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James 4

“TO GET TO THE TOP - WITH NO REGRETS”

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Today, many people are trying to get to the top. They want to succeed and be “tops” in what they do. A Christian man, Zig Zigler, has a book and a slogan that has inspired many, called “Meet Me at the Top.”

Now, of course, there are good people who question whether a Christian should want to “succeed” and get-to-the-top in what he does. That doesn’t sound very “spiritual.” It sounds “worldly.” It doesn’t sound very “umble.” It smacks of pride. After all, isn’t this whole chapter in James a warning against pride? Several times it admonishes us to “humble ourselves” (vs. 6,10).

You are right. It does tell us to humble ourselves and not to be proud. But does that have to keep us from being “tops” in what God has called us to do? Read the rest of vs. 10: “Humble yourselves in the sight of God, and He will exalt you.” “Exalt you” - what does that mean? It means that God will lift you to the top!

Our fear is not getting to the top. Our fear is of getting there the wrong way. I like what Ethel Waters says: “God don’t sponsor no flops!” God doesn’t get any glory out of failure. He wants to help us to succeed.

We at McGregor Baptist Church are committed to succeed. We pray to succeed. We plan to succeed. We have built to succeed. We go for success. The alternative to success is failure, and that is totally unacceptable! If we do not succeed in our God-given task, hundreds of Lee County residents will go on in a Christless existence and eventually spend eternity in hell. If we do not succeed in our task, it will be felt around the world, as a quarter million dollars a year will not reach the mission field. We must be “tops” in what God has called us to do.

I fear that some Christians have made humility into an excuse for mediocrity, for laziness, for poor-mouthed stinginess, for carelessness in doing their best and keeping their appointments. Humility is not a cop-out. This just shows how needlessly negative some of our religious training has been. God still wants us to carry out His plans to the best of our abilities.

Now, of course, God’s way of getting to the top is quite different from the world’s way. That’s where the rub comes. The world’s approach is to climb over, even to step on others, to compete with others, as you climb the ladder of success. This usually leads to many regrets, when you finally reach the top. It even leads to the fear that the next guys will eventually step on you in their climb.

God's way to the top is so different. It leaves no regrets, and there is plenty of room for others. We can cheer each other to the top!

Then what is God's way to the top - with no regrets? Let's look today at the verses surrounding God's promise to "exalt" us, and let's discover God's conditions that we must meet if we are to make it to the top in His way. Let's check ourselves in seven areas. I see in them an acrostic on the word Success.

**I. S - Let's check our SECRET MOTIVES (3: 13-18).**

Just WHY do we want to get to the top? What is our motive for success? Our real motives may be known only to ourselves. We need to be honest about them. This will be the key to whether or not God will exalt us.

Vs. 16: If "envy and strife" are our motives, they will lead to all sorts of confusion and evil. If we are jealous of what someone else has attained and our secret motive is to have what they have, we will never get to the top, with no regrets. If striving to be better than someone else (or to "prove" something, about ourselves, or to "be somebody") is our motive, it will bring about confusion of the worst kind.

"Such wisdom is earthly, sensuous, and even demonic (devil- inspired)." Yet so many professing Christians, in their attempts to be "worldly - wise," have fallen in the trap of wrong motivation, and their stay at the top has been brief and regretful.

God's wisdom is described in 3:17: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy."

The true motivation for success is to love people and help our world and to offer service. This is God's motivation for success.

What is behind most of our confusion and evil in the world today? Selfishness.. selfish motivation! Do you know one of the biggest problems behind inflation in the U.S.A.? Those in power positions, both in labor and management, are too often striving to "make-the-most," instead of to "give-the- most." There is a law in life that says: when you give, it will come back to you. Let's check our individual motives for life.

We also need to check our motives as a church. We are not here to keep up with Riverside or to beat-out First Assembly. We are here to serve our community and to meet people's needs. If we remember this, we will succeed.

The other day, I called a gentleman who had visited us. He said "We thought we would try one of your competitors. So we visited Cypress Lake." I was so glad that I could say: "They are not our competitor. They are our child. We started Cypress Lake 14 years ago." But do you see, even "good Christians" have been conditioned by the wisdom of this world and scarcely think twice about it. "Competitors?" No! "Partners!"

Paul adds a similar idea in Philippians 2:3: "Let nothing be done through strife and vain glory, but (instead) let each think of (esteem) others..." That's God's motivation that leads to the top!

Let's go on to the next idea, which is so closely aligned with checking our motives.

II **U** - If we want to get to the top in God's way, let's check our **URGES** (4:1-3).

"You ask and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts" (or urges). We cannot ask God to lift us to the top, if our goal is something that we "lust" after. Some purely selfish urge misses the mark. It is asking and aiming "amiss." To get-rich-quick, so we can spend our lives in ease and luxury and keep up with the Rockefellers, is not a worthy goal... I don't care how many others think so.

About this time, you may be thinking: "Be reasonable, preacher! You are so heavenly minded that you are going to be no earthly good. The goal of every business is to make a profit. People don't succeed in this world of competition and profit-and-loss statements by trying to look out for other people!"

You are sure about that, are you? Have you investigated into the lives of some of the greats?

Let me illustrate with the story of Andrew Carnegie, one of the richest men in America. Mr. Carnegie states that he never, never, never had a goal of acquiring wealth. He had one particular goal: to build a great, strong, and powerful U.S.A. with productivity. And his theory was that America could become strong, if we could bring the price of steel from \$160 a ton to \$120 a ton. That was his goal. And he succeeded in doing it. As it turned out, in the process, he became very wealthy. In fact, he felt so grateful for his wealth that he gave it away, as one of our nation's greatest philanthropists.

There was another rather prosperous man, but not in the Carnegie sense. But he was prosperous enough to have a nice clean shave, when he went to the barber shop. And he would walk outside and see people on the sidewalks, who didn't have the money to get a good clean shave.

One day, he said, "I wish I could develop a cheap little razor that every man could have what I've got: a good clean shave." He tried to invent one. His name was Gillette. And, yes, he succeeded! Incidentally, he became wealthy, too.

Henry Ford wished everybody could have an automobile. He had a goal to build a cheap and dependable car, and he did. And he got to the top in the process.

Another man, named Ingersoll, had a hobby of collecting watches. He wished everybody could have a watch. His goal was to make a pocket watch that could sell for a dollar, and everyone could have one. He succeeded. And he got to the top in the process.

Now I'm not saying that all these men were great Christians, but they did have the right urges when they started. They wanted to help others. They were not simply driven by selfish urges. And that was a key to their rising to the top.

Do you see, God's way to the top is not other-worldly at all. It works.

III. **C** - The third thing to check out on our way to the top is our **CONCENTRATION** (4:4-7).

Even when a Christian starts out with the right motives and urges, he can be distracted and detoured by the devil and his world system. The devil's confused followers and his evil system are always out to allure God's man. He uses materialism and luxury and fame, in order to make us forget our God-given goals and motives.

More than once has a man started out with noble motives and humanitarian goals and has begun to prosper, only to be intoxicated with the “good life” and high society, until he forgot his commitment to his God-given goal. He begins to worship the “almighty dollar” and to throw-in with the system. Some have even become ruthless and unscrupulous.

Once there was a minister greatly used. He began to lose sight of his calling and strayed into the high life and ways of the world. He was at the top, but he ended up an alcoholic and ruined his family and ministry. He lost his concentration and began to fall for the allurements of this world.

God calls this “spiritual adultery.” God is “jealous” of our love and loyalty. The world’s system of doing things is at odds (enmity) with all God stands for.

Let’s not lose our concentration. Let’s stay in submission to God and His leadership. Let’s resist the devil and his ways of doing things. Let’s refuse to “learn the ropes” and continue to seek God’s best.

#### IV. C - Let’s keep check on our CONSCIENCE (4:8-9).

If we are going to get to the top with no regrets, we must continually be cleansing our hands, purifying our hearts, and making sure that we are not fooling ourselves in our minds. If we want God to be near and for God to bless our efforts, this is essential!

We must “cleanse our hands.” Often we are tempted, in our ambition, to do things that are against our spiritual principles...something that might compromise our Christian testimony. Sometimes we actually give-in to the temptation and dirty our hands. Maybe we stretch the truth, or deceive someone, or cut some corner that is not really fair.

Don’t let it go! Quickly ask God for cleansing and for strength not to do it again. But don’t let it slide, or don’t let it become a practice in your business.

I’d hate to reach the top and be out of touch with God, and haunted by a guilty conscience. I’d hate to “gain the whole world and lose my soul” in the process, until my laughter would be turned to mourning, and my joy to heaviness by a gnawing conscience.

We must “purify our hearts.” Whenever success, or something we want, becomes a greater love than our love for Jesus, that’s the time to come clean. Whenever we realize that we have a “double-mind” (that we want Jesus, but we also want success-at-any-cost...that we want Jesus, but we must break His laws to get where we are going...that we want the best that heaven offers, but we also want all that the devil’s world system promises), we are flirting with disaster. It’s time to purify our hearts. And draw back to our God.

“But, preacher, will He still have me after some of the deals I’ve pulled.” He promises He will “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you” (4:8).

But how can He draw near to a sinner? He paid your fine for you. Jesus Christ came and died in your place. He took the punishment that you deserved. So He is able to offer us pardon.

Have I gone too far to ever get back into His good graces? Not if you will come back today. But, if you keep putting it off and going head-long in your rebellion, I fear the day will come when you will not even care. You’ll be settled-in with the world and God’s spirit can no longer even get your attention.

You may have to make restitution at any cost, but nothing is as important as a clear conscience.

V. **E** - If we want to get to the top God's way, let's check our **ENTERPRISE** (our tactics and methods for reaching the top) (4:11-12).

Ruthless and unethical tactics don't lead to the top - without regrets - no matter how enterprising they may seem.

Here James mentions only one example of a ruthless tactic: "speaking evil" of people. And yet, it is often used. People try to lift themselves up by cutting other people down. It is so commonplace today - even in advertising - that we almost assume it is O.K. (One car has the nerve to compare itself to a Ferrari at 1/3 the price. Listen, nothing compares a Ferrari! Wait 30 years and see!)

People use many questionable tactics in order to climb over others, on their way to the top. Back-stabbing, wining-and-dining, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," dirty politicking. We all know what I'm talking about. They are done all the time. But God will not bless us and exalt us, if we insist on playing "dirty pool" on the side.

Listen, even Christians have been known to resort to such practices. Murmuring almost tore up the early church. And you've never been "done wrong" like you will be "done wrong" if you are "done wrong" by a fellow Christian! But if they are hell-bent to get to the top by their own unscrupulous tactics, God will take His hands off and let them get there on their own strength - and they have lots of regrets to show for it! God can blow on our money, and it will disappear and He can make our plans come to naught

VI. **S** - The sixth thing to check if we want to get to the top is our **SENSE OF URGENCY** (4:13-16).

If we want to get to the top, we must do our best each day. We must have a sense of urgency.

None of this: "Tomorrow I'll get out there and hustle. Tomorrow I'll get off my duff and start to sell. Tomorrow I may get a break."

No! Today is the time to do your best! We were told in college that "the best preparation for tomorrow is to do what you are supposed to do today." I like that.

Some live in the future. They are always dreaming of what they are going to do some day. But they never get started, so they never see their dreams come true.

If you want to get to the top, do your best every day. Give your best effort. Give 110% in a small job, and God will trust you with a bigger job. Jesus' parables make this quite clear (Matthew 25:21).

Some make the same mistake of saying "tomorrow" about spiritual things: "I'll get right with God tomorrow, after I've had my fling or made my fortune." I wouldn't bet on it!

You don't even know if you'll be alive tomorrow. "Your life is a vapor" - like a morning fog that gets burned off by the rising sun. You'd be smart to do what you need to do in the present. "Now" is the only moment over which you have control. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow may never arrive. Live with a sense of urgency.

Some say, "I'll serve God after I've done well and can relax a while, and I have more time." I doubt it! If you don't have time now, you'll probably not have any more time tomorrow. You'll find something else to do or some other place to go.

You say "I'll contribute to God's work, when I make my fortune." I question that. If you can't give a tenth now, when you make a little, I doubt if it will be any easier to give a tenth when you are worth a lot.

Do you see why God says it is so dangerous to talk about "tomorrow." Today is where we live. Live each day with a sense of urgency - as unto God and He will exalt you to be "tops" in what you are meant to do.

VII. **S** - There is one last point on our checklist. Let's check our **SUBMISSION** to God's Word (4:7,17).

Do you really want to go to the top God's way? Do you see where I get these principles from the Word of God?

Then "if we know" how to do good, let's do it. If we won't do it, "it is sin!"

This is not meant to be an interesting talk. It is God's truth. God says: "This is the way. Walk you in it." Let's get with it! Let's submit our wills and our ways right now to God's control.

"That may be well and good, but I was raised differently"...to know and not do is sin.

"O yes, but already I'm in too deep"...to know and not do is sin.

"Very interesting, but I couldn't change at my age"...to know and not do is sin.

"You may be right, but my competitors don't work that way"...to know and not do is sin.

"I see where you get it, but I could never make restitution"...to know and not do is sin.

"I agree with what you've said, but there is plenty of time"...to know and not do is sin.

**God is waiting to see if we will do what we know is right!** He wants to exalt you to the top!

## **SERMON NOTES**

### **"HOW TO GET TO THE TOP - WITH NO REGRETS"**

James 4

Intro:

A. God wants to "exalt us" - to the top. (4:10)

B. But we must do it God's way. (Ch. 4)

C. So let's check our:

**S** ecret Motives (3:13-18)

**U** rges (4:1-3)

**C** oncentration (4:4-7)

**C** onscience (4:8-9)

**E** nterprise (4:11-12)

**S** ense of Urgency (4:13-16)

**S** ubmission (4:7,17)

**Invitation:**

**Now let's do what we know! (4:17)**