

Submission to a Higher Authority

James 4: 1-10

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If you have ever served in the Armed Forces, especially the Marine Corps, there is one individual that you met early on, the staff sergeant. He was that mild mannered military officer who gently encouraged recruits to have a good time as they served the nation. That's the way it was, right? Wrong! That staff sergeant was just the opposite. He was loud, harsh and demanding. He required absolute obedience. Any infraction of the military code of behavior was met with immediate discipline. You did not want to get on the wrong side of the staff sergeant. During those weeks of enlistment training, he could make a recruit's life just plain miserable.

Reading today's passage of Scripture I could not help but think that James would have made an excellent staff sergeant for new recruits of Christianity. He certainly does not mince any words in describing his expectations for service in the Kingdom of God. So let's pretend this morning that we have lined up in military formation to receive an address from Staff Sergeant James and see what he has to say to us. And let's be sure to not only hear his words but to discern their meaning for our lives as God's people serving in the army of the Lord.

And just in case you're saying to yourself, "I didn't sign up to join the Armed Forces of the Lord. I'm just an average Christian trying to do my best," let me remind you of what Paul said to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2:3-4, he tells Timothy and by inference all of us, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer." So let's straighten up our formation, get our minds off of other things and pay rapt attention to what Staff Sergeant James has to say to us.

The first thing is directly related to our old way of life as civilians. Even though we have joined up with the Lord, that doesn't mean that we have turned aside from our old ways of life. In fact, many people sign up to be Christians without realizing that a change in attitudes and behavior is required. That's precisely what James is addressing in the first three verses of chapter 4. He writes, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures." Let's be honest. These words are harsh and condemnatory. We're not a bunch of raw recruits in a bar room brawl. However, there have been times when Christians have acted in just such a way with fist fights actually breaking out during a business meeting. Thankfully those kind of things are not a part of our church family. But let's look a little deeper.

When Christians come at life from a worldly point of view, striving to get what they want without considering what others desire or what is genuinely needful, things can become difficult. That's especially true with regards to prayer. A prayer offered for personal gain and pleasure, especially if it is offered at others expense, will always receive a divine rejection. God's silent disdain will be overwhelming. Why, because the motives for such prayers are all wrong. Those prayers are all about getting what we want, not about what He wants. God will not be stiff armed into giving what is harmful and inconsistent with the way He wants us to live with one another. In military terms, He is not going to lay aside His code of conduct for human behavior to benefit selfish, uncaring pursuits.

Here's the second thing that James is telling us. Friendship with the world, a disorderly, self-centered way of life makes us an enemy of God. Take, for example, a business relationship between two partners. One is committed to the commercial enterprise which they established. There are a definite set of plans and priorities that he wishes to pursue. The other partner, so to speak, is out to lunch. He really doesn't care that much about what's happening, except for his pay check and a lot of time off to pursue personal interests. Before long, there are going to be disagreements and two partners will be at odds with one another. Eventually, they will see themselves as enemies of one another. More than likely the business relationship will be dissolved.

Thankfully, the Lord doesn't want that to happen. That's what James is talking about in verses four and five. In the Old Testament when people turned away from the Lord, it was described as adultery, like a marriage partner abandoning their spouse to seek the love and affection of another. James is saying that adopting a worldly way of life is just like committing adultery. It puts that person's relationship with the Lord in jeopardy. Here's why. When we become Christians, the Lord establishes an ongoing relationship with us through His Holy Spirit. In other words, God longs to be a part of our lives, to help us live them successfully. He jealously desires for us to be faithful in upholding that relationship. He is like a parent who loves his children and who is grieved and heart-broken when they turn aside and adopt a way of life just the opposite of what he wishes for them. Not only is that way of life destructive, like drug and alcohol abuse, but is in fact a state of rebellion. Harkening back to the military illustration, it means that God's people can go AWOL. Examining the membership listing of most any church and taking a look at the lifestyle of those who infrequently or rarely if ever attend, one would have to conclude that a lot of Christians are AWOL.

Realizing this was a problem even in his own day and time, James offers some recommendations for consideration. We should think of them as recommendations of that staff sergeant to his enlistees. He's given them a hard time during their training, but he has truly come to love them and desire the best for them, even when they have to stand before the commanding officer of the battalion for serious infractions which they have committed. This is what Staff Sergeant James has to say in verses seven through ten.

- When you stand before your commander, don't be arrogant. An attitude of genuine humility is required.

- Clean up your life inwardly and outwardly, put things in order and be properly prepared to meet your commanding officer.
- Don't be giddy and disrespectful. A grief stricken countenance is much more appropriate than a haughty attitude. Let there be a true expression of sorrow and regret for what you have done.
- At the conclusion of your meeting with the commander, a slight bow with a firm salute will indicate your willing submission to his authority. In response, he will lift you up. He will restore you to a place of honor as you continue to serve him.

In 1725 a child was born in Wapping, a town near London, England on the Thames River. The child's mother was a devout Christian and she prayed that her son would become a clergyman. Unfortunately, she died when her son was but six years old. A few years later the little boy went to live with his father, a sea captain. Possessing a rebellious nature, he rejected all authority over his life, including his mother's faith and his father's guidance. Forced into the British Navy, he deserted, was imprisoned, and finally dishonorably discharged. He continued a life of self-indulgent hedonism, becoming so vile that even his shipmates would have nothing to do with him. Involved in the slave trade, he was himself enslaved briefly in Africa. Finally, on board a ship floundering in a storm off the coast of Ireland, he cried out to the Lord remembering a verse of Scripture he had learned as a child, Luke 11:13. The comforting words of Jesus spoke to his heart, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Gradually turning aside from the sins of his past and committing his life to the lordship of Jesus Christ, he began to study the Scriptures and was eventually ordained as a minister in the church of England. He served a church in Olney for 16 years before being called to a congregation in London. Along with William Wilberforce, a member of Parliament, he became an advocate for ending slavery in the British Empire. Along with his oratorical gifts, he was also a song writer and composed numerous hymns that were sung in the churches he served. One of the most memorable has also become one of the most beloved hymns in the English language, "Amazing Grace." Who was this man? He was John Newton who said of himself near the end of his life, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior." It took a long time, until he was 39 years old, but finally John Newton came to the realization that the only way to live a life that has any worthwhile meaning or purpose requires just one thing, **submission to a higher authority.**

When you and I stand before our Commanding Officer, the Lord Jesus Christ, at the gateway of Glory, I hope and pray that each of us can say unto Him, "Having served You in submissive obedience to the best of my ability and with the help and guidance of Your Holy Spirit, I request the honor of being admitted into Your presence for all of eternity."