – the bible would call it idolatry – was pushing out these expressions of anger.

There would be times, then, when I would be under anger towards my lovely wife. I would be out, we would be in separate parts of the house. We really needed a bigger house at the time -- that was supposed to be funny, again – just to get away from each other. I’m out in the garage or wherever and the Spirit of God would say, “Just go in and humble yourself and ask for forgiveness.” I literally (and I’m so sorry, dear, to say this) would argue with the Lord. “I know you hear everything, but did you hear that? Are you aware?”

It is so difficult for us to quit judging other people and circumstances and to become convinced God is God -- to kneel before him and say, “Lord, you are the source of everything. Not my career, not ministry, not business, not money, not sexual pleasure, not this, not \_\_\_\_\_ -- fill in the blank. Only you can be God. If my relationship with Beth never changes, you are God, and I will have joy and peace in you if I follow you.” You know they have this little phrase: “Happy wife, happy life.” No, no, no, no. If God is pleased, life is whole in him.

We continue on. Here’s what follows in verse 7. If you are saying, “Okay, Brian, you gave us these four truths – how do I really act on that? You are saying, ‘humble yourself.’” I think the key is repentance. That’s where he goes here at the end of these verses. Again, it’s in wisdom language. It’s kind of in-your-face. It’s jarring you into seeing this perspective. Listen carefully. Verse 7: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God

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and he will draw near to you.” Here it is: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

So just get on your face before God. Quit making excuses. Own it. Cleanse your hands. Cleanse your heart. Notice the little reference there to double-mindedness? That’s a clue to the idolatry that’s there. This is what happened. Again, I apologize for this. Beth and I went to lunch last week. We ended the service by saying, “You know, this happened in the first five years of our marriage (so 25 years ago), and then God restored our marriage and – boom! – we started having kids, and they just kept coming. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Six. Then two weeks ago they just left. Completely without gratitude, hauled off and left. I’m out there cutting the yard again! How did this happen? In the middle of the summer!

So here we are. We are alone at lunch. “Hey! Let’s go out! We can actually afford to feed the two of us. Let go!” We were sitting there, and I was concerned for my wife. She said, “Wow, this is difficult, to hear all of this again. Not because it’s wonderful that we’re celebrating, but we don’t want to be the center. We don’t want the attention to be on us.” We don’t, but my hope here is that God will use his restoration in our lives to give you a picture of how God desires to restore all of us. It’s not just like a personal family-type thing. When we look at issues like the need for racial reconciliation, or massive social injustices that we deal with in this world, God desires to restore his creation.

When I entered into marriage, this is what that selfishness and pride looked like. It was: “Well, gee, I married this beautiful woman. How is she going to make me happy today?” This is the way marriage works, right? I had all these expectations loaded up, but I just didn’t know how to care for my wife. That’s what the next four truths are going to deal with and help us with as we push through the passage. But let me just say that repentance is the key as we want to walk it out, and that it’s at a very deep level.

I ended last week’s message by saying this happened 25 years ago. Five years in we started having kids. Then they all left us. But now we get to do it all over again. We went to lunch, just the two of us. We are dating and having a wonderful time. I saw one of the church members in the grocery store this week and this lovely lady said, “Brian, don’t mess it up this time, alright? Get it right!” I’m trying.

Alright, truth #5. Here it is:

- V. God will open your eyes to specific biblical truth that applies to your situation.

Whatever you’re dealing with – in my case it was marriage -- but you may be estranged from your children, or it may be a work issue, or it may be just a social injustice issue that God has put on your heart. Whatever it may be, there are specific truths that will apply to that. But you cannot see them if you have a log in your eye. You can’t see them until gospel humility begins to wrap itself around your heart. Again, we all do that very imperfectly, but as that happens, we begin to see.

God began to awaken, in my case, truths about what it means to be a husband. I began to go to Ephesians 5. Now, here’s the crazy thing. I had taught these truths! I had done marriage seminars! Crazy, right?! That’s what I thought. Then these began to come alive. What does it mean for a husband to lay down his life for his wife the way Christ did for the church? And what does it mean for a husband to care for her the way he cares for his own body -- that kind of daily attentiveness and that big sacrifice? And how it’s not her response, but it’s the joy of living that out in faith to Christ, by Christ, through Christ, where we begin to experience inner transformation. Those truths began to really come to life for me.

I discovered I had no idea how to love my wife. I read a little book called Love Languages. I don’t know that I agree with everything in the book today, but it was really helpful. Gary Chapman basically says there are five ways that you say I love you. You have verbal, gift-giving, physical touch, quality time, and acts of service -- five different ways that you say I love you. You say, “I love you,” and you verbally express it. You physically touch. You spend quality time. Five different ways.

So, I’m all in on four of the five. I really could do without acts of service. Guess how my wife hears I love you. The other four are irrelevant – just do something, right? There is like zero overlap. It was so earth-shattering for me to get my mind around this truth that she doesn’t hear I love you in the same way that I say I love you. She wants me to come home and mop the floor. That’s the first outburst. She’s like, “No, that is not true.” Okay, that was poorly phrased on my part. But she’s a doer. And if anyone knows her, they will defend that statement. She gets the work of 100 people done.

I have my wife’s permission to share this. Well, she’s frowning like I don’t. Okay, I’m going to move on. I will tell you this. This truth I am absolutely convinced of: that God calls husbands to lay down

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their lives and to put their wives first and to learn to communicate love. I didn't know how and I did it very, very imperfectly and do so to this day, and God blesses it. God gives more grace to those who have figured out they need God's help. It's that simple. I hope you guys will pray for my marriage this afternoon.

VI. Narrow is the way that leads to life.

What happens is, we have these patterns of behavior that we have developed – selfishness and pride, maybe, as in my case. We have these patterns that we have developed, then God begins to show us, “I want you to live a different way.” Those truths begin to live within us, but they are difficult. It is difficult for us to do. God used these two verses in Matthew 7: “Enter by the narrow gate for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many.”

Listen, this is what the Bible says. The way that leads to destruction is this broad entryway and everyone is going that way. If you are here and you don't know Jesus, you don't know Christ and you have not experienced the forgiveness of sin that comes by grace when we say, “Jesus, I need you. Save me. I want to live for you by faith in the gift of your salvation,” Christ will come in and make everything new. But the Scripture tells us that the entryway into that is very narrow. It's hard. It seems so difficult to say, “Okay, I'm not going to live my way. I'm not going to depend on my righteousness, my goodness, my works. I'm going to receive forgiveness as a gift and follow your way.”

The bible says it's very difficult. Then we are confronted with those narrow gate decisions all through life, when God begins to deal with every area of your life – your time, your finances, whatever it is. But the narrow way leads to life. “Many enter through the way of destruction, for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few.”

For me, there would be times where this verse would give life and say, “You know, you have to die to yourself. You've got to learn to do this. It seems difficult but it leads to life.” As soon as you get through that gate there is this big open pasture of life in the Lord. Maybe you come home from work and you've had a difficult day. You're sitting in the driveway, you're about to go in, and on the other side of that door there is at least one person, or maybe many people, and they have an agenda for your life. You've got what you want. You want to go in and just relax and chill. You need your “me” time, right? So there you are. You're about to go in and the Lord says, “Narrow is

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the gate and the way that leads to life.” And you say a little prayer: “Lord, help me to go in, not with my agenda. Help me to go in to serve, and to prefer those, to meet those that are waiting for me on the other side.” It can be manifested in your life in many different ways.

Let me just say this before we pass on from this particular point. These decisions are difficult for us, not because they really should be, but they just are. It’s because we are wealthy. When I say we are wealthy, I don’t mean that we are just wealthy in terms of finances. You may or may not perceive yourself to be wealthy in terms of finances. One author, Jimmy Dodd, has a section in his book Survive or Thrive where he says, “Wealth can be measured in other ways. It can be measured in terms of opportunity. It can be measured in terms of choice. It can be measured in terms of privacy.

If you have seen the movie *Hidden Figures*, it’s a very compelling portrait of how racism affected certain people in our nation and just how difficult it was to have opportunity. There is one woman who wants to be an engineer. She is black and she wants to take a class that’s offered as an extension course at the high school. Because of segregation, she is not allowed in that high school, so she can’t even go to a night course in that high school that’s a few blocks from her home. To do that, she has to go to court and appear before a judge and plead her case. She has to act as her own attorney. What she goes through to just have the opportunity that we take for granted – that we actually complain about! “I’ve got school. I’ve got this test. I’ve got this \_\_\_\_\_.” Right? Opportunity is a certain kind of wealth. Choice is a certain kind of wealth. I enjoy a good cup of coffee. I go to Starbucks. I’ve got thousands of choices.

When we adopted Joshua and Caleb, Joshua was 12 years old, didn’t speak English, and on one of his significant birthdays he got a good bit of money as a blessing in his life. I said, “Joshua, what are you going to do with this money?” This is very telling. He said to me, “Dad, in Africa, I never had money that I didn’t spend on food.” And now, he has choice.

Privacy. This author, Jimmy Dodd, talks about how the American home has been transformed from having a large living room and a large formal dining room, to almost no living room, no dining room, huge master bedroom, master bath. We are not only retreating from public life into our residences, but now we are retreating in the home from the public areas into the private areas. Right? A wealth of privacy. Many people in the world today don’t have me time. They don’t have down time. They don’t have alone time.

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My dad tells the story of growing up. He was one of 10 kids living in one home: kitchen, living area, sleeping area – all one room. They were farmers and they could see the pigs under the slats of the floor crawling under the house. He said it was glorious. It doesn’t sound very glorious to me. We are so wealthy in terms of these categories that it’s hard to go into a house with a wife and kids who need our attention in that moment. That’s just the reality right now. I don’t mean to be hard on us, but some things are hard, difficult, just because of our expectations and our condition. They are what they are, but we can choose the narrow way that leads to life in that. It was a life-giving principle.

### VII. Act in faith.

I don’t want to give you the impression that we just repent and humble ourselves and we never come to a point of action, because as God begins to bring transformation, he then begins to envision us for what a life of faith looks like. Let me give you one or two verses to help you with that. Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” What happens is, faith begins to rise in our hearts. There is a confidence that we have in God -- that he wants to do a work in our marriages, with our children, in the workplace, wherever it is that we are believing God is wanting to bring restoration. Slowly, we are beginning to see that God is saying, “Okay, it’s not about us.” He is bringing gradual transformation in our hearts. He begins to fill us with faith about his agenda and what it is he wants to accomplish in our lives. God desires to bring restoration by grace through Christ in your life.

Hebrews 11:6, is a very fundamental, very life-defining verse for me. “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.” Very quickly, there is a prosperity teaching that is a false teaching. It says that if you follow God, you’ll never be sick, you’ll always be rich, you’ll always physically prosper. It takes half-truths to appeal to worldly desires. It’s not a good teaching. And sadly, in many cases it has been used to manipulate people into giving to “the man of God.” It’s not a healthy, helpful teaching. But sometimes, the counter of that is a teaching on suffering, which is very biblical. But if we’re not careful, as we talk about the grace to suffer, we just never have faith to live.

What I would tell you is, if your kids get sick, pray for God to heal them, right? And believe God rewards faith. If you are in a life struggle, pray for God to move the mountain. Pray for God to

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work. Pray for God to bless. And believe that he will. And where his answer looks different from what we want, believe that he is giving you grace to do something, and to do something in you that is actually a greater blessing than what you thought the actual deliverance would be. That’s a mouthful there, but let’s move on.

The last principle is this.

### VIII. Learn to receive from God.

I want to end right here and talk for a concluding minute about how this works. Sometimes God uses crisis in our lives to bring us to a point where we start evaluating our lives and we start looking to God. It’s sad, but as a pastor, seminary trained, eight years of college and seminary, full-time in ministry, I went through a crisis in our relationship, in my marriage, that really brought me to God in a new way of desperation. I’ll give you another confession, and that is: I, up until that time, had found it very, very difficult to be faithful in prayer and bible study before the Lord.

So, that’s bad, right? I’m a pastor. I teach people how to be married, how to have quiet times, and I wasn’t doing well on either front. I prayed, “Lord, help me with this spiritual discipline. It’s a need in my life.” And God did. God began to help me. One of the specific truths, the subject-specific truths that God began to show me, was that when we get in bible study and prayer with God, we have to learn to receive from him. We have to learn to receive the power of his promises.

What happened is, these phrases that I’m now giving you, and these points of “narrow is the way that leads to life,” and “God gives grace to the humble” -- they were born out of a time of calling out to the Lord in prayer -- just simple, bible devotions. God wants to meet us, to fill us with the power of his Spirit and the power of his promise in order to bring transformation.

I was telling one of the elders in our prayer time before we started the service, “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gone into that place of prayer, and the Lord would begin to convict me that my attitude was wrong and that I needed to humble myself before my wife or before one of my kids to experience God’s grace.”

I’m going to conclude the service. We’re not going to sing a last song. The sermon was a little bit longer today. But restoration takes time. Two things I want to say as we conclude the service:

- 1) If you don’t know Jesus Christ, I want to be very simple before you -- please forgive my directness: Broad is the way that leads to destruction. Heaven and hell are real. Do not find

comfort in the fact that everyone is going that direction. Life is found in Jesus Christ alone. He is a Savior. Receive salvation and live for him.

- 2) Secondly, I have intentionally been very raw and transparent. And if you are a believer here, there is all likelihood that you have developed life patterns of justifying strongholds of sin and idolatry in your life, just as I have and continue to battle with. So if somehow I’m trying to portray myself as just the most awful person in the world, this is the human condition. You do not help your kids by always defending them. You are not helping yourself or your marriage by always justifying your strongholds and your blindness. Get the log out of your eye. Because here’s what happens. We go through life in this kind of dysfunction, and one day we wake up and our kids are 30 and we are like, “Man, I’ve so scarred them!”

Now, if you are here and your kids are 30 or 40 and that’s what you’re saying, you know what? God gives more grace. Weep and mourn. Cleanse your hands. Purify your heart. Call out to God. And you know what? He loves to restore. You know, the best stories are always the last second deliverances, right? There is hope for you. But there is a place where you have to stop blaming, making excuses, and experience the restorative work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen?

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