

A Spiritual Checkup

James

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O gracious heavenly Father, thank you that you have come to us in the power of your Holy Spirit and enabled us to praise you and give ourselves to you. But we pray now as we seek your face and your word and seek to listen to the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that you would send afresh your Holy Spirit to us that we may not merely come as tasters but as children who are anxious to feed upon every word that our heavenly Father says to us. We pray for grace that we may sit under your word, that we may listen to your voice, that we may allow its penetration to break through the armor which we wear as we defend ourselves against your gracious love and your passion to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. So we pray that you would by your word and through your Spirit do us good as we come for your counsel and for your presence. Minister to us according to the wide diversity of our needs but bring us, we pray, each and all, to see that you have provided all we need in Jesus Christ that we may come to him and find our all in him. We pray this for his great name's sake and for our good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now we continue our readings this morning in the New Testament letter of James where we have been reading over these past Sundays and we come today to the fourth chapter of James and there we are going to read verses 1 through 12 as James continues in these weeks to be our pastor and our guide and as by God's grace we are able to sit under his ministry. James 4:1-12, you will find this on page 1,012 in the Pew Bible, and if you've got your Children's Bible with you, children, it's on page 1,509.

Let us hear God's word.

1 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." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. 11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. 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. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Most of us when we visit our physicians either for a regular checkup or because we feel there is something not quite right, are going to the physician very much hoping that there is really nothing wrong, or if there is something wrong, it's something not very serious, and if it is something serious, we very much hope it's something that he can diagnose, and if he can diagnose it and it is serious, we very much hope that our physician can prescribe a cure and most of us trust our physicians. But there are times when our physicians will say to us, "I need to send you to somebody else. I need to send you to somebody else." Now, for those of us for whom the world of medicine is a total mystery, this seems very strange. Hasn't our doctor got a medical degree? Doesn't he know about the body? Why can't he answer my questions about what's wrong with me? And of course, your wise physician will explain to you that nobody knows everything about the body and certainly nobody knows everything about your body, and there are some people either with equipment or teams or that very strange thing, unusual diagnostic skill, who might be able to put their finger on exactly what is wrong and have such experience that they may prescribe for you a cure. But your physician may say to you humbly, "But I am not that man," and we all understand this. Probably 10% of us watch "House" and we understand that groups of highly educated doctors with all the techniques and machinery in the medical universe, they vary in their diagnostic skills to be able to put their finger on exactly what is wrong.

And you know the same thing is true spiritually. It's totally conceivable that you might come to me and say, "I'm struggling with this," and I might say to you, "I recognize there is a problem here but I need to send you to Pastor X or Pastor Y." And you say to me, "But didn't you go to theological seminary?" And I'll say, "Yes, I did. It might not have been a very good one but I went to one." "Don't all seminary graduates know everything about the spiritual life?"

And I sometimes wonder because I've known men who have had unusual diagnostic skills spiritually and it is clear in discussions with their elders or with other ministers as people have sought to help somebody that they have had such diagnostic skills that with an extraordinary intuition they seem to be able to put their finger exactly on the problem

and because they have had that kind of skill spiritually, they have learned how to prescribe the cure. And I sometimes wonder if perhaps that lies behind this letter of James. After all, these Christians to whom he is writing who perhaps were part of the great congregation or many congregations in Jerusalem and now have been dispersed because of persecution and other reasons, presumably they've got ministers too, presumably they have called their pastors, and can it be that perhaps one or other of these pastors has communicated to James, "James, we are really struggling here without your particular wisdom and insight"? And of course, he was the leader of all the Jerusalem churches because he had that spiritual wisdom and insight. "Can you write to our congregations and help us here?"

So throughout his letter, but particularly in this spiritual checkup that he gives to us in chapter 4, verses 1 to 12, we have the privilege of observing at close quarters a master spiritual physician and he speaks here precisely like a spiritual physician. The first thing he does, obviously, in the opening two verses here, is to bring to the surface, to examine the immediate symptoms that are presenting themselves from his fellow Christians and he is asking the question, "What's the cause of this?"

Now, look at what these symptoms are in verse 1, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" By "quarrels" he means long-standing, under the surface tensions and alignments and oppositions that there are in the church fellowship, and by "fights" he means those occasions when that flares up in the fellowship in particular instances.

I can imagine the body of Christ coming to James and saying to James, "When there is a little squabble, it's a very occasional thing, Dr. James. It doesn't happen very often so just something, just perhaps a pill or a bottle of something, that's all we need spiritually." And James says, "No. No. That's a symptom of something that lies deep under the surface. That's a symptom of a long-standing spiritual sickness in the fellowship." Now, of course, this kind of thing never happens in a church, does it? Christians never fall out with each other, at least not since the end of the New Testament. We know they used to fall out with each other big time in the days of the New Testament, never happens in a church. I've had people say to me when things have fallen out like this in a church, "This kind of thing doesn't happen in a church like ours." But it does. It certainly does.

You know the story of the young elder who was just kind of learning what church was really like and his small children were playing in the den with some of their friends, and he heard this tremendous racket going on and they were shouting at each other and some of them were shaking and squealing and he ran through and in a stentorian voice he said, "Stop! What's going on here?" And his little boy just turns to him and says with a smile, "It's okay, daddy, we're just playing churches." Now, that's real. You could never be a minister of the Gospel without knowing that's real, that much of your life as a minister seems to be putting out fires all over church life.

And James is putting his finger upon the causes here. I remember a situation in the church that two people had completely bamboozled me, the reaction of one to the other, and I said to one of the elders whom I knew well, I said, "I just can't get to the bottom of

it. I just can't understand what's going on here." Do you know what he said to me? It hit me physically when he said it, "Oh," he said, "that's simple. Those two have been at war with each other for 20 years." And you see, what I had seen was just the scene, it wasn't very much, it was just a little falling out, don't come too near. Then I discovered there was this sinister undergrowth, you see.

And so James examines the immediate symptoms and he begins because, you see, he recognizes that those little aberrations in our fellowship life are actually revelations of what is going on underneath our fellowship life, and he examines the immediate symptoms. Then secondly, if I could put it this way with apologies to those of you who are physicians: he refused the pathology report, doesn't he? Look at what he says in verses 2 and 3. He says, "Let's see what's in this culture." And the pathology report comes back and he sees what's in the culture of the hearts of these people. He says, "Here's your problem, You desire and do not have, so you murder." Now, whether he's speaking about actual murder or whether he's using the language the way his brother, the Lord Jesus, used the language, is really a matter of indifference. There are murders in conservative churches, aren't there? There are evangelical ministers' wives who murder their husbands. So it's possible, it shouldn't really be impossible that we might think that some of them in those days, actually they were murderers in the church. But I think rather he is using the language here the way our Lord Jesus uses it in the commonplace way in which we see it in the church. How easy it is to murder a fellow Christian by a few, well-chosen, skillfully expressed words that ruin her reputation, that damn her or him in the eyes of fellow believers, that mean it may be years before that person is able to restore credibility and true fellowship in the congregation.

"And why does this happen," says James? Because "you desire and don't have, you covet and you can't obtain, so you fight and you quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask," verse 2, "And you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." What is he saying here? He's saying, "Underneath all this there are two basic sicknesses." Let me spell them out very briefly. 1. The basic sickness here is prayerlessness. You do not have that satisfaction that would release you from envy of others and the desire to tear others down because of prayerlessness. And the consequence of that prayerlessness it is, of course, the other aspect of this that he mentions: selfishness; that you will have what you want no matter how much damage it does to somebody else and who cares what they want.

Now, you see, these two things always go together in Scripture, prayerlessness which at the end of the day is actually practical atheism, isn't it, it's godlessness. You may say until you're blue in your face that you believe in God but if you are not a person of prayer seeking God, you see? And you see what happens. We all know this happens but when prayerlessness grips our lives, when we lose the blessedness of our fellowship with God and the joy that that gives us and the contentment that we have God and therefore everything else is of secondary importance, whether we have or have not, the thanksgiving, the satisfactions of the Lord preserve us from our tendencies to demand what we want to have. But when prayerlessness comes and fellowship with him goes, all you're left with is yourself and the things that belong to yourself and James is saying,

"Dear friend, I need to examine this. This lack of God-centeredness of your life and your desires is leading to this lack of the contentment that the Lord would give to you and your envy, therefore, of what somebody else is doing so that you tear their eyes out and you pull them down."

So he examines the immediate symptoms, he refused the pathology report, and then you notice in verse 4, he gives the church and perhaps individual believers in the church, his diagnosis, what's the problem. And Dr. James, Pastor James, this one as well as this one. This one will tell you the same thing as this one. Pastor James says, "Do you know what you've got? Do you know what the problem is here? It's adultery. It's adultery." It's one of the blessings of a Scottish education that you didn't need to read and be seared by if you were a Christian, Hawthorne's book, "The Scarlet Letter." I suppose most of you had to or have read Hawthorne's famous novel, "The Scarlet Letter," and the scarlet letter is the large A that the adulteress wears. Incidentally, if you read that, you should also read Professor Leland Ryken's book on what the Puritans were really like. And don't take that as an indication of what all godly saints in earlier days in this country were like. But you know, that's a searing book to read, isn't it? This is an even more searing book because James is saying to this church, "When I look at you," and perhaps to individuals in this church, "when I look at you with this diagnostic skill that God has given to me, when I see the x-rays, I don't, as it were, I don't pull off your suit coat and see the capital S there, Superman, Superwoman, Super-Christian, I see a scarlet A that tells me the deep problem here is spiritual adultery. The deep problem here is spiritual adultery."

And he goes on to describe what that is. He says it's friendship with the world rather than friendship with God. Now, you know the whole Bible tells us to love the creation and to use the creation for God's glory so James is not talking about that. He's talking about this: when at the end of the day you feel far more comfortable with worldly people, with people who are obsessed with this world and what they can do in this world, that that's a more comfortable environment for you than the people of God. To put it very basically: that you'd actually rather be somewhere else just now than with the people of God in the presence of God. That's friendship with the world. That is to say it's an indication of this kind of spiritual...this is how adultery takes place. There is the attraction and perhaps the locking of eyes and then there is the discovery that this person seems far more exciting than my own wife or husband so I want to spend time with them and I feel. How many people say to ministers, "But the thing is, I feel so good in their presence"? Of course, that's the whole point of the temptation. You don't fall to temptations that you feel, "This is absolutely miserable about for a season." Isn't that what Hebrews says? There actually are pleasures in sin. Friends, there are pleasures in sin, there really are pleasures in sin but they don't last. They are only for a season. And this kind of friendship with the world in which I really find worldly things and worldly people, I'm more comfortable with them.

Now, I know there are some very strange Christians. It's not without some significance that the King James Version speaks about the Lord's peculiar people. There are some very strange Christians and some of us are very angular in our personalities. But, I mean, at the end of the day if we are in a church like our church where there are many Christians as we have who seem to be passing normal people, friendly people, non-

angular people, gracious people. Who do I really want to be with? What do I really love? James is saying this is the problem and he says ultimately it's a form of spiritual adultery.

You see, when I hear that, when I hear that like the prophet Nathan saying to David, "David, your problem is spiritual adultery," and when it gets me, when it grips me, then I want to say to Pastor James here, "Oh, Pastor James, is there any remedy? Is there any cure?" And James says, "Yes, there is a cure but the treatment is very severe." So let's look finally at the prognosis that he offers for our recovery.

He examines the immediate symptoms, he refused the pathology report, he proceeds to a diagnosis of spiritual adultery, and now he offers a prognosis for our recovery and here there is a little difficulty, if you'll just be patient I will point it out to. In the English Standard Version that's in our pews, it looks as though the recovery process begins with this: 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? Now, if you've got, for example, the New International Version, you find a completely different translation and that translation says the Spirit God has made to dwell in us tends to envy. So in the New International Version, verse 5 is the climax of his expose of our spiritual adultery. In the English Standard Version, verse 5 is the beginning of the remedy for spiritual adultery.

Now, does that mean we might as well now pronounce the benediction and we just don't know what's going on here? It's a simple matter of translation. It's a simple matter of translation but as many of you know, ancient languages often have points in which it's not possible to tell what the subject or the object of a verb is. It's just as simple as that. That's why. The only reason I say this is because that's the reason if you're looking at one translation or another, there are two different translations. But at the end of the day, I want you to notice irrespective of the question of the translation, the remedy that James offers is this: it's the jealous grace of Jesus Christ.

Isn't that the story, incidentally, of Hosea in the Old Testament who marries this woman who commits adultery? What is it that saves Gomer, Hosea's wife? It's the jealous love of her husband for this woman who really belongs to him. And in all the pain of recovery, it is a most beautiful thing, humanly speaking, when the jealous love of a husband or the jealous love of a wife leads to this kind of recovery, and it is so also spiritually speaking. But it's sore. It's painful. And that's why James goes on to say, "Look, it's like this," verse 6, "he gives more grace." Here I am and I'm exposed in my sinfulness. I recognize as I look into the mirror of God's word that I too am a spiritual adultery. Where am I going to find the remedy for my spiritual adultery? I don't have the resources in myself. I have tried them. And James is saying, "Dear ones, they are not found in ourselves, they are found in himself. He gives more grace."

So whether it is that his jealousy possesses us and holds on to us or he gives us more grace, it boils down to exactly the same thing, but he's going on to say that grace when it deals with spiritual adultery, is to go down deep and sometimes the surgery is painful and so he says, "God opposes the pride, the stubborn pride in my heart but gives grace to the humble. You'll need to submit to God. You'll need to resist the devil but he will flee from

you. You'll need to draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. You'll need to experience your hands being cleansed and your hearts being purified. And your mind," you notice his use of this idea again, "your mind that has been duplicitous, yes, to the Lord Jesus a bit and, yes, to the world a bit and, yes, another bit to the Lord Jesus and, yes, to the world a bit, and your double mindedness will need to be focused upon the Lord Jesus himself and that may mean it will feel wretched and you will mourn and weep and your laughter will be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. But," verse 10, "those who thus humble themselves before the Lord will gloriously be exalted."

You know, we may never have had personal contact with people who have been addicted to narcotics but we've all read enough or seen enough to know the agonies they may go through when withdrawal begins and James is saying as our spiritual physician to us today, "Dear ones, in the life of the fellowship if there are problems like this or in our individual lives, grace may work so deep down into your soul that you will feel the pain of the withdrawal symptoms from the addiction that you've had that has blinded you to the grace of God, made you prayerless and turned you into an individual whom everybody else except yourself sees is absolutely self-obsessed."

And isn't it marvelous that at the end of this passage in verses 11 and 12, he is able to say, "Now when grace grips you like this, you won't speak evil against your brothers. When you realize that the Lord Jesus has spoken so well of you and given you his grace, you won't receive that grace and speak evil of your brothers and you will be delivered from those quarrels and fights that used to characterize your Christian life."

I love that hymn of Tersteegen, Gerhard Tersteegen, that I think isn't in our hymnbook but puts James's point in verse 6 perfectly.

"O Jesus, full of pardon and grace
More full of grace than I of sin
Yet once again I seek Your face:
Open Your arms and take me in
And freely my backslidings heal
And love this faithless sinner still."

Is your Jesus more full of grace than you are of sin? There is only one way to find that out, isn't there? But it's sore. You need to find out how full of sin you are and then come and find out how full of grace he is.

How could James be so sure that Jesus has got more grace than these people have sin? Because he knew his brother died for these people. His brother died for these people. That's how he knew and that's how we know and that's how you can know that he is far more full of grace than you are of sin. But you see, the thing is this: I'm never going to taste that grace and see its fullness until I have seen how much I need it, and not to feel I need it is the first sign of friendship with the world. May we be delivered from it, dear ones, and find in our fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ all the grace we will ever need

for all the sins we will ever commit that will bring us to all the satisfaction of friendship with him.

Heavenly Father, how we thank you for this spiritual physician in whose office and surgery we have sought to report week by week and to sit under the ministry that he gives to us under the power of your Spirit. Teach us, we pray, for every look we take at our own sinfulness to take a hundred looks of the Lord Jesus Christ and find that he is full of grace. And this we pray for his sake. Amen.