

“Fuel—The Center of the YOU-niverse”

Today we’re continuing in this series we started a few weeks ago called “Fuel.” We crave fuel for our lives, we spend billions a year on energy drinks thinking that will fuel our lives, but God has a much better, much more potent, much healthier alternative to all that caffeine and other stuff. We’re looking at the book of James in the New Testament and it is loaded with fuel for our lives. It’s loaded with high energy, high octane teachings that can rev up our lives and still allow us to sleep like babies at night. Real fuel.

Let me start off by extending my congratulations to all of you. You may have missed this a while back, but it’s a big deal. Because not very long ago you were selected as *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year. Way to go!

It said on the cover: *Time* Person of the Year: You. And it actually had a little mirror on a picture of a computer screen so you can see your own face on the cover of *Time* magazine. So, way to go. In a world of YouTube, My Space, iTunes, and *Self* magazine, why shouldn’t you be *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year? I mean, that just makes sense.

With the advancement of technology in our day, you can write your musings, your thoughts, and your opinions on your blog, while sitting in your underwear, in your Lay-Z-Boy, in your house, from your wireless laptop computer. And whether you’re an expert or whether you know nothing about an issue, your comments and your opinions are just as accessible to anyone in the world as the words of an award-winning writer from the *New York Times*.

Technology and access today makes it possible for me to listen to my tunes, and watch my TV shows, and post my comments, and my pictures for anyone in the world to read or view on the World Wide Web. And in some ways that’s a good thing. But all that comes with the danger of becoming more me-centered and more arrogant. Human beings have battled self-centeredness since the beginning of self-awareness.

The battle with arrogance, and pride, and selfishness has never been more challenging. Not only are you *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year, but you play a prominent role in our text in James 4 today. You didn’t know that you were in the Bible, did you? But in the first four verses of James 4, the words ‘you’ or ‘your’ appear 19 times. In four verses! Hmmm, I wonder whose attention James is trying to get here. Maybe yours? And mine.

In James 4:1-3, James paints a picture of what a YOU-niverse looks like—with you at the center, with me at the center. Then in verses 4-6, he gives a clear picture of what truly is at the center of the universe; and then later he helps us get centered in the universe.

So what does a universe look like with YOU at the center, with me at the center? It’s not pretty. So, James 4:1 begins by asking, **“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” (James 4:1-3, TNIV).** Ouch! James, man, back off!

That word ‘desires’ is based on the same word from which we get the word ‘hedonism,’ the pursuit of pleasure above everything else—*desires that battle within*. James is saying that unrestrained pursuit of pleasure, money, glory for ourselves results in battles. And don’t we know it!? Unrestrained desire for what we want, pleasure, glory, money, prestige, stuff is the root of the fights and the quarrels in the Middle East; those unrestrained desires are at the root of the fights and quarrels you had in the office this past week, and you had in your vehicle on your way to church today. When we put ourselves at the center of the universe, that gets translated into a fight to fulfill our desires and somebody is going to get hurt.

James wants us to know that this desire-dominated life is pretty ugly. It puts people at war with one another. Because when desire is driving my life, I’ll do whatever I can to get what I want, even if it means taking it from you. Because it’s not about you. It’s about me. And we’ll do some pretty shameful things to get what we want and eliminate others who get in the way. I’ve heard of people getting into a college computer

and deleting files just to hurt a competitor's career. People have left false and malicious voice messages on answering machines to get someone in trouble.

Oh, and one other nice little side-effect of putting me at the center of the universe, of a desire-dominated life, is that I close the door of prayer. That's what James is getting at when he talks about prayers. If all we ask for are things that satisfy our selfish desires God's not going to answer those prayers. Why? Because prayer is ultimately saying to God, "Your will be done." The desire-dominated prayer is, "My desires be satisfied." That prayer is at odds with God.

So, here's the crossroads. You and I have to decide if we're going to set our lives in the direction of fulfilling our desires, or fulfilling the will of God. And if we choose our own desires, we're choosing to separate ourselves from God, and from other people.

Now, I don't want to bring a pall over this day, I don't want to grim you out, but James is hitting pretty hard. He goes on to say, "**Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God**" (James 4:4, TNIV).

We've got to talk about this. James is saying if we put ourselves in the center of the universe, if we're living by pursuing pleasure, we are setting ourselves up as the enemy of God. Now who is the God that we could make our enemy? He's talking about the God who spoke the cosmos, the vast heavens and the vast earth, into existence. He is talking about the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-everywhere God of the universe. You want to make that God your enemy? That sounds like trouble to me. Big trouble. I've seen the lives of people who make God their enemy. Not pretty.

So, when I am at the center of the universe, when I live a desire-dominated life, a pleasure-dominated life, I make a mess of everything! I end up in battles and wars that only cause destruction. I end up becoming the enemy of God! That's some hard news. That's a wake-up call. So if me being at the center of the universe causes nothing but problems, what should be at the center?

This is the shift in the thinking, in living. It's putting God and God's desires at the center of the universe. James puts God at the center of the universe by reminding me of my place. Look at the last part of James 4:14. James says, "**What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes**" (James 4:14, TNIV). I've been fighting a sinus infection all week. I went to the doctor on Tuesday and they gave me a nasal spray. You know the drill. Get it out of the package. Shake it up. Pump it a couple of times until the mist comes out. Mist. Mist. Wait! That's me! Here one second, gone and forgotten the next? Even worse, I'm a mist shoved up the nose of the world! That's how significant you are; that's how significant I am. We are mists that appear for a little while and then vanish. We are just a tiny, miniscule, momentary blip on the timeline of eternity.

You're *a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes* away. **But God is forever.** He is from everlasting; he is to everlasting. And we have to "right-size" ourselves in this vast universe. God is big and I am small. He is the center of the universe; I am not. He is the Creator; I am the creation.

But don't let that get you down. Watch this: It feels pretty good to be small when you come to the realization that the big, awesome, eternal, transcendent Creator-God at the center of the universe is a God who is crazy about you. And you can know him, and you can love him, and you can embrace him. That's what James is talking about in verse 5 "**Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?**" (James 4:5, TNIV).

James says that God is a jealous God. And maybe you wonder what's up with that. Is God some kind of unhealthy, co-dependent kind of being? No. That's just an indication of how crazy he is about you.

I love my wife; I'm crazy about my wife, and I'm grateful for the day she took pity on me and married me. But if she started showing inappropriate affection to another man, do you think I'd be cool with that? Think again. I'd be jealous. Not because of some unhealthy, co-dependent type of thing, but because I'm crazy about her!

God created us for a relationship with him, so we could enjoy him and have friendship with him. Jesus is not only the forgiver of sinners; he is the friend of sinners. Imagine that: the center of the universe is crazy

about me. We hit on this in the last series. Getting clear about who we are in God's eyes. I still carry my I.D. card with me that says, "I completely accepted, I am totally secure, I am deeply significant." The card lists 30 scriptures that back that up. But that doesn't make me the center of the universe.

Now once you discover that you're not the center of the universe, and once you get it clear in your mind who the center of the universe really is, then you're able to get centered in the universe. And that brings us to our memorization verse for today. James 4:10. Let's read it out loud together. **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10, TNIV).**

Let's say it again with the reference so we remember where it connects: *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up* (James 4:10). One more time: *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up* (James 4:10).

So listen, you will never get centered in the universe and I will never get centered in the universe until we humble ourselves. What does that mean? How do we humble ourselves? Let's start by acknowledging our arrogance. That's a big part of humbling ourselves.

A few years back I was given an award at the yearly conference of Methodist Churches in Missouri. The award was the culmination of a huge banquet with probably 1,000 people in attendance. I admit I was kind of proud. One pastor from Missouri and one church member from Missouri were given the award and they announced it at this big banquet. The person giving the award stood at the podium and began to introduce the winner of the clergy award. And she started talking about this person's accomplishments and I quickly realized that she was not introducing me, especially when she went on about the different mission trips this person had organized to places I'd never heard of, and how renown this person was for making the most beautiful flower arrangements.

I began to slowly sink down in my chair, because even though they'd informed me I'd won this award, that was clearly not me. So they did this very elaborate introduction and then said my name. And I kind of slunk up to the stage in front of 1,000 people realizing that they had gotten the introductions switched and introduced the church member instead of me. Very humbling.

But James is telling us to get centered in the universe we don't wait to be humbled, we strive to live humbly by acknowledging our arrogance. What does that look like? **Look at James 4:13-14. "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow" (James 4:13-14, TNIV).**

What's missing in those plans for the future when we say we will do this or we will do that? Did you notice in those verses, there's no mention of God? Where's your consideration of God in your education, God in your family, God in your relationships, God in your marriage, God in your career, God in your future?

There's kind of a boasting going on in that verse. "We will go; we will carry on business; we will make money." Notice what James says about these words that come out of our mouth: **"As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil (James 4:16, TNIV).**

We boast about tomorrow; we boast about our arrogant schemes—without even mentioning God's name as a part of our plans. James says, *God opposes the proud ...* (James 4:6).

Now I can think of many forces in this world I wouldn't want opposing me. I wouldn't want Tiger Woods opposing me on the golf course. I wouldn't want Warren Buffet opposing me in an auction. I wouldn't want Landon Taylor opposing me Guitar Hero. But James says when I'm full of pride, the God of the universe is opposing me!

Throughout the Bible, you find that pride is the one sin that evokes the wrath of God the most. To humble yourself, you have to acknowledge your arrogance. Acknowledge your arrogance; and then, sooner or later, you just have to fall on your knees in humility. That's what the next verses are all about. **"Submit yourselves, then, to God...Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:7-8, TNIV).**

Truly humble people bow before the sovereign God at the center of the universe, and they submit themselves fully to him. Proud people walk around, snap their fingers, and want God to help them with their agendas. **Truly humble people love to sing songs like "God is God and I am not/I can only see a part of the picture He's painting/God is God and I am man/So I'll never understand it all/For only God is God" Truly**

humble people love to sing old hymns like “Have thine own way, Lord/Have thine own way/You are the potter / I am the clay.”

James says, *Come near to God and he will come near to you*. The closer you draw to God, the closer he draws to you. And we have the choice a hundred times a day whether or not we’re going to draw close and come near to God. When the alarm goes off in the morning, right then you can make the decision and you can just say a little prayer: “God, I am going to come near to you today.” When you’re in a little business deal that is pretty much above board, but there are a few question marks that are below board and you want to just wink and forget about it, you have a choice to come near to God. When someone catches your eye and there’s that lingering look that wants to turn to lust, you have a choice to come near to God. *Come near to God and he will come near to you*. The closer you get to him, the more you see yourself for who you really are. That’s humility.

Jesus put it this way in Luke: **“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11, TNIV)**. And that’s exactly what Jesus did. It’s probably not at all surprising for you to discover that the God at the center of the universe is more powerful and bigger and awesome and transcendent than any of us. That’s not a big surprise, but what is beyond comprehension is that that God is more humble than any of us.

Jesus, the Creator of the universe, humbled himself and took on human flesh. And what’s so inspiring about that is that of all the people in history, he deserved to be exalted and have the seat of honor at the center of the universe. But he voluntarily stripped himself of his titles as Owner and Creator. He stripped himself of his position at the right hand of the Father in heaven and the honor of receiving the worship of the universe; and he became an unpretentious little, naked baby in a stable who needed sleep and was dependent on the milk of a teenager. And he spent time that no one else would with lepers, and he fed the hungry, and he threw parties for the worst of sinners, and he washed the dirty feet of arrogant disciples. Why? Because the center of the universe humbled himself.

So, today could be a day that we get re-centered in the universe—if we’ll humble ourselves before the Lord. And when you have a culture of humility in a family, you have parents who say to kids: “Hey, I made a mistake there.” You have kids who say to parents: “I made a mistake.” And spouses who say to one another: “I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

When you have a spirit of humility in a workplace, you have bosses who go to people they supervise and say: “You know what, I was a little out of line there.” You have colleagues who say “I’m sorry” to each other. And it increases the sense of team.

And when you have a spirit of humility in a church, you’ll have a pastor who can be honest about his shortcomings; and you can accept him along with other fallible leaders as being among the ranks of fellow strugglers that we all belong to. And we can be a part of a community where we heal each other up and we help others find their way.

There is nothing like life in a culture of humility where we are centered in the universe.

James says, *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up*. We’re never called in the Bible to pray for humility; we are commanded to be humble. There are some things that God does; there are some things that are required of us. And it’s our choice. So, how about it? Will you choose to humble yourself today? And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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