

INTERIOR WARFARE

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 110206
James 4:1-10
11th Message
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February 6, 2011

What causes fights and quarrels among you?

This is an important question, asked at the level of international discord or when neighbors argue. Today we can observe violence in Cairo, aggression in the blogosphere, urban gang battles, acrimony in Christian congregations, and bitterness in families. What causes these things?

The first verse of James 4 asks this question and James' word on our predicament will be consistent with much that he has already taught—especially his descriptions of hurtful speech and brackish water bubbling forth from a bitter wellspring.

On the other hand, at the end of chapter 3 we read of wisdom that comes down from heaven and of peacemakers who sow in peace raising a harvest of righteousness. With the work of peacemakers as the near context, consider the opening verses of chapter 4.

James 4:1-3:

¹What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Verse 2 is not hard to understand. Thwarted desire leads to hostile behavior that is described in blunt terms: you kill, you covet, you quarrel, and you fight. Desire denied grows more insistent and our actions more aggressive.

Further, our natural tendency is to place blame on external circumstances or the ill will of other people, yet James insists that we are guilty. The problem lies with me, not the government, not my rival, not my failed parents, not bad luck, not the economy, not the tides of history, not the vagaries of fate.

Of course, blame shifting leads finally to finding fault

with God. But we should recall James 1:13-14 “No one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.” We will never understand the angry chaos in our lives until we are willing to see what is inside us. So James (or any other peacemaker who would sow peace) must first clear away self deception. I must acknowledge that I am the problem.

But we encounter a surprise in the second half of verse two. If thwarted desire leads to acrimony we might expect a lesson in curtailing desire, reigning in passion, learning self denial. But that is not what we find. The problem is not that we have needs and longings; it is that we do not ask God to supply them. In a fallen world we will always hope for what doesn't yet exist and to be dissatisfied with brokenness and decay.

Psychologists say that human beings have two primary needs: we need to be loved and we need to achieve something of significance. These needs are consistent with our origins, creatures made in the image of God. Out-of-control passions and coveting, wrong motives and the seeking of unhealthy pleasures are all a twisting of some good desire.

We were made to hope for connection with others in love; for a good end to our story and earth's story; for real healing, for victory over death, for satisfying answers to life's big questions. If we wish for such things, we are being true to the way we were made, and therefore, we want what we don't have. But will we ask, with honest motives, for God to intervene? That is the crucial question.

Consider the following quote from C. S. Lewis from his essay *The Weight of Glory*:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant

*by an offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*¹

Why don't we ask God? We don't ask God to meet our needs because we have decided, like Israel before us, to pursue other gods. Both Israel and the church are named 'the bride of the Lord.' He has promised to protect and provide for his beloved, but with adulterous hearts we run after trinkets offered by worldly powers. We don't seek God because we have another lover.

James 4:4:

⁴You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

The phrase "friendship with the world" does not refer to Christians having healthy friendships with unbelievers. Rather it describes a heart alliance with the 'world' itself, the proud way of life that defies the purposes of God. To choose another lover is to choose enmity with God.

James 4:5:

⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

This verse is hard to translate. The NASB renders it, "he jealously desires the spirit which he has made to dwell in us." In either case it is clear that James is describing the intense emotion of married love. God's 'holy jealousy' flows from his deep love for us. In fact, we should recoil, heartbroken, at the image of God suffering as a jilted lover. Consider some descriptions of Israel prostituting herself with idols.

Deuteronomy 31:16: "And the LORD said to Moses: 'You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them.'"

Jeremiah 3:20: "'But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,' declares the LORD."

Hosea 2:5 and 8 describe the unfaithful Israel this way: "She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink. . . .'⁸She has not acknowledged that I was the one who

gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—which they used for Baal."

We can draw our own images of a faithful spouse with a ripped open heart. The wounded soldier whose courage in battle was sustained by love for his wife returns home to find her in bed with his friend. A wife who has made home an emotionally safe place for her struggling husband is tossed aside in middle age, replaced by a series of bimbos. We feel the hurt of human sufferers; how much more ought we care when our Lord is the rejected lover.

We don't have because we don't ask (or ask with false motives). We don't ask because we prefer the world. We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us.

However, unfaithfulness is not a stable condition. How will God's 'holy jealousy' express itself? His power is infinite. His judgments are final. Does his patience wear out? Can we hope for reconciliation?

James 4:6-10:

⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Here is an uncompromising call to repentance. "Submit yourself to God and, resist the devil. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts" (vs. 7-8). We are guilty of unfaithfulness and are to blame for the mess we are in. We offer no defense, no claim of extenuating circumstances. 'Grieve, mourn and wail . . . laughter becomes mourning and joy becomes gloom.' If there is any hope of a way back, it will be based completely on God's grace.

And, praise God, there is every reason to hope. We must be sure of this: repentance is the doorway to restoration. He gives more grace! If we draw near to him he will draw near to us. He will not hesitate. He has already determined to give more than we deserve and he will give more and more. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (v. 10). He is the good husband who will welcome back his wayward bride.

There is a wonderful hymn based on James 4:6 written by Annie Johnston Flint, called *He Giveth More Grace*.

*He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength as our labors increas;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing;
The Father both thee and thy load will upbear.*

*His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.²*

To the wayward, the lost, the broken, the self destructive, the confused, the hurting ... he giveth more grace ... he giveth and giveth and giveth again.

NOTES:

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1949, 1976, 1980, 2001).

²Annie Johnston Fling, "He Giveth More Grace," Public Domain.