

Your Passion at War Within You
James 4:1-12
March 3, 2024
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Read James 4:1-12

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

There are twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. They are called minor only because of their length not because of their message or impact. The most famous one that everyone knows, of course, is Jonah, the prophet who was swallowed by a great fish. Perhaps the second most famous one is Hosea, though his story often doesn't make it into the children's Bibles or the Sunday School curriculum. That's because God told him to marry a "*wife of whoredom*" as the very second verse of the book says. And then He added "*have children of whoredom.*" How would you have reacted to those commands if you were Hosea? I think most of us would at least have had a few questions for the Lord: "Really? I'm your prophet and that's my assignment? That doesn't seem like the best way for me to model your holiness or to have a solid marriage. Isn't there anyone else?" But we don't see any hesitation on Hosea's part in the text, he simply goes and marries a woman named Gomer.

After she bore Hosea three children, Gomer left him and committed adultery with other men. But the Lord sent Hosea to bring her back and love her again. He actually had to pay to buy her out of her new promiscuous life, but Hosea was obedient and brought her home. If you've read the book, you know God's reasons behind this: it is a parallel to how God's people have treated Him and how He will restore them. They had been God's bride, but they had committed spiritual adultery, by worshipping other gods, "*whoring after other gods*" is what it's called. Yahweh, the true God, would punish His people for their idolatry and unfaithfulness, but would restore them and buy them back when, as Hosea 5:15 says, "*they acknowledge their guilt and... in their distress earnestly seek me.*"

This morning, we are in the New Testament, in the book of James. We've left behind all the craziness of the prophetic Old Testament books, right? And Jesus has already died for His people and the Lord has drawn the early church full of believers who, according to the book of Acts, "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... praising God and having favor with all the people*" (2:42, 47a). The early church was on fire for God and His mission, and they were seeing miracles and salvations left and right. Everything was ideal, right? Except that in our passage today, James has some harsh words for his fellow believers. And he reaches back and borrows a phrase from the OT prophets: "*You adulterous people!*" Like Gomer and like ancient Israel, they were being unfaithful to the Lord, running after the pleasures of the world despite being God's people. But also like Gomer, there was hope for repentance, change, and redemption. Are we any different from God's people in Hosea's or James' day? Are we adulterous people, do we run after the pleasures of this world rather than the pleasures of our glorious God? Let's allow the passage to challenge and speak to us.

The first five verses show us that

I. Friends of the World Pursue Their Passions (vv. 1-5)

¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and

quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?

First off, it may be alarming to the reader to see verse 2 say that some people in the early church committed murder. It's highly doubtful that the Christians that James was addressing were actually killing people; I think if that had been the case, he would have started the letter by addressing that serious problem. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that when you're angry with your brother, you commit murder in your heart, I think that's what James is getting at here. And James started this chapter with the rhetorical question, "What causes these fights?" And before you have time to look around and point at everyone else, he answers: "what's inside of you." My biggest issues, my biggest problems are within. If I'm fighting and quarrelling, it's a symptom of the deeper issue: that I have assimilated the world's value system of ungodly pleasures, greed, covetousness, and anger. When this passage talks about pursuing your passions, it's not talking about the way we sometimes say things like: "I have a passion for fine art" or "I have a passion for justice in this world." No, it's talking about the passions of the flesh; the Greek word is *hedone* from which we get the word hedonist, one who pursues pleasure above all else.¹ Titus 3:3 talks about those who were "*once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures.*" In verse 3, the word used for "spend" is the same word used by Jesus to describe the Prodigal Son's wastefully using his inheritance in Luke 15. The bottom line is that we're selfish; we pursue our own pleasures, desires, agendas, and plans. And when people or things get in the way, we fight through them.

But James also says that your passions war inside of you, because as a new creation in Christ, you also have the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, your desire to pursue godly things clashes with the hedonism you still lust after. The new and old natures clash. Titus says that was your old life, James says that you still want to live like that, your heart is a battlefield.

James gives two issues that we should think about when your prayer life is lacking: first, have you prayed about what you need? The end of verse 2: "*You do not have, because you do not ask.*" And second, have you prayed for things that are godly, that are in His will? Your problem is that you don't desire the right things. If you did, you could ask God for them, and He would generously give them to you. But God doesn't grant selfish, sinful prayers. Jim Samra paints this scenario:

"Imagine sitting on the board of a foundation famous for providing grant money to worthy causes. Someone has submitted a proposal. On the outside, it looks amazing. Slick cover. Nice design work. When you open it up, you find that the person is requesting money not to help treat diseases, educate the poor, or alleviate suffering, but to provide for a luxurious new home, expensive car, and round-the-world trip for themselves. How would you react? Do we expect God's reaction to our selfish prayers to be any different?"²

Do you want to find a godly husband or wife? Do you wish you had deeper friendships? Are you looking for a good way to use your ministry gifts? If so, ask yourself: have I been constant in prayer about those things? If this is something that my heavenly Father would want for me, why don't I ask Him for it? The Maserati, the yacht, the lake house in Tahoe... maybe not what God wants to give you. God is not your cosmic vending machine.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 148.

² Jim Samra, *James, 1&2 Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2016), p. 55.

And then James gets to what I was talking about in the introduction in verse 4, calling those who fit this description “*you adulterous people!*” He’s not talking about unbelievers, he’s talking about those who are committed to the Lord – you can’t commit adultery if you’re not married. Jesus is the groom and the church is His bride, so when we seek to love the world, we are being unfaithful to our husband, the very definition of adultery. Keep in mind that when the Bible and I talk about friendship with the world, it doesn’t mean individual friendships with non-Christians, this is not forbidding developing relationships with your neighbors and co-workers, showing them the love of Christ. No, it’s talking about embracing the values of this world, the ungodly spirit of the age. And so verse 5 says that God is jealous with the most holy jealousy that desires that His people remain true to Him. James uses two rhyming words (they rhyme in English not in Greek) to describe what our adulterous relationship with the world does to our relationship with God: enmity and enemy. We have enmity/strife/disharmony with God, and we make ourselves His enemy. Is that how you want to be in relation to God? I know that I don’t.

How do we get change this? The next five verses tell us that

II. Friends of God Resist the Devil and Embrace Humility (vv. 6-10)

*⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”
⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

The passage turns on verse 6 and the introduction of God’s grace that is a response to an attitude within the believer: humility. Pride and arrogance lead to sinful actions, humility turns the whole ship around, pleasing God so that He stops working against you and starts working for you.

Jonathan Edwards said:

“Pride is the worst viper in the heart... It lies lowest of all in the foundation of the whole building of sin. Of all lusts, it is the most secret, deceitful, and unsearchable in its ways of working. It is ready to mix with everything. Nothing is so hateful to God, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, or of so dangerous consequence. There’s not one sin that does so much to let the devil into the hearts of the saints and expose them to his delusions.”³

Ephesians 4 tells us that if we give the devil a foothold in our lives, he’ll take it. The beautiful promise of verse 7 is that when a Christian resists the devil, he flees. And immediately, if you draw near to God, He will draw near to you. It’s not terribly complicated: at all times, you can pursue the things of the spirit and turn towards God or you can indulge your flesh and turn towards Satan. Our sermon last week from my friend, Israel, was over that very passage where Jesus resisted the devil’s temptations in the wilderness by quoting Scripture to him as a defense. Peter Davids says that “the devil has no power over the Christian except the power of seduction. When resisted he must behave as he did with Jesus in the wilderness – he fled, leaving him. That will be the experience of the Christian as well if he or she learns to say no.”⁴

The Bible does not speak of the devil as a metaphor or a mythical concept; he is a real being, an ancient one who hates God and His people and will do anything to bring us down. We don’t want to fight the devil, he is way stronger than we are; we don’t stand there and say, “Alright, give me your best shot, Satan!” No, we turn away from him and cling to Christ; our warrior is Jesus our Savior,

³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Letters and Personal Writings* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1998).

⁴ Peter H. Davids, *James* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1995), p. 102.

not us. Jesus has triumphed over the forces of darkness and given the believer the power and authority to resist in his name.⁵ Our job is to obey God, resist the devil, and flee temptation.

1 Corinthians 6:18 says “flee from sexual immorality.”

1 Corinthians 10:14 says “flee from idolatry.”

1 Timothy 6:11 says “flee from” the love of money.

2 Timothy 2:22 says “flee the evil desire of youth.”

Does that sound cowardly, just running away? No, it’s smart. There are times to stand your ground; temptation is not one of them.

And verse 9 tells us that we need to take our sin struggles very seriously. It’s not saying be wretched and mourn and weep, avoiding laughter and joy as your general mood in life. He’s not saying that Christians need to walk around with a sour face and a “woe is me” attitude; that your frown proves how holy you are. No, he’s talking about the fact that when we’re struggling with sin, we need to take it seriously, to approach it as a battle. See your sin as a big deal, don’t treat it as trivial. The verbs he uses in these verses are: wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change, and humble yourself. As you do those things, God works for you, He draws near to you, He exalts you. He gives you the grace to overcome your passions and struggles. Repent of your spiritual adultery and He will restore you.

The last two verses point out that

III. Friends of God do not Slander Brothers (vv. 11-12)

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

“Do not speak evil against one another.” That’s stronger than just gossip, though we are not free to gossip about others. This is the sin of maligning others, whether it’s slander that is false or belittling and attacking with charges based in truth. You might think that James covered this in the last chapter when he talked about controlling the tongue, but he returns here because it is inappropriate for those who are friends of God. 1 John 4:20-21 – “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

This speaking evil can be subtle or blatant. Does everyone know what an “ad hominem” attack is? In Latin, “ad” means “towards or against” and hominem is “the person,” so it’s an argument made against the person. It’s where you are arguing about a subject with another person, and rather than making valid points about the subject, you go after them. You attack their character, their motives, their background, anything that you can call into question about that person rather than actually making a decent argument to support your viewpoint. Rather than winning the argument with logic, facts, or proof, you just try to discredit the other person’s character or insulting them. So conservative people say things like, “You’re just a woke liberal idiot who wants to destroy the country.” And liberal people say it like, “You’re a backwater suppressor of human rights who wants to destroy the country.” Those are the blatant, obvious ones; it can be more subtle than that: “You just think that because you can’t hold down a job,” or “Of course you would think that with the way you were raised.” Again, it’s anything that attacks the person rather than making an argument.

⁵ Jim Samra, *James, 1&2 Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2016), p. 54.

What would James tell us about ad hominem attacks? You are speaking evil about someone else. Fight fair, be charitable towards your ideological enemies while speaking the truth in love. 2 Corinthians 10:4 says, “*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*” Did you hear that? We destroy arguments not people.

Conclusion

Chuck Colson, in his book *Loving God*, told the true story of Mickey Cohen, who was the Al Capone of Los Angeles in the mid-20th century. Somehow this infamous mobster met Billy Graham, the evangelist, and heard him speak. He also knew several men who had been involved in the mafia who had come to faith in Christ through Billy’s ministry. After he spent some time in prison for tax evasion, he got out and started to meet with Bill Jones, a layman who explained the Gospel to him. Mickey Cohen, this notorious career criminal, prayed to receive Christ into his life. It was exciting that a man like that would embrace faith, but it soon became evident that very little about his life had changed. Bill Jones later challenged him about the fact that he had gone back to his life of crime and that there was very little evidence of spiritual growth in his life. Mickey replied, “You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, Christian businessmen. So what’s the matter with being a Christian gangster?”⁶

Mickey wanted what he saw as the best of both worlds: he wanted to be protected from judgment after death and the forgiveness of his sins that salvation in Jesus offered, but he didn’t want to submit to the lordship of Christ, reigning in his passions and walking in a godly manner. He still wanted to be able to keep his illegal business, his reputation, his wealth, and everything else involved in that lifestyle. James would say that he wanted to continue his friendship with the world, his love of the world’s values, pursuing his passions with no thought to the fact that it kept him as an enemy of God. Real Christianity means that we change. We turn from a life of pursuing passion and loving the values of the world to a life lived “*coram Deo*” – before the face of God. Submitting and pleasing our true Master and Savior.

I doubt any of you are as notorious a criminal as Mickey Cohen. But you too were once a sinner who deserved condemnation every bit as much as a mafia hitman. Your entrance into the kingdom of God was a work of grace - we know that we can never do enough to clean ourselves up to be worthy of God’s love. Salvation from our sin is a free gift that we contribute nothing to, we simply receive it gratefully when God awakens our hearts spiritually and makes us new creations. After we are saved and adopted into His family, the great question of the Christian life is: Who will you love – the world or the Lord? Will you feed your pride/your ego and your passions/lusts? Or will you humble yourself, stop being double-minded, flee the devil and your own evil desires, and cling to the Lord? That is a daily struggle. But the Holy Spirit lives inside of you, giving you supernatural strength and guidance. And when you draw near to God, He draws near to you. One of the ways that we draw strength for the struggle is by partaking in the sacrament of communion. We eat and drink the love and forgiveness of Jesus and are spiritually strengthened. **-> Communion**

Benediction - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 - “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*”

⁶ Charles Colson, *Loving God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 105.