

War and Peace

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Date: 06 November 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I would encourage and invite you to turn back with me to James chapter 4. Before doing that, I meant to say this morning, earlier that I was just to pass on, I was really at a great morning this morning at Esk Valley. I think the bulletin was over favourable in saying that I was preaching this morning. I wasn't. I was simply visiting and I did a reading with him, but it was just really encouraging to be at Esk Valley church. Great to see over 40 people there and quite a number of regulars weren't able to be there and to see new faces and old faces and a community beginning to bind together and know one another and think about evangelism and think about just how they can develop the work. It was really great, really encouraging and I would encourage you to take a visit out there sometime to encourage Tom and Charlene and the leadership team and the congregation. It's really thrilling to see God's work progress and the partnership and the co-operation that's happening there.

So remember Esk Valley and Cornerstone and other churches and your prayers also. But tonight we're going to look and I hope the young people at the end today will discuss some questions related to this fantastic chapter in the book of James. I think normally we associate, or generally speaking anyway, we associate wisdom with age. So you all think I'm wise and sage because compared with most people here, I'm old. But you know as a kind of rule of thumb we think you gain more wisdom the older you get. You really become wise as you get old. Not always but as a general rule of thumb. I think that's reflected quite a lot in a way, I'm sure it's reflected in lots of different ways. But when you see people being interviewed now either in magazines or in television, one of the questions is quite often, what would you tell your 16 year old self? And they used to have that question.

But it's a great question and it's a question that presupposes that you've had a great deal of experience and you're much wiser in your old age. What would you say to your 16 year old self? And that would be I think the general thrust of people's thinking in the world that the older we get the wiser we become. Well the great thing to know to a congregation whose average age is probably about 27 is that that needn't be the case.

Because what we have in the teaching of the Bible and James is revolutionary and radical because what we're being reminded of here is that wisdom, the wisdom that God thinks is significant as is important is a gift from Him. We don't necessarily need to become old, becoming old helps and no doubt we do mature but we can be gifted wisdom for our day to day living and live with God's wisdom in a way that is very, very radical and very revolutionary. Because we are new people, that's why. Because in Jesus Christ we are new people, we're not the same that we were. We are being transformed. Second Corinthians 5 verse 17, therefore you know it well, memorise the reference if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation, the old has passed away and maybe behold the news come. We're new people, okay? I want that to be the foundation of what, if you'll stay with me tonight and as we think through this, remember that the conventional thinking of wisdom being belonging simply to the aged is not necessarily the case. I want you to consider your perspective of life changing. As a believer you've been, you know the Bible uses that language for a reason that you're reborn. It isn't just an add-on to your life, it's not just something you grew up with, it's not just a dimension. You know Jesus says that, that we're turning a completely different direction, we've got a whole different set of powers and graces available to us and to be a Christian is to be very, very different and therefore there's this constant recognition of needing to be changed and being able to be changed, reborn.

So as believers we breathe God's wisdom, that's what you're to do. You know we've spoken about James before and the New Testament reflecting the life of God, the life of God and the wisdom of God and what God wants for us to live. Well in 1 Corinthians 2, I think this is the second quote, it's quite a long quote but I want you to stick with this quote, it's very important, yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it's not a wisdom of the age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away but we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, we all like secrets, which God decreed before the ages for our glory, none of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him. These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the deep things of God, should have read that in any of you, it's better. But better translation. But that's what we have, we breathe God's wisdom, it's God's gift to us and we can live that. Look back to verse 13 of chapter 3, which is the paragraph before the one we read, who is wise and understanding among you. Okay? It speaks about wisdom. And then we recognise that throughout this book we have teaching and truth of wisdom, because we have changed what we've become.

[6 : 49] And you know the book is about acting, not as in performing, it's about not just simply hearing, it's about acting on what we hear. Chapter 1 verse 22, the core verse, but be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourself. Because if you're just a hearer of the word, it's like looking in a mirror and forgetting what you look like, spiritually speaking. So the wisdom of God and the Bible is like a mirror. And when you look in a mirror, generally speaking, ordinarily, because that's the purpose of them, you're looking at yourself.

You don't really look in a mirror to look at other people. You look in a mirror to see yourself. And therefore what that teaching is reminding us is that the Bible is there, the wisdom of God is there to encourage us, to challenge us, to look at ourselves. So this evening, don't look around other people, not only physically, I mean mentally and spiritually.

Don't take the message for other people this evening. Don't apply it to other people. But take the word this evening like a mirror. And can I ask you to really be challenged to apply this word as I have been ripped apart by it this week. So may you be in a good and positive and wholesome way be ripped apart by the word of God. Buzzwords, empowerment, and happiness. These are two kind of words that are popular today. Empowerment, the ability to change things, and being happy. Well, this is what this chapter is about. And so we're either going to look at Christ's wisdom for making us powerful, able to change our circle, our lives, or the worlds, and the same with happiness. What's our experience as Christians, okay, when it comes to feeling a sense of empowerment and feeling happy? Now if I was to ask you that question honestly this evening, now none of you would give me honest answers.

But if you gave yourself honest answers, what would it be? Is your experience of Christian, your Christian life, is it one that is exciting, challenging, renewal, refreshment, like a new life where you're happy and content, and when you feel empowered to live your life?

Well, I wonder if that is the case, I hope it is, I pray it is. But our experience is often like what James is describing in this chapter, that there is an internal war in your life. What causes quarrels and causes fights among you? Is it not this one B that your passions are at war within you? So what God is speaking about here is saying, look at your own heart and look at your own life and say, what's happening in your own heart?

[10:10] There's an internal war so that you hear the truth, you know what the Bible teaches, you know what other Christians are saying, but actually there's this war going on because you know what God wants, but you're also fighting with what you want. You know God who God is and you know he's good and right, but actually he seems to be in the way of allowing you to have a good and happy and blessed and fulfilled life. You're frustrated with your Christian life and there's an anger in there that you know what God wants, but I know what I want and I want to get what I want. And there's this wrestling between what I want and what God wants. And my Christian life or my life as a whole isn't working out to the plan that I had for it. And so you're wrestling with why is God doing this, what is God about, why is my life so unfulfilling and it's supposed to be fulfilling and I want to do things that

I know are wrong and so there's this battle and there's this struggle within your heart and so an internal war, internal maybe frustration and sometimes anger. And how does that reveal itself? Well I'll tell you how it reveals itself because James tells us. It reveals itself when you are not at peace in your own heart with God and have not dealt with the self in your own heart. Then it reveals itself in being first of all at war with other people.

You desire and you do not have so you murder, you covet, you cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel. And James is there saying that there's something that's not right within ourselves and it works itself out in division and in anger and in judgment of other people.

So you have this internal battle but the way you deal with that battle is to ignore it in your heart and you focus your attention on the failure of other people. You recognise that there's a problem within your own heart but you would rather not deal with that and I would rather not deal with that so what we do is we blame other people for that. We blame other primarily in the community, we blame other Christians. Christians have let me down. That's why I'm not happy as a believer, their behaviour, their lack of love, they don't understand who I am, they don't get me, they're not interested in me. I don't fit in to this community. I'm too holy for them or they are too holy for me maybe sometimes and what they're doing is wrong and so we lay on them the anger and the dissatisfaction that stems from our own heart and that's good you know. We feel good about that. It makes us feel better about ourselves because it puts us in the place of judgment. It keeps us from allowing God to judge our own hearts and we place ourselves in the seat of judgment and we judge other people. It's what he goes on to say in verse 11, I'm going to jump around a little bit. He says, 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 isn't that so often what we do because it gives us that sense of empowerment and that sense of significance that we are doing what's right in comparison with the failure of everybody else and we can find some level of contentment in there. Not dealing with our own heart but finding fault with others and comparing ourselves to them. War with others. War in the church.

Judgment, gossip, bitterness. But kind of worse than that is that we find ourselves at war with God. You ask that you do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend on your passions, your adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

[14 : 32] There is that whole thing within us as well where we want the blessings, we crave the sweetness of Christian truth and reality in our own lives and the friendship and the hope that it goes. But maybe we are angry with God because of the sense of responsibility and the weight of the truth of God in our lives. We would rather dictate to God. We would rather allow ourselves to continue to be sovereign over our passions and over our lives and over our choices towards happiness. And it means often in our lives two things. It means when we are at war with God and remember this is Christians that James is speaking to and you and me, we stop praying. He says that you do not have because you do not ask. And he is speaking about, he is wisdom, he is speaking about that happiness and that empowerment in our lives. But he says you have just stopped praying. You have stopped praying as a Christian because we find praying boring, repetitive. After a minute or two we were distracted or lost for words. We have nothing more to say. It is empty. It does not make any difference to us. We really do not need it. We do not need it. We can live our lives day to day as he goes on to say in verse 13, come now you say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, spend a year there and trade and make a profit. We would just make our plans without God because it does not make any difference. We can still plan our lives, prayer does not make a difference. We will be alive tomorrow. We can fulfill our dreams and we can still carry on as it were. And prayer is not an asset, it is just a liability for us. So we stop praying. We stop praying because we have misunderstood grace and wisdom and what God requires of us and what God wants for us. But maybe we do not stop praying.

Maybe we just pray badly. You ask in verse 3 and you do not receive because you asked wrongly to spend it on your desires. So we do pray and I am sure you have said this, I have said this and I have heard it pastorally many, many times when people are struggling spiritually or have drifted from God. I say, I have tried praying but it does not work.

I have tried, it does not work. And it is a very difficult situation to speak into. But as God says here, we are asking wrongly. We are saying God is the provider to give us happiness on our terms, to give us empowerment our way. We are wanting to remain as we were, we are wanting to remain what we were like before we were new creations and still be in control. That our will will be done rather than God's. So when we pray we are seeing on our terms. We are wanting Him to answer the things that we think that we need rather than what He says that we often need. He is our winning lot that they take it spiritually.

He is our spiritual sugar daddy. He is the one that we go to and ask for things and when He does not give us these things we complain to Him and we say prayer does not work. So we presume on tomorrow and we stop praying and the relationship with Him goes. Now these are very spine chilling and solemn words really, are not they? And they are very uncomfortable in our lovely new church. You are sitting in very comfortable seats. You may feel uncomfortable spiritually and that is good. That is great because that is how God wants us to feel because He wants to bring His wisdom into our situation. He wants to transform our lives. He wants us to be new creations. He does not want us to be prayerless. He does not want us to try praying and feel that it is failing. He does not want us to be at war with our fellow Christians and with others. He wants us to know Him and to know His wisdom. There is one more stage in worseness before it gets better and that is His diagnosis. In terms of God's wisdom speaking into our situation in our lives, when we feel like that, when we have stopped praying, when we constantly choose our own will rather than His in our hearts and in our lives, what does God say into that? Well it is a crisis isn't it? He says you adulterous people. That is what He says. He says you are cheating on me. That is the language He uses. Very powerful language. That is He, your profession of love for me is worthless.

It is like any of us in relationship saying I love my partner but I am going to sleep with someone else. The profession of love, the vows that we take are meaningless. If actually by our life and by our thinking we are showing that we love something or somebody else. We are denying God's truth. We are rejecting His word and His promise. In reality when it says that we are adulterous people because He says 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. He is really saying you love yourself more than you love me. Because that is the code of worldliness isn't it? He is not speaking about the world as a geographical place. He is not speaking about nations or even individuals. He is talking about the world as an attitude of mind, an attitude of heart which ultimately is self-love.

[21 : 11] The idolatry of loving ourselves before loving God. It is the deepest idolatrous battles that we ever face. It is the ultimate battle that we face is this love of self before love of Christ, before love of His will, my will, I want, I will have and Jesus will simply be in the background and so we feel significance and empowerment and happiness will come my way, even my interpretation of what might be biblical. So Jesus I am tired of your demands.

I am tired of the battle. Jesus I want it easy. I want my old life back. Jesus I love you but I want to be, I want to be in charge. I want to make the decisions. I am happy being in charge because I can compare myself with others and I am fine. I can blame others and feel good about myself. But what God is saying, you are His enemy when you think like that, and I think like that and there is an emptiness, there is a real emptiness when that is our spiritual experience. So now I begin to conclude with the great section in this chapter and we remember from what we read in 1 Corinthians before that the wisdom that God gifts to us, the wisdom that we can have is God's gift to us. He enables us if we will hear Him and respond to Him and rely on Him and return to Him. He will give us the power to transform lives and our life and genuine happiness, the kind of things we look for away from

Him with ourselves in control. What therefore must we do? How can I be wise? How God speaks His wisdom, He has exposed us with His wisdom. How can I share in His wisdom? Well it is really very simple for us as Christians. It is to use His Scripture and this book and these words as a mirror into our own soul. That is what He wants us to do here. He is longing for us to submit ourselves as He says in verse 7 to God, draw near to God, He will draw near to us. Cleanse your hands, purify your hearts, be wretched and mourn and weep, let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom along. This is the best bit, does it sound terribly enthusiastic for us? But absolutely the core for our day to day living is to recognise that what God wants to do with us is not change the person next to you, not change your husband or your wife, not change your children, not change the church, not change the government, not change the nation. His primary work is to change you and to change me, our hearts. That is what He wants for us to do. When we find that our will is battling against His will, what He does not want is to just ignore that and blame others or go on a rant and a rave. What He wants us to do is to look into our own hearts and to deal with that selfishness and that anger and that pride and that deception and that insecurity and that lust and all that lies within us honestly because we are allowing

His mirror to shine into our hearts rather than maybe the mirror of other people which can sometimes feel good about ourselves because we are better than them. But the mirror is because He is perfect. He is absolute, He is infinite, He is eternal, He is unchangeable, He is perfect and He is perfect in love and perfect in love for others and His law for us is a perfect law which He has loved me perfectly and love others perfectly and therefore we find my goodness how selfish is my life, how selfish is my complaints and my issues and my desires and my longings. I think it's a kind of fairly accurate rule of thumb to say that generally in community those who shout loudest and complain about others have the most to hide themselves because the louder we shout the more we are deflecting from our own needs and our own, the battles that we choose not to fight in our own hearts. And so the great battle that He wants us to recognise and wants us to see is what I want in conflict with what He wants and to recognise that He wants to change us from the inside out, transform our lives and open our hearts to God and that requires both humility and repentance. It requires recognising that we need to be cleansed, that there is an ugliness, that there is a self-centredness that dethrones God and that keeps Him from that right position of Lordship.

Verse 5 and I'm not going to spend time on this but verse 5 is one of the most difficult verses in the Bible to translate and none of the commentators agree on it so we're not going to come to a conclusion. It's a really difficult verse or do you suppose it is of no purpose that the Scripture says He yearns jealously over the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us. Do you know what that means? I doubt it. I don't think really any of us properly understand what that means partly because it's given as a quote from Scripture but it's not found anywhere else in Scripture. So it seems to be what James is saying is that the thrust of all the Scripture that there is is that God gives us His Holy Spirit not to be a spirit that is jealous and self-centred because He goes on to say rather He gives us grace. So when we have been made new creations it's not to stay the same. It's rather to be full of grace. So as believers salvation is a big thing. It's a gift which is a huge gift from Him and as Christians to be separated and angry from one another and divisive and prayerless is, He uses strong words. He doesn't say that's just not terribly, terribly good.

[28 : 24] He says it's murder. That's what he says. It's murder. You're like murdering one another when you're behaving like this. He's using very strongly, not physically, not in that sense but in a divisive damaging way. He's saying, if this unity is as bad as murder to me because I've given you a new heart which says, of course there's tensions but I've given you the Spirit to work through that, to change that and to transform your heart to deal with these issues in our lives. The Holy Spirit He gifts us is not one that promotes selfish ambition but promotes something radical, life changing and new that makes the Christian community as it's outworked radical, life transforming and new and He does that by His grace. He empowers us to live this way. He empowers us to change. We need to open our hearts with God. That means we need to, if you're going to look in a mirror, you need to find a mirror and you need to go to it and spend time rooming in front of it.

And if we are to know this in our lives we need to spend time in Him, in His word. Not intellectually, although it involves an intellect, but relationally. This great God who wants us in relationship with Him in this jello, beautifully perfect relationship and He wants us to spend time then allowing His truth to change our hearts to cause us to come to our knees, to be cleansed, to be purified and to stop being double minded. That's when prayer comes alive. When we understand that He's not our Santa Claus figure and we've run out of things to ask for because He's never given us in many ways and my big toes healed. It's when we recognize He wants something much deeper. He's wanting us. He's wanting our very being, our very soul, our very selfishness and He wants to transform that so that we live in relationship with Him as something that is real and therefore we live in relationship with one another in something that is real and radical. We open our heart to God and at the same time we submit to Him and we resist the devil. So there's that recognition of relationship, huge relationship, but relationship in a battlefield, okay? That we know that as believers He wants us to submit to Him. It's an interesting language, isn't it? It's an interesting language. To be a Christian is to submit. That is to recognize that He's right and He loves us and His way is the best way. Go back to 317 when He speaks about the fruit of wisdom. Wisdom, God's way, is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, good fruits, impartial and sincere. If you had a curksession, a deacons court, a membership and a community that lived by these standards, man, we would be alive transforming and we are. And we can be and we can strive to be more so because submitting to Him is beautiful. It's tough, but it's beautiful. Consciously doing what God wants, recognizing that in any relationship this, my friends, takes time and energy and commitment, just like looking in a mirror requires action. So being Christ's, yet salvation is a gift, but it's a gift that brings us to life. And then we don't just sit and become fat and inactive and disobedient. He wants us by the power of His Holy Spirit to pray and to worship and to learn from Him. And in so doing, recognizing a spiritual battle where the devil is to be resistant, where we turn from Him, where we say no, primarily to self and then to the passions that follow from it. But in a practical way, in the church and in the life of the church, because this is what James brings up, when we're tempted to covet or to fight and to quarrel, say no. Choose not to pass on as Cody was speaking about last week so

powerfully, how we speak, how we act, how we think of one another. The things that feed our self-righteousness and our ego. Be aware that we resist that, that we flee from that.

And there's a kind of, there's a dual action, we flee from that, he flees from us. So we push him doubly far away from us, we flee because he flees also. And recognize that responsibility that we have. And therefore, the outcome, what's the outcome? The outcome is that he draws near to us. I would argue that's the one thing we all long for more in our Christian lives, that God would draw near to us. We often feel that he's far away.

And maybe we just feel passive about that and say, well, I'll just have to wait until he comes closer, until I'm revived. But do you see that the order here? We draw near to God, our responsibility and our grace and the power of the Spirit, he will come to us.

[35 : 08] It's different from the order we sometimes think. Because in salvation he comes to us. But we go to him in our Christian lives and he draws near to us. And then what does he do? He lifts us up. Stens says that, you know, humble yourself before the Lord, he will exalt you. He will lift you up. And I think these are two really great concepts to fuel our desire for happiness and for empowerment to change. Not looking for change in our circumstances necessarily or in our church or in our wife or our husband or our family or our situation, but primarily seeing the empowerment being personal that our hearts. I can never love Christ. I can never do these things. I can never be a proper Christian. He says, yes, draw near to me. Deal with these things that selfish will that clogs my life giving blood.

And know that I will come near and know that I will lift you up. We want to be lifted up, exalted. But our sinful natures want us to be exalted for the wrong reasons. But he wants just to lift us up, just nearer him. And to be what we were created to be. And to be whole and to be strong and to be gracious and to be Christ like. He allows us and he wants us as we are transformed by his wisdom. So may it be that we take this marvelously practical book of wisdom, the Old New Testament Proverbs and apply it to our lives because we all have to and we all can. But what it does require is that you do business with the living God.

You must do business with the living God. You must be someone and I must be someone that deals with the living God that we cannot be Christians that are dependent only on other people or on public worship or on sound bites or on anything. You, we can be Christians once removed. We have to be people who eyeball God. We deal with them one to one and we confess the things that separate us from Him and we examine our will and our desires to see where they counter or are different from God's and we seek forgiveness and grace and we will be lifted up and he will draw near to us and our Christian life will be transformed. Amen.

Let's pray briefly Lord God we ask and pray that you would teach us from your word we know and understand that sometimes it's very sharp. Sometimes we struggle with it. Sometimes we battle with what it says we are uncomfortable with its truth and yet these are the great piercings of a friend, the stabbings of one who heals, one who like the great surgeon wants to take from us the things that deceive and separate us and can never bring wholeness and genuine long lasting happiness and forgive us when we do settle for second best which actually is an enmity to you and is not even second best. Forgive us for living like old creations with all the sin and brokenness and death that is associated with that and help us rather to live in our Christian lives so that we can soar on wings like eagles that we can run and not be weary and walk and not faint because you are a great providing loving longing God who wishes to draw near to us who will happily as we are humble before you lift us up and make our lives miraculous and our grace impacted communities transformational and powerful and influential in the city that we love and that we long to see submitting to the great wisdom of the cross and of Jesus and of the salvation that he offers. We thank you that we can confess our sins because Jesus is our wisdom and the cross is the expression of the great wisdom of God foolishness though it is to the world which mocks and laughs and looks on. May that never be so for us. We ask Lord that you would help to transform us by your grace and grace of wisdom and all its beautiful characteristics that we have read of in James where Jesus say Amen.