

Deformed Desires

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Date: 09 October 2022

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- [0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we just pray, Lord, that you would work in our hearts. You know that our hearts are full of conflicting things sometimes.
- And Father, we have trouble, Lord, sometimes focusing on you, concentrating on your word, listening to your word. So I pray now that by your spirit, you would help us to see what you have to say to us and that you would speak clearly to us so that we might gain heavenly wisdom and live for you.
- All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I don't like conflict. I try to avoid it where I can. I'm that guy who will be more likely to keep his mouth shut than try to start a fight.
- And my guess is that this is probably true of our church as a whole. Many of us wish for a life where we could all just get along. But conflict is unavoidable.
- It's present in our families, our sibling relationships, our marriages, our schools, our places of work, our horse of government. Even the early church had conflict.
- [1 : 19] Just read about those two women in Philippians chapter 4 or Paul and Barnabas in Acts chapter 15. It's everywhere. And it's also in James chapter 4.
- Verse 1 of our passage today makes that clear. What causes fights and quarrels among you? So it seems as if James is dealing with conflict in his local congregation.
- Now if I'm in James' shoes, what would I try to do? Well, I think I'll probably say, alright, the fighting and the quarreling seems to be the primary issue here.
- So let's try to analyse the situation first. What was the trigger? What are people's concerns here? Who is to blame, really? Then I'll probably try to come up with some sort of solution.
- I might say, okay guys, here are some conflict resolution techniques. Take a deep breath. Find a good time to talk. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.
- [2 : 22] Stick to one issue at a time. And let's come up with a win-win situation, okay? But what does James do? Well, there is no doubt he starts with some analysis.
- Look again at verse 1. What causes fights and quarrels among you? And then towards the end of the passage, down in verse 11, he offers a solution of thoughts.
- Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Don't break the law. Just get on with it. Let God be God, okay?
- But when we begin to dig into the verses in between verses 1 and 11, we begin to realise where James differs from my approach.
- You see, James functions a bit like a doctor here. And he's worked out that the fighting and the quarrelling are not the primary issue. They are only the symptoms.
- [3 : 29] And as a doctor, he's not content just to treat the symptoms. He's not content to say, you're quarrelling and fighting?

Oh, that's the problem. Come, come, come. You lack skill in conflict resolution techniques? Let me teach you those. That should solve everything. No, to him, that's the equivalent of giving Panadol for your headache.

When what you really have is a brain tumour. So he wants to go deeper. He wants to know, what's the underlying sickness?

What is really happening? What do these symptoms reveal about ourselves? How does this sickness work? And how do we treat the underlying condition?

So James is probing beneath the surface. He's coming up with a better diagnosis. And today he wants to share with us his diagnosis and his treatment plan.

[4 : 34] He wants to help us understand the real issues at play underneath all that fighting. He wants to spell out how our struggle with sin works.

So, having already heard the voices of Genesis and Jeremiah, we will this morning also listen to the voice of James as he unmask sin for us.

And in fact, today he will do a double unmasking because he will not only unmask sin for us, but also unmask how God works in the face of our sin.

So let's look first of all at the diagnosis. And to begin with, I want you to think back to the last time you had a little quarrel with someone else.

What was the cause of that? So let the tape of that incident replay in your minds and think about how you might answer that question.

[5 : 42] Perhaps you might point the finger at the other person or the circumstances or the emotional stress you were under. Then let's come back to verse 1.

What is Dr. James' diagnosis? Answer? You are. You're the cause. I wonder how you feel about that.

After all, our natural instinct is to point the finger anywhere other than ourselves. It was him. He really knows how to push people's buttons and make me so angry.

It was her. There's something seriously wrong with her. She must have a personality disorder. The customer service was horrible beyond belief. It would drive anybody insane.

That's the reason we had a fight. That's the reason we quarreled. But, Dr. James says, don't be too quick to let yourselves off the hook.

[6 : 46] Yes, it is true that Dr. Paul, over in Romans 12, verse 18, does say, if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone, which suggests that there are times when conflict can arise through no fault of your own.

Dr. James doesn't disagree with Dr. Paul. But, Dr. James says, don't use that as an excuse. Why do you fight and quarrel?

Because of your own desires. War breaks out among you because of the war within you. Far more often, this is the underlying issue.

Now, it's helpful to spell out what Dr. James is not saying. He's not saying that desire in itself is wrong. After all, we all have desires.

They are simply part of being human. In fact, desires are the engine room that drives our actions and our behaviours. Desire is the reason why you might study incredibly hard, because you really want that A.

[8 : 11] Conversely, desire is the reason why you might avoid the dentist, because you really want to avoid that particular pain. And contrary to what traditional Buddhism teaches, the Bible doesn't say we have to get rid of desire.

In fact, to stop desiring is impossible. The only time you don't desire is when you are dead. So the problem is not the mere existence of desire.

But James says, the problem is when our desires harden into a need. It's when a want becomes a must. It's when our cravings become a necessity.

It's when we allow those desires, rather than Jesus, to rule our hearts. It's when they drive our lives so much that nothing else must get in the way of them.

It's when our desires have become deformed by selfishness. How do we know that's the problem? Well, Dr. James says, look what happens when your desires are frustrated.

[9 : 30] Verse 2. You desire and you do not have, so you kill. Think about it. Isn't it true that a lot of the tension that arises in our relationships have to do with when we want something, but we don't get it?

Perhaps it comes across most obviously when we were four years old. We wanted that piece of cake. Our mummy and daddy said, no. And we soon let everyone know in no uncertain terms how unhappy we are.

Our screaming probably sounded like someone was being murdered. And though we might be more sub-to-edit as adults, it's the same dynamic, isn't it?

Perhaps in a romantic context, we wanted the other person to give us a certain experience, to make us feel a certain way, but we didn't get what we wanted, so we spent the rest of the evening glaring silently at our partner or just pouting in the corner.

Perhaps in a church context, we had a certain preference over how particular things are to be done, and when we didn't get our way, bitterness and resentment resulted.

[10 : 57] We might not literally kill, but as Jesus once famously pointed out, anger lies at the heart of murder.

Fighting and quarreling result from the same root. That's why James goes on to say, verse 2, you're covered, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

That's the reason we sin against one another. It's often because we want something so much that we stop looking at the other person as someone made in the image of God.

We stop seeing them as someone whom God loves. Instead, we start seeing them either as a vehicle for getting what I want, or as a barrier stopping me from getting what I want.

And when they become barriers, I want them to get out of the way. So I pick a fight with them, whether directly or passive-aggressively.

[12 : 10] So that's the problem. Fighting is the symptom. But the problem is our self-centered desires, which no longer have any room for God or others.

That's the underlying sickness. And that's why James goes on to say, verses 2 and 3, You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You see, why does James switch to talking about prayer here? Because he's being a good doctor. He wants to show us that when we don't pray, or we pray with wrong motives, those are simply different symptoms of the same underlying sickness.

Let me show you how. You see, if we stop coming to God in prayer, what is that usually a sign of?

Well, it's usually a sign that we've started thinking, I don't need God. I don't need his provision or his guidance. It's a sign that we're beginning to think of ourselves independent from him, such that instead of praying to have his desires, we indulge our own.

[13 : 46] It's a sign that our hearts are becoming self-centered. Or what happens when we do pray, but with wrong motives?

Well, it shows that we're approaching God only for our own wants and desires. We no longer approach God as Father who desires a relationship with us even as he gives us good gifts, but we see him instead only as a vending machine ready to dispense what we ask for.

We only approach God with our own agenda in mind, not his. So it's the same underlying sickness at work again.

It's the problem of having self-centered hearts with self-seeking desires. And when we pray like this, God doesn't entertain us.

Notice in verse 3 that James does not say God doesn't hear, only that we do not receive. receive. He always hears, but he is not pleased with such prayers and that's why he doesn't say yes.

[15 : 07] So that's the diagnosis. And in the end, what is the essence of such sickness? Well, James now gives a label to this particular disease.

He calls it spiritual adultery. that is James' dark diagnosis, verse 4. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?

Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Wow. James certainly cuts deep, doesn't he?

God causes his bride, but we run after something else.

We chase only our own desires. And whenever we do that, that counts as spiritual adultery in God's eyes.

[16 : 13] life. For in a marriage, you can't have room for more than one partner. Imagine if a husband decides to be in a physical relationship with someone other than his wife.

He desires another lady. Would he at that moment be a friend of the marriage? Would he not at that moment be its enemy?

That's the idea James is getting at. Either we desire to do what most pleases God, what will best serve his kingdom, what will bring glory to him, or we desire to do what most pleases me, what best serves me, what most exalts me.

And one of those desires have to win out. They can't coexist indefinitely. And when we make our own selfish desires, rather than God's kingdom, the driving force of our lives, it results in all sorts of problematic consequences.

Fighting, prayerlessness, and above all, ending up on God's enemy list. I don't think that's where you want to be.

[17 : 37] So that's the diagnosis. The problem is our self-centered, adulterous hearts. And though the problem can often remain hidden for a while, the reality of conflict often unmasks what our hearts are really like.

When we fight, we show where sin still lurks inside of us. So what's the treatment plan? How does James propose we deal with this?

Well, some possible answers come to mind, don't they? Perhaps he could say, stop desiring. But we've already worked out that's not possible.

So perhaps he would say, get your desires under control. Suppress them where necessary. Increase your discipline. Or perhaps he would resort to a scolding tone.

How dare you? How dare you chase that? You better feel as guilty as you can. But James doesn't do any of that.

[18 : 49] Instead, notice what he does. Verse 5. Or do you think scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

Now just as an aside, verse 5 is a difficult verse to translate. So if you have the older NIV or another translation in front of you, you might see it translated slightly differently.

But I think the NIV 2011 gets it right. So that's what we're going with. It's on your outline. And when we first read verse 5, I suppose it does sound a little like scolding.

but look again. Notice what James is really getting us to do. He's getting us to gaze deeply at the face of God.

And he says to us, my brothers and sisters, you desire the world. You desire all these other things. But do you not see how much God desires you?

[20 : 03] Do you not see how God burns with jealousy for you? Do you not see how he jealously longs for every fiber of your being?

That's the testimony of the Old Testament. After all, he's your husband. And which husband will be indifferent to a spouse who has strayed?

If a husband is invested in the marriage, you would expect a reaction, wouldn't you? So it is with God. He is not indifferent when we are unfaithful to him.

He is roused to act on our behalf. He is jealous for you. But he is not jealous for you like some insecure, vengeful husband.

You see, we often think of jealousy as something negative because in our experience, we only ever encounter sinful jealousy.

[21 : 08] Sinful jealousy is the sword that longs to possess what does not belong to you. But that's not the kind of jealousy we're talking about here.

In God's case, jealousy represents his zeal to protect and restore what belongs to him. It's his utter commitment to you.

And watch the heart of this husband. His heart is not to destroy you as much as he can because you've hurt him. Neither is his heart to abandon you, to leave you to your own selfish desires, which will see you trapped in endless conflict, which will leave you unable to relate to him as father, and bring you nothing but heartache.

No, his heart is to win you back. He is the God who moves towards us. And that's why we get the key verse of this entire passage, verse 6.

But he gives us more grace. When we forget all about him, he gives us more grace. When we wandered away from him, he gives us more grace.

[22 : 33] When we have been unfaithful to him, he gives us more grace. I just want you to notice how beautifully redundant that verse is. James could have just said, he gives grace.

After all, God's grace, by definition, is sufficient to meet our need. But God is so generous, he gives what is more than sufficient.

He never runs out of grace. He is like an endless waterfall of grace. That is James' treatment plan. It is to get us face to face with our God and make us realise what a God we have.

It is to unmask him so that we can see him as he really is, not what we think he is like. And he shows us that God is full of grace.

Grace means that God, in Christ, treats us in a way we do not deserve. He could have cast us out, but instead he calls us back.

[23 : 47] And it means he is making us into something we could not become on our own. Grace is not just the starting point of the Christian life, but it's very engine.

Titus 2, verse 12 makes the same point. It tells us that grace doesn't just save us, but teaches us to say no to ungodliness and yes to God because we know we are saying yes to this kind of God.

Now, at this point, some of us might get a little uncomfortable and think. Doesn't this sound a little bit antinomian?

Now, that's a fancy theological way of saying, does that mean we can do anything we like since God forgives anyway? Is that what is being taught here? But look again at verse 6.

And notice what else James says quoting the book of Proverbs. God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.

[25 : 05] In other words, James is saying God's grace is not the grace of the antinomian. God's grace is the grace for the repentant.

Let me share with you an illustration I heard which I found so helpful. Imagine you're caught in adultery. your husband or wife says to you, I know what you've been up to.

I've seen the WhatsApp messages. I've seen where you were on Google Maps. Your guilt is not in doubt. And if you are proud, what will you say back to your spouse?

You would say, so what? I don't care. You treat me badly anyway. And God opposes the proud.

After all, they don't want him. They only throw away what he offers. But suppose you say, with tears running down your face, I've been such a fool, been so stupid, I have wronged you, I have no excuses.

[26 : 19] Well, what does God offer you? God he shows favour to the humble. He is ever ready to welcome back the truly repentant.

He never runs out of grace for such people. He says, I know you're full of conflicting desires, and you give in to the wrong ones sometimes, but this is your sure and certain hope.

in Christ, your supply of grace never runs out. Do you see, my brothers and sisters, the cure for our sin sickness?

Perhaps right now there are a few of you whom the Holy Spirit is convicting. You know you're guilty of selfish desires, you know you've committed spiritual adultery, you know you've been flirting with the world a little bit too much.

And you wonder, how can I change? How can I battle my sin? The answer is see the God of the gospel as he truly is.

[27 : 28] See Jesus as your loving saviour, not as a heartless executioner. In fact, I hope that as you've been listening to this mini series over the past four weeks, you have seen that this is the consistent answer to fighting sin.

Fighting sin is never just a matter of I need to try harder, I need to exercise more willpower. Neither is fighting sin just a matter of I'll let go and let God, I don't ever have to do anything.

No. Fighting sin is always a matter of coming to God, of coming back to Jesus, seeing his white heart blazing love, experiencing his abundant grace, holding on to his everlasting goodness, believing his truth.

That is the consistent testimony of scripture. And it is what James says too. And that is why he unmask God as a God who moves towards us even when we have sinned.

And in verses 7 to 10, he unmask God as a God who invites us to move towards him. You see, there needs to be two-way movement.

[28 : 59] As God moves towards you, he wants you to move towards him. And that's what verses 7 to 10 are all about.

Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double-minded.

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

that's what God is inviting you to. He says to you and I, it's time to leave your kingdom of self and live for my kingdom.

It's time to say again, God is the king and I am not. So that might mean some things in your life have to go. That might mean you have to re-examine what you want and say now that I am in Christ I've got to get rid of this and start seeking that instead because I'm submitting to God he's my king now.

[30 : 17] And the devil might say to you hey chase after this but I'm going to say no to him too because God's grace enables me to say no.

And then God invites you to come close to him. You know what is one of the core features of adultery? Well adultery is a way of saying to your spouse I don't want to be with you.

I would rather be with anyone else than with you. And so when we're committing spiritual adultery we're telling God I don't want to be with you. I don't desire you.

I don't desire what you want. I rather spend all my energy and give all my affections to something else, my hobbies, my work, whatever it is.

But God now invites us to do just the opposite. He invites us to say to him I want to be with you. You know when we sin we just want to run away from God don't we?

[31 : 27] We feel like we can't come into his presence. The guilt and the shame will simply overwhelm us. And that makes sense if we are not clothed with Christ.

But if we are then it no longer makes sense. Because now God sees us as completely righteous.

We can come close to him and he will come near to you. And then God urges us live with one focus in mind.

Don't live any longer with split loyalties. Be consistent. Verse 8 If you are going to wash your hands to show you're ceremonially clean, then you should also purify your hearts so that your inner self is consistent with your outer self.

And when you know there's inconsistency, then verse 9 exercise what Paul calls godly sorrow. Mourn over your sin, even as you're aware there is grace for you.

[32 : 43] Shed tears over your spiritual adultery, even though you know your husband is there, ready to welcome you back. Stay humble because that is who God shows favour to.

That is who God will lift up. Those who acknowledge that James 4 verse 1 to 3 is true of them and respond with verses 9 and 10.

And it is when we do all that then James finally comes back to the surface issue of fighting and quarreling. Verse 11. He can now treat the symptoms because he has dealt with our underlying sickness.

And so he says don't slander one another. Because when you do, it's as if you're saying you're still the king and not God.

You're the one who can judge people and not God. You're not being humble. You've gone back to the kingdom of self. So how you treat others is really a reflection of how much you've understood the diagnosis of James and the treatment plan he prescribes.

[34 : 09] So my friends, that brings us to the end of this mini series. sin is to understand better how sin works.

Sin isn't just about things like stealing and lying. It goes deeper than that to the level of what we believe about God, how we feel about his character, what we do with our hearts.

And I hope it's given us a fresh resolve to keep battling sin. I know that I need to keep knowing Jesus' love more and to love him more.

And my prayer is you know that too. But we can come to him because this is the God of our gospel, the God of all grace. And I hope this whole series helps us understand just a little bit more what we mean when we say we are to be gospel centred.

So let's press on. Don't give up in fighting sin. Don't give up in pursuing Jesus. God says it will be all worth it.

[35 : 26] Shall we pray? Father, we come to you and we acknowledge sometimes we come with wrong motives.

we come only because we want to advance our own agenda. But Father, we just want to bring before you our conflicting desires and we pray Lord that the desire to please you will win out.

We pray Lord that we want to submit to you. We want to say that you are our king. We want to follow you and that we can do so with joy because you are this kind of God.

You are the God whose supply of grace will never run out. So I pray Lord that you help all of us today to keep following you, to keep fighting sin, to keep pursuing Jesus to make him our first love.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.