

XVII. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and Relationships”
James 4:1–3
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March 30, 2014 – Morning Sermon

In this study we will be looking at James 4:1-3 but to understand the force of what He is saying in these three verses I want us to understand the context. Chapter divisions and verse specifications were added much after this. This book is a flowing letter. Here is what we looked at in the last study. James 3:13- 4:3 says *[13] Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. [14] But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. [15] This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. [16] For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. [17] But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. [18] And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

[4:1] 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.

The grass withers, the flower fades but the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I wished I had thought of this but I almost entitled this study “The Day Murder Came to Church” or “The Anatomy of Murder in the Church.” This text tells us how and why murder comes to church. It gives us the anatomy of murder in the church. It also gives us the beginning point of remedy. Let me remind you of the theme of James which is the Gospel life is a life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation in a sin-cursed world informed by the God-sent gift of “Wisdom from Above.”

We are not in a Genesis 1 world. We are in a Genesis 3 world. We are in a sin-cursed world with all of its disorder but in the midst of that a sovereign God is ordering everything so that you and I learn the Gospel life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation as we are being framed and transformed by the renewing of our mind with Gospel wisdom. You have a Gospel foundation, a Gospel motivation, and you want to live a Gospel life then you have to be saturated with Gospel wisdom in a sin-cursed world to stay the course and to grow joyfully because the circumstances are not joyful but our Lord is our joy. How do we get there?

That has been our theme that this Gospel wisdom book has given to us but we have just left what I would call the apex of the Gospel wisdom book of James in our last study. Everything that went before these verses in James 3:13-18 was arriving there and everything that comes after those verses has to be understood from that text. In other words when he tells you to rejoice in the trials of life it is because they show you what you know with Gospel wisdom, they expose what you don't know in Gospel wisdom and they reveal any strongholds of idolatry that may have latched into even the new heart.

Even the new heart, the converted heart can have pockets of poison and strongholds of idolatry. These trials of life uncover it.

Those trials will send you to prayer, where you ask the Lord for wisdom. That sends you to His Word to hear it and do it. Then all of that then becomes the avenue whereby God disposes Gospel wisdom from above as a gift that He grants to us. We know that heaven's wisdom comes from above and we know that there is another wisdom which is hell's wisdom that is earthly, demonic, produces vile practices, selfish ambition, jealousy, envy and all of those things. Every single day our hearts are being subtly drawn and assaulted by earthly wisdom. God is calling upon us to embrace the trials of life, go to prayer, and get in the Word so that the Gospel wisdom from above can frame your life.

When that happens here is the result. It brings a harvest of righteousness in your personal life and in your relationships with others. Instead of selfish ambition, jealousy and vile practice, wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, reasonable, impartial, sincere, true and it brings forth fruits of praise to God. You can almost see the mirror of the fruit of the Spirit in that list of wisdom from above. As James unfolds that he says it brings a harvest of righteousness in your personal life as you're growing in grace because of Gospel wisdom. There is a harvest of righteousness in your relationships, in your marriage, family, the body of Christ at work, on teams, in classes, in neighborhoods and all your relationships. It produces a harvest of righteousness in the lives of those to whom you are related and it enhances their harvest of righteousness in their own personal lives and in their relationships. It's a multiplication harvest that this Gospel wisdom begins to produce.

That's the backdrop, the crescendo. Let's go to Jesus and go home. Unfortunately you have to go to church and you're going to see quarrels and fights. James, the preacher of this mega-thousand church, probably somewhere between 16,000 to 20,000 members in Jerusalem, is fully aware of what is going on in church. Paul refers to it in Titus 2 about speculations, quarrels and dissensions. He refers to it in I Corinthians and I Timothy. He tells us to not have anything to do with those things. James is dealing with it at the church in Jerusalem. James knows that it's in every church because every church is full of sinners, saved by grace but still sinners, not arriving at the perfections of eternity, growing in grace but still sinners.

So when you go to church what is the source of fighting and quarrels among you? Why not take a closer look at what fight and quarrel mean in the Greek but there's no help there because it's not like there is another word meaning squabbles. I know what it means because I grew up with three sisters. I can remember listening to them in the backseat. The three sisters were in the backseat and dad, mom and me were in the front seat – the adults. As I was thinking about that I was thinking what does the Father think of some our squabbles that are utterly ridiculous in light of eternity but the word squabbles is not what is used there. I not only had three sisters but I had three kids. One of my three children felt called and gifted to create squabbles in the backseat.

The words for fight and quarrel actually mean combat, combative engagement. It is language which you would find in warfare. Why do I keep saying 'in the church'? I want you to look closely at the text here. The verse says the source of fights and quarrels 'among you.' He is referring to his beloved brothers here which are us, the church, God's people. What is the source of this warfare? Why is it that there is trench warfare in the church of Jesus Christ? Are there appropriate battles that God calls us to fight?

Absolutely. Look up Galatians 1. Peter and Paul had a battle over the integrity of the Gospel. Paul would not let it be captured by the Judaizers and legalism so he had deal with it but it wasn't the meanness of a sinful squabble. It was a necessary squabble, a robust engagement that was there but James wants to know why the entrenched fighting is there in the church. In fact, how does it get even to murder?

He then asks a second question. James 4:1b says *Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* He is saying why do you have fights and quarrels among you, is it not because of what has been lost inside of you? There are fights and quarrels without because of the quarrels and battle within. Our tendency is to blame others. Whenever we engage in sinful activity we always want to play the victim. We don't want to confess ownership. My sin record started all the way back in the womb. We don't want to own our sin for we'd rather blame someone else just like Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. Adam blamed Eve. We are always looking to be the victim. We can't miss this.

Remember the trials of life? At a certain point the trials of life can actually become temptations to sin. How does a trial of life become a temptation to sin? James 1:12-15 says [12] *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.* [13] *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* [14] *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (over desires).* [15] *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.* I know we've covered this but I just want to remind you about this.

Here is a trial of life and we falter and we respond sinfully. So what is our immediate response? "I didn't sin, that was the temptations fault. I am a victim of the circumstances." Or one might say "That was God who tempted me to sin." No, the reason it became a temptation to sin, was not the Tester or the test, but it was your heart. The heart of the problem is the problem with the heart. James keeps driving that to us. With the tongue it's not a matter that you don't have a broad enough vocabulary, but your tongue is revealing your heart. Your works are revealing your heart. When two people come in and you gravitate toward the rich man then that is revealing something in your heart. He won't let you get away with whitewashing the outside of the cup. We are going to understand that the problem is within us. The problem resides in our heart and James keeps bringing that home to us.

That means what is the answer to a bridled tongue or a life reflecting godliness or to a ministry that reaches to anyone and to everyone with no partiality? It is a heart issue. It's not a technique issue. It is a heart issue that you have to deal with. How do you deal with it? Step one maybe revealing that you have a bad heart and you need Jesus. When you come to Jesus Christ step one is accomplished. He gives you a new record filled with the righteousness of Christ that has clothed you. He takes the old heart out and puts the new heart in but beloved brothers still fight and quarrel and still have an unbridled tongue and why is that? You not only need a new heart but you need to cleanse the heart. You need to fill the heart. Every single day you wake up to a battle and what wisdom is going to lay hold of your heart? Will it be the wisdom from hell that is earthly, unspiritual, demonic, with vileness and rationalizes sin or will it be the wisdom from above, through prayer and the Word in which He is framing, forming and refining you to bring a harvest of righteousness?

So James has brought us back again to the heart of the problem. The battles outside exist because the battles inside have been lost. The passions are directed now where they ought not to be. So you need a new heart and every day the new heart is the scene of a daily battle and every day that must be addressed. So let me peel it back by taking you through the anatomy of how murder, the unjust taking of lives, comes to church and not just fights and quarrels. He doesn't say kill but he says murder so how does that get to church among God's people? James gives us the four steps to this anatomy.

Here is step one. James 4:2a says [2] *You desire and do not have, so you murder.* That just explains all kinds of things in your Bible, doesn't it? Why did Cain kill Abel? His desires were not met so he went into envy and jealousy. Envy is I want what you have and I'll kill you to get what you have. Jealousy is that I will not only kill you to get what you have but I'll kill you so that you don't have what you have. So you see it with Cain, with Pharaoh when he killed the children, with Herod when he killed the children, with Eve and Adam when they brought death to a whole race. When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and it was a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate and we die. God's just penalty of death is invoked because Adam and Eve had an over desire that led them into rebellion against God and we in them rebelled also.

Hear the words of Jesus, "You're doing the works of your father Satan" who was a murderer from the beginning. Why? His desire was not to exalt the God who made him but his desire was to be the God who made him and if he can't have it then he becomes a murderer. The anatomy of fights and quarrels moving to murder and I realize some of you think I'm just giving murder in the world. Let's bring it home to church by looking at I Kings 21. There you see a king within God's covenant people by the name of Ahab whose wife's name is Jezebel. Last year I had the opportunity to stand at the very place in Jezreel where Ahab looked at this piece of land which was a vineyard that belonged to Naboth that he wanted. Naboth told him it wasn't for sale so Ahab basically goes home and pouts because he can't have what he wants. His wife decides she doesn't want him to pout and basically Jezebel gets Naboth killed. Now Ahab could claim the ground. So Naboth's vineyard now becomes Ahab's vegetable garden. Desire, kill, right within God's covenant community. You might not think this is the valid example because this was in the ten northern tribes.

Let's go south. You might think that because you have a new heart that you could never murder. In the Old Testament what man is picked out as having the heart most like unto, after God? His name is David. I have stood at this place in Israel also, where he walked out from his porch and looked over, saw a woman, Bathsheba, and desired her. He wanted her more than he wanted God and took her. His new heart had a strong hold of idolatry and had given way to wisdom from hell. To obtain it he eventually does a conspiracy to murder Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. When the Word of God was preached to David and he saw what had happened, he didn't blame Bathsheba for going out on her porch without much clothing. He didn't blame God for allowing him to walk out on his porch to see her. He said "I have sinned against You." He also sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah but it was all against God because he had his desires set on what could not fulfill his desires but he was convinced they could fulfill his desires so whatever he had to do to get it he did it.

So his heart was uncovered but what does David say in his repentance in Psalm 51? After a preacher came to David and confronted him with his sin, God brought conviction and in Psalm 51:6 David said [6] *Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.* This isn't a problem of just safe sex or a stupid decision. This is a heart problem therefore he goes on to say in Psalm 51:10, [10] *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* Teach my heart wisdom. I don't need a patch up job. I need God to go to work on my heart. So you desire and you do not have. So now we go to murder.

You might be thinking 'This is Briarwood, there isn't murder here.' There may not be murder by action but there can be murder by intention. That's why Jesus warns us that with anger and hatred you're guilty of murder. Now it's more heinous to go ahead and take someone's physical life but we can murder people by diminishing them with gossip, slander and back handed compliments. We can destroy reputations and take the life of people by the unbridled tongue which is an amazing sword that can stab to the heart. There's a murder. It may not be as heinous as the slitting of someone's throat but it's still emptying their own life blood with the unthought word, the diminishing of one's reputation, gossip and slander. So how did we get there?

Step two is in the next sentence. James 4:1b says *You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.* How did we get to coveting and we cannot obtain, fight and quarrel? You got there because you're prayerless. Step three is in the next sentence. James 4:1c says *You do not have, because you do not ask.* You do not ask so you're prayerless and you do not have therefore you start coveting. How did you get to prayerlessness? You asked wrongly. Step four is in James 4:3 which says [3] *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

The best way to look at this is to reverse it. How do we get to murder? You get to murder because you don't have what you over desire. How did you get to desiring to the point that if you don't have it you're willing to murder? You got there because of fights and quarrels. Where did the fights and quarrels come from? It was because you could not obtain what you were coveting. How did you start coveting? It was because you had a prayerless life, a life of self-reliance.

Let's start with the bottom and work up, perhaps it would be easier. How did we get to murder? Start with prayerfulness. You are prayerful but you're wrongly prayerful. You pray wrongly therefore you don't get. This is why I am utterly moved with vehemence against the prosperity gospel which is actually teaching wrong-headed prayer life. He says you are praying for that which you want to consume upon yourself. You have a consumer driven, self-reliant, self-absorbed, self-exalting prayer life and God does not give those prayers an answer of 'yes.' So when you have this prayer life and God doesn't give you those things that you are praying for then you become prayerless. Why do you become prayerless? It is because you are self-reliant and you think you'll find a way to get it. If God isn't going to give it to me then I'll get my own way and you still don't get it. So that means you start coveting – I want his, I want hers. Then when you can't obtain what you're coveting you start fighting and quarreling. Then as you fight and quarrel and you still don't get then you start over desiring which consumes you. Then you're willing to even murder, whether it's physical, emotional or verbal. You are willing to destroy someone to get what they have.

I have seen this in ministry. Let me speak to my own guild, my own industry. God blesses someone and we want the blessing. We pray and God doesn't give it to us yet we think He ought to give it to us. So we start not true disputations around meaningful issues but we start fighting, quarreling, coveting and desiring and jealousy and envy take over. We destroy them to get God's blessing from them or destroy them so they don't have God's blessing which we want. It happens time and time again. They made a movie over a mother who wanted her daughter to be a cheerleader so bad that when she didn't get it was willing to kill a cheerleader for it. It even happens within the body of Christ where we see somebody whom God is blessing and people are thankful for and we want their position. So many times we'd rather kill them than take their five drums that God has given to them over our two drums.

So we ask to consume it upon ourselves and we don't receive it. Therefore we are no longer prayerful and we don't have so start coveting. We covet and we can't obtain so we fight and quarrel. We still don't get it so we desire to the point that we're willing to destroy others to obtain it. So what would be our takeaway for this?

I'm going to give you two takeaways. The first takeaway is the wars we create in our world and in His church are the inevitable consequences of the wars we lose in our hearts. The wars outside come from the war inside. The wars we create in the world and in His church are there because we have lost the battle within ourselves. You become a new Christian and when you do you have a new heart, new record, new life, new home and a new family but you don't have a new mind but you have the ability to renew your mind. Every single morning when you get up the bell just rung, the battle trumpet just sounded. Who is going to direct your heart? Where your desires and passions are being aimed is determined by what takes hold of your heart that day, that moment. Satan knows this. In the wisdom that comes from hell he has an ally within us called the old man. Every day the old man wants to get back in control of even the new heart. If that old man is not killed he will take over your heart.

The only way the new heart is greater than the old man is for the new heart to be saturated with Jesus Christ. How do I get my tongue bridled? It is not that you have to learn new vocabulary or that you need a Christian speech therapist. You can learn all that but really it's a matter of the heart. How do my works change that produce godliness instead of reflect worldliness? It is filling my heart. How do I relate to people not on the basis of their status in the world but they are made in the image of God and they need Jesus and I want them to grow? It is a heart issue and that's how we get there. It is the battle in the heart every single day. It doesn't let up either. Every single morning Satan wants to put the old man with wisdom from hell back in control of the decisions you make that day, directing your passions and desires in the wrong direction.

So you may say 'let's do away with fighting and quarreling.' Fights and quarrels are not all sinful. I don't think Paul was sinful when he had the robust theological fight with Peter. Fights and quarrels are not necessarily sinful but without sin there would be no fights or quarrels. In other words, if Peter hadn't faltered there wouldn't even have been that theological fight there. It's like divorce. Divorce is not a sin but you can sinfully divorce. Even if you don't sinfully divorce somebody sinned or there would not even be a divorce. When we get to heaven there won't be any fights and quarrels for there will be no ability to have fights and quarrels. So we want to learn from fights and quarrels and we want to know that not every fight and quarrel is sinful but no fights and

quarrels would be present unless there was sin. So you can in this world anticipate and expect fights and quarrels even in the church.

One guy said church is like sausage. You don't want to see it get made but boy it's good once it gets made. There will be fights and quarrels. There will be theological battles and all kinds of things that are there but they must be learned from and dealt with. While we anticipate the existence of fights and quarrels and even desire to grow in the midst of fights and quarrels, we must never declare fights and quarrels as desirable and normal. Without sin they wouldn't be here. Fights and quarrels are not the problem. They are the result of the problem of losing the trench warfare in the heart and the problem is not desires and passions.

God gave you desires and passions. He gave you desires and passions to eat, drink, work, have sex, to know and rest. They become over desires and wrong passions when the heart directs them anywhere else for ultimate fulfillment other than Jesus Christ. When Christ becomes our fulfillment, now sex for God's glory and joy can be engaged in the context of a monogamous, heterosexual, conjugal, marital relationship. Now we can eat and drink to the glory of God and not find our glory in our eating and drinking. When our heart sends us to empty idols and even good gifts can become empty idols if you put them ahead or above or in front of Jesus but when our heart makes Jesus our passion, is filled with Gospel passion and we're moving to Christ, then His good gifts can be enjoyed to His glory and the empty idols of this world are shunned.

The heart says to have significance, security and strength you need this or buy this or own this or you need applause or a title but Gospel wisdom says all those things can be used for the Lord but your significance doesn't come from your titles or what you own or what you have or how much you have or how much people applaud you. Your significance is found in Jesus Christ who from the cross shed His blood and made you His child. You belong to Him. You are a joint heir in Jesus Christ in His royal nation. There is your significance and now everything else use for Him, the King. Your strength is found in Christ for I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Christ is my security, not my bank account.

I'm not talking about common sense in life, I'm just saying don't put your trust in anything other than and ultimately in Jesus Christ for your significance, strength and security. How secure are you? Nothing in creation can separate you from the love of God that is found in Jesus Christ and the cross has secured that because of His giving of Himself for you. So here is the second takeaway which has to do with the battleground of the heart, with either wisdom from above or wisdom from below.

The second takeaway is the primary, though not exclusive weapon to win the everyday war in the battlefield of our new heart is prioritized and persistent Bible-shaped, Trinitarian lifestyle prayer. It is primarily not exclusively for God uses preaching, worship, fellowship, the sacraments and all kinds of instruments to give you Gospel wisdom for the preeminence and centrality of Christ but when you go to Ephesians 6:10-21, the great passage on spiritual warfare, it begins with prayer and ends with prayer. Prayer is the foundational instrument that we must have and it's not any kind of prayer. We don't want to pray wrongly. We want to pray rightly which means Trinitarian prayer, to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. That means Bible-shaped prayer and a lifestyle of prayer.

What can I pray about? You can pray about everything. Philippians 4:6-7 says *[6] Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* So you begin to pray driven by the desire and passion to trust Christ, know Christ, love Christ and you pray to the Father through Christ. You pray in the Spirit who was given to you from Christ because Christ has united you to the Father. Christ is your Intercessor, Redeemer and has sent you the Holy Spirit. Spirit-filled, Christ-centered, God the Father trusting prayer is how you want to pray. It is that Trinitarian lifestyle of prayer which is shaped by the Word of God and then leads you into life. Then you become like the deer who is by the brook and it pants for the water, so my soul pants for Thee. That is what prayer is. It is my soul panting for the Lord.

Who can satisfy my soul? Lord Jesus, it is only You. *[5] Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. [6] In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths* (Proverbs 3:5-6). Now your desires are in the right direction. There are problems in desires and passions but it has to do with where the heart is directing them but now they are directed to Christ. Then you'll be able to sing the hymn, 'We taste of Thee, O Thou living Bread, yet long to feast upon Thee still. We drink of Thee our Fountain Head and thirst our hearts to fill.'

The Lord has done much to save you but He didn't do it to make much of you. He did it to set you free from the idols of this world to make much of Him and when you make much of Him you with Paul in Romans 11 will cry out "God, You are too much. You satisfy my soul. You fill my heart." Lord, keep the hell bent, demonic wisdom away from me. Make me wise to know, love and be satisfied in You. Now what happens? There is no murder for it diminishes. Fighting and quarrels begin to disappear. In the place of coveting there is contentment and now instead of sowing discord a harvest of righteousness begins to flow among the people of God. How blessed it is for brothers to dwell together in unity for Christ is our life, all of us. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be in Your Word. Thank You Father for the privilege to address this text. O God, how glorious it is! I gave an invitation earlier on that you might come to Christ for the new heart. Just come to Him and ask Him for He freely gives it. For all of you who know Christ and you have that new heart, God would You allow us every day for our waking eye to intentionally fill that heart with the wisdom of life, Christ our wisdom, so that our desires and passions will be focused upon Him that we might glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. The more we enjoy Him the more we'll glorify Him and the more we glorify Him the more we'll enjoy Him for You alone satisfy our heart and our soul for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.