

James Part 6: Dealing with a Heart Condition

I. Review:

- In Chapter 3, James spoke to teachers and those who think they have Christianity pretty much figured out. He warns of the stricter judgment faced by those who have been given much. God's evaluation of believer's lives is not based on how much you know; but how well you live. It is what you do with what you know. And our use of our tongue is probably the best test of that, because the tongue cannot be tamed. You can't cheat on the tongue test. Whatever is in your heart comes out of your lips. So the way to get an "A" on the tongue test is not to control the lips. It is to cleanse the heart!
- Your words and your actions reveal the source of your "wise-ness". It is either earthly wisdom that is produced by the "*bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts.*"(3:14) and results in "*disorder and every evil practice*". Or it is a heavenly wisdom produced by the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our speech and actions, and is evidenced by pure, peace-loving, considerate, and submissive living.

Now as we come to chapter 4, the Spirit focuses us on how harboring this "*envy and selfish ambition in your heart*" comes out in the way we live. It is evidence of a heart condition. Let's start at James 3:13. **Read - James 3:13 - 4:10**

II. The Motives at the Root of Conflict: vs. 1-3

A. The Source of Wisdom Is Seen in Your Actions:

The verse numbering and chapter divisions of the Bible were added centuries after it was written to help people find specific passages. The division between chapter 3 and chapter 4 of James doesn't help our understanding. A new chapter implies that we are starting a new topic. But James is not. He is pressing home his argument with those who think they are wise enough to be teachers, but don't do what it says are actually "*harboring bitter envy and selfish ambition in their hearts.*"(3:14) He declares that wisdom ultimately comes from either heaven or hell. And the source of our wisdom is revealed in the actions it produces.

In contrast to the wisdom from God which produces "*pure, humble, peacemakers*" (3:18); James readers were squabbling with one another and living in an atmosphere of fights and quarrels.(vs.1) James asks them a logical question;

"If you are indeed believers in Jesus Christ, what is causing this quarrelling?" vs.1

James thinks the answer is obvious. "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"

Paul asks almost the same question of the church at Corinth in 1 Cor.3:1-3.

“Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual people but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. . . . For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly. Are you not acting like mere men?”

B. Selfish Desires:

Once again the Holy Spirit is showing us that the real problem is not just the outward behaviour. It is the internal things of the heart that are coming out in their behaviours. The Greek term here in James for “desires” is “*hedonon*”. This is the root word from which we get the term “**hedonism**”. Hedonism was the Greek philosophy of life that living for pleasure is the chief good in life. We don’t call it that today; but it is as popular as ever as a philosophy of living.

- The motto of hedonism in the time of the Greeks was; *“Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!”*
- Today’s motto hedonism is; *“Whatever Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas!”*

Even though most Christians would reject such a motto for living, many of us are what I would call “**closet hedonists**”! We are living for whatever culturally acceptable pleasures we can find in life. The pursuit of wealth is one of many such culturally acceptable pleasures. When life becomes a self-centered pursuit to fulfil our own desires two things happen.

1. We start to “*envy*” those who already have what we desire.
2. And we become driven by “*selfish ambition*” to get what we desire.

Where have we heard that before? Those are the very same motivations God just told us reveal a life based on the wisdom of hell. (James 3:14) And verse two captures the driven-ness, perhaps we could say “*addictiveness*” of such a life. It says; *“You want something, but don’t get it.”* 4:2

This is not really a strong enough translation of the Greek. The “want” here, is an anxious desire. In modern terminology we would say;

“You just gotta have something, but you can’t get it.”

Application: Have you ever felt like “*you just gotta have something?*” But you can’t have it, because you don’t have the money or your credit card is already maxed out, or your spouse or parents says “No!” How did you react? Angry, frustrated that your boss doesn’t pay you enough? Quarrelling with those who don’t agree with your choices?

I think most of us have found ourselves in a situation where our heart was irrationally invested in something that we desperately wanted . . . a house, a car, a dress, a relationship. There is a

huge range of desire between thinking something would be nice to have and feeling like you can't live without it. When I feel something tugging strongly at my heart, I try to stop and speak truth to myself. I chose to recognize that I am probably believing a lie, invented by my self-deceiving heart.

I am believing that this thing I want will make me happy or satisfy me. That is a lie. Or, it is more accurate to say it is a "HALF TRUTH". It may make me happy for a while, but it won't satisfy me. Sooner or later, I will just want something more, or something else. So I try to stop and speak a truth statement to my foolish heart. Jesus said "*I am the bread of life.*" He wasn't talking about food. He was talking about our deepest hungers. He is the only one who can satisfy my deepest desires. So I stop and make a truth statement to myself and to my heart:

"It might be nice to have this thing, but it won't satisfy me. It won't make me happy for long! Only Jesus is the bread of life, only He can ultimately satisfy me!"

C. Hatred: vs.2

Now the phrase "*you kill and covet*" vs. 2 has caused a lot of discussion. It is unlikely that they were actually guilty of murder. Or that it was such a common occurrence that he would make such a general accusation about them. It is more likely that James is using this statement as HYPERBOLE; an exaggerated example in order to make a point. The frustration of their desires was producing intense anger and hatred in them toward others. This understanding fits with Jesus use of hyperbole in Matt. 5:21-22 when He said that hatred in your heart is just as though you had murdered the person already.

D. Twisted Spirituality: vs. 2-3

James goes on to say that their heart condition was messing up their spiritual lives as well. He points out that they rarely brought their desires before God. And when they did, they were totally self-centered. They were asking just to fulfil their own selfish pleasures. Their selfish desires even twisted spirituality into just another means to get what they wanted. It was just a way to manipulate God to give them what they wanted in life.

I call that "Christian Magic". Magic and the occult is all about getting supernatural powers to do or give you what you want. Many people who claim to follow Christ are in reality, trying to control God. They are trying to get God to do what they want Him to do. For example, they pray and go to church to get God to like them so that he will protect them and bless them financially.

But God will not be manipulated. He is the Lord of the Universe. He invites us to submit our lives to Him, so that we may find our life in Him. There is a big difference between walking by faith and Christian magic. Magic is about trying to control the spirit world and get them to do

what you want. Faith in Christ is about submitting your life to God and inviting Him to control you. But you can only do that if you believe that God is truly good and knows what is best for us!

III. Cheating on God: vs. 4-6

A. A Jealous God:

As we come to verse 4, Dr. James gives his diagnoses of our heart condition. He calls this self-centered living adultery. And then he says something that is surprising to us. He says that the Holy Spirit living in us “*envies us intensely*.” That is a warning that God jealously loves us. When living for self and for pleasure becomes the overriding desire in our lives, it becomes our God, our master, and our lover. It becomes “*the object of our devotion*” and our worship. It demands fulfilment and produces conflict with others. But God says;

*"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; **for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God**, Exodus 20:3-6*

*"Do not worship any other god, **for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.**"*
Exodus 34:14

We like to think about God as a loving God, a powerful God, even a holy God. Did you know that God's nickname is Jealous?

This is a completely counter-cultural viewpoint. In our culture, jealousy is never seen as a positive thing. It is seen as the selfish feelings of a person who came in second in a romantic pursuit. They are consumed by their own sense of loss and anger, rather than joy for the other person's discovery of fulfilment and love.

But what if selfish human jealousy is a poor and twisted shadow of God image in us? What if God's jealousy is not self-centered, but other centered? What if the God who created us possesses perfect knowledge of what is truly good for us? What if God's sacrificial love and commitment to His people is always for our best? So when we choose cheap substitutes, shiny bangles, and passing pleasures over His perfect love for us which is for our good; is He not right to be hurt, disappointed and angry? Is it not right that He should intensely desire His people whom He gave His life for, to turn back to loving and seeking Him?

B. A Cheap Substitute:

James does not mince words. He refers to those who live for self and pleasure as “*adulterous people*.” Like an unfaithful spouse, we set our affection on something or someone else to

satisfy us. And evidently, God is angered by the betrayal of His perfect and sacrificial love for us which is for our best. He is exasperated to see us choose temporary pleasures instead of the Creator, Sustainer, and Purpose of the Universe. He knows we are deceived and charmed by things that will never really satisfy us. It is like we have exchanged the commitment of marriage for a cheap hooker. Some of us, who would never consider being unfaithful to our spouse, have an adulterous relationship with the world.

James goes on to say that friendship with God and friendship with the World are mutually exclusive.

You 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. 4:4

What does it mean to be a “friend of the world.” My best answer is that it is not measured by what you have, but by what you seek satisfaction in. What do you dream about having that would make your life happier, a new toy or a deeper relationship with God? What do you look to for satisfaction and happiness in life?

C. An Offer of Grace: vs. 6

But God does not leave those of us who struggle with affection for the world without hope. James reminds us that “*He gives us more grace.*” God has a high standard for the devotion of His people, but He gives us the grace to love and obey Him that is greater than what He demands.

And the secret of receiving this grace is humility . . . recognizing my need of it!

He quotes the O.T: “*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*”

Sometimes I may feel so ensnared by the things of the world that I cannot possible respond appropriately to God’s jealous love for me, even though I understand it is for my good. But my confidence is not in my will power, it is in His gracious power to cleanse my heart and renew my love for Him.

IV. Surgery for a Fickle Heart: vs. 7-10

So the path to freedom from the control of the desires of our adulterous hearts is humbling ourselves before God and crying out for His grace. James gives specific actions for those who want to be doers of the word and lovers of God. This is heart surgery for my fickle heart. They are steps in humbling yourself.

A. Submit:

This is the logical response to the quotation “*He gives grace to the humble.*” Submit yourself to God. “*Lord, I don’t want to let this go, but I know that you know what’s best for*

me and I choose to submit myself to you and trust you to give me the right kinds of desires.”

B. Resist: *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”*

This world is not a neutral place. The powers of darkness are just as real as the power of light. They are not as powerful, but they are just as real. Do you know that you have to actively resist the powers of darkness? The powers of darkness will seek to exploit our own desires to deceive us and make us slaves. We must recognize his lies, and our own self-deceptions and reject them. Then, take authority in Jesus Name and command them to get away from us.

C. Come near: *“Come near to God and He will come near to you.”*

God isn’t hiding, but He may be waiting. He may be waiting for you to draw near, in the word, in prayer, in worship from the heart. This is a promise of God’s response when you truly seek Him. If you have drifted away, it is time once again to draw near.

D. Wash:

There are two parts that go together. *“Wash your hands”* is a command to clean up your conduct. *“Purify your hearts”* insists that purity must penetrate to our thoughts and motives. This is the step of confession.

E. Mourn:

“Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” vs. 9

This is not a depressing call to be grim-faced unhappy people. It is a call for all-out repentance. It is a call for brokenness that reaches our core. It speaks to our need to recognize the high cost to ourselves, our families, our church, and our community of masquerading as followers of Jesus while mostly serving our own desires. It is a specific rejection of the adulterous relationship we have developed with the world.

F. Humble:

Finally, James calls us to *“humble ourselves before the Lord”*. I think this means to see myself as I really am and acknowledge it to God. It is to own my proud and self-seeking ways. It is to acknowledge my superficiality and my self-serving pleasure seeking heart. And it is to acknowledge that only God can save me. Not just save me from my guilt, but save me from me and my desires. Only He can make my life something fruitful that truly honors Him. For that to actually happen will require His supernatural intervention in my life every day. It will require even more of His grace.

But when we do truly humble ourselves before the Lord, something strange and paradoxical

takes place. God begins to lift you. He gives you favour with people. He gives you strength for the battle. He gives you new desires to please Him and serve others. When God starts doing these things, the walk of faith becomes an energizing adventure, rather than a burdensome effort.

V. Conclusion:

An affair with the world is perhaps the most easily besetting sin of Western Christianity. Enticed by this seductiveness, we pursue it thinking it will lead to happiness. But the envy and selfish ambition it produces makes us tend to use people and even use God for our self-centered purposes. We end up destroying those relationships and we can ultimately endanger our souls.

The effects of the cultural changes brought on by the current pandemic and social distancing have yet to be fully appreciated. But for awhile, our pleasure seeking, boredom avoiding, entertainment pursuing society slowed down or even came suddenly to a halt. Ski season ended early. March Madness never got off the ground. Hockey playoffs were shortened. There were no concerts to attend. Movie releases halted. The Olympics were delayed. Wimbledon got wiped out. The bars weren't even open. Dulling the boredom of our lives with an endless parade of new contests, and shows, and activities, and achievements took a direct hit. Many people didn't know what to do with the time they suddenly had on their hands. A similar thing often happens to people who retire and suddenly don't know what to do with themselves.

In many ways, the rush, busyness, and noise of our world went silent for awhile. For a lot of people silence is uncomfortable. When things get quiet, we are confronted with questions we may not have had to ask ourselves for awhile. What is life really about? Where am I looking for satisfaction? Perhaps this is one of the benefits of the regular exercise of the Christian disciplines of taking time for both silence and solitude.

The Christian answer to this question is that the One who created you, loves you. He came to earth and became a man, the man Jesus Christ. He gave his life as a sacrifice for our sins and invites each of us to believe in Him and receive Him into our lives by the Holy Spirit. And when we then seek our life in Him, He empowers and gives us grace for living that lifts us out of the self-centered pursuit of pleasure and into a life of meaning, and love, and satisfaction. Something Jesus called Life Abundantly! How foolish it is for those who have come to know Him, to turn back to our former way of life.

Reflection Questions:

1. Does the source of your life produce fresh water or salty? What does the "tongue test" say about what's going on in your heart?

2. Sometimes we don't recognize we are slaves because the chains that bind us are made of gold. What "things" in your life has God given you as a responsibility to consciously steward for His kingdom? How do those things subtly begin to own you? (*"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*)
3. Quarrels are an indicator of pride and self-centered living. What is it about pride that makes it an obstacle to receiving God grace and power? Why doesn't God just give the grace anyway?
4. The Holy Spirit is using James to amplify the practice of confession and to deepen us in the skills of humility. Looking at James list, where do you need to grow in the practice of confession?
5. How have you experienced God lifting you up through humbling yourself in confession? What has God taught you in this area that could help others too?

So submit yourself to God and resist the Evil One and his lies. Draw near to God for He will surely draw near to you. Wash your hands and hearts agreeing with God about what is wrong. Mourn it in repentance and humble yourselves declaring your need of God to lift you up and give you a heart that is fully devoted to Him. Let's Pray!