James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Nine

He Gives More Grace

Quarrels, Pride, and the Only People God Opposes

James 4:1–6

We are continuing our study in the book of James. This letter was written by the brother of Jesus, to followers of Jesus who had lost nearly everything to keep worshiping Him. They left homes, friends, and family to keep their lives. They are in a real trial, under immense pressure, and it is in the trial, like us, that they begin to falter.

It is in the trial that their double-mindedness starts to show itself, the gap between what they believe and how they actually live. When things get hard, when it does not look like God is coming through, that is when our faith, or our lack of it, begins to reveal itself. So James writes this letter not to comfort them but to confront them, not to coddle them but to call them higher. He is going to do the same thing to us tonight.

We have spent the last few weeks in chapter 3, where James showed us two places that double-mindedness surfaces, in our words and in our wisdom. There is heavenly speech and demonic speech, heavenly wisdom and demonic wisdom, and you cannot always tell them apart by how they sound. The test is never how it sounds. The test is what it produces. Heavenly speech produces heavenly fruit, and heavenly wisdom produces a righteous life. Do we bless God with our words and then turn around and tear apart His creation with that same tongue? Do we claim to be wise and then live according to the flesh? Both expose the gap we have been talking about all series. So open your Bibles to James 4.

i. Where the Thought Begins

Every so often it is worth reminding ourselves of something important. Subheadings and chapter breaks were not in the original manuscripts and are not inspired. They were added later to help us navigate the text. But they can also mislead us. A subheading can make you think a passage says something it does not. A chapter break can make you assume the previous thought has finished when it has not.

That matters here, because the chapter 4 break falls in the middle of a thought rather than at the end of one. So we need to back up a few verses and find where James actually started.

> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.
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> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
>
> James 3:13–18, ESV

Hold on to two phrases there. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James says that where those two exist, you get disorder and every vile practice. Chapter 4 is going to show us exactly what that disorder looks like once it gets out into a room full of people.

ii.

What Disorder Looks Like

> 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.
>
> James 4:1–2a, ESV

James has just told us that false wisdom produces disorder and every vile practice. Now he shows us what that disorder actually looks like on the ground, and in his language it looks like fighting, murdering, quarreling, and coveting.

The murder is clearly a reference to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says that hating your brother is murdering him in your heart. These people were not killing each other. They were hating each other.

And what is causing all of it? It is not primarily the people around you. It is the war within you. It is inner turmoil that leads to outward conflict. You desire and do not have. You covet and cannot obtain.

So here is the question James would ask you. If you find yourself constantly fighting and bickering with people in the body of Christ, what might that reveal about what is going on inside of you? Is your dislike of that person rooted in jealousy? In pride? In coveting? Are you angry because they have something you do not have, or are living a life you believe you deserve?

That is disorder welling up out of the unsanctified parts of your soul.

iii.

Bitter Jealousy and Selfish Ambition

The Greek behind bitter jealousy is *zelon pikron*. Zelos on its own can mean zeal, intense desire, jealousy, or envy, and it is not inherently negative. But James modifies it with *pikros*, which means bitter, harsh, or poisonous. It is the same root behind his image of a spring producing bitter water a few verses earlier.

So bitter jealousy is more than simply wishing you had what someone else has. It is an intense, resentful desire that begins to view another person's good as a threat to your own. Here is the most useful way I know to test for it.

Bitter jealousy is when someone else's blessing starts feeling like your loss.

Someone else gets recognized, and you think, why was I not recognized. Someone else's opinion carries the room, and you think, why did they not listen to me. Someone receives attention, and you think, why are they not noticing me.

Selfish ambition sits right beside it, and it is not the same thing. It carries the idea of self-seeking, rivalry, and pursuing your own advancement at the expense of other people. It was also a word for campaigning for public office, working to win people to your side.

So if bitter jealousy looks at someone else and says I resent what you have, selfish ambition says I want to be the one who has it. One is concerned with what you have. The other is concerned with what I want. James pairs the two of them together on purpose.

iv.

You Do Not Ask

> 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 4:2b–3, ESV

Remember what he has been calling out. Jealousy. Coveting. Discontentment. And then he drops this line, and it is doing two things at once.

The first is this. You are discontent because you do not have what you want, and it has not even occurred to you to go ask the Lord for it. Your initial reaction is to fight, to quarrel, and to take. And you are a believer, which once again reveals the double-mindedness he has been tracking since chapter 1.

The second is just as sharp. When you do ask, you ask for selfish gain. You ask for more because you want your will done rather than His. You are in this for yourself.

The Progression

Discontentment › Bitter Jealousy › Selfish Ambition › Quarreling and Hatred

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Now James is going to get to the whole point of his letter. He has spent four chapters building the case that brings them to this moment, and we need to feel the intensity with which he is writing. The last four chapters have been rebuke after rebuke.

Doubting God. Blaming God for temptation. Hearing the Word and not doing it. Failing to control the tongue. Claiming to have faith with no works. Showing favoritism to the rich. Failing to show mercy while expecting it for yourself. Neglecting the poor and needy. Desiring a platform to teach while being careless with your words. Speaking blessing and cursing from the same mouth. Operating with demonic wisdom. Bitter jealousy. Selfish ambition. Hatred and spiritual murder. Pride. Coveting what other people have. Quarreling and fighting to get what you want. Praying with selfish motives.

Eighteen of them in four chapters. James has systematically stripped away our ability to pretend that our biggest problem is somewhere outside of us. And then he lands the big blow.

v.

The Big Blow

> 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"?
>
> James 4:4–5, ESV

You are adulterous. Unfaithful to the One who has been faithful to you. You are breaking the covenant with Him. You are His, and you continually give yourself away.

You have become a friend of the world and therefore an enemy of God. In trying to do things the way the world does them, you have set yourself against Him. You thought this whole time that you were a friend of God.

Then he asks whether you suppose the Scripture speaks to no purpose when it says He yearns jealously over the spirit He has made to dwell in us. You were bought with a price. You are not your own. The Spirit of God wants full Lordship and unbroken covenant, and to be filled instead with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, to tear down others made in His image, to fight and hate, is to break that covenant. He is jealous for you, in the same way that you would want your spouse jealous for your faithfulness.

Before You Turn the Page

Imagine that you are born again and you are hearing this message. You love God, but you have gotten lax. You have gotten complacent, you have been living in some compromise, and these sharp words cause a reaction somewhere in your soul. Remorse. Conviction. Pain. Regret.

If you love Jesus, if you are really born again, and James writes a letter exposing you for who you really are and showing you how deceived you have been, the reaction should be brokenness. Do not rush past that in order to get to the comfortable part. Sit in it long enough to be honest. Then look at the very next words he writes.

vi.

Grace to the Humble

> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
>
> James 4:6, ESV

In light of everything that has just been exposed, He gives grace. That is the gospel, and the gospel does not change once you have been born again.

This group has just been described in the strongest possible language as enemies of God. That is hyperbole driving the point home, but do you know what Paul says about the enemies of God? That God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still His enemies, Christ died for us.

What you need to realize is that if you respond rightly to His correction, He will meet you with grace. You can come back to the cross and rest in the gospel even if you have been living in compromise, even if you have lost your way entirely. No one is too far gone. Not you, not your kids, not anyone.

But there is a qualifier, and it is the key to understanding this whole letter. Grace comes to the humble. It only comes when you can be honest with yourself and with Him and come to the conclusion, Lord, You are right. I have done these things, and they are evil and wicked. I have been unfaithful when You have been faithful, and I am so sorry. It only comes when you are broken over your own sin.

When you are confronted over your own sin you will have one of two responses, pride or humility. Pride minimizes the severity, ignores it, defends it, covers it. Humility owns it. So even now the Lord may be confronting you about something. Do not meet it with pride.

He opposes the proud. Not the lost, not the wicked. The proud.

So maybe the question we need to leave with tonight is simply this. How do you respond when God confronts you? Because James has spent four chapters holding up a mirror, exposing the gap between what we say we believe and how we actually live. And when we see something in that mirror that we do not like, we can defend it, minimize it, blame somebody else, or look away. That is pride. Or we can simply say, Lord, You are right. That is humility.

James leaves us with both a warning and a promise in the same sentence. God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. So when the truth hurts, do not run from it and do not fight it. Let it do its work, because on the other side of conviction there is more grace.

And that is what brings us to the communion table tonight. Because at the table God exposes our sin, and then He refuses to leave us there. The bread and the cup remind us that He gives more grace.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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