

Desire

James 4:1-12

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Amen. That was the cry of the church through the millennia, the cry of our own hearts. “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.” That’s how the book of Revelation ends. And it’s the song that we sing. We are in the in-between time. We’re waiting for when He comes. And we are where we are right now--sometimes it’s a mess, sometimes it’s muddled up, sometimes it’s joyful--always working forward because the Holy Spirit is at work. Because our Heavenly Father is at work. Jesus said, My Father is at work to this very day and continues His work, and that Jesus too is working. He says that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. And so that is what we are waiting for, and that is what we are longing for.

But there are hindrances along the way. And today, as we get back into the book of James, I want to talk about one of those hindrances. And guess what? It’s not out there somewhere. It’s not the world. It’s not the opposition. It’s not anybody else. It is within us. We started the book of James back at the beginning of last year and wrapped up chapter three this fall before moving into our Christmas series. So today we’re picking it back up. I anticipate that we will be finished by about Easter time, maybe a little bit after. We’ve been going through slowly, and every once in a while I get asked about that. The thing is that our Lord Jesus Himself respected not only every word, not only every letter, but every mark of the law. Not one jot or tittle, not one little mark of the law will pass away. It is all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And so He draws our attention to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness. And so we give our attention to the Word of the Lord and to the Spirit’s work through the Word, so that He can accomplish the purposes for which the Word was sent forth. May the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. That’s our desire, and that is our prayer. And so this way of going through slowly and sometimes drilling down on a verse and seeking the Spirit for the depth of meaning that He has placed within the Scriptures, is an important part of what it means to be a child of God.

So we enter James chapter four this morning. I’m going to read verses one through 12, and we will be a few weeks in this first part of James chapter four. James 4:1-12: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not

receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 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. Or do you think Scripture says without reason, that He jealously longs for the Spirit He has cause to dwell in us? But He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?"

So we finished up chapter three, and if you remember, the whole chapter is about the destructive power of the tongue. And James is careful to point out that this is rooted within. The tongue is a restless evil among the members of the body. It's not something out there. It comes from within us. But it is nurtured--the danger of the tongue, the destructive power of the tongue--is nurtured by the world, by the culture around us, and inflamed by demonic forces.

And so this powerful evil resides within us. However, he ends up chapter three by talking about wisdom among us, and that the wise and understanding among us are peacemakers who produce a harvest of righteousness. He then opens up chapter four with a contrast. If peacemakers produce a harvest of righteousness, where does the fighting and the quarreling come from? Peace has its root in wisdom. Where does quarreling and fighting come from? What is its root? What is the seed? What is the remedy?

1. A real danger within churches

A. Then and now

These are the questions that James asks as he observes the situation in the churches entering chapter four. It's important for us to recognize that he is addressing a real danger within the churches. And to see that we want to look at what the situation in the churches was then, and how that compares to how things are now. Please remember that James is writing to Hebrew Christians who have been scattered out of Jerusalem into the rest of the Roman world. He's not writing to one particular church in one place. When Paul writes to

the church in Corinth he says, “Hey, you've got this issue. Let's talk about that. You've got this issue. Let's talk about that.”

In the book of James, the Lord's brother is writing to these Hebrew believers who were scattered out of Jerusalem by persecution and have gathered in worshiping communities in the various cities throughout the Roman Empire. And he sees something in common. In fact, he sees a number of things in common among these churches. He sees class conflict. We've read about that. When you have rich brothers and sisters and poor brothers and sisters and how they relate to each other. He sees striving for recognition as some push themselves forward within the congregation. He sees envy, ambition. He has described disorder and evil practices. He's described cursing each other while praising God. He's talked about financial abuse. There are some serious issues within those churches, and he's deeply concerned about them. But he's not really surprised. And we shouldn't be surprised that issues that arose within those churches and that arise within churches now.

Jesus said that the identifying mark, the banner of those who follow Christ, is love and unity. The love and unity that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share, manifested in us and flowing through us, is a testimony to the world of who Christ is. And so where are we going to be attacked? We're going to be attacked on the tertiary things? No, we're going to be attacked on the big thing. And in that day and in our day, the unity and the love of the church is what comes under attack.

B. A concern about destructive power

And James is deeply concerned because of the destructive power of these issues within the church. He starts out in verse one of chapter four. What causes--in fact it's even shorter than that. Where are these fights from? Where are these quarrels from? The NIV uses the word “fight” but the translation there is “wars.” James is describing real battles, actual warfare. In fact, throughout the entire rest of the New Testament, both in the Gospels as Jesus uses this word, and in the epistles and then the book of Revelation. You remember all those descriptions in the book of Revelation about the armies of the world that are gathering together to wage war against the church and to wage war against Christ?

That's the word. This is real battle. Where does this warfare come that is among you, James asks. He's talking about concrete combat and fighting. And the word that he uses here for quarreling. That's what Paul talks about as something that has caused him, Paul, real pain. When Paul writes to his disciples Timothy and Titus, and he warns them about quarreling that is foolish and unprofitable and worthless. That's what James is talking about here.

He is deeply concerned because of the destructive power of this foolish, unprofitable, worthless warring among the churches. And that kind of conflict, apparently, was prevalent

among all of those churches that James was writing to. Certainly, then, if you look at Paul's letters to his churches, you can see that it was prevalent there, and it is prevalent to this day. I read this week about a dad who looked out the back window and saw his daughter, who was supposed to be playing with her friends in the backyard, and they were fighting. And he opened up the door and he called out, "Hey, y'all, stop fighting!" And his daughter called back, "Oh, dad, we're just playing church." Who's the leader? I don't know what they were fighting about, but she was probably modeling something that she had seen.

2. This danger must be dealt with at the source

For James the solution is to look to the source. He doesn't address whatever it is that they're fighting and quarreling about at this point. He's not so concerned about who's right and who's wrong and what's the solution. He is concerned about the source of these issues. Let's read again chapter four, verse one and the beginning of verse two. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight..."

A. Tools to draw our focus to the center

Even the way that he has set up these verses draws our focus to the central issue, draws our focus to the heart. First of all, there's the whole flow of the paragraph. We've already mentioned this. He says that wisdom within produces righteousness, but what I see is fighting and quarreling. So where does it come from? Drawing our focus to the question of source. In fact, the structure of these two verses is all designed to make us focus on the heart, to make us focus on the middle.

Did you notice how he kind of has a parenthesis surrounding these verses? "What causes **fights and quarrels among you**?" And then he ends with. "And so **you quarrel and fight**." Fighting on the outside, quarreling the next thing in. Among you, are you doing something? He's trying to draw us to the very center of these verses. The center of the passage. And what's in the middle? "**You desire**." The whole design of what he is writing is drawing our focus into the desires of the heart. That's where the issue is.

B. Desire is the heart of the matter

Desire is the heart of the matter. Now, if you look at how we see desire in the whole Bible and in the New Testament, it's important to understand that it is not necessarily a negative term. Desire can be a good thing. It can be a simple matter of someone desiring food. It's not necessarily bad to want something to eat. You have to have something to eat in order to live. God has placed a natural desire within us to eat.

There are other very positive examples of desiring things in Scripture. Peter tells us that the angels long to understand in ages past what it was that God was accomplishing in the plan of salvation. They desired, they longed to look into these things. The author of Hebrews wants us as believers--we just sang it--to desire, to long for what is ahead of us. Jesus, when He gathered with His disciples for the Last Supper, said, "I have eagerly desired, I have longed to share this Passover with you."

--selfish seeking of satisfaction

Desire can be a good thing, but most of the time when we see it in Scripture, and absolutely here in James chapter four, what is in focus is the negative side of desire. In fact, the parallels or the synonyms used within these verses talk about pleasure-seeking, what we describe as hedonism. Those kinds of desires within our hearts are what James is focusing on here.

We see it in Jesus' teaching in Luke chapter eight, the parable of the sower. And he's scattering his seed, and "The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures [desires], and they do not mature." (Luke 8:14) It's not only believers. It's entire fellowships that are hindered in reaching maturity because of pleasure seeking, because of uncontrolled desire at work among them. So what kind of desire are we talking about then? Is it physical, fleshly desires? Well, certainly that is one thing that is in mind.

In Galatians chapter five we have a good description of this dynamic. Paul sets up the desires of the flesh against the working of the Spirit. And then he says, "The desires of the flesh are these things: immorality..." And so, of course, desire can be physical lusts and seeking for physical pleasure. But he goes far beyond that. He talks about idolatry. What is idolatry? It's anything that we set up in place of God so that our love, our focus, our attention goes to that thing instead of going to the Lord, Who alone is worthy of all of our love. The love of our heart and our soul and our mind and our strength.

That can be work. That can be a church ministry. That can be a family member. That can be anything that we allow to displace God in our hearts. That's a desire that James is drawing our focus to. There in Galatians five, Paul also lists jealousy, selfish ambition, dissension, envy. This is the desire that lies at the center of our being. And James is identifying this as the source of warring within the churches.

So what drives that desire in a concrete sense? What is it within? Is it self-esteem? A need that we have to be valued, to be loved? And if we sense that that's in danger, then we begin to fight for it. Is it greed? That can be a desire for money, or a desire for power or for anything else. And we fear if we're losing that money or that power, we want to fight for it. Is

it control? We don't want to lose control because we fear what might happen. And so we begin to fight for that.

There's all kinds of examples that we could find. Let's use, as an example, simply making a plan. Two people making a plan. We have to do it all the time. The place where that happens most for many of us is within a marriage relationship. It can be at work. It can be in a hobby. It can be in Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts or whatever it might be. People have to make plans together. One person has one idea. Another person has another idea. And these things come into conflict. And they come into conflict because, "Well, certainly my idea is the best idea." Or because the thing that I want to happen is the thing that I'm going to make sure that happens. Or if it doesn't happen in this particular way, then we're going to lose control of the whole situation and who knows what might result from it?

These desires battling within lead to conflict, lead to the warring and the quarreling that James describes. And so a destructive cycle begins. It starts in our hearts and it plays out in our relationships. That's actually what James describes here in two different but parallel ways. Look again at the beginning of verse two. "You desire but you do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight..." It starts with desiring something. It starts with coveting something. We then see that we can't get that thing. We aren't able to obtain it, we don't receive it. And the frustration that results from desiring and not receiving then plays out in relationships. You kill. You fight. You quarrel.

I've been hearing about a book that my wife has read, and another friend has read, that describes the source of literal warfare. War always results from scarcity. If there's a scarcity of some essential resource, there's not enough to go around, then people begin to fight about it. Nations begin to fight about it. That's what James is describing here. We want something. It might be to be right, it might be to have our way, it might be to have our particular preferences satisfied in some area or the other. We want something, but we're not getting it. There's this scarcity of fulfillment of this desire that I have. And so we begin to fight about it.

3. Selfish desire destroys

A. Spiritually destructive

And James describes the cycle as leading to terrible destruction. Desire destroys. And the cycle that is initiated by desire is destructive. First of all, it's spiritually destructive. James uses the strongest possible terms in these verses to describe the destructive fruit of desire: warfare, quarreling, and killing. Did that one grab your attention? "Whoa, I haven't killed anybody!" In fact, I don't know anybody in the history of our church or most other churches

that has actually killed somebody else. We are so far from murder. What are you mentioning here?

But James actually uses the word for murder. He uses the word that is in the sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not kill. And he says you're killing each other. What he has in mind is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew chapter five. We've already talked about this in the context of the book of James. Jesus says in Matthew 5:21-22, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago [referring to the sixth commandment], 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' [that's a term of contempt] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

Jesus Himself, James' big Brother, says anger, spite, insult, and curses are the spiritual equivalent of murder. And if you look at it, both the victim--the person who's on the receiving end--and the perpetrator, the one who is committing this act, are destroyed as a result of it. One of the things I read this week pointed out that we should not allow this use of metaphor to lessen the impact on us. We're not explaining it away. Okay, it's not really killing. Jesus is using this figuratively. It's a hyperbole or something like that. No, James could have used a different word if he wanted to soften the blow. James chose the word "you kill," because he didn't want to soften the blow.

I'm reminded of how Hollywood has romanticized war, and for many of us, kind of made it acceptable and less heinous. Until we watched a movie like Saving Private Ryan or one of the more realistic depictions of the horrors of battle, watching bodies be torn apart and maimed, and the awful bloodshed and the loss that war really does produce. And James wants us to know that quarreling and fighting within the community really produces maiming and horror and death. It is spiritually destructive.

B. Spiritually counter-productive

It is also spiritually counterproductive. Moving on to the end of verse two and verse three, "You do not have because you do not ask God..." So desire is hindering prayer. You're not even praying because you are trusting in yourself. You are pursuing what you want. "You do not have because you do not ask God. And when you do ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

So he's bringing us back around again to that concept of desire, that concept of pleasure-seeking that is at the center of our hearts and of the passage. We want something, but instead of bringing it to the Lord in prayer, we fight for it. And we do not receive. We want

something. But when we do bring it to the Lord in prayer, what we're really seeking is not His best, but our satisfaction. And so He hears this prayer. But He says "No." He doesn't answer. He can't allow us to continue on the self-destructive path of pleasure-seeking, of selfish ambition, of vain conceit.

No wonder such prayers are unanswered. Now, I want to point out here that last week we talked about the good kind of asking. The point is not to say if you want something, you shouldn't pray about it. No, we saw very clearly God wants us to come to Him and present our needs and present our requests to Him. But the good kind of asking is done in faith, knowing that He will give what is best and trusting Him to do what is best. And being willing to receive from Him whatever it is that He provides in answer to our prayer.

That's not the kind of asking that is described in this passage. This passage describes a manipulative kind of asking, saying, "Well, God says He answers my prayers. So I'm going to ask Him for this thing because I really want it. And if I don't get it, I'm probably going to get mad at God in addition to everybody else." James has been drawing our attention to the heart issue. It's not this argument or that argument. It's not this point that somebody wants to make or that point that somebody wants to make. It's not this theological issue or the other. The heart of the issue is desire.

Dealing with Desire

1. Identify the desire

So what do we do with desire? I mean, next week, when you feel that tension welling up within. What do I do? In the business meeting, in the home, at school, in the friendship or relationship. First thing is to identify that desire. James doesn't tell us to look at the circumstances or the other person. James says, look at the heart of the matter. What is going on in your heart?

And to use that concept that I described earlier. What is the lack that I'm feeling? What is the scarcity in my life that is magnifying my desire to the point of welling up and boiling over into quarreling or fighting? Is it that need for affirmation? Is it that insistence on having something my way? Is it a fear of the future? A fear of some loss? Identify that desire. Where is it coming from? Pray about it. Ask the Holy Spirit for the wisdom.

So many times Scripture describes for us that we cannot understand our own hearts. Solomon said it in the Proverbs: nobody can understand his own heart. The prophet said, the heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked. Who can know his own heart? Even the apostle Paul said, my conscience is clear, but that doesn't make me innocent, because God is the One who judges me.

We are so capable of self-deception. It is so hard for us to identify what's really at work in our hearts. But that's where it starts. And so we need to turn to the Holy Spirit in prayer and lay ourselves open before Him and say, "Spirit, please show me what is at work in my heart. What is this need that I feel, this desire that I'm pursuing, and is starting a cycle of destruction?"

2. Trust God

Identify the desire and then trust God with it. Do we really believe that ultimately He is the One who satisfies every need? Are we really ready to receive our completeness in Him and not in anything else? If I am feeling a lack in my life, am I willing to let Him fill it instead of fighting to fill it myself? Identify that desire and trust God to satisfy it, rather than fighting to satisfy it ourselves.

3. Pursue Godly desires

And then when we identify within ourselves fleshly or worldly desires, we need to displace that with a pursuit of godly desires. For example, Scripture urges us to desire to pursue wisdom, to seek wisdom, to apply our energies to wisdom. To go into the Scriptures. To talk with brothers and sisters. To pray to the Holy Spirit who gives wisdom. Seek wisdom, seek understanding. It is more valuable than gold and any treasure.

It's even okay to seek godly pleasures. This is not a sermon about austerity and denial of every sort of pleasure. We need to recognize that God created us to enjoy things. But because He is the Creator and He is the Author of pleasure, we receive it in the way that He has designated. Because everything else is deception, everything else is desire, and everything else is destructive. And so enjoying His blessings in a way that gives Him glory is a way of displacing godless desire, immorality, and idolatry.

Spiritual gifts--eagerly desire spiritual gifts. And the point of spiritual gifts is serving one another for the building up of the body of Christ. Do you want to pursue something that God says is worth pursuing? Build up brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ by finding and exercising the gifts that He has given you. It's right there in Scripture. You want to desire something good? Eagerly desire spiritual gifts for the edification and the building up of the body of Christ. That's worth investing your time.

And then, of course, the apostle Paul tells us in such passionate and strong terms, the greatest thing that we can desire is knowing Jesus Christ. Not just knowing about Him. We do need to know about Him. And so we go into the Scriptures, and we pray. But know Him personally in our praying and in our reading. Seeing Him at work in our lives and in our world, understanding His ways, giving Him glory for that, and pursuing Him in that. These

are the kind of desires that, if they're at the heart, produce a harvest of righteousness. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, I want to thank You, and we want to thank You this morning, that You have placed desire within our hearts. You have not made us to be machines. You've not made us to be passionless and pleasureless. And we know that You created us for unending pleasure at Your right hand. And that that is one of the things that awaits us in eternity. And that when we cry, "Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!" And when we look forward to that day of being with You, one of the things that we look forward to is ever-increasing pleasure in Your presence. Thank You for the desire that You have given us to drive us through each day of service to You. What is it that can motivate selfless service? What is it that can motivate love for people who are different than us? What is it that motivates pouring out our lives in disciple-making relationships or in sharing the gospel? That motivates us in serving You? It is the desire to see You get glory as more and more people are won to Jesus Christ. It's the desire to see Your kingdom come and Your will be done. It's the desire to see righteousness and justice established on the earth. This is a good thing You've placed within us. But Lord, our flesh and the evil one pervert every good thing into something that is opposed to You. And so we pray, Lord, for the work of Your Spirit in us and among us. To redeem desire as a powerful force for good and for Your glory. Lord, I pray that You would help me, and that You would help my brothers and sisters in the course of this week, to constantly bring before You the desires that battle within us. To let You sanctify them by the power of Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.