

Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2011
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War and Peace
James 4:1-6

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 (ESV). 4 You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who is a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

The Voice of Pride, P. B. Shelley, "Ozymandias."

I met a traveler from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert, Near them on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on those lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked, the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 My name is Ozymandias, King of kings:
 Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sand stretches far away...

So speaks the voice of pride. James says "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (4:6). This is the testimony of all Scripture.

- God is king over all that are proud (Job 41:34).
- The Lord preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full (Ps 31:23).
- He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34).
- Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:14).

James hates pride: the hypocrite who claims to be religious but doesn't care for the poor. The boasting of the tongue (3:5), the ambitious, who say, "Tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there... and make money" (4:13-16).

James asks a probing question: "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" James 3 says God's wisdom creates a beautiful life (3:13), but those who lack wisdom suffer "disorder and every evil practice" (3:16). Even within the family of faith, passions and worldliness cause private lusts to burst into public quarrels (4:1-6).

Worldly wisdom and selfish striving

James knows that sinful passions lead to battles in his community. He states this almost poetically, as some translations show:

Fact + result	You desire and do not have, so you murder.
Fact + result	You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.
Fact + reason	You do not have, because you do not ask.
Fact + result	You [do] ask, [but] do not receive,
Full reason	Because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Context: James 3:14-16 says worldly wisdom leads to selfish ambition and envy. Unchecked, it leads to quarrels, fights, even murder. James hopes we live in God's wisdom, yet he knows how many live by the world's wisdom. To warn us away, he describes the rivalry, pride, strife that envy and ambition breed.

James 4:1 says worldly wisdom leads to fights and struggles. There are fights "among you" because of passions "that are at war within you." Literally, James says our passions are at war "in our members." "Members" means the faculties within one person, not the various members of the church. Selfish passions make believers wage war within themselves. We feel anxious, conflicted, tense. Why? Our desire to serve Christ and neighbor conflicts with the desire to serve self.

Internal conflict leads to external conflict. Whenever envy and selfish ambition create battles within us, they disrupt relations outside us. Quarrels and fights break out. James says "You desire and do not have; so you kill. You covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war" (4:2). This isn't literal murder. The word for "fights" (*machai*) *can* refer to physical violence, but it usually means verbal sparring or internal struggles (2 Cor 7:5, 2 Tim 2:23, Tit 3:9).

We speak the same way. We hear about "battles" in Congress and legal "fights." No one is getting killed. But the language of warfare and violence suits the strife, acrimony, criticism, and deceit that happen when people seek supremacy.

It's necessary to fight some battles. We should fight for the unborn – politically and personally. We should fight for the truth. Sometimes refusal to fight is a sign of cowardice. But too many of our fights begin with selfish desires, not noble causes. James says we fight due to our "passions" – disorderly desires.

Application: If you ever find yourself angry, in a fight, try to pause and ask, "Why am I angry? Is there something selfish in me that causes this?"

"Passions" and "desires" can be good or bad. We may long to be a good husband and father. We may desire to learn a new skill or to accomplish a great goal. But we say we hope or aspire or wish to do good things. "Passion" usually suggests lack of emotional control. The word also has sexual overtones in English and in Greek, often referring to disorderly and sexual desires.

For James, the desires definitely are not good. These desires are the appetite for material things, for sensual delights and for sexual pleasures. The overriding factor is the yearning for my satisfaction.

How we fight

Desires lead to fights because they are self-centered. Husbands and wives easily end up fighting when resources are limited and desires are unlimited. He wants a vacation week with the boys; she wants a new

refrigerator. He says, "I work hard all year. I need some fun, something to look forward to, to keep me going." She says, "But what you spend in one week hunting can buy a refrigerator for the whole family that will last twenty years. And as for fun, we were just at the beach in July?" He replies, "Yes it will last twenty years, but you'll want a new one in seven. And it rained every day and the kids squabbled constantly at the beach, so it was hardly a barrel of fun."

When a husband and a wife are arguing for their own way, they use as much truth as they can to win the argument. So it did rain at the beach and the kids did squabble, but they still had lots of fun. But that is forgotten, because the man is arguing for his trip. When we try to get our way, we remember history selectively. We distort the facts a little, so they favor our point. Then, our spouse catches us in a small distortion and that can lead to another round of "discussions."

So James is right: Envy foments materialistic desires, which drive selfish talk and behavior. When we chase our selfish desires, we quarrel and fight. Meanwhile, sacrifice and mutual understanding fade away.

It gets this bad

Our selfish desires become so strong that we cannot bring ourselves to pray about them. James says, "You do not have because you do not ask" (4:2). This sounds odd, since believers can always pour out their requests before the Lord (1 Sam 1:15). Yet James understands how difficult it is to present selfish requests to the Lord, regardless of the intensity of the desire. The heart is free when we pray for friends and family, for kingdom and church.

It can be harder to pray for our legitimate needs. It may seem a bit selfish. And perhaps we are afraid to hear God say no. For then, beyond the unfulfilled desire, we also wonder if God is displeased or disinterested: Does he not hear? Does he judge me unworthy?

But we can hardly pray for clearly selfish desires. We feel awkward; words fail us. We imagine, "If I don't tell God my desires, perhaps he won't know. But if I say it aloud in prayer, my selfishness will be undeniable." So we do not even ask.

Historically, when automotive accidents or decrepitude forces me into the market for a new car, I know what I want: a brand new car, filled with luxury and sporty features, at a 90% discount. But it is hard to formulate that in prayer.

But other prayers may be just as hard to articulate. We may be ashamed to ask for a vacation or some luxury or an honor or position. Sometimes people even wish someone will falter, so we can take their position. We may want control or revenge. Prayer guides of old do not offer prayers suited for such occasions. Our fathers in the faith stressed prayers that expressed love for God and neighbor, humility, confession of sin.

Too often, we hesitate to pray. Ask yourself: Do I harbor a desire that is so far outside God's will that I am ashamed to mention it to him? Am I shoving it under the bed, into the basement, hoping God won't see it? So we fail to pray. Yet, James says, some do pray "that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:3). God denies it, because we ask wrongly, wickedly. He will not answer a prayer that aims no higher than the belly – their appetites (Phil 3:19). Why would God answer the prayer of a believer who wants to live as his enemies do?

The diagnosis of wisdom of world (4:4)

When James says, "You adulterous people," he makes a specific accusation. The charge is spiritual adultery, not spiritual fornicators, because the people are joined to Christ. They are married to Jesus, but they run after other gods. This endangers their relationship, their marriage, to him "adulteress" evokes the prophetic tradition. Just as faithless Israel sought to worship both the Lord and the Canaanite gods of fertility and prosperity, so Christians attempt to pursue both God and the world. This is not vacillation, it's spiritual adultery.

Jeremiah says, "But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel" (Jer 3:20). Few Israelites set out to worship pagan gods alone. They intended to worship the Lord and pagan deities, to gain the benefits of both. But just as no husband tolerates a wife who takes on a lover to gain the benefits of two men, so the Lord will not tolerate Israel's lovers.

James censures adultery, but he even objects to friendship with the world: "Whoever wishes to be a friend of world establishes himself as an enemy of God (4:4b). We use the word "friend" lightly, when we really mean "cordial associate." In antiquity, as today, true friends share a mindset and an outlook on life. They share interests, values, and goals. They see life and live their lives in similar ways. They care for each other, work together and agree on what should be done.

Christians are the friends of God in this high sense. Earlier, James said believers are "unstained by the world" (1:27, ESV). We can be friendly toward anyone: kind and helpful, good neighbors and co-workers. But in the deepest sense, we cannot be friends with the world because our values are so different. For example:

Our society is acquisitive. It defines happiness in terms of bank accounts, homes, clothes, cars and great experiences: restaurants, concerts, trips to Europe. Question: Why is our current economic crisis so unsettling for people who are not poor, still have jobs? Because we don't have as much and that eats at our identity.

Our society is a merit-based. Our position depends, in part, on our parents' status. But personal accomplishments matter more. We can rise above our past, become "somebody," if we seek training, work hard, and reach our goals.

Our society is self-promoting. One football player carried a pen in his sock and whipped it out after catching a touchdown pass, to sign the football, while millions watch. Another hid a cell phone on the field, to call his friends the second he scored. The braggart's credo is, "I'm so good I can hardly stand it." These are infamous cases, but they are not alien cases. They just take our values to extreme.

Hear me: accomplishment is good. We should make the most of God-given skills and opportunities. But we cannot accept the **system** that says, "I must achieve and acquire to be happy, to know that I am somebody."

In God's system, all humans have honor, since he made all in his likeness. That should relieve self-doubt, based on our performance and make us feel better about ourselves! But we are not God's friends if we define people by their clothes and cars, awards and titles. We are his friends if we treat everyone with respect, regardless of the value culture puts on them.

Can you do that? Can you see how that would help you and the world around you feel like a better place?

But if we do live by our society's three values – acquisition, merit, self-promotion – rather than God's values, we are disloyal to God. If we live for "our pleasures" James calls it adultery. Yet the Lord, like a good husband, woos his faithless wife. "The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted" (Isa 54:5-6). The Lord woos us through James too, in 4:5-6.

The problem and its cure (4:5-6)

James brings his indictment of worldly wisdom, envy, ambition, selfish pleasure to its climax with a question: "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" Notice - when James writes "Scripture says" he is not quoting one passage. He is condensing the entire biblical message about the human condition. This is our situation: "The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely."

There is some debate about this verse – translations differ more than usual (I believe the New International Version (NIV) is most accurate). I want to walk you through a couple key points:

New International Version: The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely.

English Standard Version: He [God] yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us.

First, the spirit means our human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. The context indicates that James means the human spirit. Through chapters 3-4, James focuses on the human spirit – our ambitions (3:14, 16) and passions (4:1, 3). Indeed, verse 4:5 summarizes James' comments on the disorder of the human spirit. "Spirit" appears one time in James, 2:26, and it clearly refers to human spirit. The question arises because Greek rarely uses capital letters, the New Testament never capitalizes "spirit," (even when it clearly refers to the Holy Spirit.)

Second, this intense desire is an evil or selfish desire. I want to affirm: It's good to have strong desires, even passions. Heroes of the faith such as Abraham, David, Jeremiah, Peter and Paul were all passionate, captured by a vision. Strong desires motivate us to persevere, to finish a goal. They empower us to love when it's hard to continue when we want to quit.

The Bible even says God yearns jealously for his people (Zech 1:14). This is not jealousy as selfish control, but the good jealousy that longs to keep what belongs to us or protect those whom we love.

But James is talking about evil desires, selfish desires and strife (4:1-3), evil longings. Envy is the desire to have what someone else has and deprive the proper owner of it. Paul calls envy a depraved vice (*phthonos*) (Rom 1:29, Gal 5:21, 1 Tim 6:14, Tit 3:3). Envy is always negative in New Testament and Greek literature.) Paul uses *epipothēō* positively seven times (e.g. Rom 1:11, 2 Cor 5:2, Phil 1:8, especially used for Paul's desire to visit friends) and Peter does once (1 Pet 2:2). But *phthonos* is negative in Matt (27:18), Mark (15:10), Paul (R 1:29, Phil 1:15), Peter (1 Pet 2:1).

James says we're prone to envy and selfish striving; all Scripture agrees. Look at the brothers in Genesis. Jacob got the blessing Esau wanted and Esau threatened to kill his brother. Joseph had the favor of God, and his father, so his brothers sold him as a slave. God blessed Abel, so Cain was envious and killed him.

The communist experiment, first proposed by Plato, then by Marx, and attempted with no success in some Greek states, in Russia, Cuba, China – is largely an attempt to stamp out envy: one table, shared

parenthood, goods.¹ Bertrand Russell thought envy is a universal: We always compare ourselves to others and for some perverse reason we always decide we come up short. "If you desire glory, you may envy Napoleon," Russell said. "But Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I dare say, envied Hercules, who never existed."²

Joseph Epstein said of envy: "I will speak as a male: Did we not envy boys who were more athletic, more attractive to girls, more cool and socially adept. We looked and eyesight became sharp to detect friends with more freedom, more spending money, cooler parents. We lived in a faint cloud of envy. So then, how much have we changed as adults?"

God has endowed humans with a drive to achieve, to taste glory. But alas, we put our energy in vain projects and fan selfish desires. Instead of aiming for success, we are content to watch someone else fail. Is this what God intended us to make of our life energy and talents? Surely, God gave humans a desire to do great things. A capacity to yearn, to desire, to dream for great things. He did not give us our energy, our fight, to spend it defeating and plundering others. God made us for glory, to aspire to the glories of loving God and blessing our fellow humans.

After he diagnoses the problem, James announces the solution: God gives grace. He resists the proud, gives grace to the humble (4:6). James does not describe how God sent his grace, but I will. He humbled himself, gave his life for us on the cross, then rose from the dead in victory over sin. In James Christian readers knew how Jesus accomplished the salvation that the Spirit offers us by his grace. Now God extends his grace to the humble who believe in him.

The gospel of James suggests a test. What are your longings? Is your spirit filled with selfish or ambitious cravings for things, for power, for having things your way? Our ambitions can be simple: safety, security, modest prosperity, peace, a little leisure. That people do things "my way." This can be selfish, too.

It's good to dream. A child's dream of the Olympics can at least inspire practice. A businessman or woman ought to aim for success. They want a profit, but they also love their clients and customers. Teachers want people to listen to them because they hope to love people through helpful information. So our dreams can prompt us to love people, or to be selfish. Again, we need to examine ourselves.

I once shared a meal with a retired college president. He said, "Of course, I wanted my school to grow and prosper after I leave. But there was a tiny part of me that hoped for some trouble, so people would think of my time as the glory days." That man was honest in his self examination, looking for pride, repenting.

Grace for the humble

If we find such sin in ourselves, we should confess it to the Lord. Do desires battle within you? Do you want, even demand, your way? One sign of this: living in the world of "if only" If only there were no tensions in my relationships - how unrealistic! If only 'event x' hadn't happened - as if we somehow deserve a life without trouble, as if things would be better if we ruled history. If only I lived somewhere

¹ Epstein, 83-85, Plato Republic

² Conquest of Happiness, 67.

else, was younger and healthier, had more money, had never suffered my wound... Even this can be a form of selfish desire.

James says that if we repent "He will give grace to the humble." Let me tell you what that means. First, we sin. We put people down, bully them, take advantage of people. We get in a debate or an argument, realize we are wrong, yet keep arguing, because we would rather be wrong than appear to be wrong. We take things or privileges that are not ours. We indulge mean thoughts about good people. At home, we pass up chances to love our spouse or parents. Parents rebuke their children too harshly, for sins we showed them how to commit. All that is sin.

When we sin we can be cold, hard, and defensive or candid and open. It's good to be candid with people, but imperative to be candid with God. When we say, "Lord, I have sinned, I could make excuses, but I really don't have any. I'm not going to tell how good I am. I want to ask for mercy, I want to ask in the name of Jesus, God and man, my redeemer and my Lord."

If we say that, sincerely, James says God will lift us up. If we ask for mercy and forgiveness, he will grant it. He will forgive, love unconditionally, like a good father or mother, and begin the process of restoration. Our faith may falter. Our repentance may be flawed. Yet saving faith rests not on the quality of our faith but on the object of our faith - Jesus.

So we must choose. There is the way of ambition, fighting, grasping, and pride, and the way of repentance and grace, which grants peace with God and neighbor. Remember, James says no one passes God's tests, even suffering missionaries. God gives grace to the humble. So let's humble ourselves and ask for the grace that lifts us up, so we can stand before him. Then the grace that starts to remake us – so we still fight and quarrel, but not so much, not so readily, as his wisdom, his friendship takes hold.

So God forgives if we humble ourselves and repent. Repentance is more than feeling sorry. The penitent acknowledge their sins at hand – pride, selfish desires, envy; hearing the word, but doing nothing, reckless speech, following the crowd when we know the crowd is wrong. Then we ask God to forgive us, to restore us, and to give us his life – life with the risen Christ.

We cling to the gospel, but even our clinging is tainted, because we are too glad that our sin is covered, and not enough sorry that we did it. God even saves us from the defects in our faith. The man after God's heart knows this so that he returns again and again to the beloved gospel.