

## Defeating the Enemies that Divide Us

James 4:1-12

Let me begin by asking a question, did you come to the Christian faith expecting a rose garden or a battlefield? Many preachers, in their effort to persuade and evangelize often paint a rose garden picture. Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved. And it is true that Jesus will transform your life. He promises life to the full. But Scripture also warns us that as we follow Jesus, we will follow him through the battlefield. In this life and in this world we are behind enemy lines. The problem is that too often in the church, we're fighting the wrong enemy. We spend too much of our effort and resources fighting each other, instead of the real enemy.

When James asks, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?", he's using the language of the battlefield. These are military terms. The way most English translations render this verse, "*fights and quarrels*" makes it sound like a brother and sister fighting in the back of the family minivan. Verse 1 could be translated as "What causes wars and battles among you?" But he's not talking about international conflict, nor is this a commentary on Roman foreign policy. James hasn't just turned off the evening news where he heard the latest update on Roman forces conquering Britain. He's talking about internal conflict in the church— the fights and quarrels among the body of Christ.

This becomes very apparent at the end of our text in verse 11 when James says, "*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.*" Now that gets into his reader's Jewish history and the Old covenant, but the point is when we pick each other apart, when we criticize and make biting remarks behind each other's backs, we are breaking the heart of God, and we are doing great damage to the body of Christ.

It's significant that James uses such brutal, militaristic language to describe church squabbles, because our usual tendency is to water it down. "We had a little disagreement." "It was just a spat." "Oh, she just had her feelings hurt." "We just had a different vision about where the church was headed." We act as though divisive behavior in the body of Christ is normal and expected until it all blows up. And anyone that's been bloodied emotionally and spiritually wounded in a church fight can really appreciate the graphic imagery in this passage. No, James says, it isn't normal. This is a battle. This is a conflict, and there are casualties. People get hurt, lives damaged, and the cause of Christ suffers.

The spiritual landscape is littered with the bodies of those that were lost to the wars and battles among us. You think that language is too strong. Listen to what James says in verse 2, "*You want something but don't get it. You **kill** and covet, but you cannot have what you want.*" He uses the Greek word for *murder*, the unjust taking of life.

Now James doesn't mean that these 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians were literally going around committing homicide. His point is that the same kind selfishness that drives people to murder is same selfishness that breeds division and strife in the church. Sometimes the taking of life doesn't happen in an instant, with the pull of a trigger or the thrust of a blade, but it happens bit by bit– with the “send” button rather than a bullet. We kill with a cutting word here and a stabbing remark there. We slice our brother with a condescending put down. We hammer our sister with a sharply timed bit of gossip. We strangle with our unwillingness to forgive. We poison a child of God with a well-placed innuendo. We suffocate by believing and spreading lies because they fit so well with what we to be true.

When we fight each other, we are fighting the wrong enemy. Turn to your neighbor and say, “You are not my enemy.” We spend way too much time in the church fighting the wrong enemy.

We need to remember who the real enemy is. In this passage, James warns us about the three real enemies that are the source of our problems– three enemies that form the spiritual axis of evil. They are our passions, the world, and the devil. These are the enemies we need to be fighting, not each other.

### **Our Passions**

The first place we need to look to find our real enemy, James says, is in the mirror. Enemy #1 – Our own passions. These are our selfish, fleshly desires that consume us and become such idols in our lives, as James says they battle within us. We have desires and passions in our own hearts that wage war within us. James talked about this in chapter 1, if you remember, “*each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.*”

He describes that process a bit more fully here:

*<sup>2</sup> You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. <sup>3</sup> When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

This all comes from the sinful desires within us. The language James uses here refers to those things which give us pleasure. We are seeking only our own fulfillment. James isn't against all desire or pleasure. These things aren't evil in and of themselves. It's when they become all-consuming necessities, that we will seek to fulfill at the expense of others, and at the expense of God's will for our lives, that is when they become an evil enemy. When we think something will give our pleasure, we direct our desires toward that thing, and we want it. Then we want it more than we want what God wants. We want it more than His love, His presence, His holiness, His people, His purpose, His calling. We want it

badly, and we want it now, and if anyone gets in our way of getting it you better watch out. Frankly, this is where most of our fights and quarrels start.

Am I describing any of you here, or is this only me? Have you found yourself stumbling into this pattern? You get your mind set on the fact that you really want something, and it begins to consume you. You can come up with all sorts of reasons why you need it. (Bring old cell phone) You think it will make your life better.

We bring this same type of thinking into the church. If they would only sing these songs, if only they did their music this way. If only it was this much faster or this much slower, or this much louder or that much softer. If they just sang two more songs, or two less. Then I would really get what I want out of church then. Then worship would be meaningful and fulfilling. If I could only get what I want.

If only the preacher could change his sermons. If only he told more jokes I could pay attention more. If only he told fewer jokes, he wouldn't waste so much time. If only he didn't tell so many stories. Just teach the scriptures, then I would learn more. You know that preacher needs to tell more stories so I can connect with Scripture. You know he really needs to bridge that gap from Bible times until today. He doesn't use enough Scripture. He just uses way too verses, I just can't keep up. It's hard to follow. If only it were more biblical, if only it were more practical, then I could really grow spiritually. If only I could get what I want.

As long as we see people as the key to getting what we want, or in keeping us from what we want, our lives, and our church, will be filled with fights and quarrels. You will never get along. You will never find the right church, the right pastor, the right class, the right small group. Because people aren't the key. God is.

Our passions cause us to seek the wrong things from the wrong places. We're kind of like the old country song, "Lookin' for love in all the wrong places." We have a God-shaped hole in our hearts and we try to fill it with pleasure, or power, or money, or education, relationships or popularity, but none of those things is the right shape to fill the hole.

Our passions and desires all point to a real need in our lives, but because of our sinful nature, they often drive us to fill those needs in all the wrong ways with all the wrong things. It is so easy to buy into the philosophy which says, "If it feels good, do it." I mean it feels good. But if your desires are fed by your sinful nature, they aren't a voice to be followed, but an enemy to be slain.

### **The World**

That's just the first enemy we face. In verse 4, James introduces us to the second enemy that would love to rip us apart, the world:

*<sup>4</sup> You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? <sup>6</sup> But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."*

When we hear this term, "friendship with the world," we may first think of those who live worldly lives. In modern terms, he's talking about Christians who frequent inappropriate movies, get drunk when their with their non-christian friends, Christian couples who choose to live together before marriage, Christian business people who rip off their customers and lie on their tax forms, or those who whittle away the hours on Not Safe For Work websites.

Certainly, friendship with the world includes those types of things. James does say here that their prayers weren't being answered because they, "ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

But good church people can be guilty of friendship with the world too. People who go to church every week, and also to Sunday School and Bible study. Sometimes our friendship with the world isn't in what we do, as much as it is in our attitudes. We can have a worldly attitude that seeks what we want. It's a worldly attitude that looks at things in the church with the worldly wisdom that we talked about last week. It seeks to solve problems with the world's ways to doing things. It is this world-friendly attitude that helps produce those fights and quarrels among us.

There was a perfect example of this in the news this week from a Baptist church in Georgia. The pastor had a disagreement with a 103 year old lady who'd been a member of the church for 92 years. The pastor sent a certified letter revoking her membership and banning her from attending services. Church members then met after church on Sunday and voted to terminate his position. The pastor refused to honor their vote, and instead filed a restraining order against a couple of other church members. It turns out he was terminated before in 2009, and he ignored that firing too. I have no idea what the fight is about. I don't know who's right or wrong. What I don't know is this isn't how we do things in the church. This is the worldly way of doing things.

But as the Apostle Paul reminded the church in Corinth, "*For though, we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.*" We've got to quit looking to worldly means to getting what we want.

We've got to quit looking to world to give our lives meaning and purpose. We expect the world to deliver only what God can give us. The world offers us trinkets, cheap knock-offs of the real thing. The best the world can give you is a cheap substitute for the good things of God.

The world offers us amusement, when God offers us deep, abiding joy.

The world offers us money, when God offers us all the riches of the heavenly realms  
 The world offers us the security of dead bolts and alarms, when God offers us peace and rest.  
 The world offers us knowledge, when God offers us wisdom  
 The world offers us sex, when God offers us oneness and intimacy  
 The world offers us popularity, when God offers us purpose  
 The world offers us fame, while God offers us eternal glory.

The World can never give us what is only available in God (Show Tom Brady video) After winning his third Super Bowl, Tom Brady was interviewed by Steve Croft from 60 Minutes. Here is a man who has all the world has to offer, and listen to what he says, "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what is.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, 'God, it's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be."

James doesn't just tell us, though, that the world can't deliver what we want. He tells us we can't be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time. When we seek from the world, what only God can give, it is supremely insulting to God.

James says that when we snuggle up to the world to get what we want we are being like unfaithful spouses. First we think we're just going to cozy up to the world a little bit, and next thing you know all of our clothes are off and we find we're committing full-fledged spiritual adultery.

If I was to seek intimacy and pleasure in the arms and affections of another woman, how do you think Teresa would feel? When we seek from the world what only God can give, how do you think He feels? The world is not our friend. It is an enemy.

### **The Devil.**

In verse 7 we find our third enemy, the Devil. James writes, "*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*" Wait a minute, James! Where did the devil come from? You talked about our passions and desires that wage war within us. You talked about friendship with the world, but when did the devil come into this picture?

Ah, he's been there the whole time. The devil is closely allied with the other two enemies. He will use the world and our passions to destroy us and tear us apart. Sadly, we as Christians, when we give into those two enemies, we do the devil's best work for him.

Satan rarely comes at us directly. He doesn't usually make himself know. He doesn't knock on the front door of your heart, and say, "Hey, it's me, the devil. Let me in." If he did that, we would recognize it. We would be on guard. Instead, he uses our passions and the world to convince us that his

way is the best way. This way we let our defenses down, and we let Satan into our lives and into our church to do his worst.

It's one thing to diagnose the disease, but it's another thing entirely to cure it. We can all see the problem. We'll all admit to it in general terms, even if we have trouble admitting to it in specific instances. The problem begins right here, in the sinful and selfish desires in my heart. I want what I want and I want it now, and you better not get in my way. That problem is then fed by a world that offers to give me everything I want. The only problem is that what it gives me are only cheap substitutes for the good things of God. Lurking behind all of this is the evil one, the devil who seeks to use your own desires and the allure of the world to bring you down and tear us apart.

### **Submit**

So how do we cut out this disease? What is the cure? James gives us the answer right here in vs. 7, "*Submit yourselves, then, to God.*" The answer comes when we submit ourselves, our passions, our desires, our wants, our dreams, our agenda – to God.

Again, James borrows a word from the battlefield. The word translated *submit* is a military term that means to put in proper order or rank. A military only functions well on the battlefield if there is a proper chain of command. It is important to submit the one over you.

We are to submit to God. It's not about us. It's not about what we want or what we get. It's about Him, and what He wants, and what He has called us to. It's not about me. What I want doesn't matter. This isn't Dan's church, my church, or your church, or even our church. It's His church. It is His will that is to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are called to yield to his authority and will. When we realize that God is in charge, we take our selfish passions off the throne of our hearts. When it's no longer about what we want, then we no longer have to be right. People are no longer the enemy. We are released from the demands of temptation

#### **A. Resist the Devil**

The rest of our text spells out just how we go about submitting to God. First, we resist the devil. To say, "yes" to God, we must say, "no" to Satan. Sure the devil is powerful and all sorts of schemes against us, but he's got nothing compared to the power of God. As the Apostle John reminds us, "*Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.*"

And here is an amazing promise. With the Spirit of Christ in you, you have the power to tell Satan off. You can send him packing. You can say, "Not here. Not this time. Not anymore, and don't let the door hit you on the way out." And you know what James says, "He will flee from you." You can put the devil on the run.

## B. Cleanse Your Life

You want to snuggle up close to your Creator? You want to be close to God? You want to submit to Him? It starts in the second half of vs. 8, *“Wash your hands, you sinners.”* This is all about repentance— about turning from sinful patterns of behavior. Our hands represent our actions, what we do. Remember the old children’s song, *“Oh, be careful little hands what you do.”* If we want to snuggle up to God, we no longer snuggle up to the world.

*“Purify your hearts, you double-minded.”* It isn’t just about what we do though. James isn’t just looking at our actions. If we are going to truly submit to God, it must go all the way to the heart. This command dives straight into our motives- doing the right thing for the right reason. Our hearts are no longer impure with the wrong people and the wrong things on the throne of our hearts. We topple all idols off the throne. Whatever is on the throne of your heart, if it’s something other than God, you’ve got to knock it down.

## C. Sorrow over Sin

Vs. 9 says, *“Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.”* The next step in submitting to God is to be sorrowful over our sin. Don’t excuse it. Don’t justify it. Don’t blame someone else. Be broken. Mourn. Feel the same way about your sin the way God does. Jesus said it this way in the Sermon on the Mount, *“Blessed are those you mourn, for they will be comforted.”* We are not like a little kid who’s only sorry he got caught.

We are deeply saddened by our sin. We long for transforming change to come into our hearts. The deep, abiding joy of God comes with first mourning over our sin. Until we feel about our sin the same way God does, we will never feel intimacy with Him. It is only when we submit ourselves before Him that he can lift us to where He wants us to be.

When you submit to God, He can now come close. Vs. 8, *“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”* Do you have any idea how much God loves you? Do you know how much God wants to be close to you? Margaret Feinberg, in her book *Sacred Echo* tells the story of a father and his young boy doing some Christmas shopping. After only a few stores, the boy became restless and fussy. The father picked up the boy and held him close and began to sing to him a random, original song with no random or rhythm. *“I love you. You are my son. I love being with you. You and me together.”* Soon the boy calmed down and the father completed his shopping. On the way out to the parking lot, the boy looked at his father and said, *“Sing it again, Daddy. Sing it again.”* God doesn’t want to be distant in your life. He wants to come near. God wants to be with you. As verse 10 says, *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*