

Shane Lee, Draw Near to God
Reading: James 4

January 31, 2015

Thanks for reading that for us, Joey. We'll get to the fourth chapter of James here momentarily. As I was reading --sometimes it's difficult for me to come up with a topic to speak on but this time it really wasn't, so I had the topic or what I had in mind relatively early on in the process. But as I was putting my thoughts together, I realized that my thoughts about it were maybe a little bit different than I thought. This is a sermon that very much reflected, very much interested me and so this is kind of just the expression of some thoughts that I had in some study that I had throughout the past couple of weeks. In Hebrews the 10th chapter I was doing a little reading and I stumbled across a phrase in this 22nd verse. Hebrews 10:22 the Nancy so kindly put on the bulletin. I'll start in verse 21. Hebrews the 10th chapter verse 21 and 22 says, "and having an high priest over the house of God." Verse 22. "Let us draw near with a true heart." Let us draw near, draw near, draw near to God. And that's why we'll spend a little time in James chapter four that Joey just read for us because when I read that phrase "drawing near to God," I instantly thought of James 4:8: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." "Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you." "Come close to God and He will come close to you" depending upon the version you're reading. What does this mean? Like so many things in Scripture and so many Biblical topics and some men that I spoke to that are looking at me now, sometimes we can tackle a topic and we can really give a synopsis in about 30 seconds and seem to do it a relative amount of justice. But once you peel back that initial layer, sometimes there's just depth and depth and depth, seems like you need 3 or 4 weeks to really get into. So now I either need to sit down in 30 seconds or you're going to be here a while. But I thought it would be good for us, at least it was good for me, to take a look at what is this drawing near to God mean.

We have this phrase here in the 10th chapter of Hebrews, and we also have it in the fourth chapter of James. So I'd like to take a look a little bit at both of those passages, the 10th chapter of Hebrews and the fourth chapter of James. I'm not obviously going to go through the chapters exhaustively. We don't have time for that, but in order to get a little context and to flesh out a little bit of what this concept means. The book of Hebrews is much like the book of Romans and that it has largely one common theme. It has a doctrine it is trying to convey from start to finish. Unlike some of the other letters of Corinthians, Galatians or Ephesians where there's specific issues being addressed, and Paul kind of hops topics. There is kind of an overarching theme of the book of Hebrews, and I know many of us are familiar with that. The book of Hebrews is talking about the superiority of Christ. Christ is better than the angels, Christ is better than Abraham, better than the prophets, and also the superiority of the New Law versus the Old Law to the Jews to the Hebrew nation saying what was before isn't good enough anymore, and that's specifically what this 10th chapter is talking about. Just to highlight a couple of verses that I know some of us are familiar with, but in the 10th chapter verse 4 it says, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." Bulls and goats can't do it. We can kill them all day long and it's not going to take anything away. In fact, it even says as much in verse 11: "and every priest stands

ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." Think about that. The priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. Talk about a religious or theological hamster wheel. These guys are standing in the exact same place, doing the exact same ritual, killing animal after animal and it doesn't do anything. It does something--God wouldn't have them do it if it didn't do anything, but it doesn't take away sins. They were doing all this stuff, literally spinning their wheels. If we drop down into verses 12, 13 and 14, I'll read those: "But this Man [this man being Christ] after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. " This man, he offered one sacrifice , and afterwards, he took his place at the right hand of God. Dropping in 14: "For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." So his one offering-- I know that this is familiar for most of us-- but this one offering did away with all that. His blood did what the blood of all those animals could not do. So then we get to verse 18. "Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin." We don't have to do that anymore. We don't have to offer these sacrifices and the reason I went through that is because in verse 19 now we have a THEREFORE. It says therefore, because we don't have to do that, because we don't have to mess with the bulls and goats. "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus," Well, now they have boldness to enter the holiest and what does that mean? What is the holiest? It was the holy of holies and I'll take just a brief time to turn back there. You don't have to necessarily, but just for the sake of time because I don't want to spend much time there, but in Leviticus chapter 16 we have God talking to Moses and talking to Aaron about the Day of Atonement and what it meant to go into the holiest or what it means to be in the holy of holies. Well in chapter 16 of Leviticus verse 2, God says to Moses tell Aaron your brother not to come in just at any time into the holy place inside the veil. You can't just trounce on in there any ole time. Tell your brother Aaron not to go in there just any time" before the Mercy seat, which is on the Ark lest he die." If he comes trouncing in here whenever he wants to, he is going to die. And anybody else that does that is going to die. If anybody is going to come into the area where I am, where God dwells, he's going to die, save for the Day of Atonement.

Later on in this 16th chapter, it goes on and spells out in great detail what the high priest had to do at that time. In verse six it said that he had to sacrifice a bull to cleanse himself, in verse 11 he had to sacrifice a bull to cleanse his household, in verse 15 he had to sacrifice a goat to cleanse the people. And to sacrifice these three animals to cleanse himself, to cleanse his household, and to cleanse his people as he went into the holy of holies. Nobody else could go in there. They tied bells around the garments so that the other priests could know that they were still alive and still kicking because they couldn't go back and see what they were doing. They also sometimes tied ropes around the guy's ankle so in case something happened to him they could pull him out because they weren't allowed to go in there. This is what had to happen to commune with God. One man got to do that one day a year. I see that in Hebrews 10 now saying, THEREFORE, we don't have to do that anymore. It reminds me of the power that Christ's sacrifice really did. Because we don't have to do all that blood and guts, and those ceremonies and rituals and things like that because of that in verse 22 it says" let

us draw near." This passage here in Hebrews is saying you have the ability to do something, generation after generation didn't have the ability to do. One man got to do that one day a year and he had to go through all of this. You can do it--we can do it--now whenever we want. This passage tells me that we each have the ability to commune with God, something previously not possible, and it is only possible because of the blood of Jesus Christ. First Peter 3:18 says "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, [why?] that He might bring us to God." The power of Christ's blood allows us to be near God. So when we are told to draw near to God, Hebrews 10 tells me that something that people weren't able to do at all times and it tells me that it's something the Hebrew nation would've cherished and would have valued very much.

So now let's look at James chapter 4. I won't take the time to read this entire passage--Joey just did that so that's probably a good plan--but I will highlight a few things here in the fourth chapter of James. In verse four of chapter 4--it's a fairly famous verse where it says "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God," talking about the dichotomy between friendship of the world, and association with the Lord. In verse six, the writer here quotes Proverbs and says "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble," and because God gives grace to the humble from this quote, he starts off in verse seven and says, "Therefore submit to God." God gives grace to the humble, so therefore be submissive. This is a good thing. In verse seven, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." In verse eight, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you double-minded." In verse seven we have a concept of submission to God, and that if we resist the devil, he will resist us and then we have the flip side of that in verse eight. If we draw near to God, he will draw near to us.

So what is this . . . what is drawing near to God? It seems like a relatively simple phrase and we think we know what it means to be near something. I can draw near to Steve. I can see Steve; I can get close to Steve. Gaynor has drawn near to Steve--she's brave. When we see somebody we see something we can approach them, we can come near to them. Well, how I do I draw near to God? Where is He? There is no more holy of holies anymore, there's no more mercy seat anymore, I can't tie bells on my garments or go into a secret room. So how is it that I draw near to my God or we draw near to our God? Obviously, this isn't a physical nature. This isn't a place we need to travel to or a place that we need to go to, but rather has to do with our attitude and our lifestyle and our spirituality. I came across a quote that's a little lengthy, but I'm getting to go ahead and read it. It was one man's thoughts surrounding this drawing near to God, and so hopefully it helps you get a little bit of a framework as it did me. I quote: "The drawing near is not a physical act. It's not building a tower of Babel by your own achievements. It's not necessarily going to a church building or walking up front. It is an invisible act of the heart. Drawing near is not moving from one place to another. It is a directing of the heart into the presence of God." I like that last phrase "it is a directing of the heart into the presence of God." What does it mean to draw near to God? Well, it means to get our hearts in his presence and align that and associate ourselves in the closest possible manner with the creator of the universe. What does it

mean to draw near to God? Well, something I found interesting is in both of these verses that we're kind of using as our source text this morning in Hebrews 10:22 and in James 4:8. There has to do with the concept of cleanliness of the heart. I'll read 10:22 again. It says, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience," so our heart has to be true and it needs to be sprinkled or cleansed from an evil conscience. If we turn over to James chapter 4 verse eight, after it says "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts," so what does it mean to draw near to God? Well, in some capacity, it means to purify our hearts and purify ourselves. I did some thinking about this--I guess that's good. I had some thoughts before I got up here this morning. I did some thinking-- I don't have an answer and I'm okay with that--I don't know if we have to cleanse ourselves before we're in the presence of God before we draw near to God or if drawing near to God cleanses us. This might be a little bit of a chicken or egg thing. I don't logistically how that all works. I do know that they're closely associated. Being in the presence of God and being cleansed goes together. I don't understand all the logistics on it, but when I think about how I draw near to God I think I should probably start thinking about cleansing myself and purifying myself. I'm a little cautious in that because in one part of my brain I feel like we do need to be cleansed before we're in the presence of God; that's why Aaron had to sacrifice those three things before he went into the presence of God, but I also don't want to create a situation where we feel like we have to be absolutely perfect before we accept Christ as our Savior. You know, there is a little bit of balance there and I think there is a process, but when we are communing with God, and in the purest sense, I think our garments ought to be as clean as possible. Being in the presence of God is an awesome and a serious thing. If you don't think so, ask the faithful high priests that worshiped on the Day of Atonement.

Another thing that further enforces that point is in James 4:4 that friendship with the world is enmity with God. If we're to draw near with God, then we should probably not be as friendly with the world as perhaps sometimes we would like to be. I don't see how you can be an enemy of God and drawing near to God at the same time. That doesn't seem like that would work out too well. So what are some of the effects of drawing near to God? We are to draw near to God. There's two clearly stated passages that we have referenced multiple times this morning, so what are some of the effects of this? I've said it before and it clearly states in James chapter 4 verse eight that if we draw near to God--what will happen?-- he will draw near to us. I write terribly and I draw even worse but I'm going to do it. (Draws diagram on board). So if we draw near to him, what does it say? He will draw near to us, and again logistically, I don't understand all of how that works, but I am smart enough to know that that's a good thing, and it makes sense, too. This is essentially God saying I'll meet you halfway. We say that all the time--sometimes literally, like let's meet for lunch, I'll meet you halfway or sometimes kind of more metaphorically like well, I'll help but you have to meet me halfway. That's exactly what God is saying. I will come to you and protect you and I will be your God, but you've gotta meet me halfway. I'm not going to come up and bear hug you and smother you. You draw near to me, and I conversely will draw near to you. Again, I may not understand

everything about that, but I do understand that it is a good thing and a position that I think we ought to strive to be in.

What else is an effect of drawing near to God? Well, it's kind of a side effect right in verse seven. Before that he says, resist the Devil and he will flee from you. (Draws on board). So now we've got the Devil and if we resist the Devil he's going to flee from us. Again, I may not understand all the logistics behind this, but I'm smart enough to know that that's a good thing and I think these things are related, and it makes sense. I'm not a shepherd. I don't own sheep and I own a dog but he doesn't know what to do with sheep. . . . I'm going to get back to my notes. (Laughter) Sorry, I made eye contact with the wrong person over here. My notes say wolves don't attack sheep standing right by the shepherd. That's what I'm trying to get at. If we're right by the shepherd--who does the wolf attack? He attacks the sick one right on the outskirts. But if there's a sheep right by the shepherd, I don't think that's who the wolf is going after. If you want the Devil to leave you alone, stand by the shepherd . I know that sounds so elementary, but it's so true. Have there been dark times in your life? There have been dark times in my life. Has there been time when temptation. . . and you don't want to get into that --and I don't want to go through various temptations--greed, gossip, anger, jealousy--I guess I will go through a list of them. If you want the Devil to leave you alone, don't sit there and say, Devil leave me alone; why don't you stand by the shepherd? I've tried to be strong enough to do this on my own, but it doesn't work; it doesn't work.

So this seems relatively simple, right? We've got a choice--a good choice and a bad choice, so let's just go to this one, but yet if you're anything like me, sometimes it just doesn't always work out that simply. It should be black and white, right? But yet sometimes there are shades of gray that come into and why is that ? Well in my mind, sometimes there's a pool of mud. Instead of drawing directly near to God, we like to kind of trounce through the mud and then say that we're drawing near to God, and we'll do as good as we can, or we'll do good on a lot of levels. But when we stand before God on the Day of Atonement, and you look down, and from your ankles down there's mud. From your knees up, you might be spotless and you might think I'm doing good. I've just got a little mud; it's not bad. It doesn't work that way. James 4:4 tells us that being a friend of the world is enmity with God, and I know that God sees this is mud, but we don't. To us these things are sparkly and they're shiny and they're money and careers and they're fun things. If they looked like mud then I'd leave it alone, but they don't look like mud sometimes. Yet in our efforts sometimes to draw near to God, we trounce through it. We are so good at making excuses; well I've got mud boots on, so I can walk through the mud and then I'll take them off and I'll be clean. You know, don't buy mud boots, just wear sandals and walk around. We try to get so close to things sometimes and still think they we're having some form of godliness or type of godliness. Yet I think sometimes were fooling ourselves. If we can recognize mud for mud and we can recognize filth for filth and realize that we're standing before our God sometimes with mud caked on our shoes. I think we'd be better served for it.

God drawing near to us and the devil fleeing from us are the two major results from drawing near to God. These are the two big umbrellas and underneath those things are

a whole host of things that I don't have time to get into this morning, and I don't really want to necessarily, but the tangible benefits from drawing near to God are so numerous. Second Corinthians chapter 1 talks about the comfort that God will give us; Matthew chapter 11 where Christ says come to me all ye who labor and I will give you rest. James 4:10 just a little bit later says that God will lift us up. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up. James 5:11 talks about how merciful God is. Second Thessalonians 3:3 talks about how faithful God is. And if you're in close communion with God, you will receive all these benefits-- his mercy, his love, his compassion, his comfort, his shelter, his forgiveness, his faithfulness, and if we resist the devil, temptations will go away. They will. There's things that used to be struggles for me --I've used this before--and it's a very public one and also relatively easy to talk about. To pray for my meals at restaurants 10 years ago that would really have been difficult for me to do. I don't know why --you're just embarrassed some bogeyman is going to steal your food while you have your eyes closed, or something, but it's embarrassing, you don't know if someone is going to make fun of you, think you're weird or whatever; that used to be a real struggle for me and it's not anymore. I had lunch with Dane Hartman this week downtown and we said a prayer. I looked at him and said that used to be so difficult for me, and I don't think twice about it. If you resist him--it isn't even a temptation for me anymore; it's just not difficult. Now there are other things--I'm not trying to stand up here and tout myself as some spiritual expert, but when we resist these things, temptations do lesson. When we dig in and stand up against the devil, those things do lesson.

So, that's the majority of my thoughts that I have with respect to drawing near to God. I don't understand all of the ins and outs of it, but I do understand that it is something that we should do and is something that we should take serious. I also think that there's something to be said for our attitude when we draw near to God. God is the same yesterday today and tomorrow. The God of the Old Testament is the same God we serve today, and so the amount of reverence and the amount of fear that those men had when they went into the holy of holies, I think a lot of that is lost on us. We do have free access and that is such a gift, but we ought not take it for granted. You know we're not sending God a text message or friending him on Facebook, but sometimes and I'm looking squarely in the mirror-- sometimes we can adopt that attitude. When we're communing with God, He is God. I heard the analogy before and we've probably all heard it before. It's like if you are to meet the president, the most revered person I can think of, if you're meeting the president, are you going to show up in sweat pants and a ball cap, chomping bubblegum and holding a cup of coffee? Probably not. You're going to have some sort of reverence there, yet when we commune with the Lord, be it here or elsewhere, are we chomping on bubblegum, drinking coffee in the presence of God? It's not to be taken lightly, nor are the benefits to be taken lightly. It's a very comforting thing when I think that the Lord will draw near to me if I draw near to him. I'd like to shift gears and draw this to a close. I said that that's basically exhausted my thoughts with respect to drawing near to God.

The past five years--and this is in transition by way of an invitation-- the past five years I've had the best job I've ever had, an amazing job. I work for a bank that I absolutely

love, work for people that I love, doing work that I mostly enjoy. It's the best job that I've ever had. The owner that I work for is the best boss I've ever had. It's just been a very good place; he's allowed me to do things, he's treated me very fairly in a number of capacities. There's been times I've had offers from other institutions to make more money and I went into him and I told him that, and he said to go back to work, I'll take care of it and I trusted him and he didn't even say what he would do. I didn't really know. He kind of laughed, and I went back to work and I thought I don't even know what just happened. The next two paychecks I got a bonus--he took care of it. He's a good man when it comes to that type of thing and we're a relatively close knit group. Part of the reason I stayed there, and part of the reason other people have stayed there is because we believe in the company. We believe in the direction the company is going; there have been promises made about what my career is going to hold and you can go on from there. Seven weeks ago he called the whole group together and announced that he'd sold the bank to a \$30 billion corporation. It was tough for us to hear and tough in a lot of ways. His character didn't change; he's still a good guy. He literally had no choice--some regulatory reasons and financial reasons that he is could not keep the company going, but these things that I and many other people have been buying into these other opportunities that have come up that we turned down (and one person I know turned down a lot of money to stay there) and then in one fell swoop it all changed. We have about 90 employees; I don't know how many employees a \$30 billion corporation has, but it's a whole different ballgame. He called me into his office and we had a very frank discussion. He said you know I feel terrible because it's like with a flip of the switch nobody trusts me anymore. And it's the trust he worked so hard to build. There's no hard feelings; I still have a great relationship with him. Friday was my last day there--my own doing-- I found another opportunity I decided to pursue because the ballgame has changed. My future is not what I thought my future was going to be. It was a little emotional on Friday. Tears welled, but they didn't run so I didn't shed any tears. I controlled the tears, but the thing is he's still a good guy and I still trust him. But he's not able to deliver on a lot of promises that he made. It's not his fault; it's not my fault. It's nobody's fault. I trusted him because time and time and time again he'd come through for me, like I said, and now frankly because he didn't have the power to. That's kind of a long story to elaborate that here's someone that I trusted about as much as you can trust somebody and yet he still wasn't able to do for me what I thought he was going to be able to do. I've reflected a lot on it the past couple weeks as I was making this transition, but there's so many things in life that just aren't certain including believing things that my boss told me that I wanted to believe and did believe.

In Deuteronomy 7:9: "Therefore know that the Lord your God, he is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commandments." God is a faithful God. I'm going to read part of that again. . . "a faithful God who keeps his covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commandments." My boss let me down in some capacity and I don't blame him; it isn't his fault, but God will not let you down. And if you will draw near to him, He will draw near to you. If there's anybody who would like to come forward and accept the gospel invitation, please do so as we stand and sing.