

The War Within

James 4:1-12

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 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. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

4 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. 5 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"?

6 But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4:1-12 (ESV))

Within these words, we are once again, able to experience the personality of this special chosen writer of scripture. Here, I can, in my imagination, hear the Apostle James passionately preaching and crying out to those who will listen, saying, "My dear friends in the Lord, you are not taking the teachings of our Lord seriously enough. You are saved but you are still behaving in the same ways that you behaved before you were saved. You fail to take that which you have learned on Sunday into all the other days of the week. In Christ, you really are a whole new creature and you need to leave your old ways behind and get on about the new."

And I love the way that the Holy Spirit brings these scriptures to us with such simplicity. Too often, our rationale will get ahead of the simple truth and cause us to miss out on God's intended meaning. But here, from these very first words of this chapter, the Holy Spirit is blunt and to the point. He declares to these brethren then, and consequently to you and me now, that "wrong desires and passions are brewing and fomenting within

our souls. And those wrong desires and passions are then manifesting themselves on out into the whole body of believers causing conflict, discord and divisions. Verse 1,
1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (James 4:1)

Here, God's use of the word "war" is purposeful, intentional. Our difficulty is not just one "battle". It is a "war". And a war has many battles. And war is intense, destructive, and is long and drawn out. And if a "war" within just one individual person's soul is allowed to fester and foment, it will eventually spill over into other hearts and minds in the congregation, bringing with it conflict and discord, destroying the "unity" that is so vital to a body of believers.

And a lack of "oneness" strikes at the very heart of the Lord Jesus personally. As we read in John 17, "unity", "oneness" within a body of believers is absolutely essential, else that body will be crippled and ineffective, unable to bear fruit. In some of the last words that the Lord Jesus spoke to His disciples before He was crucified, He gave a passionate prayer for "unity" between the brethren. "Oneness", togetherness, agreement, accord is absolutely essential to a vibrant life within a church body. Listen to His prayer to God the Father in John 17. There He prayed . . .

20 "I do not ask for these only (that is, the twelve disciples), but also for those who will believe in me through their word (all believers, you and me). 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.
(John 17:20-23 (ESV))

May I say it again? "Oneness", "unity" within the "Body of Christ" is of utmost importance to God. As Jesus expresses here, "oneness" is an essential necessity in His relationship with God the Father, and "oneness" is therefore essential within the relationship between us believers.

And take careful note of the serious consequences that can take place without unity. Here, in verse 2, using words that would seem to better address street-level unbelievers, God warns of coveting, fighting, quarrelling, even murder. Here, in our church, we can't imagine such behaviors. But as James is warning about here, such things certainly can take place, even among people who really are saved and wanting to be good Christians. The simple truth is, none of us are exempt from these extreme and sinful behaviors.

And this is just one more of many such warning that God keeps giving to us, that yes, though we be “new creatures” in our “new birth”, and though it be absolutely true that “when the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed”, we can still somehow bring our old habits and old behaviors into our “new life in Christ”.

But thanks, be to God, He has generously given us His Holy Spirit to help us with this “war within us”. And with His intimate presence and power working within us we really are able to do as verses 7 and 8 instruct. We can and must “draw near to God” and “resist the devil” and resist the sin that the devil brings with him. And with the Holy Spirit’s power at work in us, we are emboldened to reach forward and “work out the salvation” that Christ has worked into our souls. He tells us in Philippians 2, to

12. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

(Philippians 2:12-13 (ESV))

And this really is the “hardest part” of our Christian experience. Our salvation was actually the easy part for us, Jesus having done all the hard work of suffering and dying on the cross. But now, you and I have to join in with Him and we have to “put our hand to the plow and not look back”. We have to “work out our salvation” in all the difficult circumstances that come to us each day. And that means doing battle with the desires and passions that flood our souls and lead us astray.

Thankfully, in this “war” that rages within us, our battles to “resist the devil” are in the Spiritual realm, and we are able to use “spiritual weapons” to fight those battles. And rather than our “resisting” the devil by our human efforts of trying hard to be good, and trying not to argue and quarrel and gossip and slander our brethren in the church, God has given us a much more spirit-filled approach to this battle, that of adding the strength of Godly attributes to our faith, attributes such as those spoken about in 2nd Peter 1 . . . virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. With these Spirit-filled “weapons” in our arsenal, the Holy Spirit will enable us to do things we’ve never done before.

This folks is the highest and best expression of “freewill”, our freewill, empowered by the Holy Spirit, working to do God’s Will using His weapons of war. This is the only “battle plan” that can win the war of desires and passions that rage within us. Verse 2,

2 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. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

(James 4:2-3)

Think about this for a moment! Up until that special “life-changing” moment in time when God called us to Himself in salvation, all that you and I knew was this manner of behavior described here. We were not only friends with the world, we were one of its children, doing everything that it does. It ways flowed freely through our veins. And yes, though we may now be ashamed to acknowledge it, we really did like all of that sinful behavior.

But then, in one indescribable moment of “regeneration”, we were changed, “born again”, and everything really did become different within us. All those behaviors that were once part of our old nature, suddenly were no longer natural to us. When we would do one of those sinful behaviors that we freely did while we were unsaved, suddenly a powerful new conviction would course through our heart and mind, telling us to “wait, stop, something is wrong with what I just did”. And we are promised that the Holy Spirit will be faithful to always keep doing exactly that, to warn us away from our temptations and provide us a way of escape. And He will.

But, with that being said and very true, a question . . . From verses 1 and 2, what is at work within our soul as our passions heat up and we begin to want to revert back to our old ways of coveting, fighting, quarreling and sometimes even murder. The answer is, it is our forever enemy, sin. And sin will never cease to wage war within our soul. Recall the words in James chapter 1, verse 14,

14 . . . each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (James 1:14-15 (NKJV))

Do you see the correlation of those words in chapter 1 with these words here in verse 2 of chapter 4? There in chapter 1, the Lord is giving a simple allegory that most all of us should be able to understand. In the same way that “desire” can result in “conception” and the birth of a child, so also can sinful desire, when allowed to get out of control, eventually well its way up into full blown sin.

The unspoken caution is clear, that we must attend to sinful desires before they are able to get out of our control. In verse 7 we read,

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 4:7-8)

Sinful desire is powerful and it seems to have a mind all its own. And if we do not resist our sinful desires, those desires will conceive and give birth to full blown sin.

And sin seems always to love company. Because, while trying to keep control of one sin, suddenly another sin is bred, and then another, and another, sins of coveting, and fighting and quarreling and murder and on and on.

And here, in verse 4, we are called adulterous people. How does that description fit us as Christians, “adulterous people”? It fits because as believers, we really are no longer our own, to do with as we please. We have been bought with a price and are betrothed to Jesus Christ as His “Bride”. And we are no longer allowed to seek after the company of other lovers of our souls. We just cannot do the things and have the friendships that we once had as unbelievers. It makes God “jealous”. And listen!

4 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. 5 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”? (James 4:4-5)

Take careful note of those ending words in verse 5. As believers, you and I are not our own, we are the temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Ours is a relationship with the Holy Spirit that makes us “one” with Him. And if we involve ourselves in corrupt, vulgar and sinful behavior, we are requiring the Holy Spirit to do those things with us. And that makes God “jealous”. And folks, we do not want to make God “jealous”.

“He (God the Father) yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? (James 4:5)

But . . . we say. I try so hard, and I just can’t seem to help myself. I just keep stumbling and falling. What is the answer for me? Here, God gives us the exact answer. He tells us that being submissive and humble is our beginning step. And humility and submissiveness are really not as difficult as we make them out to be. It simply requires the realization that we really cannot help ourselves and cannot solve our own problems. Defeating sin is impossible for men, but is wholly doable by God.

But again, we must be willing to join with Him and do our part. As we seek to be humble and submissive, we must invoke one of those attributes of God that we mentioned a moment ago, the attribute of “virtue”. What is “Virtue”? “Virtue” is a “Spirit empowered” courageous commitment to being “excellent in character”. It requires “valor” and fearless effort. And God’s promise to us is that as we step forward in “virtue”, He will enable us by His unstoppable power to be humble and submissive to Him. Listen! Verse 6,

6 But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:6-10)

So then, what shall we conclude from our consideration of this passage? It is this! Desires and passions of the wrong kind will forever find their way into our souls and cause us to be tempted towards sinful behavior, sinful behavior that if left unattended, will surely spread out into the people around you. And yes, the devil is behind it all. That is just what the devil does. And He will always do those things.

But you and I do not have to give into those desires and passions. We really can join with the Holy Spirit and humble ourselves before the Lord, and He will bring peace to our troubled souls.

6 . . . "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. (James 4:6-8)