

Humbling Ourselves, Befriending God
James 4:1-10
April 30, 2023

Prayer (We are the beloved of the Lord...)

Have you ever wondered why friends fight? Why are there arguments and conflicts in places like marriages....or in the church?

Today's text picks up on the two types of wisdom mentioned last week. There is the wisdom from above and the wisdom from the world. The wisdom from above reveals a love of God that leads to a forgetfulness of self while the wisdom from the world reveals a love of self that leads to a forgetfulness of God.

James is writing to a church that is in conflict because the people were following the wisdom from the world. As I sat with this text and thought of ways to bring James' message into our world, I thought it might work to use a story, a picture and a practice. First, the story.

Christ became real to me in August of 1979. In June of 1980, I found myself on a summer missions project with Cru in Daytona Beach, Florida. My original plan was to spend the summer at home with my high school girl friend but in God's sneaky design, He brought me to Daytona Beach.

I was so young in the faith. I was a spiritually immature introvert living in tight quarters with five roommates and 43 other people on an evangelistic mission. What could go wrong?

I was out of my element. I felt alone and like I didn't fit in. One night the group I was supposed to be with had other plans that didn't include me so for the first time that summer I found myself alone in my hotel room.

It was 6:45 so I thought I'd call my girlfriend. I knew that she would be happy to hear from me and that she would help me feel seen, important and valued.

She was delighted to hear from me but after about 90 seconds she told me she needed to go. "Oh, where are you going?" "Out," she replied. "Who with?" I said, expecting that she would say Melanie or Karen or one of her friends. There was an unusually long pause. "Bill." "I hope you have a great time. We'll talk later then."

And with that I was set adrift as every anchor that my young life had counted on had broken free. My emotions were churning. After a long, hard run on the beach followed by rigorous calisthenics, I sat out on our sixth-floor balcony.

It was a moonless, cloudless night. Below me I could hear, smell and see all the things a young man would want. There was a cacophony of classic rock and roll, the smell of alcohol mixed with the perfume of attractive women and the image of people having fun as cool

muscle cars cruised the beach. Constant activity, friendships, acceptance, motion and change. That was spread out beneath me.

Above me was a starlit sky. Peaceful, calm, stable, unchanging, strong. I looked for the line of demarcation, the horizon, that would form the line separating these two worlds, but I could not find it. It was as if these two realities shared the same space.

As I thought about the difference in these two spheres I was struck by an impression. It was not a discernable voice, but it was a strong impression that I knew was not from me. It came to me three times and carried this message:

Everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ.
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As I sat there, hovering between those two worlds, I remember looking up and down a couple of times. I thought about those words. And then I verbally agreed and said, "Yes, everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ." And with that decision came a palpable peace.

Suddenly it didn't matter. The people around me could do or say or think what they wanted. I didn't need or want what they had anymore. For the first time my anchor was holding fast to something far more stable and eternal than anything this world could offer.

What I want, what I think I need—my desires, my life, my plans—all must take second place to what He has prepared for me. To say that everything is secondary does not mean that everything else is unimportant. It just means that everything else finds its proper place and expression when it comes under submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That was the start of me learning to surrender to God's love. I have not been consistent over the years, but I am so grateful that this kind of surrender was planted early in my life.

Everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. With this priority order in mind, listen to the first part of our text.

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? ² You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. ³ And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

Through James the Holy Spirit tells us that the struggles we have with others around us come from the struggles we have with ourselves within us. I want something that I can't get so I scheme and kill and fight and wage war to get it.

Some of the things we want are easy to see. We want a new car, financial freedom or a bigger home and when we see someone who has the things we want, it can stir some nasty feelings within us.

Other things we want are not always easy to discern. I want security. I want to be important. I want to be successful. I want to be free from fear. I want to protect myself from shame.

Deeper and deeper and deeper the needs go until they are hidden in the shadows of our heart. As we allow the Lord into those secret places, we begin to see how the obvious things we want are actually connected to the hidden things we need. That means, if we do achieve the obvious thing we want it won't really fix the thing we actually need so we end up wanting another obvious thing and continue to experience an unresolved tension within.

We know that James weaves the Sermon on the Mount into this letter, so when James accuses the people of killing to get what they want, my guess is he is referencing what Jesus said in Matthew 5.

Jesus said, "You have heard it said, do not murder, and anyone who murders another is subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister is subject to judgment." Anger is the trigger that brings a killing response.

I don't think those receiving James' letter were actually killing one another (though it might be). Rather, I think they were angry and James wanted them to know that their anger was a serious problem.ⁱ

Everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. All the obvious things I want, are a reflection of a deeper inner need—security, identity, acceptance, value, hope and many others. These deeper needs can only be met through the love of our gracious God. Putting Him first quiets the war on the inside which brings peace to relationships on the outside.

That's the story. Let's move on to the picture.

The Bible uses the image of marriage to communicate the relationship that God expects to have with His people. Out of all the people groups in the world, God chose Israel to be His bride. He bound Himself to her at Mount Sinai with a covenant that expresses the way He would love them and how they could love Him in return.

Through His prophets, God told His people that they were acting like an adulteress wife as they flirted with the world, flirted with other nations and even worshipped other gods. Their hearts were not completely devoted to their husband, the Lord.ⁱⁱ

Rather than living with singular devotion, they were double minded. If they would repent, God would forgive them and restore them, but they needed to first recognize what it was they had done.

James picks up on this prophetic picture and applies it to the church in verses 4-6.

⁴ You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. ⁵ Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. ⁶ And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say,

"God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble."

God made us for Himself. We rebelled against Him, choosing lesser things as being more important than Him. God gave us His all through Christ and, once we come to Him through Christ, He wants us to give our all to Him. As His spouse, our allegiance must not be divided. Our love for the Lord cannot be diluted by a flirtatious love with the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are free to enjoy the many blessings of this world, but we are not free to pursue them as a way to meet our needs. Looking to something other than God to meet the deeper needs of my life is called idolatry, and that's not a good thing.

Paul told Timothy to teach others that we should not be arrogant or to put our hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put our hope in God, who richly *provides us with everything for our enjoyment* (1 Tim 6:17). Enjoy it, but don't rely on it. Receive the gift, but keep your focus on the Giver.

The story: everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ. The picture: we are bound by covenant to a God who loves us more than we can know and He rightfully desires our full allegiance. Yet until the Lord returns, we will continue to drift from the story and waver in our love. What's the solution?

James provides it for us with the practice in verses 7-10.

⁷ So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

⁸ Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. ⁹ Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy.

¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

There is that word again, humility. Humility before God is found in what John the Baptizer said about Jesus—"He must increase; I must decrease." Humility rests on the

confidence that God is involved, He is good and He can be trusted to do His work in my life. It is not all up to me.

Humble yourselves before God. Learn to put Him at the center rather than yourself. See all of life through the lens of the Kingdom He is creating for His glory and not the lens of the kingdom we want to create for ours.^{iv}

This humility starts with two practices.

First, resist the devil and he will flee from you. The devil is known as the tempter. He is the one who tries to draw us away from fidelity to God by promising to give us the things that we want. This is what the devil was doing when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4 and I commend that for your reading.^v

The first thing we do is put our hand up and say “No” to the tempter. The second thing we do is put our arm out to say “Yes” to God. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Isn’t this the most amazing promise? It shows up in Zechariah and Malachi and other places in Scripture. If you take a step toward God, He will take steps toward you.

So take a step, James says, by washing your hands and purifying your hearts as you become single-minded in your devotion and allegiance to the God who loves you. Washing hands and purifying hearts is a figure of speech that represents one’s actions and motives. Take a step by seeking to transform both your inner attitude and outward behavior.

James was writing to a congregation of Christians here so their first step would be to resist the temptation to push for their own way and begin considering how they might love the other person. Their first step would be to imitate the example of Jesus from Philippians 2 who did not come to be served but to serve.

Living like this is not easy. It can cause anxiety and worry as we wonder if we are truly going to be okay if we are not fighting with others for what we want. Peter understood how hard this could be. So, after he told his flock to humble themselves, he added that they should cast all their anxiety on God because God cares for them (1 Peter 5:6-7). I know it is hard, Peter writes, but remember, you are not alone.

James’ closing lines about weeping and wailing is an Old Testament way of saying, be humble and repent. Change your behavior. And when you do this—when you seek to love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself—when you do this the Lord will lift you up.

Agree with God that you are in the wrong and change your behavior. This is the hard part, isn’t it. Some of our patterns of thinking and behaving are so deeply ingrained that we think it is impossible to change. But the truth remains...draw near to God and he will draw near to you. God is the change-agent, not us.

He knows our frame. He knows we are weak. He knows we are but dust. That's why Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavily burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am humble and gentle of heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus can bring rest even to the war that wages deep within us.

The war within us is where it all begins. The war within is where we find the source of discord with others. The war within is where we find the source of our wandering from our first love. Scripture teaches that there does not need to be a war raging within us.

Right here is the threshold of the Holy Spirit's work. Those who cross this threshold will find that their lives do change. As we align our lives with what God has said is real about us, Himself, His Kingdom and our culture, then we find ourselves abiding in the vine of Christ so that God's life flows into us. When His life flows into us, He is the one who brings the fruit. It is His energy that brings the change He promised and we seek.

For decades now we've been saying that life-change happens best in the context of Christ-centered relationships within a community of grace and truth. The Christ-centered relationships help us see all of life through a God-centered lens while the community accepts us as we are but loves us too much to let us stay that way.

If you are new to Christ or to Covenant then your first step is to come to Thrive! If you have been here a while then make sure you are connected with other people who are seeking to grow in Christ. If you need some guidance, Brently Jordan can help you in that search.

There is so much to think about here, but maybe James' words can be summarized with three simple things:

A Story: Of Priority

Everything is secondary next to knowing and serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Picture: Of Marriage

We are bound to God by a covenant of devoted love. Flirting with other loves is no longer an option.

A Practice: Of Humility

In humble reliance on the One who loves you, resist the devil and draw near to God.

Closing Prayer

Let the Lord do His work. Yet not I but through Christ in Me

ⁱ See also 1 John 3:15

ⁱⁱ Jer 3:7-10, 20; Ez 23; Hosea 1-2, 9:1. Hosea was commanded to marry a faithless prostitute to illustrate the spiritual wandering of God's people.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 John 2:15-17. Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

^{iv} The instrument does not take the credit for the sound it produces. We are instruments in the Redeemer's hands and so we surrender to Him in the songs He wants to play through us.

^v When Jesus was fasting in the wilderness He was hungry and the devil tempted Him to take matters into His own hands and turn the stones into bread. Jesus resisted by saying pointing back to Scripture, stating that He did not live by bread alone but by every word that came from the mouth of God.

The tempter knew that Jesus was building a kingdom and so promised to give Jesus all the wonders of the world. All Jesus had to do was surrender to him. Jesus replied from scripture, saying we shall worship and serve God alone.

The First Adam fell to the tempter's snare. The second Adam, Jesus the Christ, remained faithful to the God He served. We are to follow His example. So the first step in humbling ourselves before God is to resist the devil and, when we do, we will find that he flees from us.