

James 4:1-10

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Preachers: Adriaan Neele, Chris Matthews

- [0:00] My name is Chris Matthews. I don't know that I've met all of you. My wife and I have been here for about a year in New Haven and been at Trinity pretty much since week one, enjoying the fellowship here in the family of God. And it's just a great privilege and joy to open God's Word with you tonight. We've been continuing through a series in James. So if you have your Bible, you can open to James chapter 4. Just a little review on the book of James. James is a letter, much like the letters that Paul wrote. And it was written probably first of all the books that we have in the New Testament. Most scholars agree that it was probably written within 10 to 20 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Unlike Paul's letters, which were mainly written to Gentiles and churches that he planted, James, who was the half-brother of Jesus, was a pretty upstanding, high position of authority figure in the church in Jerusalem. And he was writing to a group of Christians in the diaspora, which was just the Jews that were scattered around the Roman Empire and were no longer living in Israel. So we don't know a lot about this community of Jewish believers, but we do know that James has kind of a central concern. Now the book of James, Ian has pointed out in several of these sermons that it reads more like a sermon than a letter in a lot of ways. And part of that is it's filled with practical wisdom and encouragement and really a lot of practical instruction about the implications of one's faith being lived out in your life. And the primary concern of James from really the start all the way through is to deal with what I would call a confident hypocrisy as a Christian. So those that would live a life claiming to believe in Jesus Christ, yet testifying by their lack of endurance and suffering or their lack of obedience to Christ or their lack of dependence upon God that their faith is actually not genuine. And so in that way, he is a lot more like Jesus Christ, who when he was preaching, often was speaking with Pharisees who considered themselves the people of God and yet were being hypocritical in the way that they were living their life. So for that reason, James, more than any other writer, really reinforces the teaching of Jesus Christ, specifically the Sermon on the Mount. And so you'll see those themes all through James, where he's speaking very much like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, talking about the true nature of those that belong to the kingdom of God.
- So nowhere is this concern, this primary concern of confident hypocrisy, people who are very confident that they're believers in faith, but their lives do not reflect it, nowhere is that clearer than in the passage we're looking at today. It's really the emotional crescendo of the entire book, and we'll talk about why that is. So if you have your Bible there, we'll start reading in James 4, verse 1, and we'll read through verse 10.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. 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. 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. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us, but he gives more grace. Therefore, it is said, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. 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. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for how it shapes us and guides us. We thank you for how it convicts and encourages. We ask right now for your spirit to come and fall upon this place for you to illuminate our understanding of these words by your presence within us. I ask that you guard my tongue from error, and that you help us to seek out your truth and leave forever changed. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

[5:08] Amen. So, before we get into this passage, which is really, starts out talking about Christians fighting, I want to go back a little bit and look at the last part of chapter 3, which really is the basis of what leads James to bring this subject up. So, at the end of chapter 3, in verses 13 through 18, James contrasts two kinds of wisdom, and he tells the Jewish people that he's writing to, the Jewish Christians, that they should walk in the meekness of wisdom. And to contrast that, he says, don't walk in bitter ambition or in selfish ambition and bitter jealousy. And that's the kind of wisdom that is earthly and not the kind of wisdom that comes from above. So, he has these two kinds of wisdoms that he's contrasting. And in general, wisdom is just knowledge applied, or I have a right understanding about something, and I have a right judgment of how to act in accordance with that.

And so, he's talking about two different ways of applying knowledge to act. And one, the earthly wisdom is motivated by a self-seeking ambition and a discontentment that comes from looking at others and feeling like you don't have what you need to be satisfied. Whereas, the wisdom that comes from above is devoid of that. Matter of fact, the first way he describes it is the meekness of wisdom.

And meekness is a term that means completely absent of a self-seeking motivation, right? I'm not self-seeking anymore. I long for the good of others. I have a different motivation in what I do.

And then he talks about other characteristics that proceed from the wisdom from above, and that ends with this discussion of a harvest of righteousness sown in peace by peacemakers, okay? So, you have these words, meekness and peacemakers that he brings up. So, that might remind you of another passage of scripture called the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Those are two of the Beatitudes where Jesus is describing what are the people like who truly belong to the kingdom of God. And the second Beatitude is, blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. And I think it's the sixth one is, blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God. And so, two of these are tied here. So, what James is saying in the last part of chapter 3 is not simply, well, there's a wiser way to go. You could live this way, but there's a better way. No, he's contrasting what it's like to be a son of God, what it's like to be a member of the kingdom, and what it's like to live not like a member of the kingdom. So, this is a very serious contrast. And to be a member of the kingdom means to be a meek person, and it means to be a peacemaker. So, that is what leads him to ask this question, okay? It's an inevitable question. If those who are part of the kingdom are peacemakers, then this inevitable question arises, well, what could cause peacemakers to fight against each other?

And that's the question that he starts with, is what's the root cause of the quarrels and the fights that happen among you? And before we look at the answer to that question, think of the weightiness of that question. Think of the tragic irony of fighting peacemakers, two peacemakers that are fighting. It's devastating. It means that something that's causing that is so tragic or so important to those people that they're willing to deny the very part of their identity as peacemakers. So, to be a member of the kingdom of God, to be a son of God, is to be a peacemaker. And so, how tragic is it when you see a Christian husband and a Christian wife with an impassable difference, or when you see a church that splits, or when you see in church history Christians that war against other Christians over differences in theology? It's just not supposed to happen. We're supposed to be by our very nature. Those that are called sons of God are peacemakers. So, this question should bring so much brokenness and sorrow in our hearts, this tragic irony of peacemakers that are at each other's throats. Imagine that there was a couple of people who were at a complete impasse at trying to solve their problems. And so, they go to a firm to seek out a mediator, and they open the door of the firm, and a couple of the mediators are having a fistfight when they open the door. That's the kind of irony that's here, okay? He's saying, he's reminding us back to the Beatitudes, the nature of those who belong to the kingdom of God are. They don't seek their own self-interest, and they don't seek anything but peace. And yet, what causes you to fight? So, you know, I confess that when I get in an argument with my wife, or I have another brother or sister in Christ who rubs me the wrong way, I'm not nearly as broken as I should be of the mockery it makes of my identity in Christ to have animosity between us, okay? So, that's what leads him to ask this question. And so, before we look at the answer he provides,

[10:57] I want you to think a little bit about how you would answer the question if someone asks you. So, think about someone that you have trouble getting along with that's another believer. Maybe it's a friend, maybe it's a sibling, maybe it's your parents, maybe it's a co-worker, maybe it's your spouse that sometimes or frequently you are entering into quarrels with. If somebody were to ask you about the last fight that you were in, what caused that fight? What was the root cause? Why did that happen?

How do you think you would answer? If it was me, I would most likely start talking about the circumstances that led to it, the external circumstances. What we were talking about, I might even get all the way down to a blow-by-blow kind of he said, she said, well then she said this, and then I got upset, and the cause would be all about that. It would totally be about how I was wounded and how therefore I responded and then how that wounded them and so on and so forth.

And so, when James asks this question, you're almost expecting that there's going to be some big external cause. Like, I'll tell you what, some of you deny Christ and some of you don't. You know, he's going to come with some big external reasons why peacemakers should be at war.

But he doesn't do that. He doesn't even talk about what they're fighting about. Instead, look at how he answers in verse 1 and 2. What causes these fights and quarrels among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

So James is saying the source of your conflict, regardless of the external circumstances, is something within you, an unfulfilled desire or passion. This word here that is translated pleasures or passions is usually translated pleasures. It's the word that we get hedonism from or hedonistic. And it only occurs a few places in scripture, twice in this passage here in verses 1 and verses 3. So to kind of understand what he's talking about and really to understand why he personifies these passions as at war within us or battling within us, I want to look at a couple of other uses of this word. One of them is in, is a pretty common one that you remember, it's from the parable, because we just preached on it on Sunday morning a while back, is the parable of the sower.

[13:27] And when Jesus talks about the seed that falls on the thorny soil, right, the thorns rise up and choke out the life that's produced from the seed, which represents the gospel. And the thorns are described as the, as the worries and the riches and the pleasures, which is the same word from here, the pleasures of this world. One of the other only occurrences of this word is in Titus 3.3.

And in Titus 3.3, Paul is talking about what they were like before they became Christians. And one of the things he says is, we were slaves to our passions and our pleasures, pleasures to various passions and pleasures, pleasures being this word here. So when you're trying to understand why is he personifying these desires or these passions inside of me as being at war? In other words, at war with what and at war in what way? Well, it's at war for controlling influence. And you see that in both of those other texts, right? When the gospel comes into the life of someone and they have these pleasures that are strong in their life, it's fighting for dominance. It's fighting for control. It's fighting to own that soil. And, and Paul says, before we became Christians, we were slaves to those hedonistic desires. Now, hedonistic in this term usually has somewhat of a negative connotation, but it doesn't necessarily mean strictly sinful things that you want to do. This could be anything. This could be desires to be loved, desires to be treated fairly. Anything in you that you have a desire for can rise up and war and battle to be the controlling influence of your life. And it will cause the fights and quarrels among you. No amount of external wounding, wounding is the only cause for a fight and quarrel. That's what James is saying. The ultimate cause is inside of you. And it's the fact that you're not satisfied. There, there are unfulfilled longings of your heart that are crying out to be fulfilled. And something happened between you and another brother or sister in Christ that caused you to war with them because that desire is seeking to be fulfilled. Okay? So that's the first thing he says. The root cause of Christian strife are unfulfilled desires. But he doesn't stop, stop there. He moves on to the next level. So he asks the question or he answers the question, why do we have unfulfilled desires? So why as Christians, what's the purpose, why is there a Christian who's unsatisfied? And he gives two possible answers.

Let's look at that. It's in verses three, verse three and yeah, just verse three. And actually the end of verse, we'll start reading the end of verse two. 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. Okay? So he's given us two possible causes and they're both variations of pride. Okay? So the first version of pride is a self-reliance that leads to prayerlessness.

So we're unfulfilled in our soul because we're trusting in ourselves for our own fulfillment. We're relying on ourselves for our own fulfillment. And that's, that's evidenced by our prayerlessness.

So you may have a God, a God desire, a godly desire in your heart, a good desire in your heart, and it's unfulfilled because you're not letting God fulfill it by seeking him in prayer, by seeking him out as the source of your satisfaction. So that's the first part. You have not because you ask not. But the second one is another manifestation of pride, and that is self-discipline.

[17:18] deception or worldliness. That I ask, so I pray for things, but the things that I'm praying for are not ultimately for God or aren't ultimately according to his purposes and provision. They're solely so I can satisfy or satiate myself. And so that he describes it as so you could spend it on your own passions or fulfill yourself. And so those are the two root causes of our unsatisfied desires.

So pride rears its ugly head here. Now, you know, we get so used to in the Bible, I don't know if you do, but especially in the Old Testament, to people being called like harlots or adulterers. I don't know. It kind of loses its pack. So I want to talk a little bit about that here because in verse 4, I think it's the emotional high point of the entire letter, and it can be easily lost on us because we weren't the individual person he was writing to. So imagine you got a personal letter in the mail, and it opened up with, my dearest friend, and then there was a paragraph. And then the next paragraph started, my dear sister in Christ or brother in Christ. And then the next paragraph started, dear brother. And then the next paragraph started, dear brother. And then the fourth paragraph started, you evil betrayer. Right? That's what happens in this text. Eight times throughout the book, he calls, he refers to them as my brothers, my beloved brothers, so on and so forth. But at the very mention of this, of worldliness creeping into the heart and becoming the dominant controlling influence, he calls these people adulteresses or adulterous people. It's actually the feminine word for adulterous that he refers to them as. So it's a shocking thing that he changes so dramatically in his tone. And I think the reason is, is because it's so easy for us to think that we're being faithful to God solely because he's one of our heart's affections. Okay? So a lot of people today find their identity predominantly in the things that they like or want. You know, you can see this if you go to

Facebook, you know, what are your favorite movies? What are your favorite books? What are your favorite things to do? You almost feel like people find a lot of their personality in their likes and dislikes.

And so a lot of times you feel like Jesus for people is just kind of in that list. Like, I like fantasy football. I like surfing on the internet. I like Jesus, you know. And that's kind of how Jesus is added into people's lives. And this leads to a life of rampant, unfulfilled dissatisfaction in the heart. A heart divided that wants to take from two different masters. And so James here is pointing out to them what you're doing by doing that, what you're doing by wanting other things in the same way that you want Christ, is you're committing adultery. You're being unfaithful to your Lord and Savior.

You're breaking covenant with the God of the universe. So it's a huge, serious thing that he brings up here. And so this worldliness leads him into this kind of discussion of, can I serve two masters? Again, going back to the teaching of Jesus, he points out that friendship with the world is enmity towards God.

[20:59] So what does it mean to be a friend of the world? And how do we, how would we evaluate ourselves to know are we being a friend of the world? Well, first thing you could ask is, am I completely satisfied with no unfulfilled longings in my heart? I'm walking around completely satisfied.

Most of us are not going to answer if we answer honestly, that's me. I don't have any longings. There's no sadness. I'm never prone to depression or feeling sorry for myself. I never lash out at others.

I never get my feelings hurt. I never take things personal because I'm fully satisfied. Okay. So that's step one. Step two is, if not, then what are your unfulfilled longings? What is it that your heart wants or longs for that you do not have? And the way that you answer that question is going to help you identify what you, what's the controlling influences of your heart.

And then the way you can really answer that question is, what am I actually doing to seek and to accomplish the fulfillment of these desires? In other words, when I'm sad, when I'm down, what do I do in order to deal with that dissatisfaction, with that sadness, with that trial? When someone wounds me, what do I do in response to that? This is, this is the thing that reveals in your heart what's the controlling influence. And James is saying, do not, do not confuse yourself. If, if what you do when you're sad is you eat, or what you do when you're sad is you veg out on the couch, or what you do when you're sad is you play video games, those are your controlling influences. Those have become God to you.

And what you should be turning to, uh, what you, when you should be satisfying yourself in God, you've replaced him. And those things can't satisfy you. So they leave you in this state of constant longing that will eventually mean you lash out even against your own body, another believer in Christ. So that's what James is saying here. So you have to do the hard work of seeking out, what are those deep longings of my heart? And what am I doing to fulfill them? Uh, so in summary of this, of this part, the root cause of fighting peacemakers, of, of peacemakers who fight is that the peacemakers have unfulfilled desires that they will betray their very nature to fulfill. And these unfulfilled desires are actually the result of prayerless self-sufficiency or of self-deceived worldliness.

[23:47] Okay. Now, if James had stopped there, this would be a pretty depressing sermon. Um, you know, because I think all of us are extremely convicted when you take a look at the things that you do to satisfy yourself or to, um, or the conflict that exists between your marriages, your close friendships, your, even your own family. But he doesn't stop there. So after pointing out in verse six, verse six, the jealousy of this, of God for his bride and our unfaithfulness, he, there's this, one of these great butts, you know, occasionally there are these great butts in scripture. And this is one of them, uh, in, in, uh, verse six, but he being God gives more grace.

Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So we have the root cause of, of what causes quarrels. We have the reason that we're unfulfilled. And now we have this reason for hope. And that is that we have a God who is inexhaustible in his grace. He's inexhaustible in not only forgiving us, but in satisfying us with his grace. But this is grace that's conditional.

Did you notice that? Um, grace is unmerited favor. We never deserve it. We never can do anything to deserve it. But not always in scripture is God's bestowal of grace unconditional. Often in scripture, God's bestowal of more grace is conditional. And in this, this case, it's conditional on, uh, on what?

On humility. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So our response, uh, to God's, the offer of God's grace should be humility. Now what, what is humility? Is it just, well, okay, I'll think really badly about myself. I already do after what you just said. So thank you very much.

I'm humble now. No, um, no, it's not that at all. Uh, my favorite illustration of humility is because, and partially because I love just picturing this in my mind is when Jesus was, uh, with his disciples, right? And, you know, I, I imagine these guys as pretty burly guys, a lot of more fresh fishermen, and they like to argue amongst themselves, you know, who's going to be the best, you know, that kind of thing. And they probably, they probably thought of themselves as a pretty important bunch of guys.

[26:20] And he goes over and gets a four year old, you know, a little kid. And he brings him right in the middle of these guys. And he says, not one of you will enter the kingdom of heaven unless you're like this. Now, what does that mean? Well, in what way do we have to be childlike? Do we have to be silly? Do we have to know very little, uh, about all the things we're going to learn later in life?

Um, you know, being a parent, one of the things that I've noticed is there's a, as your children get older, little by little, and it's small things at first, they want to start doing things on their own. Have you noticed this? Um, I want to, I want to climb into the car on my own, even if it means I'm going to fall and scream and then you have to pick me back up, but I want to try it. Little by little, they want to do those things on their own. But most of the time, little children just recognize they're completely dependent on someone else to live. Uh, they, they, and they don't, they don't even question it. I'm totally dependent on you to live. And even when they want to try things on their own, if you move too far away, they don't want to try anymore, right? They, they, they want to do it. They want to, they want to learn. They want to grow, but they want to know that the one that keeps them alive is right there. That's what he's talking about. So humility, the humble is just someone who recognizes I'm absolutely completely dependent on God to be satisfied and to be forgiven. I'm absolutely completely. And, and James's response to that is he's here. He's here with grace. He's here with grace. And so after giving us that reason for hope, he gives us actually 10 imperatives, uh, commands, uh, that I call the road of God's grace. So he's telling us, okay, this is conditional. Uh, God's grace doesn't just come to everybody who has a, who, who, who, who has a prideful heart. There's, there's a path, there's a road, uh, of getting, of gaining God's grace. And we don't gain it because we earn it. We gain it because we put our faith in it. And so let's, let's look at these commands and we're going to go through these pretty quickly. Um, and it starts off in verse seven, submit yourselves therefore to God in light of the fact that God is jealous for you. And in light of the fact that he gives grace, fully submit yourself to your whole allegiance to Jesus Christ. Now, does that mean we don't get pleasure anywhere, but in Jesus Christ? Yes, it does. Everything that we enjoy in our life that we don't enjoy for his sake should be gone. And everything that we enjoy that can be joyed for his sake, we should always be enjoying for his sake. We should always be giving him thanks and glory for, for, for, for what we have. So we submit ourselves fully and wholly to him. Our unfulfilled desires reveal our broken allegiance to God. We have to resubmit completely. Every day, every day, every morning when you get up, every evening before you go to bed, you should be examining yourselves for your unfulfilled desires, especially when you feel sadness or boredom or anger towards somebody else. Where, where have I started to seek something else for satisfaction? Because this is not the nature of the, of the one who's satisfied in Christ. The second command, resist the devil and he will flee from you.

We have to resist the influencing forces that constantly lead us to, to divide our allegiance. Now, the reality is the devil and demonic forces are far too strong for us to resist on our own.

But our resistance is not based on our own strength, and it's here in this passage, but God's promise to give us grace and equip us to stand. There's promises like this all through scripture, uh, that if you resist the devil, he will flee from you. Now what that, that's not saying if you resist the devil because of your efforts, he will flee from you. It's conditional on verse six. God gives grace to those who humble himself, and if you work to resist, God will cause the devil to flee from you. And the reason we know that is all of these conditionals all the way through are God's action. Okay. Uh, uh, you'll see that in the next one.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. We have to remain closely connected to our God. We draw near to him predominantly through abiding in prayer and his words abiding in us. If you spend three or five minutes today in prayer and you watch TV for one to six hours a day, like the average Christian in the country, there's absolutely no way this is going to work. You're not drawing near to God. He's not going to draw near to you. But if you draw near to God, he will draw near to you. His grace is there for those who will humble themselves. Uh, the next, there's a series of five commands here that are all really one command and that's to consecrate ourselves through true repentance. So I'll go through these commands. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep and let your laughter turn to mourning and your joy to gloom. So here, James is picking up on another of the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. So we have to be grieved by our own sin. It's not an idle thing. That's what James is trying to do by taking these beloved brothers all the way through and calling them adulteresses, helping them realize the gravity of what they're doing by loving, you know, their fantasy football league the same much, same way they love Jesus. I mean, that's what you're doing. And you have to mourn and grieve and turn away from those things and cleanse yourself. And God is there. He is faithful. He will provide the grace to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. The last, he returns to where he started in verse 10. Humble yourself before the Lord and he will exalt you. We have to humble ourselves every day to the Lord. You know, the things that God's given us in Scripture that are means to humility, such as fasting, prayer and fasting and times of seeking God's face, they've really fallen out of vogue today. And I think it's because people are trying to serve two masters. And to give up pleasure for the sake of humbling myself before God, it just doesn't, doesn't register to them. But God has given us means in which to humbly seek his face. Our humility is also fueled by this confident hope in God's future grace that one day he will exalt us as co-heirs with Jesus Christ, inheritors of all things. There's no reason for us to fight for importance here when we're going to be co-heirs with Christ.

[33 : 57] So that's the road to God's grace. So as we close, consider the longings and unfulfilled desires of your own heart.

Consider what you do when you're depressed, when you're sad. Consider the things that get stepped on by other Christians that cause you to fight with them. And seek the Lord while he may be found. I close with Isaiah 55, 6-7. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. Father, we thank you for your word.

We know that there is no lasting satisfaction outside of you. And I confess to you that my heart, when it is unfulfilled, when it is sad, when it is depressed, when it feels wronged, often does not turn to you for satisfaction, does not turn to you for more grace, does not like a child recognize my complete and utter dependence on someone else to live.

But I try to medicate myself with what this world seeks value in, with entertainment and leisure. So, Father, forgive me. Forgive us. Teach us to seek your face wholeheartedly, Lord. You have promised that when we seek you with our whole heart, you will be found by us. Fill us with your spirit and your presence. Give us confidence and faith in your promises that when we seek you, we will find you.

[35 : 54] When we resist the devil, he will flee from us. When we draw near to you, you will draw near to us. And you will be the satisfaction for our souls. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.