

He Yearns Jealously

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Date: 23 March 2014

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- [0 : 00] Well, welcome back to our series on the book of James, this wonderful letter. And if you'll turn to page 1012 and follow along, that would be a great help.
- I've been very blessed by this sermon series in James to be hearing David preach on this and have found that God really works on my heart and on my mind.
- God is being read and as he is preached. And I know that is because when we're hearing James, we're hearing wisdom that is from above.
- We're hearing the wisdom from heaven. And that is why these are words that are life-changing. They are words that heal us because James is concerned with the healing of our souls.
- He has told us that in chapter 1. He is interested in the healing of our relationships, our relationship with God, because through that, our relationships with everyone else is healed.
- [1 : 12] And James is thinking about wholeness as he's going through this great letter. And that's why I think it's good to think of James as a very, very good doctor.
- And that's what I think of when I look at this particular Bible reading that we heard. He is a very good doctor. You see it throughout, he being a doctor of our souls throughout the letter of James.
- He has a terrific bedside manner, doesn't he? He loves his church, and so he calls the church his beloved brothers and sisters over and over and over again.
- There is a warmth about him. He approaches us warmly. But not only that, he is a very, very fine diagnostician.
- He's very clear. He's thorough. He's searching. And he's 100% accurate when he diagnoses sin in our hearts, the thing that actually disrupts the relationship that we have with God and with each other.
- [2 : 18] He goes to the very heart of the matter as he diagnoses, and that is usually our very own hearts. And so he describes our suffering.
- He describes our doubts, our temptations, our self-deception, our anger, our faith, our greed, the way that we speak to one another, our pride and our gossip, and our divided loyalties.
- He names that sin that lies in our hearts, and we really can't escape it. He's very clear about it. And so when he gives us a diagnosis, he gives it to us really straight.
- He does not sugarcoat it. He doesn't try to make it more acceptable to us by making it something less than what it really is. And this means that James can make us very uncomfortable.
- But as we hear him, it is a discomfort that leads to wholeness and to health. And that's why he's a good doctor. And he doesn't just stop at the diagnosis.
- [3 : 24] He always has a remedy for every spiritual sickness. And in that remedy is a deep, profound healing for us as a community, for us individually as well.

And that's because God's words in this letter are words of power, words that transform us. So if you're interested in healing your relationship, interested in seeing the wholeness of the church, this is a letter to read over and over again.

Now there's one final thing, and I think this is part of the discomfort of James, is that he gives prescriptions to us, as any good doctor would do. But unlike many doctors' handwriting, James is completely legible.

He is very clear in what he is writing and understandable. And you know, unlike that little writing that you see on the medicine bottles and containers that I'm having a harder and harder time reading, the eyes of our hearts can see very clearly what James is saying to us, what he is prescribing.

And the challenge is that it is a call to action, and our sinful nature rebels against it. We kind of wish we couldn't read it in some cases.

[4 : 47] But keep in mind that, as Augustine said, God gives what he commands. So we're going to see about God's grace, how God gives to us his grace to do what he commands.

And that's why that's on the front of the bulletin. You all get rockets if you actually read that. But this is what to keep in mind as we go through chapter 4, 1 through 12.

God gives what he commands in this prescription. So let's look at 1 through 12. Here, James outlines a diagnosis, a remedy for healing, and a prescription.

Those three things. And you can sort of organize this passage around that. Through it, God brings wholeness to every generation with great effect.

So let's look. Verses 1 through 3. Here's the diagnosis. He says there's quarrels and there's fights, which are the very opposite of the peace that wisdom brings that we heard about last week.

[5 : 52] And why is that? Well, you can see it at the end of verse 1. It is because of the passions that are at war within you. And by passions, he means self-indulgent pleasures, our selfish hearts.

And there is a war within yourself and within the community. And it is because people are living with selfish interests in the same place. And there will always be conflict when that is the case.

And this is the root of sin of selfish pride rearing its ugly head. It's powerful because even after Jesus has redeemed us, has released us from the power of sin, we still struggle with that selfish pride.

And the church throughout its history in every generation has been riddled with these conflicts to different degrees. And every single Christian congregation has struggled with those quarrels, those struggles, those wars.

Our own church has experienced it as well. If we look at our history, quite a number of years ago, I was invited to a church to preach there.

[7 : 06] And they were going through the letter of James as well in a sermon series. And I preached on this passage. At the end of the service, the rector of the church stood up and he asked forgiveness of the whole congregation.

And he confessed that he had, out of his selfish pride, caused, been a big part of a struggle that they had had in their church.

Now it's only God's grace that he could do that. It was quite a courageous thing to do. It was God's grace. And I believe it was James working through his diagnosis in this man's life.

And Dr. James goes a little bit further here. He describes that sickness of the soul in verse 2. He says, what happens is you desire and you do not have.

And he said, that's a trajectory that's so serious that it can lead to murder. In fact, that is what always leads to murder in the end. He says, you covet and you cannot obtain.

[8 : 11] Not only that, but you stop asking. You stop asking God in your prayers depending upon him so you don't receive from him. And when you do ask, he says, you don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your own passions.

In other words, this pride, this self-interest is what guides you instead of desiring what God wants in your prayers. It's not true that God answers prayer all the time.

God answers the prayers of people whose hearts have been changed, who have been redeemed, who want what God wants. You see, pride twists that.

And so we ask for what is just guided by our passions. It's a sobering diagnosis of the sin of pride. And if you're like me, you hear it and you know that some of it at least applies to you.

And certainly, I knew that as I was preparing this as well. And so James says, your thinking has become identical to that of the world.

[9 : 18] A world that thinks and lives as though it can do without God. And so you desire power and prestige and possessions and pleasure.

In other words, our own agenda. You are committed to having the things of this world. And so there's this deep stress because you must have what the world offers.

And no peace can come from this. Only dissensions, Dr. James says. And then he sums up his diagnosis with a really shocking thing in verse 4.

And it is a summary. He says, he calls his beloved brothers and sisters, you adulterous people. It's really serious. Can you imagine what people felt like when they heard this letter read out to them in their churches?

He's been calling them beloved brothers and sisters. And suddenly here, he says, you adulterous people. You know, maybe they were surprised. Maybe they were angry. Maybe shocked or resentful.

[10 : 22] Or perhaps they were convicted because he is telling them that they have forsaken their first love and they have fallen in love with something else.

It's a terrible charge to make because the church is known as the bride of Christ. And we can't see it here, but in the original, James calls them an adulteress.

In other words, the bride who has been unfaithful. And he's saying to each church, you are the bride that has forsaken Jesus. You have gone after another lover.

And that's not a new situation. In the Old Testament, Hebrew people, when they forsook their God, God called them his unfaithful wife.

But instead of loving idols and following after them, James, the churches of James' time were loving the world.

[11 : 22] They were loving the world. And this is our issue as well in the West today. It's in verse 4 at the end. He says, Do you not know, James says, that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

And therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Now, when James is saying friendship with the world, he's not talking about loving the world and seeking to bless the world.

In fact, it's good for us to humbly thank God as we do in the Thanksgiving service in the book of Common Prayer, to thank God for all that is beautiful in creation and in the lives of people.

It is right to love the world in that way. But friendship of the world that James is talking about is coveting the world and its way of thinking.

It's really about shrinking from its criticism, of really desiring and wanting to have his praise, really craving that praise.

[12 : 29] We take on its values and follow on with what is acceptable and what is fashionable. The world also says to us, don't take your faith too seriously.

And we agree. It's very easy. And in fact, it's our default to really wish, as it says here, to be friends with the world. Because you can swim with the stream and not against it.

But James throws cold, cold water on that idea. He says, you can't both love Jesus and be friends with the world. God calls that double-mindedness.

It is spiritual adultery. And you are actually making yourself to be an enemy of God, James says really clearly. And that diagnosis of double-mindedness is so pervasive in this letter.

It's really an important thing for us to keep attention to. One of the things I think of when I was thinking of double-mindedness this week was an incident in my life quite a few years ago.

[13 : 37] I used to go canoeing with my family in the wilderness in northern Ontario. And we would go to week or two long canoe trips. And we would do lots of portages between lakes.

We'd carry our canoe and our supplies to the next lake. And we would pride ourselves in getting faster and faster, especially my brother and I. Well, one day I decided that we'd do the portage and at the end of it put the canoe down and not tie the canoe up.

And I put it down in the water next to a rock ledge. And I had my pack. And I stepped down into the canoe, keeping one foot on the rock and one on the canoe.

Now, I don't know if you've ever done that before, but there's a time when you are suddenly sensing that gradually the canoe is moving further away from the rock. And there comes a time when you realize that the law of physics are actually working against you.

Has anyone ever experienced this before? Nobody. Okay. And in this experience that I had, things started going in slow motion.

[14 : 48] I could see my family all over there watching what I was doing. and I could feel my legs stretching further and further apart. One on the rock, one in the canoe.

And at some point you realize, I cannot do the splits. I physically cannot do that. I'm going to have to give in. And down I went with a great splash hanging on to the canoe.

and I'm sorry to say that my family were completely unsympathetic to my plight. In fact, they couldn't stop laughing. And I hear about it now over and over again.

There's this scene of me walking, soaking wet out of the lake and them having a great time watching this. And I think this is exactly what happens when Christians want to be friends of the world and lovers of God at the same time.

You simply cannot do both. You will find that you cannot stand on the rock. It's impossible. You get left hanging on to the values of this world and floundering spiritually.

[16 : 02] So you see, this is the mire that we get ourselves into by our pride. It's very serious. It's like quicksand that will suck us out of the place of real life with God.

It threatens the unity that we have with God. And it's James' grim spiritual diagnosis. How have you, how has our church been unfaithful to our great lover who is God, our Lord?

That's the diagnosis. But right after that diagnosis comes the remedy. And we thank God for this. Look at verse 6. There are five beautiful words that heal us.

And it's this. But God gives more grace. Isn't that marvelous? After hearing how serious this sin is that we are mired in, he says, God gives more grace.

And there probably should be an exclamation point after this. Because in the midst of being stuck in sinful pride and worldliness, the grace of God operates with power to bring you back right in the midst of our sin.

[17 : 13] You know, some people say the gospel is not present in James because it's not actually named. But James actually glories in the gospel. He knows all about grace.

It permeates this whole book. And in verse 5, if you just jump back to one verse, you see God's grace operating in our unfaithfulness.

It says, God yearns jealously for us even as we seek friendship with the world. God yearns jealously for us.

That is grace. That is a good jealousy that says, even when we wander away from him, he is working powerfully to bring us back, to call us back to himself.

And that grace, I believe, is perfectly described in Romans 5.10 where it says, for while we were enemies of God, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.

[18 : 12] We were reconciled while we were enemies. And in Jesus, God's grace seeks us out even when we are far away. It works powerfully to unite our hearts to God, to be single-minded in our love for him, to reconcile us to him.

This is grace deeper and more powerful than any sin that entangles us. Why would God reconcile himself to enemies? It is because he yearns jealously for us.

There is a healing love about this that transforms the way we relate to our family and our church and our neighbor. That's grace. Now, he goes from the remedy of grace to the prescription.

And if you want to name the prescription in one word, it is humility. Humility is the prescription. And that's why as we go on there in verse 6, it says, God opposes the proud.

You know, every bit as much as gravity was opposing me trying to be in two places at one time. God opposes the proud, our prideful sin.

[19 : 24] But he gives grace to the humble. So you see, humility is the prescription. Think of the very nature of good jealousy. What is the first and necessary action you would require of an unfaithful spouse?

The first thing you would require is that you give up. That person would give up their lover. And so when God speaks of his gracious jealousy for you here, he is requiring you to give up friendship with the world.

He is requiring you to give up selfish pride and instead to covet God, to love God with all your heart, to find in him alone all of the blessings that you need or could ever desire, the blessings found in Jesus.

And this is what repentance is. And it takes humility to do this. It's not easy. But as we said, God gives what he requires.

God gives to us what he requires. And I think the season of Lent is a fantastic help to us in doing this because it is a humbling season. It is a season when we examine ourselves, we read the Bible, we pray to detect the sin and unfaithfulness that we need to give up so that we can turn our affections, our love, our commitment to God in what we think and what we say and what we do.

[20 : 54] And wonderfully, you know, as we close this passage, James spells out that humility in his directions on how to receive grace. And these are really helpful, very practical.

He tells us how we actively engage with the powerful medicine of grace. And James envisions that we take this medicine together. it's in verses 7 through 10.

He says five things, five commands really quickly. He says, first of all, submit yourself. Submit yourself to God. And that's in verse 7.

And what he's saying is to acknowledge God's authority over you very, very simply. It is the foundation of humility. And when we live in this way, when we live as a community that says that God is in charge, that whatever our vision is, whatever it is God wants us to do, we will look to him.

We will depend upon him, knowing that he alone is our Lord and the head of our church. We are submitting ourselves together to God's rule. And it makes it easier for us to submit to God in our personal lives, in all the aspects of our life.

[22 : 13] And then secondly, God calls us in this remedy to resist the devil. This is part of the prescription. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

It's a marvelous command because he's calling us to start to fight again. You know, every time we backslide away from God, we actually stop fighting against sin, the world, the devil.

It's the first sign is that we begin to negotiate with sin and we don't fight it. We give up. And he is saying, James is saying to us to help each other to fight as we resist temptation together.

Fight the devil in this way. I remember as a single person when I was leading the evening service, one of the things I found very, very helpful as far as being faithful in my sexuality was knowing that there were other men in my situation who were being faithful to God in the way that they related to women and what they did with their sexuality as well.

To know that others were resisting and being faithful in that way was a tremendous help in resisting the devil. When I see people no longer talking evil about others, which is what's mentioned in verses 11 and 12, I am tremendously encouraged not to speak evil about others myself.

[23 : 44] It is an incredible strength to see people talk about others in the church in ways that are up-building. To say good things about another person behind their back is a complete switch.

To see that influences us. It resists that temptation to gossip and to tear down. Bridling the tongue happens much easier when we see others doing it in the church.

There's a wonderful promise here too that God's grace is so powerful that as we resist Satan, Satan recognizes that God's grace overcomes him, overcomes temptation.

And that's God's promise. He will flee. And then thirdly, this part of humility is to draw near to God.

It's a beautiful verse, draw near to God. And this takes place in the way that we live our lives. It takes place in our prayer. We help each other to pray every time we gather together.

[24 : 48] When we pray the liturgy together, we are encouraging each other to come before God, to draw near to Him. When we have prayer teams during the communion service, we are encouraging each other to draw near to God.

When we have keeping company with God, it is a time when we draw near to Him. We are praying about how we will live that is a life that is lived in reference to the closeness of God.

It's a call here to get on our knees, to draw near to God in humility. And then finally, or fourthly, God says through James to cleanse your hands and to purify your hearts.

Now very simply, that means to put that which was wrong in your life right again. This is the real action of repentance. It's talking about making your heart single, single-minded, single-minded in our love for God.

It's not an easy thing to do. That's why that quote from Augustine is so important. God gives to us what He requires. But it's something that we have to do in the attitude of our hearts and in what we do with our lives to make things right and acceptable to God who we are living for.

[26 : 15] And then finally, there is this kind of shocking part of the prescription. It says, Be wretched, mourn, and weep. And the way that He puts it is in verse 9, Be wretched and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Now that's serious stuff. It says, Be deadly serious about sin. There are times in our life when it is right to weep.

That's part of the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who mourn. And it's saying to stop being lighthearted and frivolous about sin. When we as a community take sin seriously, we deeply strengthen our humility.

And that's why when we do the confession of sin together, it is an incredibly important act that we are doing in our confession. You heard this morning when we prayed, we prayed that God would help us who are miserable offenders is the way that we put it.

Miserable offenders. And that is really a line that says that we are mourning for our sins. And I think we help each other to mourn our sins as we hear that in one another in that prayer.

[27 : 43] I think it helps us to deal with sin ruthlessly when we pray that prayer together as a community. And so here's James' prescription for us.

When we receive God's grace with active humility, God exalts us. God heals us. Our strength as a church is only through our humble dependence upon God.

It is the strength of our life and our service for Him. It's not through education or through status or through how much we have served God that we have strength.

It is through a period of intense humbling that we see ourselves as God sees us and we allow God to do a humbling work so He can exalt us.

So He can raise us up and really use us in powerful ways to bless one another and to bless the world around us. But the key is humility.

[28 : 46] And in this way we reflect Jesus Christ who Himself gave Himself up, humbled Himself, became a man so that He would die for our sins and be exalted to the right hand of the Father.

Dr. James knows this is the wholeness that comes as sickness and pride is detected, as the remedy of grace is made known and as the prescription of humility is followed.

He will exalt us. He will use us in powerful ways. And I ask that you would pray with me. There's a wonderful prayer. If you turn onto page 194 of the prayer book, there is a great prayer that describes this passage.

And there may be a prayer book that's near you. If there is, you can grab it. And I think we'll say this prayer together. And then you can keep it open as we hear a musical reflection following what we've heard.

You can think about this prayer. Page 194 at the bottom. And in it you see the diagnosis. You see the remedy.

[30 : 01] And you see the prescription as well. Let's say this together. When it says sinful men, it's actually talking about sinful people. And together we say, O almighty God, who alone canst order their unruly wills and affections of sinful men, grant unto thy people that they may love the thing which thou commandest and desire that which thou dost promise, that so among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.