

Submitting to God - Part 1

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of submitting to God and resisting the devil through humility, moral purity, internal devotion, and daily repentance.

Duration: 38:12

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:6, James 4:7-9

Topics: "Submitting"

Description

In this sermon by Alistair Begg, the focus is on James 4:7-10. The sermon begins by addressing the challenge of worldliness and the danger of claiming to be friends of God while living as friends of the world. The phrase 'More Grace' is highlighted as a source of encouragement to help believers fulfill their calling and understand their true identity before God. The sermon emphasizes the importance of personal devotion and cultivating a deliberate approach to drawing near to God, even in a culture that promotes instant gratification.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. I invite you to turn to the book of James in the New Testament and chapter 4. It's page 856, if you would like to use one of our church Bibles. And you will be encouraged to realize that we've now moved on from page 855, where we've been for some considerable time.

We're going to read simply from verse 7 to verse 10, because this will be the focus of our study both this morning and then again this evening. 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.

Now, just a prayer together before we turn to this. We come, Lord, in a spirit of genuine humility to bow before you, the living God, and to open our hearts and minds to your truth, the Bible. We pray for the help of the Holy Spirit, both in speaking and in hearing, so that we might understand, and in understanding, that we might trust and obey, and that you will conform us increasingly to the image of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Well, actually, we're beginning where we left off last time, which is two Sundays back now, and that was we had reached verse six, and mercifully so, because the first five verses were distinctly uncomfortable, challenging us in relationship to our potential worldliness, confronting us with the danger of saying that we're friends of God while living as friends of the world, failing to face up to the fact that all of our aggravations and acrimony actually emerge from inside of ourselves. And just when we were almost overwhelmed with the sorrow of it all, we came to verse six, and were greatly encouraged as we went out that day with the phrase, he gives us more grace, in order to be able to do what he calls us to do, and in order to see who and what we are before him.

A number of people came to me because they were a little disconcerted by what we had to say about God's opposition to hearing prayer, and it was quite fascinating to me, and not something that took me by surprise, and it was a reminder to me, and I think to each of us as we thought the things through as I talked with some people, that we have to allow the Bible to adjudicate on all of our thinking, so that when it says that God opposes the proud, it means exactly what it says, that God is actually opposed to those whose hearts are turned away from him, that he does not hear the cries of those who defy his right to rule, that he is resistant to those who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and who worship and serve the creature rather than the creator. But it is not hopeless, because there is an abundant supply of grace for those who will humble themselves before God, admit their real situation as sinners in need of a savior, and become the beneficiaries of all that has been provided in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is for that reason that we turn with great frequency here, Sunday by Sunday, to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

We won't turn there again now, but as I wrote the reference again in my notes this week, I actually wrote parenthetically in my notes, I wonder how many times a month I find myself turning to this passage. Because it really is the passage, in many ways, for Parkside Church. It's the passage for people who regard the possibility of getting into heaven on the basis that God grades on the curve, and that as long as we are in a position to be slightly better off than the group that is around us, then presumably we will be fine.

And that is why we go again and again to the words of the publican and the man who knew himself to be a sinner, who wouldn't even look up to heaven, but just said, God be merciful to me, I just really am a sinner. The fact of the matter is, this morning, if you've come, and you're wondering about what it means to know God, if you're thinking about it, and you've perhaps come out of a background that suggests to you that what you need to do is get yourself as fit as you possibly can for an approach to God, I want you to know that all the fitness that God requires is that you see your need of Him. All the fitness that He requires is that you see your need of Him.

Because by nature, we do not see our need of Him. By nature, we are resistant to Him. By nature, we are not seeking Him.

By nature, we are running from Him. And therefore, it is a great and glorious experience when suddenly, in taking even ourselves by surprise, we find ourselves saying, you know, this wonderful offer of salvation in Jesus is just exactly the thing that I need. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.

Flavel says, They that know God will be humble, they that know themselves cannot be proud. They that know God will be humble, they that know themselves cannot be proud. And Augustine, as he reflects upon the proud assertions of his younger days, before he came to know the Lord Jesus, he said, Because pride

was the beginning of sin, so humility must be the beginning of the Christian discipline.

Now, you will notice, if your Bible is open, and I hope it is, that what you have in verse 6 is essentially repeated again in verse 10. Verse 6 and verse 10, with the emphasis on humility, bracket what is then given to us in verses 7, 8, and 9. I think that that is important to keep in mind, and I hope that that will become clear as we work our way through the passage. Just in case any of his readers are tempted to go into flights of fancy over what it means to be humble and how humility would be expressed in the living of life, James, as we would expect by now, provides these practical pointers along the pathway of Christian discipleship.

And I've tried to summarize them in a variety of phrases, and I'll give you the phrases as we go along. And the first is this, Submission to God is the outworking of a truly humble heart. Submission to God is the outworking of a truly humble heart.

And the word that is used here is *hupo tasomai*, which is actually a word that emerges from the military, and it means to align oneself under the authority of another. To align oneself under the authority of another. And the real test of the humility of our hearts is to be seen practically in the way in which we align ourselves under authority.

We are, again by nature, those who oppose authority. We don't like to be told what to do. We don't like to be told where to go.

We want to be where we want to be, and do what we want to do, and go to bed when we want to go to bed, and go to school if we feel like going to school, and so on. And all of the things that you deal with as a parent, with these unruly rascals called children, are indicative of the anti-authoritarian streak which is a fundamental part of human nature. And therefore, it is an expression of God's amazing grace when a man or a woman, whether a boy or a girl, says, you know, I'm going to align myself under the authority of God.

It is not a grudging obedience. It is possible to be obedient without being humble. Those of you who have served in the military know the imperative nature of obeying commands.

And in many instances, you would be honest enough to say that the feeling of your heart did not go with your obedience to the command. Indeed, you may have been vociferously opposed, character-wise, and perhaps in a number of ways, to the individual who issued the command, but you obeyed. And so there was ostensibly a measure of submission, but it was a grudging obedience.

When James talks here to the believing person about submission to God, he's not talking about grudging obedience, but he's talking about a joyful, happy abandonment to the will of God. A joyful, happy abandonment to God's will as it is given to us in God's Word. Throwing ourselves, if you like, wholeheartedly and happily into the doing of God's will.

Calling it our delight to discover his truth. Delighting in the law of the Lord. Meditating on it day and night.

Not simply because it is duty, but because of the privilege that attaches to it. And so ungrudgingly, we line up under his command. The distinction between that which is apparent on the outside and that which is true on the inside is masterfully recorded for us in the anecdote concerning the small boy in the days before seatbelts in the back seat, in the days before those buckets that you strap the little characters into.

And his mother was driving in the car and he was in the back seat and she told him it was imperative that he sat down. However, he was in his position of authority in between the two seats, heading for the rear view mirror as an emblem on his forehead if she had to stop very quickly. And she could not get him to sit down.

And so she stopped the car and applied the pow-wow method. She did the pow and he did the wow. And then she got him back in the seat and they continued down the road.

And they had gone only about a hundred yards when the voice from the back seat said, I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside. And I don't know where you are. Only God knows where I am.

Those who know me best will have an inkling. But there is all the difference in the world between a formal posture of conformity and the happy wholesale submission to God. Our friends and neighbors will know something of it because submission to God is revealed in submission to others.

So when you have a recalcitrant child, he does not submit to God no matter what he tells his youth group leader. If he will not tidy his bedroom at his mother's request, he does not submit to God. If a wife is cantankerous, nagging like a dripping tap, she does not submit to God.

If a husband is bombastic, sarcastic, demanding, unloving, hypercritical, he does not submit to God. If a man will not submit to civil jurisdiction, he does not submit to God. So you see, the idea of submission to God, and it's very easy to take, for example, verse 7a, take it out of the context in which it is set, take it out of the entire context of the Bible, and make it a kind of cozy, personal, experiential encounter with God.

The kind of thing that you can do lying in your bed, as it were, when nobody's around. Oh, I submit to God. Well, fine, that's easy.

But when your wife says to you, could you go down the stairs and get a glass of water for me? Then we'll find out just how much your devotion as you lay horizontal is expressed when you get vertical and mobile. Well, let's move on. Submission to God is the outworking of a truly humble heart.

Secondly, active allegiance to God involves sustained resistance to the devil. Active allegiance to God involves sustained resistance to the devil. There are two sides of one coin, if you like.

You see how important it is, again, that we don't dislodge statements of the Bible from the surrounding statements. Because if we do, we do a disservice to the context, and therefore to its application. The approach of the devil in the Garden of Eden was deceitful, appealed in many ways to the egos of Adam and Eve.

The reason that God doesn't want you to do this, said the devil, is because if you do this, you will be as God. Wow, that sounds attractive. And you'll know everything.

Fabulous. And you'll be able to enjoy the things that he's keeping from you. Terrific.

Every one of them a flat-out lie. And unless we understand the ploys of the evil one, and become awake and alert, we will so easily succumb to his nonsense. How, then, do we exercise a resistance movement? How do we resist the devil so that he might flee from us? Well, we could say many things in response to this, but let's just say three, and briefly.

Number one, we resist him humbly. Humbly. In the awareness of the fact that we can't resist him, apart from the strength that God provides.

That's the significance of verse 6. He gives more grace. Submit to God, resist the devil. How am I going to do that? He gives more grace.

The hymn writer says, I have no strength but thine to lean upon. When Paul attacks the issue of the Christian warfare in Ephesians chapter 6, he starts in exactly the same way. When he says, Finally, be strong and put on the full armor of God.

What's missing? Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. To say, come on now, be strong, is an invitation to disappointment and despair.

Because we're not strong. And we collapse with relative ease. So the exhortation is aligned with the encouragement.

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Now go ahead and do this. But we need to be humble enough to say, I have no strength except the strength that you provide.

Which is hard for most of us who feel that we can handle most things. I can handle this. I'll be able to take care of this.

I can handle him. The starting point is, I can't. And until we say, I can't, we'll never really be able to say, I can.

It seems so obvious, doesn't it? So if we come to resist him humbly, we may do so also confidently. Confidently, how can we say that? Because of the promise. Resist the devil.

That's what we're supposed to do. And he will flee from you. He will flee from you.

The two great dangers in relationship to the devil and Satan and so on are either to become totally preoccupied with him so that everything we see and experience, oh, that must be the devil that did that. There were books for a period of time, about ten years ago, that had demons everywhere. The demons were all over the place.

And the people were reading the books. And it drove me nuts because they would come and tell me, I saw a demon on your shoulder the other day. And I said, no, I was holding a baby and she spilled on me.

It was close, but that wasn't it. Or whatever it might be. I saw the demon, the demon was up in your office and he was on the ledge and all this kind of thing.

I said, okay, thank you. I'll get back to you. So, the one hand is to be completely preoccupied with demonic activity and the other hand is to deny its existence entirely.

And in both instances, the devil wins a great victory. Because over here he gets us thinking about him constantly, which is a wrong and foolish thing to do. And over here he gets us denying his existence altogether.

He says, well, this is terrific. He doesn't even believe in me. I'll be able to sneak in on him quietly and catch him while he's unaware.

That's why Peter says, stay awake and be alert, for the devil is a roaring lion going around looking for somebody to devour. So, in other words, the clarity of Scripture helps us. Humbly.

Incidentally, in saying what I'm saying, I'm not denying the existence of demonic activity. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just pointing out the extreme.

Humbly, confidently, and biblically, insofar as the only way to beat him is to use the weapons we've been provided. And what are the weapons that are provided? Two. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and prayer.

They are the two weapons which Jesus employed, aren't they? Read for homework in Matthew chapter 4. Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan. And Satan comes to him and says to him, you know, if you throw yourself down from this point, all the kingdoms of the world will be yours. And every occasion, with every temptation, it reads, Jesus replied, it is written.

Then the devil comes back the second time, and he quotes the Bible to Jesus. Because he's a clever rascal. That's why you have to be discerning, folks.

The fact that somebody quotes the Bible or holds the Bible or says something about the Bible is not the issue. The issue is, what are they doing with the Bible? The devil was happy to quote the Bible. The devil understands the Bible.

That's why he even quoted it to Jesus. Now, we mustn't be unaware of his schemes. But it is by the sword of the Spirit that we might defeat him.

Because it is in the clarity of the instruction of God's Word that the temptations that come our way are addressed and may be resisted. And by prayer. By prayer.

We're going to come to the notion of communion with God in just a moment. But it is interesting, when you read the Gospels, to discover the occasions in which it says, very briefly and almost parenthetically, and Jesus went away into a quiet place and he prayed. Or Jesus went into a mountain and he prayed.

You have it, for example, in John chapter 6. When after the feeding of the 5,000 and the people are in a great enthusiastic throng. They want to come and make Jesus king. They decided that he must be the prophet that comes into the world.

And then John just says, and at that point Jesus went away by himself into a mountain. He had to resist the temptation. That came at him as a result of the enthusiastic response of the people.

Back in the quietness of his own place. In communion with the Father. Father, help me here.

I pray to you. I must resist these temptations. Now, I hope you find this helpful and I believe it to be right to say to you that we really go wrong if we pay too much attention to people that we see apparently resisting the devil.

Christian television introduces me to some of this. It takes me into a realm that I've never really dealt with very much. I have seen deep spiritual darkness in London and in other places and dealt in trying situations with people whose lives were overwhelmed.

But the kind of stuff that I see on television is alarming and distasteful to me. Where the people do things to folks and try and knock them on the floor. And they say, rebuke him or carabunga or something like that.

Get out of here. Go on. Kill.

Be gone. Do. The.

The people are like, whoa, son. They're going back like that because the pastor scares the dickens out of them half the time. And so they should.

I dive on the floor with most of those jokers. How do you get to that? Well, it says resist the devil and he will flee from you. I understand.

Where does verse 7b come? Right behind verse 6 and right in front of verse 8. So do you think that verse 6 and 8 and 9 and 10 and the chapter and the context might be the way that we could discover what it means to resist the devil and what somebody looks like when they resist the devil and while they're resisting the devil? Answer. Yes, that would make sense. So what do you discover? That the characteristics of those who are involved in this resistance movement.

Are. Submission to God. Verse 7. Moral purity.

Verse 8b. Wash your hands. Internal devotion.

Make sure that your affections are single minded. Guarding your hearts. And verse 9. Daily repenting.

How do I resist the devil? By submitting to God. By keeping clean. By guarding my heart.

And by repenting daily. I suggest to you that you will be far better off there than going to a religious professional who is going to try and take care of it for you with one quick caravanga. And the devil is a master at appealing to our wounded pride.

I think that's the reason why Paul, when he introduces the subject of leadership in the local church, says make sure that you do not appoint a leadership in the local church, somebody who is a novice in the Christian faith, because that may lead them to conceit and they will fall under the same condemnation as the devil. You see? Because pride goes before a fall. And when we are in the infancy of our Christian faith, we may think that we are capable of just about everything and anything.

It's going to take time for us to realize that there are many ribs that are going to be bruised by elbows. There are going to be many scars on our shins. There are going to be many things along the journey of our life that confront us with the fact that we're desperately in need of God.

And until we get fashioned by those things, then it is actually a dangerous thing for us and everybody else to be put in a position of authority. D.E. Halstead, who was the successor to Hudson Taylor as the general director of the China Inland Mission, he said, I would not, and I've told you this before, I would not appoint a man to the mission field unless he had learned to wrestle with the devil, because if he has not learned to wrestle with the devil, he will wrestle with his fellow missionaries. And, you know, when you find a person who's constantly argumentative and disruptive and undermining everything, you can be dead sure they do not submit to God, and two, they are not resisting the advances of the evil one.

So, if you're with me, we have said, first of all, that this submission to God is the outworking of a truly humble heart, that active allegiance to God involves sustained resistance to the devil, and now, thirdly, intimacy with God does not happen by chance, but it must be deliberately cultivated. Intimacy with God doesn't happen by chance, but it must be deliberately cultivated. Look at verse 8, come near to God and he will come near to you.

There's a real Old Testament element to this, and, of course, we would expect that, because that was James' Bible. And one of the great features of the people of God, as it became apparent in their moving under the direction of Moses, was this notion of being near to God. And I'll just quote to you from Deuteronomy chapter 4, and it says, God is speaking through his servant, and he says, See, I have taught you decrees and laws, as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you're entering to take possession of it.

Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them, the way the Lord our God is near us, whenever we pray to him? Do you remember that song in the 60s? It's amazing how many 60s songs are gone now, forever. Even in Christian terms, it's understandable, I think, because they've been superseded.

But we used to sing it in Yorkshire. In the stars his handiwork I see, remember that one? On the wind he speaks with majesty. Though he ruleth over land and sea, what is that to me? And then, I can't remember.

And then it goes to, Then one day I met him face to face, and I felt the wonder of his grace. Then I knew that he was more than just a God who didn't care, who lived a way up there. And now he walks beside me every day.

You see, that is the distinguishing feature of the Christian. That is the distinguishing feature of the church in every generation, from Genesis all the way to Revelation. That is the great and glorious consummation in the book of Revelation.

And I will be their God, and they will be my people, and I will dwell with them, and I will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and so on. What is it? It's this amazing intimacy with God, which distinguishes the people of God. But such intimacy with God is a cultivated intimacy.

And we better beware of seeking the promise without obeying the command. Because there is both command and promise in verse 8, isn't there? Come near to God, that's the command. And he will come near to you, that's the promise.

Do you find yourself tempted to invert it? People come to me all the time and say, Well, you know, I would come near to God if he came near to me. I'm waiting for him. I'm waiting to have the right kind of feeling.

And when I have the right kind of feeling, then I'll be praying. When I have the right kind of feeling, then I'll be attending. When I feel right about it, you know, then I'll be doing these different things.

And I have to say, My dear brother or sister, you've got the thing back to front. You've got it upside down. Draw near to God.

And he will draw near to you. Drawing near to God in the privacy of my own heart. In the exercise of personal Christian discipline.

In the experience of heartfelt devotion. If you like, in the realm that is unseen by anyone else. Because what we really are before God is what we are before God when no one's looking.

Neither our spouse, nor our children, nor the people who may have most access to us. Andrew Murray says, When a man is on his knees before God, that is what he is and nothing else. So do I draw near to God.

The exercises of personal and private devotion are exercises. It's hard for us because we're the readers of the one minute manager. We're the readers of seven minutes a day to the flattest abs in the entire world.

We are constantly bombarded by the fact that you can get it now. And without effort. Take the waiting out of wanting.

Visa card, or whatever it is. Take the waiting out of wanting. I'll have that right now.

ATN, boom, drive through dry cleaning, hurry up. So the idea of drawing near to God in a way that is deliberately cultivated is actually counterintuitive. And we may laugh at some of our friends, although I hope we don't.

Because we must admire their devotion and their interest. We may smile. We may wonder when we see people from different cultures and different backgrounds.

Going about the business of their own personal devotional life. But some of us would do well to take a leaf out of their book and at least make a stab at it. The psalmist says in Psalm 14, doesn't he? I waited for the Lord.

I waited for the Lord. And in the mythical Psalms of Scotland, that notion of waiting is teased out in the melody line that is employed. And as a small boy, the singing of Psalm 14 seemed to take the entire service.

But it burned it into me. And if you know that Psalm tune, I won't disgrace myself or embarrass you by singing it all. But this is the length of the meter in the singing of this unaccompanied in a highland church in Scotland.

It goes like this. I waited for the Lord, my God. Now, at that point, I'm looking at my sister going, holy smoke.

We're going to be in here forever. This is unbelievable. We've only done one line.

And I look ahead in the Psalm. I'm going, oh, goodness gracious. That's the kind of thing that has boys running out.

It's like, let's go do something naughty here. This is amazing. Or, by God's grace, it burns into a boy's heart, you see.

And in the mercy and providence of God, that's actually what it's done for me in the long run. As bizarre as it may seem, I think nostalgically of that place. I can smell the cushion on the wooden seat in that tiny church.

In Tern and Rosher, hanging off the end of the country. Because when I come out of there, I said, why are all these farmers and these fishermen and these folks with narrowed fingers and fabulous blue eyes and striking countenances. Why are they doing this? And then I discovered, you see, they are developing, they are cultivating intimacy with God.

And what they are working out in public is simply the out and overflow of what they are doing in private. That is why it is an undeniable fact, and I lay it to your consideration, that a disinterest in the gathering of God's people to sing God's praise and to hear God's word in the public arena is somehow, barring illness, barring acts of mercy, barring considerations of godliness, it is somehow related to an absence of personal delight and joy in cultivating the nearness of God in the privacy of my own heart and in my own home. And people who do not sing in private will not sing in public.

People who do not pray in private will be bored with prayer in public. People who do not read their Bibles for themselves to discover the truth of God's word will regard the exercise as prolonged and a nuisance and so on, and something to be dealt with as quickly as possible. And so James so wonderfully says, if you are going to understand God's grace which is given to you, then submit to God.

Resist the devil. Cultivate this intimacy with him. And remember what a wonderful thing it is that in Jesus you've been made kings and priests to God.

Because in the Old Testament, the only people who could draw near to God were the priests, weren't they? They had to go with sacrifices on behalf of the people who couldn't enter. And then Jesus dies on the cross, and the sacrifice for sin is made, and the curtain in the temple is torn in two, declaring access, so that all may come confidently and boldly to the throne of grace, where they might find mercy and grace to help in their time of need. Well, I think we'll stop there and pick it up here, God willing, this evening.

Father, we bless and praise you for your holy word, the Bible. We thank you for the gathering of your people and the encouragement that it gives to us to sit not alone, as happens during the week, but in the framework of others who love Jesus and want to follow him and know more about him and live in intimacy with him. So we pray that as we go, we might know your grace and your mercy and your peace, that which comes from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg.

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