

Look In and Look Up (James 4:1-6)

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Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a fight with a family member or friend and suddenly thought, "I have absolutely no idea why we're arguing. I think it started with getting home late from work, or who put whose clothes in which laundry basket, or whose turn it was to sweep the kitchen after dinner, or something like that. And honestly, part of what makes me so angry right now is that we're all worked up about nothing."

"Why is this such a big deal? Grow up people. If we're going to have a fight, let's pick something worth fighting about like the fact it makes no sense to throw your shoes all over the floor so I have to get out of my car and clean up your mess every time I try to pull into the garage. Or why you keep 'forgetting' to open our super-easy budgeting app to see how much money we have left in clothing before you buy yet another pair of shoes because they were 'on sale.'"

I'll let you decide which of those scenarios are real and which ones have been modified to protect the guilty. Does that sound familiar? I'm angry and I don't know why because this whole situation shouldn't be such a big deal. But somehow, I'm still really angry. How in the world did a laundry basket cause those words to come out of my mouth?

James 4 opens with the same age-old question. V. 1, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" He's just finished laying out in 3:13-18 the fundamental choice we make every day of our lives. Will I live according to the wisdom of this world or the wisdom of God? True wisdom, the wisdom of God, is humility in action that leads to peace. James 3:18, "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

Apparently, however, peace was not ruling and reigning in the churches to whom James wrote. Their relationships, even between professing Christians, were riddled with fights and quarrels. And James knows the situation isn't going to change until they understand something and choose to act accordingly. It's a biblical principle, a timeless truth, that is relatively easy to explain, but takes a lifetime to apply. **The answer to our conflict with men is found in our relationship with God.**

Discovering the source and the solution to the animosity you're experiencing in your relationships right now doesn't start with what that person is saying or doing,

or refusing to say or do. The source and the solution to human conflict is found in the condition of your own heart, and in particular, the way you're relating to God. In 4:1-6, James helps us recognize our need to focus in two directions in the midst of conflict. We need to look within, evaluating the desires and passions in our heart in light of God's Word. And we need to look without, running to Jesus for the hope and help we need to love what he loves so we can act in a way that makes for peace.

If you're fighting, in other words, you need to look in and you need to look up. Look in and look up, because the answer to conflict with men is found in our relationship with God. James helps us get there by making a series of perceptive observations about the spiritual realities in play in the midst of our conflicts. We'll linger on the first and move more quickly through the second and third.

1) THE ROOT OF EVIL ARE THE DESIRES WITHIN US (vv. 1-3)

The essential answer to the question in v. 1 is found in vv. 2-3. "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."

In the midst of a fight or quarrel, what do we feel? We feel like it's the other person's fault, right? What they're saying or doing is making me fight and quarrel. James says the exact opposite. The conflict may be triggered by what someone else does or says, their actions may prove the occasion for our sin, but the ultimate reason we choose to sin has nothing to do with them and everything to do with the desires within my own heart.

For example, if I meticulously walk through our entire bedtime routine with the kids after a long day and finally sink into my reading chair only to hear arguing and fighting down the hall, how will I respond? Whatever I choose to do next has nothing to do with the kids. It has everything to do with the desires in my heart. If the ruling desire, the passion sitting on the throne of my heart, is, "I want more than anything else to honor God's priorities and purposes for my life, including the gospel ministry of parenting," I might be exhausted, but I will quietly walk down the hall and patiently address my kids.

But what if that's not what I want more than anything else in that moment? I mean, maybe I want that a little bit. But what if what I want the most has nothing to do with God. "I want rest. I deserve rest. I worked my butt off today so I could put food



on the table you ungrateful...." What will happen next? I will snap my kindle shut, double-step down the hall, and issue a series of angry threats and ultimatums which will likely be followed by one of two things, either indignant silence or, "Hey dad, I feel like you just lost your temper with us."

Never blame someone else for your own sin. Their sin may prove the occasion of our own, but they are never responsible for our own. We sin, we fight and quarrel and commit evil against one another, whenever any desire other than glorifying God occupies the throne of our hearts and another human being has the audacity to frustrate our wishes.

The next time you feel anger rising in your heart toward someone, stop and ask, "What do I want right now that this person is not giving me?" What ruling desire in my heart am I demanding they fulfill? Is it respect? Is it peace and quiet? Is it money? Is it sexual satisfaction? What do I want that I'm not getting that is causing me to get angry? The root of evil are the desires within us.

So when we discover them, what should we do? How should we handle the desires in our heart that people inevitably fail to meet? Should we just stuff them or try not to care so much? No. Look again at v. 2. "You do not have, because you do not ask." That's an incredible statement. James' first response to the desires in our heart isn't to say, "Just stop wanting that or just stop caring about that." No, he says, "Look to God to satisfy that desire instead of demanding another human do it for you."

For example, if you're a parent of adult children, could a good desire for them to experience God's blessing in their life present a temptation to give them a less-than-gracious piece of your mind when they make yet another foolish decision? Absolutely. So what's the solution? Take that desire for them to experience God's blessing and pray for God to work in their heart and life instead of pressuring them to change.

Don't stuff it. Don't ignore it. That's a good desire. But it's not a desire your child can ultimately fulfill. Only God can bring his blessing to pass in their life. Only God can satisfy that desire. So ask God. Pray to God. And keep casting your cares on him as you wait for God to do what only God can do.

Whether it's a desire for joy, peace, refuge, purpose, identity, love, justice, or all the other good things we want, the issue often isn't what we desire, it's who or what we're looking to for the fulfillment of that desire. Only the Lord can ultimately give



you those things, friend. Obeying v. 2 means we take all of our good desires and ask the Lord to fulfill them in the way he knows best. Psalm 4:6-7, "There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!' You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound."

The Lord is a generous King and invites us to ask him to fulfill our deepest longings and desires. But that assumes something, doesn't it? That assumes the desire we're asking God to fulfill is a good desire. That's not always the case, is it? Our desires are not categorically good. At best, they're a mixed bag.

The world says, "If you feel like doing it, or having it, or saying it, it's part of who you are and it must be good." God says, it might be, but it might not be. Until Jesus comes back and makes all things new, all our desires remain corrupted by sin, even as Christians. Thus the Bible warns us to neither reject our desires like the ascetic monks of old or worship our desires like Americans do in the name of personal freedom. Instead, we bring our desires to the Word of God and ask him to sift and evaluate them.

Why? Because if we don't, we are bound to fall into the trap of v. 3, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." The word for "passions" has a broad range of meaning. It can be good or bad. In the context of v. 3, however, it's clearly bad, describing sinful desires God refuses to fulfill and lovingly so.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, I tried to do it God's way, but it just didn't work out. He never brought a spouse. He never gave me the job I wanted. It wasn't working for me. If God wants to come through, that's fine. But if he doesn't, I know what I want and I'm going to make sure I get what I deserve, one way or the other."

Friend, if you have asked God to satisfy a desire in your heart he has yet to meet, we need to check our hearts. We have to ask hard questions, like, "Why do I want a raise? Why do I want a girlfriend? Why do I want that person to remember my birthday? Why do I want that child? Why do I want my business to grow?" Could it be that you want what is good, but for reasons that have nothing to do with God and everything to do with you?

God isn't fooled. He won't allow us to co opt him into serving the idols of our heart. He won't let us use him to satisfy a desire that isn't pleasing to him or submitted to

his authority. He's not a heavenly vending machine. He's our King. We need to stop demanding created things satisfy our souls. And when we bring our desires to the Lord, we must take care to ask rightly, for his glory and our good, remembering (point #1) the root of evil are the sinful desires within us.

2) THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IS OUR BETRAYAL OF GOD (vv. 4-5)

If you step back from point one – the root of evil are the sinful desires within us – you could think, “Ok, I get it. There are things I want that I probably shouldn't want. Or good things I want, but for the wrong reasons. But come on, Matthew. Nobody's perfect. Why is what I want such a big deal? Why should I spend all this time evaluating the desires of my heart? That doesn't sound like fun. Who wants to go around constantly evaluating exactly what they want or why they want it? That feels like a recipe for stress. Why not just do whatever I want to do as long as no one gets hurt?

Here's where vv. 4-5 are so helpful. The spiritual goal James is gunning for here isn't a lifestyle of excessive introspection where we never actually enjoy or pray for anything because we're all bent out of shape over our mixed motives. No, the goal is a spiritual sobriety that recognizes the spiritual significance of our desires. Because what we want reveals the true condition of our relationship with God.

As Christians, whenever we love or desire something more than we love or desire God, whenever the ruling passion sitting on the throne of our hearts is something or someone other than God, we are guilty of spiritual adultery. Why? Because Jesus bought us for himself at the cost of his own blood. We're not just his people. We're his bride. So whenever we swap in something or someone other than him as the supreme treasure of our souls, we're not just making a little mistake. We are betraying the Lord. We're violating our covenant relationship with him.

Look at v. 4, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” James isn't talking about avoiding or refusing to love people who don't know Jesus. He's talking about an intimacy of relationship where we give our highest affections and deepest loyalty to the same gods of power, pleasure, and possessions the rest of the world does. He's reminding us of Jesus' words in Matthew 6. “You can't serve two masters.” You can't give your heart to the things of this world and also give your heart to Jesus.



There's no such thing as spiritual neutrality. Either you are an enemy of the world and a friend of God, or you are a friend of the world and an enemy of God. Banish the lie, Christian, that you can remain a friend of God while surrendering your heart to the pursuit of wealth, or fame, or ease, or sexual ecstasy, or self-expression the way the world does. You can't. If you're desiring and pursuing what the world desires and pursues, your allegiance is to the world no matter how many Bible verses you know or how long you've been going to church.

The God who created you and died for you is jealous for his glory. V. 5, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." He's not an indifferent deity, mucking about in heaven, grateful for anyone on earth who's willing to throw him a bone. No. He is the Lord of glory. And the holy intensity of his commitment to his glory is the very fire from which the universe itself sprang into existence. He will not stand idly by and watch you ignore him. He will not turn a blind eye if you rebel against him. Either you run to Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins or he will justly punish you for your sins. Sin is that serious.

The problem isn't that we love the people or pleasures of this world. They are a gift from God. The problem is that we love them more than God and instead of God.

When you're tempted to ignore the desires swirling in your soul or think whatever's going on in your "heart" isn't a big deal, remember that. The problem of evil is our betrayal of God.

So do we do with the fact that every one of us, Christians included, is filled with all kinds of desires that are not pleasing to the Lord?

3) THE SOLUTION TO EVIL IS THE GRACE OF GOD (v. 6)

Look at v. 6. If all James said was found in vv. 1-5 we would have every reason to despair, for you will never find a man or woman who has the power to change their own heart. We like to think we rule over our desires. In reality, they rule over us. We're hopelessly enslaved to them and the anger we feel whenever someone else dares to frustrate them. We feel the truth of Jeremiah 13:23, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil."

So what does God do? What does his holy jealousy for his glory in and through your life, friend, compel him to do? It compelled him to send Jesus, to come for you, to



pursue you, as a father his prodigal son, as a husband his wayward wife. It is both exceedingly frightening and exceedingly good that God yearns jealously over the spirit he has caused to dwell in us. Why is it good? V. 6, because "he gives more grace." Where sin abounds, the grace of God, the undeserved and transforming love and power of God won for us by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, abounds all the more!

You say, "I'm sunk. You have no idea what I've done." Friend, Jesus gives more grace! You say, "It's hopeless. I keep committing the same sin over and over again." Friend, Jesus gives more grace! You say, "I know it's wrong, but I can't stop craving it anyway." God knows, friend, and he gives more grace! In view of the spiritual adultery in our hearts, the only hope we have is the only hope we need – God gives more grace.

Douglass Moo says it this way. "James is here reminding us that God's grace is completely adequate to meet the requirements imposed on us by (his) jealousy." Praise God for that, friends! Praise God there is no depth of evil, no degree of corrupted desire, mixed motive, or sinful lust too great, too strong, or too long standing for the power of King Jesus to overcome.

We'll learn in the second half of this passage how we practically access and experience his heart-changing power in our lives. But don't miss the immediate and upfront call to hope in the Lord even before James gives us all the details of his deliverance! Turn your eyes upon Jesus and the grace, the spiritual hope and help, God holds out to you in him.

If the cumulative guilt of the sin of the world was not strong enough to keep him in the grave, sexual lust is not too big for him. Financial greed is not too big for him. An insatiable hunger for the approval of men or an arrogant desire to prove your worth to yourself is not too big for him. James 1:6 is the good news of the gospel in miniature. Jesus gives more grace. Period.

CONCLUSION

The root of evil are the desires within us. The problem of evil is our betrayal of God. But the glorious, sin-shattering, death-destroying, soul-redeeming solution to evil is the grace of God. That's why I say the answer to our conflict with men is found in our relationship to God.



Our relationship with God is the answer in the sense that it explains what has gone wrong. A ruling desire for something or someone other than God has occupied his rightful place in our hearts. And our relationship with God is the answer in the sense that the power we need to change must ultimately come from him and has already been made freely available to us through faith in Jesus.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Don't set yourself in opposition to God by refusing to confess the evil desires in your heart. Confess them and then cry out to God for help in the words of King David in Psalm 51:7-10, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

May the Lord do that works in our hearts, friends, day after day, until we see him face to face. Let's pray.

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