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The Book of

Session Ten:
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James 4:7-10—Meeting God in Humility

❖The Text (NRSV)

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

❖What's going on here?

-v.7—Of course, any time a new section begins with a “therefore,” it is always wise to ask what it’s *there for*. Here, James is still following the train of thought from 4:6 and its understanding of God as one who deflates the arrogant and fills the humble with grace. Given that this is who God is, the appropriate stance toward God is one of humility. This is not to belittle our worth or demean ourselves—James, along with Genesis 1, does see humans as made in the “likeness of God” (James 3:9). But nonetheless, we are created to live under and in the Reign of God; rather than giving ourselves over to our desires (and making ourselves God), James calls us to place ourselves under the One who truly is God and to place ourselves in this One’s direction. The Greek here makes a play on the contrast between thinking we are “above” or “more than” we really are (this is behind the “proud” in 4:6) and being humbly who God has made us to be, “belong” God, as it were, or “under” God’s rule.

The idea of “resisting” the devil in this verse also echoes the same language of God “opposing” the proud back in 4:6; more literally, the verb suggests “standing against.” With whom or with what will we align ourselves? Since James is addressing people who would see themselves as aligned with God, he wants them to see all the places in their lives that are

inconsistent with this professed love for God and God’s ways. He names those places for what they are—points at which we are more truly aligned with the demonic than we are on board with who God is and what God desires for creation.

Again, since James’ audience professes faith in God, he sees them as *already* under God’s rule and *not* under the power of the devil—as the people of God, they are not caught between the whims and controls of two dueling fates, but live already under the sway of God’s Reign and are called to be obedient to *this God*. We as believers are not at some objective point above both God and the devil and then asked to choose which we will follow—we already find ourselves within the scope of God’s rule. And as our lives are increasingly aligned with this rule of God, we are out of the realm of the devil’s power.

The point of all of this is that James believes he is asking us to do something that *is* within our power—the devil *can* be resisted. Of course, this begs the question of ‘what the devil’ that phrase means—what does James mean by “resisting the devil”? Given the preceding verses, James seems to see the wisdom, ways, and thinking of “the world” (called devilish in 3:15 and viewed as hostility to God in 4:4) as demonic. But resisting the devil is more than renouncing a supernatural being who is called “the devil,” but also, as we say in the baptismal liturgy, rejecting sin and all the devil’s empty promises.

“I ask you to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, reject sin, and confess the faith of the Church, the faith in which we baptize. Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?”

—Liturgy for Holy Baptism, LBW (p.123)

What does it mean to renounce the promises and ways of the devil in your life?

In other words, resisting the devil is not just having the correct theological belief that the devil is “bad,” but turning away from all the ways that we are bent in on ourselves and rejecting those actions, patterns, and ways of living that are self-centered, divisive, violent, and without love for neighbor. It means recognizing that quite often, the demonic is most powerfully seen in our world not wearing a red suit and carrying a pitchfork but more insidious and hidden in our attitudes of hate, greed, and self-sufficiency—and then resisting those subtler demons as we see them in our lives.

-v.8—The corollary to resisting the devil and the devil’s consequent fleeing is the idea of drawing near to God. In some sense, James may not see these as two separate thoughts (as though there were a middle ground, or limbo of neutrality between God and the devil). Rather, to resist the devil (and all the ways of life that oppose God) is to be open to God—and to a willing submission to God.

The flow of this first sentence in 4:8 sounds as though it is a condition, as though God will draw near *only if* we first draw near to him. (And of course, that kind of talk sets our Lutheran Spider-Senses a-tingling.) But again, context is important, and here, James isn’t asking, “under what conditions does God relate to us?” but rather “under whose allegiance—whose way of living—will you stand?” James isn’t concerned so much with an abstract chronology of *when* God comes into our lives but with a practical challenge, a dare to root out whatever in our lives is opposed to God, and to bring into alignment with God’s Reign whatever has gone its own way. The point then is to highlight in extreme black and white the contrast between the divine and the demonic ways of life—between love for neighbor, working for peace, and humble service on the one hand, and divisive, violent, self-serving arrogance on the other. For James’ audience in particular, who are mired between those extremes in what James calls “double-

mindedness,” his concern is to expose all the inconsistencies and infidelities in their lives for what they are.

Now if this verse is still sounding rather grace-less and works-oriented, it is important to recognize here in 4:7 the invitation to turning around—for those who find parts of themselves and their lives opposed to God, there is the offer made to come to repentance and new life, in fact to the very “grace” that God “gives...to the humble” (4:6). Back in 4:4, James had called his audience “adulterers,” alluding to the recurring image of God’s people as unfaithful lovers. Here, one wonders if James has the same image still in the back of his mind and wants to present the open invitation of God for reconciliation between Lover and Beloved. God as faithful spouse, then, is holding out arms in waiting for the unfaithful beloved to return and seeking to bring the people back to right relationship.

We can hear James’ invitation to “draw near to God” in the same mindset as the prophets like Hosea, who after depicting the relationship between Israel and YHWH as a broken and reconciled marriage, holds out to Israel the invitation, “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity,” (Hosea 14:1) and then answers in God’s voice, “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them” (Hos. 14:4). James sees this living possibility to start over again here, too, but it will come at the cost of having all of our towers of pretense knocked down.

-v.9-10—Together with the second half of 4:8, James calls for repentance—and in typical James-style, he speaks of it in terms of taking *action*. Specifically, James uses the language of ritual acts of repentance—washing the hands and purifying the body symbolically of sin. Here in 4:9, ritual acts of repentance still seem to be in the background. Repentance here is understood to be a major event—

a whole re-orientation of life; as such, it isn't to be taken lightly but instead is marked symbolically as a U-turn of the whole person. In some ways, the baptism of John in the Gospels is one such symbolic act that marked this life-changing repentance, and our baptisms as well carry this sense of radical transformation within us. And much as James sees this repentance as reason to "mourn" and "weep"—all actions associated with grief and death—Paul talks about *baptism* as a *death* and a burial of an old life and the beginning of a walk "in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

One also gets the sense from James' language in 4:9 of the grieving and lamenting that goes with having ones pretenses and comforts knocked out from under oneself. You can almost hear those statements of "woes" from Luke's Beatitudes in the background ("Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."—Luke 6:25), as Jesus, too, envisions God's great reversal when the things that are puffed up in ourselves are deflated and the lowly things are raised up. James takes this idea and offers that there is yet hope of life beyond that mourning and weeping—we must be broken apart in the places where we have become recalcitrant and stubbornly opposed to the life and rule of God. But then, James says, God takes those broken shards of who we are and lifts them up to put them back together again.

❖ Themes—Submitting to God

Bob Dylan, echoing Jesus on the subject of having two masters, put it well: "You gotta serve someone. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you've gotta serve someone." In an age and society where there is a great deal of seeing in shades of grey and in which most of us live in a mess between both belief and unbelief, both Dylan's and James' words about submitting to only one completely sound harsh—if not impossible. For that matter, the idea of submitting and serving God doesn't sound like

terribly *good* news—what about our *freedom* in Christ? The New Testament does give us a resounding affirmation of our radical freedom in new life, and yet it's also interesting that the big freedom-in-Christ writer, Paul, also says that while we used to be slaves of sin, we are now not merely freed to do as we please, but are now *slaves of God* and of righteousness (See Rom. 6:15-22). But for Paul and James (and Jesus), this isn't a coercive, oppressive slavery, but simply a dimension of our humanity. Humans are creatures who worship and serve—it is what we are made to do. The question is what and who we worship—if it's not the God who made us, we are very clever in inventing something else to serve. James wants us to see, though, that we are most truly free and most truly who we are made to be when we are serving God in love. After all, we've got to serve somebody—it might as well be the One who has served us, loved us, died for us, and lived for us.

Connections: The "R" Word—Repentance

-James describes almost ritualistic signs of "repentance" in 4:8-10. What do you think of when you hear the word "repentance"? Is it a positive term or a negative term? What rituals to express repentance do we have today—what is their purpose? *For whom* do we do these rituals—for God? For us?

-Is repentance a one time event, more like going through a doorway, or more like an on-going way of thinking and living? Some of both? What leads you to this conclusion? What about forgiveness—is it a one-time thing or a long-term state?

-What is the relationship between repentance and forgiveness? What does forgiveness look like in your everyday life?

-What things in your life might you identify as "demonic"? What would it look like if parts were brought under the Reign of God? How could it happen?

James 4:11-12—Who Gets to Be the Judge?❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

❖ **What's going on here?**

-v.11-12—James has just spent several verses describing what kinds of actions and changes of mindset come with repentant humility before God. But James never lets the vertical relationship with God become detached from the horizontal relationship with each other. So humility before God also means a humble love for neighbors—and that specifically means refusing to put oneself above another as judge. Again, it is hard not to think of the words of Jesus in the background here—the Jesus who said that not only was murder wrong, but any angry speech toward our brothers and sisters. To stand in judgment over one's neighbor is to reject God's place as lawgiver and judge, also—so judgment of our neighbor is a violation of both our horizontal *and* our vertical relationships. It is both a failure to love and idolatry.

So the sixty-four-thousand dollar question here becomes, what does it mean to judge our neighbor? Does this rule out correcting our brothers and sisters in Christ or holding each other accountable? This is probably another yes-and-no type answer. Clearly, James very bluntly judges the actions and ways of members of his congregation to be sinful, and he pulls no punches in expressing his criticisms. Is he violating his own rule? Or is there a difference between what James has done even just in chapter four and the kind of judgment that James condemns? One has to at least imagine that there can be ways of

correcting and reproving one another without judging. Perhaps for James, motivation is important—am I motivated by love for the other in what I have to say, or am I really addressing my own need to stand over against another? Am I *threatened* by someone else's differing opinion and so lash out because of my own insecurity? Or maybe humility is an important component for James as well—to stand in judgment is to ultimately condemn—to render a verdict, whereas loving correction has the humility to understand that it is not the final word. For James this seems to be relevant, for “there is one...who is able to save and to destroy.” To take a position of judgment is to usurp God's place and to pretend that it is within our own power to forgive or condemn another. But instead, if together, we hold each other accountable to the rule of God that guides us all, we can humbly correct and be corrected—and we can learn where points of diversity are good, as well. The kind of admonition that James seems to practice himself and would seem to be distinguished from judgment recognizes its place not as the final word, but as the on-going guidance for life that we all need. It is the humble direction of our feet when we lose step to come back into the dance of forgiveness.

Connections: “I’ll Be the Judge of That...”

- Where are there places in your own life where you have felt the urge to judge someone else? What was it that sparked the urge in you? How have you dealt with it?
- Do you think there is a difference between correction and judgment? What is this difference? How do you see that difference in real life situations?
- Why do you think we are so quick to judge other people? Are there ever valid reasons for judging?
- Is refusing to judge someone the same as being tolerant? Are either of those the same as showing love to all people? Why or why not?