

You Adulterous People! James 4:4-10
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“You adulterous people!” That’s what God’s Word says to us this morning in the letter of James. This may be a little shocking, and it’s certainly intended to be so. If you’ve read the book of James you know that in several places he refers to his readers as “my brothers” or “my beloved brothers.” But here the tone is entirely different. He addresses us as “adulterous people” and thus introduces the strongest rebuke found in the letter. What I love about this passage is that it contains the strongest rebuke in the letter and it also contains some wonderful promises. We are rebuked for our spiritual adultery, and we are also assured of God’s grace for those who humble themselves before Him and submit to Him and draw near to Him. So let’s allow the Word of God to do its work in our lives today. May the Word bring us to our knees in repentance, and may it then lift us up in the knowledge of God’s marvelous grace.

I. **Spiritual adultery (verse 4)**

Let’s begin in verse 4 under the heading, “Spiritual Adultery.” James says, “You adulterous people.” Adultery is the violation of a marriage covenant. The love that has been pledged to a spouse is given to someone else. And as devastating as that is, it’s clear from the context that James has in mind something even more significant. He’s speaking of spiritual adultery. In the Old Testament the relationship between God and His people is often portrayed in terms of a marriage union. God is the husband, as it were, and Israel is His wife.

This is seen most clearly in the book of Hosea. God told Hosea to marry a prostitute in order to serve as a picture of God’s faithfulness to His promiscuous people. Just as Hosea’s wife went back to other lovers, the Israelites were committing spiritual adultery with other gods. Jesus used this same kind of imagery when he said, “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this *adulterous* and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

The rebuke in James 4:4 draws on these Old Testament images and Jesus’ words, and James identifies very clearly what this spiritual adultery involves. The adulterous relationship is with the world. God is the faithful husband. And the world is the illicit lover. And the truth of the matter is that our ultimate allegiance is going to be to one or the other. We can’t entertain both interests. It’s one or the other. It reminds me of Jesus’ words, when He said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and

love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). You can’t serve God and money. You can’t place your ultimate hope in God, and also place your ultimate hope in money. And that’s just one illustration of the truth that you can’t hope in God and also hope in the world. You can’t be friends with both, because friendship with one implies enmity with the other. The world is diametrically opposed to God, and God to the world. And therefore it’s adultery to claim allegiance to God while still seeking after the pleasures of this world.

This is related to the previous verse, which says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (verse 3). In light of verse 4 we can understand this as an adulteress going to her husband to ask for money only to turn around and spend that money on her adulterous relationship. Let that image burn into your mind so that you can see how appalling our sin is to God. We come to Him asking for so many things, and how many of those things are just an overflow of our sinful passions. We want stuff from God only to spend it on our passions, on our adulterous relationship with the world.

Look at the force of verse 4. First there’s a rhetorical question, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” And then, for emphasis as well as to make the point even clearer, he says, “Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” Now, it’s true that we will all struggle between our desire for God and our desire for the world, between the Spirit and the flesh. But there’s also something very definitive about James’ statement here. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. That means if you side with the world, if it’s the world that captures your attention and your affection, then you are an enemy of the Almighty God. And that is a very scary position to be in.

This severe warning should serve as a wake-up call to anyone who is flirting with the pleasures of the world. It may mean that you are merely a hearer of the word but not a doer, that your faith is a dead faith, that your wisdom is not from above, but from below. If you come to church thinking that you’re a friend of God, but your real passion is for the things of this world, then I pray this verse will show you your dire situation. You are not a friend of God. In fact, you are His enemy. There needs to be repentance in your life, which James will describe in verses 7-10.

For all of us, this verse should spur us on toward greater holiness. This is a warning that should keep us from drifting into a worldly lifestyle. We’re all susceptible to this, and we need to be on guard. It would be easy at this point to give you a set of rules, a set of guidelines, and set of dos and don’ts. Godly behaviors –

worldly behaviors. And then you could evaluate yourself based on the list. That would be our tendency – to turn this into a list. But the real issue is in our hearts. And so I simply ask you to consider, What is it that you desire? What do you find yourself thinking about most often? What kind of thoughts fill your mind when you wake up and when you're falling asleep at night. What drives the decisions that you make? When you decide what to listen to, what to watch, where to go, what to wear—what shapes those actions? Is it a love for God, or a love for the world?

II. **God's jealousy and grace (verses 5-6)**

Moving on to verses 5-6 we will see God's jealousy and grace. Verse 5 is a very difficult verse to interpret. If you're reading the NIV you may have scratched your head when I read from the ESV, because the two translations of this verse are very different. The NIV says, "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" The ESV says, "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'?" The main difference is that "the spirit" is taken as the subject of the verb in the NIV, while it's understood in the ESV to be the object of the verb. And each way is legitimate. The question is: which rendering makes the most sense in the context? It's a very difficult decision. James could be making a statement about the intense envy within each of us. That's the way the NIV takes it, "the spirit that he caused to live in us envies intensely." And that would relate to the jealousy and selfish ambition and quarreling and fighting that are mentioned in 3:13 – 4:3.

However, it seems like the ESV translation fits better with the flow of thought in verses 4-6. Verse 4 refers to spiritual adultery, drawing on the theme of God's covenant relationship with His people. And verse 5, then, refers to God's jealousy for His people. In a covenant relationship there's an appropriate jealousy that is felt, one for the other. It's a desire for the relationship to be absolutely exclusive—forsaking all others. And in this way, God yearns jealously over us. It grieves Him to see us committing adultery with the world. He wants us to be faithful to Him.

Verse 6 is such a wonderful and timely word at this point in the passage. I love it that the strongest rebuke in the letter is followed by a statement about God's grace! Have you committed adultery with the world? Are you now living in the world? Is your life drifting more and more toward worldliness? Know this: God gives more grace! He graciously forgives our sin, and it is by His grace that He enables us to follow Him. He yearns jealously over us. He wants us to be faithful to Him. And it's His grace that causes this to happen. His grace is more than enough to overcome

our rebellion and change our desires so that we follow Him and obey Him and seek our joy in Him.

In the second part of verse 6 we learn something very important about God's grace. James quotes from Proverbs 3:34, saying, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God's forgiving grace and enabling grace is not bestowed on everyone. And this shows us our responsibility to humble ourselves before Lord. God doesn't give grace to the proud. He opposes the proud. Those who think they don't need God, those who think they can make it on their own without God, they don't receive grace from God. In verse 2 it said, "You do not have because you do not ask." That's the predicament of those who will not humble themselves before God and plead for help. God will oppose you. Human pride is fundamentally at odds with God's grace.

1 Peter 5:5 quotes the same verse from Proverbs. Peter writes, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." There's a fundamental opposition between our pride and God's grace. You see, God does everything He does in order to glorify His Name. His supreme purpose is to show the splendor and power and goodness of who He is. And therefore He does not exalt the proud. He does not give grace to the proud, because that would only draw attention to the person. But those who are humble to ask for help, those who understand their need—it's in their lives that God shows His power and goodness and glory. He showers grace upon the humble, and He is glorified in helping those who know their need.

III. **Repentance and Faith (Verses 7-10)**

Following the quotation from Proverbs, James expands on this mention of humility, and he lists 10 imperatives in verses 7-10. I'll give these verses the heading "Repentance and Faith," because we'll see here how we need to humble ourselves in repentance and draw near to God.

So, first of all, in verse 7, "Submit yourselves therefore to God." The word "therefore" connects these verses to the previous verse and the Proverbs quotation. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble, therefore submit yourselves to God. Don't resist Him in pride. Humble yourself and submit to him. This is very similar to the concluding command in verse 10 to "humble yourselves before the Lord," and the two commands serve as book-ends for this section. Submit yourselves, verse 7. Humble yourselves, verse 10.

We must come to the Lord in humble submission, not prideful rebellion. He is our Lord. He is our Master. And He commands and deserves our complete submission to His will. In what areas of your life are you refusing to submit to God? Is it in the area of finances? God is calling you to be more generous, but you refuse. Maybe it's your marriage. God exhorts husbands to be the sacrificial loving leaders in the home, and maybe you, husband, are neglecting that responsibility. You find it easier to be passive and irresponsible, and thus you are refusing to submit to God's design for manhood. Wives, God commands you to submit to your husband—to respect him and support him and follow his lead as he follows Christ. And maybe your pride causes you to strongly resist your husband's leadership. In doing so you are not only refusing to submit to your husband, you are refusing to submit to God.

Maybe it's sexual immorality of some kind that you're struggling with, and you refuse to give it up. You have a secret sin that you won't turn away from. You're refusing to submit to God.

Whatever it is in your life, you need to know and you need to continue reminding yourself that there's such misery in resisting God's commands, and such joy in submitting to Him.

The next command is, "Resist the devil." And then a promise is connected to it, "and he will flee from you." Submission to God entails resisting the devil. Looking at it from the opposite perspective, when we refuse to submit to God we are giving the devil a foothold in our lives. The devil is opposed to God and everything God does and everyone who belongs to God. Therefore, we must resist the devil. He will seek to attack us and destroy our faith, and we need to be alert and on guard against his schemes. 1 Peter 5, which I already read from (it has several similarities to this passage in James), it goes on to say, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:9-11). Also in Ephesians 6, and listen to these important words at the beginning, it says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." And then we're instructed to "put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." And the armor includes the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes which are the readiness given by the gospel of peace, the shield of faith with which we can extinguish all the

flaming darts of the evil one, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

So how do we resist the devil? By faith. Faith in the truth of the gospel, which is revealed in the word of God. And when those flaming darts come our way, the lies of the devil seeking to entice us with worldly pleasures, we need to resist those temptations with the knowledge of a far superior pleasure. We need to trust that God is better than sin. Communing with Christ is far more satisfying than the short-lived delights of the world.

And, by God's grace, the devil will flee from us. Not because of our strength. But, as Ephesians 6 said, because of the Lord's might—"be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." And the Lord has defeated the devil, by dying on the cross and rising from the dead on the third day. And in the end the Lord will utterly destroy the devil so that he can no longer attack us. It's with this confidence that we can resist the devil and know that he will flee from us. For we belong to One who is far greater and far more powerful than him.

In verse 8 comes the next command, also with a promise. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." This is an amazing statement, and an amazing promise, especially as we consider the majesty and holiness of God. God's perfect holiness does not allow that anything impure or unholy enter into His presence. In our sin, we cannot draw near to God, or God to us. There's a great chasm that separates us, and it's called sin. We are all sinful by nature, and we have actively and intentionally disobeyed God. We have refused to submit to him. We have refused to humble ourselves before Him. And in many, many ways we have dishonored Him, scorned Him. Because of this we deserve eternal punishment. We deserve to go to hell.

The precious news of the Gospel is that God has made a way to uphold His justice and also extend grace to sinners. He did this by sending His Beloved Son into this world to live a sinless life and then to die a sinner's death. Jesus Christ did this in our place. He lived the sinless life that we are required to live but cannot live, because of our sin. And then He died the sinner's death that we all deserve, but are now spared from. Jesus did this for His chosen people, for His sheep, for those who repent of their sin and trust in Him. It's because of Jesus that we can draw near to God, and God will draw near to us.

Let's look now at what James says about repentance, which is an essential component of the Christian life. The only way we can draw near to God is by repenting of our sin, turning away from our sin, mourning over our sin, and trusting in Jesus Christ. And these verses make a powerful statement about the depth and significance of real repentance. Look at how James describes this,

beginning in the second half of verse 8, “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.” These are strong words, and harsh words, going right along with the way this passage began, “You adulterous people!” Again, instead of the usual “brothers” or “beloved brothers,” James addresses his readers as “you sinners” and “you double-minded.”

All of this is a vivid picture of what true repentance should look like. We need to cleanse ourselves and purify ourselves, both outwardly and inwardly. Our sinful deeds have to change, and our sinful hearts have to change. And accompanying these changes will be great sadness and pain. “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.” There’s a mourning over sin that every true believer will experience. The realization that I have been so foolish to pursue sin. The feeling of anguish over the sinful things that I have done. This is what Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 7:10 when he says, “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret . . .” There’s a godly grief that we should all experience in our lives that produces repentance. We look back at past sins and look into our hearts and see sinful attitudes and actions that are still present in our lives, and we weep over these sins. We don’t minimize them. We don’t joke about them. We mourn over them.

I ask you: How do you perceive the sin in your life. Is it something you ignore and trivialize? Or can you begin to see the gravity of sinning against a holy God? Mourn and weep over your sin, and let your mourning produce repentance and faith, from which comes real hope and peace knowing that our sin is forgiven.

The truth is that everyone will mourn at some point. If not now, at the judgment day. Jesus said, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:25). If there’s no repentance of sin now, there will be eternal mourning and weeping to come. But for those who mourn and weep now, and desperately cast themselves upon Jesus, there will be an eternity in heaven without mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4).

The last verse in our passage restates the point of verses 6-7. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. And we are, therefore, to submit ourselves to God. And now James states one last command, in verse 10, “Humble yourselves before the Lord.” And this is followed by another promise, “and he will exalt you.” I take this to be basically a restatement of the quotation from Proverbs. If you don’t humble yourself before the Lord, He will oppose you because of your pride. But if you humble yourself before Him and repent of your sin and submit to Him and draw

near to Him in faith, then He will give you grace. He will exalt you.

I think the message of these verses should bring each and every one of us to our knees before the Lord. I encourage you to find a time to be alone with the Lord and meditate further on this passage. Think about the worldliness that is present in your life. Consider the spiritual pride that has subtly crept into your heart. Identify specific areas of sin in your life, in the past and in the present, and mourn over your sin. Humble yourself before the Lord in these ways, submitting to Him, drawing near to Him. And receive His abundant grace.