

Seeking a Community of Humility

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[0:00] All right, Anna's going to come and read for us from James chapter 4, verses 1 to 10. That's our New Testament reading today from which our sermon is based.!

You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people, 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. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says, he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

[1:25] Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Amen. All right, well, it's been three weeks since we were last in the book of James, so we come back to it today. We'll need a reminder or two about the book of James, the letter.

And it's a book that's about following Jesus holistically. It's an epistle to the first century church all across the Mediterranean about growing in discipleship in every part of who we are and in every sphere of life.

It's a hard-hitting letter. It's uncomfortable. It's exposing. That's definitely true of what we're talking about today. So one of the really helpful summaries we've latched onto for James is the language from Philip Melancthon, the reformer, the Lutheran reformer.

And Philip summarized the whole book of James by saying, So James does not teach that you're saved by works, but that you're saved by grace alone, through faith alone.

[2:38] And saving faith never remains alone. So in each week we've seen different ways that faith, saving faith, God's grace changes us and should produce change. He called us to good works and to change our speech patterns and to become doers of the word, not hearers only.

To serve the afflicted, the orphan and the widow. And today we come in the same vein and we see that the community of faith is indispensable for deep character change.

That you can't experience deep character change in your life. Saving faith that leads to character change. Spiritual change from within without the community of faith, without the local church.

That's the expression of wisdom. You don't grow in wisdom apart from being a part of the body, the congregation. Now you won't find the word community in the passage we read anywhere.

But if you were here a few weeks ago, we looked at chapter 3. And back in chapter 3, verse 10, there is a question that becomes the structuring point of the section that we're in today.

[3:42] And the question in chapter 3 was, Who is wise and understanding among you? So that's a question to you, to the church James was writing. Who is wise and understanding among you?

And maybe you could name some of the people you think are wise and understanding around here. It was a question to the community of the church about who can be your teacher, who can be your leader. It's about community leadership. So he starts this whole section about on the subject of community.

Who can be the leaders in the church? Who's wise among you? And then you come to the beginning of our passage, verse 1. The parallel question. The opposite question. But what causes fights and quarrels among you?

So the first question was about community leadership. The second question is about community breakdown. What is causing fights and quarrels in your midst? And so you see the whole theme of the section is about the church, the local church body and the community.

How the community of the church can grow you and cause deep character change and cause you to, chapter 1, verse 4, become perfect. Which really just means mature, lacking in nothing, a holistic disciple.

[4:50] Or how an unhealthy church community can break you and can actually push against our spiritual growth. Now we're going to look at three things, but let me give you a side note before we do so.

The side note is this. There's an assumption in this passage. And the assumption is to grow, you need the congregation. The assumption here is that you cannot just show up on Sundays for an hour and leave and not be a part of the local community of the church and still grow.

You need sermons. I believe in them. They're very good. I'm giving one now. But deep character change, the type of spiritual growth that James is talking about in this book, requires you not only to congregate for an hour, but to be a congregation.

And that means that if you're just listening to a sermon for an hour, and it's not an hour, by the way, 30 minutes on a Sunday, and leaving, and you're not bearing anybody's burdens in this room.

Nobody's bearing your burdens. You're not growing in friendship with anybody in here where you can ask them to pray for you, and they can ask you to pray for them. You don't know anybody in the local church, our local church, well enough to where they can speak the truth and love to you and it be okay.

[6:07] You're not going to experience the depth of spiritual growth that James is talking about. The assumption of the passage is that the community of the local church is the soil in which spiritual growth takes place.

It's a non-negotiable. It's absolutely indispensable. So, let's see what James very specifically teaches us about it. The first thing is this. Let's ask his question as our first point.

What causes quarrels and fights among us? What frustrates character-shaping community, the kind that can really grow you? That's the question he asks in verse 1, and we're going to spend half of our time on that point.

So, this is our longest thing to think about. He tells us in verse 1, what causes quarrels and fights among us? And this is his answer. Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

So, the word passion is the Greek word hedonon, from which we get the word hedonism, just self-seeking, a life of self-seeking pleasure. But the way he frames it here is that these passions, what are they?

[7:06] We'll find out in a moment. But they're at war within us. So, that word war is really a term for a general strategizing militarily. So, what he's saying is that in you, in your soul as a Christian, if you're a Christian today, there are passions that are strategizing like a military general against who you really are in Christ.

They're working against you. They're trying to destroy you and trying to fight you from within. Paul calls it the flesh. So, now the question is, okay, well, what are these passions? James, tell me what these passions are.

And he does that in verse 2. Here they are. You desire and you do not have, so you murder. You covet and you cannot obtain, so you fight and you quarrel.

So, what is he thinking of, this hedonon, this passion that's raging within us? And it's simply this. You want something, but you don't get it, so you start a fight.

So, he says that the passion that is raging in us, that is causing little grumbles and fights in a local church community or anywhere else in the social orders of your life, is that we want to get our own way.

[8:21] And when we don't get it, we'll start a fight to get it. We'll start a quarrel to get our own way. That's his answer. And the word he gives us that's translated there in that second part of verse 2 is he

calls this the one word that the whole Bible describes to describe this problem within us, covetousness.

You covet. You don't get what you want, and so you start quarrels and fights in the local church or anywhere else. So, deep covetousness. What is that? What is this passion raging within us? And it is really just simply that. It's that I want what I want. And if I don't get it, I will fight for it. I will fight you for it.

I will fight other people for it. And he's simply saying that desire to get our way is what causes fights in the local church and breakups and division.

This is, covetousness is an umbrella sin. So, you could take an umbrella and write the word covetousness all around the top of it. And you can fit every other sin really underneath the umbrella of covetousness.

[9:26] It's simply wanting good things in a bad way. It's over-wanting. It's wanting good things God's given us too much. But the real heart of it is just simply wanting what you want to the neglect of everybody else.

So, think about this umbrella sin. Money is a good thing. It's a gift of God. But if you want money, if you over-desire money, it becomes greed. That's a type of covetousness.

What Augustine called a disordered desire. Sex is a gift of God. But if you want sexual fulfillment in the wrong place apart from God's design, that is called lust.

It's over-desire. It is a type of covetousness. It is wanting in the wrong way, disordered desire. If you look at your neighbor and they have something that you didn't even know you wanted, but then you see them having it and then you want it, and you think, my life would be so much better with that, that is called envy.

And it's a type of covetousness. It's a disordered desire. Coveting, let me give you a more technical definition. Coveting is inordinate desire to possess something we know is forbidden to us.

[10:34] An inordinate, deep-down desire to possess something that we know before God is forbidden to us. But the most simple way to say it is when we think, I just want my own way.

I want to get what I want to get. And we'll cause fights to get it. Now, he gives you an example of it, and this helps you know so much, that he is talking to the local church.

He's talking to Christians who have professed faith in this epistle. And you see that in verse 3 because where does he take us? He takes us to prayer. So he says, you ask and you don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

So he says, let me show you an example of how this works out in the local church. You're praying. He's writing to the first century church. You're praying, and then you're turning and saying, no, God is not answering my prayers.

I'm not getting what I want. And he's saying, why? Well, because you're asking in covetousness. In other words, your prayer life is one where you come before God and say, Lord, this is what I want.

[11:34] Please give it to me. And then you don't get it, and you say, God is not answering my prayers. And it's because you're asking wrongly. You come before God in prayer and say, not thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven, but my will be done on earth and in heaven as well.

Well, and so he says, you pray, but you pray wrongly. You pray with desire for something else than God's will for your life. And so you don't get your prayers. Now, when you do that, when we do that, James is telling us, we, when we want our own way and we don't get it, you know, when we want, when we want hymns or psalms and we don't get it the way we want it and a thousand other things, he said, covetousness draws us to start fights and start quarrels, but when you turn in prayer to God and you say, God, this is what I want, and you don't get it, you start to fight God.

You start to not only become an enemy of the local people, you start to become an enemy of God. And so that's what he says in James 4, 4, is not friendship with the world, enmity or being an enemy of God.

And what's friendship with the world? Friendship with the world is the heart posture that says, I want what I want. I'm going to get my way. That's friendship with the world. And so when that's so deep in us and it even gets into our prayer lives, it's saying we start to pray as enemies of the living God.

Boy, the film Amadeus, many people I think will have seen Amadeus, 1984, and it's the story of one of the great composers of the last couple of centuries, Salieri, an Austrian composer in the Austrian

court.

[13:13] And Salieri is probably the most sympathetic portrait of covetousness in cinema. Because when you watch Amadeus, you realize Salieri, he's a pious man.

He's no obvious villain. He loves God, and he really just wants to do one thing in life, and that's praise God by making great music, composing great music. And it's going fine until a man named Mozart comes onto the scene.

And Salieri sees Mozart, and Mozart is just so much more talented than he is. And it starts with murder in the heart, as James puts it.

James doesn't say here that we covet, so we murder. What's he talking about? Murder in the heart. You know, what we do five times before breakfast every day with that person that's frustrating us so much at work. Salieri starts to murder Mozart in his heart, and it gets worse, and it gets worse. And eventually, in the film, in Salieri's prayers, he turns to God and says, why would this man be given so much more talent than me? He's impious. I'm pious.

[14:19] And he turns to God, and he says, from now on, we are enemies. You see, when covetousness gets so deep down into us, and it is deep within us, not only do we turn when we don't get our way and we fight with people, we actually say to God, from now on, you are my enemy.

You've not given me what I want, the way I want it. This is James 4.4. Friendship with the world. Getting my way is to be a living, even as a believer, acting as if we are enemies of God, practically. If John Smith, hopefully no guests today are named John Smith. If John Smith finds that he is constantly fighting and quarreling at home, at work, in the social communities that he's a part of, in his local church community, everywhere he goes, John and Jane Smith find they are in quarrels and little fights all the time.

The problem is John and Jane Smith. There is a desire and a covetousness that is ruling the heart that just simply says, I want to get my own way, and it begins to manifest in every single part of life. Friends, I think we're in more danger of this than ever before in world history, of being captured by covetousness more and more. However, the work of Jonathan Haidt, who's written so much on the problem of social media, one of the things he points out in his book, The Anxious Mind, he says, research has consistently shown that passive scrolling and watching other people's lives produces measurable increase in envy and dissatisfaction with your own, while active posting daily produces anxiety about your personal status.

[16:05] The platforms are, in effect, covetousness machines. One of my favorite people in the world that I really admire is a guy in the States called Ben Sass.

And Ben is the former senator of Nebraska and later the president of the University of Florida. And Ben is currently, as we speak, dying of pancreatic cancer at the age of 54.

He was a guy that many people in the States had hoped would one day be president in the U.S., but he's a reformed Presbyterian Christian and a PCA church, the denomination that I came from before coming here.

But Ben, in a recent interview, was asked, as he will be many times, what do you think about AI? And the question was, will AI bring heaven or hell?

And he said, yes. And this is what he said as a paraphrase. The thing that will divide society more and more won't be political perspectives as much as how each of us use these tools.

[17:06] Some of us will use these tools without intentionality. And so AI slop will drive our bad desires into worse desires. It makes us, because we covet, simply more covetous.

And then he calls it this. This is an eternal slot machine of dopamine hits. Radical individualism will be fully realized. But on the other hand, the dividing line will be this.

Others, knowing their own temptations, will be far more intentional. Those who use the tools versus those who are being used by the tools. The great battle for the life of the world is the life of the soul in front of the screen.

Because we are coveting people, and the screens are making us more covetous. Covetousness, which is pride. Paul says, which is idolatry. You see, the tenth commandment, thou shall not covet, is the first commandment.

Have no other gods before me. They're one and the same. Because in covetousness, we're being told, don't serve any other gods. Don't think anything you desire can ultimately satisfy you except God alone.

[18:11] But we chase our own little wants for our own contentment and satisfaction. And we end up disillusioned. These things, this is the tail wagging the dog. Our wants are controlling us.

We're not free. And what we're being asked to do here is to see how deep covetousness really lies within us. It is the source of all of our problems. It is the reason we fight. It is the reason we quarrel. What causes community breakdown in the local church? It is not circumstances. It is what is within us. Disordered desires. Secondly, that was our long point, remember.

Secondly, then James says, what does he tell us to do about it? Really what he tells us next is to go deeper in to fix it. So he gives us a more substantial diagnosis than even what's going on in the life of our hearts.

So covetousness over desire is wanting to get our way. It is such a problem in all of our communities. What would produce a beautiful community, a harvest of righteousness?

[19:12] And the answer is to kill the covetous desire. And so James here comes and notice he doesn't first say, go out today and sort out all your relationships and make sure they're healthy.

Instead, what he does is say, humble yourself before God. That's the answer to kill covetous desire. Now, this is how he does it. It's a deep diagnosis and it's hard hitting and it's hard to read.

And it's in verse four. Look at what he says in verse four. You adulterous people. And you might have a footnote in your Bible, a footnote that tells you that the word adulterous there is actually you adulterous.

It doesn't say people, but you adulterous. So it's in the feminine. So it sounds as if he's talking to women only. You adulterous. But why does he do that? The reason he does that is because he's taking the feminine metaphor from the Old Testament and using it in the New Testament to us, to the local church and saying we are like Israel in the Old Testament.

What does God say in the Old Testament? He said, I am the great groom of Israel who pursues my bride with relentless love, but she is an adulteress. She runs away from me. And the reason he uses this language is because he says in our covetousness, we are committing spiritual adultery.

[20:34] That's the deep diagnosis. And you see what he's trying to do is get us to realize, yes, you can think today, boy, I've caused so many little quarrels and so many little fights in my home life, my church life, my work life.

But he's saying, hold on a second, we'll come back to that. You need to realize that covetousness and the little quarrels that we start is spiritual adultery against God himself.

It's friendship with the world, and therefore it's being an enemy of God. It's saying this life is about me and my own way, therefore it is not about your will for me, God. It's not about your way.

Therefore, it is spiritual adultery. That's the hard-hitting language that he puts it in. He's telling us, look, it's not just fights about X, Y, Z. And I thank God that we have almost none of this around here. But it's not just fights about the vision for the children's ministry or Psalms versus hymns or the thousand other things it could be. It's about our relationship with God is the deep diagnosis, the biblical diagnosis.

[21:38] It's as if we, in our covetousness, are sitting on God's lap in order to slap him in the face. We take all the great gifts and the things he's given us, the many gifts, and we treat them as if they are our gods, that we are our own God.

And so we sit on his lap using the self that he's gifted us in order to actually slap him across the face. It's spiritual adultery. And he gives more grace than we have ever coveted.

His grace runs far faster than our rebellious sprint away from him. Verse 6, the best five words in the book of James. But he gives more grace.

His grace is deeper than all of your sin. You cannot outrun him. You see, he's putting it in the metaphor of the great groom chasing after his bride who has run away.

And when it says he gives more grace, it's saying you cannot outrun him. You can desire everything in your Christian life but him, and he will overcome you with his grace. God resists the proud but

gives grace to the humble.

[22:55] How? The resistance is the pursuit. He resists you because he's pursuing you. You covet. You want things you shouldn't want. And you feel the guilt of that in your life. You feel the problems it's causing.

God is resisting you because he's pursuing you. His grace is outrunning you. He's chasing you further than you can run. And that's why we've got to see that we, in this passage, we're the adulteress.

We're the older brother. We're the prodigal son. We're the Barabbas, the guilty one who went free because his grace goes further. Where is Jesus in all of this?

If you look at verse 6, 7, 8, 9, all these commands he gives you to deal with this problem, he says, humble yourself. Submit to God. Resist the devil.

Draw near to God. He will draw near to you. And these are commands for us today. But who is he talking about here? He's talking about the great groom himself who in the incarnation came to pursue you because his grace gives more than your sin can ever take away.

[24:00] Jesus Christ is the humble one. He submitted himself to God. He resisted the devil. He drew near to God and God drew near to him. He did everything that we're supposed to do, our desires, yet we didn't.

So he came and did it for us. Jesus Christ is the groom who pursued us all the way to the point of dying for our covetousness. He was crucified because we have coveting, evil, deep desires.

That is his pursuit of us. His grace gives more than your sin can ever take away from you. So let me invite you. Draw near to him today. While today is still today, he longs to overcome all of your sins with grace.

Don't hide from him. There's no point in hiding from him. You can't keep a clean reputation before God. No, he sees every deep desire within you, the things that everybody else in the room does not know about.

He knows. Don't hide from him. It says that he longs to lavish you with grace. Come to him while today is today and say, I am the prodigal in the far country. I am the elder brother who refused to go into the party.

[25:08] You today are the one coin that was lost that Jesus Christ came to find. You are the one sheep that he is running after.

His grace gives more than your covetousness takes from you. And so lastly, to close with this, we're being told here about the beauty of what can be a countercultural community.

And I just want to give you a quick, very brief run through of that. When we receive his grace, he says that we have the ability to become a countercultural community that is not in friendship with the world, but friendship with God.

A beautiful community. Kalos. Good community. As the Greek text puts it. And here it is. There's just a few things he tells us as we conclude. Verse 7. A beautiful community submits to God.

When we submit to God, a beautiful community is one. Our local church can become this more and more where we are a people who have nothing to prove. So when you submit to God, what are we being told? You submit to God, you have placed your identity so securely in his grace that you have nothing to prove here.

[26:17] That means you don't need anybody else for anything. You're not in a relationship to use anyone else. You can simply distribute goods like he did because you are so submitted to God, so fully satisfied in him that you're not performing.

You never need to. You have everything you need in him. And that's the ground of a beautiful community. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian author, he wrote a little story called How Much Land Does a Man Need?

And it's about a peasant who was poor who desperately thought, if only I can get land that will heal all of my woes in life.

And so he said in the book, the peasant, I will not fear the devil if only I have land. So someone comes and offers him as much land as he can walk around in a single day.

So he said, if you can, as much plot of land as you can circle in a single day, that will be yours. And so the peasant goes out and he starts hustling. And he, from sunrise to sunset, he goes as far as he can.

[27:26] But then he realizes at some point he's got to turn back. Because the rule was, you have to make it back to the starting point by sunset to get the circle of land that you've walked around. And so in the end of the story, he finally gets to the point where he started, right at sunset.

And he worked so hard to get every little centimeter of land he possibly could, he collapses dead.

And he was buried in a grave six feet long.

And Tolstoy asked, how much land does a man need? And the answer is six feet to be buried in. Do you see the point of the story?

The more stuff from others we think we need in this life, the more we get it, the more disillusioned we will be.

You've got to see that only the real God can satisfy your deepest desires. It won't be land. It won't be the promotion. It won't be the romance.

[28:27] Only the God who made you can satisfy your deepest desires. And so when he says submit to God, what is he saying? He's saying when you say God is all I need, God is all I have, then everything else becomes just a good thing, just a gift.

Land is just land. It's great. But it's not your idol. It's not your God. You don't need to get your way to get that last centimeter of land. Then everything else, every person simply becomes a gift in your life, not something you need to use.

Secondly, here, a countercultural community tells us resist the devil. Now, this means when he says go, therefore, in the gospel, in the power of the gospel and resist the devil.

It means you can. It's a command. You can resist the devil. So the devil is tempting us to covetousness all the time. And he lures us. And he doesn't sin for you, but he longs for you to sin. And so he's telling us a countercultural community is actively resisting our own covetousness, resisting the devil. Thirdly, it looks like people, a countercultural community looks like people who draw near to God rather than withdraw.

[29:31] Draw near to the Lord, he says. What are we being asked to do here? It's the opposite of verse 3, where we draw near to God in prayer by saying, Lord, this is what I want, and I want you to give it to me.

The prayer of Salieri. And he says, no, draw near to God. What is a countercultural community?

One where you go to God in prayer and you say, thy will be done. I do not have an agenda. I come to you in prayer and I don't, I just say, thy will be done in my life.

I don't bring my own agenda. You do with me what you want to do with me. Fourth of five, it looks like people who are honest about their own failures. Look at the end of this passage, the very end. He says, be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and joy to gloom. Humble yourself before the Lord. He calls upon the church, a countercultural community to do something that the world never expects, and that's to weep over your sin, to have tears.

And he says, a beautiful community is one where people are weeping over their covetousness, are recognizing their sin in their life and weeping over it. Let your laughter be turned to tears over the depth of sin, the truth.

[30:38] Don't hide from God. Own it. Let your laughter be turned to tears. This is really just an invitation. And the last word is this, to embrace how sinful we really are. That's what he's asking us to do here.

You know, if you're fighting today to say, this is not my problem. I'm not that covetous. Then we are simply trying to pretend that we don't need God's grace. And this is how this fuels beautiful community.

Boy, when you are able to say, I know how deep the battle is within me. I know that I am far more sinful than I can imagine.

That my desires are far more disordered than I'm willing to admit. Then when you look at your brother and sister in the room and they start a little quarrel about something in the local church, what do you say?

You say, what's their problem? No, you don't say that. You say, I know what their problem is. It's my problem. I am far more of a sinner than I'm willing to admit to anybody. And I know that that's what they're struggling with as well.

[31:40] You see, when you say, when you weep, when you wretched over your sin and mourn before the Lord, he gives you grace and he allows you to turn to your neighbor and say, I know what that comment was about.

They're struggling with covetousness like me. It's a life-giving exercise to say, I am such a sinner and I know everybody else is just like me. That means that the final word, the countercultural community is just one of humility.

Humble yourself. Let's be humble. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, not taking on low self-esteem, but it's the rest and submission to God to think of yourself less.

And it's all, all because Jesus Christ is the one who humbled himself so much for us, for our covetousness, that he was willing to give you grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.

His grace gives more than you can ever sin, than you can ever run. He keeps giving it. It all depends on grace upon grace. So let's rest in it.

[32:46] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have created here a community of grace that we don't get what we deserve. And therefore, today, we submit ourselves to you. We confess our deep covetousness that we want things we should not want and ways we should not want them, and that that is destroying us.

And so we think about all the little quarrels and fights in our life, even this morning, the little things we fought about in the kitchen or the ways we've already been frustrated here at church today, maybe.

And we think we have a deep problem. And we confess it before you. So now as we close in singing, we ask that you would meet with us as we recognize our worth is not in what we own. It's not in land or relationships. It's in what you say about us. So help us to be so satisfied in you that we can treat everything else as a good gift from you.

We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.