

*Faith That Works: With Friends Like These...*

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*Psalm 37:16-24; Mark 10:17-31; James 4:1-10*

Our final Scripture reading today is from James 4:1-10: May God bless the reading of his holy, sacred, and precious Word. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. 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. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 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.”

“If it weren't for the fact that the TV set and the refrigerator are so far apart, some of us wouldn't get any exercise at all.” That was one of the trademark jokes of Joey Adams, someone I'd never heard of before this week. Turns out Joey Adams was a vaudeville comedian for over 70 years who wrote a humor column in the New York Post for decades and published 23 comedy books. He was a major part of the New York Friars Club, which became known for celebrity roasts. At these roasts, the closest friends and associates of a famous comedian or celebrity would come together and celebrate them by making pointed jokes at their expense. These roasts led to Joey Adams' most famous quote that we all know – “With friends like these, who needs enemies?”

With friends like these, who needs enemies? It may be a recent quote in world history, but the sentiment goes back all the way through time. Cain kills his brother Abel. The longstanding feud between the brothers Jacob and Esau didn't just last their lifetimes – it lasted between their descendants for centuries. One of the saddest psalm is Psalm 55, where David cries out to God for protection from the wicked who are hunting him. About halfway through the psalm, he reveals who is after him – “It is not an enemy who taunts me – I could bear that. It is not my foes who so arrogantly insult me – I could have hidden from them. Instead, it is you – my equal, my companion and close friend. What good fellowship we enjoyed as we walked together to the house of God!”

We all know what it's like to be betrayed or insulted by a close friend, for a relationship to go astray. It's one of the most painful things we experience. Today, James explains the root of fights and quarrels that happen among the people of God – spouses, family members, close friends. And not only is he right, when we look at those stories we see in the Old Testament – Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau – we see that the same factors are at play. Not only that, James presents solutions that point us back in the right direction, towards our Lord and Savior.

The first section of James 4 describes the problem – fights and quarrels among you. You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. The nature of the strong language like “kill” in this passage makes us wonder if this is really aimed at Christians at all, but several clues tell us that it is. James mentions that our inclination should be to ask God for what we need in prayer – something that only believers would do. James talks about being adulterous people – and that is only possible if the people James is talking to are wedded to Christ. He calls upon submission to God. This is not suddenly a charge to unbelievers to believe; it's an intense discussion with the church to get its act together.

Does James mean that Christians are actually killing others over their wants? It's hard to say. On the one hand, James is writing a book steeped in Jewish tradition and understanding, and hyperbole is expected. Are Christians in James' day literally killing each other over their wayward desires? Nothing from history tells us they were – in fact, the church brought together a lot of different ethnic groups that were traditionally enemies.

But remember the words of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount – where He states that we will be liable not just if we murder our brother, but if we harbor anger against our brother. The apostle John in 1 John 3:15 says that “whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding within him.” The New Testament is very clear that rage against each other is akin to murder; it has the same effect on us spiritually, even if we don't commit the action. Just like the church today, the early church had anger management issues.

But anger really isn't the key problem; it's a problem, all right, but it's a symptom of the real disease: *covetousness and the desires that battle within us*. You want something you can't have. That's the issue. And we're not talking about the necessities of life here – food and water, air, clothing, shelter. We shouldn't begrudge anyone those things. We might remember again Jesus' words of prayer, “give us today our daily bread.” He assured us that God knows what we need and will provide for us. What James is getting at is something else entirely.

It's envy and desire that create such massive problems in our relationships, in our churches, in our everyday lives. We want what someone else has. We covet it for ourselves. Cain and Abel – Cain was angry that Abel's sacrifice was accepted but not his own. We don't know exactly why, plenty of possibilities, but here's the thing: God actually spoke to Cain about his anger, warning him about it, and yet Cain still kills Abel. Why? Jealousy. Envy. Maybe of Abel's relationship with God, maybe of all Abel had, we aren't certain. But we know that the animosity came about because Cain wanted what Abel had. Same with Jacob and Esau...Jacob wanted the blessing of the firstborn and all that came with it. He was envious. Combined with Esau's lack of respect for the blessing, selling it for a bowl of soup, and a huge generational conflict emerges.

It doesn't matter how much we have or the quality of what we have, we always want more. We have a great house, beautiful house, God blessed us with it. And yet I'd love a vaulted ceiling; love all that sunlight coming in. I'm not envious of much in California, especially now, but I envy southern California weather. I envy all these new cars with keyless starters and seat warmers and whatnot. Not significantly so, not so much that I'm running right out to fix these things, I am pretty content, but envy is real for everyone.

Fights and quarrels happen within the church family, too, over envy and desire. Who's getting the most attention from the pastor? Who gets to choose what color the youth room is painted? What kind of music will we use – contemporary or traditional or a blend or what? Who has the say how the memorial monies will be spent? All these have split churches wide open. We've not talking about political and social issues that wreak havoc, we've talking about minor issues that still expose our hearts. Wanting what we want, angry when we don't get it.

I've had to ask myself sometimes in my journey with Jesus, and I've had others ask me about it too, is, "Why didn't Jesus provide X thing I prayed about?" And sometimes that thing seems to be genuinely good, healing of an illness, provision for a loved one. I can't always answer those questions; sometimes, it's simply not the will of God in that moment.

But there are plenty of times – plenty of times! – when what James says comes roaring at us. First, we don't ask God. We think something, we are like, "It'd sure be nice if," but we don't take it to the Lord in prayer. Or if we do, we ask once and forget about it. That's a pretty sure sign that it's not that important. Look, when we all used to eat out, when the waiter didn't bring us our soda, we'd ask again. Sometimes twice. We want God to provide something important for us and we don't bring it up again? That's kind of weird, don't you think? And really, a lot of things we just don't pray about at all. God wants us to approach Him about everything, and yet we don't.

But even more importantly, we fail to check our motives. As James says, we don't receive often because we would wind up spending what we get on our pleasures. Our motivations are so important, and we so easily deceive ourselves about them. If I got a promotion at work, would I spend the extra money helping the poor, helping our mission to spread the love of Jesus, or would I spend it on a new car I don't actually need?

Is what I receive from God's hand something I would use to bless God's people and to bring God honor, or would it just wind up as another trophy purchase collecting dust? We have to ask those questions even about things that seem godly. As a pastor, do I buy more books for my theological library so I can learn and grow in my relationship with God, or do I want an impressive looking bookshelf so I can feel good about myself? Lots of things to examine.

But James pulls no punches when it comes to where our hearts should be. We are adulterous – when we get friendly with the world, when we let our envy and desires sway us, we're breaking our vows to Christ. When we envy, when we covet, when we want the stuff of the world, we are showing our divided loyalties. Now don't misunderstand; it does not mean that owning things is bad in and of itself. But you can only prioritize one thing. Either it's going to be God, or it's going to be the world. How many of us make our relationship with God a priority above all things? All of a sudden, we recognize it's not just about how you spend your money; it's how you spend your time, where your mind naturally goes when there's a free minute. If I spend an hour a week on Sundays at worship, eight hours of sleep a night, forty hours of work a week, what do I do with the roughly 71 other hours I can control?

It turns out that God is jealous and envious too, but in a perfect and perfectly understandable way. The Spirit God causes to live in us envies intensely. This is the jealousy spouses should have for one another; after making their vows, they belong to one another exclusively. How much more does God have the right to claim us for Himself alone? In Exodus 34:14, when telling the Israelites not to run after idols, God says that one of His names is Jealous. But unlike human jealousy, this is perfect jealousy – He made us for Himself, He claimed us for Himself, Jesus died for us to be united with Him – why shouldn't He be jealous?

Yet, James says, He gives us more grace. He forgives our indiscretions, but He wants us to stay true. He gives us the ability through the Holy Spirit to become faithful. He gives grace to those who humble themselves before Him and do not proudly strike it out on their own in their own strength. He is jealous for us, and because of that jealousy He also makes it so that those who belong to Him can be loyal and true. His goal for us is to be wholly His in every way.

So how do we remain true to God? How do we stop the fights and quarrels that break our relationships apart? How do we stop envying the world and desiring what the world desires? James gives us several answers, all of them true, all of them useful. I'm not going to center on each of them today because there are too many, and some overlap, and some we've talked about. But we'll get a feel for how we can play a role in stopping friends from becoming enemies and siblings in the church from endless squabbling.

First, James says, *submit yourselves to God*. He used this word last week, too, describing how true wisdom is submissive, willing to give up its own desires for godly desires. That is the same concept here, but in a very personal and active way. Submit yourselves to God. In our society and culture, as in ancient Near Eastern culture, submission is an incredibly hard thing. We chafe against rules and restrictions. We don't want to submit to anyone; we want to choose our own path, choose our own rules, choose our own morality. Submission to God says, "It's not in my hands. I'm not the one who gets to choose. I am under God's direction and not my own."

Submission to God is difficult in the sense that we have to give up our own self-determination of what is right and wrong; we have to give up our pursuit of our own selfish self-interests. And yet there is freedom in submitting to God. We are not under the pressure of the world to conform to its ways. We are not under the burden of the world's eye – we might be condemned by the world, but it no longer matters because the world is not our highest authority. Submission to God breaks us free of the noose of envy that tightens with every purchase we make to keep up with our neighbors. Submission to God gives us the freedom to love well.

James' next command, *resist the devil*, is part of our submission to God. To submit authority to God means we resist the devil. Resist the temptations he throws at us. I think sometimes we softball this one; we resist in a halfhearted way and the enemy is like, "Is that all you've got?" Resistance is not half-hearted. Resistance is taking back territory from the enemy that he has stolen, territory he has no right to claim. Take up spiritual arms and fight him with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God; be prepared with faith and righteousness, and every last one of the enemy's forces, even the devil, will flee. He has no power except what we give to him.

As we resist, we also come near to God. James assures us God will come near to you. I think when we do this, we'll find that God will come near to us because He never went anywhere. He never left us; we left Him. We just need to travel the path back. But this is so important. How can we submit to God and resist the devil if we don't come near to God? If we spent half the time we spend watching TV, playing games, reading social media, half the time, with the Lord in prayer and reading and Scripture and learning, we would be spiritual giants.

This might be the hardest one – for all of us. The world has set us up in patterns of expecting pleasure through everything, from the shows we watch to the places we eat to the schools we attend. As we've been helping Jackson do some college hunting, I've been amazed at how many schools make a chief point of advertising all the places to eat on campus, all the social activities, all the things to do. It turns out a lot of the cost of education these days is paying for amenities to lure in students. And here I thought college was about learning something? We must come near to God, and to do so takes time, resisting the urge for constant entertainment and amusement and pleasure.

“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Summed up in a nutshell, this is *renewing purity*. Purity also came up last week, but it's the idea of returning to the innocence we had before, repenting of the actions we've taken that separated us from God and cleaning up the mess we made when we did so. And notice too the theme that James has given to us throughout his book – clean up both the outer actions (wash your hands) and the inner life (purify your hearts). The Spirit will make both clean as we submit to Him.

Maybe to our modern ears words like “sinners” and “double-minded” seem harsh and judgmental. They are words we need to hear. We will only seek purity, we will only pursue righteousness, if we know we aren't yet pure and righteous. We don't need a therapeutic gospel that makes us feel better. We need the real gospel that tells us that we are sinners in desperate need of rescue from the penalty of our treason against God – and the good news that God has sent that rescue to us in the form of Jesus Christ for all who would believe and trust in Him. We need to wake up from our slumber. Nobody likes being called a sinner. But if it's the truth, then turning to Jesus and finding the purity we had lost is paramount to our eternal souls.

James' next instructions hit me as strange. “*Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.*” Aren't we supposed to have joy as Christians? Yes, absolutely. We find great joy together as we worship the Lord. There is absolutely a time for laughter and fun and happiness. But confronting our sin is serious business. Perhaps the greatest danger for us is to take our sin lightheartedly.

Sin is an affront to God. It debases us. Sin is horrific. Our sin impedes others from taking the gospel seriously. Sin takes away our joy because it leads us down paths of destruction. If you've ever gotten into serious trouble, you know that feeling at the pit of your stomach when you know you're in over your head and don't know how to get out. Mourning our sin feels like that. It doesn't last forever. But it should last long enough for us to realize we never want to go back to that place.

Finally, *humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up*. That's a constant and recurring theme in James. Be humbled before God. Don't lift yourself up. Take on the posture of Jesus, who made Himself a servant to others despite His status as the Son of God. That's the place from which God will raise you up. Do these things, make yourself low, and God will raise you far higher than you could raise yourself.

May we take these lessons of James to heart. May we not be those who in envy and jealousy tear one another and our relationships apart. May we live ever near to God's grace, rejecting the world, following Him, humbling ourselves, knowing that God loves us fiercely, jealously, and forever.