

HOW TO MOVE CLOSER TO GOD

James 4:6-10

Good afternoon! We're on the third part of our series "On the Move". In this series, we're looking at the different ways God moves in our lives both literally and figuratively. For example, in the first message, we saw that we can always trust God and follow him because he makes the way for us, he paves the way for us when he wants us to move to a certain place or wants us to change our life's direction. In the second message, I talked about how God is always busy and active in saving the lost and that we should be sensitive when the Holy Spirit moves us to share the good news of Jesus to someone. This morning, I'd like to share with you how to move closer to God spiritually.

Many people in the world want a deeper and more personal relationship with God. That's why millions of people followed "The Oprah Winfrey Show" making it the highest-rated television program of its kind in history. Oprah's brand of spirituality attracted people. But then, we know that she's off the mark biblically. You're here this morning anyway, I believe, because you also have that desire, that longing to be closer to God, the Creator of the Universe. Unless, your spouse dragged you into coming here. But, truth is, as Blaise Pascal is often quoted, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator." That quotation is not quite accurate because when I looked it up, Pascal's exact words are these: "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by

God himself". (From page 75 of Blaise Pascal's "Pensees". Don't you like that quote even better?)

So, how do we move closer to God? What do we need to do if we are seeking to be more spiritually fulfilled?

Early this week, I was pondering on what I'm supposed to share with you today. I know I'm going to give a message about getting closer to God. On Monday, I woke up in the middle of the night with a passage of Scripture in my mind. It was the famous passage in John chapter 4 where Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman. And I focused on verse 24 which says, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." And I began to outline in my mind how the message would progress using the surrounding verses. I was confident it was my text for this morning. So, how come it's different now?

It's because on Wednesday, I went to a prayer summit in Fredericksburg and the guest speaker talked about James 4 and right there I felt this was what I needed to share. The speaker, Dr. David Earley, a pastor and author, in fact, encouraged the pastors who attended to share his message with the church. And so, today, this message is more or less what I learned from that prayer summit. So, take out your outlines, get your pens, and let's go through this passage together that would help us to get a better sense of the love and goodness and holiness and faithfulness of God.

How do I move closer to God? First,

1. I must be humble.

James says, **"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."** He quotes from Proverbs 3:34. Why would he quote this? If you look at the first five verses of this chapter, he talks about man's sinful nature.

He talks about how man is so arrogant and proud and he sets himself up against God. That is man's nature. But I want you to notice something. James is actually writing to believers. These believers are scattered throughout the Roman empire and his letter is supposed to be read to all the churches at the time. Anyway, James is aware that some Christians are behaving in an ungodly manner, quarreling and living like they belong to the world instead of to God. But as he points out in verse 5, God intensely wants each of his children to exhibit the fruit of the Holy Spirit, "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?" The NIV has the Spirit in small letter but when I checked, that should be capitalized. Besides, the context says it should be.

Now, the problem is the fruit of the Spirit is not easy to come by. Am I right? What is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, by the way? Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Do we really know it by heart, or we know it only in our minds? Do we exhibit these traits? I need to know it not only in my mind but I need to learn to apply it in my life. Tell the person next to you, "Know it then apply it". But it's easier said than done, right?

But you know what, God did not command us to love and be joyful and peaceful without any help. God's grace is enough. And if enough is not even enough, he gives us more grace! Verse 6, "But he gives us more grace". If you're not feeling loving toward your spouse, ask God, and he gives you more grace. If you're lacking patience as you drive on the road, ask God and he gives you more grace. If you're not being patient with your children, ask God and he gives you more grace. If you're not joyful because you can't pay the bills, ask God and he gives you more grace. That's God's promise, he gives you more grace.

More grace to endure, more grace to be kind, more grace to be loving. But, for every promise of God, there's a condition. What is it?

Be humble! What does being humble mean? The Dictionary says it is “modesty, lack of pride, not being arrogant, lack of vanity”. The Bible has a wonderful definition of it, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil. 2:3-4) It is saying that humility is taking away the focus from yourself. It is putting others before you. When we do that, then God blesses us.

Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator, was an outstanding example of this truth. Shortly after he took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. “It's perfectly all right, Madam,” he replied. “Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend.” She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

Because he showed humility, God blessed Washington in ways he couldn't have imagined.

Now, the opposite is true. If you are proud, God opposes you or resists you as some other Bible versions would say. Pride, btw, is “a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority”. In short, it is having a feeling of self-importance or self-centeredness where you think like you're better than everyone else or you can do everything on your own. The Bible says that God hates the prideful. In **Proverbs 16:5** it says, “**The LORD detests all the proud of heart.**” Being proud is saying, “I can take care of everything. I don't need God.”

Now, the Greek word for “oppose” means “to range in battle against”. It is actually a very old military term used by the Greeks. It refers to placing a soldier in a specific platoon to resist an attack. Then it came to mean an organized resistance that can never break down. So, when God opposes you because you are proud, it means God will never act in favor of you. However much you try to pray, to do ministry, to be a Bible scholar, or what-not, you will never please God. He will never bless you if you are proud.

Now, I'd like you to take a look at the hand-out. It shows the difference between a proud person and a broken or a humble person.

So, to move closer to God, I need to be humble. Second, **2. I need to submit to God.**

James says in verse 7, “**Submit yourselves, then, to God.**” The Greek word used for submit gives the idea of “placing oneself under”. In other words, it is a willing and voluntary act to be under the control of another.

To submit is one of the hardest things to do. It is often the cause of problems in relationships.

I read the story of a captain of a ship. He looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message, “Alter your course 10 degrees south.”

Promptly a return message was received: “Alter your course 10 degrees north.”

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: “Alter your course 10 degrees south—I am the captain!”

Soon another message was received: Alter your course 10 degrees north—I am seaman third class Jones.”

Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: “Alter your course 10 degrees south—I am a battleship.”

Then the reply came “Alter your course 10 degrees north—I am a lighthouse.”

Many of us in today’s world have little respect for authority. We operate as if rules can be changed or should be changed to fit our personal needs and desires. Commercials egg us on: "Have it your way," "Rules are made to be broken." In reality, we can’t always have it our way. We have to conform our lives to a higher truth, a higher authority. Truth is not going to change to accommodate us. We are the ones who must change to conform our lives to what is true.

Only God is true and his Word is truth like a lighthouse. It's not going to change to accommodate us. We are the ones who must change to conform our lives to what God wants for us. That’s why we need to submit. We ran the risk of ruining our lives if we try to control it ourselves. The more we resist him, the more our lives gets destroyed.

I think I already mentioned before that I plan to write a book called “How to Be Humble Like Me”.

And I already plan to follow it up with a sequel entitled, “I am So Humble I take Pride in It”. There’s a third book to complete the trilogy. It’s entitled, “I Submit to You that I’m Humble and Not Proud”.

Now, submitting to God means surrendering everything that is dear to me to him. You see, every area of my life that is not surrendered to God is or will soon become a point of conflict in my life either inwardly or outwardly.

So, what does it really mean to submit to God? It means

a. Saying “yes” to God even when my will and God’s will cross.

In Luke 9:23-25, Jesus says, “Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?’”

Submitting oneself to God is one of the hardest things to do. It’s like carrying your cross and dying because Jesus says it’s like losing your life. It’s a big sacrifice. As human beings with a natural tendency to sin, we like the pleasures of the flesh. We like to indulge our flesh. We easily get tempted. But Jesus says you have to place your will under God’s will. His will should always be over your will.

Submitting to God also means

b. Saying “yes” to God even when the decision is costly and painful.

In Luke 22:41-44, we read, “He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”

Sometimes, God will ask you to make a decision that will be very hard for you to make.

Maybe, it means going to another country to become a missionary even when you don't have the funds. Or giving up a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship because that boyfriend or girlfriend is not a Christian. Or being truthful about your ITR even if it means losing a lot of money. Again, it's not about our comfort. It's about doing the will of God.

Thirdly, submitting to God means

c. **Surrendering your Isaac to God.**

God promised Abraham that he will make him the father of many nations. However, many years passed and the promise wasn't fulfilled. Then, at age 100, he became the father of Isaac. And he loved Isaac so much.

Now, I want you all to turn to Genesis 22:1-2, we read that God asked him to do the impossible.

“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’

‘Here I am,’ he replied.

Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.’”

The Bible doesn't tell us what Abraham's reaction was. But based on what we read in Scripture, there was no hint that Abraham ever questioned God about this test. Despite the seeming absurdity of this instruction by God, Abraham had reached the point in his life wherein he absolutely knew that God could be trusted even though he couldn't understand. His faith in God was now absolutely firm.

Folks, let me tell you the following truths: **1. The call to surrender is the call to obey commands that feel inconceivable and believe things that seem impossible.**
2. The call to surrender is the call to let go of what we love most to be embraced by the One who loves us the most.

So, dutifully, Abraham obeyed God. Genesis 22:3 says, “Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.”

The third truth is this: **3. The call to surrender is a call to obedience.**

We continue in Genesis 22:4-5, “On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.’”

Do you see the great faith that Abraham showed in these verses? In fact, he says in the end, “...we will come back to you.” He was absolutely certain that God can be trusted. God gave him Isaac because he was the promised child. Will God turn his back on his promise? Somehow, Abraham knew that Isaac will survive. In fact, he believed that even if Isaac died, God can raise him up again.

And we know what happened. At the point when he was about to stab his son, Genesis 22:11-12 says, “But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’

‘Here I am,’ he replied.

‘Do not lay a hand on the boy,’ he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’”

Let me give you one more truth: **4. The call to surrender is a call to trust God.**

So, let me ask you, “What is your Isaac? What do you need to submit to God? Will you trust God fully?”

To move closer to God, I need to be humble, I need to submit to God, and finally,

3. I need to deal with sin.

James 4:8-9 says, “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.”

Folks, there are three things about sin that we need to understand. First,

a. Sin and God cannot co-exist.

You see, God is a holy God. We are sinners. So, it is impossible to draw near to God without dealing with sin. The Bible says about God, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” (Habakkuk 1:13)

Isaiah discovered how God cannot tolerate sin in his presence. Now, please turn to the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:1-4, he tells us of a vision he had,

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

Isaiah was so overwhelmed by this vision. He then felt so unworthy in the presence of a holy God. And so, he blurted out in verse 5, “Woe to me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’”

Clearly, what we see here is the big difference between a holy God and sinful man. Which brings us to the second thing we should know about sin.

b. Sin separates us from God.

Isaiah says in 59:2, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”

Our sins serve as a barrier between us and God. The reason we cannot experience God’s blessings is because of the sin that we are hiding. But nothing is hidden from God. Everything is exposed to him. He is the light. We cannot hide from the light. Even if we live in darkness, his light will reveal anything that we’ve been hiding. The Bible says, “Your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32:23)

Folks, every unresolved sin is like a brick in the wall between you and God. God is holy. God’s primary attribute is holiness. If you want to draw near to God you must tear down the wall of sin. You can do that because

c. Sins can be washed whiter than snow.

God says in Isaiah 1:16, 18, “Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong... ‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’”

God urges us to stop sinning. He promises to cleanse us if we do. He promises to change us inside out. How are sins cleansed then?

d. Sins are cleansed through confession.

We need to deal with sin by confessing it to God. To confess is to agree with God that what we’re doing is not pleasing to him.

1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Folks, we need to realize that having sin in our lives is the primary reason we cannot come near to God. It is absolutely necessary then that we deal with every known sin in our lives. Maybe there’s a sin that is lurking in the dark. Confess it and let God’s light shine upon us to cleanse us. And resolve not to do it again.

We thank God because we have a Savior who has cleansed us from our sins and continues to cleanse us every time we come to God for forgiveness of our sins. Jesus died for us to set us free from our sins. He will never tire of forgiving us. He sacrificed his life for you. He died on the cross to forgive your sins. Now, he wants you to acknowledge your sins and ask for forgiveness. That shows humility. If you want to move closer to God, that's the first thing you need to do. And God will forgive your sins and the Holy Spirit will enter your life and change you. And it gets better because God will give you eternal life once you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. When you die, you will go straight to heaven where you'll be with Jesus forever. Jesus rose from the dead for this purpose. He loves you and he wants you to rise from the dead as well in the future.

To move closer to God, first you need to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Then, as you live your Christian life, you can keep on moving closer to God by always humbling yourself, submitting to God, and dealing with every sin you commit.