

Series James

This Message Faith Without Intimacy With God is Dead

“Come near to God and He will come near to you”

Scripture James 4:1-10

I hope your appreciation of James is increasing with each passage we study. We have discovered that his thoughts are spiritually deep and insightful. We have discovered that his style of writing is blunt and direct. He doesn't “beat around the bush” in getting his message across to his readers. He wanted the truth of his words to “sting.” He wanted his readers to escape from the fog of worldliness which had clouded up their faith.

James had served as the spiritual leader of the Church in Jerusalem before its members were scattered to regional locations. This letter, which was sent “to the twelve tribes of Israel scattered among the nations,” was his effort to provide continued pastoral care to his former parishioners. Face-to-face contact was not possible, so he had to resort to the written form of communication, and he used his words to confront, in the most succinct, gripping, and persuasive way possible, the sinful motives and evil practices of once fervent followers of Jesus.

In the message last week, James contrasted “the wisdom which comes from heaven” with the “wisdom which is earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil.” The fact that the believers were “harboring bitter envy and selfish ambition in their hearts” (*James 3:14*), and the fellowships were characterized by “disorder and every evil practice” (*James 3:16*), was evidence that the believers were not listening to God and not living out the faith that they professed. They were not “showing the good life by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (*James 3:13*). There was too much pride and too little love.

In chapter 4 James continued to point out the worldly attitudes of his readers. He urged them to change their motives, return to an attitude of humility, submit to God, and practice “the wisdom that comes from heaven.” The title of this message is “Faith Without Intimacy With God is Dead.” In this passage James pleads with his readers to return to and remain faithful to God.

Read James 4:1-10

At the end of chapter 3, James mentioned the climate of peace which was necessary for the production of righteousness (*James 3:18*). Peace was clearly not the climate in which the recipients of this letter were living. Their lives were characterized by constant “fights and quarrels.” In the Greek language, these two nouns (“fights” and “quarrels”) were normally used to describe open warfare between nations, and, hence, they were very forceful expressions of the kind of open antagonism which existed between believers.

James explained the reason for the combative attitudes with a rhetorical question, “Don’t they come from your desires?” This question was worded in such a way that the only reasonable answer was “yes, they do.” The term translated “desires” is the source of the English word “hedonism,” which designates the philosophy that views pleasure as the chief goal of life. James was implying that the believers had given up on their desires to follow Jesus and were instead seeking to satisfy the desires of their hearts.

James mentioned the “battle within them.” Individual believers undoubtedly had spiritual conflicts going on within them, that is, in the inner being of their souls. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit would have been working on their minds and in their hearts. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to convict believers when their lives are not in sync with the ways of God, so it was not surprising that a battle was going on within them. Notice that verse 5 is another reference to the ministry of the Spirit, “The Spirit that God caused to live within us envies intensely.”

Verse 2 is one of those absolutely shocking statements that James inserts occasionally into this letter. The thought of verse 2 is, “So strong is your desire to obtain something you want that you kill and covet for it.” That statement seems so exaggerated that commentators have debated the meaning for centuries. The word “kill” is in the context of “fights and quarrels,” words which speak of warfare. Is it possible that even believers will, on occasion, let no evil action stand in the way of their achieving personal satisfaction?

Most commentators take the word translated “kill” to be a substitute for “hatred.” They base their understanding on statements made by Jesus, who equated hatred with murder, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (*Matthew 5:21-22*), and the Apostle John, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (*1 John 3:15*). Both statements equate murder with hatred.

When hatred is combined with covetousness, they form a very potent blend of evil attitude. Covetousness is the excessive desire for what one does not have. It is based on discontentment with the resources that one has, especially when compared with the possessions of another person. A close synonym is the attitude of “greed.” Philosophers and historians both agree that virtually all the evils in human existence can be traced to attitudes of covetousness. Ironically, covetousness very seldom leads to the actual attainment of what is desired. However, the efforts driven by the desire are almost always the cause of conflict and strife.

James’ point was that individual believers should not look beyond themselves for the source of interpersonal conflicts. Rather, they were to look within. The source was selfishness. Notice how many times James used the pronoun “you” in verses 1, 2, and 3: “fights and quarrels ... come from within you.” “You want something but you don’t get it.” “You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want.” “You quarrel and fight.” And finally, “You do not have because you do not ask God.” and, “When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives.”

James was alerting his readers to the disastrous consequences of living merely to satisfy personal desires. Yes, the Jewish believers were being treated badly by both their Gentile neighbors and unsaved fellow Jews. Yes, they were impoverished and in desperate need of more of the necessities of life, but these were not excuses for their worldly lusts, desires, and behaviors. The secret to resolving their conflicts was to correctly identify the source of their problems, and that source was clearly stated by James to be personal selfish desires — the kind of desires that “come from ... within.”

Remember the old cartoon strip featuring Pogo? Pogo would sometimes come out with the most incredibly accurate philosophical statements. One of the best was, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” That’s exactly what James was explaining. Spiritually speaking, we are our own worst enemies. James referred to this enemy as “your desires,” verse 1, and “your pleasures,” verse 3. (These are the same word in Greek language.)

Having identified the source of the bitter fighting as personal desire and pleasure, James then continued on to write about the consequences of such behavior. Notice the shocking statements in verse 4. He referred to his readers as “adulterous people.” He accused them of “hating God,” and being “enemies of God.” Strong words!

It was James' intention to psychologically jolt his readers — to alert them to their true spiritual condition, which was, in a word, “unfaithfulness to God.” He wanted them to face squarely the magnitude of their sins. This concept of spiritual adultery was probably based on several Old Testament passages in which the LORD God compared unfaithful Israel to an adulterous prostitute. (*See, for example, Hosea 2:2-5; 3:1-5, 9:1*).

Individuals who profess faith in Jesus are confronted with a significant life decision related to their growth as disciples. They can choose to maintain a “friendship connection with the world” or to pursue, through obedience, a tight faithful relationship with God. These two ways are direct opposites. The word “world” here refers to the system of evil controlled by Satan. By its very nature, then, “friendship with the world is hatred toward God.” Friendship with the world means living to please yourself apart from God. The believer who deliberately “chooses to be a friend of the world” thus automatically “becomes an enemy of God.”

Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the choice required of His listeners. He said that they could proceed through life on the wide way which led to destruction or get on the narrow way which led to life (*See Matthew 7:13-14*). James was echoing this same teaching. He was trying to impress on his readers the importance and urgency of getting their lives back on track.

The word “Scripture” appears in both verses 5 and 6. James appealed to Scripture in an attempt to persuade his worldly minded readers to reverse course and begin to follow the ways of God. Verse 5 is a rhetorical question, which can be paraphrased, “Don't you realize that the Holy Spirit of God is jealous that you have chosen the world over Him?”

Although James attributed verse 5 to the Old Testament Scriptures, there is no passage which provides a verbatim quotation, but there are passages which give the gist of what James had written, such as the statement in the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me ... for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (*Exodus 20:5*), and “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (*Exodus 34:14*), and, “This is what the LORD Almighty says, ‘I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her’” (*Zechariah 8:2*).

Individuals who have made a commitment to Jesus are expected to follow through on that commitment. The worldly minded believers who received this letter needed to recognize that they had instead positioned themselves as enemies of God, and that they were facing divine judgment. Verses 4 through 6 highlight God's expectation that His people render total, unreserved, unwavering allegiance to Him rather than to the world.

Verse 6 is both a warning and a promise. The quotation is from the book of Proverbs, "The LORD mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble" (*Proverbs 3:34*). A version of that proverb was stated by Jesus, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (*Luke 14:11; also Luke 18:14*). Although God does not give grace to those who are proud, self-reliant, and self-righteous, He does give grace to those who quit trying to satisfy their own desires on their own and who humbly submit themselves to God.

God in grace gives his people the help they need if they want to resist the appeal of the world and to remain loyal to him. The words "grace" and "humble" become the theme for verses 7 through 10 where we find a series of ten commands.

The word "repentance" is not found in those verses, but it is the concept behind the commands. James described the actions of repentance that specifically apply to the attitudes and behaviors of his readers. Repentance begins with a deep sense of humility, requires the putting off of sin, and it involves a cleansing of hearts and hands, which represent the innermost motivations and deeds of the believer, and anticipates genuine remorse for past actions.

The meanings of most of the commands are clear enough. There is no uncertainty about the phrases, "submit to God," "resist the devil," "come near to God," and "purify your hearts." The words, "grieve, mourn, and wail" represent sorrow for improper behavior. The phrases, "change your laughter to mourning" and "change your joy to gloom" have similar meanings to "grieve, mourn, and wail, but they refer to "repentance." Repentance means to change the direction of movement. Repentance means to stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is correct. When one's life is headed the wrong direction, it is necessary to turn around and head off in the proper direction. That is the essence of repentance.

There is a pattern in these verses. Commands are followed by promises. For example, the commands to “submit to God” and “resist the devil” are followed by the promise, “the devil will flee;” that is, he will no longer be able to tempt and influence the person to do evil. The command to “draw near to God” is followed by the promise “and He will come near to you.” That promise highlights the need for believers to maintain a spiritual intimacy with God, the title of this message.

Next there are four related commands: “Wash your hands and purify your hearts,” “grieve, mourn and wail,” “change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom,” and “humble yourselves before the Lord.” The promise which is linked to these commands is “and the Lord will lift you up.” The meaning of the phrase “lift you up” is not entirely clear, but it is undoubtedly linked to Jesus’ statement, “he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

There is an obvious connection between the actions of repentant believers and God’s response. God gives Himself to us when we give ourselves to Him. God jealously waits for His people to be completely focused on Him. The problems addressed by James in this letter were serious, but he held out hope for those who humbled themselves and submitted themselves to God, repented, and made the necessary changes in their lives. We must keep in mind the promise part of verse 6: God Himself provides the grace for godly living.

“The spirit of worldliness” has always been a problem in church fellowships. James wrote his letter with the objective of reviving the faith of 1st Century believers who were from a Jewish background, but his teaching is as relevant today as in the 1st Century. The causes of conflicts in the Church are varied and they often manifest themselves in subtle ways. However, according to James, the root cause is an attitude of selfish worldliness.

Relational problems will be avoided only when believers “submit to God in humility” — putting God before self, and putting the interests of others before personal interests. When they do this, God has promised that they will be “lifted up.”