

03.27.11 / James 4:1-5

Passage Insight

In the passage immediately preceding this week's passage, James contrasts the wisdom of God with the "wisdom" of the world, which is not actually wisdom at all. He makes two things clear: 1) the outcome of a life fueled by the wisdom of the world is a life marked by disorder and vile practices, and 2) the only solution to the problem of worldly wisdom is the wisdom of God, who is Christ. In this week's passage, we see these same truths in even greater detail.

In John 17, Jesus prays for unity among the body, oneness among the body of believers that is a pure reflection of the oneness of God, but as evidenced by verse 1 of this week's passage, fights are instead the order of the day. Christians are fighting against one another, and it should clearly not be so. This word "fights" in Greek refers to being in a state of war. The Christians to whom James was writing were fighting for themselves and thus against one another to such an extent that it felt like war. And it gets worse, as we'll soon see, because their fight for themselves leads them ultimately to war with God, which is never a good thing. Some might say from the outset, "Well, it doesn't feel like that's going on here in our local church, so maybe this passage doesn't address us as much as it did them." But, as we'll see, this couldn't be further from the truth, because what was at the root of this war is indeed present here within individuals who are part of the body of believers, and we must address it now, at this stage, rather than allow the symptoms of selfish desire to overtake our local church as well.

As we examine the hearts of the individuals in question here, we see that their passions are at war within them. In other words, even their own desires can't agree with one another. One desire is for X, another desire for Y, both within the same person, and the two desires compete for attention, demanding that the individual "pick me, pick me!" We are each likewise conflicted internally when we take an honest look at our desires. One moment we desire something good, the next moment something bad, the next moment something good but with selfish motivations, the next moment something worse than the first thing! We'll explore the solution for this dilemma momentarily, but first let's look at the outcome of our evil and selfish desires and how they are not isolated or limited to us in any way.

Our selfish desires impact (even kill) others, not just ourselves. While some of us would say that if we do something out of selfish motivation, it's not a big deal if it's not hurting someone else, but the truth is that because we were built to love and care for one another, when we are self-serving and driven by our own selfish desires, we are denying one another the love and care that they were also built to receive from us. When we act from selfish desires, we are automatically hurting someone else, whether or not we know it right away. At times, our selfish desires move us to intentionally harm one another, typically for one of two reasons: 1) they have something we want, and so we want them out of the picture (consider how in 2 Samuel David had Uriah killed so that he could cover up his adulterous affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba – this all started with David's coveting of Bathsheba, selfishly desiring what was not his in the first place – this desire led him to war with his fellow soldier, led him to literally kill for the sake of his selfish desire), or 2) we think that if we can knock somebody down a couple notches, then somehow that will build us up (the opposite, however, is true, as we see in Luke 14:11, which tells us that, "... he who humbles himself will be exalted." – additionally we see in Philippians 2:3 – in so doing we reflect the Lord's mercy, patience, and grace to both our enemies and our brothers).

In short, our fleshly desires cannot be trusted, which means we must rely on something outside of ourselves to serve as the gold standard for the way we make decisions. This is where Scripture comes in and becomes the measuring stick by which we should gauge the source of our desires. We can compare and contrast our desires with those of God

as seen in the Holy Scriptures, and in so doing gain a clearer understanding of the source of those desires. From there we will have the capacity to decide for ourselves – will we follow the leading of our desires or God's?

Verse 3 says, "You ask and do not receive. . . ." What does this tell us about God? Sometimes God says no to our prayers. This is in fact an act of love and mercy when He does this, for who would want to serve a god who constantly left us to get and rely on what WE wanted? Where's the authority in that? Where's the compassion, the protection, the provision? No. God loves us enough to lead us toward His good things rather than those things that we value above Him. While we consistently ask for things that will merely glorify ourselves and cater to our hedonistic pleasures, as the text suggests, the Lord often keeps us from these things because He knows that what will truly satisfy the longing of our souls is HIS glory, not ours, HIS good pleasure, not ours, justly He is the only one who deserves such glory. So when we ask for things to spend them on our passions, it is good, it is wise, it is merciful and compassionate, for the Lord to deny these requests. Instead, what does the Lord provide? We see in Luke 11:13 that the Lord stands ready to give the treasured Holy Spirit, His own being and essence, to those who ask Him. This is in remarkable contrast to our selfish desires – this is the very goodness of God Himself. So, not only does the Lord demonstrate His mercy and restraint when He denies us the evil desires of our hearts, but He even more powerfully and eternally demonstrates His perfect love for us by offering us goodness itself! He offers us HIMSELF, living and active inside of us, if we simply ask Him. I can't stand it. . . it's just such good news!

Verse 4 tells us that friendship with the world puts us at enmity with God. Where does friendship with the world start? It starts with loving ourselves more than we love God, just as in the Garden of Eden. This self-love leads us to seek to become like God by our own actions and merits. Remember what James writes in verse 1, that our passions are at war within us, that we long for a multitude of things that we think will satisfy our deepest longings, that we idolize the created (in this case, ourselves) rather than worship the Creator – it is this war within us that leads us to be at war with God Himself. This is the same combination of desire and action that brought the curse of sin into the world.

So, what's the cure? In a word, Jesus. If the problem is our selfish desire, then we must have our desires reoriented to be in line with the desires of God. Because our hearts are prone to self-service, we need new hearts, and the only way this happens is by receiving God's Holy Spirit as a gift from Christ our Lord. This will no doubt lead to a gradual change in the very desires of our hearts, and we should find over time that our desires, and subsequently our actions, more and more closely reflect the God who is restoring those who love Him (1 John 3:8-10).

Finally, it should be noted that verse 5 often brings much discussion among scholars and translators. Because of the nature of the original Greek in which James was written, it is difficult to know for sure the exact meaning of the verse. According to some scholars, the "spirit" referenced is God's Holy Spirit, in others that it is the spirit of life in all of humanity. Some translators interpret jealousy to be a characteristic of the broken spirit of humanity, while others attribute this jealousy to the Lord as his right and what leads Him to His pursuit of those He loves. There is no full consensus, and varying translations will emphasize some of these points and others depending on the interpretation that drove the translation. Regardless of this, we can be sure from the surrounding passage, and from the whole of the Scriptures, of the larger truth: without the Lord, who loves and pursues us perfectly, we are left to rely on our own selfish desires, which will not only fail to sustain us, but which will ultimately lead us to war within ourselves, with one another, and with God. But because God loves us so much, He shows us another way. When we believe that Jesus is Lord and confess with our mouth that God raised Him from the dead, our God saves us from our sinful desires

by replacing our broken heart with a new one, giving us His own Holy Spirit, causing us to want the things of God and to take the action that corresponds with our newfound Godly desires. Praise God.

Application Questions / Prayer

Friendship With the World

- 1) Where are you making friends with the world?
- 2) How do you justify this?
- 3) Specifically, how have you seen this friendship with the world put you at odds with God?
- 4) How does Christ lead you to make or renew peace with God?

Asking God

- 1) What do you typically ask God for?
- 2) How does He respond?
- 3) What does this tell you about God? About yourself?
- 4) Consider Luke 11 – Pray as a group for the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who believe and for the Spirit to illuminate the truth to those who don't yet believe.

Sources

- Prayer
- Tyler Jones
- The Bible Exposition Commentary
- The Bible Knowledge Commentary
- The Bible Reader's Companion
- A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments
- A Handbook on the Letter from James