

**“Sowing the Seeds of Peace”**  
**Sermon Series on *Faith That Works* #6**  
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**(James 4:1-12)**

One morning as a mother was making pancakes for her two sons, the boys began to argue with one another about who was going to get the first pancake. The mother saw this as an opportunity to teach her kids about learning how to share and not fight with one another. So she said, “You know, if Jesus were sitting here, He would say ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’”

One boy quickly turned to his younger brother and said, “You be Jesus!”

Why is it that we want everyone else to act like Jesus, but it’s not our first impulse? Why do we fight and argue with the very people who are closest to us and we love the most? As Rodney King famously asked years ago after the riots in Los Angeles, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

The apostle James had some insight into the answers to these questions, and he writes about it here in the fourth chapter of his epistle.

**I. Our Struggle in Relationships.**

James begins the passage by saying, “*What causes quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill and you covet, because you cannot have what you want*” (Jms. 4:1-2). Here the apostle builds a connection between the outer problems we experience in relationships and the inner problems of our own selfish hearts. The arguments we have with other people often stem from problems we’re experiencing internally in our own souls.

James uses strong language to describe the battle within. The two Greek nouns he uses in this passage were normally used to describe warfare, but they also came to be common but forceful expressions for any kind of conflict. James chose the vocabulary of war not because there was no other way to say it, but because there was no other way to express the shock of people who claimed to be followers of Christ to live in such conflict with one another.

James asks, “*What causes fights and quarrels among you?*” And he answers, “*Don’t they come from your desires?*” The term “desires” is a translation of the Greek word *hedonon*, from which we got the English word “hedonism.” What James suggests is that in the same way selfish pleasure is the overriding pursuit of a hedonistic life, so the cause of fighting and arguments can be traced back to

selfish desires that battle within our own hearts. The problem lies within, and it's below the surface.

When the San Diego Yacht Club's sailboat won the America's Cup back in 1988, the margin of victory was attributed to the ingenious design of the boat's hull more so than the skill and efficiency of the crew. What mattered most in the race was below the deck, not above it. A better-designed hull enabled their sailboat to go faster.

In the same way, many problems in a marriage, a family, our business, or even a church can't be solved unless we look below the surface. It may be easier to try and clean up the external appearances than it is to address our selfish motives and desires, but it never gets at the root problems that lie beneath the surface. Instead of fighting the battle within, we often end up fighting one another.

The Bible illustrates how this happens. Think about Cain when he killed his brother Abel in Genesis 4. He was angry with God for refusing to accept his offering, and he took out his anger on his brother. God warned Cain that sin was crouching at the door of his heart, but Cain refused to heed the warning. The problem was in Cain's heart, and it had nothing to do with his brother Abel.

Or take another example from Scripture in the life of Absalom. He was intent on pursuing his own personal agenda of power and success, so he conspired against his father, David, who was the king. He used his personal charisma to steal the hearts of the people so he could take the throne for himself. As a result of his willful pride, a family was divided and a whole nation suffered.

Now, before I point fingers at other people, I should take a hard look at my own life. How many times have I stormed around the house trying to find my wallet when I've lost it, and I directed my anger at Lorie? The fact of the matter is that I'm upset with myself for having misplaced my wallet for the umpteenth time, but I take out my anger on my wife instead. The problem really has nothing to do with her. It has everything to do with me, and I project my anger with myself on the person who is closest to me. Do you ever do that?

Who can measure the devastating impact of angry words which can break a friendship, destroy a marriage, or split a church? Who can measure the rage seething beneath the surface no matter how things might appear at face value? If we're going to discover peace with God and the peace of God, we've got to deal with the battle deep inside our own hearts and not overlook these problems. We need to dig down to the root of the matter and address the problem within.

## **II. Friendship with the World.**

James continues his analysis and writes, "*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*" (4:4).

James suggests that for the follower of Jesus Christ, there are really two main potential objects of our affection – the world and God. And the two aren't compatible. To be a friend of the world and to adopt its set of values is to choose to live in a manner that is contrary to the standards and values of God. And the result of this is that we're at odds with the Lord when we do so. The person who chooses to be a friend of the world by that choice becomes an enemy of God.

When you hear the word “worldliness”, what do you think of? Most people think about the obvious dos and don'ts often associated with bad behavior – things we should avoid like smoking and drinking, doing drugs, sleeping around, and using foul language.

When I was in college, I heard a little poem that poked fun at some Christians' ideas of worldliness. It went like this:

Rooty toot toot, rooty toot toot,  
We are the boys from the institute  
We don't smoke, drink, cuss, or chew.  
And we don't go with girls who do!

However, the kind of worldliness James criticizes isn't as obvious or as simple as the list of behaviors in that poem. Author John White has written:

“One can avoid [pornographic] movies and beer parties [but] still harbor...bitterness and pride [in one's heart]. We can be cigarette free but untruthful [in our speech], total abstainers [from alcohol], but gossipers, modest in [our] dress but acquisitive [in buying too many things]...The heart of worldliness has more to do with...possessiveness, jealousy, the pursuit of [material things], pride, and snobbery than with the more traditional... taboos [we usually associate with it].”<sup>1</sup>

My friend Doug Webster says that James' readers were susceptible to what he called “greeting card Christianity.” By that he meant they politely said all the right words to someone in need, but they didn't do anything about it themselves. They preferred personal opinion over biblical conviction. They protected their self-interest and discriminated against the poor. They were hearers of the Word, but not doers of it. And they wanted a “decaffeinated Christianity”, not the kind that keeps you up at night worrying about widows and orphans, the poor and the oppressed.

I think that whenever I

- Compromise my morals,
- Join in the off-color humor at school or work,
- Use another person for my own purposes,

- Have an opportunity to speak for Christ and fail to do so,
- Rationalize away hard biblical teaching,
- Copy someone's homework or cheat on a test,
- Put someone down or make a joke at their expense,
- Or cheat on my taxes or on my expense report at work,

by these actions I am choosing to be a friend of the world and not a friend of God.

James opens and closes his call to repentance with virtually the same words, "*Submit yourselves, then, to God....Humble yourselves before the Lord.*"

Everything in between underscores a deliberate turning to God. The apostle provides ten imperatives that call us to action:

Submit to God;

Resist the devil;

Come near to God;

Wash your hands;

Purify your hearts;

Grieve, mourn and wail;

Change your laughter to mourning; and

Humble yourselves before the Lord!

James is trying to penetrate our comfort zones and wake us up from our spiritual apathy. In an age of consumer Christianity, when we think it's all about us, James calls for repentance. And he urges us to examine our hearts and take a hard look at our lives, because if we don't it will have devastating consequences.

Legendary singer Whitney Houston died in 2012 in a bathtub in a California hotel at the age of 48. Apparently it was an accidental drowning due to an overdose of drugs. The irony is that Whitney began her singing career in a church in Newark, New Jersey, and Gospel music was the foundation of her early life. But as fame and fortune came her way, she began to struggle. And she couldn't decide if she wanted to be a friend of the world or a friend of God. In the end she lost her life in that battle.

A woman in my former church was worshipping at the Maundy Thursday Service one year, and during communion God spoke to her. In the silence of that hour He said, "You're breaking my heart. Why aren't you living the worthiness of your calling in Christ?" It pulled her up short, and it convicted her of some things that needed to change in her life. Has that ever happened to you?

What needs to change in your life? What is God saying to you today? What is the message He wants you to hear? The Lord asks for your complete affection and devotion, and He won't allow you to have other lovers of your soul. The call is to

transfer your affection for the things of this world to the things of God. Whose friend are you, really?

### **III. The Problem of a Critical Spirit.**

In verses 11, 12, James makes it clear that his readers had fallen into the habit of criticizing one another. So he says to them, "Stop it!" In passing judgment on another person, we usurp the position of authority that is reserved for God alone. He's the One who is our Judge, and the apostle bluntly crushes any right his readers may have thought they had to sit in judgment over someone else.

A critical spirit is a plague of our culture, and frankly it's a problem in most churches. The media have made an art form of it, and all of us tend to be armchair quarterbacks who second-guess everyone in leadership and everything they do. The bottom line is that God is our Judge, and, ultimately, every person will have to answer to Him.

Slander and gossip are sins that are condemned together in Scripture. It's the sin of people who meet in the parking lot and gather in little groups to pass on confidential information which destroys the good name of those who aren't there to defend themselves. It's a breach of the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And James tells his readers, and he tells us, "Stop it!"

There was a young man during the Middle Ages who went to a monk and said, "I've sinned by telling slanderous statements about someone. What should I do now?"

The monk replied, "Put a feather on every doorstep in town."

The young man did it, and then he returned to the monk and asked if there was anything else he should do. The monk replied, "Go back and pick up all the feathers."

But the young man said, "That's impossible! By now the wind will have blown them all over town!"

And the monk replied, "So has your slanderous word become impossible to retrieve."

Whenever we spread a rumor, talk about someone behind their back, or triangulate a third person into the problem, we contribute to the sin of slander and gossip about which James warns his readers in this passage. We should take his counsel seriously and put into action some of the imperatives he urges.

### **Conclusion.**

I want to close by asking some questions, and then I'll tell you a story. First, where have you broken a relationship by a quarrel, and with whom do you need to make peace today? Who have you been taking your frustration out on, and where do you need to ask forgiveness?

Second, in what ways have you been a friend of the world and an enemy of God? Where have you found yourself compromising your allegiance to Jesus, and in what area of your life do you need to repent and start over?

Finally, how have you manifested a critical spirit in recent days, and about whom have you spoken behind their back? How have you been a gossip and slandered someone's good name, and what are you going to do to make amends for that?

I close with this. There was a man that smelled like a brewery who got on a subway one day, and he sat down next to a priest. The man's shirt was stained, his face was full of bright red lipstick, and he had a half empty bottle of rum was sticking out of his pocket. He opened his newspaper and he began to read. A couple of minutes later he asked the priest, "Father, what causes arthritis"?

The priest replied, "Mister, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap women, and drinking too much alcohol!"

"Well I'll be," the man muttered, and he returned to reading his paper.

The priest felt guilty about what he said so he turned to the man and apologized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?"

"Oh, I don't, father," said the man. "I was just reading in the paper that the Pope has it."

Let's be careful to guard what we say with our mouths and what we think in our hearts. Let's sow seeds of peace and not conflict with the people around us. And let's become known for the kindness of our speech and not the anger or duplicity of our words. If we do, we'll show we're a friend of God, and we'll develop a faith that really works. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John White, *Fighting With the World*, pp. 28,29.