

## **The Problem With the Church**

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Growing Into Maturity  
James 4:1-10

In the section that we are going to look at today from the book of James, James begins with a problem—war! He says, “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” Literally, what causes wars?

I don’t know how many of you have been in the military. With our all-volunteer Army these days a smaller and smaller percentage of adults participate in military service. There is a greater distance between professional soldiers and the rest of the civilian population. Both my father and my father-in-law, as they age, talk more often about their experiences in WWII. My dad spent his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on the beach at Normandy in the massive invasion of France. 21 years old and he was landing tanks at Normandy and watching friends get killed around him on the beach.

My father-in-law, who is a little older, had a much longer record of service. He was drafted out of college and marched across North Africa under General Patton. He marched into Sicily and then after the D-Day invasion, marched across France and into Germany. He actually won several medals including a silver star for bravery. He unloaded a truck full of munitions that was on fire. Apparently, the Germans had shelled my father-in-law’s encampment and this large truck of artillery caught fire. He leaped on the truck and unloaded the shells before they all exploded. Pretty amazing.

James begins with the question what causes wars? Have you ever thought about that as you pick up your newspaper in the morning or watch TV, which is often just the recording of global conflict? There are some major battles now in Afghanistan. This radical Muslim group called the Taliban took over the city of Kabul, the nation’s capitol. Women are not allowed to be on the streets. They have chopped people’s hands off for stealing. They hung the former President of the nation from a pole. Some of you may have seen the Aerial photos of the riots going on now in St. Petersburg, Florida, after a police officer shot a guy in his car who the officer was trying to arrest.

On less violent scales you consider the amount of legal warfare through the proliferation of lawsuits, litigation, in our country. You know, in the city of Washington D.C., they say one out of every ten adults standing on the street is a lawyer. Do you want to know what is wrong with this country? Consider that statistic! The city of Columbus used to have, I think, when I went to law school, we were told that we had the third highest ratio of lawyers to population in the country. I don’t know if that is still true anymore. But it was true fifteen years ago.

There is an endless array of conflicts that people get into. I remember the first two cases I handled as a 24-year old lawyer in my very short-lived legal career. The first case involved a man who was suing his brother, his own flesh and blood brother, because of a dispute involving some oil wells. The family was absolutely at war.

The second case that I was given involved a wealthy man who had me draft a prenuptial agreement. This wealthy man had left his first wife for a much younger woman. You know the story. But he wanted to make sure that this much younger woman didn't soak him for his fortune before they got married, so he wanted me to draft for him a prenuptial agreement to protect his wealth. I remember at the end of the day sitting there thinking, "You know, these people don't need lawyers, they need a pastor!"

It would be wonderful for us if we inside the church could sit here and cluck our tongues and say, "Look at all those people outside of the church and how they battle with each other. Fighting in their families and getting divorced. Suing each other. Oh, isn't that so very tragic?" We feel so bad for them. It would be just great if we could look outside of the church building and pity those poor people out there for all of their wars and all of their fights.

James, who is not one to pull punches, does not simply ask the hypothetical question: what causes wars; he says what causes wars and fights among us? You see the same thing in the church, and I don't care what label is on the church building—it could be Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Methodist, Baptist or Vineyard—it doesn't matter what label is on the building, you see the same conflicts in the church that you see out there in the world. If we were to pull back the curtains of many of our homes and look inside, we would see parents and children screaming at each other, angry exchanges between husbands and wives, major arguments with ex-spouses, gossip in women's groups, slander in men's groups.

When people talk about what they don't like about church, they have done surveys, some people say, "I don't like church because the sermons are boring and irrelevant." Or, "I don't like church because all they ever do is ask for your money. They are just greedy." Or, "I don't like church because everyone is a hypocrite." I have always laughed at that one. It reminds me of the old Groucho Marx line, "I would never join a club that would have me as a member." I mean, of course the church is filled with hypocrites. To stand outside the church and judge it is the most hypocritical thing someone could do. What human being on the face of the planet would not have to admit "guilty" to the charge of wanting to look better than we actually are? The only person in church history who was not a hypocrite was Jesus Christ. Jesus was the only one who could say, "Who here can point out any sin in me? Which one of you can convict me of sin?" Everyone looked down because no one could find anything that was true against him. But it always amazes me when people criticize the church for hypocrisy. The church is filled with people and sinful people always want to mask their sins and put better spins on their attitudes than the truth would demand.

Along with boring sermons and the church being filled with hypocrites, James says a third serious critique is, "My problem with the church is all the conflicts and infighting." See, the warfare is not just out there. He asked the question what causes fights and quarrels not hypothetically, but among us in here.

And then James answers the question. The warfare around us and among us begins within us. Verse 1: "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" Literally, James says, "Don't they come from your pleasures?" The Greek word is *hedonon*. It is where we get the English word

“hedonism.” The reason for our conflicts is that we, each one of us, are committed to self-pleasing. We are committed to pleasing ourselves.

Think about why you conflict with someone else. I am not going to focus on the huge things, but the little irritations and annoyances and struggles and rubs that we get into with others. Is it not fundamentally based in our own desire to please ourselves? You sit down in the evening and what you have in mind is that you have worked hard all day and now it is “Miller Time,” time to relax. You are going to sit in front of the set. You don’t want to be disturbed.

But someone has a need. Your spouse has a need to talk. Your husband has a need to have something sewn. Your child has a need for help with their homework or to be driven to a friend’s. We get angry when someone calls us on the phone and breaks into our relaxation. Why? Because we are committed at that moment to pleasing ourselves through relaxation. It is a small thing.

But is that not at the root of all of our conflicts? We want to put our money into a room addition on our house and some missionary is asking for help. We get upset.

Teenagers, you may want to hang out with your friends and your parents want you to rake the yard. Or your roommate, you discover, has eaten all the ice cream that you were fixated on eating. You had dreams about “Cookies and Cream” ice cream, and it’s all gone.

James says that the root of all of our conflicts is that ultimately each one of us wants to please ourselves. There are these self-pleasuring principles in each one of us. And they are aimed like missiles and artillery out toward the world. When someone tries to put a limit on our pleasure or tries to invade our space or doesn’t meet our needs, we fire off these missiles at them like an armed camp. Of course, we would never put it as starkly as James does. “It is just selfishness.” We wouldn’t say that we are irritable or down right nasty. Or defensive. We don’t say that it is just me indulging myself. We say, “It is a mood.” We are just in a sour mood. We are in a bad mood.

We are not responsible for it, of course. Indeed, we indulge our moods. We have a right to our moodiness and then we practice mood control. Watch me get even with him. When he comes over to give me a hug in the evening, I am going to be icy cold. I will control the atmosphere of my home. Or the atmosphere of my work place by one of my bad moods.

Friends, I want to talk to you parents for a moment. See, I think that we parents do often see that we ourselves are selfishly indulging our moods. We often do see that we do have choices regarding how we are going to respond to events. That no one made us miserable as we are choosing to be. We can see that in ourselves. But you know, we often allow our children to practice mood control and mood indulgence. I don’t know how many times I have seen parents relate to a sour, creepy, negative attitude in their children and write it off as “they are just in a bad mood.” We say to ourselves as adults that we are not allowed to practice mood control, it is wrong of us to give a cold shoulder to someone as a way of getting vengeance. But parents you let your children practice mood control all the time in the home and you give ambivalent, weak responses to what in your children is simply this self-pleasing principle. Self-pleasing is not just a problem with adults, it is a problem with 5-year olds and 15-year olds. May I encourage you parents, and myself as a parent, to draw the line when you see

your child practicing mood control in the home, manipulating you by a bad mood? May I encourage you to not be so ambivalent, so weak, and so wimpy? And to give yourself permission to confront selfishness in your child as much as James confronts it in us as adults.

James says that there is a way for us to get our needs met. We can ask God. In verse 2, James writes, *"You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God."*

He is not meeting my needs. Women complain because their husbands or boyfriends are not affectionate. That they are insensitive or not good listeners. That they are dominating or controlling. He is not meeting my needs.

Husbands respond, "She is not meeting my needs. She nags me. She is unforgiving. She holds grudges. She withholds sex."

James says that there is a way for your needs to be met. Ask God. Stop fighting and ask God. We reach into each other all the time for what we first of all must go to God to obtain. There are deep needs inside of everyone that no other person can meet. Do you know that?

The image that I love portrays a married couple fighting with each other. Meet my needs. Meet my needs. It is the image of two ticks where there is no dog, who try to suck the life out of each other. We try to suck the life out of each other.

James says that instead of sucking the life out of your spouse or out of a friend, reach into God. But then he quickly reminds us that when you reach into God, you don't receive because you ask with the wrong motives so that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.

It is interesting. James doesn't say that God doesn't hear your prayers. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. God hears everyone of your prayers. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes God says, "Not now." Sometimes God says, "Yes, I will meet your need." But James says that we can't receive it because we are so filled with a desire for self-pleasing. God is saying yes, yes, yes. But we can't receive it. We say, "God, I want peace in this relationship." God says, "Yes, I will give you peace." But we can't get the peace because our hearts are so filled with the desire to be proven right and the desire to be vindicated and to have the other person taken down and to get our way and to win. To have them understand us and to have our reputation totally restored.

If we would just surrender, if we would simply say, "God, I want peace. But I want it on your terms and not mine. I want an end to this warfare, but on your terms, not mine." God would hear that prayer. Today we are going to explore together what I am calling "The Problem With the Church." I can't put the problem any more succinctly than the English writer G. K. Chesterton put it when he was answering an essay contest that posed the question in England: What is wrong with the world? Chesterton telegraphed back: I am. He signed it, G. K. Chesterton.

Do you want to know what is wrong with the church? What is wrong with our families? What is wrong in our marriages? What is wrong with our relationships? Why they are strained?

Let's start with ourselves. With our own hearts. With our own selfishness. With our own self-pleasing. *The Problem With the Church*. Let's pray.

James 4:1-10

*“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you 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. 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 is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us tends toward envy, but he gives us more grace? That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace 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.”*

James wants to project our problems against a much larger backdrop. We understand the seriousness of indulging our moods and our sins against each other. James in verse 4 and indicts us saying, *“You adulteresses, (not just adulterous people, he uses the feminine) do you not know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend to the world becomes an enemy of God.”*

I will pause there because there is a problem in the translation in verse 5. But James is projecting our sinful responses to each other against a larger backdrop—friendship with the world, he calls it. And we say what is wrong with being a friend of the world?

Now, you need to understand that James is not condemning is being friends with someone who doesn’t go to church. He is not saying, “I am really upset with you because you had lunch with someone who doesn’t believe like you do.” The world that is condemned in the Bible is not the world of people, who come in all shapes, colors, and sizes, beliefs. The Bible doesn’t condemn the world of people. You should know God’s attitude toward the world of people.

What is God’s attitude toward the world of people? The most famous verse in the Bible, it lays out the gospel message as well as any verse in the Bible. Here is God’s attitude toward people: John 3:16. Maybe you learned it in Sunday School. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* A few verses later, Jesus didn’t come into the world to condemn the world, that is the world of people, but that the world through him would be saved.

So, James is not talking about friendship with other people when he says, *“Do you not know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?”* The Bible means something different when it condemns the world. And by the world, the Bible is referring to the world of ideas, the world of viewpoint, the world of attitudes. The adoption of perspective that is totally anti-Christ, anti-God, and anti-truth, the embracing of certain kinds of mentalities that are just absolutely destructive.

Like what? Like hedonism. I mentioned that before, the viewpoint where someone says, “I have a right to be happy.” And this right to be happy is indulged to the point that it can run roughshod over our marital vows, over the

needs of our kids, over our commitment to Christ. By exercising this supposed right to be happy, people can walk away from their marriages with no pangs of conscience. "Well, my wife has been depressed for a long time. She can't meet my needs. See ya." "Well, my husband is a terrible communicator. I have a right to be happy." People can do things that God hates because you know, I have a right to be happy. Where is that written, by the way? That you have a right to be happy that should take precedence over everything else including what is right. Where is it written that all of us get to be absolutely selfish and grab as much for ourselves as we can? And that is the way we are going to function together as a nation?

The amazing thing, friends, is that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. Anyone want to sign up for misery? Yeah, I want to be miserable the rest of my life. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. But happiness is one of those things, as the English writer, C. S. Lewis put it, happiness is one of those things that can never be obtained directly by aiming at it. If you commit yourself so as to be happy, you will be one of the most unhappy people on the face of the earth. Happiness is one of those things that you can only obtain indirectly by aiming at doing what is right. By following God and obeying God's commandments, God as a by-product gives you happiness.

But if you aim at happiness, if you say, "Well, this marriage is not working out. I am not happy. I am going to leave and go after happiness" you will be unhappy. And all I need to do to prove that is to hold up before you people who are the most self-indulgent, perhaps in the country, people in the movies. People in Hollywood. People who have gone after happiness with all of their might. Who have everything that we say you need to be happy. They have great looks, tons of money, enormous fame. Pick up anyone of the Hollywood biographies, if you can stomach it, and just read a few chapters. What you will find in a real quick read of these people's lives is profound misery. A significant percentage of actors and actresses are addicts, either alcohol or drugs. The vast majority has been married at least twice. Some have been married 7, 8, or 9 times. Many are undergoing long-term psychiatric care. Several have had children commit suicide. One of the most beautiful actresses of our generation commented not too long ago, "I am the most miserable person in the world." Another actress said, "I am just a piece of meat."

Jesus told us the way to be happy. You know, that list that is called the "Beatitudes,"

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." You know, those Beatitudes in Matthew 5. The old Philip's translation prefaced everyone "Happy are the meek..." "Happy are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

Do you want to become happy? Go after being right. Go after doing the right things. You want to be happy? Be a peacemaker. Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called Sons of God. Happy are the pure at heart, for they will see God.

Hedonism is friendship with the world. So is pragmatism. We are living at a time when people evaluate everything by whether it works. Not by whether it is true, by whether it is good, but by whether it works. If the country is working, it

doesn't matter if we are good people, or if the people who run it are good people. So long as it works. What is true is determined by what works.

Folks say, essentially, all the time in our day, "Well, I tried to be obedient to God. It didn't work and, therefore, I am going to give up on Jesus. I am going to give up on my marriage, because my marriage is not working. I am going to give up on trying to battle against this particular sin because it is not working."

I don't know how many times I have talked with people who are making major decisions in their lives not based on whether God in the Bible has laid out this path for them, but because they have watched other people make these decisions and it has worked for them. The pragmatic mind-set.

Over against this, you need to hear the claims of the gospel. The claim of the gospel is that Christ will work for you only if you are true to him whether he works for you or not. Let me say that again. The claim of the gospel is that Christ will work for you only if you are true to him whether he works for you or not.

You should not come to Jesus because he is fulfilling, although he is. Or because he will empower you or meet your needs, although he does. But because he is true. Because any other way of living is a lie and lies will ultimately destroy you.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Sometimes sin works for us for a while. The hook for many of us in indulging ourselves in some area or other is that sin works for a while. On a purely pragmatic basis, if what is true is what works, and then sin does work for a while. Why shouldn't we sin with impunity? Why shouldn't we simply adopt the attitude that says, "Well, I know this is wrong, but hey, I want to do it. It is working. And I can always ask God to forgive me later." He will won't he? I can always ask God to forgive me later and he will, won't he?

Here is the problem with that. That attitude is built on a lie. The lie is that I will remain in the same spiritual position after I sin as before I sin. God will always forgive us. But we won't always want to be forgiven. With every sin, you put another block in the wall between you and God. With every sin, you pour more garbage down the drain and clog up the pipes through which you will then want to receive God. With every sin you turn yourself more and more away from God and walk more and more in the shadows.

Yes, sin works for a while. I have experienced that in my own life. But because it is not true, it ultimately destroys our relationship with God. We find it more difficult to believe. More difficult to even want to believe. More difficult to even want to pray. We find that we have to walk back farther this time. That the hole is deeper. That our faith is weaker.

But to understand the seriousness of our problem with sin, we need to set it into the relationship that James says we have with God. He says, "You adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" James is rooted in Old Testament Judaism and the relationship that God has with his people in the Old Testament is often likened to a marriage. God walks down the aisle when he makes a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. Some of you may want to write that down in that strange story of God walking down the aisle. There is a marriage going on there. Jesus uses the marriage analogy when he describes his relationship with us in Matthew 9. He says, "How

*can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and they will fast."*

John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Bridegroom and the church as the Bride. In John 3:28, he said, *"I am not the Christ, but I am sent ahead of him to announce his way. The bride belongs to the Bridegroom."*

Paul talks of the relationship between Jesus and the church as being like a marriage. And in the end of history, John in the book of Revelation talks of the church coming down from heaven being like a bride. Our relationship with God is described as being like a marriage. And you know what friendship with the world is? When we have evaluated things based on whether they will make us happy? Or when we judge truth by whether it is working for us or not working for us in the moment? Rather than by whether it is true, based on what is revealed to us here in this book. Do you know what friendship with the world is? It is spiritual adultery. That is why James says, "You adulteresses..." The church, by the way, is always feminine compared to God's masculine. We are always adulteresses. Always the ones who are responding to God. We are always feminine.

See, here is the way it works. We begin our relationship with God the way a person begins a marriage. You are not married because your parents were married. Or because your grandparents were married or because you believe in marriage. You are married because, if you are, you stood in front of a Rabbi or a priest or a minister or judge and you exchanged vows. That is what gets you married.

In the same way, you are not a Christian because your parents were Christians. Because your grandparents were Christians. Because you grew up in a Christian home. You are a Christian, or not, based on whether or not you have exchanged vows of commitment to Jesus Christ. If you have never walked the aisle with Jesus and exchanged vows with him, you may be a Catholic, a Methodist, a Vineyardite, but you are not yet a biblical Christian.

You see, a biblical Christian is a person to whom Jesus has made a vow that sounds something like: I Jesus, take you, sinner, to be my child. I promise to save you from God's judgment for your sin. To give you eternal life. To grant you access to God. To answer your prayers. To fill you with a sense of purpose and meaning. To give you strength in your weakness and hope and comfort in times of crisis. I pledge to you that I will never leave you or forsake you and that I will be with you always.

Jesus makes a vow to us. And these vows are promised to us in the Bible.

We respond to his vows and you are not married until you make your own vows to God in which you say, "I, sinner, take you Jesus to be my Savior and my Lord. I give my life to you completely for better or for worse, whether it works for me or not, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, whether I am happy or not, I pledge myself to you to be your follower, now and in eternity.

Here is what friendship with the world is. Friendship with the world, sin, is a violation of our marriage vows with Jesus. It is spiritual adultery. Part of the reason why we are not more apt to run from sin is that many of us see sin as a violation of an impersonal rule rather than a violation of a personal relationship



with God. We see sin as just “oh well, I am breaking one of the commands,” instead of that I am being unfaithful to my marriage relationship with God.

Let me put it this way. Those of you who are married, you walk into your husband’s office and you see him with a co-worker sitting on his lap, straightening his tie. Do you say that what is going on here is an offense against a command or do you say “That creep! You traitor, you have violated our marriage!”

Husbands, you go to the gym to pick up your wife from an aerobics class. You are going to surprise her and you see her kissing another man. Is this simply an abstract violation or after you get done unloading your gun, do you say, “You have violated my right to your exclusive affection. We swore some things about being loyal to each other.”

Now, when you understand that your essential relationship with God can be likened to a marriage and that our embrace and love for the world (and by that we are talking about the world of attitudes and ideas, of a right to be happy, it is only true if it works) is spiritual adultery, then you can understand God’s response to our spiritual adultery.

Verse 5, I told you before, is particularly difficult to translate. The New International Version translates verse 5 this way, “*Or do you think that scripture says without reason that the spirit he calls to live in us envies intensely.*” But it has a marginal reading that actually is far better, if you have a New International Version, down at the bottom of the page it gives an alternative translation: “*God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us.*”

The point is, and the reason that I prefer the marginal reading, which by the way is the option that the New American Standard Bible went for, is because of the context here. We are married to God. We commit adultery and the person who gets jealous as a result is God.

Friends, I want to underline something here. Many of us need to reconfigure our understanding of who God is and how God relates to us. Putting it real simply, many of us relate to God as if God has no feelings. The notion of God being jealous is just almost unthinkable. We imagine God to be an impassive block of marble who is living in this utter tranquility and nothing fazes him. Nothing fazes God in that nothing catches God by surprise. Nothing fazes God in the sense that God ever loses control. But that God has feelings and becomes jealous is part of God’s revelation of himself through the whole Bible. In fact, it is there back in the Ten Commandments. If you were to look back at Exodus 20, you would see that in the middle of the second command, God says that we shouldn’t make idols for ourselves in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or the waters below. He goes on to say in Exodus 20:5, “*You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.*” Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself to us as being jealous. He is a jealous lover. He demands exclusive devotion to him. He is very fierce about making sure that we are faithful to him and that we don’t go after other lovers.

The idea that God has no emotions is a Greek idea that came into the early church. I think that it has marred our perspectives of God for the last 17 centuries. God is personal. And it is inconceivable that because God is personal, he doesn’t feel. Which means that when we repeatedly sin, that does

something to the heart of God. When we suffer—friends, I don't know what your thought is about when God relates to you when you suffer, but I believe that God feels your pain. In some mysterious way, God is so connected in love for his people that just as he said to Paul in Acts 9 when Paul was persecuting the church, Jesus didn't say, "Paul, why are you persecuting the church?" He said, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus is so intertwined with his people that he feels what we feel as someone who is in love feels the pains of their beloved. A mother hurts when their child hurts. They don't just view it impassively. They don't just say objectively, "You are the one who hurts, but I feel nothing."

We commit spiritual adultery and that does something to the heart of God and maybe that should give you pause.

What, then, is our response to the notion that we have been unfaithful to God? We have broken our vows. We have flirted with the world and have batted our eyes and bowed before idols of power, position and prestige and money.

Well, the choice that is presented squarely to us by James in James 4 is repentance. In verses 7-10, James presents us with 10 imperatives. Every one of these verses is written in the imperative. Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil. Come near to God. Wash your hands. Purify your hearts. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning. Humble yourself. There are ten imperatives.

James says that if you find yourself having been unfaithful to God, and then your response needs to be active repentance. You need to do something. You just don't wait for repentance to drop on your head. You don't just give up and lay down in your sin. You need to do something.

Now, in this closing part, I want to talk about repentance. Because I really believe that American Christians do not understand what repentance means at all and how we deal with sin when we find it in ourselves. American Christians are trained to simply confess sin. To say to God, "God, this is what I have done and I am sorry." But we know virtually nothing about repentance from sin even though the word "repent" in some fashion appears over 1000 times in the Bible.

Let's examine this. We say, "Well, what is God's response to our sin?" We mentioned jealousy. You might say, "Well, I have sinned. I have violated my marriage vows. God is jealous. What that probably means is that the hammer will drop; God is going to pour out his wrath on me. He is really upset with me."

James surprises us with this amazing word of kindness in verse 6 says, *"But he gives us more grace. That is why the scripture says that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."* God gives you an unexpected response. The God that we are looking toward, while he is jealous, while he feels the pain of a betrayed lover, gives more grace, is long suffering, continually comes back to us unfaithful adulteresses. He doesn't give us the response that we think we are going to get. He gives more grace.

I don't know how many of you know the story of the Prodigal Son who returns to his father after wasting his father's inheritance. One of Jesus' famous stories. The son takes half the estate of his father and goes out and spends his father's money on partying. In today's world, he would have spent his dad's money on drugs, maybe gotten someone pregnant, smashed up the family car. The boy comes home and in Jesus' story, the father who represents God rushes out to the boy and immediately embraces him.

Now, I have often thought why doesn't the father in the story play it cooler, let the boy prove himself, be a little more guarded about what kind of response he would give. I have often thought that the father is like a bad poker player, who just shows his hand. We say, "Father, hold your cards a little closer to your chest so that I can't see them." But God the Father always shows his hand. He says, "Do you want to know what you will get if you come to me? You are always going to receive grace. Let me show you my hand. Forgiveness."

We say, "Hide your cards a little bit."

He says, "Oh, you want to see them more? Forgiveness, grace, grace. Forgiveness."

We say, "No, no, no. I have just sinned. I have just done this terrible thing."

He says, "Let me show you my hand again. Forgiveness."

But he just keeps giving more grace. You never need to guess what you will get from the hand of God if you turn to him. You are not going to get a clenched fist punched in your face. From the hand of God, if you turn to him, you are going to get blessing. You are not going to get a slap. You are going to get more grace.

If you run from him, he will oppose you. But if you come to him, no matter how bruised you are and how much of a mess you have made of your life, you will get more grace.

To repent, which means to turn from sin and turn to God, you must know your standing with God. To repent, we must know also our superiority over sin. James says, "Submit yourself to God and resist the devil and he will flee from you." You see a sin in your life. If you want to repent and turn away from your sin and back to God, you need to know that not only will God be gracious to you, but also you need to know that God has empowered you to beat this sin.

I don't know how many times I am lied to and how many times you are lied to where you say, "You know, nothing that I do will ever make any difference. I am going to lose anyway. Try as I might, I am going to fail. I might as well forget it. I might as well give in. I am never going to overcome this thing."

Friends, I am telling you, I don't care what your battle is or what addiction you are going through. You must expect success, because God has assured us of our superiority in our conflict with sin. In Romans 6:14 he has said, "*Sin will not have any dominion over you.*" He has put his Holy Spirit in us. We are new creations. We may not feel that way, but that is what we are. You can resist. You must resist. Because you can win and you will win if you keep fighting. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

We need to know our standing. We need to know our superiority over sin. We need to know our resources. If we resist, then we can draw near to God and he will draw near to us. So often we resist, we fight for a while against a besetting sin, an attitude, and a way of relating. We decide to go back into our marriages or re-engage in a fight against our anxieties. But then we wear out after a while and give up because we don't know our resources. It is not enough to keep resisting sin. We also have to draw near to God and allow God to nourish us. Unless the life of God in you is nourished and built up, you are going to give up your fight against sin after a little while. You have to keep the lifeline open to God, friends.

It is not just fight, fight, fight. It is also feed your soul, feed your soul. Build yourself up in your faith. We feed our souls through prayer and through fellowship. Through Bible reading and taking communion. We open up every single door we can to God and we just keep inviting him to come in and strengthen us inside.

And then we need to know our objective. James says, "Wash your hands, you sinners, purify your hearts, you double-minded." Repentance does not mean I want to be forgiven while I remain in sin. While I continue to do this thing, God, give me grace, give me grace, give me grace, forgive me, forgive me, free me from sin but not yet.

Repentance's objective is to be purified, to be cleansed totally from this besetting sin. Whatever it is that plagues you, your goal is to completely have it eradicated from your life. And note that James talks about purifying, washing your hands and purifying your hearts. He talks about our outward behavior and our inner attitude. Repentance involves both. You cannot have repentance unless there is behavioral change and also heart attitude change. Both are needed. Both. Some people just focus on heart attitude. They say, "Well, I can look at pornography because I don't feel any lust." Baloney. God hates the action. God hates the heart attitude.

So there is none of this "Forgive me God, while I live with my girlfriend." Or, "Forgive me God about my relationship with this person while I continue to gossip about them." You need to know your objective while you are returning to God. And your objective is complete eradication of this sin in your life. Whatever it is. If it is greed or anxiety, it is pulling up all of the weeds. It is total victory. It is complete conquest, however long that takes. I am not there. I am not going to be there, perhaps, until I die. I am on a journey.

But I know what the goal is. The goal is not just having a few weeds in my garden. The goal is pulling them all out.

To fully repent, we must know our own wretchedness. Verse 9: "*Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.*" James is speaking to us like an Old Testament prophet. I don't know if there is a verse in the New Testament that more radically attacks American feel-good religion than James 4:9. "*Grieve, mourn and wail.*" Can you imagine one of these church consultants coming into the church and saying, "You know, I will tell you how you can get your church bigger and get people to give more money. Call your people to grieve, mourn and wail." No, no, no. The way that we always must be in Christianity is always happy and all of our music must be uplifting.

But real Christianity, a real relationship with God, is not just real good, feel good religion. Sometimes it is totally appropriate for us to feel bad. Now there are some among us who feel guilty over what is not sin or who feel guilty over what has been cleansed and clearly repented of in the past. There are people who the apostle Paul says have weak consciences and need to be trained to believe in the cleansing power of the blood of Christ.

But you know, there is a much, much more serious problem in America today and in our churches today than people who feel guilty over what is not sin. We have a massive number of people who don't feel bad about what is sin. We have a massive number of people who can sit in church week after week while they are living such radical contradictions to their profession of faith. How can it

be that we listen to the words of Holy God and continue in a hypocritical lifestyle, contradicting everything that we have just pretended to believe the moment we walk out of the church?

We Americans never want to feel bad about anything. We run to therapists who will help us get rid of bad feelings. Do you know, friends, one of the signs and the healthiest sign that you could have in your life at times is that you still feel bad about your sin. Or you feel bad when life really hurts. It says that you are still alive. That your conscience is not yet seared. That you are not yet dead inside. That you are still able to be awakened. Praise God that there are times when you can't roll over and just go to sleep. Praise God that you wake up in the middle of the night and you are troubled and you are upset. What a tragedy it would be if you had an abortion and could just walk away from it. Or if you hurt someone in your family or in the church and you felt nothing, even though you were just really mean-spirited.

It is one of the things that you can be thankful for that you feel bad when you explode at one of your kids. Friends, we need to regain in America the permission to feel bad for a while. If we have really hurt another person, feel bad. James says, "Weep, mourn and wail." Repentance is more than a mental thing, an intellectual deal. It is because we have made it so intellectual and so abstract that we have such superficial Christians. Our Christianity is so shallow. It never really gets down into our hearts.

We quickly heal ourselves and say, "Peace, peace" to ourselves when there is no peace. Let your emotions run their course. Don't always run away from pain and feeling bad. No one in the history of the church who knows anything about deeper spirituality has ever said that there isn't a time in our lives when we need to feel awful.

You lose a child and you are sorrowful, feel bad. Feel bad before God.

And you know, feeling bad about our sin is not feeling bad because of the consequences of our sin. It is not feeling bad because we have been caught. It is not feeling bad because of the mess we have made. Ultimately, it needs to be seen as God, I have sinned against you, my lover, and my husband. You who have always been good to me. You who have always been true. You who have always been faithful. You who have never let me down. You who promised me so much. Against you I have sinned.

Repentance has not had its full effect until it has engaged your entire person, not only your brain, but your heart and emotions. And once we have gone through this process, we can have hope that the Lord will lift us up. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

It is very painful to hold up a mirror to ourselves and to look at what we are and what we have done. But you have to, friends. You have to take some time to look at yourself. To experience the horror of what you have done and what you are. To not just keep running away, turning on the TV and avoiding every bad thought. But then you need to after looking at yourself, look at Jesus. And our hope is that rather than lifting ourselves up and rescuing ourselves, he will lift us up. He will change us.

I want to challenge you that if you are in a pattern of sin in your life, to use James 4:6-10 as a guide for working through your sin. I want to challenge you to allow yourself to feel bad for a little while because that alone will provide the

hope for change. Without pain, virtually none of us change. Without conflicts, virtually none of us change. Yes, we have problems in the church, but when we yield to God, he will lift us up. Let's pray.