

Choosing Friendship with God

James 4:1-12
Pastor Tom Becker

Opening:

As we turn our attention to the Word, I want to ask you, who is your BFF? That is, your *best friend forever*. I don't think I ever would have called him my BFF, but I have a friend from high school years with whom I'm still very close and able to talk to, talk with, at any time and share some of the deepest things and pray together. My daughter certainly has at least one BFF. This type of friend is someone that you can share your secrets with, that you talk about your dreams and your plans. You can share adventures with them, as well as failures and tears. Someone that you are comfortable with and that you can go through anything with. It's important to have friendship and the Bible talks a lot about friendship. In fact, there's a special word for friendship in the New Testament. It's a word that describes brotherly love, the love that is shared between those who are actually friends. Friendship is not taken lightly in Scripture. Friendship describes shared faith, a shared mindset, shared interests and values, shared goals. Friendship goes very deeply. The legendary friendship of David and Jonathan is given to us as an example, and the Book of Proverbs describes for us a friendship that can be even closer than the relationship we have with a literal brother or sister.

Earlier in James Chapter 2, we were reminded that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. And so, friendship with God is presented to us as a possibility in the Old Testament. But like so many Old Testament realities, something that was temporary or individual at that time, is for us as believers, a possibility of a permanent relationship.

Jesus described to us what it means to be His friend. He said to His disciples in John Chapter 15, something that is often misquoted, taken out of context, but He was very intentional in saying, "Greater love has no man than this, that he laid down his life for his friends." And He was talking about His relationship with His disciples, His relationship with those who follow Him. We can be called His friends and the recipients of that great friend, that great love. In fact, He went on to say, "You are my friends if you keep my commandments." And elsewhere He describes, the greatest commandment is that to believe on Him and to love Him. Further, He said, "I no longer call you servants, but now I call you my friends." That's something worth pondering, God wants to be your friend. He chose you. He redeemed you at a great price, purchased you to be His own. He called you and is now in the process of sanctifying you all of these things which enable us to be in that close personal relationship with Him, that can be described as friendship. It's an astounding reality, and it's something that He wants for all of us.

Another way of describing our relationship with God is that of marriage. This also comes from the Old Testament and flows into the New Testament. In Isaiah 54, the prophet said to the nation of Israel, "Your creator is your husband." And then he described Israel as the bride of Yahweh. And

then, of course, we know in Ephesians Chapter 5, the apostle Paul tells husbands to love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or blemish. Using that image of a bridegroom and a bride to describe Christ's relationship with the church. So ponder that as well. The Almighty Creator of all of the universe, the One who is described in Scripture as Holy, Holy, Holy, the One who holds all things together by His powerful word, wants to be your friend. Yes, even wants to be your lover.

And so this image of friendship and marriage is presented to us as a possibility of the intimacy of our relationship with the living God. That's actually all a very long introduction to the next paragraph in James that we'll be talking about. I'd like to read for you James Chapter 4 verses 1 through 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 cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. And 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. Where do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused 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?”

This morning we're focusing on those central verses, verses four through six. I want to read them again.

“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 caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace.”

God Takes Relationship with Us Seriously:

There are a few things I want to focus on as we look at this passage this morning. And the first one is that God takes this relationship with us seriously. Maybe you notice this is one of the most strongly worded paragraphs in the whole New Testament, calling us to a serious relationship with God and to repentance. Did it stand out to you that he [James] addresses his readers or his listeners in a very specific way? All throughout the book to this point, he has used the phrase over and over *brothers and sisters*, or even *my dear brothers and sisters*. Every time he starts a new paragraph or a new topic in order to draw in the attention of his listeners, he calls them by this rather intimate or amicable term, *brothers and sisters*. And then suddenly he looks straight at them and says, “You adulterous people!”

This is one of those places where James grabs them by the collar and shakes them to get their attention. “You adulterous people! Don’t you realize?” He needs to have their attention as he draws them in to this essential point of how seriously God takes our relationship with Him. Once again, this is rooted in Old Testament concepts. In the book of Hosea, we have the beautiful promise God says to His people, “I will betroth you to myself forever.” That’s the relationship that He longs to have. But what is the prophecy of Hosea filled with, if not as a description of the people of Israel, as an adulterous and unfaithful people, and their relationship with God. They’re given to idolatry. They’re given to injustice and to bloodshed, to worshiping everything but the God who has called them to Himself and to serving the idols of the nations. Jeremiah similarly says, “Like a woman who is unfaithful to her husband, you, Israel, have been unfaithful to the Lord.” Jesus carries this over several times. He addresses His generation as an adulterous and evil generation. In the previous verses, James just got done talking about us being driven by desires and by pleasures. And what he wants us to understand and what he wants us to take seriously is that when we choose the values and the mindset, the pleasures or the goals or the methods of the world, we are committing spiritual adultery.

Enmity with God:

The next thing then, is that spiritual adultery is described here as enmity towards God. Now enmity with God is a pre-Christian, pre-faith state of existence. In the book of Romans Paul says that the mind governed by the flesh is hostile or at enmity with God. In Colossians Chapter 1 he says that at one time we were alienated from God and were enemies in our minds towards Him. And so, before Christ, the relationship is one of enmity. But here James is writing to believers and is saying that spiritual adultery is falling back into enmity towards God. And it’s not something that happens by mistake. It is intentional. Did you see those words? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. That word is, literally, preferring one thing over another. It describes a deliberate, willful choice. James has already used it to describe a pilot who is guiding a ship wherever he chooses. And in a beautiful example in Chapter 1, James says that God chose to give us life by the word of truth. God made a deliberate choice to give life to us. And then James is describing here a deliberate choice away from God.

Our Daily Choice:

So we are confronted with a daily choice. Am I going to be a friend of God or a friend of the world? And I'm not talking about some theoretical choice that we might run across one time or another. I'm talking about moment-by-moment, day-by-day, choices. I'm talking about today and tomorrow and who knows, maybe even into Tuesday, when we're stuck at home and we have an opportunity for time with the Lord, time with our families. How are we going to spend our time? How are we going to use this opportunity? Will it be to cultivate friendship with God or to cultivate friendship with the world? Friendship with the world is choosing our prior state of enmity towards God over this loving relationship that God has designed us for and called us into.

And when we make that choice, the third thing that James talks about here, is that we provoke the jealousy of God. This is how seriously he takes it. We think of jealousy as a universally bad concept, and it's pretty much universally used in Scripture to describe bad things. Driven by jealousy, the religious leaders of the day crucified Jesus, driven by jealousy and false motives and selfish ambition. People undermine and war with each other. We are called to get rid of jealousy, but Scripture also calls our attention to the jealousy in a positive sense of a spouse who wants to preserve their relationship with her beloved. And then our Lord is the only One who is always right to be jealous. Again, He's the creator. He is the Redeemer. And that redemption came at a very great price, the precious blood of His son, Jesus Christ. He is the One who is worthy of all love and all loyalty. And therefore, He is the One who is right and holy to be jealous of our affections. In the book of Exodus, when God is forming a nation that He is calling to Himself and is commanding them to live in an exclusive relationship with Him, exclusive in the sense of excluding worldly values and excluding the idols of the nations, this is what we read, "Do not worship any other God, for the Lord, whose name is jealous, is a jealous God. Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land. For when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you, and you will eat their sacrifices." In other words, two alternatives are presented before the people: spiritual adultery or living in a right relationship with God. And God is jealous of their affection, jealous of their loyalty, jealous of their relationship. And that's not just an adjunct to who He is. It's not just a word that describes how God sometimes feels, it is His name. The Lord whose name is Jealous. It is in a central characteristic of what it means to be God, to so value that relationship with you, with His creatures, that He would describe it as jealousy when He longs to have that exclusive relationship with us. And so James looks at the churches that he's writing to. He sees their double-mindedness. He calls it out as spiritual adultery. And he says God takes this seriously. Don't live at enmity with him. Instead, live in that relationship that He longs to have with us. This is a matter of the heart. This is a matter of our values and our loyalty and our own longings, longings for the things of the world, or longings for our relationship with our Creator. But it's also a matter of His heart. God's jealousy is His longing. Again, can we really grasp that the Creator of the universe so longs for that relationship with us, that He would be jealous of it? He chose us. He made us his own. And he will brook no rivals in that loving relationship. There's no room for compromise. There is no middle ground. Jesus himself said, you cannot serve two masters.

Cultivating Friendship with God:

So we have been called, not only called, but created for this loving relationship with God that can be described as friendship, and even that can be described as marriage. How can we cultivate that friendship with God? First of all, obviously to make choices that show that we love Him above all else. James has already described double-mindedness in several places through this book, and he will go on to do so until the end of his letter. He started out, for example, by talking about money as one area of double-mindedness. And he is very careful to say that those who value treasures, those who value possessions, those who value money above their relationship with God will perish along with their money. There cannot be two masters. Will it be financial gain or will it be our Lord?

He calls us to that relationship with Him. James talks about our ambitions. Are we going to pursue selfish ambitions? The things that we want, the things that we think are best, the things that we desire for ourselves? Or are we going to pursue what is best for others, considering others to be better than ourselves, looking out for the interests of others rather than our own interests?

And of course, he has talked about pleasures. He's referring, of course, to the pleasures of the world, like alcohol, or drugs, or sex; areas in which so often we tell ourselves, well, just this little thing will be okay. It's not so bad. I can see others are doing it. It's probably okay for me, as well. But again, he calls us to love and to value and to place our loyalty in Him above every pleasure that this world calls us to. Friendship with the world can be seen in our choices in entertainment, and can be seen in the various idols that we have in our lives. But we are called to a different kind of love. We are called both in the Old Testament, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God. The Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." And then Jesus, repeating that in the New Testament when he's asked, what's the greatest commandment? It's not, do not do this, do not do that, and do not do the other. The greatest commandment is, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, with all your strength. God longs for us to live in that loving relationship with Him, and that relationship is often seen in daily choices that reflect our friendship with God or our friendship with the world.

Another way to cultivate that friendship with God is to be intentional about our life in the Spirit. Again, in the previous verses, James 4:1-3, we talked about what is it that we desire and what are some good things that we can desire. And one good thing that we are called to eagerly desire is to understand and to practice spiritual gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ. We are to eagerly desire walking in the Spirit, eagerly desire knowing Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us. And so, putting aside the values and works of the flesh, and walking in the Spirit is being intentional about our relationship with God and about developing that relationship with Him.

And then the third thing that we can do in cultivating that relationship with God, and this also comes directly from the preceding verses, is recognize that quarrels and fights are a manifestation of friendship with the world. A couple of weeks ago, again we looked at verses one through three of chapter four. If you didn't have an opportunity to listen to that sermon, I would encourage you to do so. I don't think it's a particularly wonderful sermon, but I think that those are particularly important words that the Holy Spirit has for us through James. He asked the question, "Where do these wars come from among you brothers and sisters? Where does this killing and coveting come

from? Doesn't it spring from your desires? You want something, but don't get it. And so you speak words that maim and kill." That springs from desire for worldly things, including selfish ambition and vain conceit, instead of a desire for the glory of Jesus Christ in His church. Now, James is not overlooking the fact that the people within those churches and the people within any church have different values and opinions, things that they want to see and longed to see. He is not trying to squelch healthy discussion among the church, but he is addressing the feelings that we cultivate and the way that we relate to each other. He wants us to understand that when disagreement degenerates into divisiveness and partisanship, when discussion devolves into personal attacks, it's an indication that we are choosing desire over devotion, that we're choosing self over Christ and His church. It's a manifestation of friendship with the things of the world instead of friendship with God.

Conclusion:

These verses end with that beautiful phrase, "but He gives more grace." He is calling us. Our loving Creator and Savior is calling us to an intimate friendship and relationship with Him. He is calling us, by His grace, into a relationship that is based on mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ, and then He is calling us to relate to each other with that same grace and mercy. What a beautiful thing our Lord is calling us to, and how beautiful it is to follow Him in that loving relationship.

Closing Prayer:

Let's pray together: "Heavenly Father, All of this idea of a relationship with you is based on your prior love. This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave Himself. Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ. And thank you that that gift of Jesus Christ has opened the door for us to be sons and daughters of the living God; has opened the door for us to come into your presence with prayer at any time has opened the door for us to be able to love you in return. Thank you for that. Lord, I pray that you would forgive us, I pray that you would forgive me, for the times that I am more given towards friendship with the values and the perspectives of this world. Lord, I pray that you would turn our hearts towards you. Thank you that that prophecy made by Hosea, that you would betroth us into an everlasting relationship, that is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Thank you that that individual and temporary thing of being a friend with God is now true for everyone who is a follower of Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray that you would help us today and every day to walk in that relationship with you, to live out that relationship with you, to follow hard after you, to make knowing Jesus Christ the one thing that we desire, and to make spreading the word about Jesus Christ a daily pursuit. Lord, help us to love each other with the love that you gave us. Help us to love the world with the love that you gave towards the world, when we were still at enmity with you, You gave Your son as the sacrifice. That's the call that Jesus gave. That's the command that we want to obey: to love you, to love our neighbors, and so, to bring you glory. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.