



The Difficulty of the Devoted Life

James 4:1-10 | Jonathan K. Dodson | May 29, 2014

Over the next three weeks we are going to look at the Good Life. How can we experience the *summum bonum*, the truly good life. By living a Devoted Life, A Giving Life, A Serving Life, A Holy Life. This morning I'd like to talk to you about the devoted life. What does a life of devotion to God look like, why is it so hard, and what can we do about it?

The Difficulty of Being Still

The joyful importance of drawing near to God appears *throughout* the Scriptures: "Delight yourself in *Lord* and he will give you the desires of your heart." "The nearness of *God is my good*" (Ps 73:28). But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." God is a rewarder of those who seek him. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." **To be Christian is to be someone who draws near to God**, who experiences the Father/Son/Spirit as the ultimate reward of life. **To have a healthy, delightful, rewarding relationship with God, we need to "draw near to God" in private and in public.** In a city like Austin, and a church filled with families and aspirational people, the majority of us find private, personal time with God to be the most difficult. So let's focus on that. Since God is invisible, and speaks primarily through his living Word, quiet time is critical to knowing him. We have to still the other voices so we can hear his voice. Incidentally, I wonder if this is why folk music has become so popular—because our lives are so busy—we reach back lyrically and musically to slower times. You don't have to be Christian to know how important it is to slow down into silence. In the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau wrote: "**We have lost the art of being still and doing nothing.**" Can you remember the last time you did that? It can be so difficult? Sometimes when I kneel in prayer, a to-do list materializes in my mind. I feel the urgency to do that task. Perhaps you can relate? To fight this off and draw near to God, I often leave my home office to sit on my back porch, where in the stillness of the morning, I *do* nothing. I receive. Listening to God in the rustling of the leaves, the songs of the larks, enjoying the gentle breeze. These are some of the most peaceful, joyful times in my week, and yet it can be so very hard to get there! Why is it so difficult to draw near to God? William Temple helpfully remarked, "**Your silence is your religion.**" What did he mean? He meant that wherever your thoughts go in the silence, they lead you to your religion. **Wherever your thoughts collect, there's your god**, your object of devotion. If it's not God and things to do or things you want done, then your actual religion may be busyness. Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard wrote volumes of philosophy and became the father of existentialism. Yet, he described himself as a spectator in life, someone who learned about the views and theories of others while contributing nothing to the greater base of knowledge. He envied "great men" who pursued interests with great success, while struggling to find his own *purpose*. As a result, he felt a profound sense of inadequacy. You don't have to be a philosopher to feel this. Take mothers. You feel the pressure to accomplish—well disciplined children, secure because of your home remedies, fed by organic, gluten-free diets, well kept homes with inviting interior design, a stand out hobby or side-job or great career, with kids who poop and read on their own by age 3. If you don't **accomplish**, you feel a sense of inadequacy. Artists feel the same thing with their music, anyone who works with their vocation. **We mistake purpose for accomplishment.**

Kierkegaard eventually saw through this: “Let us never deceive youth by foolish talk about the matter of accomplishing. Let us never make them so busy in the service of the moment, that they forget *the patience of willing something eternal*.” He came to the point where he realized the futility of busyness in service of temporal things, and the importance of slow, patient eternal things. James calls this futility friendship with the world, which actually makes you an enemy of God. I know it sounds harsh. He points out that if your passion isn’t God, you’ll get in bed with anything. He actually calls Christians with misdirected passions “Adulterers!” What’s an adulterer? Someone who cheats on a committed relationship, who seeks emotional, relational, sexual fulfillment (I would say ultimately “purpose”) outside of a committed marital relationship. Instead of spending your time with God, you spend it with work (overworking) or sneak out continually playing in the city (overplaying). You’re in bed with the wrong god, cheating on true Good. We confuse purpose with accomplishment. If we can busily accomplish our goals in relationships, work, parenting, then we’ll have the good life. But that’s actually bad for us. We’re adulterers and God is jealous.

The Jealousy of Grace

This is why James says, “Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? (4:5). God loves you enough to be jealous. He hates your friendship with the world because he loves you. What truly committed spouse would sit idly by while her husband or wife cheated on her? A committed, loving spouse chases after her, and he’s chasing after you, passionately pleading with you to return to him: “for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex 20:5; 34:14). His jealousy is a holy jealousy. He insists on more. More than finding your purpose in accomplishing (overmothering/overworking), more than finding your thrills in the city (overplaying). He insists you walk away from those mistresses. He demands your holy joy, which can be found in no other place than a faithful relationship with him. It’s a better love, a holy love. Now, going back to James 4:5, it’s odd that the text asks us if we think it’s to no purpose that **Scripture** says this. The word for no purpose actually means empty, hollow. Why jump to the conclusion that we think the Bible is hollow? Well, if you don’t embrace God’s diagnosis of your heart, and you insist on making excuses or trying to justify yourself, then you’re essentially saying your **authority** is better than God’s authority in Scripture. You’re basically saying to your Creator, “I know how I work, how I thrive, what my purpose is, better than you do. I just need rest, a better community, a more sensitive spouse, I need better kids. I am a more reliable, trustworthy authority. The Bible is hollow.” **Behind the difficulty of drawing near to God is not only misplaced passion or purpose but misdirected authority.** We think we know better than God, and our reluctance to read, meditate, and apply his Word (over our word) is proof of that. But God insists that he is right, passionately. He can do that because he’s a better authority (he’s outside of time and history and made all of us) *and* a better lover. He is committed to you, committed to the death, to death do us part, and beyond into eternal life. Now that’s love. This is why, before telling us to draw near to God, we see God doing a lot for us. He *yearns* for us. He aches for us in our absence. His holy jealousy makes him cry out for us. He gives us his Spirit and *dwells* in us. He doesn’t just spend the night; he moves in. He marries us and never leaves us, even when we cheat on him. He loves us enough to confront us. James says [he is](#)

opposed the proud (self-authority, self-fulfillment), but *gives* grace to the humble (those who come under his authority and seek his fulfillment). You see, he's a God of grace. He gives grace. His grace is love that chases us down, calls us back, pursues an unfaithful Bride who is unworthy of his love. Many of us would tell him to leave her, but he doesn't. Why? Grace. Twice the text says it. He gives more grace, more than the most gracious person you know. This is our jealous God; he yearns, dwells, gives, and gives, and gives. But to get it; you have to receive it. You have to open up your arms, your schedule, and *draw near to God*.

How to Draw Near

In verses 5-6 we see all these indicatives of God's gracious action towards us, but they are followed by a string of conditions. If you want to experience his grace, you have to draw near to him. It begins with verse 6: **Humble yourself**. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Take your place under his authority and his love. That's where grace flows—down—to those that receive him, to the humble. In *Screwtape Letters*, CSL fictional account of an elder demon's advice to a lesser demon, Screwtape says, "Whatever you do, don't let the patient be present. Get him to think on the past or the future." The devil does not want us present, away from the religion of busyness, drawing near to God. But humble submission to God is your resistance. It's counterintuitive. Instead of fighting the bully yourself, you make friends with the upperclassman, you come under his authority. Submit to God and the devil will flee. Now, *draw near* to God. All of this is drawing near to God, but James adds sorrow. We hurt when we regret things. When we come to our senses over our adulterous sin. True repentance has an emotive component. **Draw near weeping over your sin and rejoicing in your Savior**. Verse 10 says "**Humble yourself and he will exalt you at the proper time**." This word exalt means to lift up. Its used to describe our being lifted up into the heavenly places and seated right next to Christ, near unto God. See, when you've found a better authority, better purpose, a better love in Christ, you don't have to lift yourself up. You don't have move so fast. You don't confuse purpose with your accomplishments. Instead, drawing near to God, seeing Christ in the text, you realize what he has accomplished for you. You see he has secured a better identity through his death, a greater love in his life, and a greater authority in Word. Then, we can slow down, and in silence draw near to God in prayer and Scripture reading. John Owen recommends we return to prayer, but perhaps not as you usually pray. He commends prayer in the Spirit, through whom God conveys his jealous love. Rom 5:5. In other words, pray in the Spirit. Don't barge into the relationship with all your demands; humble yourself to make these biblical requests. He suggests three things that have transformed the way I read and pray: 1) Ask for insight into his promises. When reading God's word, don't assume you have the insight (making it a rational treasurehunt). Ask the Helper to help you (relational). 2) Ask to experience your need. So often we are blind to what we need. We're poor authorities on life. Maybe a need for encouragement, repentance, worship. 3) Finally, ask the Spirit to create desire. Very often we don't even think about this, as if have the power to do seek the good life. Ask the Spirit to create desire to obey in some way, serve others, whatever it might be. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. The nearness of *God* is your good.