

We're picking back up our study in the book of James. James is writing to the early followers of Jesus in the first century. His focus is on how desire impacts their relationships with one another and their relationship with God. It's fitting to talk about desire as we enter the new year. You have new things that you're thinking about - new things you want to do, new plans you have for this year, and maybe new challenges coming up. You have new desires for yourself, your family, and your career.

But desire present a challenge for us for two reasons. First, desire is a challenge because we tend to understand desire only on the extremes. For example, maybe you feel like you want to do, say, or acquire something. On one side of the extreme, you think that because you feel it, the desire is right or good. So, you act on that desire. Or maybe you live on the other side of the extreme. You have a desire to do, say, or act, but somewhere along the way, you learned that desires are to be avoided. So, you push aside any sense of longing or passion. We're not sure how to live somewhere in the middle.

The second challenge about desire is that desire requires discernment. But we haven't developed the skill of learning to ask better questions about our desire. So, we have end up in places and have experiences where we pursue things, we thought were right - only to find they are something we should not have pursued. Oscar Wilde famously wrote, "There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it." Maybe you have had that experience, and you're not sure how to make better choices around desire.

In this message, James will talk about an internal issue that has a negative external impact. The root of the problem is undiscerned desire. My hope for you is you would see a new way forward with desire. I want you to ask better questions about your desire. At the end of our time, I'm going to give you a question that you can use as you think through desire in this new year.

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

James is addressing the quarrels and fights in that church community. If you're familiar with the New Testament church, it is often lifted as a perfect representation. It's refreshing to hear the early church struggled with the same things we do - quarrels and fights. And James says quarrels and fights have an internal cause in each individual, namely, "The desires that battle within you."

Later, Jewish rabbis developed a philosophy around this battle. They said that in humans is the desire to do evil and the desire to do good. The "battle" is less between you and God, and more about choosing and yielding to the better way that God has already given you - the better conscience or insight (whatever term you want to use). Every day and every moment, you and I can yield to the evil desire or the yield to the better way. You get a choice; that is the battle.

For those James is writing to, they had yielded to desires, which were ending with them in relational destruction. Think about it this way; maybe you have been in a situation with someone at work. You're frustrated and fed up with their actions toward you. So, you go into work early and write an intense email, with equal parts anger, argument, and passion that you are certain will result in your vindication. And you hover over the send button, somewhere in the back of your mind, you hear some preacher long ago saying, "The anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God." You remember the common sense that all emails can be forwarded. There is that moment of decision. To which desire do you yield? That moment is the battle.

James is teaching his community that they have hit send too many times. As a result, it has destroyed two things in their community. First, it has destroyed their connectedness with one another. Listen to this language: "you kill," "you quarrel," "you fight." This

is extreme language. Were they actually killing each other? I don't think they were, but there is a background in the Old Testament for this language.

In the Old Testament, people were killed because of unchecked desire: Cain and Abel, David and Uriah, and Ahab and Naboth. There are stories throughout their history where people were killed because of someone yielding to an evil desire. Even their prayer life with one another is hindered. Prayer, at its base, is a connection between you and God. But it is also a connection between you and other people. All of this is happening, James says, because of the battle that is happening within them. They have yielded to the wrong way.

But if that were not bad enough, James goes on and even takes us deeper.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." vv. 4-6

Unchecked desire not only destroyed their connectedness with one another but, second, it destroyed their connectedness with God. He calls them "adulterous people," which, again, is looking back to their history. The Old Prophets use the image of marital infidelity to talk about when people choose a path different from God. The prophet, Jeremiah, said it this way, "As a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me." The prophet, Hosea, is a book about Hosea whose wife was unfaithful to him. He was commanded to go back again and again, pursuing her and taking her back. God is making a point throughout history that he's drawing people to himself. It's a unique relationship, and the only image that the prophets could think of that would get close to the power and weight, is the image of marriage.

James summarizes that relationship of God to people in this way: God is jealous for you. Maybe you've never heard this before. Maybe you've never thought about this previously. Maybe the best thing for you today is to hear that God is jealously in love with you. God is passionate for you. God's heart desire is to show himself to you because the very best thing for you is to be in a relationship with him. This is what God has been doing throughout history. It's an interesting contrast.

Where many of our desires have ended in destroyed connectedness, the desire of God is that He passionately loves you, and he jealously desires you.

And then there's this promise for you and me: He gives us more grace. When you feel like you've gotten to the end of grace, there's more grace. There's grace on top of grace. When you feel like you've excavated to the bottom of that grace, there's even more grace. You won't stop finding grace. This is who God is for you. This is the passionate, longing, and jealous love of God for you. God will not put up with rivals because, in his passion, the very best thing for you is to be in relationship with Him.

And then comes the hinge point between this section and the next. It's the only statement that shows up three times in the Bible: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." The humble are the people who respond to the jealous love of God and yield to that better way. James gives the way of how to humble yourself.

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. vv. 7-10

There are couplets: Resist the devil...and come near to God; wash your hands...purify your hearts. The promise of God is that He will draw near. Hands have the image of work; the heart has an image of commitment. Choose actions and be committed to things that will benefit, that will lead to the better way. Grieve...change your laughter. In other words, live the sober-minded life, being clear that this is a battle.

The apostle Paul had a great example of this in one of his letters. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, he says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." This is a great example of submission. Whatever thoughts come, take them captive. Arrange them in a new way that gets you out of the cycle of the destructiveness of things that destroy our connectedness with one another and with God. James says to this community, "There's a better way to live. There's a better way to spend your energy. Arrange it in the stream of God."

Then James gives practical advice to his community that can help us as well. It was probably something

happening in their community: Slander. And maybe something that you see in your community, family, work, or other spaces.

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. 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? vv. 11-12

There's a lot in there that we don't have time to get into, but think about like this. Slander is what happens when you sit above a person, when you put yourself above someone else. That's exactly what James has been arguing against. The way forward is not putting yourself above someone else. The way forward is arranging yourself under the purposes of God. Slander puts you above someone else. It undoes the humility that God pours favor upon.

Now, judgment. The Bible talks about judgment in a variety of different ways. But in short, you are called to challenge people. You are called to call people out to new places and new things, particularly if they're living in destructive ways. That's what James is doing. He's not judging. He's doing the thing that we should be doing. We can summarize what James is saying as, "You move toward people when you act in ways that are for them, that communicates God's jealous passion for them." How do you know if you're judging rightly or sitting above them? If you're for the other person, and if you have a way that you can communicate how passionately God is in love with them, then you're ready to speak to them. This is James leveraging desire. This is James leading his people to think about desire with discernment.

What do we do with this teaching? I mentioned earlier a question that can help you in your discernment process of desire. Here's the question. "Where does your desire lead?" The next time you have something you want, something you want to say, something you want to do, or something you want to engage in, ask this question, "Where will this lead?" The things you desire to say, do, or acquire build something up or tear something down. When you act on your desires, you are investing in something or someone. What is the result?

With the desires that come in whatever situation you're facing, whatever's coming across your path this new year, and whatever scenarios you're going to

meet this week, as you get back to work and school, what would be different if you asked this one question? "Where does this desire lead?" I wonder how many situations you've been in that you wish you did not get in, and you wouldn't have been in if you'd asked that question first. I wonder how many things you missed out on, something you weren't willing to take a chance on, or a step of courage you avoided because you weren't willing to ask the question, "Where does my desire lead?"

May God lead you to leverage your desire for His glory and your good.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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