

NEVER STONES OR SERPENTS

When Divine Intervention Merits Our Full Attention

“A Journey Through James” Sermon 16

Texts: James 4:1-10; Matthew 7:7-11; Psalm 24:3-7; Hosea 14:1-4

James 4:1–10 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.**

Matthew 7:7–11 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ **For everyone who asks receives,** and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ **Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?** ¹¹ **If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!**

Psalm 24:3–7 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. ⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation. ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah ⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Hosea 14:1–4 Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. ² Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, “Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. ³ Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’ to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy.” ⁴ I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.

Introduction:

We all have watched reality TV shows involving people whose lives and relationships have been ruined by some life-enslaving sin – hoarding, alcoholism, substance abuse, etc. These broken behaviors don't just affect that individual, they have a devastating impact on those who love them – their family and friends.

These destructive behaviors don't start out as cruel masters. They enter as winsome friends promising something appealing or comforting and entice the person with assurances of pleasure, comfort, security, or control. However, as these desires grow unchecked, an action becomes a pattern, then a habit, and before long it takes over the entirety of that person's life – damaging their relationships, their career, their finances, their home, their physical and emotional wellbeing, and in some cases, their very lives. These stories are tragic when they happen to anyone – but they are devastating when they happen to a Christian because of the immense damage done to the credibility of the gospel and their service to Christ.

Usually, at some point in the reality show episode, a close friend or family member (or a group of them) decides the time has come to take drastic action before their friend or loved one destroys themselves – and so they do an intervention.

That is exactly what is going on in our text. For three chapters, Pastor James has explained what a living faith looks like, how it is strengthened and matured, and what should flow from the life of a person whose faith is whole hearted, single focused, and fully trusting in God and in His Word.

James exhorts us to be people who have chosen the right wisdom as the operating system for our hearts. When we are careful to live as doers of the word and not as hearers only, this wisdom functions like a transmission converting our living faith into actions, words, and works that please God and serve others well.

James introduced two Friends of God who embraced this good wisdom and modeled what wholehearted, single focused, and fully trusting faith produces over the course of one's life. Abraham reminds us that a living faith faithfully obeys God's words and does God's will in the hardest places and darkest moments of

life. Rahab reminds us that a living faith will truly save and deliver us on the day God's judgment comes.

In chapter three, James slows down and intentionally parks on the two distinct Wisdoms that operate in the two different Kingdoms in which believers have their citizenship. He describes the deadly effect of embracing "Wisdom from Below" by exposing the inner motives and the external evidence that mark the life of a believer who consistently operates by that demonic, earthly, and unspiritual wisdom.

In contrast, James also describes Wisdom from Above and reminds his readers that its chief component is that it is "pure" – unadulterated and unmixed by any component of the Wisdom from Below. The defining evidence of this wisdom in the life of a believer or congregation is the *Shalom* produced when believers consistently operate by this wisdom.

Apparently, James realized some of his readers might hear everything he has said and yet continue to insist they were all about "wisdom from above" and were in fact "friends of God." BUT what was coming out of their lives contradicted their claims and revealed the presence of **three spiritual dangers that had ensnared them:**

1. They were double minded. James actually states this directly (4:8).
2. They were self-deceived. James warned against this danger repeatedly in the first chapter (1:16, 22, 26).
3. They had aligned themselves with the enemies of God.

And they were too blind and too deceived to see it. So, their loving Pastor James does a divine spiritual intervention. Interventions of this nature are designed to grab attention; confront bad or destructive behavior; shock the recipient into seeing the full impact of their bad behavior on their lives and on others; and provide hope, help, and a clear pathway back to good and healthy behavior and restored relationships. James does all these things in this passage.

While we listen in on this divine intervention James does with his readers, let's remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit preserved it in the Bible because there may be some of us who need this same spiritual intervention in our own lives this morning.

As we start into the text, we need to consider several **important reminders about our text that apply to us.**

1. James is writing to Christians (“brothers” in 4:11), so whatever he has to say to them and however strongly he says it, we need to remember his words are addressed to us.
2. James is writing to a congregation (or congregations). Therefore much of what he has to say is stated corporately in that it is directed to the congregation as a whole (“among you” 4:1).
3. James intends his words to impact individuals within the congregation. In other words, while he addresses the congregation at large, he refuses to allow individual Christians to hide in the crowd. What he says to the congregation must also be prayerfully considered and diligently applied by each individual member of this congregation. And we must each apply his words to ourselves.

So, with this in mind, how does James design and carry out this intervention with his beloved readers? His intervention is powerful because it is crafted around **three important turning points** that the congregation must receive, believe, and embrace. We can see them clearly by asking **four questions that are the key to unlocking this text:**

First, “What evidence does James use to make his case that these believers are in fact operating from the wrong wisdom?”

Second, “What is at the root of this devastating reality? What has caused them to embrace the wrong wisdom?”

Third, “How does God feel about what has happened among them?”

Finally, “What response does God demand from them?”

So, let's follow James as he unfolds this divine intervention by:

I. Confronting the Devastating Reality (4:1-3)

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.

- James immediately calls their attention to an undeniable reality – they have destroyed the “shalom” God has made and called them to display. Peace had been broken not by outsiders but by insiders!
- This broken peace is perhaps the single greatest evidence that the wrong kind of wisdom has been at work in their midst.
- Believers operating with Wisdom from Above love peace and work hard to make peace. Its presence is evidence of Wisdom from Above.
- However, instead of sowing peace, these believers were at war against each other! And this was a sure sign of the wrong wisdom!

A. A Convicting Question

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

- This question reveals two issues going on in these believers:
 1. Believers were engaged in relational conflict with each other.
 2. These conflicts were prolonged, fierce, and verbal in nature.
 - Term for “*quarrels*” is the term for a prolonged active war.
 - Term for “*fights*” implies that the attacks were verbal assaults in the form of heated disputes, loud arguments, and personal defamation or disparagement.
 - James’ is making the point that the war going on among them is being carried out by verbal attacks and angry outbursts.

B. A Clarifying Answer

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

- But why were they at war? What was the cause of their conflict?
- James does not allow his readers to point to others as the reason for the conflict. Instead, he points them to a much closer and more internal cause

for their conflicts – their own internal passions that were waging relentless, brutal war within them.

- You are at war with each other because your “passions” are at war within you.
- The term for passion is our term “*hedonism*” – *a strong sensual desire or an intense appetite for something pleasurable*. Although this term can be used to describe a strong appetite for legitimate pleasures, in this context it clearly refers to inordinate, sinful pleasures. James referred to this in 1:14-15.
- Jesus warned that some who respond to the gospel will be *choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature* (Luke 8:14).
- James has already warned us that our desire, if left unchecked, will lead us to sin (1:14-15), and that is exactly where he goes next.

C. Their Wicked Conduct

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

- “*You desire and do not have*” – this is the word he used to describe how temptation works in 1:14.
- This desire is so important to you that you are willing to commit murder to obtain it and enjoy the temporary pleasure it offers.
- James is not accusing them of physical murder. He has been talking about the wrong use of the tongue (3:1-12). Here the nature of their conflict is verbal assaults and angry outbursts. Later in the chapter he tells them to stop speaking evil against a fellow Christian (4:11). He is talking about character assassination.
- Jesus reminded his followers that murder starts in the heart – *to hate your brother or insult him or disparage him as a “fool” is to be guilty of murder* (Matthew 7:21-22).
- James repeats his accusation, but this time uses the term “*covet*” to remind his readers that what they were not just sinning against each other, they were sinning against God by breaking the tenth command – “*Thou shalt not covet*” (Ex 20:17; Dt. 5:21).
- James explains that behind these strong desires is the sin of coveting – wanting something God has prohibited.

- And because you are coveting and not obtaining, you are murdering each other with your mouths and shattering Shalom.

D. Denial from God

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.

- So, if God is the giver of good gifts (James 1:17), and since He has invited His children to ask Him for things and assured them He would give them what they asked for (Matthew 7:7-8), why then were these believers not receiving what they wanted?
- Here is the wording of Jesus' promise to His followers: *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7–8)*
- James makes a very pointed statement – ***you do not have what you desire because you are not asking God for it.***
- ***You have stopped asking*** because, when you do ask, you do not receive what you asked for from God.
- And the reason you do not receive, is because you are asking wrongly. So, in what way are they asking wrongly?
- Not necessarily that they are praying for wrong/sinful things; but that they are praying for those things in order to use them in wrong ways – to satisfy their appetites instead of using them to exalt God's name, to extend God kingdom, or to do God's will on earth instead of their own.
- And the reason God does not give you what you want is that He is a good Father who only gives good gifts that will benefit you and help you accomplish His will, elevate His name, and advance His kingdom as you live in the little kingdoms of the world.
- Jesus made a very vivid comparison to help us understand how God responds when we ask for things: *Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a **stone**? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a **serpent**? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9–11)*
- Like any human father, God never gives His children stones or serpents when they ask him for food. He only gives good things to those who ask

Him. And when what we ask Him for will damage us or hinder us from exalting his name, advancing His kingdom, or doing His will, as a good Father, he does not grant us what we have asked because to do so would be like giving us a stone or a serpent!

- Think about the good things we often ask God to give us: More financial resources, a better car, a bigger car, restoration to health, extended life, a good marriage, well-behaved children, success in our career, a new job, vindication over our enemies, etc.
- How often do we ask for these things out of our own self-interest as opposed to asking God to give us these things only if they help us exalt His name, advance His kingdom, or better accomplish His purpose/will for our lives?
- Would we be content if God decided not to heal us if that would advance the gospel more effectively? Would we be content if He halted our career path and moved us to a job we didn't like as much because there was someone there who needed to hear the Gospel from us?
- ***Would we see these answers from God as good gifts, or would we feel as though He had given us a serpent or a stone?***
- And more importantly, where would we turn and how would we respond when we realize God is not a personal vending machine that delivers whatever we think is good or whatever we think we want, when and how we want it?
- Will we operate by His Wisdom or will we turn to the World?

James has graciously confronted his beloved readers with the undeniable evidence that they have chosen to operate by the wrong wisdom, and it has resulted in heavy spiritual damage to their relationships and to their ability to fulfill the mission God has assigned to them as ambassadors of His kingdom to all the little kingdoms of the world where He has placed them.

But James is not finished with his intervention. After confronting them with the evidence of their departure from God's wisdom, he now exposes the root problem going on among them.

II. Exposing the Deadly Root (4:4-6)

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.”

A. Their Shocking Position

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.

- Not only are they at war with each other, they are at war with God!
- James accuses them of adultery against God. The OT prophets used this same terminology to shock God’s people so they would see the true nature of what they were doing when they worshiped other gods or took up the values and practices of the pagan nations around them.
- James is forcing these early Christians to face this very same reality. They were sinning against Christ in the same way the nation of Israel sinned against God in the OT. And they were guilty of the same disloyalty – they were guilty of spiritual adultery!
- Israel often protested against this charge by claiming to love God (Malachi 1-2); but God was very direct and relentless in His exposing of their adulterous heart and disloyalty to Him (Mal 3:13-15).
- While claiming friendship with God, they had aligned themselves with the world and lined up under the god of this world – and this put them on the opposite side of God and positioned them with the enemies of God. This is why James stated, ***“to be a friend of the world (to align with the world) is to intentionally make yourself an enemy of God.”*** There is no middle ground for believers.

B. Scripture’s Admonition

*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”? Therefore it says, “**God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**”*

- James points to the entire message of Scripture to help us understand how God feels when His people become spiritual adulteresses and align with His enemies: ***He opposes them.***
- The term “*oppose*” portrays God arraying Himself in battle against an opponent. This is more than just God being angry. James looks back to

Solomon's wisdom and warns proud believers that God will actively oppose and work against them to frustrate their plans and stymie their efforts (Prov 3:34).

- But why does God take such an aggressive stance against His own people? It has to do with the work He has done in them.
- James puts it this way: He yearns jealously over the spirit that he caused to dwell in us.
- So, **we must answer two questions about this verse (4:5):**

1. *What is the spirit that God caused to dwell in us?*

Option 1: it is the Holy Spirit given at salvation.

Option 2: it is our human spirit that God placed in every man when He created us and breathed into us the breath (spirit) of life.

Option 3: It is the new life God brought forth in us by means of the Word of truth (1:17).

2. *Who is yearning jealousy? – God or the spirit that dwells in us?*

Option 1: It is God jealously longing for loyal love of His people.

Option 2: It is the Holy Spirit zealously fighting against the flesh for the purity of the believer in whom He dwells.

Option 3: It is the spirit of the believer who, apart from the Wisdom of God's Word and the power of God's spirit, will be increasingly prone to the lust of the flesh, the pride of life, and the lust of the eyes.

While there are good arguments that can be made for all of these positions, ***I have become convinced James is talking about the new spiritual life we received when the Word of truth brought us forth as first fruits of the New Creation (1:18).***

I think the warnings about temptation in James 1:13-16a combined with the explanation about how temptation works even in believers point to the idea that our flesh (the irredeemable part of our nature) that is still part of who we are, yearns and lusts ardently for things the World and its wisdom promise to give.

Here is what I think James is saying: *The Scripture clearly warns believers that they can and do commit spiritual adultery against God. And the Scriptures clearly teach that even as believers, our spiritual life is still heavily influenced by the hedonism of our flesh that constantly yearns ardently for their fulfillment. And apart from God's gracious provision, we will yield to those desires.* Which is why Paul warned those who were confident in their ability to stand, to take heed lest they fall (1 Cor. 10:2).

C. God's Gracious Provision

But he gives more grace

- So what has God done to counter our flesh and to protect and preserve His people?
- He has given more grace – the term “*more*” implies something awesome, amazing, jaw-dropping. The term “grace” implies strength and enablement.
- What is this awesome, jaw-dropping enabling strength God has abundantly given? What is the “more grace” God has given us?
- James tells us that when the Word of truth brought us forth into life (1:17), God implanted the Word in our hearts (1:21).
- This implanted Word is the “Wisdom from above” that James has been talking about. It is the inspired written word that reveals the Living Word (John 1:1-4; Heb: 1:1-3). And it is the living Wisdom of God that was by God's side when He created the heavens and the earth (Proverbs 8).
- All of this leads me to believe that the jaw-dropping gift of grace that James is referring to is the Holy Spirit of God that indwells us, enlightens us, and enables us to do God's will as revealed by the Word of God graciously implanted in our heart.
- How will believers ever win the war the flesh is waging against them? Where will they get strength to resist temptation? How will they truly know and understand the wisdom they have been given?
- James' answer is that God has given us a good and perfect gift in the Word of truth. And when that Word of truth brought us to life, God caused an even greater gift to dwell in us – His Spirit.

- That Spirit goes to war against our flesh (Gal 5:17), but if we will align ourselves with the Spirit and submit to His control and follow what He has written in the Word, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16).

Which brings us to the third and final component of this intervention by which James exhorts adulterous believers to return to their first love, repair their broken relationships, and recommit to a whole hearted, single focused, fully trusting faith in God.

III. Embracing the Divine Remedy (4:7-10)

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.

A. Expressed Generally – Submit humbly and Resist boldly

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you

- What must we do when we find ourselves on the wrong side, living by the wrong wisdom, and for the goals and objectives of the wrong kingdom? We must run to God and return to His side!
- ***We must submit humbly*** and return to God and to His wisdom just as James exhorted us to do when he instructed us to “*Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness (submissiveness) the implanted word which is able to save (deliver) your souls*” (1:21).
- ***We must also intentionally resist boldly*** by realigning ourselves on God’s side by boldly and intentionally standing against the world, its wisdom, and its god. We must resist (stand against) the devil. And when we do this intentionally, dependently, and boldly as directed by God’s Wisdom and empowered by God’s Spirit, the devil will flee.

B. Articulated Specifically – Repent truly

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

- Submitting and resisting involve genuine repentance when we have betrayed Christ by aligning with the world, its wisdom, and its god.

- This is what James means when he exhorts believers who have sinned and who are double minded to “draw near to God.”
- How do we actually do this? How does a sinning, double minded believer return to God (draw near)?
- ***First, he must acknowledge he has sinned*** and cleanse his life (hands) from whatever sinful behavior has stained his life. In other words, he must put away all moral filthiness and any rampant wickedness that he has allowed in his life.
- ***Second, he must unify (purify) his divided, double minded heart*** by identifying and removing anything that has adulterated the pure wisdom of God that God implanted in his heart.
- Drawing near to God involves approaching Him through His Word and responding fully and solely to that wisdom alone.

C. Displayed Appropriately – Mourn joyfully

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

- Worldlings mock at sin (Prov 14:9). Sinful sorrow arrives only when the bitter consequences of sin rest heavy on an unrepentant heart and leads to spiritual death (2 Cor 7:10b).
- True sorrow over sin manifests itself in genuine grief and sorrow for having acted disloyally to One who loved so freely and gave so abundantly and this sorrow leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:10).
- Unlike sinners who eat, drink, and make merry while they are sinning, believers who have been graciously humbled by God over their sin, respond by mourning over their sin (Mat. 5:4).
- But this genuine sorrow is mixed with Spirit engendered joy over the gracious work of godly sorrow that has resulted in renewed life! ***Joyful mourning marks a true repentor!***

D. Rewarded Graciously – Wait confidently

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

- But what produces such joy in the midst of godly mourning?
- God has promised to do something for believers such as those who, after having followed the wrong wisdom and becoming double minded, genuinely repent and mourn over their sin.

- James gives them great reason for joy – God has made a promise to them. *He will receive them. He will restore them. And He will lift them up from where they have fallen!*
- All that was initially lost, is not gone. As Paul would later say to the Romans, “*Where sin abounds, grace abounds more!*”

Conclusion:

Humbling ourselves before God is hard business. And to help us, God gives our godly friends or family the courage to be like James and bring a gracious, divine intervention uniquely designed to deliver us from our sin.

God has recently allowed me to experience how easy it is to operate from the wrong wisdom and how hard it is to acknowledge and repent.

Earlier this week I was with a friend who said, “Pastor, I want to share something with you that I have observed.” He affirmed me, assured me of his love and appreciation for my ministry and friendship. Then he graciously pointed out something he had observed and experienced in the times we were together.

I thanked him and went home and thought about what he said and reflected on the courage it took for him to say what he said. Initially my response was to quickly embrace his observation and solve the issue by determining to do better by working harder to improve in that area of weakness. However, the more I worked on this passage, the more I began to realize that in order to actually change, I had to see this as more than just a weakness. I had to see it as a manifestation that the kind of wisdom that James was warning believers to avoid was affecting and influencing that particular area of my life. And the more I worked in this text, the more I began to see that it was more than just a weakness – in that area, I was not doing God’s will nor was I reflecting the kindness and grace I regularly experience from God and other believers.

So – what do you do when you are not just preaching James on Sunday morning but engaging with him throughout the week? I decided to go escape to Jonah and do some prep for our upcoming Fall series. I avoided James by working on the lesson

on Joseph I agreed to do in Pastor Ben's class during our Equip hour. But eventually I had to go back to James. And James was waiting for me. Kindly, graciously, directly, and relentlessly God used James to speak to me through these verses.

And here is what it came down to for me – was I willing to acknowledge the truth that had been presented? Was I willing to look carefully at the root issue? And was I willing to humble myself and repent?

So what about you? How will you respond to James' intervention in your life? Will you deflect or deny and continue on your willful way? Or will you humble yourself before the Lord? Will you repent, cleanse worldly wisdom from your heart, and wait for Him to lift you up?

How will you respond to James' message to you this morning?

- Will you deflect or deny and continue on your willful way?
- Will you humble yourself before the Lord?
- Will you repent, cleanse worldly wisdom from your heart, and wait for Him to lift you up?
- What would James ask you to do if he were here this morning?
- How does Jesus (who is here) want you to respond to this message?