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James 4:7-12

IT'S TIME FOR UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER!

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The Civil War was one of the most trying times in American history. You had brother fighting against brother, father against son, Virginian against Virginian. It was a long and bloody strife. How would it end? There were those who demanded unconditional surrender. Ulysses S. Grant was known as "unconditional surrender" Grant. Unconditional surrender simply means that the defeated party has no say in the matter. They don't get to negotiate concessions. They are at the mercy of the victorious army and pray that that party will be kind to them. Sometimes it works out that way and sometimes it doesn't. Many believe that American history would have been very different if Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated.

We are engaged in war every day of our life. God wants our soul and so does Satan. Satan already has most of the souls on earth. He has allies in the world and in our own sinful flesh. This war is something that demands everything that we have. It is something that cannot be taken lightly. There are many people who want to engage in part-time Christianity. They will be Christians but it will be on their terms. They will tell God what is acceptable and what is not. They will decide when it is convenient to assemble for worship, attend the Lord's Supper, read their Bibles, pray and many other things. They may be away from the Lord's house for months and perhaps even years, but God should be willing to take them on those terms.

At the same time God should be aware that these people enjoy many of the sinful pleasures that the world enjoys and they don't plan on giving them up soon, now or in the future. They don't want to get any of their friends upset with them because they are different, so they will continue to fit right in with their friends and neighbors. They will espouse a "cafeteria Christianity" that allows them to pick and choose exactly what tenets of the Christian faith that they are comfortable with. That sounds good to many people today and it sounded good to people of the first century as well.

It would not sound good to James and it would not sound good to Peter or Paul or John. It would not sound good to Moses or Isaiah or Daniel or our Lord Jesus. Part-time Christianity and cafeteria Christianity are incompatible with the demands of our faith. The very First Commandment states: "You shall have no other gods." If we put anything ahead of our Lord, we are guilty of idolatry. That is a commandment we have broken times too many to count. Nevertheless God demands everything we have to give because he has given us everything he has to give. We see that IT IS TIME FOR UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER!

We have been studying James for four weeks now and we can say that James certainly wasn't wishy-washy. He is not looking for something to say in the face of political correctness. You cannot miss the meaning of James' words. He calls us to live a Christian life. He calls us to resist the ways of the world and live according to our calling. He does so out of concern for our souls. He knows how powerful the lies of Satan and the pull of the world are. We cannot give a half-hearted commitment. We must give our all.

James calls us to humility and peace. One of the things we know is that peace between us and God has been restored through his Son Jesus Christ. The breach was real. There was nothing that we could do to restore that peace.

Sin and death had entered the world and we were doomed. God's justice demanded that we be punished for our sins of thought, word and deed. God's Law was unyielding. It demanded that we be perfect; not merely better than some or even most, but that we be absolutely perfect in our love every second of our lives. There isn't a man, woman or child who could do that.

God himself would be our peace. Jesus would become a human being, just like us in every way possible, but one. He would have to be sinless. He would have to resist every temptation of Satan. He could not avoid the cross. He would have to drink every last drop of God's wrath upon sin. He couldn't take it in small doses. He couldn't quit if things got too painful. He had to give everything that he had. There was no half-hearted commitment here! Jesus would suffer hell itself so that we could be saved. He was our only hope.

James would preach the Law. His letter is a very heavy preaching of the Law. He wanted his hearers to know that they had failed, that they were sinners in desperate need of a Savior. He wanted them to know that there was no other way out. The preaching of the Law accomplishes its purpose. It drives us to ask the question: "What shall we do then?"

James does not merely strike fear into people's hearts but he will point them to the grace of God. We must repent of our sins. We must acknowledge that we need God and that we must replace our selfishness, envy, anger, greed, lust and pride with something far better, something completely different. It is time for unconditional surrender!

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

True Christian humility does not crave the life of pleasure which so often causes endless troubles. It does not crave the friendship of the world, because that would place one in opposition to God. It does express itself in repentance and submission to God. Submission is more than mere obedience. Obedience may be done for any variety of reasons. We may obey out of compulsion, grudgingly, out of fear of punishment. We do something but we don't want to do it. We do what the boss tells us to do, but we complain every minute of it. Our children do what we ask, but they certainly don't do it with a smile on their face. They are mumbling under their breath how hard they have it. That was the way Israel behaved throughout the wilderness journey. They may have occasionally done the right thing, but they certainly didn't do it for the right reasons. They went through the rituals of worship but their hearts were far from God.

Yes, submission is more than mere obedience. We place ourselves under God, in his ranks, under his leadership and direction. This is something that we do willingly, without hesitation or condition. It is done gladly, out of recognition that God is bigger, better, stronger and more worthy than we are. Submission is an attitude, not merely a matter of what we do. We acknowledge God as our maker, our Savior and the one who wants what is best for us. We open our ears and hearts to his Word. We say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!"

We are to resist the devil. Satan is indeed very powerful. St. Peter reminds us that he walks about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. We have seen his handiwork. We have seen the carcasses of souls destroyed by Satan throughout the history of the world. What chance do we possibly have? First of all we must realize that we cannot defeat him by ourselves. It is impossible. But we know that with God, not only are all things possible, but Satan has already been defeated. He has been conquered by an even stronger lion, the Lion of Judah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus resisted all of Satan's temptations. Jesus humbled himself unto death, even death on the cross, taking the sin of the world upon himself and paying the ransom price. Satan cannot bring a charge against us because Christ has taken away our sin. Death could not hold our Lord. Jesus rose from the dead exactly as he had promised and he proclaimed his victory to the world. Satan has lost the war. He can no longer harm us. He is like a lion at the zoo. He can growl. There are moats and bars and glass between you and the lion. You are safe. But if you are stupid enough to open his cage and walk in, that's another matter. Don't open the door for Satan. Resist him with the truth of God's Word.

Come near to God. God's love is for everyone. There is not a person on this earth for whom Jesus did not die. We all have things in our past that we are ashamed of, things we said, people we hurt, things that cannot possibly be defended. Yet, God's grace is for all. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. A repentant sinner is never turned away. Every day begins with a clean slate through the blood of Jesus.

We are to wash our hands and purify ourselves. This is picture language. The Pharisees would make a big show of hand washing and demand that others do it as well. Yet their hearts were filthy with sin. Pilate tried to wash away the guilt for ordering Jesus to be put to death, but he failed. He did not go to the one whom he was crucifying for the cleansing he needed. We do not want to be double-minded. Christianity is not a part-time profession. It is a full-time calling. We must remain focused on our God and on our goal every day.

"Grieve, mourn and wail!" These words might sound strange from one who tells us to rejoice. James is not telling us that our lives have to be filled with constant grief, but we see the effects of sin on people all around us. We see the pain caused by alcohol or drug addiction as a person slowly loses his health, his family, his job and his life. We see that pain caused by marriages ending in divorce for the husband, the wife and the children. There are very few winners in divorce. We see the pain as parents see their children forsake the Lord and follow their own desires, refusing to have their children baptized or brought to Sunday School. The effects of sin will move us emotionally as well.

Humble yourselves before the Lord. We cannot enjoy spiritual health until we acknowledge our sinful failures and seek God's forgiveness. We are not to slander one another. Slander does not merely mean to lie. False witness is anything that comes from a heart that intends evil toward our neighbor. It may be true or false. We like to bring others down so that we might raise ourselves up. We are not to judge sinfully, claiming the ability to read people's hearts. We are not morally superior to others. There are times when we must judge people so that we can correct, encourage and call them back from their lives of sin to return to God.

It is time for unconditional surrender. We must confess our sins and see our own unworthiness. We must repent and humble ourselves before God. Surrender yourselves! Unconditionally! AMEN.