

Submitting to God - Part 2

by Alistair Begg

Submission to God involves a humble heart, active allegiance, intimacy, and bringing actions and affections into line with God's authority.

Duration: 31:44

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, James 1:20-21, James 4:7-10

Topics: "Submitting"

Description

In this sermon, Alistair Begg focuses on the importance of submitting to God. He emphasizes that true submission comes from a humble heart and involves resisting the devil. Begg also highlights the need to intentionally cultivate intimacy with God, rather than leaving it to chance. He concludes by emphasizing the importance of aligning our actions and affections with God's authority, warning against being double-minded and pursuing the wrong things.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. I'm going to invite you to turn again to James chapter 4, and we will look at the portion that we left hanging from this morning. James chapter 4 and verse 7, 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. We pray for your help, Lord, as we turn to the Bible.

We earnestly seek you. Come and speak to us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Well, so far we made these points. Number one, that submission to God is the outworking of a truly humble heart. That's the link between verse 6 and 7 and what he returns to in verse 10.

Secondly, we saw that active allegiance to God involves sustained resistance to the devil. And then thirdly, we noted that intimacy with God doesn't happen by chance, but rather it has to be deliberately cultivated. And now as we come to the second part of verse 8, the part that begins, Wash your hands, you sinners, we gather our thoughts under the heading, Our actions and affections must be brought into line or into

alignment with God's authority.

Both our actions and our affections, if we are submitting to God, must be brought into alignment with his authority. Our actions, our outward deeds, and our attitudes or our affections are the hidden parts of our lives. We saw this morning that a knowledge of the Old Testament was helpful in looking at what James was saying.

And this is again true when we come to wash your hands, you sinners. If you know the Old Testament at all, you will know that very specific instructions were given to God's people in relationship to cleanliness, the cleanliness of their utensils and indeed of every other thing. And if you read, for example, in Exodus chapter 30, there are specific instructions given there concerning the basin that is used for washing is to be a bronze basin.

It's to sit on a bronze stand. It's to be placed between the tent of meeting and the altars. There's to be water put in it.

Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water and so that they will not die. And also when they approach the altar to minister by presenting an offering made to the Lord by fire, they shall wash their hands and wash their feet so that they will not die.

This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants for the generations to come. Now, this is not all that is represented there. But this was one of the simple ways in which mankind was to be reminded of God's absolute purity and holiness.

That in the very ritual duty of ceremonial washing, on each occasion, the thoughtful participant in washing their hands or feet would be saying, The Lord Yahweh is holy and pure. And we wash our hands in recognition now of God's absolute holiness. As time passed, the ceremonial usage came to be applied figuratively to the cleansing of moral defilement.

And that's why in the New Testament you have these pictures of washing, which point away from themselves and forward to the cleansing that the washing with water signifies. And just as our hands get dirty physically, so we routinely are stained by sin's defilement. Yes, we are.

And the designation, wash your hands, you sinners, is a perfect designation for each of us who is in Christ. Remember that this letter is being written to those who, as a result of God's intention, have been born again, as a result of his instrument, the word of truth. And in order that his intention may be fulfilled, that we might become a kind of first fruit of all that he has created.

Therefore, even in Christ, we are nothing more than sinners who are saved by grace. And for us to mistake that in any way is to do the scriptures a disservice and to put ourselves in difficulty. When I was in the hospital earlier this year, I was intrigued to discover that quite a pitch was made to the patient to feel perfectly free to ask each member of the medical staff who came into one's room, did you wash your hands? I was allowed to ask that.

I was intrigued. And I did it a number of times and I felt embarrassed doing it. But after they told me and made such a fuss about it, I thought it was only right that I got into the program.

And so I had I had surgeons of great stature coming in and just about to shake my hand. And I would say, did you wash your hands? And I could tell by the look they gave me, who do you think you are, you cheeky chap? Because in many, in many instances, they might have said I really didn't need to, because just before they walked in the room, they squirted that little thing and they were all good and ready to go. It frankly was a bit of an impertinence and I stopped it fairly swiftly.

But we ask our children that all the time, don't we? Did you wash your hands? And often they say, no, I didn't need to. Oh, yes, you needed to. And God says to us, did you wash your hands? And we say, no, I didn't need to.

Oh, yes, you did, he says. To say I don't need to wash my hands is to be self-deceived. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

If we read, wash your hands, you sinners, and assume that it must have been written for somebody else, then we miss the point of what James is doing and saying. Insofar as our hands represent our actions, it is a call for us to confess our sins and to seek God's help so that in our actions we won't continue to sin. And notice who does the washing.

Wash your hands. This is not the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the work of the energized believer.

This is your work and my work as Christians. And it's important to note because it gives the lie to the idea, and it is a prevalent idea, that submission to God is somehow or another a call to inactivity, a call to abandon all effort, a call to simply let go or to yield. And somehow or another the concept that is promulgated is the idea that submission to God just actually means passivity, so that you can tell if you are really submitted to God if you do nothing at all.

I was at a conference this past week, and the gentleman who was speaking along with me came very, very close to telling all these businessmen this very thing. And I had to go off and go in the bathroom and talk to myself and say my prayers of confession and help and everything so that I wouldn't stand up and take apart what my colleague had just said. But actually it's not helpful because it isn't right.

Wash your hands. This is true because James has already pointed that out. You turn back one page and you're in chapter 1, and you remember what he said in chapter 1. Verse 20, man's anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth. Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. Of course, we are not going to be inclined in this way without the enabling of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit doesn't do it for us.

That's the point I want you to notice. The Holy Spirit doesn't wash our hands. We wash our hands.

We come and confess our sins. We are the ones who, aware of our actions being out of line, need to be brought in line with the truth of God's word. As with our actions, so with our affections.

Hence, purify your hearts. Purify your hearts. Every day that we live in our world, which is a fallen world, we live in the context of a society that organizes itself, in large measure, apart from God, and in many ways, in opposition to God.

And since we live in that world, and since we are influenced, and often powerfully influenced, by thoughts, and attitudes, and mentalities, about all the things in life, about money, about prestige, about friendships, about human sexuality, it's virtually impossible for us to come through a day without finding that our hearts are in need of fresh purification. That's why it is important that we guard our hearts, as the Scriptures say. But even on our best day, making our best attempt to guard them, nevertheless, we fail in the area of our affections.

We can also easily be pulled in two different directions at the one time, and then we find ourselves, as described here at the end of verse 8, double-minded. We realize, when that is the case, why it is that Paul says in Romans 7, very honestly, that good I would, I don't, and the bad I wouldn't, I do. He's double-minded when he says that.

So that instead of the seat of our affections being tuned in, if you like, like a radio signal, to the clear, singular message of God and his truth, we're tempted to begin to listen to the wrong voices, to pursue the wrong things. And before we know it, often imperceptibly, we've begun to waver in our loyalties. We've become undecided in our intentions.

And we're two-faced. Wash your hands. Remember the children's song? Well, be careful, little hands, what you touch.

Well, be careful, little hands, what you touch. There's a Father up above, and he's looking down in love. But be careful, little hands, what you touch.

Be careful, little feet, where you go. Because there's a Father up above, and he's looking down in love. So be careful, little feet, where you go.

It's not unusual to hear Christians say, but these things don't matter. Jesus has dealt with everything, and we're all fine, and it's hunky-dory. Now, if you know it to be fine and hunky-dory, then you will wash your hands.

And you will know you need to. And you will recognize that when it says you need to purify your heart from double-mindedness, that that will be true as well. A friend and I were talking just last evening about somebody far away from here, actually on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a well-known figure who in the last year has renounced what was a very, very highly publicized commitment to Jesus Christ.

The individual had a large profile in the United Kingdom as somebody who was an unequivocal and committed Christian. And he came out in the media to say that he had doubts, and that he had actually turned his back on the Christian story. And I asked my friend last night, is there any indication of moral failure in this man's life? Well, yes, he said his announcement about renouncing the Christian faith came on the heels of his marital collapse.

And I wasn't at all surprised. Because if we become double-minded, if we try and ride two horses at once, eventually we will be torn apart. And if we are on the wrong side of the call to purify our hearts, if we are involved, let's say, in immorality, one of two things will happen.

We will either alter our lifestyle in repentance and realign ourselves with God, or we will continue our immoral lifestyle unrepentant and then have to redefine God in a way that accommodates our immoral posture. And that is why so many people's intellectual things, if you trace them, not in every case, but in so many cases, you will often find that it is something that has to do with a moral posture that gives rise to the

redefining of God. Well, I don't like to think of Him in that way.

Well, no, of course you don't. Because it's inconvenient, isn't it? So I'm going to have to think of God in a different way, or I'm going to have to bring my life into line with God as He has revealed Himself. This is written to Christian people.

Wash your hands, purify your hearts. Now, if we find ourselves in that kind of precarious position, then the only answer is to turn again to God and to submit ourselves to His cleansing power. And Peter, when he writes to his scattered believers in his day, he references their coming to Christ, and he says in 1 Peter 1, verse 22, Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth. And if he there describes the cleansing that takes place when we come to Christ in faith, then John is talking about the ongoing necessity of cleansing, where he says in 1 John 3, 3, concerning the hope of the return of Jesus, and everyone who has this hope within him purifies himself even as Christ is pure. So the idea of being washed and continually washing is an idea, indeed is a truth, that the Bible makes perfectly plain.

So again, you'll be helped as I am helped. If you have a chorus or a song that puts it succinctly for you, particularly if your mind works lyrically, then you have something with which you can speak to God. And you know that because I've told you this a hundred times, but it is a great help to me, the little children's chorus, Cleanse me from my sin, Lord.

Put your power within, Lord. Take me as I am, Lord. And make me all your own.

And keep me through this day, Lord. In your narrow way, Lord. And make my heart your palace and your royal throne.

You might think that you could do that once and be done with it. It is an amazing and wonderful thing to me that the song of a boy is the song of a teen, is the song of a young adult, is the song of a middle-aged man, is the song of a soldier at the end of the race. Cleanse me.

Meet me. Fill me. Use me.

Well, that's as much as we can do with that. We must move on. The fifth thing, and there are six, the fifth thing is that in submitting to God, we will learn to laugh and cry appropriately.

The overarching heading of these two studies is simply submitting to God. And this is in verse 9, isn't it? Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

That's not exactly a wonderful verse for a talk to the youth group, I don't think. You would have to be very, very good to teach verse 9 to the youth group. And I know we have very good fellows, and perhaps they've even done it.

In which case, I wish I'd had their notes. But one of the sure signs that we are not bringing our lives into alignment with God's rule and reign is when we can sin with impunity and when we are no longer struck by the gravity of sin. That is a day of great concern.

When we are able to do things, to say things, to react in certain ways, ways that we know are actually a violation of all that God has made clear to us. And we can actually look back to a day in time when we were alarmed by that, when we were stirred by that, when we were concerned about that. But it has

become in us a custom of easiness.

And so, in our actions and in our affections, we've actually got ourselves in the most dreadful of predicaments, whereby we laugh at the wrong time and we cry in the wrong place. It is important, isn't it? When you go, especially to Shakespeare plays, if you don't have a clue what's going on, you have to be very, very careful, because you're not allowed to be spontaneous at Shakespeare plays any more than you're allowed to be spontaneous at the symphony. I mean, you can't clap any time you want at the symphony.

It's an interesting thing, if it has to do with decorum or whatever it might be. But I mean, if you go and clap at the end of the first movement when you're not supposed to do it, you'll get written up in the magazine or in the plain dealer or something. There was a Philistine last night at Severance Hall.

He clapped seven minutes into the event. Maybe he liked it. Maybe he liked it.

Maybe he was alive, unlike some of the other people that were sitting there, who've been sitting there for about 85 years. They don't know if they're in for Mahler or Mendelssohn. They don't know if it's Christmas or Easter, but they're there.

Anyway, that's just a comment, now that the orchestra has gone to Europe. Maybe they haven't gone yet. But anyway, I'm sure they'll be leaving soon.

But I mean, all I'm referencing is the appropriateness. You've got to know when to clap and when not to clap. It's bad.

And the same in the plays. It's very sculptifying and boring, quite honestly, in many cases. But the instance here is far more significant.

You see, the question is, what is the proper posture of the Christian when confronted with the reality of sin? What is the proper posture of the Christian when we come face to face with our own sin? Answer, it is definitely not to laugh it off. It is definitely not to laugh it off. Oh, it doesn't matter.

It's a slight thing. It's a passing thing. No, it's not.

And that's what James is saying here. We dare not confuse the reality of Christian joy with a superficial deity which makes light of sin. And again, hymn writers probably are of the greatest service to us.

And that's why it's important that we sing hymnody that has content to it. A hymn that we never sing here, written by Cary in the 17th century. It begins, But the second verse reads as follows.

In wonder lost with trembling joy, we take the pardon of our God. Pardon for sins of deepest dye, a pardon sealed with Jesus' blood. Every time I make light of sin, I add my spittle to those who stood around the cross.

Upon that cross of Jesus, my eye at times can see the very dying form of one who suffered there for me. Or, oh, to see my name written in the wounds for through your suffering I am free. The salvation that is given to us in Jesus is free to us because to him it was an inestimable cost.

And what James is simply doing here is he's calling his readers to consider this, to make sure that they don't get on the wrong side of it. Essentially, he is putting in his own two cents for what Paul references in

2 Corinthians 12 as an expression of godly sorrow. An expression of godly sorrow.

Now, let's not get carried away with it. The Bible actually affirms laughter is one of God's gifts. Job chapter 8 talks of God putting laughter into the mouths of his children.

And it's great to laugh, but at the right time, and about the right things. But the laughter that is provided for us by God is not the flippant laughter of the double-minded who are tempted to flirt with the world's friendship. And while there is little doubt that some of us probably do need to lighten up, it's probably true that some of us need to tighten up.

And only when I learn to cry about my sin may I truly learn to laugh about my freedom in Christ. And I just wrote in my notes, Lord, help me to laugh at the right time and at the right things. And finally, just a concluding thought.

It comes full circle to verse 10. Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up. This is our last principle under our heading of submitting to God.

As we submit to God and see ourselves as before the Lord, we gain a right perspective. And let's make sure I say this next word absolutely properly, because this is one of the most misquoted words in English, and you'll get a chuckle out of this. But anyway, let me start the sentence again.

I'll go all the way through. As we submit to God and see ourselves as before the Lord, we gain a right perspective, and prostration is the only response. Alright? And every consonant is vital for our understanding in that word.

In other words, just to cast ourselves down. It's interesting, isn't it? The song we began with this evening, you know, we stand and we lift up our hands, and, you know, a few people that feel that they would like to do that, they will do that. And that's absolutely super.

Sometimes I feel like doing that myself. But then the next line is, and we bow down, you know, with our faces to the ground. They're not a movement.

So, and, you know, we lift up our hands to you, we lift up our hearts to you. Well, how do you lift your heart up? You know, we lift up our hearts to you. No.

So, you know, it's a kind of selective approach. And when it comes to the idea of bowing down before God, probably the best place to do it is in your bedroom. Because it perhaps would be misunderstood as a show of affectation.

Robert Burns said, Would to God the gift be ye as to see ourselves as others see us. James says, The real issue is not to be seen as your friends see you, but to view yourself as God views you. Oh, God, you have searched me and you know me, says the psalmist.

You know my posture. You know, when I sit down and when I stand up, you know my thoughts and you know my motives. If you weren't looking, God, and I know you are, I'd be tempted to describe myself in glowing terms.

But how can I? Because you know me. I can get by a few folks, but I can't get by you. The only thing I can do before you, gracious Creator God, Redeemer, Father, Friend, King, Master, Sovereign, is just lie down on the carpet in my room.

That's really all I can do. Because I've discovered, Lord, that there is a huge difference between the man who seeks to lift himself up or the woman who seeks to lift herself up and the man and the woman lifted up by God. So much of the Bible is counter-cultural in our day, isn't it? Because just about everything in our schooling, particularly from a secular perspective, although not limited there, is about self-affirmation and self-promotion and making sure that everybody really knows how wonderful we all are.

It's a dreadful thing, really. That's why verse 10 is there. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up.

You may do it right now. You'll certainly do it when the roll is called up yonder. We're not going to sing this song.

I will sing another one, but it reminded me of a song, We Bow Down, We Lay Our Crowns at the Feet of Jesus. It's really the only right response. And then you see, when you get to verse 11 and it says, Brothers, do not slander one another, you realize how humility plays into that as well.

Because one of the best ways to exalt yourself is to run somebody else down. It doesn't actually improve your position, it just makes you feel better. But we don't need to worry about that tonight.

We'll keep that for another day. Let's just pause in a moment of prayer. Perhaps just a silent prayer in our own hearts before God.

We've worked through a lot of stuff today and it's hard to assimilate it all. But our submission to God is the outworking of a humble heart. Our allegiance involves resisting the devil.

We might want to say, Lord Jesus, I need you to help me as I go into Monday. I haven't been doing too well in this regard. Intimacy with God isn't come about by chance.

It must be deliberately cultivated. Maybe there's something that we need to tell God, that we want to make a pledge to Him that we're going to be far more deliberate and focused in our desires to seek Him. And then our hands on the outside and our hearts on the inside being brought into alignment with His truth.

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