

The Book of James

Lesson 8: Friendship with the World -- James 4:1-10

James has a way of asking questions that go straight past the symptom to the disease. He looks at the quarrels and conflicts among the believers, the fighting, the friction, the cold wars in the church, and he asks, where do they come from? We would answer with the usual list: that person, that decision, that offense, that misunderstanding. James gives a different answer, and it is uncomfortably close to home. They come from your passions, he says, from the desires that are at war within you. The battles out there start with a battle in here.

You want and do not have, so you fight. You covet and cannot get, so you quarrel. James traces our conflicts back to a heart that is grasping for something it thinks it must have. And then he exposes the spiritual root beneath even our prayerlessness and our misfired prayers: you do not have because you do not ask, and when you do ask, you ask wrongly, to spend it on your own pleasures. Underneath the friction is a heart trying to satisfy itself on its own terms.

Then James says the hardest thing in the passage. He calls them adulterers. Friendship with the world, he says, is enmity with God; whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. That is covenant language, the language of a marriage betrayed. To give our deepest loyalty and affection to the world's values while claiming to belong to God is not a small inconsistency. It is spiritual unfaithfulness to the One who jealously yearns for our whole heart.

But this is not a passage that leaves us crushed in the dust. It bends down to lift us up. God gives more grace, James says, and he quotes the promise that God gives grace to the humble. Then come ten rapid commands that are really one invitation: submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee, draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. So we come to this passage to find the true source of our conflicts, to be honest about our divided loyalty, and to discover a God who resists the proud but pours out more grace on all who will humbly come home.

Group Discussion: James says our outward conflicts come from desires battling within us. Without naming names, where have you seen a conflict that looked like it was about one thing but was really about a craving or fear underneath? What does that reveal?

Personal Reflection: What is something you currently want so much that, when you do not get it, it spills out as frustration, anxiety, or conflict? What is that desire telling you about where your heart is seeking life?

Read James 4:1-10

Study Questions

1. James asks, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (vv. 1-2). What is James teaching about the true source of our conflicts, and why is it significant that he locates it in our own desires rather than in other people?
2. Think of a recent conflict in your life. If you trace it honestly to its root, what desire of your own, to be right, to be in control, to be comfortable, to be respected, was driving it?
3. James says, "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (vv. 2-3). What does this teach about prayer, both the failure to pray and the problem of self-centered prayer?
4. Examine your own prayers. Where do you simply fail to ask God at all, and where do you ask mainly for what would serve your own comfort or pleasure? How might God be inviting you to pray differently?
5. James warns, "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" (v. 4). Why does James use the language of adultery, and what does it mean that friendship with the world is enmity with God?
6. Where have you been trying to be a friend of both God and the world, holding God's hand while keeping your heart's loyalty with the world's values? What would undivided loyalty to God require of you?
7. James says God "yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us," but "he gives more grace," for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (vv. 5-6). What does this teach about God's jealous love, the abundance of His grace, and why pride and humility are so decisive in our relationship with Him?
8. Where is pride keeping you from receiving the grace God is ready to give, perhaps in an area where you have refused to admit need, ask for help, or repent? What would humbling yourself there look like?
9. James gives a series of commands: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (vv. 7-10). What do these commands teach about the way back to God, the reality of spiritual conflict, and the promise attached to genuine repentance and humility?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James exposes our divided hearts and then calls us home to a God who gives more grace to the humble. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to submit, draw near, and humble yourself before Him this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 John 2:15-17, do not love the world or the things in the world; Matthew 6:24, no one can serve two masters; Romans 8:5-8, the mind set on the flesh versus

the Spirit; Psalm 51:1-17, a broken and contrite heart God will not despise; 1 Peter 5:5-9, God gives grace to the humble; resist the devil; Luke 18:9-14, the tax collector who humbled himself went home justified.