

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part twelve

Teaching #1826 - Sunday, September 13th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

KNOWING WHERE OUR BIGGEST PROBLEMS REALLY COME FROM

James 4:1-6 - "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? [2] 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. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. [4] You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. [5] 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"? [6] But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

There are several places where James introduces a new section or topic of his letter with a direct question:

James 2:14 - "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"

James 3:13 - "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."

And now, in today's text - **James 4:1** - "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

Our text in our last teaching ended with words sounding much like James' brother Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus pronounced special blessing on *peacemakers* - "**Blessed are the peacemakers....**" - and James said, "**....a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace**" (**James 3:18**). If there is a special blessing for peacemakers pronounced in this verse, the first verse of our text today fleshes out exactly *why* James' encouragement to peacemaking was so urgently needed among these scattered Christians - **James 4:1** - "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

There were quarrels and fights among these believers. Of course, we'd all like to believe, even if we take the trouble to go and make peace, that the cause of the strife and division was all in the *other* person, and, praise God, it's just a good thing we're spiritual enough to overlook the other person's fault and make peace.

James won't let us rest with that delusion. The DNA of "*quarrels and fights*" (4:1) runs like a river right through all our fallen human hearts. This is C.S.I. James' style. This is how James investigates where *ungodly wisdom* - the kind he says fights and quarrels, that fractures relationships, marriages, and congregations - comes from. The problem runs deep. It's of no use to point fingers.

If I'm going to grow in the pure, meek, soul-nourishing wisdom of God, it's not going to be easy. Religious poems on the wall and flowery promise boxes aren't going to do it. There is much to be undone and dealt with in my own heart. There's a lot of deep self-analysis in today's text. It takes a lot of honesty to read these words properly. That's where James is taking us in our study today.

- 1) **THE NEED TO SCRAP AND QUARREL AND FIGHT IS BORN IN THE SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS OF AN UNSATISFIED HEART**
James 4:1-2 - "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your *passions are at war* within you?[2] You *desire and do not have*, so you murder. You *covet and cannot obtain*, so you fight and quarrel....."

We all think we quarrel and fight because we're *right*. James says it's more because we're *empty*.

Note the careful wording of **verse 1**. The things happening "*among*" them (quarrels and fights) come from the things happening "*within*" them (passions that are at war and unsatisfied). This is so important. We think quarrels and fights come from *external circumstances* and, perhaps, *mistreatment*. James says these are only the *triggers* of the problem, not the ultimate *source*. Quarrels come from inner spiritual conflict and need - the "*passions that war within*" all of us.

Not everyone *thinks the way I do*. That's the root of *diversity* in the church. I want my *rights honored and validated*. That's the root of *division* in the church. And those two statements are not the same thing at all.

“Your passions are at war within you” (4:1). Not all the time, of course. There are situations that *set things up* - that *stimulate the conflict of passions within me*. I’m entitled to something, and I’m not getting it. I was hurt and didn’t deserve it. I wanted something and had to wait too long for it. I did something and no one noticed it.

And James says I have *passions* that live inside of me, and you have *passions* that live inside of you, that *don’t like it* when those situations take place. They begin to bristle at these situations the way your skin bristles at the touch of poison ivy. An inward *reaction* is set into motion.

All of those inward passions, when set into motion, have enormous power because they feel so *right*. They scream for fulfillment and satisfaction. They always feel like justice. So much so that we allow ourselves to be dragged along by them because we become convinced we’ll find satisfaction and personal fulfillment if we cater to those inner drives. We usually don’t initially realize that those desires are *against* us, not *for* us. Worldly wisdom can easily mimic the wisdom that comes down from above - from the Spirit of God.

Of course, we know from God’s Word these passions aren’t helpful at all. They’re totally self-destroying. In fact, Paul specifically says no matter how compelling these inward passions feel, and how promising they seem for accomplishing something good for my life, they are contrary to the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart:

Galatians 5:17 - “For the desires of the flesh *are against the Spirit*, and the desires of the Spirit *are against the flesh*, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

“To keep you from doing the things you want to do....” What strange words! You’d think giving in to our desires would be doing *exactly* what we want to do. We need to think about these words.

There’s a *yes* and a *no* in these words from Paul. In one sense these passions at war in the heart lead me to do *exactly* what I want to do, at least what I want to do right then and there. But in a deeper sense, usually discovered too late, these passions *keep me from doing what I would want to do, if I were thinking clearly about my ultimate joy and satisfaction in Jesus*. In that *ultimate* sense, these passions keep me from doing what I would *truly* want to do if I was thinking like Jesus.

Peter speaks to the same issue - **1 Peter 2:11 - “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, *which wage war against your soul*.”**

“Which are against your soul....” There’s the same idea again in different words. Peter comes with the same caution. These passions don’t just war against *each other* (as James points out in our text). Their ultimate target is *you*. Peter says they are against *“your soul.”* Your soul is *you - your joy, your satisfaction, your best possible future, your well-being*. That’s what these passions are warring against. The problem is these desires don’t *feel* against your own inner good when they first start to tug at your mind.

Peter tells us to remember this because, while the battle with these passions of the heart rages you don’t *feel* like they are *against* you at all. They *feel* like they are *on your side* - out for your rights, your vindication, your pleasure, your satisfaction. But, says Peter, in reality they *“war against your soul.”* They attack like *terrorists* attack. They work from the inside. You don’t see them coming.

2) **INWARD PASSIONS, WHEN YIELDED TO, INCREASE BOTH THE EMPTINESS OF THE SOUL AND THE ADDICTION TO FUTURE SIN AND BONDAGE**

James 4:2-3 - “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. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

Notice how these verses *begin* and *end* with the emphasis on inward desire - **“You desire and do not have....”** (2). **“...because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions”** (3). *Desires* and *passions* frame everything else James says in these two verses. Frustrated inward desires are the fuel for strife and the quarrels.

The hard part of these verses is figuring out what James means when he says, **“You desire and do not have, so you**

murder (2). Was James actually saying these Christians in these churches were **killing** each other? And if not, why does he use such a violent term?

Certainly there is nothing in the passage to make such a statement impossible. I mean, these Christians **could** have been so violently opposed to one another that at least some of them were actually killing each other. But it's hard to believe, if that were the case, that James wouldn't say more about it than he does. **"So you murder...."** Three words? That's all James has to say about these Christians who are killing each other? No further condemnation for the taking of human life? It doesn't seem likely to me.

I think what James **is** doing here is showing the **end result** of the truth he set forth in **3:16** - **"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."** James specifically talks about murder because that's on the extreme end of what selfish ambition and jealousy can produce. To say we'd never **do** that totally misses James' teaching. After a certain point, once desires win the war with your soul, you aren't in charge anymore. You lose the ability to define the stopping point of the moral deterioration of your soul.

That's James' point. You no longer draw the lines of what you would or would not do. Quite literally, **"every evil practice"** (**3:16**) can spring up, and James used the sin of **murder** to make this point. The person who says, "I'd never do that," doesn't understand how inward desires work, or how they grow and drive and steer and blind.

No doubt James has in mind what he heard Jesus say about tracing the outward act of murder back to the unchecked hatred and rage in the human heart:

Matthew 5:21-22 - **"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."**

Like computer software, anger, hatred and murder are **bundle** sins. You aren't safe from the outward expressions (especially in terms of divine judgment) until you deal with the passions in the heart. This is James' point when he talks about anger and murder as well. James continues:

James 4:2-3 - **"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. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."**

"You do not have, because you do not ask"(2). That doesn't mean, just pray and God will give you everything you want so you don't have to quarrel and fight for it. James makes this clear in **verse 3** - **"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."**

A lot of people have trouble interpreting these verses, yet they have profound truth tucked in them. James is describing what makes us quarrel and fight for our way - the **"passions that are at war"** within us and - that drain our inner joy as we accommodate them. You can see this in the very words James chooses - **"You desire and do not have"** - **"You covet and cannot obtain"** - **"You fight and quarrel and you do not have."** Selfish ambition, bitterness, and the desire to vindicate our own rights leave the soul empty and unfed.

"You do not have because you do not ask." **"Go to God,"** says James. Turn to God, not just to help you fulfill all your present selfish agenda, but to **find God Himself**. Find in God that **"harvest of righteousness"** James described in **3:18** - **"And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."**

Let the Holy Spirit overrule those conflicting, self-emptying passions that are beating the war drums in your soul. You can't live like that! Go to God. Ask Him to change your heart because only He can!

Then James warns us - **James 4:3** - **"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."** You can't **mix** calling on God and fulfilling your own selfish-ambitions. You can't **drag God** into your agenda. He won't respond on those terms. O how we love to make our own agendas sound holy by dragging God's name and God's cause into them!

This is the reminder we all need from James that faith in God isn't something we use to satisfy our own wishes. This is rampant in the church today, particularly in some extreme charismatic wings of the church. Rather, faith in God is

surrendering what you think is going to satisfy your soul. It's trusting that God's agenda, however unmotivated you may feel toward it at the present moment, will ultimately fill your soul with joy and purpose.

3) HOW PEOPLE REJECT GOD WHILE THINKING NOTHING BUT LOVING THOUGHTS TOWARD HIM

It's at this point in the letter of James that we have to deal with some of the most contested, difficult verses in the whole New Testament.

James 4:4-5 - "**You adulterous people!** Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. [5] 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'?"

Right away we should know something's up in James' mind. Up to this point James has extended nothing but a passionate, loving heart to his readers. Nothing but **brotherly terms** are used in addressing them:

James 1:2 - "Count it all joy, my brothers...."

James 2:1 - "My brothers, show no partiality...."

James 2:14 - "What good is it, my brothers...."

James 3:1 - "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers...."

James 3:10 - "....My brothers, these things ought not to be so."

Then, all of the sudden, you wouldn't put pastor James on the radio anymore - **James 4:4** - "**You adulterous people!**" Is James just losing his patience? Is this just anger in his voice? Or is there some other reason for these cutting words?

James is using these words with a purpose. They aren't **temper**. They're a **lesson**. Actually James uses the feminine form of the word, "**adulteress**," though only the NASB catches it. James is picking up on a whole group of Old Testament texts, framing the unfaithfulness of God's people toward Him in the picture of a **bride** who is unfaithful to her **husband**:

Jeremiah 3:20 - "Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. "

This is a repeated Old Testament theme suited perfectly for James' teaching on holiness among these scattered Christians and congregations. These words set the bar in terms of the **kind of faithfulness** God requires of His children.

My wife can be unfaithful to me - an **adulteress** - even though she may love everything about me. She may like my good character, may enjoy being in our house, love the kids, and think I'm a good husband. But if she sleeps with another man twice a week, she **denies** her relationship to me, even though she may not have a bad thing to say about me. In fact, she may still want to be my wife!

This is James' point. These fighting, quarreling Christians needed to hear James **call** them adulteresses because they didn't **see** themselves as **denying** God at all. They were still in the church. They still prayed. James says so in our text. They still worshiped God regularly.

But James says their adulteress state didn't come from **denying God**. It came from their **friendship with the world** - **4:4** - "**You adulterous people!** Do you not know that **friendship with the world is enmity with God?** Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world **makes himself an enemy of God.**"

James has just spent three verses describing how these Christians had been pursuing their own selfish ways. Now he tells them the **result** of pursuing their own ways. They make themselves **enemies** of God, whether they think of themselves as such, or not.

The point James made in verse 4 is backed up and beefed up in **verse 5** - "**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'?**"

This is the tricky verse to handle. Translators themselves wrestle with the precise meaning, as can be seen when you compare the NIV with the NASB and the ESV:

“Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?” (NIV)

“Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?’” (NASB)

“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?’” (ESV)

The verse is difficult primarily for two reasons. **First**, the quotation James sites from **“the Scripture”** nowhere exists in the Old Testament. So where is this quotation coming from? **Second**, you can note, especially when the NIV is compared with the other two translations, that the subject of James’ quotation is different. Both the NASB and the ESV have **God** as the one who is jealous over **us**. The NIV has our own **human spirit** as the one prone to envy or jealousy (same word in the Greek).

No wonder no one ever preaches from this verse. We need to honestly look into these two issues:

First, the fact that we can’t find James’ quotation anywhere in the Old Testament (and the term “Scripture” is always used for the books of the Bible we recognize as the canon of Scripture - never apocryphal books or other books of Jewish history) - the fact that we can’t find James’ quote shouldn’t be all that alarming.

There are other times when a common Old Testament **theme** is simplified, phrased, and used as a lens to emphasize a teaching point. A great example of this would be **Jesus’ words** in **John 7:38** - **“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”**

Those words are not an exact quote of **any** passage in the Old Testament. Jesus takes a very common Old Testament picture of the Holy Spirit as water and as doing a refreshing work in the heart of those under the New Covenant. That’s exactly what James is doing in the fifth verse of chapter four.

The second issue is **who is the jealous party in James’ text?** The Greek wording can actually be translated both ways. How will we know? I think the rule here is to let the context supply the meaning of the fifth verse. James has just been framing our faithfulness to God in the context of the Old Testament picture of the marriage relationship between a faithful husband and an adulteress wife. That being the case the picture of God as **jealous** for our loyalty to Himself seems to make the best sense of the flow of the passage.

God knows how hard we all find it to get an **actual sense** of spiritual realities in this fallen, material world. We don’t easily feel the weight of our own inner inclinations. And the world around us supports and justifies our fallen nature. So James, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, teaches us about devotion to God by giving us a comparison to a relationship we all understand - marriage.

In fact, **why** did God create marriage? And **why** did He make it such a pure, monogamist relationship? He could have replenished the earth in other ways. Chickens and cows don’t marry. And why just **one** spouse? Why not two or three? Why does Jesus say, quite specifically, **“the two shall become one flesh....”**?

The unbelievable truth is, God created marriage **just** so we could have a visible, concrete pattern for the **kind** of devotion **He** wanted from **us**. He created marriage so we could learn **marriage language** - so we could **know**, in a vivid, **felt** sense, that **partial** loyalty to Him isn’t loyalty at all.

If my wife is **unfaithful** to me, she can’t be just a **little bit** unfaithful to me. An **“adulteress”** is an adulteress. She can’t be just a **bit** of an adulteress. Would you be happy with your spouse if he or she, when confronted with infidelity, responded by saying something like, **“Well, you may be right. But overall I’ve been faithful to you!”**

Marital faithfulness can't be **overall**. It's an **absolute** faithfulness that **defines** what a marriage is.

4) **THERE IS GRACE, NOT ONLY TO CLEANSE FROM SIN, BUT TO KEEP THE HEART FROM FALLING**

James 4:6 - "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Whenever you preach so strongly about sin and purity, there are people who think you're somehow being stern and loveless - like somehow people are just going to leave church feeling brow-beaten and low and hopeless. If that's how you're feeling right now, please notice these beautiful words in the text "**But he gives more grace.**"

"God's standards are so high, Pastor Don. I've already failed Him so many times. I don't have a chance!" That would be true but for the fact that God gives **more** grace. Realizing the demands of the relationship isn't a **bad** thing. It's a **good** thing. I want the people for whom I perform marriages to **know** the kind of faithfulness marriage demands of them.

Yes, it's a demanding kind of faithfulness, but there are great **blessings** in that relationship too. In fact, you only enter into the **best** marriage has to **offer** when you grasp and give the kind of devotion it **requires**. So many professors of faith never discover the immense captivating joy of being "**all in**" with the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So God has to help as only He can. Many times God's demands seem to bend us to our knees in humility, that's a good thing. James says God gives special grace to the humble. You end up lifted by His strong arm. You find the special delight and satisfaction of His smile and favor.

But you have to admit where you really are spiritually - the hiding from the truth in a service like this - the spiritual play-acting - the justifying of spiritual unfaithfulness by comparing yourself to the other lame Christians all around you - all that has to be laid bare. Then, for the very first time you find spiritual gold. Forsake all for the treasurer of knowing Christ as your deepest joy and passion.