“No Side-gods”
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James 4:4-10
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The Root of Quarrels in the Church

Last week, you may remember that James taught us the reason why we have quarrels in the church—not necessarily our church specifically, but in churches in general. The reason quarrels happen is because of our own desires. You want something. You want people to like you. You want to look good in front of others. You have something specific you want done, and when it doesn’t happen, you think someone else is to blame for you not having that thing in your life—that thing that’s going to give you pleasure.

Because you didn’t get what you wanted, you blame the other person. That causes a quarrel. You’re looking to someone else to provide your joy and satisfaction—something that’s supposed to come from God. James goes on to say that you don’t have because you don’t ask. So we don’t ask God, and because we don’t ask, God doesn’t give. He wants us to ask.

Some of you might say, “But I do ask!” Then James comes back and says, “Yes, but when you ask, you ask with bad motives.” You’re not asking for something God wants for you. You’re asking for something that’s going to feed the idolatry of trying to get satisfaction outside of God. That’s not what we want. That’s not what God wants. And God’s not going to feed that.

How the World Deals with Desire

Now, some of you might say, “What’s wrong with having desires?” Because I’ve got desires. You’ve got desires. If I didn’t have a desire to eat, I wouldn’t eat. If I didn’t have a desire to have a job, I wouldn’t have a job. Desires cause us to do things. That’s natural. You’re supposed to have desires because that’s what forces you to act.

But this is a big issue. There are a lot of ways we deal with desire. Different philosophies throughout time and around the world have tried to answer this question.

You may recall—I think I’ve talked about this before—the man Siddhartha. Do you know who that is? Siddhartha became the Buddha. He lived in relative comfort, without pain or struggle. But when he went out into the world, he started to experience angst and dissatisfaction. Why? Because he had desires that weren’t fulfilled. And when a desire is left unfulfilled, it leaves you with angst or dissatisfaction.

So, how do you deal with that gap between desire and fulfillment? Buddha said: eliminate the desire. Go into a state of meditation, eliminate all desire. If you don't have desire, there's nothing to be fulfilled. Therefore, no angst. That's one philosophy.

Another philosophy is what we call secular humanism. This became very popular back in the 1980s. The idea is: whatever desire you have, fulfill it. That's the American way. It doesn't matter if it's good or bad—it's your desire. You don't want angst, you want peace, so you gratify the desire. You want it? You buy it. You're married, but you see another girl and think, "I want her." So you have her. That's the way of the world. So, we have one philosophy that says eliminate desire, and another that says gratify every desire. But Jesus had a different way.

Jesus' Way of Ordering Desire

Jesus' way was completely different. He didn't say eliminate your desires. He didn't say gratify every desire. Jesus said: order your desires. It's not that you shouldn't have desires, but your desires have to be placed in the right order. In the book of Matthew, Jesus says:

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." — Matthew 6:33

So, seek first His kingdom. He's number one. You put Him at the top of the pile, and all your other desires have to be related to and come under that. Let's say I'm living my life and I have a desire for someone outside of my marriage. I don't act on that desire because I have a greater desire—God. I have a greater desire—my wife. I have to order my desires. That's the way we're supposed to live when it comes to desire.

James told the Jerusalem church that the root cause of their divisions was their own selfish desires. So, the practical question is: how do I get those desires back in order? If I'm not going to eliminate my desires, and I can't gratify them all, then how do I order them?

Spiritual Adultery and the Church

So, if you've got your Bible, turn to James chapter 4, and we're going to pick up at verse 4. This is what it says:

"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." — James 4:4

That sounds pleasant, right? We were just talking about desire and arguments in the church, and then James throws out the "A-word" at us—"you adulterous people."

In the original language, it actually says, “you adulteresses.” That’s important because James is talking to the church. I don’t know if you know this, but when we talk about marriage, one of the reasons there’s no marriage in heaven is because marriage is a picture of the relationship between Jesus and His church. There’s no need for marriage in heaven because we’ll be united with the One our earthly marriages were pointing to—Jesus.

So, who’s the man in that relationship? Jesus. And who’s His bride? The church. This is the model of what a true relationship should be.

When you look at relationships culturally and say, “Well, it’s Pride Month,” or “Love is love,” or whatever the world says—no. The relationship God models is Christ as the groom (a man) and the church as the bride (a woman). One is nurturing, the other is dependent. They love each other. It’s the same model we see with Adam and Eve. Your marriage is a picture of that. It helps us understand the relationship we have with God. So, when James says, “You adulteresses,” he’s not just calling out sin. He’s saying, “You are a church—a bride—cheating on your husband.” That’s why he uses the term “adulteress.” He’s talking to the church, the female part of the relationship.

You might say, “Whoa, James, why are you using such strong language?” But he has to. He’s calling it what it really is. The people in the church might say, “We’ve got quarrels, but we’re not sleeping around or anything.” But James is saying, “Yes, you are—spiritually.”

Friendship with the World Is Spiritual Infidelity

James says:

“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.” — James 4:4

Here’s why he uses the term “adulteress.” Scripture refers to the church as the bride of Christ. When the church is unfaithful to God, it’s spiritual adultery. That unfaithfulness is being represented in the problems people are having with each other in the church. Why is that? Because you’re not satisfied with your husband—God. You’re not satisfied with the fulfillment He offers. You have desires, and instead of going to your husband to fulfill them, you go outside the marriage. You look to idols, to the world, to other sources for satisfaction. And then you get mad at your brother or sister in the church because they didn’t help you cheat.

If you’re married, who are you supposed to love the most? Your spouse. The wedding vow says, “forsaking all others.” When you entered into a relationship with God, you were supposed to forsake all other gods, all other sources of joy and satisfaction. But if you start making friends with other “gods,” and you’re having desires that your husband—God—is

meant to fulfill, and you meet those desires outside the marriage, what do you call that? Adultery. And what do you call the person doing that? An adulterer or adulteress. That's why James uses that term. You're cheating on God with the world.

Flirting with the World

When we embrace the things of the world but turn away from the very God who freed us from our sin, we've got a serious problem.

James says:

"Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?" — James 4:4

If someone is having an affair with my wife, that man is automatically my enemy. We're not hanging out after work. He's my enemy. And if she's friends with him, then she's my enemy too. That's what James is saying. In the relationship between the church and Jesus, if you are a friend of the world—which is diabolically opposed to Jesus—then you are an enemy of God. If you're flirting with the world, you're cheating on God.

You go out into the world during the week. You go to work, and everyone's doing worldly things. And you say, "I love Jesus, I'm in a relationship with Him," but then you flirt with the world. You watch things you shouldn't watch. You say, "It's just a little bit." It always starts with flirting.

You say, "I'll get some of what I need from the world." Then eventually, you get most of your satisfaction and peace from the world. You feel more comfortable in the world's arms than in God's. And now, you'd rather spend time doing worldly things than spending time with God and His people. That's how people who used to come to church all the time end up showing up twice a year.

No Other Gods—God's Jealous Love

Let me read this from the Old Testament, because I want you to know this isn't new. The very first commandment says:

"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." — Exodus 20:3–5

Now, some of you read that and think, "No other gods before me—does that mean in order? Like, I can have other gods as long as God is number one?" No. It means no other gods at all. Not in front of Him, not beside Him, not behind Him. None. God doesn't want

you to have any "side gods." This isn't a relationship where you say, "Well, I'm not serious with those other gods. I'm just having a little fun." No. God is a jealous God. He wants your full devotion.

So, here's the question: What do you do to make sure you don't get swept off your feet by the world? Because God demands absolute faithfulness. No side gods. No spiritual affairs.

You might say, "But I live in the world, and I like some of the stuff the world offers. How do I stay faithful?" James is practical. And so is God.

Grace Greater Than Our Sin

James continues:

"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'" — James 4:6

You say, "More grace than what?" More grace than your sin. Grace that's greater than all your sin. Regardless of what your sin is, His grace is more. It's bigger. It overpowers whatever sin you've got. Grace that's greater than your struggle. Grace that's greater than your desires. Grace that's more than enough to get rid of any "side gods" in your life.

You might say, "I can't do that on my own. I can't stop wanting these things. I'm like Hosea's wife in the Bible—always cheating." But God says, "Ask me. I'll give you more grace than the trouble you're in and the struggle you're having." If you're thinking, "I don't know if I can be faithful to God," the answer is: yes, you can—because God will give you the grace to do it.

But there are conditions. You want that grace? Here's how you get it:

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." — James 4:6

To receive this grace, you must be humble. Grace and pride are enemies. If you want to celebrate pride, you're celebrating something that is an enemy of God. Pride is the beginning of all sin. Why? Because pride says, "Bless me, reward me, celebrate me because of who I am in myself. I was born this way. Accept me as I am." That's pride. And that's the opposite of what God says.

Grace is God accepting you not because of who you are or what you've done, but entirely because of who He is and what He's done. If you're going to be proud of anything, be proud of God. Give Him all the glory—none for yourself. Pride says, "I don't need to repent. I don't need to acknowledge sin." But humility says, "There's nothing in me that makes me worthy. Everything I have is because of You, God."

Submitting to God and Resisting the Devil

James continues:

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” — James 4:7

You might say, “I don’t like that. I don’t submit to anybody. I’m in charge of me.” But that’s not wise thinking. If you’re not submitted to God, you are automatically submitted to the devil. That’s your default setting—out of the womb. And the devil will make you think you’re not submitted to him just to keep you under his control.

So, what do you do? You resist the devil. And when you do, he will flee. That’s a promise. That’s the law of God. He must flee when you resist him.

Some of you think the way to get the devil out of your life is through an exorcism. But it’s not about someone else resisting the devil for you. James is clear: you resist him yourself. You say, “No more,” and the devil has no choice but to flee. This is how you stop being a friend of the world. This is how you stop being an adulteress. You come back to your husband—God.

Draw Near to God

James writes:

“Come near to God and he will come near to you.” — James 4:8

Now, in the Old Testament, it didn’t work that way. Remember Moses? He sees the burning bush, and God says, “Don’t come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” God was saying, “Stay away. I’m holy, and you’re not.”

Later, when Moses went up the mountain, God told him to keep the people away. If they touched the mountain, they would die. The message was: stay away. But then Jesus came. He entered our world. He became incarnate. And now, instead of “stay away,” He says, “Come close.” At the Last Supper, John leaned against Jesus. That’s how close they were.

Jesus says, “Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you.” It’s not like a broken marriage where one person tries to get close and the other pulls away. No—God says, “You move toward me, and I’ll move toward you. I’m ready. I want intimacy with you.” It’s like a husband saying to his wife, “Anytime you want closeness, I’m here.” That’s what God says to us. “You want intimacy with me? Just say the word. I’ll stop everything and be with you.”

God has forgiven all our past infidelities. He’s ready to restore intimacy. And the more we draw near to Him, the less we want to go outside that relationship. Because it’s so good when it’s just us and God. Why would we seek satisfaction anywhere else?

Clean Hands, Pure Hearts, and Undivided Loyalty

James continues:

“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” — James 4:8

What does that mean? Washing your hands refers to your actions—what you do. Cleanse yourself. Stop contaminating your life with sin. Purify your hearts—that’s about your thoughts, your motives, your desires.

Then he says, *“You double-minded.”* In other words, pick one. God is saying, “It’s either Me or the world. You can’t have both.” You can’t say, “I love God, but I also love this other thing.” God is a jealous God. He won’t share you.

James goes on:

“Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” — James 4:9

You might think, “That sounds depressing. How is that going to help me?” Here’s how: because too many people in the church are playing with the world, flirting with temptation, and laughing it off like it’s no big deal. But God says, “Stop laughing. It’s not funny.” Cheating on God isn’t a joke. The man who cheats on his wife and says, “It’s not that big of a deal,” is the one who’s going to keep doing it. The one who truly changes is the one who falls on his face, weeps, and says, “I can’t believe what I’ve done. I never want to do that again.”

Brokenness Leads to Restoration

I remember a time early in my ministry—probably my second year as a pastor. I was dating a girl, and things went a little further than they should have. I didn’t have sex with her, but it crossed a line. I remember sitting in my office, praying, and this overwhelming guilt came over me. I thought, “My ministry is over. How can I ever preach again? How can I be an example to young people?”

I wept. I had this white couch in my office—lots of people had cried on that couch—and I remember kneeling down into it, just weeping. I thought, “All I can do is go tell my senior pastor. I’ll be fired, but at least my conscience will be clear.”

So, I went in, still weeping, and confessed everything. And he laughed. To him, it didn’t seem like a big deal. But to me, it was huge. And I’ll tell you—after that moment, for the next six months to a year, kids in the youth group were telling their parents, “Something’s different about Dustin. I don’t know what it is, but I want what he has.” It wasn’t because I had done something great. It was because I had been broken by my sin. I had wept. I had confessed. I had mourned. And God lifted me up.

Humble Yourself and Be Lifted Up

James concludes this portion with a powerful promise:

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." — James 4:10

That's exactly what happened to me. I humbled myself—really by default, because I felt so broken—and God lifted me up.

So, how do we eliminate divisions in the church? Here's how: each one of us must humble ourselves before God. When we do that, we receive the grace that allows us to stay faithful in our relationship with Him. We stop expecting others to provide what only God can give. That's where quarrels come from—when we expect people to give us what we were supposed to get from God all along.

So, we're going to pray, and then we'll sing one last song. But remember this: we are friends of God. We are lovers of God. And He loves us. He doesn't want to share us. So, give your whole self to Him.

Closing Prayer:

God, I thank You. It's not like You're leaving us without pleasure. It's not like You're leaving us without good things. Everything You have is better than everything we've been seeking. When we seek the world for satisfaction, we're settling for subpar joy—counterfeits of the real thing. God, we don't want to settle anymore. Everything we want is in this relationship we have with You. You fulfill all our joy and peace. You give us people, relationships, jobs, purpose—all under Your authority and love.

God, we love You. Draw our hearts to Yourself. And if we are in rebellion, draw us back. Help us to mourn and wail, to fall to our knees humble and ready to receive the grace You give. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.