

JAMES 4:5-10

STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIFE

“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?’ 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. 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.”¹

There is appointed a day when each individual must stand before God. Unbelievers will stand before the great white throne as described in the Apocalypse [REVELATION 20:11-15]. Before God, each lost individual shall receive the judgement he or she has earned as they are formally sentenced to separation from God and from His goodness for all eternity.

In a similar manner, all who are redeemed by the grace of God must stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ to receive the divine assessment of their life [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. Standing before Christ the Lord, no one will be asked whether he has amassed wealth, or whether she was popular, or whether she felt good about herself. We each will give an account of our life as we shall stand as open books before the Judge of the entire universe. What will be revealed for us who are Christians is whether we have been successful in our life as Christians.

Writing the Corinthian church, Paul spoke of that time when we shall appear before the Lord Jesus. He wrote, “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” [1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15].

Ultimately, we will be called to give an account of how we have conducted our lives. The divine review appointed for Christians is not to determine whether they are saved or lost; the review is to demonstrate the perfection of Christ’s work in their lives. This is the point that disturbs me. Many people profess to be followers of Christ the Lord; however, their lives show little of His perfecting work. Though I am not judge of any man, I am appointed, as is each Christian, to be discerning about the fruit produced in the life of those confessing Christ. For if the fruit is bitter, it is because the root is bitter.

James has confronted professing Christians with the knowledge that those who position themselves as friends of the world—loving the present life more than the life to come—set themselves in opposition to God. For the child of God, this places them in the position of the loss of rewards that might otherwise be granted. More immediately, it means that the child of God will experience diminished intimacy with the Father because the child has sacrificed access to God’s throne and knowledge of His will.

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Those who are unknown to Christ are even now under condemnation. Such people do not merely position themselves as friends of the world—they are fully identified with the world. Therefore, the Bible refers to them as “earth dwellers.” They only delude themselves if they imagine that God will overlook self-centred lives to accept them into His Kingdom.

The focus of the message this day is to examine James’ words to discover the steps necessary for a successful Christian life. I am not primarily focused on outsiders to the Faith at this time. Nevertheless, as I begin the message, I am compelled to offer any who are not believers in the Risen Son of God and who are sharing the service, mercy and life through Christ Jesus the Lord. Before moving any farther into the study today, I want to take a moment to point any such individual in our service to the life that is found in Jesus the Lord.

The Word of God verifies our experience and innate knowledge that we are sinners. The Word declares in dark words that censures all mankind:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

[ROMANS 3:10-18]

No one should imagine that any are exempt from this divine condemnation. Neither should any Christian think himself or herself better than others because they have received grace. Though we who are believers are redeemed, it is not because we deserved God’s mercy. Our condition is accurately described by the Apostle. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” **[EPHESIANS 2:1-3]**.

We are constrained to confess that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” **[ROMANS 3:23]**. We, as is true of all people, “were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” **[TITUS 3:3]**. When the Apostle lists the list of those who are excluded from heaven (those who are unrighteous, which category includes the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practise homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers), he concludes with a sobering statement: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” **[1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11]**.

As sinners, we were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” [EPHESIANS 2:12]. We were condemned and under sentence of death. The Bible informs us that “the wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23]. We perhaps knew about God, but we did not know God. We did not have access into His presence and though we perhaps practised a form of religion as a formality, it was nothing but show. Though we may have felt good about our efforts, we knew that we were lost and we had no freedom from guilt.

Condemned, we had no way to influence God to show us mercy. However, God is merciful, and demonstrating His compassion for us, He provided a means for our salvation. “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6-8]. God sent His Son into the world to provide an infinite sacrifice because of our sin. Jesus, the Son of God took on Himself the sin of each of us. “For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

Knowing our condition and knowing of God’s provision, all that remains for anyone to have freedom from condemnation and to be accepted into the Family of God is to accept the sacrifice God has provided. The Bible offers life in the Son of God. This is what is written. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Summarising this truth, Paul quotes the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Certainly, it is our prayer that each individual sharing the service today has received the life that is found in Christ Jesus the Lord. My prayer is that each individual to whom I speak this day has received the life that is found only in Jesus the Saviour. One truth that is often neglected by the modern pulpit is that those who are redeemed reflect the character of the Father. This is a central theme in John’s first letter. Remember, John was writing professing Christians, providing the evidences of a transformed life. Listen to a portion of what he wrote.

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever...

“Little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him...

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother...

“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth...

“This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” [1 JOHN 2:15-17, 28, 29; 3:4-10, 14-18, 23, 24].

According to this, those who are born from above, those who have been saved, demonstrate their redeemed status through the way in which they live. Underscore a great truth in your mind, however. Those who are saved do not live a good life in order to be saved or to keep themselves saved; they live a good life because they have been transformed by the presence of Christ who now rules over their life.

According to John, redeemed people *do not love the world or the things in the world*. They are *grieved by evil* that grieves the Father. They not only are kept safe in the Risen Son of God, but they *choose to live in Him*, seeking what pleases Him. They *no longer enjoy sinning*, but rather they *seek to practise righteousness*. Christians who are truly born from above no longer enjoy sinning because it is against their new nature. Twice-born people *love the brotherhood of believers*—they enjoy being around other Christians and doing the things that Christians enjoy. They *willingly choose to be among the people of God* because this is family.

What is interesting to note is that those who are not characterised by these criteria cannot claim relationship either to God or to the Son. Though they may *profess* life in Christ, the unsaved do not *possess* life in Christ. One may say that she is a citizen of Canada, but unless one was born of Canadian parents or until one takes the oath of allegiance he is not a citizen of the nation. Similarly, one may claim allegiance to Christ, but until that one is born from above and into the Family of God, he or she has no part in that Family.

I recognise that I have violated homiletic principles by presenting such an extended introduction. However, the issue of salvation is essential to the remainder of our discussion. Until one is born again, until one is saved, until one exercises transforming faith in the Living Son of God, that one cannot aspire to a successful Christian life. With that, I invite you to consider James’ words as we discover the steps to a successful Christian life.

A SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIFE — What does a successful Christian life look like? How would you recognise a successful Christian? What characterises his or her life? Ultimately, it will matter little how much you go to church, or how many prayers you recite, or how frequently you peruse the Bible, if you perform these acts as duty. Throughout the Word of God are found statements revealing what God expects of His people. Consider some of those statements.

“With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but *to do justice*, and *to love kindness*,
and *to walk humbly with your God*?"

[MICAH 6:6-8]

According to Micah, God expects justice and kindness and humility before the Lord God, which is essentially what James anticipates of Christians. James says that God gives grace to the humble, and thus urges readers to humble themselves before the Lord [see JAMES 4:10]. Earlier, we saw that God expects His people to be just as they pursue the will of God [JAMES 2:8-13] and to demonstrate compassion and seek purity [JAMES 1:26, 27].

According to Moses, God expects reverence and obedience to His Word. "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good" [DEUTERONOMY 10:12, 13]? Moses' instruction anticipates the teaching of Jesus to His disciples, "If you love Me, you will keep my commandments" [JOHN 14:15].

David points out the will of God, and not surprisingly, it agrees with the truths that we have already witnessed from Moses and from Micah which were iterated by Jesus and James.

"O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
and speaks truth in his heart;
who does not slander with his tongue
and does no evil to his neighbour,
nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
in whose eyes a vile person is despised,
but who honours those who fear the LORD;
who swears to his own hurt and does not change;
who does not put out his money at interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things shall never be moved."

[PSALM 15:1-5]

So God expects a humble heart that reflects purity and a desire to know and do the will of God.

Ultimately, a successful Christian life consists of knowing and doing the will of God. It means that one pursues God, seeking to please Him in every way. A successful Christian life is summed up exceptionally well by the preliminary statement of Westminster catechism: "The chief end of man is to know God and to enjoy Him forever." If we love God, we serve Him willingly and not out of duty. If we love God, we seek to discover what pleases Him and then do those things. If we love God, we want to know Him and honour Him in all that we do or say.

THE POWER TO LIVE A SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIFE — “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?’ But He gives more grace.” Knowing the will of God requires an individual to read the Word of God. Doing the will of God requires the power of God motivating the individual’s life. James gives us insight into the work of the Holy Spirit living within through this statement. Let’s study what this is all about more closely so we will know what God is doing.

As Jesus prepared His disciples for His exodus, He spoke of the Holy Spirit whom He would send following His resurrection. He promised, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” [JOHN 14:16, 17]. Of course, the Helper Jesus spoke of is the Holy Spirit.

The Master continued His instruction, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.’ Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.

“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” [JOHN 14:18-27].

Shortly, Jesus would speak once more of the work of the Spirit whom He was sending. “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” [JOHN 16:7-15].

Concerning the Spirit of God, Jesus taught us many things. ***God’s Spirit dwells with us and in us***; He is also revealed to be the Spirit of Christ [see ACTS 16:7; ROMANS 8:9; 1 PETER 1:11], and thus ***prompts us to love the Master and to keep His Word***. Especially does the Spirit of the Lord ***teach us***, causing us to remember the things Jesus taught and all that glorifies the Father. He ***convicts others through our life, empowering us*** to speak with boldness and to witness with clarity. Above all else, the Spirit of God ***glorifies Jesus the Lord***. He points out the will of the Saviour, encouraging us to obey that will; and we, guided by Him, also point others to the Saviour. Because He obeys the Father, He ensures that we have all that the Father has promised, which is His very Person committed to our good and His glory.

Thus, James says that the Spirit of God is envious for us to do what honours the Father. He watches over us, prompting us to follow the Saviour and to avoid evil. Those who are able to pursue their own desires without remorse over their disobedience to the will of God are *de facto* excluded as followers of Christ, for His Spirit is always at work prompting us to do what is good. A successful Christian life is one which discovers the will of God, pursuing hard after God, and proving obedient to the will of God. A fine summation of all that please God is provided by Paul when he writes, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body [1 CORINTHIANS 6:19, 20]. The power for a successful Christian life is the Spirit of God living within each Christian.

THE STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIFE — “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. 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.” In these few sentences, James points out necessary steps leading to a successful Christian life. We do well to implement his instruction.

I must stress that the first requirement is assumed. James assumes that those to whom he writes are Christians—that they have received Christ Jesus as Master of life, believing that He died because of their sin and that He raised to declare them right with the Father. Those who are believers, who have their sin forgiven and who are born from above, are then urged to humble themselves before God, appropriating His grace. The process of appropriating grace is outlined in seven steps that lead to a successful Christian life.

The first step for Christians is to *submit to God*. The term used for “submit” is a military term. The concept is that of accepting one’s proper place. A private does not give orders to a colonel, but rather accepts the position of obedience to fulfil the mission that has been assigned. The attitude of submission is a Christian ideal. Wives are taught to submit graciously and voluntarily to their own husbands [EPHESIANS 5:22-24]. Christians are to have a submissive attitude toward government [ROMANS 13:1]. Through His own life, Jesus provided us with the example of a child submitting to his parents [LUKE 2:51; see also EPHESIANS 6:1-3; COLOSSIANS 3:20].

With the submission to God, Christians are called to *resist the devil*. To resist the devil is to take a stand against the devil, who is a slanderer. This is the concept Peter presents when he urges believers, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith [1 PETER 5:8, 9a]. This is also what Paul means as he draws the Ephesian encyclical to a conclusion. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” [EPHESIANS 6:10-18].

The safest place for the child of God is next to the Father's heart. Therefore, Christians who seek to be successful are urged to *draw near to God*. In the original language, this word would have been understood to imply a decisive turning to the Lord that was done once. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this is the word used to signify worship. Thus, James is urging believers to determine to worship, seeking God rather than seeking what God can give.

Cleansing the hands and *purifying the heart* are two steps necessary for a successful Christian life. These two mutually supportive admonitions address the need to cease overt sin and to cultivate inward purity. It means that we must shun all that dishonours God. Let me speak to this pointedly for a moment. It means that we must no longer justify our angry speech or slanderous accusations against others. We must cease justifying our perusal of pornography, quit excusing the filthy language and wicked situations that we watch on television and avoid denigrating commitment in marriage, choosing rather to live holy lives. It means that we must cease justifying pursuit of our own personal interests rather than pursuing what honours God and all that builds others. It means that we must cease placing ourselves at the centre of life to ensure that Christ is central to our life.

The second admonition to *purify the heart* means that we must cease being "two-souled," yearning for God even as we try to hold onto the world. The admonition is a practical call to apply again the words of the Psalmist.

"Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in His holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully."

[PSALM 24:3, 4]

As we saw in a previous message, worldliness is essentially divided allegiance.

James calls us to *grieve over sin*. This is the intent of his words, "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." This is nothing less than a pointed call to repentance in the face of serious sin. Sin is not to be excused or treated lightly. Rather, sin should bring us to the point of distress at our failure and at the cost that must inevitably follow embracing sin. In the eyes of the Christian walking with the Father, sin will become "sinful beyond measure" [see ROMANS 7:13], and he will be seized with godly sorrow. The reason there is no revival among the churches in this day is that we no longer deal with sin, seeking rather to make people feel good about themselves. Thus, the death of the Saviour becomes meaningless simply because we imagine we can handle matters ourselves.

Finally, James calls us to *humble ourselves before the Lord*. It is possible to be outwardly submissive while harbouring an arrogant spirit. James will have none of that, calling us on our attempts to do such a terrible thing. Rather than laughing over sin—dismissing it as of no consequence, James reminds us that one of the marks of true repentance is a humble heart. As David has said,

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

[PSALM 51:17]

Have you ever heard a believer pray, “Oh, Lord, humble me?” That is a dangerous prayer. How much better for us to take the initiative to humble ourselves before God—confess our sin, weep over them and turn from them!

“The LORD is near to the broken-hearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.”

[PSALM 34:18]

I fear that we are not convinced of the words of Jesus who taught that “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” [LUKE 14:11]. We want to have it all—feel good about our own accomplishments before the Lord even while being praised for being pretty good people. However, set against our personal aspiration are the words the Apostle wrote to a young preacher years ago. “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 TIMOTHY 3:12].

The theme of the text before us is repentance and forgiveness. It reminds us that a successful Christian is one who keeps short accounts with God. Earlier, James described demonic behaviour, and now with a rapid staccato burst of commands he exposes the foolishness of that behaviour while urging his readers to turn again to the Lord. Worldly methods will never gain the approval of Holy God. Nevertheless, we can live a successful life, if we are willing to heed the will of God and honour Him by seeking to implement His reign over our lives.

My prayer is that you are a Christian, and that your life reflects your walk with the Master. My prayer is that all who are under my charge as a shepherd of God’s people will pursue a successful Christian life. I have come to appreciate the words of the Apostle who pleaded with the Corinthian Christians: “I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:2]. May God stir us up so that we seek to make our walk with Him successful, until Christ returns. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.