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## THE CURSE OF THE PUFFERFISH James 4:6-12

One day while on vacation Laurie and I were at a beach that we thought might be good for snorkeling. I went into the water to check it out and found out it was mostly a bust. Nothing much to see. But I went to another area mostly just planning to swim a little, but when I put my mask in the water I spotted a few fish, then a few more. Then I realized I was surrounded by quite a few fish, some of them pretty big. Laurie came and joined me and we enjoyed looking at the many fish that we encountered in that one small area. We noticed one small fish. It was brown with white polka dots all over it. The official name of this fish is tetraodontidae, so named because it has 4 large teeth it uses for crushing the shells of crustaceans, which is the staple of its diet. We've seen them before, and this one was quite small, maybe only 4 to 6 inches long. This fish has an unusual defense mechanism. It is maneuverable, but not very fast. To help protect it, this fish has an unusually expandable stomach. It can fill that stomach with water so it inflates like a balloon, apparently to present a more intimidating image. This is why it is more commonly known as a pufferfish or blowfish.

There is something else unusual about this fish. Its internal organs and sometimes even its skin contain a toxin that makes some of them among the most poisonous creatures on the planet. The toxin is 1200 times more potent and deadly for humans than cyanide is. There is enough poison in one pufferfish to kill 30 adult humans, and there is no known antidote. You're fine if you just don't eat the thing.

I bring up our brief encounter with a puffer fish because they bring to mind a problem that all of us humans have. We also have a tendency to puff ourselves up. It is not a defense mechanism, but it turns out when we are puffed up we also tend to be toxic to others.

There is a thread that runs through James 3-4. There were problems in the churches that James addressed in his letter. They were not getting along with each other. Way too often they were verbally tearing each other down. They were quarreling and they were compromising their faith in order to make life easier. There is one thing that connects with all of these problems. It is the very human propensity for elevating self. It is the human habit of making life all about ourselves. When we do that we do whatever is necessary to promote our own agenda for our lives. We tend

to compete and put others down and fight to get whatever it is we think we need. In James 4:6-12 this issue is going to take center stage.

Jean Jacques Rousseau had this as the dedication of his 1789 book, *Confessions*. “To me, with the admiration I owe myself.” The opening lines of the book are, “I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.”

Well, we're not that bad. Perhaps not, but we live in an era where our culture puts self at the center, and that skews a lot of things. There is a dating website named OKCupid. Like other dating sites it has a questionnaire that candidates fill out. They recently revealed something astounding. One of the questions on their form asks simply, “Are you a genius?” Astoundingly, 40% of those filling out the form answered yes. To qualify for most so called “genius clubs” like MENSA, you need to have an IQ in the 98<sup>th</sup> to 99<sup>th</sup> percentile. That means roughly 1 or at the most 2 out of a hundred qualify. So how is it that 40 out of a hundred think they qualify?

Yeah, the pride problem is still with us. Most of us think we don't have a problem with pride. But we do. Every single one of us does. And it is toxic. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “Pride is spiritual cancer; it eats up the possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.” He also said pride is “the one vice of which no man in the world is free.” In other words, this is an issue for all of us, even if we think it's not. Let's see what James says about it in James 4:6-12. I am going to review what the entire passage says first, then by way of application we will look at 3 commands in these verses.

## HUMBLE YOURSELF BEFORE GOD

Verse 6 paraphrases Proverbs 3:34, saying, “God is opposed to the proud but shows favor to the humble.” The Proverb originally said that God, “mocks the proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.” Peter referred to the same verse in 1 Peter 5:5 in wording almost exactly like James.

That this same idea shows up 3 times in the Bible should get our attention. That tells us there is an important principle here. This truth is at the heart of the gospel of Christ. It breaks down all of the human race into 2 categories. There are the proud, and there are the humble. One ends up at war with God, the other receives grace and favor from him.

I think it is interesting that the original Proverb lumped together the humble and the oppressed. There is something of a parallel to that in Jesus' opening words of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:3 he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Notice in verse 10 he said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The poor made up the majority of the people who flocked to Jesus. They were fishermen, woodworkers, dirt farmers, and day laborers. They had no power and no significance in this world and they knew it. They were humble because life had humbled them. They had nothing to brag about. They had no influence and no one thought them worthy of any notice whatsoever.

The theological effect of this was it made them feel like they were worthy of nothing in the spiritual realm as well. Hey, if they were insignificant and counted as nothing in the eyes of the influential people in the world, what could they expect from God? God is infinitely greater than any human, which meant that they had infinitely less standing before him than they did before the people who matter in this world. Astoundingly, it was those humble nobodies who would inherit the kingdom of heaven.

It is no accident that Jesus opened his most quoted sermon with the words "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That idea was a stark, almost violent antithesis to the conventional wisdom of that day, and of ours for that matter. They thought that the rich were blessed. Those who are famous, rich and powerful are the people who are blessed in the world's estimation. They equated wealth with being favored by God, so if you were poor you obviously were the farthest thing from favored by God.

But Jesus taught that in order to experience God's favor and to be welcomed into his kingdom you had to be poor in spirit. You had to have the humility that is typically characteristic of those who know they are nothing in this world and have no claim on anyone, especially God. Jesus said you will never be a part of his kingdom without that humility. James says much the same thing. God gives grace and favor to the humble.

Let's think about why that might be. I have mentioned before that Laurie and I, as part of our kitchen renovation, undertook the task of replacing a hanging lamp with a recessed light. Even now at times when I reflect on that experience I find myself wondering what I was thinking. Let's see, Rick Myatt, home improvement project that involved tools and electricity, what could go wrong? We were assured that this

was an easy thing to do, and foolishly we believed that. We found some You Tube videos that made it look easy. So we started off doing what those videos suggested, confident in our newly discovered “knowledge.” It didn’t take long before that project started going sideways. We ended up calling some friends who helped, doing some things we couldn’t do and who instructed us in what we needed to be done. Fortunately, we humbled ourselves and let them help and instruct us, and the project, amazingly got done. We could have insisted that we knew what we were doing. We could have ignored their advice and refused their help. At best the project would not have gotten done. At worst, we would have completed it, but in a way that would lead to us burning our house down. The key was we needed to humble ourselves, acknowledge our need and accept the help and instruction of our friends.

Let’s change the project from replacing a lamp, to being accepted and loved by God, receiving eternal life and living out that life beginning even now. God offers to enable us in that project. The same principle applies. We can insist that we know what is best. We can do it our way and disaster will ensue. Or we can humble ourselves, admit we can’t do it and we need help, and receive life. It all starts with us saying, "I NEED HELP!"

#### TURN FROM ERRANT WAYS

In the middle of verse 8 James starts to sound like an old time hellfire and damnation preacher thundering away at his audience. He calls them sinners and “double-minded.” He tells them to grieve, mourn and wail. They are to change their joy into gloom. Yikes.

There have been Christians throughout history who have presented their religion as a matter so serious that there is no room in it for laughter or joy. It is a dour, frowning sort of thing that admits no levity at all. In my earlier years of ministry I encountered a couple of people like that who informed me I was on the wrong track. I used humor, and there is no room for humor in real Christianity, and I needed to talk a lot more about judgment and repentance. James sounds like the founder of that party.

Jonathan Edwards’ said in his famous sermon “Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God,” “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight.”

Was James condemning like that? It sure sounds like it. However, it is helpful to note that he will address his audience 4 more times in the remainder of the letter as “brothers and sisters.” If they were so bad I doubt he would lose the “sinners” and go back to “brothers and sisters.” What is he doing here?

Listen to these words. “Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine...Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the betrothed of her youth...Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed...Put on sackcloth you priests and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar.”

These are all quotes from Joel 1. It is an example of something you see occasionally in the ancient prophets. It is like poetry in the sense that the prophets are using imagery and emotion to evoke feeling in their audience. It is not necessarily to be interpreted literally. It is to communicate the urgency of their call. James’ readers were familiar with such passages from the prophets. They would have understood that James is making a similar prophetic and somewhat poetic appeal to his audience. It was a way of communicating that this is a deadly serious appeal.

James did not mean following Jesus is a thing that is morose and utterly lacking in joy. Quite the contrary. Jesus said it was about us having fullness of joy. What James was saying was that they needed to take the things he was talking about very seriously. There were some things they needed to turn away from. Their fighting with each other and verbally tearing others down was not a minor issue. James is saying this is serious business. They needed to take seriously the call to follow Jesus with no compromise.

## DO NOT PUT YOURSELF ABOVE OTHERS

Finally he ends this section with warning them not to let their pride cause them to put themselves above others and judge them. Unfortunately, this is as human as breathing oxygen. Pretty much everyone who has human DNA and who breathes in the air of this world has a tendency to judge and criticize other people.

I was watching a baseball game recently. Because the Padres haven’t really given us anything to cheer about in a long time, I fall back to the team that was my favorite as a child, the Cleveland Indians. So I was watching a playoff game recently. In a tense and critical moment, the Indians were behind by a run, but they had 2 runners in scoring position with 2 outs. The pitcher got 2 strikes on the batter, a guy who is a good hitter. I knew what was coming. The batter was left

handed and the pitcher was right handed. But that pitcher has consistently given the batter fits with a slider that breaks low and inside. I said to the screen, "This is going to be a slider, low and in. Don't swing. If you don't swing it will be a ball." Sure enough, the pitcher did exactly what I said he was going to do. Except he didn't do it very well. The pitch was poorly executed so it was never in the strike zone. It was way too low, in fact, it hit the dirt before it got to the plate. The batter swung anyway, striking out and ending the inning. I verbally said to him, "Why did you swing at that? It was never a strike. It was never close. And you had to know it was coming." I was judging him. I, who was a terrible baseball player who could not hit a breaking ball to save my life, who struck out on pitches worse than that, was upset at this guy for failing to do something that I could never have come close to doing.

You might say that doesn't really matter because it's just sports. The problem is the thing I did with that guy we all do on a regular basis with people in myriads of ways. We judge and criticize their decisions, the way they raise their kids, how they spend their money, whether they are really following Jesus as closely and as fervently as we do.

The problem is that pride always looks down on others. It also sees itself as being the arbiter, the one who has the right to see what is wrong with other people. C. S. Lewis said our pride is always in competition with every other person's pride, and that it is constantly looking down on other people. James' terse answer to our pride is found at the end of verse 12. "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" Romans 14:4 asks, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."

### APPLICATION

Compromising to make life easier in this world is actually driven by pride. It is a pride that says, "I know what is best for me and I'm going to do it no matter what God says." Criticizing and judging other people is founded in pride. Pride is at the heart of this passage. C. S. Lewis wrote, "Pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil...Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind." To make matters worse, Lewis said, "It is pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began." All of the human misery that all of us share in comes from human pride! Given that pride is such a problem and is really the cause of every other spiritual problem, how are we to deal with it? There are 3 commands in verses 7-8 that can help us.

## SUBMIT TO GOD

Verse 7 tells us to submit to God. That's the logical action of someone who is humble. Verse 10 tells us to be humble before the Lord. So this tells us that the solution to our pride problem, which has been the source of all the human misery in history as well as our misery today, is to humble ourselves before God and submit to him.

I don't think of myself as an especially proud person, but as I considered this passage I realized there is pride in me and that it reveals itself in 3 subtle ideas at show up in my thinking.

I think, "I am not that bad." I'm not perfect, there is no denying that. But I'm a pretty nice guy. I'm usually patient with people and am kind most of the time. I don't lie or cheat, I certainly would never harm anyone intentionally. I'm faithful to my wife and love her deeply. In a sense, I'm kind of proud of being pretty good.

I think, "Life is about me." I'm not some horribly selfish narcissist, but I admit I am awfully focused on me. My thoughts generally revolve around how I am, what I need, what I have to do, how do I look, how do I appear to other people. In fact, when I am honest I realize I am quite self conscious.

I've had a couple of trivial reminders of this lately. When we got back from vacation we had a big basket full of mail that came while we were gone. Included in it was a notice from our credit union that we were late for a car payment. I thought, "Did I miss that? In our rush to get ready for our trip did I forget to pay that?" I couldn't believe I would have done that. Then I thought back to the days just before we left and I remembered making sure all the bills that were due while we were gone were paid. That included our car payment. Just to make sure I checked our bank account and sure enough, I had made that payment. So the credit union must have messed up. I immediately called them, anxious to point out their error and get it straightened out. I could imagine them saying, "Oh, you're right. I'm very sorry, I don't know how we messed this up, but we'll fix it right away." It didn't go quite that way. When I talked to the credit union representative he pointed out that yes, I had made a payment, but that the payment was short by 10 cents. He then directed my attention to the notice I received and told me to read it more carefully, and sure enough I could see that it said that right on the notice. I was really embarrassed. I felt so stupid. I felt stupid for making the wrong payment to begin with, then I felt even more stupid for not seeing what the problem was when it was written right on the notice. Suddenly I was the one embarrassed and

apologizing, and it did not feel good. I thought this guy must think I'm a total idiot, and I didn't like how that felt.

That is a normal reaction when you've done something that dumb. But it was a rather intense feeling. It was that intense because somewhere inside I feel like life is about me, and when I feel like I, the star of the Rick Myatt Show, look bad, it's terrible. That sense of embarrassment exists because I'm so focused on me. That's pride.

I have mentioned before that I have an unfortunate clumsiness when it comes to eating. I especially have a penchant for spilling ketchup on myself. A while back Laurie and I were having burgers and fries, which, in my case, requires copious amounts of my favorite spice, ketchup. Before the meal Laurie said, "Rick, I just washed that shirt so please be careful and don't spill ketchup on yourself." I assured her there wouldn't be a problem because I was going to be extra careful. At one point near the end of the meal Laurie looked at me and said, "Is that ketchup on your shirt there?" I looked down and sure enough, there it was. I have no idea how it got there. I suspect that some foul fiend walked by me and surreptitiously squirted ketchup on me just to make me look bad. That had to be it because I couldn't have dropped it on myself. I was being so careful. But there it was. I sheepishly admitted to the offending condiment and Laurie just said, "Oh, Rick," in a tone of voice that expressed at least a certain amount of exasperation. Just that tone of voice offended me. How dare you be exasperated with the star of the show? Don't you know who I am?

My point here is one aspect of my pride shows up in how focused I am on life being about me. Pastor and author Tim Keller wrote, "True gospel humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation with myself." In other words, a truly humble person doesn't view every situation through the lens of how he or she looks and how this affects him or her.

I think, "I know what is best." One last way my pride shows up is that I think I know what is best for me. That can manifest itself in not listening to the advice of people wiser than me at times, something we all have done. The bigger concern is when I think I know better than God what is good for me, and as a result I grow resentful and maybe a bit rebellious when God doesn't give me what I am certain is best for me.

To submit to God and humble myself before him is to take the exact opposite approach on all those things. It is to say before God I am much worse than I am



even aware of. In other words, I am in much greater need of God's grace than I usually think. If our problem before God was that we do some things wrong sometimes, we commit some sins, I could think I'm doing pretty well. I'm a very moral individual, so maybe I'm doing pretty good. But submitting to God is admitting that the issue is far deeper than that. True goodness, true righteousness, is being so good that there is not even a taint of evil anywhere in a person. That's not true of me. I wish it were.

Have you ever done some good thing, maybe sacrificed to help another person or worked hard to make some ministry happen, and unbidden the thought pops into your head, "I hope everyone sees how much I have done"? Or something like that. Have you ever been hurt by someone, then when something bad later happened to that person thought, "Ha, ha, serves them right"?

When we were on vacation one night we were returning to our hotel room after we had been out to dinner and we noticed a couple looking at something in a flower bed next to a sidewalk using a flashlight app on their phone. My first thought was they had dropped something and they were looking for it. As we got near them I said, "Did you lose something?" I was about to offer to help. But they said, "No, come here and look at this." They shined their light on what they were looking at. It was the biggest snail I've ever seen in my life. This was the Godzilla of snails, the snail that ate Tokyo. This thing was huge. My reaction was "Ewww, that's just gross." At times we get a glimpse of some things that are in our hearts and we have that same reaction. Ewww, that's just gross. It may not be the Godzilla of sins, but it's disgusting nevertheless. That kind of stuff is in our hearts. And we can't help it. We can't stop it, it just happens. That's because there's something wrong inside us that stains everything we do, even the good things. And that's what needs to be forgiven.

In Luke 7 Jesus is at a dinner at an important person's house when a woman with a disgusting reputation comes in and washes his feet. All the proper people, including the religious leader who hosted the dinner, were horrified and repelled. But Jesus pointed out that she was so grateful to him because she had been forgiven much. She did way more for him than did the host. In verse 47 Jesus said, "He who has been forgiven little, loves little." Seeing our need for forgiveness, humbling ourselves before God, is the core of loving God.

Submitting to God is seeing God as the star of the show, the center of everything. That means our concern isn't about how we look or what we want, but how he looks and what he wants in every situation. Submitting to God is believing that he

knows what is best and gratefully accepting and obeying his will in everything. This is a hard thing. I have some things I am praying about that I desperately want. But there is no guarantee that God will give them to me. If I truly humble myself before God, then I must say, "I will accept what you give, whether it is what I want or not, and I will praise you and be content and joyful either way."

## RESIST THE DEVIL

The mention of the devil is a bit startling in this context. Why does James suddenly bring him up? There has been no mention of him prior to this, so this seems kind of random. Why does James mention the devil here?

Who is it, besides you, that wants you to think you are the star of the show, the center of all things? Who wants you to think you don't really need a Savior, because you're pretty good just as you are? Who wants you to think you know far better than God what you need in life? The devil is behind all of that. In the Garden of Eden it was Satan who came along and said, "You should be like God. He's trying to keep something good from you. You know what you need better than he, and when you disregard his ridiculous ban you will find out you're as powerful as he is. You should be the star of this show."

Satan has a lot of ways of attacking us. He tries to get us to doubt God. He tries to beat us up with every trial, hardship or loss he can manufacture to get us to quit trusting God. Everything he does is aimed at ripping us away from God. And at the heart of it he is continually stoking the fire of our own pride. He is familiar with it, because he himself is full of his own pride.

There is great news in this passage. When you see that rearing its head, starting to do its damage, you can identify where that's coming from. This is Satan trying to do his usual thing. The great news is that all you have to do is resist him. Say "I don't think so, Satan. Not this time." Amazingly he will give up. Once he is unmasked and you see his hand at work and refuse to be taken in by his stupid demon tricks, he will run away.

Before I had heard of anyone having this happen I received a message on our voice mail that was supposedly from the IRS telling me that I was delinquent in my taxes and they were about to sue me so I'd better call. I was confused by this and concerned. I did some research on this thing and discovered that it was a scam. It happened again later, and I called the number they left and said, "Hey, I know you people are a bunch of slimy crooks and this is an attempt to steal from me." The guy hung up. We don't get those calls anymore. That's how it is with Satan. As

soon as you call him on it, telling him you know this is one of his scams, he runs away.

### DRAW NEAR TO GOD

James intended us to see the dichotomy. Resist Satan and he runs away, but seek God, just reach out to him, and he draws near. He will be right there. What we often don't realize is that God longs to be with us. He loves for us to come be in his presence any time, any day.

Living in his presence is the greatest antidote to our pride. As we live with him and see his grace, his unconditional love, his compassion, his kindness, his mercy, his goodness, his holiness, his wisdom and his power, we become more in awe of him. There is no greater answer to human pride than awe of our gracious, Almighty God.

I have mentioned before that Laurie and I have a great friend, Mike Riley, who is the football coach at Nebraska, at least for a few more weeks. Mike is possibly the most positive and unflappable person I've ever known, and he is a terrific coach. He has coached at the top levels of college football and in the NFL. Do you know that in all the years I have known Mike not once was I tempted to share wisdom from my years of coaching my son's high school hockey team? My little experience as a volunteer coach was a joke compared to what he has done. I never offered him any of my abundant wisdom about football gleaned from years of watching it on television. I would have felt stupid doing such a thing.

What is amazing is that this magnificent, powerful God cares about us and wants to be with us. Our kids have their lives to lead and they don't spend much time thinking about the parents. They have jobs, friends, families, responsibilities that occupy their attention. But our thoughts are never far from them. One Saturday late afternoon a couple of weeks ago Laurie and I were just about to get some sort of dinner plan under way when Carissa called. They were going to bring their rabbit over so we could bunny sit while they were on vacation, and they wanted to know if we'd like to go out to dinner with them. Are you kidding? We dropped everything to jump on that opportunity. We are ready at any moment and all one of our kids has to do is say "Are you guys available?" And we are there immediately. James says that's how God is with us.

The greatest remedy to our pride is living in the presence of our God. It also happens to be the thing we need most to live in peace, security, hope and joy.