

The Work of Peace and the Gift of Grace

James 4:1-12

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I am humbled to preach on today's text which is a continuation of our series in the book of James. Please turn or tap your Bibles to James 4, and we will be reading verses 1 through 12. James 4:1-12. This passage really is a continuation of everything that pastor Randy Lovelace spoke about last week about a harvest of righteousness being sown in peace by those who make peace. And so this passage here talks about how we do that. How do we do the work of peace? And how do we respond to the gift of grace?

Let us read this now. James 4:1-12.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 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. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 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. 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"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 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.

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. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Father, may the preaching of your word remind us of the gift of grace given to us. We who are filled with envy, evil desires, and enmity towards you were given grace. May we live lives that are transformed by that grace. And may your word pierce through our hearts and minds and souls and strengths to be a living and active word within us. Let the Holy Spirit do the work of peace. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Pastor and writer R. Kent Hughes in his insightful and pastoral commentary on the book of James recounts the story of Charles Spurgeon and his ministry. One time, a lady came up to Charles Spurgeon to encourage him and his work. She walked up and said to him, "I pray for you every day that you may be kept humble." Spurgeon replied, "Thank you so much. But you remind me of a failure of my duty. I have never prayed for you that you might be kept humble." "Dear sir," she cried, "there is no need for such prayers for I am not tempted to be proud." Spurgeon wryly replied to this lady, "How proud she was to obtain such a delusion." Like all great humor, what makes this story great is that it speaks to the truth of the human condition. We often think of the problem in the world as being out there, and that we hold the solutions and the keys to peace around us. You know, if only people would listen to our counsel and our direction, then peace in the world and with those we come in contact would be so easy. But in doing so,

we often and regularly find ourselves in a state of naïve delusion, neglecting our own faults of our own rebellion and our own sense of judgment.

James 4 is really a continuation of what we preached on last week about living wisely. The work of peace comes from wisdom from above. But to say that James 4:1-12 is just merely an addition to this would neglect its place in the entire book of James. Rather, James is expanding now on everything that he has discussed in chapters 1 through 3. Trials and struggles should be met with joy. Believers should be doers of the word and impartial to others, that faith must be accompanied by works, and that all of us should watch our tongues and have wisdom. These are a culmination in the practice now that is played out to the covenant community in verses 1 through 12 of chapter 4. What James is focused on in our passage here today is the root cause of the difficulties of living in community and the threats of the peace of that community.

So let's look at verses 1 through 4 more closely again which discuss the disrupters of peace. What are they in this passage? In verse 1, James recognizes that the community which he is writing to is quarreling and fighting. Now, we don't know whether this was verbal fighting or even physical fighting. But James isn't concerned with that so much as he's concerned about the heart of these individuals. Whereas you're often told that as a teacher or pastor or counselor that you're supposed to be neutral in mediation, James completely bucks this advice and says to both parties, the problem is you. In particular in verse 1, it's, "Your passions are at war within you." That word for "passions" is not simply just about strong feelings, like I have a passion for baking brownies, or a passion for Apple products, or a passion for Eric Johnston for keeping our church operational. Those are good passions, right? We often say it's good to be a passionate Christian. But that isn't the way the word "passion" is being used here.

The word that James is using for "passion" in the original language is one that speaks to the pursuit of selfish pleasures at work against the object of peace. Think of it as an immature whining individual who's so fixated on their own way that they steamroll or combat anyone who shares any bit of disagreement or discord against them. And James says it begins with the heart.

So James's main point, his main thesis in these four verses and the disruptor of peace is this. The disruption of peace is more about what is happening inside our hearts than what is happening outside our homes. Or maybe in the case of quarantine, the disruption of peace is more about what is happening inside our hearts than what is happening inside our homes. So James is saying that before you head out into conflict, before the quarreling occurs, ask yourselves this question. What passions are at war with the wisdom that God has called you to live in? What passions are at war with the wisdom of a gentle, pure, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere heart that God has given to you? What passions or selfish pleasures are so blinding you that you are ready to fight anyone and everyone who gets in your way?

Because the condition of a wicked passionate mind leads itself into the natural consequences of verses 2 through 4. You desire, so you murder. You covet, so you fight. You do not have because you do not ask. You do not receive because you spend it on your selfish passions. These are the result of an inward heart manifesting into the outward actions of pain, misery, and death. In this way, James is framing his argument to his audience in a way, in a philosophy, in a worldview that they would have understood. And that is this. The definition of envy leads to the destruction of others.

One biblical commentator on this passage says that James is connecting the idea of envy and jealousy with war because that would've been in line with the philosophy of the Greco Roman era that they were living in. It was natural for any competition in those days to lead to the death of your opponent. The writings of Greek philosopher Plato demanded that the logic of envy and competition was the elimination of your opponent.

So James like any good Christian evangelist is using and showing how this worldview and thinking is flawed. You ask the Lord without faith, you treat God like a glorified ATM machine, then you won't receive because you are rooting your confidence in yourself. You merely hear the word and don't do it,

then you will forget that you are just like as though you looked into a mirror and stepped away. You show partialities to others thinking it will earn you favor when in reality you are casting judgment without mercy, and then you become judges with evil thoughts. And then you inevitably, due to a lack of controlling your tongue and a lack of wisdom, lead yourself to the destruction and even the murder of others.

This is why James leads to the striking conclusion in the start of verse 4 to call these individuals, "You adulterous people!" This is not a church growth strategy phrase for any pastor, okay? "You adulterous people!" But, you see, he's using the language of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah who would call the people of God adulterers for forsaking their relationship with God. The people of God were supposed to be like a faithful bride, and yet they have chosen a relationship with the world. And in doing so, they created war against the very God that granted them the peace that they were hoping for. They have chosen to be at war with God because their desires have exceeded their devotion. They would rather choose themselves over their salvation. They would rather choose the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life rather than the love of their Father. Disciples do this. We read in our scripture reading this morning James and John do this. But remember the disruption of peace is more about what is happening inside our hearts than what is happening in or outside our homes.

And let me especially speak right now to my CPC youth kids, and actually our covenant children living with your parents or guardians right now. I cannot even begin to understand right now the difficulty that you must be facing as a student and as a child. Those of you who are graduating, you've had your celebrations taken from you, and it's not your fault. Those who are dealing with loneliness, depression, and anxiety, you've been removed from your friends and community in a way that only makes these problems seem worse. You're trying to learn and take classes in an online format that doesn't feel like education and learning. And you're distracted, and you're hurting, and you're confused. And it feels as though so much of what's happening is outside of your control, and your first reaction, therefore, is to take it out on those closest to you like your family members.

And I just want to say to all of our covenant children, examine yourself. Consider how your passions are disrupting the peace with those closest to you in your family. And you might be thinking to yourself, well, you don't know how annoying my siblings are getting. You don't know how unreasonable my parents are being. You don't know what I'm having to sacrifice for the sake of what these adults are doing and telling me. They just don't understand. And I just want to say to you to examine and search your heart. Pray that God would reveal to you what selfishness is at war within you. Where can you sympathize and make peace in your own household? Can you look at your parents with understanding and love and gratitude? Because I guarantee you that they are just as scared as you are. They are doing the best that they can to be strong. What would it look like for you to approach your parents and, instead of starting war, to embrace them and let them know especially on Mother's Day how much you love them and care for them, to allow the harvest of righteousness to sow peace between you and your family?

And to the parents of our covenant children, here's my exhortation to you in light of these verses. I can't imagine the difficulty you have right now being a parent. All the time that you've invested in strategically planning out the roles and responsibilities of your home has now gone out the window. You're overworked and over-stressed, and on top of that, your kids are complaining and rebelling at you at every stage and turn. Some of you have been laid off, and, through no fault of your own, you are now having to find a way amidst the largest unemployment ever in the history of this country since the Great Depression to provide for your family. You're hearing stories of friends and family members contracting the disease, and you just want to lash out because enough is enough. And so you lash out at your kids.

I just want to say to those parents to consider how your passions are disrupting the peace with those closest to you. Examine and search your heart. Pray truly that the Lord would reveal to you what selfishness is at war within you. Where can you sympathize and make peace in your household? Can you look at your children with understanding and love and gratitude? Because I guarantee that they are just as scared as you are. They are doing the best that they are able to be strong. What would it look like for

you to approach them and, instead of starting war, to embrace them and hug them, especially on Mother's Day to let them know how much you love them and care for them, to allow a harvest of righteousness to sow peace between you and your family?

See, once you've identified the disrupters of peace in verses 1 through 4, you can now see in verses 5 through 8 the giver of grace. Or in other words, if verses 1 through 4 is the virus, then verses 5 through 8 are the vaccine. Verse 5 begins by asking us to remember the source of wisdom, and that is the word of God.

Perhaps you are wondering what specific Bible verse is quoted here in verse 5 when he says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." And some of you might be troubled to know that a specific verse like this in the Old Testament and the New Testament doesn't exist. But this shouldn't make you worry or fear. James is simply quoting scripture's teachings and using the phrase "Scripture says" in your Bible to summarize the teaching of what the Bible teaches. Verses like Exodus 25, "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." Exodus 34:14, "For you shall worship no other God for the Lord whose name is jealous." And familiarity, as James would have been with Paul's teaching, 1 Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not know that God's Spirit dwells within you?"

James here in verse 5 is summarizing the whole of scripture to show that the answer to unrighteous jealousy which leads to death is a righteous jealousy that leads to grace. Do you see the difference between the two? Unrighteous jealousy leads to division. Righteous jealousy leads to God's dwelling within us. Unrighteous jealousy leads to war. Righteous jealousy makes peace. Unrighteous jealousy leads to legalism. Righteous jealousy leads us to grace. And He gives more of it.

In verse 6, this is the grace that is given to those who are humble enough to recognize that they need to receive it. This grace is in direct opposition to pride. It's a grace that causes us to submit ourselves to the only source of salvation and grace that we can find, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the grace that gives us the strength to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. So in verse 7, the promise is that when we draw near to God, He will draw near to us. Not that He will consider drawing near to us, not that He might draw near to us, that when we humble ourselves and draw near ourselves to this holy, righteous, merciful, just God, He will draw near to us.

The promise is that those who are weary, broken, humbled will find peace in the arms of a savior. The promise of God is that those of you who are fed up and tired of everything that has been going on in the past two months is that He will draw near to you. And the promise of God in response to your envious and straying heart is that if you pray and humble yourself, He will be near to you because He is faithful. Christian, this is your hope. Will you draw near to God and let go of the desire to control your own life, to control your own passions, and will you go to the giver of grace and receive it because He is generous to give it?

This is the invitation and the good news of the gospel. God invites you to receive His grace through His Son, Jesus Christ. This offering is free for you. That God knows the disruption of peace inside your hearts, and yet He still invites you to His heavenly home to receive grace from our sins, from our shame, from the punishment and guilt that we deserve. And He gives more grace and more grace and more grace. Will you receive it?

Do you see here if you are willing, verses 8 through 12 is allowing us the window to see how we bring about the work of peace in our lives? Verses 1 through 4, the disrupters of peace is the virus. Verses 5 through 8, the giver of grace is the vaccine. And the second half of verse 8 and through verse 12 is the work of peace. This is vigilance.

And it starts here in the second half of verse 8 with two exhortations and two labels. We are to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Why? Because we are both sinners and double-minded. James does not mince any words, does he? James is not speaking here of cleansing our hands and our coronavirus Purell and Lysol saturated world. James is reflecting back to the Levitical law when he says,

"Cleanse your hands," which calls for sacrifices only to be made by priests when they have given themselves and made themselves clean to make such sacrifices. And you got to remember the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of today. Coming to God demands purification. So through the hands in the Old Testament, sacrifices were offered. Through hands, objects were declared clean. And through hands, others were even ordained for ministry.

So James here is recognizing that sinners and double-minded individuals need to, like the priests of old, cleanse themselves in order to be able to approach this God. They needed to endure hardship, distress, labor, all of these things which are covered in the sense of the word "wretched." "Wretched" is not talking about something necessarily negative here. It's talking about perseverance, endurance, hardship, distress labelled "Be wretched." Endure. That in reflecting on their sin and enjoyment of sin, James is saying you need to move towards mourning and weeping. The sin which you used to laugh about, the sin which you enjoyed so much, the ones that said, well, you know, it's just so bad that it was good, is to be rejected, despised, and mourned over. We are to turn our joy of our sin to gloom, of our laughter to mourning in verse 9 because when you are humbled by your sins, in verse 10, the promise is that the Lord will exalt you.

So let me just pause here and ask a simple question that James is presenting. Do you hate your sin? Have you mourned and wept over it? Or do you just accept it as a part of the world? Do you know that you're at enmity with God when you do so?

You see, one thing that James is trying to eliminate is the idea that embracing grace means excusing sin. And that is the unfortunate result of today's modern Christian thought, that grace covers all of my sin, so I can continue sinning in the same degree and the same enjoyment as I have and will continue to do. But if we do this, Columbia Pres, it means that we only embrace a three-chapter gospel which is creation, fall, redemption. But you must remember that the Spirit of God that is dwelling within you, dwelling within you in verse 5, is calling you to see that you are a new creation restored, consummated. He is restoring you today.

The activity of the Christian is not merely to look at Christ and the cross and claim justification but also to claim sanctification in the power of the Holy Spirit that dwells within you to walk in faith and obedience and hatred of your sin. To see that Christ is your great brother who takes the selfish passions at war within us, to take the death that we deserve because of it, who takes our pride, our shame, our ungodly laughter and tainted joy, and places all of that upon Himself as He dies for us on the cross for our sins. He humbles Himself before the Father on our behalf, submits to the Father's will, cleanse our hands for us, and purifies us so that we might be able to approach the throne of God.

And because Christ our great brother has made this right relationship with us, to those who come to Him by faith, to those who humble themselves and ask Christ to draw near to them, you now have this posture and this power of being and bringing and giving grace and making peace with the world. So don't let anyone ever label you as the frozen chosen in this congregation, you reformed Presbyterians. Let the doctrine of the Holy Spirit fuel your fight, and your battles, and addictions, and your hatred of your sin. Let the doctrine of the Holy Spirit remind you that yes, your sin is forgiven, praise God, but that it is also being put to death in you. Let the doctrine of the Holy Spirit remind you to make right relationships with others around you. Humble yourselves because He will exalt you.

In this way, James here, not the James mentioned in John of our earlier scripture reading but James the brother of Jesus, is echoing his brother's words on the second greatest commandment in verses 11 and 12. In essence in these verses he's simply saying love your neighbor as yourself. How do we go about this? James says that we will do this by not judging evil against one another because doing so would be placing yourself in the position of God and over God. You are saying God is not the rightful judge. I am.

Now, here is what James is not saying. James here is not saying that righteous, lawful, and good judgments shouldn't be made. Scripture affirms that we should do this as Christians. However, he is

calling against unrighteous wicked judgments that are in essence trying to take the place and the role of God in that person's life. So in other words, when you do so, you're saying Jesus on the cross, His taking of the punishment wasn't enough. God's judgment isn't enough. No, only your sense of judgment will make things right. And James says that when you have done this, you have now placed yourself over the law and have spoken evil over it. You have tried to take the law into your own hands, and you have perverted it. You have taken the place of God, and instead of humility, your pride leads to death.

There is a very real application of this here that we've experienced this week. I, like many of you, am grieving over the news of Ahmaud Arbery. It speaks to the way in which our African American brothers and sisters are wrongfully judged by those who not only speak evil but act evil out in ways that echoes in all too familiar history in this country. From the lynching of Will and Jesse Powell in 1917 for brushing against a farmer's horse to the unrighteous murder of an African American man in 1926 just for being present at a picnic where his presence scared a girl to Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, and countless African Americans who are slain not by the content of their character but slain by the color of their skin.

And as I have listened to my African American brothers in Christ, pastors, brothers and sisters in our denominations in the PCA, I realize more and more in reflecting on James 4 why James is so direct to call out the wrongful judgment of our brothers and sisters in Christ. You see, because the gospel is never intended to be preached and then left aside in the treatment of others. The gospel is always indicative and then imperative. The gospel is preached so that the people of God remember the grace they have been given and extend that to love their neighbors as themselves. The grace that reminds us that we are in the image of His Son, the Imago Dei that resides in every human being, nationality, gender, and race. And that is why this week and every week, we grieve and listen and share compassion with our brothers and sisters in Christ, to live out everything that we've seen in the book of James, why we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry, to not show the sin, the partiality, to watch our tongues, to be doers of the word, to be wise and bring in a harvest of righteousness, and to know that the real evil, the real disrupter of peace is more about what is happening in our hearts than what a runner is doing outside our homes.

In that sense, we see how we have come full circle in our sermon. The solution to disrupters of peace is understanding how to rightfully speak what is good to our brothers and sisters by humbling ourselves before the giver of grace, to submit and lay everything captive in your heart that is causing war, murder, covetousness, and unholy jealousy, and submitting it to Christ. You see, the power of the book of James, a book that rarely references Jesus, is that this is in essence the New Testament's version of Esther, that the reader is to see Christ in every exhortation, working in every command, being the power behind everything that James is telling the church to do, and to force to examine ourselves and realize our desperate need for Jesus, to see that restoration is done through the hands and feet of Christ and the church, His body, to bring His gift of grace to others in the working of peace. Let's pray together.

Father, I thank you that you are the peacemaker, the peace giver, and that by your grace you strength us by the power of your Holy Spirit to be like our brother Christ, to love our neighbor as ourselves, Lord, to speak against unrighteous judgments, to examine our own hearts, and to be reminded of the grace we've been given. Lord, we thank you for your word to us today. And in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.