

It is a wonder the kingdom survives  
James 4:1 – 6  
Fairview Presbyterian Church  
September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Let me share with you a Bible mystery. We have explored before the purpose of miracles in the Bible. The function of miracles in the Bible is to reveal that God clearly and unambiguously stands behind the one who performs the miracles. They show that God sent this man, the miracle worker. During the ministry of Jesus, Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, visits Jesus secretly at night, telling the Lord, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”<sup>1</sup> Nicodemus is absolutely right. The miracles confirm that Jesus is sent by God.

Who are the two greatest men of God, the two greatest spiritual leaders, in the story the Bible tells? They are Moses and Jesus. Moreover, as you might expect, Moses and Jesus are the two greatest miracle workers in the Bible. No one could do the things that Moses did -- the Ten Plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea, bringing water from the rock, giving Manna, the bread from heaven – unless God was with him. No one could do the things Jesus did – the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of a man born blind, the restoration of lepers, the casting out of demonic spirits – unless God was with him.

On one hand, you might expect that the ability to perform such unequalled miracles ought to establish the leadership authority of these two beyond any question or doubt. God is with these men in a special way and – so we might expect – their people ought to follow with unquestioning loyalty and allegiance. But in fact, this is not the case. Everywhere Jesus goes, the people are astonished that he, Jesus, teaches as one with authority. Everywhere he goes, the religious leaders grow more jealous and envious of his authority. Consider what happened as a result of Jesus’ greatest single miracle during his ministry: the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. Remember, Lazarus’ raising was not a mere resuscitation. It cannot be claimed that Lazarus had merely swooned and then was brought back from the brink. No. Lazarus had been dead for four days by the time Jesus arrives in Bethany. They had laid Lazarus in the tomb. His body was decomposing. Jesus orders the tomb opened and commands Lazarus to return to the land of the living from among the land of the dead. And at Jesus’ command, both Lazarus’ body and spirit are restored. A miracle like this the world had never seen.

You might think that such a miracle ought to remove all doubt. Does the raising of Lazarus lead the Jewish religious leaders to turn in submission to Jesus’ undeniable God-given authority? No. John tells us,<sup>47</sup> So the chief priests

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 3:2.

and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, <sup>2</sup> And, let’s be honest, at a distance of two thousand years, we can be hard on the religious authorities of Jesus’ day. So let me ask, did the raising of Lazarus remove all doubt in the hearts and minds of his friends and disciples? We might want to think so. Yet, only a little more than a week later his friends could not find the strength to pray with him in the Garden and, when the authorities arrived, his closest followers abandoned him, running in fear.

Let me ask you a question my friend: imagine you had been present at both the raising of Lazarus and at Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane? Do you think that you would have responded any differently than the disciples did that evening? Be honest.

Here is the Bible mystery we wish to explore today. Why is it that among his friends, the more Jesus’ god-given authority is established and made explicit, it seems to pay little or no dividend in strengthening their resolve and faithfulness? And, closely related, why is it that, among his enemies, the more Jesus’ god-given authority is established and made explicit, the greater their jealousy and animosity becomes? The more Jesus’ authority is revealed, the greater they are blinded to the truth of who Jesus truly is.

Why is this? In our passage today, James answers these questions. His answers provide a rather disturbing look at the reality of the human heart in general, and the Christian heart in particular. James’ first point is that it is the battle within the human heart that begets the battles within Christ’s church.

### **It is the battle within the human heart that begets the battles within Christ’s church**

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

Sometimes, on a brief, cursory reading of these verses, Christians misunderstand the intent of James’ words. James is not talking about conflict in Afghanistan, Chechnya or the Straits of Taiwan. He is not telling us what causes the rise of tyrants such as Pol Pot, Khomeni, or Joseph Stalin. No. Remember, James is writing to the church. James’ words address the church, not the world. He is talking about quarrels, fights and conflicts that erupt within the local church and within the wider church.

Note that James tells us something very interesting and, to be honest, quite sobering, regarding the source and genesis of most church fights. He says that the battle within the human heart begets the battles within Christ’s church.

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<sup>2</sup>*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jn 11:46-48.

There are church fights outside because of the turmoil inside. Internal conflict yields the bitter fruit of external conflict.

Have you ever been involved in a church experiencing a church fight? A church fight is an ugly affair. A church fight can derail Christian ministry, divide families, strain friendships, ruin pastoral careers and drive people from the community of faith they have hitherto called home. Most local church fights are small-minded affairs. We like to re-tell the stories of the great spiritual conflicts of church history: Augustine versus the heretic Pelagius; Sir Thomas More's conflict with King Henry VIII; and, of course, Martin Luther's refusal to recant his teaching at the Diet of Worms, launching the Protestant Reformation. It would be a blessed thing if most church fights were about such weighty and worthy issues – issues that truly are worth a fight – as the doctrine of justification; the integrity of marriage; or the place (if any) of human merit in salvation. In fact, most church fights erupt over debates about much smaller matters: over musical styles in worship; building projects; the use of cemetery funds; a desire to return to “the good old days;” and the color of the new carpet in the sanctuary.

The internal conflict James has in mind is conflict with God. He is saying that enmity with God leads to enmity with others. He says that our passions are at war within ourselves. Some translations translate James' word at this point as *lusts*, but that does not quite get at what he means. The word *lust* in modern English has an almost exclusive sexual application, whereas James' word is broader. What James in fact is saying is that the root of most church fights is the human desire to possess what another person owns. When people talk about the conflicts that they are participating in in life, invariably they seek to put as positive a spin upon the reason for the conflict. They proclaim noble ideals; self sacrificing motives; and disinterested purposes. In response to this tendency, James replies, “Do not believe the press releases: the real reason behind church fights is human desire and envy.”

**Do not believe the press releases: the real reason behind church fights is human desire and envy**

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

James uses two words to describe the root of the problem: desire and envy. His use of the word *murder* is rhetorical. He is not referring to literal murder, the taking of a human life, but rather to the tendency of humans in general and Christians in particular to engage in interpersonal conflict.

James is saying that the core of the problem is desire, strong desire, passionate desire, unbridled desire. The problem is that people *want*. Desires lead to fights because our desires are self-centered. They lead us inevitably into conflict. We want to be in control. We want win the day. We want our side to

prevail. We desire our opinion to be vindicated. We insist that we be proven right. We require that *our way be the way*. We demand that our authority be recognized.

Moses had overseen the Ten Plagues, parted the Red Sea, and provided water from the rock in the middle of the desert. Yet these miracles did not prevent people from grumbling about Moses around the campfires. These miracles did not prevent rebellious attitudes from arising among some of the leaders. They looked at Moses and they **wanted** – they *wanted* his power, his place, his role of leadership. In a similar manner, Jesus performed great miracles of compassion, kindness and healing. Yet, the leaders of his day would not submit to his God endorsed authority, but instead conspired against him. He was betrayed by one of his own, and abandoned by the rest of his followers.

What the example of Moses and Jesus tells us is that there is an inherent human desire to attack those who are on the top simply because they are on the top. Those in leadership positions excite envy and illegitimate desire in others who are not in the same leadership positions. “There is no way to place a man in a position of unquestioned authority without creating in the minds of sinful and envious men the very reason for questioning it.”<sup>3</sup> We will always be tempted to question, challenge and undermine God’s appointed leaders.

James tells us that envy is ubiquitous. It finds its way into everything. And, it is a spiritual shape-shifter. It does not reveal itself as envy, but instead takes on an air of “spiritual” concern to hide and mask its true desire. Envy does not say, “I want that.” It shape shifts. It says instead, “I just do not feel fed by the pastor’s preaching. I do not think he is really preaching Christ.” Envy says, “It simply does not feel like **my** church anymore.” When you hear someone say, “You know, there really are a lot of people unhappy at the church;” it is really envy speaking and what he is saying is, “Give me that.”

God provides spiritual leaders in our lives. Our responsibility is to acknowledge and submit to that leadership. Are we willing to humble ourselves? Or will we give in to the envy that causes fights, quarrels and divisions?

James’ judgment upon allowing envy to lead and have its way in our lives is strong. It is, says James, spiritual adultery. It is the worst form of worldliness. Worldliness means looking to the world, and not to God, for the guidance we need regarding the things we love and value most.

**Worldliness means looking to the world, and not God, for the guidance we need regarding the things we love and value most**

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Credenda Agenda* Volume 18/3 – Stinkers in the Church, p. 5

James can liken friendship with the world to spiritual adultery because of the structure of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments begin with the spiritual demand of absolute loyalty God alone. <sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. <sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> The Ten Commandments end in prohibiting envy. <sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” <sup>5</sup> The two together form the frame of how our lives ought to unfold. They are counterpoint, describing on the one hand our relationship to God and, on the other, our relationship to the world. It is one and the other: love the Lord and keep desire within its proper boundaries. The commandments begin by focusing on God and end by telling us not to focus upon our desire. God’s great competitor for the affections of the human heart is its desire for the things of this world. As Jesus eloquently put it, “No man serves two masters.” We are either worldly or godly. It is one or the other, either or.

You may be asking yourself, “*What exactly is worldliness?*” Good question. How do we know the worldliness James is speaking of in this passage? James tells us. He says that worldliness is *friendship with the world*. Being friendly with the world puts us in conflict with God. And, being a friend of God puts us in conflict with the world.

Note that the idea of friendship binds up all the various faculties of a person: heart, affection, mind, emotion, commitment, desire, hopes and dreams. The idea is that we share the same mindsets with our friends. We think like them. We are like them. We share similar outlooks and worldviews. So the question asked is this: “Where do you get the values and opinions that guide you in the living of your life?” Do you get them from the world or from God? Do you get them from what you were taught in school or what you are taught on Sunday mornings? Are your values and desires shaped by a desire to honor God with your wealth and possessions, or by the latest editions of Car and Driver, Vogue, Maxim, Martha Stewart Living, The Sporting News or Cosmopolitan? Paul lays the challenge given to us clearly in Romans 12, <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. <sup>6</sup> A Christian is constantly seeking to break out of the molding, squeezing power of the world. The way we break out of its grasp is by the study of God’s word, which leads to the renewal of our minds.

James’ next point is to say that human history is a continuous story of selfish ambition, envy, jealousy, and desire.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ex 20:2-3.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ex 20:17.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ro 12:2.

## **Human history is a continuous story of selfish ambition, envy, jealousy, and desire**

<sup>5</sup> 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”?

It does not happen very often, but every now and again we come upon a verse in the Bible in which there is not certainty as to how it should be translated into English or, once translated, what it actually means, how it should be understood. This is one of those verses.

The translation difficulties of v. 5 are such that I am not inclined to enter in to a full blown discussion with you regarding them: frankly, the issues are too technical and would quickly turn tedious. In my opinion, James is simply telling us that the problem of envy is worldwide, universal and timeless. Envy is at work in the story of world history. And it is at work in the story of the history of the church. It is inescapable.

But James’ next point, flowing out of the previous one, is an observation that is surprising, even shocking, to the modern world. Contrary to popular opinion: God takes sides.

### **Contrary to popular opinion: God takes sides**

<sup>6</sup> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

In our modern, multicultural, relativistic world, people take offense if it is suggested that God takes sides in human conflicts. At the slightest whiff of the assertion of divine partisanship it is indignantly asked, “Who are you to think that God is on your side?”

It is true that it is neither right nor wise to believe that God’s purposes are wholly the same as ours. America’s interests are not necessarily the same as God’s interests. God is not on the side of either Democrats or Republicans in political debates. God is not on the side of the capitalists, the socialists or the communists. But, saying these things is not the same as saying that God does not take sides.

James tells us explicitly whose side God is on: “*God opposes the proud and he gives grace to the humble.*” The modern assumption that God does not take sides is mistaken. God most definitely takes sides. But the standards by which God determines whose side he is on are very different from any standards the world can conceive. Those who are self-confident and proud God will oppose. God gives those who are humble and self-sacrificing his grace. This is not a formula for winning power and influence, wealth and possession, in our world. God is on the side of those who will humble themselves and submit, not

those who assert and demand. God is on the side of those who do all that they can to live at peace with others; not those who are continually picking fights and causing turmoil. God is on the side of those who refuse to exalt themselves, but instead seek to show honor to others. God is on the side of those who turn the spotlight of self reflection upon their own motives, seeking to root out envy and jealousy. God is on the side of those who consider others better than themselves. God is opposed to those who seek to justify themselves; repeating over and over again to themselves the reasons why they are justified in nursing the bitterness and anger that is in their soul. God is opposed to the proud and self confident. God is opposed to those who believe that they are good enough in their own efforts. God is opposed to those who believe they can earn their own ticket into heaven. Instead, God gives grace to those who turn in faith to him, relying not upon their own efforts, but upon the righteousness that is ours through trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

On which side are you? Standing proud? Or bowing in humble faith?

Say "Amen," Somebody!

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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”? <sup>6</sup> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”