

Fourth Sunday of Lent  
James 4:7-10 – Time to Clean Up!  
March 13-15, 2010 by: Pastor Wessel

*James 4:7-10 --<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

**Introduction** – You can probably start to imagine it this time of year. Maybe a little unusual for the second weekend in March, but much of the snow which fell in our area over the last month has melted. The ground that has been hidden over the winter months is now uncovered and the melted earth has become matted grass and dried up plants and mud.

Although a little cold, some boys or girls might see the sloppy mess of spring as a perfect play area. Of course, mom and dad probably wouldn't be too happy about it. Can you picture mom as she hears the door open? "*Caleb, are you home from school?*" "*Hi, mom!*" She rounds the corner and immediately catches herself and raises her voice: "*Not one more step! What have you been doing?*" Caleb's pants are covered in mud from the knees down, his arms up to the elbows and even a few streaks across his face. "*Not one more step until you take off those clothes and get cleaned up!*"

It's a good illustration of what happens to us with our Father in heaven. James tells us, "*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*" But God is pretty clear that we can't come near to him if we covered with sin from head to toe. We need to be washed clean and given fresh clothes. Does it remind you of the lost son who got full of the mud of wild living and then came home to dad? Does it remind you of the people of Israel who got full of the mud of sin-filled worship of false gods and then cried out to the Lord?

Over the last few weeks, we have been talking about repentance in the life of a Christian. Through his chosen servant James, God gives us a pretty clear picture of the heart and core of repentance. Repentance basically means:

### **It's Time to Clean Up!**

#### **I. God shows us we are dirty**

#### **II. God shows us where we can get clean**

#### **III. God makes us clean**

#### **I. God shows us we are dirty**

Do you hear the urgency in these words? It seems like James is desperately pleading with us. In fact, there are 10 commands in these short verses. They emphasize that there's no time to wait. There is a problem and it needs to be taken care of now!" The 10 commands: *submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change, humble yourselves.* Clearly, things just aren't the way they should be.

Out of context, it is hard to know what is going on. The whole letter from James addresses misguided Christians who lost sight of God's will. From head to toe, James preaches the law to people who wear an attitude of self-centered lovelessness. In the first verses of chapter 4, we have the immediate context which confronts us with problems that we can relate to. James talks to people with wrong motives and sinful desires who want to be friends of the world rather than friends of God. This leads to quarrels and fights, damaged prayer lives, hatred and envy, self-centered pride. James transitions to our section for today with a well-placed quote from the Proverbs of Solomon: "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" A harsh reality for sinners—to see God as our enemy instead of our ally.

How can we get rid of sinful pride and walk humbly before God? By repenting of our sins. Using the illustration of the mud-filled child and connecting it to our text, let's see what repentance is. The child who got muddy on the way home from school had a lot of fun. He came home happy, thinking the mud was not a big deal. When did he realize it was a big deal? When mom's voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

In the same way, we might not always realize our sins are a big deal. There are "big deal" sins, but there aren't that many people who commit murder, rape, robbery, etc. But God's voice (his commands which are clearly spelled out in the Bible) stops us dead in our tracks and shows we are dead in our sin. God shows us just how dirty we are by proclaiming his law, condemning the "big deal" sins, the sins in our minds, and the sins we may not even have realized were sins. He says, "*Stop right there. You aren't taking one more step.*"

What is the purpose of the law? Why does God show us our sins? Because he loves us and he wants us to grieve, mourn and wail, to turn the laughter of sinful pleasure and selfish desires into gloom by realizing that the price paid for such worldly, temporary happiness is terrible and not worth it. God proclaims his law to humble us, to bring us back to the reality that our sin breaks our relationship with him and unless we resist the devil, humble ourselves, and submit to God, we can expect no good thing for our future here on earth or our future after we die.

## II. God shows us where we can get clean

Thankfully, like mom, God doesn't leave us just standing there, covered in filth. Mom doesn't say, "*Get out of here! I never want to see you again!*" What does she do? She provides the solution to his muddiness. "*Not one more step until you take off those clothes and get cleaned up!*"

God shows us our dirt, but then he shows us where we can get cleaned up. Of course, it isn't the clothes and the outside of our bodies that need the most cleaning: "*Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded!*" Where can we go to get such a deep cleaning? Is there some God-designed washing machine or bathtub where we can get out the dirt of sin? Yes, there is. We didn't install it. God did. One hymn puts it beautifully: "*There is a fountain, filled with blood, Immanuel was slain, and sinners who are washed therein, lose all their guilty stains.*" God's Word declares: "*If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*" (1 John 1:7)

God saw your guilt-covered soul and he installed the fountain of living water for you to wash your hands and purify your hearts. The fountain of eternal cleansing is provided to every sinner, free of charge, because Christ our Savior died for the sins of all people, without exception. The fountain flows from the cross and the greatest act of love in all human history. The blood of Christ your Savior will not lose its power to make you clean and spotless before God. It will not run dry. The fountain will flow until the last day, up until the moment when the spring from which that fountain flows, will reveal himself in glory to all people.

## III. God makes us clean

Is this the end of the story? Yes and no. We can see we are dirty. We know there is a place where we are made clean. But not everyone is clean, even though everyone is forgiven.

Why? Well, some don't believe mom. Maybe they don't think the mud is that bad and don't feel like changing clothes and getting washed up. They go back outside and play some more in the mud. Or they stand there with a blank stare, in utter disbelief that mom would say I can't traipse through the house looking like this. Some people can't see how bad the mud really is, ignoring the seriousness of sin as God shows it in his Word. Changing clothes and getting washed up doesn't seem like the right answer to them.

A person who has no Christian faith in the Triune God may be able to see that each of us has some sort of problem in life and maybe have even seen Jesus Christ presented clearly before them as the only solution. But they have chosen another way. Someone might say, "*If I'm real careful, maybe I won't sin too much more for the rest of my life.*" But any path that relies on what we do as individuals instead of depending entirely on the cleansing blood of Jesus, will always fall short of providing a real solution that gives real peace and freedom from God's punishment. God has to clean us up or we are not clean. God is the only one who can give permission to enter his house.

That is why God the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through the powerful Word of God. By means of the Word, he brings us to the fountain to be washed clean. He connects us, like a water pipe, to the fountain of Christ's pure blood, giving us faith and trust and confidence in the forgiveness of sins, which we need every day. Without that faith in Jesus Christ, it is as though you are standing there covered head to toe with mud, the sink is standing within reach, but you are paralyzed, because you do not believe that sink can really make you clean.

**Conclusion** – Thank God for the gift of his Holy Spirit. He is the heart of repentance. Through the Word of God, he shows us the mud of our sin, the water that cleans us up, and then he actually does the washing. Does that make you think of your baptism? Even though these verses don't directly talk about baptism, it is appropriate to think of it here. You have the Holy Spirit. You have the washing. You have repentance and forgiveness. When you repent of your sins, you are doing nothing more than going back to the baptismal font and remembering that there, through my Savior, I was washed clean of all my sins.

These verses are filled with commands. You and I don't have the power to carry out these commands, but the Spirit of God works in our hearts *repentance*, a change of mind and heart, so that we recognize how horrible sin is, run away from the devil, and submit to God instead. God will not turn you away. Come near to God, trusting in the loving sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Wash your hands and purify your hearts. God's invitation to come and get cleaned up has no expiration date. His door is always open. Amen.