

Whose Chisel Sculpts Your Coral?

James 4:7-12

The Book of James #9

“Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.”

On the shelf of our bedroom at 6585 35th Place resides one of our most prized possessions. It isn't the clever sign that says: “I wish I was an octopus so that I could reach out and slap eight people.” That one is on a wall in my son's room. Nor is it the other sign that says: “Due to Covid-19, Sweet Caroline is banned. There will be no hands touching hands. Reaching out. Touching me. Touching you.” That one has yet to be hung. But it will be. Instead it's a landscape sculpture made from stone by one of the Florida Highwaymen. You've heard of them, I'm sure. Since no art galleries would accept their work, the Highwaymen sold their works in towns and cities along the roadsides in Florida for the better part of four decades. What I love the most about the sculpture is the type of stone the one mysterious Highwayman used to carve it. It's not cut from marble or granite. Such stones provide too much resistance and require specialized tools that the poor Highwaymen of Florida didn't have access to. It wasn't cut from alabaster either. Though that type of stone is preferred by sculptors all over the world for its durability, alabaster isn't readily available or accessible in Florida. Instead it was made from good ole-Floridan-fashion run of the mill corral. Corral has just the right amount of amount of pliability, durability, and exterior strength to make it suitable for the Florida Highwayman's chisel.

Do you know what the word “resistance” means? It's the attempt to prevent something by fighting back via action or argument. It's the coral saying to the Florida Highwayman: “No. You are not going to cut anywhere on my corral today.” But here is the issue James addresses today about resistance in a spiritual context. Of all biblical texts dealing with resistance and pliability – which are many – James 4:7-12 stands out for its in-your-face logic. Here it is: You either resist God or the devil in your life. Not both. To resist God is to submit to the devil. And to resist the devil is to submit to God. And the choice you make as to which chisel goes on your corral – and which one doesn't - will impact every single thing about your life. How we respond to God and other people will be rooted in whether we make the choice to resist the devil or resist God. How we maintain direction in life has everything to do with whether we will resist the devil or resist God. So my question today to you church is this one: whose chisel are you allowing to sculpt your coral? To answer that question, please turn with me to James 4:7-10. Notice, in particular, the amount of imperative statements.

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.¹¹ Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Four Evaluations Are Necessary for an Honest Answer:

1. The Submission Evaluation (7)

- **The First Rocky Movie:** (1) One of the greatest movies of all time; (2) In one scene Rocky's getting beat like a tied up goat; (3) When he goes to his corner, Mickey – his trainer – says to him: “he hasn't laid a glove on you all night, Rock;” (4) To which Rocky responds, “keep an eye on the referee then because someone in that ring has been beating the devil out of me all night.” (5)

- **Main Idea of the Point:** To resist means to fight back. And fighting back against the devil is accomplished by submitting to God. And submitting to God is accomplished only by obedience; doing what he tells you to do.
- **Main Textual Emphasis -- Obedience:** (1) Fighting back against the devil and submission to God are done the exact same way: through obedience. (2) Obeying God is resisting and it is submitting. (3) If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread // Man shall not live by bread alone. (4) If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the temple and the angels will catch you // Do not put the Lord to the test. (5) All this I will give you if you bow and worship me // Get behind me, Satan. Worship the Lord and serve him only.
- **App:** “Where our Captain bids us go, tis not ours to murmur no; He that gives the sword and shield; Chooses to the battlefield; where we are to fight the foe.

2. The Draw Near Evaluation (8)

- **Getting Cornered By a Rooster in a Barnyard:** (1) If you’ve never been cornered by a rooster in a barnyard, then, friend, you are missing out. (2) If you take a step to the left, Mr. Rooster takes one too. (3) If you take a step to the right, Mr. Rooster does to. (4) Every step you take, Mr. Rooster follows. (4) God steps in all directions in your barnyard too. (5) But He’s not the rooster looking for the fight. He’s the Passover Lamb who bears your burdens.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** God always delivers on His promises. If you “draw near” to God, there’s a promise He makes to you that He will always keep: He will draw near to you.
- **Main Textual Emphasis - Drawing Near in OT vs NT:** (1) In the OT book of Leviticus, the people of God were commanded to “draw near” to God seven times over the course of the year. (2) A horn sounded to signal each one. (3) When the shofar blew in the spring, it was time for Passover, then Unleavened Bread, then First Fruits, then Pentecost; (4) When it blew in the fall, it was time for Rosh Hashanah, then the Day of Atonement; then the Feast of Tabernacles. (5) James draws on this imagery to tell each individual that the time for drawing near by festivals has passed. Now to draw near to God, a festival isn’t required. Jesus is wholly sufficient. For he is the Passover Lamb. He is the Unleavened Bread: His body took away the sins of the world. He is the first fruits of the ground for up from the grave he arose. His spirit is with us now because of Pentecost. And He has Tabernacled among us.
- **App:** No one whose genuinely been after God in their life has ever been turned away without finding an answer to that which burdens his/her soul.

3. The Turn To Evaluation (9-10)

- **Mending with Blue Jeans With Very Thin Threads:** (1) I have more blue jeans than you can shake a stick at (2) Problem is many of them are so old they are no longer blue or recognizable as jeans. (3) If you look closely at many of the pairs, they have threads coming out at the seams. (4) Many of them are not original to the jeans either. (5) They are thin threads I sowed into them to hold them together.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** We always turn to something when our lives need mending. Turning to God requires humility and a contrite heart. Turning to the devil requires a lack of humility and the lack of a contrite heart.
- **Main Textual Emphasis - Humility by Choice or Force.** (1) James calls his readers to humble themselves by choice and turn to Him to find solutions. (2) Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself. It’s thinking of yourself less. (3) It’s dying to self and living by faith in the One who loved and gave himself for us. (4) We can willingly humble ourselves or we can be humbled by Him via force. And that’s a process that will be significantly more painful in the long run. Just ask Nebuchadnezzar.
- **App:** Turning is the door hinge of spirituality. Everything starts with doing it the right way.

4. The Judging Evaluation (11-12)

- **Toddlers, Elementary School, and Me:** (1) I have a China cabinet in my house that my mother gave me. The thought never crossed my mind when my kids were toddlers to ask them to clean the China Cabinet. They aren't qualified. (2) When my kids learned arithmetic in elementary school, the thought never crossed my mind to put them in charge of our bank accounts. They aren't qualified. (3) I've officiated a zillion weddings in ministry and the thought never crossed the minds of anyone to put me in charge of wedding planning. I'm not qualified.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** We operate under the power of the devil when we undermine God's law by assuming we have all the pertinent facts and information to make a qualified judgment on somebody. We operate under the power of Jesus when we cease from judging because we recognize we can't see the issue from God's perspective. He's qualified. We are not.
- **Main Textual Emphasis – Judging People as Bad as Making Another Set of Ten Commandments –** (1) James equates judging people – which seems like a trivial sin – as something major because judging implies (2) that a new law is added: ours. (3) God's is no longer sufficient. We are now the lawgivers, thereby undermining God's law. (4) Judging, then, is not only a reason for conflict. It's equally an elevation of our standard above God's.
- **App:** Judging means to open the soul of another person and shake your head in disapproval. We are not in this business because God isn't. Let us be doers of the Word. Not modifiers or changers of it.