

We are picking up in our study of the New Testament letter written by James. James was the half-brother of Jesus and one of the leaders of the early church. You may recall this letter is very practical. It answers the question, if you really believe in Jesus, what kind of life will you live? It's a "boots on the ground" approach to our faith. What you believe is important, but if that doesn't impact how you live your life, what good is it?

One of the specific areas of life James concentrates on is how to live in community. James talks a lot about how our faith impacts our relationships with one another, especially with fellow believers and followers of Jesus. A few weeks ago, we left off at the end of James chapter three, where James talked about what true wisdom is. He said true wisdom is peace-loving, considerate, submissive, impartial, sincere, and full of mercy. You can be a very successful person but still lack this kind of wisdom.

I've been reading the biography of Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple. He was a fascinating person, incredibly brilliant and creative, but terrible at this thing called community. But what's both interesting and sad is Christians haven't always been so good at this either. It's like the father who heard a commotion in his backyard. He looked outside and saw his 8-year-old daughter and some friends in a heated quarrel. When he intervened, his daughter turned to him and said, "Dad, we're just playing church!" Sad, but sometimes true.

What's even sadder is there are many believers today, who because of that, have decided to stay away from church. Maybe they've jumped around to different churches, but sooner or later, they see and experience the same old thing, followers of Jesus not loving one another and fighting one another. It's too painful to hang in there and work it out, so they leave.

The unfortunate thing about this is you can't grow as a believer apart from Christian community. Our culture has pounded the idea into our heads that we're whoever we want to be, and it doesn't matter who we do life with. But even social scientists will tell you who we are and what we believe has way more to do with our family, our relationships, and our community than anything else. Most of us grow up and say, "I'll never be like my father" or "I'll never be like my mother." We're adamant about that. We hold onto that into our 20s and 30s, but then at some point, we realize, "Oh my gosh! I'm just like my father." Or "I'm just like my mother." I say to my son all the time, "Do you see this? This is what you have to look forward to!"

Community shapes us, and we shape community. And that's why so much emphasis is put on this in the Bible. Over and over, Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." The very last thing Jesus prayed for was unity in the church. Unity doesn't mean we agree on all topics, but we don't let that disagreement destroy deeper bonds of love. Think of all the "one-another" commands: love one another, serve one another, accept one another, honor one another, submit to one another, forgive one another, confess your sins to one another, weep with one another, bear one another's burdens. There are dozens of these in the Bible. Why? Because Christian community shapes us, and we shape Christian community. But far too often it's shaped in the wrong way, which brings us to our text: James 4:1-12.

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. James 4:1-2a

The Cause of the Problem: Selfish Desires

Look how James starts, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" He wouldn't have asked that question unless these fights and quarrels were happening. Later in verse 11, he says, "Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another." The word used for slander describes all kinds of harmful speech: talking behind someone's back, making unfair accusations, lashing out in anger, or questioning authority. All this is happening in the churches James is writing to.

And James asks, "Where does this come from? What's the cause of this? Why is this happening?" His answer is quite simple. He says, "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" James says, "Look in the mirror. The problem is in you. The problem is in those desires that wage war within you." The word he uses for "desires" is the word *hedone* from which we get our word hedonism. Hedonism is a philosophy of life that says the whole point of life is pleasure. But James isn't talking about hedonism; he's talking about something closer to home. It's that orientation towards pleasing ourselves we all have.

The Enlightenment philosopher, John Stuart Mill, described it well, "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way." Western culture was built on that idea. Scottish writer of a century ago, George MacDonald, described it more bluntly when he said, "For the one principle of

Hell is 'I am my own. I am my own king and my own subject.'" Life revolves around me. None of us would admit to thinking that way, but it comes naturally to all of us.

It's like when my wife and I wake up in the morning; someone has to take the dog out to pee. I don't want to do it. It's cold out there. I want her to do it. But she doesn't want to do it either. That's a problem. Or you're running errands, and you have to stop at the market to pick up something for dinner. You're tired and in a hurry, but you can't find a parking spot. Finally, after circling the lot for the third time, you spot a space, but just as you move in that direction, you see another car moving there as well. Who gets the space?

Or you're having a conversation with someone you think highly of, and all of a sudden, a really irritating person walks up and wants to join the conversation. You want to blow him off. Why? I'm pursuing my good in my way. I'm my own king and my own subject.

Or how about this? You're on social media, and a photo comes up of a family you know well. They're all up at some posh ski resort. They look so happy and healthy, and here you are sitting at home watching the Hallmark channel. You start thinking, "Must be nice." You start to feel sorry for yourself. You begin to resent them and even judge them for spending hundreds of dollars to frolic in the snow for a day.

James says it's this kind of self-orientation that destroys community. Look at verse 2a. He says, "You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." In other words, it's your unmet desires causing these conflicts. You say, "Well, I've never murdered anyone." But it's true most homicides are just crimes of passion, often regretted after the fact. And let's not forget Jesus said being angry at a brother or sister is a form of murder. You see, so often it's the small things that get us. Every day we're faced with small choices to die to ourselves. I'll take the dog out. I'll let you have that parking space. I'll welcome this irritating person into my conversation. I'll not be envious and jealous. These are small deaths, but they define us. James even says this "I am my own" thinking impacts our prayer life. Look what he says,

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. vv. 2b-3

There are a couple of things to notice here about prayer as it relates to our desires and passions. On the one hand, we can and should go to God and ask him to meet our unmet needs. He's a generous giver. There are many things we miss out on because we don't persistently ask God and wait on him. On the other hand, God isn't a vending machine where you get to pick whatever you want. So often we come to him with our desires, which

is good, but our desires aren't always for the right things or, at the very least, our motives are mixed. Craig Blomberg, a New Testament professor at Denver Seminary, says:

"...our seemingly more noble requests for good health (so we can serve Christ better), good finances (so we can care for our families properly or give more away), or a good job (so we can exercise our spiritual gifts best there) can easily end up being motivated by the more fundamental yet ultimately selfish desires to feel good, to be able to buy whatever we want, or gain a good reputation with others."

Finally, James nails us all with these very pointed words.

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? vv. 4-5

These are hard words, but James is reminding us of a couple of things about God and how he views us. First, we have a relationship with God that's much like a marriage covenant. He's the groom, and we're his bride. He loves us passionately. He desires all of us. There's an exclusivity appropriate in committed love. He doesn't want us looking elsewhere to get our needs met. He rightly desires single-minded love and devotion, like any good husband. And so, there's an appropriate jealousy God has when we turn to another. These sound like such harsh words, but really, they're words of wounded love. God desires all of us. He created us to relate to him as our husband, our lover, our provider, and our defender. And when we turn to other things, he's jealous. We can't have it both ways. We can't have this little fling on the side with the world and remain friends with God.

That's the second thing about God — we're his friends. That's another beautiful way of showing how much God cares for us. In James' day, friendship was taken more seriously than today. It was a lifelong pact between people with shared values and loyalties. James says you can't be friends with the world and stay friends with God. The values of the two are ultimately at odds with one another. Jesus essentially said the same thing, "You can't serve two masters. Either you'll hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Mt. 6:24). So, James is simply calling us back to our single-minded devotion to God as our husband and friend.

But, remember, this whole discussion started with James talking about conflict — fights, and quarrels within the family of God. This means the relational conflict we experience with others starts with our relationship with God. The problem isn't as much a social problem as it is a spiritual problem. When we refuse to submit our selfish desires to God, when we chase after other

things, we commit spiritual adultery and become God's enemies. And when we do that, we'll inevitably put those same pleasures and desires before others, and end up in a battle with the very people we're called to love.

The Solution to the Problem: Grace for the Humble

And that's why, when James turns to what we ought to do about all of this, he focuses on the vertical rather than the horizontal. We might think the answer is just to learn to get along with difficult people, like set boundaries, be more assertive, or be a better listener. There's a place for all that, but that's not where James focuses.

He starts with these words:

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." v. 6

What we need isn't better people skills, but more grace. Grace is an undeserved gift. This isn't saving grace but the grace to face every need and every crisis with His resources. When God demands something, like loving one another, He supplies the grace to live out what he demands. The writer of Hebrews put it this way, *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16). God gives us grace, specifically in our time of need.

One of my favorite stories is of Corrie Ten Boom. When she was a young girl, she witnessed the death of a baby. Frightened by this experience, she burst into tears and sobbed to her father,

"I need you. You can't die! You can't!" Corrie's father sat down beside her and gently said, "Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you the ticket?" She sniffled a little and replied, "Why, just before we get on the train." "Exactly," her father responded, "and our wise Father in heaven knows when we are going to need things too. Don't run ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need, just in time."

You see, God doesn't give us grace for the future. Grace can't be stored. It's given for the moment we're in need. It's like the manna God supplied the Israelites in the wilderness. It's for today — right now in your time of need. Do you have a personal propensity for insecurity and fear? He gives more grace. Are you so stubborn you can't stand to lose an argument? He gives more grace. Do you constantly say things that hurt others, you love? He gives more grace. Do you want to learn how to cultivate true friendships? He gives more grace.

But how do you get that grace? Look what James says as he quotes from Proverbs 3:34 — God gives this grace not to the proud but to the humble. The proud are those who feel like they can do all

this on their own. They have things figured out. They don't need any help. God does not help those who help themselves; he helps those who cannot help themselves and turn to him.

That's why James rattles off ten commands, which all have to do with this humbling process that makes God's grace available to us.

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

Notice these commands are bracketed by the idea of humbling ourselves before God. First, we need to submit ourselves to God. It's like, let God be God. That irritating person is someone God put it in your life. The difficult task of forgiving someone who's hurt you is something you do not because it makes any sense, but because God tells you to, and he knows what's best. Submit to God.

And then the very last command is similar, "Humble yourselves before the Lord." Don't wait to be humbled, humble yourself. Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. Humble people don't claim their rights. Humble people don't go around, pointing the finger at everyone else as the problem. They understand what James says in verse 12, "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?"

In-between these two commands are eight other commands, all of which are part of humbling ourselves before God. We might think of humility and submission to God as a passive thing, but it's not.

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Humility and submission require an active resistance to the enemy. Satan loves to create division and bitterness in the body of Christ — don't let him.

"Come near to God and he will come near to you." Again, this isn't a passive but an active thing. Draw near to God! How do we do that? Pray! The essence of drawing near to God is prayer. And prayer is bringing your helplessness to him. When you do that, the promise is, he'll draw near to you. He'll sustain you. He'll bring you the help you need when you need it.

"Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." These two commands use Old Testament imagery of ritual cleansing and purity in temple worship. The idea is to clean up your act. Wash your hands refers to those external things and actions that you need to get rid of. But there are things on the inside, too — thoughts, desires, and resentments. So, he also says purify your hearts. Deal with those things no one sees.

"Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom." More actions! He's saying, don't take these toxic actions and attitudes lightly. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." Mourn over what? Mourn over your sin. Do you mourn over those attitudes and actions that cause strife? You don't need to beat yourself up, but don't blow it off either. Take it seriously.

Do you know the one thing that will get in the way of all of this? Pride. C.S. Lewis said a lot about this. He said of pride:

"[It is] the essential vice, the utmost evil... Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison. It was through pride that the Devil became the Devil: Pride leads to every other vice..."

He went on to explain how pride impacts our relationships.

"Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich or clever or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If someone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest."

God will humble the proud, but humility before God is the channel through which grace flows. You might call it "the gravity of grace." Like earth's water system, which flows from the highest to the lowest, grace's gravity flows to those who are the lowest, to those who mourn, to the poor in spirit, and to the meek where it brings life and blessing. The promise is if you humble yourself before him, he will lift you up.

Here we are at the start of not just a new year but a new decade. My wife and I have been reflecting on all the changes in our lives over the past ten years. We moved to a new town, we saw two of our kids get married, we accumulated four grandsons, our marriage turned 40, and we each turn 60, we each lost a parent. As a church, we planted a church on the North Peninsula. Lots of changes and those changes have shaped us.

But as we look to a new decade, I want to encourage you to reflect on a question that comes out of this passage. What kind of community will you shape around you? You see, community shapes us, but we also shape community. And, as we've seen, this isn't just a question about our relationship with others, it's also

a question about our relationship with God, which will overflow into every other relationship we have.

And so, on the dawn of this new decade, I want to challenge you to consider how you're shaping the community around you? We've learned the problem is most often not with others, but with us. We've bought into the lie: "I'm my own king and my own subject." Are you living with yourself at the center? Have you developed a friendship with the world, and without even knowing it, become an enemy of God? And how is that fundamental infidelity poisoning the relationships that matter most in your life? The solution is to stop demanding your own will and your own way and humbly submit to God. When you do that, God's grace will prove more than sufficient.

A perfect example of this is Jesus. The Son of God came not to be served but to serve. The Son of God humbled himself and took on all the weaknesses and infirmities of human flesh. The Son of God claimed his rights but humbled himself and died the death we deserved.

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Phil. 2:5-11

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

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