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James 4:1-6

Ninth Message

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# THE REASON WE RAGE

*SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE*

The New Testament book of James was written by the brother of the Lord Jesus to the Jews of the Diaspora who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Life was extremely hard for these impoverished Jewish Christians as they were being oppressed and mistreated by wealthy landlords. They could hardly be blamed for feeling that life was unfair. On the one hand, they wanted the judgment of God to come quickly on the rich and wealthy; but on the other hand, they were being tempted to cater to their masters so that they might gain materially and thus live more comfortably.

James wrote his letter to inform these brethren about the purpose behind the trials and afflictions which they were suffering. His opening words have become familiar down through the centuries:

**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various kinds of trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 NASB)**

God uses trials to bring about spiritual maturity in Christians— but only if we will let them do their work. While we are in the midst of a trial we are tempted, not by God, but by our own sin, to escape, to seek to be in control, to be self-centered, to envy the prosperity of the rich and famous. The theme of this letter, therefore, is how to understand and respond to the pressures and stresses of life so that God can do his work in us.

According to James, the most essential ingredient to living under stress and affliction is acquiring what he describes as the “wisdom from above.” James is referring to godly character. This wisdom from above is the ingredient that will enable us to respond to pressures and difficulties with grace and purity. Wisdom will make us men and women of influence and significance, no matter the size of our checking account. Wisdom is what will allow us to care for the orphan and the widow, even while we are enduring hardship. Wisdom will allow us to become “doers of the word.” And if we lack wisdom or godly character, James says we must “ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach.” If we ask in faith, says James, wisdom will be given to us.

The trials that come our way, therefore, are given to test us in order to reveal what kind of people we really are on the inside.

If we are to be people of wisdom, however, the kind who will live life with the characteristics of purity, gentleness, mercy, and without hypocrisy, as James outlines in chapter 3, then we must deal with a highly explosive element that we are prone to succumb which can wreak destruction in our lives and our relationships at any time. The land mine that we are referring to is anger.

We live in a world characterized by violence and turmoil. Conflict is part of our everyday existence. On the international level, we only have to look at the strife in Bosnia or Northern Ireland; the hostage crisis in Peru; the conflict between Arabs and Jews in the

Middle East, and the civil war in Rwanda, to see that this is true. On the national level, we note the anger and strife that the abortion issue raises whenever it is discussed. During the recent Presidential campaign, we were embarrassed by the insults exchanged between the candidates. We are dismayed at the incivility of Congress. In our communities, we are continually facing crime and drug problems, strikes by teachers, senseless murders, parents abusing children, children abusing other children. In our homes, we see conflict between husband and wives, parents and children.

And our newspapers record the sad details of much of this. A couple of years ago, I clipped the following article from a newspaper:

Enumclaw, Washington. A man bulldozed his three bedroom, \$85,000 home after his wife filed for divorce, and the destruction apparently was legal because he first took the time to pick up a demolition permit, police said Sunday. . . . She filed for divorce last Monday. “I told him I wanted to keep the house. I guess he didn’t want me to have anything,” she said. “It took him 15 minutes. I had beautiful antiques.”

And from Newark, New Jersey:

A 65-year-old woman was convicted of reckless manslaughter for fatally shooting her husband during a fight over where their television remote control was. She and her husband had been drinking. When they couldn’t find the remote control, her husband demanded to know where it was and shoved her. She got a shotgun to frighten him, she said, and it fired accidentally.

What is the cause of all this conflict? And what can we do about it? In our text today from chapter 4 of James’ letter, we will see that people of wisdom and influence understand and control the rage that seethes up at times, resulting in many of the things we have referred to. Today, we will focus on why we rage. This might seem an unusual text to preach from during the Christmas holidays. Its truth is sobering and unsettling. But perhaps this is the very thing we need to hear as we deal with the family problems, conflicts, and disappointments raised by the holidays.

James begins in chapter 4 by asking the penetrating question:

**What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? (4:1a)**

Remember that he is addressing the members of the Body of Christ. Certain brethren within the church family were in conflict with one another; they were at each other’s throats. The truth that is set out here in these verses, however, applies to any relationship, whether at home, at work, or in the church.

James goes on to answer his own question:

**Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive,**

**because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. (4:1b-3)**

What is the source of conflict? It is our own pleasures. “Pleasures” is the key word in these opening verses. This word describes something that is pleasing to the taste, i.e. the pleasure of the senses. “Pleasures” are sensual desires and appetites that lead to evil, actions that are centered on pleasing self (oftentimes they are sexual in nature). The word “hedonism” comes from the Greek word for pleasures. In philosophy, hedonism is the doctrine which holds that pleasure is the principle good that should be the aim of action. In psychology, hedonism is the theory that a person’s actions always have pleasure as their purpose. Hedonism is pleasure-seeking as a way of life.

James says that these pleasures wage war in our bodies (literally, they do “military service”). We struggle within ourselves; our pleasures are in conflict with the Spirit of God; and the things we pursue are contrary to what is right and good and healthy.

Why are we prone to hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure? One reason is that our senses are aroused by living in a sensual world. We think that if we can taste, feel, touch, see and hear, that we will experience life and happiness. Of course, this is a great deception. The fact is, the pursuit of pleasure never satisfies the deep cravings of our souls. Hedonism can be entertaining and satisfying for awhile, there can be a temporary quenching of our thirst, but pursuing pleasure merely gives way to desires and longings that become more acute and perverse.

In the parable of the sower, it was pleasures that choked off the life of the good seed and caused it to die. In Titus 3:3, the apostle Paul says that pleasures enslave us. Here in James, the author says that pursuing pleasures is the source of conflict. We pursue them because we are deceived into thinking they will produce life and joy. But God says that the pursuit of pleasure will yield conflict, slavery, and death.

On another level, we pursue pleasure to numb the deep pain of our souls which is revealed through suffering. And remember that this is the context of the letter of James—how the Christian should respond to trials and afflictions. The difficult things of life unmask us; they expose our hurts and weaknesses, the feeling of not being loved, of not being accepted. In the midst of suffering, we reach out for life-preservers. We pursue pleasure to numb the pain, and we become addicted to sensual pleasures. We surround ourselves with possessions that carry the promise of security. We become dependent on people to meet our expectations. If they fail, of course, they become the objects of our wrath. We want to avoid the hard and painful lessons of affliction, trial, and suffering, and yet, ironically, James says that it is these very things that yield true joy and peace. It is trials that produce spiritual character.

The source of conflict and tension is our own insistence on satisfying the deep cravings of our souls. Conflicts arise when we cannot get what we want, when we are blocked from our pursuit.

James lays out some typical scenarios:

*“You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.”* “Murder” here is not literal. The word describes the intensity of our desires. We hate, so we wish that someone did not exist. We sabotage someone who won’t give us what we want.

*“You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.”* Other people seem to possess what we want—at least it looks that way. This

strikes us as unfair, so we become jealous. Soon, jealousy turns to hatred, and so we declare war on some unsuspecting person.

*“You do not have because you do not ask.”* We become self-absorbed and self-directed, and we forget about prayer. Our last resort when we desperately pursue our pleasures and desires is to talk to God. But if we do not want to involve God, God will not get involved.

*“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.”* We lay out our agenda, and expect God to comply to our desires. We “pray,” asking things like, “God, give me a beautiful house and I will use it for your purposes.” But God will not answer these prayers because our motives are wrong. We want to acquire things for our own pleasure.

The pressures and trials of life strip us bare, exposing our needy hearts. Our sensual appetites and carnal cravings are aroused by things that promise to numb the pain of our struggles. These pleasures wage a war within us, and our appetite increases. We reach out for the pleasure that will drug us into enjoyment, but we find the way blocked. As a result, we become obsessed. We try harder, but we are never satisfied. We even pray, but we pray selfishly, hoping that God will grant our wish so that we will not be exposed. Finally, we explode in anger. At times, we manifest our anger in seemingly insignificant ways, like arguing. At other times, the explosion destroys everything in sight in a Mount St. Helen-like eruption.

The source of conflict and tension is our own desire for pleasure, our insistence on satisfying the deep cravings of our souls. When we are denied, we find ourselves conflicted and tense. The problem is not people. It is not our bosses, our parents, spouses, neighbors or children. The problem is ourselves, our desire to be pleased and satisfied, and our unwillingness to submit to what appears to be unjust affliction and suffering.

We learn early in life to respond in this way. Put a couple of children together in a room with one toy and watch how fast conflict will develop. When a child doesn’t get what he wants from his parents, he throws a tantrum. If the parent relents, then the child learns that this kind of behavior will yield results.

As we grow older, we become more sophisticated at this, but the same dynamics are involved. For example, during the Christmas season, we deeply desire the feeling of being loved. But we are disappointed. We feel let down, and we vow to not talk with a certain family member. How many of us are angry because we didn’t get what we wanted for Christmas? A husband has a difficult day at work and his sense of adequacy is at an all-time low. He comes home, seeking affection from his wife. He isn’t even aware of his motives, but his hope is that the love of his wife will numb the pain he feels. When she does not respond in the way he wants, an argument begins over something trivial. If it is not checked, soon there is all-out conflict.

We become filled with rage because life is not going the way we want. We get mad if we are stuck in traffic. We get mad at our children because they are messy and fail to do what they are told. We become enraged because we don’t get the promotion we feel we deserve. We carry rage for years, simply because something went wrong and we have never accepted it.

Some people become angry when they can’t impose order. I love to plan and schedule. When I can’t get order, I become frustrated. I remember once sitting in our back yard with my family, trying to plan our summer road trip to Colorado, but no one would pay attention. Rather than planning our trip, my wife and children wanted

to have a food fight. The more foolish they acted, the madder I got. Finally, I stomped off in a rage, trying to make them feel guilty. They didn't, of course.

The reason we fight, the reason we rage is because we are prevented from experiencing the self-seeking pleasures that promise, vainly, to give us joy and life or the necessary control that will eliminate confusion. Simply put, we just don't get what we want, whether it is material goods, love, acceptance, sex, or order. No matter what it is, we make war when we cannot satisfy our desires.

Next, James goes on to say that there is a deeper problem that is manifested by conflict, tension, and anger. And that deeper issue is really spiritual in nature: it is the problem of idolatry and pride. Verses 4-6:

**You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (4:4-6)**

When we pursue our own pleasures we are choosing between God and the world, choosing friendship with the world rather than friendship with God, choosing to put ourselves, not God, at the center of everything. Paul makes this contrast in 2 Timothy 3 when he talks about men being "lovers of self, lovers of money, . . . lovers of pleasure [the same word, hedonism] rather than lovers of God."

The first term that James applies to this deeper problem is spiritual adultery. He refers to this group of believers as "adulteresses." The term is feminine, since it applies to the church. These believers were choosing to have an affair with the world. In the context of the letter, these struggling Christians were tempted to look upon the fatness of the rich and give them preferential treatment. They wanted to make friends with them, thinking that if they could have what the rich had, then they would be satisfied and protected from the harsh realities of life. But this only led to internal strife and contention within the church, so that Christians began to fight over honored positions such as "teacher."

When we are seeking our own desires we are choosing friendship with the world over friendship with God. When we pursue our pleasures as the source of joy and life we are trying to get the world to love us, to satisfy us, to fulfill us. James says that this is a spiritual problem: We are pushing God out of our hearts. The source of conflict is rooted in our own pride, our propensity to want to be the center of the universe, to become like God—to become our own god, to control our lives, to save ourselves from insecurity and mystery. When we see anger surface, like an iceberg, there is probably a much larger mass of pride lying hidden beneath the surface of revealed sin.

The result of our adultery and pride is that God opposes us. In fact, friendship with the world results in hostility toward God. There are only two camps; we are in one or the other. We can't maintain two lovers. When we seek our own pleasures, God becomes our enemy because he opposes the proud. And if God opposes us, then we will definitely not get what we want. This is a fact of life, isn't it? Have you ever found that the more you tried to get something or make something happen, the more obstacles you ran into and the more frustrated and angry you became? That is because it is God whom you are up against.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man but enmity to God. In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

The apostle John warned: "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

God becomes an enemy to us because he jealousy desires the Spirit that dwells in us. God is a jealous lover. This image is portrayed throughout Israel's history. God wants to be Lord of our lives. He wants an intimate, one-flesh, marriage relationship with us. He wants to bless us. But he cannot give to us as long as pride, arrogance and selfish desires stand in the way. Therefore, he must oppose us in order to break our pride and self-will.

The irony is that God gives the afflicted a much greater grace. He is "opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble." The quotation in verse 6 is from Proverbs 3:34: "Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted." The person who is humble is the one who is afflicted, who is brought low by trials and suffering. But, as James says in chapter 1, let the humble brother "glory in his high position," because it is to this one that God can pour out his grace.

This is a strange paradox. Everything that we desire, everything that we try to get from the world, only God alone can give to us. His grace is better than anything we can get on our own. He leads us beside quiet waters. He gives us rest in green pastures. He feeds our souls. He fills our cup with gladness. The psalmist said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Henri Nouwen writes: "The deep truth is that our human suffering need not be an obstacle to the joy and peace we so desire, but can become, instead, the means to it."

But pride works contrary to this process. Pride opposes affliction and humility. If we fight against our afflictions and seek the favor of the world, God opposes us. But if we humble ourselves, acknowledge our poverty, and seek God, then we can receive his grace. God opposes us only because he is jealous for us and longs to bless us. It is in our brokenness that we receive the greatest gifts.

This was the testimony of many who shared their poems of brokenness with us a couple of weeks ago. In the midst of their deepest trials they had found God and his grace. The very things they feared they would not possess in life were the things that God had in store for them all along. That is because "God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble."

Trials and afflictions open up our wounded hearts. In response, we grasp for pleasures to numb the pain, to hide the hurt, to gain the love and acceptance that we so desperately long for; then we become angry when our efforts are unsuccessful. The anger that we manifest only reveals to us the depth of our pain and the deep needs of our souls. The question to ask when someone explodes is not, "Why are you so mad?" but, "What hurts so badly?" The deeper problem is that we are seeking the answer to our hurts through our sensual desires. We are trying to find love, affection and approval by being

friends with the world. When this happens, we empower people and circumstances to destroy us. James says that this is spiritual adultery. And not only that, it is emotional suicide. As the Bride of Christ, we are leaving the One who wants to pour out his love upon us in an effort to find it somewhere else. Christ longs to be a husband to us. He longs to care for us. He is jealous for our affections.

The real issue, of course, is, do we believe this? Do we believe that God can bestow upon us a greater grace? Is he big enough to meet all our needs in Christ Jesus? If we do not believe that, we will continue to be angry people who explode when we do not get what we want. We will continue to try and befriend the world, and God will oppose us. We will go through life with a chip on our shoulder, a burr in our saddle, a scowl on our face. Let us humble ourselves before God so that his marvelous grace can fill our souls. Then we will be less contentious, less quarrelsome. We will be sweeter and easier to live with, and our concern will be for the needs of others, not our own selfish desires.

Humility is the spiritual answer to the conflicts and quarrels that arise among us as a result of our own pursuits.

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