

“Knock, knock.” Who’s there? “Sadie.” Sadie who? “Say de magic word and I’ll let you out!” “Knock, knock.” Who’s there? “Nobel.” Nobel who? “No bell so I knocked!” “Knock, knock.” Who’s there? “Dewey.” Dewey who? “Do we have to listen to anymore knock, knock jokes?” I appreciate the few groans I got which I’ll take for laughter. I would have had better jokes but I didn’t have any copies of Readers’ Digest. That little magazine always had good clean jokes in its “Laughter Is the Best Medicine” section. And for the most part laughter is the best medicine isn’t it? If you’re laughing, you’re too busy to be stressed. In fact, one of the qualities you were looking for in a new pastor at Open Bible was a pastor who had a sense of humor. Well, you do have one like that. So if we could just laugh our way through life, we’d be set, right? Not exactly, says the Apostle James in our text. In fact he explains when laughter is not the best medicine. Let’s find out what James is talking about.

If you were looking for some light reading to cheer you up before bed, the New Testament book of James is not usually the book most would grab. That’s because James, the half-brother of Jesus, had to write stern words to Jewish Christians who acted as if Christianity was like nothing more than a go-out-for-Sunday-brunch ritual. They may have been on their best behavior while at church but they quickly shrugged out of their niceties as easily as kicking off a pair of dress shoes once they returned home. You may think I’m exaggerating but listen to James: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight” (James 4:1, 2a). Christians coveting, quarrelling, even killing?!? And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Other problems these self-professing Christians had were boasting and slandering. They also discriminated between the rich and the poor, and took advantage of those who were less well off than they. The worst part is that these “Christians” weren’t the least bit bothered by these sins. They figured that as long as they believed in Jesus, they were bound for heaven no matter how they acted along the way.

Have you ever been at a church with members like that? Of course you have. Wherever Christians gather, sinners meet...even here. Tell me, have you ever caught yourself coveting someone else’s set of wheels as you walked through the church parking lot or maybe the home that they get to live in in retirement vs. yours? What about a pair of shoes you saw flash on the way up to Holy Communion? You can’t afford such a nice pair, as if God never gives you good things? Ever wonder why you have to work a side job in retirement just to keep the bills paid, not just because you need a diversion in retirement like others?. And did you perhaps “admire” something more about that person in church than the shoes he or she was wearing? Can it be? Would we really entertain such sinful thoughts at such a sacred time in worship? Or have you ever gone to a church meeting where you didn’t have to fight down the urge to “put someone in their place”? How about slander? You really can’t stand a particular person. So you sinfully judge them. Sinful judging is to think yourself morally superior to another. Sinful judging goes beyond criticizing the sin and makes the person feel worthless. Sinful judging is criticizing without love. Sinful judging is criticizing a person to make you feel bigger. When we do this, we are putting ourselves in the place of God and insulting God. “Ah, but like you said, Pastor, we Christians are sinners. We’re not perfect.” You’re right. But that wasn’t James’ issue with his readers. His problem was their attitude about their sin. James wrote: 220;8Wash 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 ” (James 4:8b, 9).

James’ readers thought that their sins were harmless - funny even, like the tantrum someone else’s three-year-old throws in the middle of the mall. And we’re a lot like James’

original listeners, aren't we? We don't think when we hurt someone's feelings that it is a big deal. They'll get over it. We laugh that we showed them who was boss. We worry about our health or what the future holds. Hey, everybody worries. No big deal. We may brag to some of our friends about money we took under the table. The government gets enough of my taxes. Can't be helped as we laugh about it. We laugh about how we told a half truth to our spouse, so we wouldn't get any flack. What she doesn't know won't hurt her. And we boast about how we got back at a neighbor for that pesky pet of his. But there's a time when laughter is NOT the best medicine. God, who seeks our eternal happiness, doesn't want us to be jolly when it comes to sin. He wants us to mourn, wail, and hate what we've done.

It might be helpful for us to remember how the "happiness" that sin brings is so short-lived, and therefore not worth pursuing. It's like the happiness that comes from rolling around in a mud puddle. Have you ever tried it? I played some tackle football as a kid in fields that were nothing but mud and rather enjoyed slip sliding in the mess to see how filthy I could get. But when the game was done it didn't take long to start shivering from the cold and to start itching from the mud drying on the skin. The only thing I could think of then was getting cleaned up. It turned out that rolling around in the mud really wasn't that great.

Nor is rolling around in sin. In fact it's much more harmful than rolling around in mud because it's more like splashing around in a toxic dump. You might not feel the effects of radiation right away after playing with radioactive material but sooner or later your hair will fall out and your whole body will start shutting down. The reason we don't always feel the immediate effects of our sin is because God is patient with us. He wants us to come to repentance before we suffer the consequence of our rebellion against him. So listen to the Apostle James this morning. Wash your hands of your sin, and not just your hands, purify your hearts! Don't say, "OK Pastor. I'll stop this sin if that's what it takes for me to continue to be a member at Open Bible. ." That's not true repentance is it? God doesn't just want us cleaning up our actions but our attitudes as well. Turn your laughter over your sin into sorrow. If you won't, God will with eternal finality.

But how can we mere mortals accomplish this? I mean if Satan is the one who tempts us into these sins, what chance do we have against him, he who was once a powerful angel? Do you remember the opening verse of our text? Listen to it again. "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). That's a powerful Scripture promise isn't it? Through faith in Jesus and through our baptism we have the power to resist the devil so that he must run from us as fast as his hideous legs can carry him! The key to accomplishing this is submitting to God. Our society doesn't like that word submit. To them submitting means giving up individual rights and freedoms and doing what someone else tells you to. When James urges us to submit to God, however, he isn't telling us to become a slave of some ogre. Submitting to God is more like falling in line behind a police escort as you walk through a dangerous part of town at night. Most people would be happy for that kind of protection. In the same way eagerly put yourself under God's care and direction. Arm yourself with his Word and you will regularly send the devil running faster than a rat scampering from a soup can hurled his way.

But we will still stumble and fall into sin won't we? What then? James tells us: "Come near to God and he will come near to you... 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:8a, 10). Remember the story of the Prodigal Son. Remember how that young man took his father's inheritance and blew it in wild living. Remember how the young man lost every penny and found himself eating what pigs were eating. Finally, he came to his

senses. He decided to go back to his father's house and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against earth. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men. This prodigal son made no excuses. He took responsibility. Likewise, we won't make excuses for our sins when we fall. We won't blame our upbringing, our impossible boss, our lack of sleep, or our siblings for our outbursts. We'll take the blame and be saddened at how we have hurt our heavenly Father and abused his trust and misused his gifts. And then we will be confident – confident that God will lift us up the way the father in the parable restored his son to the family with a welcome home party. God won't do this because our sins are of no consequence. God doesn't shove our sins from his sight the way we mindlessly scrape our plates into the garbage after supper. No, God forgives because next to us stands Jesus who is constantly wiping us clean of our sins with the blood he shed on the cross. Every time these feet took us down the wrong path, Jesus walked the right path for us. Every time these hands were used as tools of wrongdoing, Jesus had his hands pierced with nails to pay for our wrongdoing. Every time this mind thinks unwholesome thoughts, Jesus had a mind filled with pure thoughts for us. Jesus was lifted up on a cross, so that we might be lifted up from the depths of our wrongdoing and restored to the family of God. Unlike the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus doesn't stand in judgment of us; he stood under judgment for us taking the blame for our sins so that we are forgiven. Truly we have been lifted up.

You'll be happy to know that I'm not going to end this sermon with any jokes. After all neither sin nor grace is a joking matter. God is serious about both and so we will be serious about both. Stop laughing about your sin, no matter what it is, and get serious about your life as a Christian under God's grace. Only then will you have a real reason to laugh – joyful that not even Satan can keep you from the eternal delights of heaven. Amen.