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James 4:1-10

Eighth Message

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PATH TO PEACE

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

Every time we turn on the television, open the newspaper or listen to the radio we are bombarded with reminders that we live in a world filled with international conflict and violence. What is much less publicized, yet is equally destructive, are the feuds and fall-outs that occur in our families and churches. Whether it is wars that rage around the globe or conflicts that rage in our community, our world is filled with fighting. The pundits point to a variety of economic, social and political reasons for our discord, but James identifies a much deeper spiritual dimension to the strife.

It is obvious from his comments in this passage that James is addressing a community of Christians who are fighting with one another. He doesn't address the details of their discord; that is not his major concern. What is of paramount importance to the apostle is that as brothers and sisters in Christ, Christians must uncover the core issue and ultimate resolution to their conflict.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? 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. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble and oppressed." 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 4:1-10 TNIV)

The Source of Conflicts 4:1-4

A. Our selfish, unbridled desires

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (4:1-3)

James says the root cause of our conflict is our selfish desires that battle within us. The word for "desires" is the word used for "hedonism" – the relentless, ruthless pursuit of personal pleasure without regard for others. Our greed and covetousness set us against each other.

But what happens when our pursuit of pleasure is frustrated? We get angry. We covet, we quarrel, we fight and we kill. We need to look no farther than the story of Cain killing his innocent brother Abel to see the potentially deadly result of unbridled jealousy and anger. James says our conflict with each other is like the red light that flashes on the dashboard in our car. It is a warning sign that tells us to look under the hood to discover the real problem. If we are quarrelling and fighting, we must look deeper to find the cause. The root of our conflicts is our preoccupation with pleasing ourselves.

We might have expected James to say that we do not receive because we ask for the wrong things. He is not condemning the things we ask for, however, but the motives behind our prayers. We don't have what we desire, says James, because we don't ask God or our motives are self-serving. Is the reason we don't go to the Lord in prayer because we are too proud? Because we don't want to admit that there is something we deeply desire that lies outside human achievement? Or is the reason we don't ask because we don't believe that God has any interest in helping us, that he is too distant and our troubles are too small?

Jesus makes it clear that it delights the heart of our Heavenly Father when we go to him in prayer. If we know how to give good gifts to our children, says Jesus, "how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him!" He is a Father who wants to give, who wants us to ask him for the things we need. It delights him to answer.

When our desires are frustrated, we are to go to our Heavenly Father in prayer. There is no formula to follow, no secret words to say. Our prayers do not have to be long or have impressive vocabulary to be heard by God. There is no such thing as unheard prayer or, for that matter, unanswered prayer. But sometimes the answer God gives is no or not yet, because sometimes what we ask for feeds our selfish passions and not his purpose.

There is nothing wrong with desiring the good pleasures of life. The Scriptures make it clear that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim 6:17). What James is condemning is the pursuit of our pleasures becoming the ultimate aim of our lives. Left unchecked, our selfish and unbridled desires not only draw us into conflict with each other, they lead our hearts astray and tempt us to betray God.

B. Our Betrayal of God

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (4:4)

“The world” is used here to describe all that sets itself independent of and contrary to the way of God. Our “friendship” with the world suggests not only our intimacy with it but also imitation of it. If we as God’s people, his bride, imitate the world by seeking to satisfy our deepest desires apart from him, then we are, says James, adulterers and enemies of God. Like an Old Testament prophet, the apostle uses these two strong metaphors to rebuke our compromising ways with the world and unfaithfulness to the Lord.

If we choose the method and motivations of the world in satisfying our desires, then our purposes become contrary to God’s purposes and he must oppose them. We cannot remain faithful to the Lord and his way and at the same time align ourselves with the self-serving priorities of the world. The two are incompatible. As Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt 6:24).

Adulterer, enemy—these are strong words describing our betrayal of the Lord. James makes it clear that we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can live in intimate fellowship with the Lord when our heart yearns for satisfaction from the world. And yet this is exactly what we do.

The number of ways in which we turn our back on the Lord and compromise with the world are too many to illustrate. I believe we can get to the core of our sinful compromise, however, if we search our heart and ask ourselves: What are the subtle and not so subtle ways we choose to act, speak or spend like those who do not know God? What are the ways we choose to live in disobedience to the Lord, yet justify it because that is the way everyone else seems to live?

James has been harsh, direct and firm in his rebuke of our self-centered way of life and the turmoil it causes with each other and with God. Evidently we need a wake-up call. With our selfish passions so strong and so deep within us, are we doomed to forever live in conflict with each other and in enmity with God?

Fortunately, James shows us our path to peace.

The Path to Peace: Repentance 4:5-10

Our Motivation to Repent: The Grace 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. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.” (4:5-6)

In our path to peace with each other and with God, the first step is not our own. It is our Heavenly Father who makes the first move. He is the one who pursues us. He sent his one and only Son to redeem us.

Jesus said, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will

of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:38-40).

Though we are unfaithful to him, he will not lose us or give up on us. He longs for us and pursues us with great passion. And here is the amazing thing: He comes after us not to condemn us but to restore us to a proper relationship with himself. God responds to our betrayal not with rejection but with grace.

What comfort there is in this verse! It says that God is tirelessly on our side. He never falters in respect to our needs; he always has more grace at hand for us. No matter what we do to him he is never beaten. His resources are never at an end, his patience is never exhausted, his initiative never stops and his generosity knows no limit. Our path to peace is through repentance, and the abundant grace of God is our motivation to repent.

It is in this environment of love, grace and mercy that James urges us to take proper steps toward repentance, the remedy for our selfish and wayward heart.

Our Steps of Repentance 4:7b-10

A. Cling to God (change allegiances now!)

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. (4:7-8a)

The love and devotion which the Lord shows to us motivates us to love him and devote ourselves to him in return. So the first thing we must do is make a choice. We can’t have two allegiances; we can’t have two loves. Our first and proper response to God’s grace is to humbly submit to him, to turn our back on the world and cling to him. “Submission” is a military word. It means giving our allegiance and active service to a superior in order to engage in a battle under his leadership.

The battle we are engaged in is to resist the devil. It is our very act of submitting ourselves to God and clinging to him that brings us under Satan’s attack. Resisting him is not idly wishing our sinful, selfish desires would go away, but standing firm against his evil schemes and actively refusing to give in to his temptations.

The apostle Peter warns us: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). He may be a roaring lion, prowling around for easy prey, but if we put on the full armor of God and take our stand against him, the devil will flee from us.

James couples the promise, “resist the devil, and he will flee from you,” with the parallel promise, “come near to God and he will come near to you.” We come near to God not hoping he will be there, but confident that he is there and is eager and willing to come near to us. When we change our allegiance away from the world and give ourselves wholeheartedly back to the Lord, we find that he is there, eager to welcome us and restore us into a proper relationship with him.

The scriptures make it clear that it is Jesus who brings us near to our Heavenly Father. He is our royal priest who is able also to “save forever those who draw near to God through Him” (Heb 7:24-25). Once we have changed our allegiances and clung to the Lord, we are able to take the next step of repentance.

B. Cleanse ourselves of sinful deeds and thoughts

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:8b)

As we come near to our holy Heavenly Father, the filth and depravity of our sin becomes increasingly evident. We are able to see more clearly the serious and devastating nature of the conflicts and quarrels that arise from our selfish attitude. When James invites us to wash our hands and purify our hearts, he is asking us to deal with our outer life (our actions), as well as our inner life (our heart).

This is the meaning given by the Lord when he calls his people to repentance through the prophet Isaiah:

“wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.
“Come now, let us reason together,”
says the LORD.
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.” (Isaiah 1:16-18)

James invites us to wash our hands and purify our hearts from our sin. We do this in honest confession before the Lord in prayer. As the apostle John said, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). We can be confident in the cleansing we have through the blood of Jesus Christ.

This leads us to our next step of repentance.

C. Grieve over our sin

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. (4:9)

Once we have come home to God and dealt with what is not pleasing to him, then we are then in a place to reflect on the pain we have caused him and the damage we have done to others. “Grieve, mourn and wail” are terms used by the Old Testament prophets to call God’s people to repentance (Joel 2:12). Jesus picks up on this when he says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt 5:4).

Once we see our sin for what it really is we are able to honestly “grieve and mourn” over our selfish actions and attitudes that defile us and demean others. This does not mean that as Christians we are constantly sad and gloomy. To the contrary, we grieve over our sin so that it will bring us to full and honest repentance and ultimately forgiveness from the Lord and joyous exaltation with his Son Jesus Christ. Paul testifies that a heartfelt sorrow for sin is

a mark of true repentance: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret” (2 Cor 7:10).

In summary, James asks us to change our allegiance: to resist the devil and cling to God. Then, once we are home in God’s arms, the cleansing process of our deeds and thoughts can begin. Once we are free from the blinding deception of our sin and see it for what it really is, then we are in a position to reflect and genuinely grieve over it.

Our final step toward repentance may be the most difficult of all.

Wait on God

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (4:10)

To “humble ourselves before the Lord” means to recognize our own spiritual poverty, our desperate need of God’s help, and to submit to his will for our lives.

It is difficult for us to wait upon the Lord and trust in his timing and his way. David Roper tells the story of a man who was on his rooftop fixing the television antenna. He lost his footing, and as he slid off the roof he managed to grab hold of the gutter. Hanging about twenty feet off the ground, he began shouting to his neighbors for help. But there was no one there to help him. Looking up into the sky, he said, “Is there anybody up there who can help me.” A voice came out of the sky, saying, “I can help.” The man responded, “What should I do?” The voice from above said, “Let go. I’ll take care of you. Trust me.” The man looked down at the ground. Surveying the situation from his perspective, then looking up again, he cried out, “Is there anybody else up there who can help me?”

All too often that is the way we pray. We say, “Lord, help me,” but we are not willing to wait upon him for his provision, in his way and in his time. God may give us what we want right away or he may give it to us later or he may not give us the possession or the experience at all, but instead gives us his presence, where we find the satisfaction and joy we are ultimately seeking.

This path to peace, of repentance to exaltation that James lays out is beautifully illustrated in the parable Jesus told of the loving father and his prodigal son. The wayward son, having come to realize the shallow satisfaction of having “freely spent” his father’s inheritance on selfish pleasures, remembers the generous and gracious love of his father. In his poverty and despair, with no hope of cleaning up his act on his own, he chooses to return home. Broken and humble, he begins his journey back: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20) The father quickly replaces his son’s ragged and dirty clothes with his finest robe, and celebrates his return with an extravagant feast, because his son who “was dead is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24).

What a wonderful picture of the way God loves us, welcomes us back home and restores us! It is in his embracing arms and loving presence that we change. God is generous with his grace and forgiveness. When we are in his presence, we find the satisfaction

we crave. He is the only one who can transform our hearts from selfishness to humility.

When our physical, emotional and spiritual needs are evident, our Heavenly Father invites us to go to him in prayer. When we hunger for unconditional love and eternal significance, we find our satisfaction in him alone. When we understand that our life is in the capable hands of our Heavenly Father who loves us and has our best in mind, then we are able to wait on his provision and his timing. We are able to trust him and live in the contentment of that trust. When we do, we are on the path to peace with God and each other.

Last week, I encouraged you to be honest about your relationships with one another (with your spouse, your child, your friend, your co-worker), and to go to each other with gentleness and humility, speaking the truth in love so that there might be reconciliation and peace in our community. Now I encourage you to be honest with yourself and with God. To take a deep look at the condition of your heart and the condition of your relationship with God and go to him in prayer.

These words by Henri Nouwen have been an encouragement to me on offering to the Lord in prayer all that is on my heart and mind:

Our inclination is to reveal to God only what we feel comfortable in sharing. We are often tempted to select carefully the thoughts that we bring into our conversation with God. What makes us so stingy? Maybe we wonder if God can take all that goes on in our minds and hearts. Can God accept our hateful thoughts, our cruel fantasies, and our bizarre dreams? Only in pouring out our story of fear, rejection, hatred, and bitterness can we hope to be healed. The more we dare to show our whole trembling self to God, as did the ancients who prayed the Psalms, the more we will be able to sense that God's love, which is perfect love, casts out our fears, purifies our thoughts, and heals our hatred.¹

Don't hold anything back in your prayer. Give God your whole heart. It may be difficult for you to find words that express your repentance. Don't worry about the words you use; just be honest with God. This is the way King David expressed his repentance in prayer after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba:

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.**

**Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.**

**Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.**

**Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.**

**Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit
from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:1-5,
7, 10-12)**

Heavenly Father, you are our Creator and Redeemer. Thank you for pursuing us with your love and grace, and welcoming us into your presence through your son Jesus Christ. Thank you for your word which cuts deeply into our hearts, exposing our sin and showing us the way toward healing and peace. We confess our unfaithfulness to you, and we ask for your forgiveness. Wash and purify us through the blood of Jesus Christ. We humbly submit ourselves before you. Give us your strength to resist the devil and draw near to you in all that we say and do. In your name we pray. Amen.

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