

Come Near to God

James 4:1-12

Key Verse: 8

“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

This past week I read an article about 100 celebrity married couples that have broken up recently. The sad thing was that some of them were on the list more than once with different people. The CDC reported that the 2011 divorce rate was 53% which is up 4% in the last decade. This got me to thinking what about music groups that have broken up, like the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, the Supremes, Van Halen, ABBA, the Police, the Eagles, Journey, REM, Talking Heads, the Clash, Pink Floyd, Guns and Roses. The list could go on and on and on. They break up for all kinds of reasons such as creative differences, drug or alcohol abuse, band members not being paid the same amounts, insulting each other and there was even a case of armed robbery against one another. Whether it's married couples or groups or organizations, it seems that statistically the odds are not in your favor of remaining together forever. France has even tried to come up with a 5 year expiring marriage license. That automatically expires unless you renew it. Therefore saving you the expense of a divorce lawyer. What is the root problem of this mess? James addresses it in our passage today.

Of married couples here, who's had a fight? Or how about between a parent and a child. Do you mind if I ask you what it was about? In your opinion, what causes the fights between you? Why is it that so often we, especially as Christians, do not live using wisdom from above? You remember from last week's passage, wisdom from above is pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, merciful and sincere. If we live with this kind of wisdom surely we would have far fewer interpersonal conflicts. Not all conflict is bad, some can be good but what our passage is talking about today is the nasty fights, the ones that cause scars and bring pain and distrust and eventually lead to broken relationships. James generalizes the root problem of all our interpersonal conflicts. Does anyone want to take a guess as to what the root cause is? I'm not going to give it a way let's work our way through it. Let's read verse 1. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?” The Bible says that part of the problem is the desires that come from within each of us. If you remember from the first chapter of James it says that each of us are tempted and dragged away by our own evil desires. And after our desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin and sin when it is full grown gives birth to death. (Ja 1:14-15) each of us are filled with desires, some good some bad. Probably more bad than good. And often we are tempted by our evil desires. The problem comes is when we dwell on those evil desires because if we let them run wild long enough eventually we'll act on them. Take for example a married person that sees an attractive man or woman. Its not a sin to recognize someone's good looks. But the problem occurs when we dwell on them, maybe staring at them or fantasizing about them with our imagination. If this happens on a regular basis eventually that person will act upon it. As the police say for a crime to happen all you need is two things, motive and opportunity. And so if you have one part of that equation going on in your head all the time all that needs to happen is for an opportunity to come along and the relationship is killed. We live in a world of motive and opportunity. That's why it's so important to control what we think about and meditate on because all we need to act is the opportunity.

However to control the desires within us is not easy. James says that they battle within us. St. Paul described it like this, “For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” (Rom 7) You’ve seen on TV or in the movies this battle portrayed as a little white angel sits on a person’s left shoulder and a little red devil on their other shoulder with each giving them advice on what they should do. And there’s a battle going on for control of their actions. This happens every day. So it’s crucial to focus your desires on good things that way when good opportunities come along you will act upon them but more importantly when bad opportunities come along you won’t act on them.

In verse 2 James gets more specific about what desire is battling within us. Take a look at verse 2. “You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.” There is a covetous desire brewing within us. Coveting is to desire what we don’t have and someone else does. It could be anything from material things, relationships, or influence. Like a new car/computer, or someone’s family, or their position at work. We want what they have but we can’t get it and so that bothers us. And sometimes people act like spoiled little children when they can’t get what they want. Basically we are all selfish. This is a common trait among people. I remember when Julia and I first got married and we went out to eat. We ordered our food and started to eat and Julia began to help herself to my fries. I got so mad because she was taking my fries. So I said, “If you wanted fries, you should have ordered your own.” And then a fight began. I was being selfish. And I don’t think I am alone. James says that when we can’t get what we want, we quarrel and fight and even kill. Killing a person is the extreme, which happens all the time, just look at the news. However what I think happens more often is that we don’t literally kill the person but figuratively kill the person. We kill their character either by character assassination, slandering them, saying bad stuff about them, or by attacking them verbally and fighting with them, or by humiliating them and crushing their spirit. To simplify why fights occur is that it comes down to we want something and we don’t get it and so interpersonal conflict occurs.

Let me give you a few scenarios and you tell me what’s going to happen. Let’s say there is husband and its playoff season in his favorite sport and his favorite team is in the playoffs. And he has been looking forward to seeing the game all week. In his mind he’s got the game all planned out, what he’s going to eat, maybe with some friends, whatever. And then when the day finally arrives his wife, not knowing his desires, reminds him of something important he’s forgotten to do and she wants done. What do you think is going to happen? A fight’s going to break out, why? It’s because his desire is not being fulfilled. He wanted something and didn’t get it and he’s disappointed. Or how about this one, let me pick on the girls this time. Let’s say there is a woman and she has a friend who is either getting married, having a child, or it’s her birthday, and she wants to throw a party for her. And so she starts to make plans, cleaning up the house, having it painted or whatever, in anticipation of having people over so that maybe she can show off her house, or be seen as someone that is important in that person’s life, or that she really wants to show them how much she cares. And so she makes all these preparations and then right before the event she finds out that another person is going to host the party, what do you think is going to happen? You guessed it, another fight, why? It’s because her desire is not being

fulfilled. She wanted something and didn't get it and she's disappointed. Or let's say that there is a person at work and a higher position opens up and so they begin to work harder in order to get that position of leadership. But when the time comes, that position is not offered to them but to someone they think is not qualified to have that position. And now all of a sudden they have to report to that "unqualified" person. What do you think is going to happen? You guessed it, another fight, why? Because their inner desire is not being fulfilled and now they are going to fight because they didn't get what they wanted. Generally speaking the source of all our conflicts come from this one issue, we're not getting what we want. Think about the last conflict you had, what were you mad? Was it because you were offended, cheated, humiliated, what? I'm not saying that we should never fight, that you should become a punching bag. There are times when we have a right to be angry and we should. But more often than not, the source of our conflict comes from our desire to get what we don't have. So James says, "Where do you think all these fights come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come because you want your own way, and fight for it. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to do whatever it takes to get your hands on it."

At the end of verse 2 James implies, "Have you ever thought about asking God for what you want?" Most of the time we don't. Usually we just react on our impulses. What he is saying is that the reason our desires are not being fulfilled is because we are not bringing them to God. But some will say, "I've asked God but he never gives me what I want." To that James answers in verse 3, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." When we come to God and ask him for our hearts desires we have to examine what our motives are when we ask. If our motives are in-line with God's, then he will grant our request. On the other hand if our motive is for our own pleasure then he may not grant our request. This doesn't mean that God wants us to live a boring unpleasurable life. But what it does point out is the fact that we live for our own pleasures more than for God's. When we live for our own pleasure, it's called hedonism. Before I became a Christian, this was my goal: Enjoy life. And often what we desire, can cause us harm, but we're not usually thinking about that. We only want, what we want, when we want it and if I don't get it, I'm going to pout.

And here is where we find the root of all our interpersonal conflicts. Can anyone tell me what this is? The root of all our conflicts is idolatry. We are worshiping something instead of God. And usually we are worshiping ourselves. When our primary motive is to please ourselves, more than God then we have become idolatrous. We are placing ourselves in the highest place of our lives, so that what we want matters most and then we struggle to get it.

And what is James' response to this? Let's read verse 4. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Idolatry is the pattern of the world. James rebukes us when we become friends of the world. At first this seems a bit harsh, what's the problem with being friends of the world. Aren't we supposed to make friends and then win the to Christ? The problem here is that in this friendship, we try to win the approval of the world. Sometimes when we meet someone we like, we want to get them to be our friend, so we try to win their approval. And in doing so, we may lower our standards and do things that we shouldn't. A true friend will love you for who you are but a false friend will try to get you to do

what they want. You can spot them when they say things like, “If you are my friend then you will do.....” Watch out for these false friends because they are not sincere.

However James makes a strong statement that being a friend of the world makes you an enemy of God. Verse 5 reveals that God gets jealous when we love something more than him. Think of a married couple and if one of them has a very close friend of the opposite gender. And they spent a large portion of their time with that boy/girl friend. How would that spouse feel? Even if nothing bad was going on, they still would feel jealous. That is how it is with God because he wants to have a one to one relationship, not a one to many. And who of us can say that God is ALWAYS at the top of our list? And that’s the problem, all of us are adulterous people because of our sinful nature. We seem to love so many things more than God. This desire comes from our inner pride, again to put ourselves above God. However James quotes scripture in verse 6 saying, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” If we continue to be so prideful, God will humble us. I heard this statement: we are either humble or humiliated. Which do you think is better, to humble ourselves, or be humiliated? Most of the time it’s our choice.

So then what should we do? We have to be conscience of our relationships. Our relationship with God and our relationship with others. In our relationship with God let’s take a look at verses 7-10. “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” In these verses we find several things we can do to strengthen our relationship with God. First submit ourselves to God. This mean obedience to his word. Humility before God. Changing the way we think. Valuing God’s desires over our own desires. Second, resist the devil. This means to flee temptation. St. Augustine had a lust problem, he knew that he was especially weak to this kind of temptation. So whenever one of his former girlfriends met him on the street, he ran the other way. Third, come near to God and he will come near to you. This is our daily walk with God in our prayer life, studying his word and meditating. This really helps with giving us the right desires in our heart. Fourth, wash your hands & purify your hearts. This focuses on repentance and turning away from those things that lead to sin. And lastly we are to “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” This sounds so negative and depressing. But I believe that James wants us to take this seriously. Sin is not a laughing matter. We must take our relationship with God seriously and desire to please him above ourselves. When we humble ourselves before God, he will lift us up.

Next James addresses our relationship with people. Take a look at verses 11-12. “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.” ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” James says flat out, stop slandering others. Often we don’t think twice about slandering someone else. In our desire of self promotion we assassinate someone else’s character. However when we do this we are sitting in judgment of them, putting ourselves above them and trying to take God’s place as

judge. However we can't help ourselves because even after we've become Christians we still fight with others. So what can we do? Come near to God and humble ourselves and ask his help.

Act by Faith