

May 27, 2018
James: A Wake Up Call
James 4:1-10

The "Ideal" and the "Real" (4:1-3)

Peace ... *"the peace that passes understanding"* ... is God's desire for our lives. *"Godliness with contentment is great gain,"* writes Paul (1 Timothy 6:6). James has just reminded us that, if we are truly wise, we will be pure, peace-loving, gentle at all times, willing to yield to others, full of mercy and good deeds, showing no favouritism, and always sincere (James 3:17). *"Those who are peacemakers will ... reap a harvest of goodness"* (James 3:18). But we live in the real world. Those words sound wonderful, but you know and I know that things don't always happen that way! Stress happens! We yearn for a close relationship with God. We crave genuine spirituality. But life just takes over. We find ourselves miserable.

James asks a pointed question: *"What causes fights and quarrels among you?"* (James 4:1). He answers with another question, a soul-searching question, an intensely personal question: *"Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"* (James 4:1). *"Wait a minute! I don't have a battle of desires within me! He's talking to someone else, right?"* Let's look at what James has to say ...

"You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them" (4:2). James is not talking about literal murders. He is talking about our relationships. About the fact that we often sacrifice people – friends and family – as we pursue our desires. We can be driven, selfish people. We don't like to hear it. But it's true, isn't it? It's wedding season! As couples get married, life is wonderful ... but there will be issues. We all struggle with our selfishness. Sometimes things go the way we'd like them too ... sometimes they don't. How do we handle them when they don't? What's the root problem?

James identifies one key issue ... our spiritual lives! *"You 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. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."* (James 4:2-3).

Do you see what James is saying? First, we don't have that deep, meaningful spiritual relationship with God because we aren't willing to put much effort into it (you don't bother to ask). When we do think about God, it's usually because we want something. Now! We may be praying for the wrong thing. When we pray, *"Lord, this is what I want you to do ... do it now,"* we are, in fact, telling God what to

do, saying we know better than Him what ought to happen. That's a dangerous place to be. Especially when – as James frankly states – we naturally gravitate toward things we think make us happy and gives us pleasure rather than what we know is really best for ourselves or for the Kingdom of God. We go through all the religious motions, but we have no real living experience of God. We let a variety of passions control our decisions. Bottom line, we're miserable.

But when we pray, *"Lord grant me wisdom – grant us wisdom – to know Your will ..."* we allow God to be God. We ask God to fill us with Kingdom thinking and Kingdom values. And, James says, our prayers will be honoured! Recall where James began this letter: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."* (James 1:5)

Brutal Honesty (4:4)

"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." James is swearing here! "Adulterer" is the polite translation of a rude name. Then he says, *"Take a look around you! Can't you see there are different values and priorities going on here? The things that our society says are most important (possessions, fame, wealth, position) aren't really that important! If that's what you want, you're in trouble! Because God's values are different (being pure, peace loving, gentle at all times, willing to yield to others, full of mercy and good deeds, showing no partiality, and always being sincere)."* James is saying relationships – with God and with people – are most important. That's not what "the world" says!

Open your eyes. Are the values you see being lived out all they're cracked up to be? You don't have to experience it all to realize it's hollow. But do realize that chasing after all the "stuff" in life is hollow. What is really important? Do you feel spiritually lost? Miserable? Good! Now here's the answer ...

Our Strength (4:5-10)

"Do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? (or 'that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us'; or 'that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously'). But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

God jealously longs for us to be faithful. That's an interesting metaphor isn't it?

Like a spouse, who sees his partner drifting into infidelity, God jealously longs to be one with us in spirit. His great desire is for that perfect union. The Bible often uses the picture of the ideal marriage for our relationship with God. Jesus is the groom; the church is/we are the bride.

In the Old Testament is the amazing story of Hosea. Hosea's life is a parable of God's relationship with His people. God commanded Hosea, *"Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord"* (Hosea 1:2). So Hosea marries a lady named Gomer. They have three children together. Then Gomer leaves Hosea and becomes a prostitute. Chapter 3 begins, *"The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.' So I bought her for fifteen shekels (6 ounces) of silver and about a homer and a lethek (10 bushels) of barley"* (Hosea 3:1-2).

God is like Hosea. He loves His bride – His people – us – and He will pay whatever price is necessary to win her (us) back. But God's people (we) are like Gomer. We are often enticed away. We drift into unfaithfulness (just what James said ... we fight; we envy; we chase after the wrong things; we're adulterous people). God's declaration is this: *"There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; there is violence everywhere, and bloodshed follows bloodshed ... You have rejected knowledge ... you have ignored the law of your God ..."* (Hosea 4:1-6).

If we're honest with ourselves and with God we have to confess that we can be unfaithful to God. If we think our spiritual lives as a marriage to God, as a spouse we have been unfaithful. We haven't put much time or effort into it. We've put other priorities way ahead of God. We have forgotten our first love. But just as Hosea did not give up on Gomer, God does not give up on any of us: *"How can I give you up? How can I hand you over? ... My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger ... For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath"* (Hosea 11:8-9).

God is willing to pay the price to redeem His bride. *Not "fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley."* God becomes a person, lives among us, we have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. And He dies on the cross – for us. To save us. To redeem us. To pay the price. The cross – the centrepiece of our faith – is a reminder of the supreme love of God for us. He redeems us with His own blood shed for us.

God's call to us is this: *"Return to the Lord your God ... Return to the Lord . Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say*

'Our gods' to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion" (Hosea 14:1-3). "Submit yourselves to God ... Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:7-10).

This is a good time to renew our vows ... or perhaps to make our vows for the first time ...

If we were to ask Jesus: *"Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, do you affirm your love and loyalty to us? Do you promise, to love us, honour us, and keep yourself faithful to us through all the circumstances of life?"* He would answer, *"On the cross, I already showed you, I do."*

So now we ask ourselves: *"Do you come today to affirm your love and loyalty for Jesus? Do you promise, with God's help and to the best of your ability, to love him, honour him, and keep yourself faithful to him through all the circumstances of life, and forsaking all others, keep only to him as long as you shall live?"* Will you answer, *"I do"?*

If we were to ask Jesus: *"Will you take us as your precious bride, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow? Will you promise to love us and cherish us and to be faithful to us?"* He would answer, *"On the cross, I have proven to you, I do."*

So now we ask ourselves: *"Will you take Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow? Will you promise to love him and cherish him and to be faithful to him alone?"* Will you answer, *"I do"?*

Imagine the scene as Hosea takes Gomer into his arms once again. Imagine the scene as God takes us into his arms once again. The invitation to you, today, is to come to return to the Lord. To join with him in the celebration. The Lord of all Creation invites you to come home. He has paid the price. He has forgiven the past. Now He welcomes you home. *Come near to God and he will come near to you.* Will you come?