

## *Cleaning Up After Sin • James 4:8*

Modern media has broken down many of the old verbal barriers. More than a generation ago “Gone with the Wind” was a scandal for using one swearword. Now you can watch almost any TV show and hear routine profanity and obscenity. With the exception of the “S” word, every term from A to Z can be heard along with just about every imaginable topic during hours of daily talk shows.

Even in everyday speech, almost anything goes. Men and women and boys and girls are stunningly blunt and direct. But the “S” word is seldom heard. It seems too offensive. Too insulting. Not even in church is it often spoken. Just saying it risks alienating some people, and talking directly about it is sure to offend someone.

Think about it. When was the last time you heard anyone use the word “sin”? Although it is a word that God often uses. He calls people sinners and he names specific sins. He has been greatly misunderstood as a result. Many people think God is narrow, strict, intolerant, unkind and mean because he is not embarrassed to speak directly and often about the sins in our lives. But actually the misunderstanding could not be farther from the truth. God uses the “S” word out of love. He loves us enough to speak honestly and directly with us.

It is in the warm context of James 4:8 that we are told, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

When our children were born, fathers in the delivery room were not as common as they are today. I kind of wanted to be there, but I wasn’t sure. I had attended all the classes and done all the preparation, but I still had my doubts. When the moment came, the delivery room nurse told me to wash my hands and put on a surgical gown and put surgical boots over my shoes.

There were two objections I could have raised. First, I could have asked why I had to wash and get all dressed up if I was the father.

Was someone accusing me of being dirty? Then there was the fact that I wasn’t totally sure I wanted to be there in the first place. I wanted to witness the birth but I was afraid I might faint or get sick so I could have considered staying out. My mind went in opposite directions at the same time.

I didn’t actually voice my objections, but if I had the nurse would have said, “Look buddy, you are covered with germs whether you can see them or not and your germs aren’t welcome in this delivery room. You can’t have it both ways. Make up your mind: come in or stay out. Decide now.”

The Bible gives much the same advice. Coming

near to God is an honor exceeding the birth of any child. The truth is that we all have sins crawling all over us, regardless of whether or not we can see them. So we need to make up our minds whether we are going to come near to God or not. We can’t have it both ways. As James 4:8 puts it, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

If we want to come close to God, we must take sin seriously because sin is an offense to God. It is rebellion against God. Sin is doing what we should not do, and it is *not* doing what we should do. God hates sin. God is the opposite of sin. God and sin simply don’t mix.

Think of sin as being like harmful bacteria or virus. A person with a healthy immune system will reject that bacteria or virus. God has a perfect, healthy immune system. He rejects all sin. It’s automatic. No one with sin can come near to him without being rejected.

Let us never think that it really doesn’t matter if we lie, steal, cheat, murder, become drunk, are greedy, lust, indulge in extra-marital sex, hate, refuse to forgive, inappropriately use God’s name, worship things instead of God or fail to do the good we should do. All of these and every other sin listed in the Bible are like deadly germs that keep us far from God.

*Sin is doing what we should not do, and it is not doing what we should do.*

We must take sin seriously because God takes sin seriously.

Taking sin seriously doesn't mean taking sin stupidly. Some people take sin so seriously that they give up. They assume they are so bad that they can't be forgiven or fixed. That is never true. The Bible is clear in 1 John 1:7 that "the blood of Jesus, God's son, purifies us from all sin." Like the strongest antiseptic against bacteria, the blood of Jesus Christ can forgive and clean away any sin of any one.

Some people live as if sin is a problem when it is not. They have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior. They have confessed their sins. They've received forgiveness. But they still feel guilty.

Never assume that general feelings of guilt mean that sin is keeping you from God. Instead, ask God to show you any sins in your life that are in the way of a close relationship with him. If you can't find in your life a specific sin that's listed in the Bible and if God doesn't show you a specific sin that needs to be dealt with, you may assume that all sins have been forgiven and absolutely nothing sinful stands between you and the Lord.

Another way of saying it is that God will show you specific sins and that general non-specific feelings of guilt are either from the devil or from your imagination.

Yes, take sin seriously, but don't be so stupid as to think that God cannot forgive your sin or that you are guilty of some sin that you cannot even name.

In order for us to come close to God we must get rid of sin on the outside and on the inside — "wash your hands" and "purify your hearts." Hand washing in Bible times was not primarily for sanitary purposes. Ancient people lived long before the germ theory of modern medicine. They had no idea that clean hands reduced infections. They had never heard of salmonella or influenza. Hand washing in ancient times was a ceremonial practice symbolizing repentance and proper behavior toward God.

In modern times we would say if there is a sin there, just quit doing it! If you are lying to your family, stop lying and start telling the truth. If you are stealing from your employer, give it back and don't steal anymore. If you are sexually active with your girlfriend or your boyfriend,

then quit doing it and save sex for marriage. If you are living together, move out. If you get drunk every weekend, stay sober. If you are verbally or physically abusive, change the way you speak and don't ever hit again.

Everyone says, "If only it were that easy!" Agreed. Stopping sinning in order to get near to God is not always easy. Long habits and entangled relationships are not easily ended. So here is some practical advice. Begin with the decision to stop the sin. Then try a symbolic act. Wash your hands as you pray, asking God to help you never to use those hands to steal again. Brush your teeth as you pray, asking God to help you never to use your mouth to lie or swear again. Take a shower as you pray, asking God to help you never again allow your body to engage in an immoral sexual embrace. You may be amazed that when you wash your hands of sin you draw closer to God than ever before. And, God gives you the supernatural power to resist temptation to repeat the sin.

If you do the same sin again, take it seriously again. Confess that sin to God. Ask him for his help. Ask him what you should do to break the power of that sin in your life. Then, symbolically wash another time. But don't give up! Never give in to sin. God doesn't give up. Take God's advice and "wash your hands, you sinners."

The next step for those who want to draw near to God and who take sin seriously is to "purify your hearts". This refers to our inside attitudes rather than our outside actions. If we are purified on the inside we are far less likely to sin on the outside since the actions we do on the outside grow out of the decisions we make on the inside, in our minds and hearts. People with pure hearts don't lie, steal, cheat, murder, swear or otherwise do wrong. Sin on the outside is always a function of sin on the inside. If we get our insides fixed our outside problems come under control.

The primary barrier to inside purity is double-mindedness. James 4:8 continues, ". . . purify your hearts, you double-minded." The Greek word is dipsychus. The "di" means "two"; the "psychus" means "soul". We are double-minded when we want to have two souls — one for God and one for sin.

Have you ever noticed that every time an atro-

cious crime receives major media publicity there are always neighbors who say what a nice person the murderer was? A woman can murder her children and someone will look into a camera and say, "She was such a loving mom." A man can have 16 affairs and a friend will tell the talk show host what a faithful husband he was. An extremely violent serial killer will be described as a kind and gentle man who loved animals and little children.

We are prone to say, "That's ridiculous!" But it isn't ridiculous at all. These people are all dipsychus — "double-minded". They are trying to have it both ways.

What God wants is for us to be single-minded for him! He wants us to decide on the inside to have hearts for him and him alone. We must deliberately choose for God to be number one in our lives. Instead of trying to have it both ways, we must choose to live God's way. When we choose to give our hearts wholly to God, our hearts are transformed on the inside.

It's amazing what happens with a purified heart. Take the case of the teenager who becomes sexually active. At first it's a mistake or an adventure, but it becomes a habit. At first it is rationalized as an act of love, but it becomes promiscuity. At first it doesn't make any difference, but it eventually wrecks life.

We hear it said, "Once you've lost your virginity there is no getting it back again." While that may be physically true it ignores the supernatural power of God to purify from the inside out. Desiring to come close to God, ask for God's forgiveness. Taking sin seriously, resolve to have no more sex before marriage. Believing God

means what he says, quit trying to have it two ways and give your heart wholly to God. God performs miracles. God purifies on the inside so that the soul is healed. The heart becomes as if sin had never happened.

And this is true in every other area as well. It is as if the sin had never been committed. It's as if the decades of deceit had never occurred. It's as if the lies had never been told. It's as if the injury had not happened. God purifies the heart. It's amazing and supernatural.

It's true that ignorant and evil accusers on the outside may refuse to forgive and forget, but the person with a heart for God knows the absolute forgiveness and purity that God has created on the inside. And the process works for any one and every sin.

No one has more to be thankful for than the person who hears and heeds this great invitation from God. It's amazing how quickly God can change our lives. If there is a single sin that keeps you away from God, now is the perfect time to say "yes" to God and kick that sin out!

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