

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Series on the Book of James

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Bible Text: James 4:1-10

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It was one of those questions of the ages, the kind of question that everybody asks at some time, asked by dear Rodney King as Los Angeles had exploded into horrible riots in 1992. Rodney King, who had been accosted by four Los Angeles police department officers on video tape, officers who had been acquitted of their beating. And as a result of that Los Angeles had exploded into violence. Rodney King said, "Why can't we all just get along?"

Not far from the question that James asked, if you want to turn there, to James four again in your bulletin or in your Bible.

You experience it all the time. It doesn't take a whole lot. It doesn't take much to reflect. You don't have to go too many days. You don't have to look very far. There is conflict in your life. I wish I could stand before you and say my life is remarkably marked by peace, my life is fundamentally free of conflict, but I can't. It doesn't take me long to reflect on many, many incidents.

I was thinking as I was reading James of incidents of yesteryear. You sort of do that when you are at a place where your children are gone and you are more of an archaeologist than anything else digging through the mound of your own existence. I was thinking of this moment where I had to do a bit of a home repair. I am not a mechanic nor a carpenter. But when I would start to do a repair Luella would grab the kids, get in the car and go someplace safe, because there was surely going to be danger. I had the great ability to make some kind of difficulty in the home worse by my skill.

Our storm door was broken and flapping in the wind and I thought that maybe on a Saturday I could launch in and fix it. It doesn't seem to those of you who have skill to be much of a repair. It took me the greater part of the day. I am the guy that goes to Home Depot, asks for things and as I leave the aisle they laugh. They call in other guys on their cell phones to tell them about the conversation they had with me.

I finally did fix the door. I had such a feeling of accomplishment. I thought the family would applaud.

The door was fixed for Sunday. Monday I came home from CCF to see that door flapping

in the wind. I had murderous thoughts. I knew it couldn't have been me. I knew somebody in my family broke the door. I am not sure whether I stepped inside the house or was still on the porch, but I remember very clearly just beginning to yell names, not a very big thing. It doesn't take very long. It doesn't take very far. You don't have to have much of a memory. There is conflict in your life.

Look at James' question.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?”¹

Now let me remind you what James is doing. I have done this all of these reflections in the last several weeks. Beginning with the 19th verse of chapter one, James is laying out this righteous life to which God has called us. Remember what James is saying is that your fundamental paradigm for living has changed. No longer as a child of God is your life meant to be shaped by your wants, your needs, your feelings. But you have been called to have a life that is shaped by the righteous purposes of the kingdom of God. The paradigm has changed. And James has been laying out what that looks like. And, perhaps, James four is actually the crescendo of that conversation, because using the case study of conflict, something that is so regular and so familiar and so present in all of our lives that it is a wonderful basis for having this discussion, James wants to unfold for us the difficulty that all of us have in actually living for this righteous life that God has called us to, the struggle of living for God's kingdom. And conflict actually reveals how deep and abiding that struggle is.

I want to be honest with you. I find this a very difficult passage, not because its teaching is unclear, but because its teaching is clear. And I don't want to think that it addresses me. I don't want to think that it characterizes my struggle. But it does.

Now hear the question again.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?”²

Isn't this true? When you and I are irritated, when we are angry, when we are impatient, when we are experiencing conflict with somebody, the instinctive response for all of us is to look this way to explain that conflict. If this circumstance wasn't in my life if this conflict wasn't in my life, if they didn't do that, if they hadn't said that...

And look what James does. James does something that is radically different and in its difference draws us to humbly face something that is incredibly important for us to face. Look at his answer.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”³

¹ James 4:1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

James says, “Here is what is going on inside of you. There is a war being fought inside of you in all of the situations and all of the locations and all of the relationships of every day life. Think about this. Where is your life conflict free? Who here has had a marriage completely free of irritation, impatience, anger and conflict? Who has had a friendship free? What parent has been free of that? What sibling has been free of that? What body of Christ has been free of that? What community has been free of that? What city has been free of that? What nation has been free of that? It is everywhere. And he says it is rooted in this war that takes place in our hearts. It is a war of passion or you could translate this word pleasure. There is a war between what single thing, what single focus will be the thing that pleases me, the thing that brings me life shaping pleasure. Do I get my deepest, fullest pleasure from my wants, my needs, my desires being delivered to me? And I love it when I actually get what I want. Or is my life shaped by a higher and grander and more glorious pleasure. It is that I now find deep abiding, life motivating, life shaping pleasure in doing the will of God, in being part of his righteous cause on earth.

Now hear this. Where do you do that? Where you live every day. And that war rages.

Now think of the concept of war. What is the purpose of war? War only has one purpose, to win. And winning only has one purpose, control. There is a war for the rulership of your heart and that war will continue to rage until the final enemy is defeated and we are ushered into the final kingdom. There is a war.

And because you are a worshipper, you are always living in pursuit of something. Your heart is always being ruled by something. Romans 1:25 captures it so eloquently. We are either living in worship and service of the creator, but we are living in worship and service of the creation.

John Calvin said these scary words, these words have echoed in my brain for years. The heart of sinful man—are you ready for this—is an idol factory. There is a war of desire in your heart.

Look what he goes on to say.

“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”⁴

Listen to this principle. I think I have shared this with you before, but it is so eloquently grasps what James is talking about. A desire for even a good thing becomes a bad thing when that desire becomes a ruling thing. You see, when my heart begins to be ruled by some craving for something in the creation, it alters the way I look at you. You want something, but you can’t get it, so you kill and you covet.

That ruling desire for something in the creation now dehumanizes you, because I quit looking at you as an object of my love. I look at you either as a vehicle for getting what I

⁴ James 4:2.

want or an obstacle in the way of what I want. You quit looking in a functional way at people as people. People are agents to deliver your desire or they are walls in the way of your desire. And when they are obstacles, you are spontaneously angry and you want to remove them. Listen. It alters your very relationship with God. Look what he says.

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”⁵

What happens is you don't really want God to be your Father. You want God to be a vending machine, ready to dispense what you ask for.

Listen. I think it is shocking to think that very often we are praying godless prayers. They don't have anything to do with the will of God. They don't have anything to do with the kingdom of God. They have to do with hoping somehow, some way God would endorse our desires and to deliver to us the things that we have decided are good for us and would please us. How shocking.

David Henderson in his interesting book *Culture Shift* writes this. “We have tended to turn the Christian faith into a relationship through Christ with a God who is the divine vending machine in the sky there to meet our every need. Unhappy? Unattractive? Unsuccessful? Unmarried? Unfulfilled? Come to Christ and he will give you everything you ask for. We forget—here are these hard words—God is not primarily in the business of meeting needs. And when we make him out to be, we squeeze him out of his rightful place at the center of our lives and we put ourselves in his place. God is in the business of being God. Christianity cannot be reduced to meeting people's needs. And when we attempt to do so, we invariably distort the heart of the Christian message.”

Brothers and sisters, I would ask you this evening to reflect with me of this moment. What do you really want from God? What do you crave from his hand? I would ask you. What do you really want from the people that God has placed in your life? Whose kingdom shapes those two fundamental relationships of life?

Look with me at verse four, because you get God's perspective here, God's response to this struggle that we are talking about.

“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.”⁶

Here is the core principle, if you would of this passage. Here it is. Sinful human conflict is rooted in spiritual adultery. Our problem with one another is not, first, that we don't love one another enough. Our problem is, first, that we don't love God enough.

What is adultery? It is when I give to one the love that I have promised to another. We have been brought into a relationship with Christ. The Bible describes it being marital.

⁵ James 4:3.

⁶ James 4:4.

God owns our love. He owns the deepest, fullest love of our hearts and we struggle with one another because there are other lovers that claim our affection. Because as anyone chooses to be a friend of the world, becomes an enemy of God. Think about that. Think about this illustration. When a man is in the midst of a physical relationship with a woman other than his wife is he not at that moment an enemy of that marriage and an enemy of the welfare of his wife? And any time I chose rather to have my will and my way in the way that I want it at the time that I want it, in the manner that I want it, in that moment I stand as an enemy of the purposes of the kingdom of God.

Hard language. But hear what comes next.

“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’?”⁷

Here is what James would do. Are you listening to me? Rather than saying at this moment how dare you, he turns our hearts to the glorious and beautiful and faithful and eternal love of God and says, “Don’t you know who you are?” You are people who by the glory of God’s grace have been chosen to be the objects of eternal love. And true love, true, real love is always rightfully jealous, is it not?

If I would slide on the coach next to Luella and put my arm around her and turn her face toward mine and say, “Luella, of all the women I love, I love you the most,” I would imagine that my nose would have a different shape. And I am not sure that would be wrong, because, you see, if Luella loves me, it is right for her to crave that that love would be fundamentally exclusive. Your Lord loves you. He loves you with a love that is so pure and so faithful. It is hard for me to wrap words around it. And because of that love, there is no way that he could love you and tolerate a fickle, unfaithful, selfish wandering heart.

But then comes the sentence that for me allows me to hear the hard words of this passage. Look at verse six.

“But he gives more grace.”⁸

Hear this, brothers and sisters. You are not in this battle by yourself. Your Lord walked with his feet on this earth. He faced the seductive temptations of the created world. He endured all the range of temptations that all of us endure. He knows how deep that struggle is. And his grace is not just the grace of past forgiveness. It is not just the grace of a future in eternity, it is a grace of this war right now. Your Lord battles on your behalf. And his grace is greater than the deepest, most abiding war of heart that anyone in this room faces. Praise him. His grace is greater. And that grace allows us to come out of the hiding and to say, “Yes, Lord, James four describes me. Oh, sometimes I love your kingdom. Sometimes I do find my greatest joy in being part of what you are doing on earth. And because of that I am at those moments I am patient and I am giving and I am

⁷ James 4:5.

⁸ James 4:6.

kind. But, Lord, so often I am not. So often I am self oriented and self focused. So often I have a hair trigger of anger and impatience. So often little things make me mad and make me angry. So often I say and do things that have nothing to do with your kingdom. And, Lord, in the comfort of your grace I run to you and not away from you.”

Well you say, “Paul, ok. What do we do?”

Well, that is where this passage ends. Let me just read the final three verses.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.⁹

First, submit yourself to God. Brothers and sisters, I would encourage you as a self conscious act of commitment to God, you as soon after this service as you can have a quiet moment, you get alone with the Lord and you say, “God, once more, I submit me and mine to your kingdom.” And I pray for divine deliverance from the kingdom of self, oh Lord. Please help me.

Second he says, “Resist the devil.” We need to be vigilant and we need to be watchful. There is an enemy who would hold before us the temporary and seductive pleasures of the kingdom of self. And we need to be growingly aware of his tricks. We need to be watchful. We need to be good soldiers in this important war.

Then he says, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts.” We have got to bring before the Lord—hear this brothers and sisters—the sins of words and actions, the sins of behavior that are the result of the service of self. That is cleanse your hands. And the sins of the heart that are the result of the service of the kingdom of self as well.

Where are you using your gifts, your abilities, your time, your energy your resources, your words, your mentality for the service of something else than the kingdom of God? And where is that rooted in a heart that still is holding on and still ruled by the love of the creation more than the love of the creator?

And then I think verse nine is very important.

“Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”¹⁰

Brothers and sisters, I think there is a clear call for us to grieve. There is a clear call for us to weep. I don’t think that the problem of the body of Christ is that we are too mournful. Perhaps the weakness of the body of Christ is that we weep too little. Perhaps if we saw

⁹ James 4:7-10.

¹⁰ James 4:9.

our disloyalty with the clarity that God would have us see it, we couldn't do anything but weep. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." Maybe we are all too casual. Maybe we are all too satisfied. Maybe we have lost the sense of the ugliness and the disloyalty and the damage of sin. Maybe we are {} able to look sin in the face and not be moved. I would say to you, based on this passage of Scripture, if we can do that, we are people in trouble.

There is a way, as I have said to you before, that we should be the saddest community on earth, because we get the stunning glory of his gift juxtaposed with the reality of our own disloyalty and sin.

I am going to ask you this question because it has been on my heart this week. Brothers and sisters, when is the last time you have wept over your sin? My dear mom told me that one moment when my dear brother Mark—and he wouldn't mind me talking about this—was far from God she said, "I doubt in that moment the ravages and the danger of sin." And she said, "All I could do was weep and say, 'Oh God, Mark. Oh God, Mark.'"

When have you wept over your sin?

And then, finally, verse 10.

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."¹¹

God welcomes the needy. God welcomes the weak. God welcomes the poor. God welcomes us to come in honesty and humility. And he says to us this beautiful, beautiful thing.

"He that comes to me, I will never, never turn away."

I would say to you against his evening: Come, come, come. Your marriage needs for you to come. Your children need for you to come. Your friends need for you to come. Your community needs for you to come. Because the problem of the brokenness that we experience every day is not the sin and brokenness of the world around us. The problem is the wandering and disloyalty of our own hearts. You come. He will hear. He will forgive. He will empower. He will deliver. Come. Come. Come.

Let's pray.

Lord, we are so thankful for this hard passage of Scripture. We are so thankful of the way it reveals our hearts, because we believe in, we embrace your grace and the invitation to come to you in weakness, in brokenness, in failure, lame, blind, needy we come. And we say, once again, "Lord, in the glory of your grace, deliver us from us so that with zeal and joy and the deepest of pleasures of heart we would serve you and you alone. Hear us, we would pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹¹ James 4:10.