

James 4            “Passions and Quarrels: When Faith Is Absent”  
Proverbs 3:13-35  
Psalm 119:73-80

March 4, 2018

In Proverbs 3, the father tells his son that wisdom “is more precious than jewels,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her.” (v15)

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” (v17)

Heavenly wisdom – as we heard last week,  
“is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits,  
impartial and sincere.”

Our Psalm of response comes from Psalm 119, verses 73-80.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Psalter.

It consists of 22 stanzas,

each of which has 8 verses –

each verse beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

It is perhaps best known as a song about God’s law – his statutes, his commands.

But it *should* be better known as a song where *I* come to *you*, O Lord,  
and talk about what *really matters* to me!

So let us draw near to God,  
singing Psalm 119:73-80  
Read James 4:1-12

Have you ever had to boil your water in order to drink it?

I served as a missionary intern for a summer in Ghinda, Eritrea – in East Africa.

I spent a month as the chaplain at the OPC hospital in Ghinda.

I had to get my drinking water from a cistern.

I never forgot to boil my drinking water!

Because every time I went to the cistern,

and pulled a bucket of water up,

there were always frogs – living or dead –

floating in the water!

Somehow, when you have dead frogs floating in your drinking water,  
you don’t forget to boil it!!

If you don’t boil your water in such a place,  
you’ll wind up with giardia, dysentery, and a whole host of intestinal bugs!

James says, in effect, that we need to *boil* our desires.

“Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded!”

Your heart is contaminated.

Your cistern is full of frogs!

If you think that you can just carry on and ignore it –  
you will destroy your whole community!

In James 4, we come back around to a number of themes that James has already introduced.

“the destructive power of speech (especially slander),  
doubters who have not because they ask not,  
the eschatological casting down of the proud and exaltation of the lowly,  
the worldlines that sets itself over against God,  
the strife that comes from self-interest and arrogance  
rather than from true wisdom,  
which is humble and considerate and thus peaceful,  
and the relation of the Christian to the law.

In all of these matters genuine faith and its fruits  
are contrasted with selfish unbelief and its fruits.” (McCartney, 206)

James uses two strong images of conflict in chapter 4:  
murder and adultery.

## **1. Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength (v1-10)**

### **a. Murder: Warring Passions Cause Strife (v1-3)**

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions<sup>[a]</sup> are at war within you?<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

We have two words here in verses 1-3 –

our old friend desire (epithumew) in verse 2 – the verbal form of the noun epithumia (which we ran into back in chapter 1).

And the noun “passions” or “pleasures” is the Greek word *hedone* –  
from which we get our word “hedonism” –  
which is often used as a synonym for “desire.”

*Hedone* is used by our Lord Jesus in the parable of the seed and the soils  
to describe the seed that fell among the thorns –  
those who have heard the gospel,  
but then are choked with the cares and riches *and pleasures*  
of this life. (Luke 8:14)

Paul uses it in Titus 3:3 to speak of how we were once foolish, disobedient, deceived,  
serving various desires and pleasures (epithumia and hedone).

James told us back in chapter 1, verses 14-15, that our *desires* (epithumia) tend to trip us up:  
“each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin,  
and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (1:14-15)

But in chapter 1, James was dealing more with the individual.

How should *you* think about *your* temptations?

God does not tempt you.

Rather, temptation comes from *your* desires – “each person”  
is lured and enticed by *his own* desire.”

Now, here in chapter 4, James applies that principle to our relationships with one another:

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?*

What is it that prompts interpersonal conflict?

Quarrels.

Fights.

And James answers:

*Is it not this, that your passions<sup>[a]</sup> are at war within you?<sup>[b]</sup>*

When James says “within you”

the phrase is “in your members” (in your parts).

Your passions – your pleasures – are warring among your members.

Jesus had said that the pleasures of this world choke the growth of the word –  
so that those who say that they believe wind up unfruitful.

James takes that image a step further.

What happens when you are unfruitful?

Well, your passions – your pleasures – are given free rein.

And when you pursue your passions and pleasures,  
invariably your passions and pleasures end up at war.

And it’s not just an internal conflict!

It doesn’t just affect you!

When you –

and when *I* –

pursue our own passions and pleasures  
we end up bumping into one another!

The conflict spills over from *my* heart into *our* lives.

When James says that your passions are at war within you –

he is speaking of *you plural* –

none of us are islands –

none of us can pretend that we are isolated from everyone else.

Think about how he says it in verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> *You desire and do not have, so you murder.*

David wanted Uriah's wife.  
So he arranged to have him killed.  
Maybe you haven't actually killed anyone yet.  
But in your heart – and in your words – you *have*.

*You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.*

We see this so clearly in young children fighting over a toy.  
How do you generally respond when you see two children fighting over a toy?  
So often we start by asking, "Who had it first?!"  
Or, "Whose is it?"

When I was in seminary, I lived with friends who had a different approach.  
One day the boys were fighting over a toy,  
and Steve got down on the floor with them and asked,  
"What is going on?"  
He recognized that there were *two* greedy hearts he had to deal with.  
Indeed, there were *three* –  
because he, himself, didn't want to be dealing with quarreling boys!  
He could have solved the problem by saying,  
"Oh, it's his toy – fine, give him the toy."  
But all that would do is communicate the idea that if you own all the toys,  
then you can have whatever you want!

What the boys needed to learn –  
what *we* need to learn –  
is that the problem resides within our hearts.  
We covet and cannot obtain, so we fight and quarrel.  
We desire and do not have, so we murder.

*You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you." (Matt 7:7)  
Well, I keep asking, how come God doesn't give it to me?!  
Often the answer is given: "because you do not ask in faith."

And that's true.  
But what does it *mean* to ask "in faith"?

That's what James is getting at here.  
You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly –  
to spend it on your passions.

If you are driven by your desires...

Wait –  
what do we mean by “desires”?

We need to go back to what we saw a few weeks ago about desire!  
According to the scriptures, our “desires” include all sorts of things.  
Our bodily desires for food, drink, clothing, sex...  
Our desires for knowledge, meaning, friendship, love...

Those basic, ordinary desires are what trip us up.

There are three passages in the NT that use “desire” in a good sense:

Do you remember?

Luke 22 – when Jesus says, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you.”

Jesus says that his *desire* is to eat the covenant meal with his people.

Phil 1 – when Paul says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ,  
for that is better by far” –

and 1 Thess 2 – where Paul tells the Thessalonians that his desire  
is to see them again soon.

So what *should* we desire?

We should desire God and his people.

It’s the same point that Jesus made when he said

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength –  
and love your neighbor as yourself.”

If you love God with *all* your heart –

then that means that *everything* you do is done out of love for *him*.

So, if you are driven by your desire for Christ – and for his kingdom,  
then all that you do will be good.

If you are driven by your desire for anything else –  
that is not the wisdom that comes down from above,  
but is earthly, selfish, demonic.

And as we saw last time, wherever jealousy and selfish ambition exist  
there will be disorder and every vile practice.

Wherever the *self* is at the center – wherever *I* am the center of my own universe –  
that is where trouble starts!

Remember the children fighting over the toy?

“He hit me!”

“He hit me first!”

“That’s because he took my toy!”

“But I asked – and he wouldn’t share with me!”

When you untangle the web of competing desires  
you find at the root this same basic point:

Wherever the *self* is at the center – wherever *I* am the center of my own universe –  
that is where the trouble starts!

And that's why James explodes in verse 4:

**b. Adultery: Friendship with the World Is Enmity with God (v4-6)**

<sup>4</sup> *You adulterous people!*<sup>[c]</sup> *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*

You were created for God.  
You were designed to be *his bride*!  
So if you run off with the world,  
then you are an adulteress.

Or do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?  
You cannot cozy up with the world!

The Bible uses the term “world” in two different ways.

For instance, in John 3:16,

God so *loved* the world that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
so that whosoever believes in him should not perish  
but have everlasting life.

You find the same idea in 1 John 2:2 –

where Jesus is said to be the propitiation not only for our sins,  
but for the sins of the whole world.

In other words, if you think about the world as it was created by God –  
and as it is being redeemed and renewed –  
then you should love the world,  
because God loves the world.

*But*, there is another sense in which scripture uses the term “world.”

1 John 2:15 – “Do not love the world, or the things in the world”

Or here in v4 – “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”

The word translated “friendship” is the word “*philia*” – which could be translated  
“love” – or “brotherly love.”

The idea behind friendship is that you are seeking to *help further*  
the aims and goals of your friend.

The world has been corrupted by sin –

by desires for things other than God –

by loves that are oriented towards the creature rather than the Creator.

So friendship for the world means seeking to advance the aims and goals of the world.

And the world is opposed to God.  
You cannot be friends with that which is hostile to the one that you love!  
The world is hostile to God.  
The world is in rebellion against its Creator.

Think of it this way:  
if there was a band of robbers breaking into your parents' house,  
how would you respond?  
“Hey guys! Welcome! Take whatever you want! How can I help you?”

No!  
*Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

<sup>5</sup> *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?*

There is a bit of a challenge in verse 5 because we can't seem to find *anything* in the scripture that says, “he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.”  
For that matter, we can't find a quote like that *anywhere* in ancient literature!  
So rather than thinking of this as a quotation,  
we should probably think of this as a paraphrase of biblical teaching.

What does it mean?  
He yearns jealously over the Spirit that he has made to dwell in us.

God has poured out his Spirit on his people,  
and thus we become friends of God  
(think of 2:23, where James said that Abraham was a friend of God).

And God is a jealous God.

He wants us for himself.

Think of the adultery theme that verse 4 sets up –  
if God has poured out his Spirit upon us – so that we become friends of God –  
then if we betray God by befriending the world,  
if we demonstrate by our actions that we prefer the company of the world  
to the being *with* our God –  
then no wonder God yearns jealously over the Spirit that he has made to dwell in us.

If your spouse was flirting with someone else – you would be upset!  
If you were flirting with someone else – your spouse would be upset!

*And should be!*

But verse 6 shows us the solution to all this:

<sup>6</sup> *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

Yes, God yearns jealously over the Spirit that he has made to dwell in us –  
but God’s jealousy is not the final word.

Rather, “he gives more grace.”

And James quotes Proverbs 3:34 to demonstrate this:

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

God opposes those who befriend the world,  
but to those who repent –  
to those who humble themselves and return to the LORD –  
he gives more grace.

I don’t care what you have done.

You may be guilty of murder and adultery.

But there is grace for those who humble themselves and repent of their sins.

If you try to defend yourself –

if you try to walk the fence and maintain friendship for *both* the world *and* God,  
you will fall off that fence – to your own destruction!

But verses 7-10 lay out the nature of true repentance:

true repentance requires submission to God and humility before him.

### **c. Repentance: Submission and Humility (v7-10)**

<sup>7</sup> *Submit yourselves therefore to God.*

The first line of verse 7 provides the overall thesis:

“Submit yourselves therefore to God.”

We don’t like to submit.

We don’t like it when someone else tells us what to do!

But this is the whole point!

Our desires trip us up *precisely* because *we* put ourselves at the center!

If *I* am the center of my own little universe –  
then God *is not*.

Submission is scary.

You have no guarantees.

We want to say, “Okay, God, I’ll submit – so long as you don’t...”

That’s not submission.

Submission means *I’m not in control*.

In all human relationships, submission is always qualified.

In marriage, the wife submits to her husband “in the Lord.”

In my ordination vows, I submit “in the Lord” to my brethren in the Presbytery.



But there are no limits on submitting to God!  
There is only a promise:

*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

Submission to God means that we resist the devil –  
and God promises that the devil will flee –  
because Satan has no more power over us than he did over Jesus!  
Sure, he afflicted Jesus – like he afflicts us –  
but if you are united to Jesus –  
then you have confidence that the devil will flee  
when you resist him!

And in the same way, if you draw near to God, he will draw near to you.  
This is a word used in the OT to speak of the priests drawing near to God  
in their sacrificial duties.  
We are called to draw near to God through what Jesus has done for us!

Friendship with the world is enmity with God.  
But if you draw near to God, he will draw near to you.

And as you draw near,

*Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*

At first it might seem strange that James exhorts *sinners* to cleanse their hands.  
But James is speaking to Christians.  
He is speaking to those who have been “double-minded” –  
a phrase that James introduced in chapter 1, verse 8.  
The double-minded man in chapter 1, was the man who asked for wisdom –  
but doubted – and did not ask *in faith*.

These are Christians who are trying to love God *and* be friends with the world.

It's not possible.

You *cannot* succeed at this.  
But that doesn't stop us from trying!

But James admonishes us to be *wretched and mourn and weep*.  
When was the last time that you wept over your sin?  
We will weep over our misery – over the afflictions of this life –  
over the nasty things that others have done to us –  
but when do we actually mourn and weep over *ourselves* and our *sin*?

Our shorter catechism reminds us that repentance unto life is a saving grace  
whereby a sinner of a true sense of his sin,  
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,  
does *with grief and hatred of his sin*,  
turn from it unto Christ,  
with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

When you realize that you have sinned –  
when you realize that your friendship with the world has put you in the position  
of enmity towards God –  
that should cause you to hate your sin!

And so James concludes this section by saying:

<sup>10</sup> *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.  
Therefore, humble yourselves before the Lord!  
Have the same attitude in you that was also in Christ Jesus –  
who though he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God  
a thing to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing – taking the form of a servant –  
being born in the likeness of men.  
And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.  
Therefore God has highly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In the same way,  
you are called to humble yourself –  
you are called to seek first the kingdom of God and *his* righteousness.

## **2. Love Your Neighbor as Yourself – in Your Speech (v11-12)**

<sup>11</sup> *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.* <sup>[d]</sup> *The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.* <sup>12</sup> *There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*