



## **THE HEART'S DESIRE – James 4:1-10**

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This week in our Grace Groups we looked at the account of David and Bathsheba. It is confronting! How could David, “a man after God’s own heart”, not only steal another man’s wife while he away fighting for him, but then deliberately command a battle strategy which resulted in that man being killed, along with a host of other soldiers. All this was so that David, who already had a harem full of wives and concubines, could satisfy his lust. It is hard to understand how he could end up in that place.

And yet, today, we regularly hear of other leaders of God’s people who have also gone against all they said they believed and sinned because of their desires. For some that is sexual sin as with David. For others it is abuse of finances or power. Even in our own church, we have seen our leader led astray and choose to sin. This hurts not only those personally involved, but all those around them as well. We see this in David’s life as it tears apart his family and destroys his relationships with his closest advisors and commanders.

But it isn’t just leaders who face temptation and are led into sin. As Christians, we’d like to think that we would never do something so blatantly wrong as David. And yet – which one of us can say that we have never done something which we knew was wrong? Why does this happen?

Last week we finished with a wonderful description of the kind of lives and relationships which reflect God’s wisdom, God’s way of life. We see a picture of loving relationships which result in peace and righteousness. This is God’s plan for His people. It is a picture which is reiterated over and over in Scripture. The song we just sang pulls from some of those passages in the Bible. As I read what James wrote and sing about this love which God designed to bind us together, I long to experience it, don’t you?

However, are relationships among God’s people always like this? Not in my experience. And not in the experience of James’ readers either. In the very next verse, James confronts their reality. Instead of peace and gentleness, mercy and sincerity, they are experiencing quarrels and fights, scheming and jealousy! God’s way is PEACE, but their experience is CONFLICT. Why are they doing things they know are wrong? Why do we? Where do these sinful actions come from?

### **The heart of the matter**

In continuation of his discussion which we have looked at over the past couple of weeks, James is going to show them that the heart of the matter is ... the heart. Salty water comes from salty

springs. Sinful actions come from a sinful heart. Last week we looked at our thinking – the kind of wisdom we chose to follow – wisdom from God or wisdom from Satan. In this week’s passage, James is going to go deeper into the heart. Our thinking is influenced by our desires. We choose to follow the manner of thinking which is in line with our heart’s desires. And what shapes our desires? Our desires are shaped by what we love. James will call this friendship, but this is a stronger concept than casual friendship. When James talks about friendship, he is talking about what we love, where our allegiances lie.

The first question James asks is: “What does your heart desire?”. His answer is that we have evil desires or desires shaped by seeking after our own pleasure and benefit. As he said last week, we are naturally selfish. We want what we want when we want it, and we’ll do anything necessary to get it. We want what we don’t have and so we scheme and kill to get it. We are jealous of what others have and so we fight and wage war to take it away from them. These might sound extreme. And yet – David did all these things to get what he wanted – even killing! I’m not aware of too many pastors who have to deal with homicide between their church members, although it is not unknown. However – my father was a pastor in one church where there was a fist fight in the parking lot over what colour to paint the roof of the church! And just because we are not murdering each other, doesn’t mean James isn’t talking to us. Remember what Jesus had to say?

*You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. (Matthew 5:21,22)*

When we are driven by selfish desires, we don’t care about others. We love our own pleasures more than we love other people. This destroys our relationships with others. And it damages our relationship with God. As we seek to get what we want ourselves, we aren’t trusting Him to supply what we need. And if we do ask Him for what we want, our motives are so twisted that God cannot give us what we need. Several times in this letter James will tell us that God desires to give generously. It is striking that here is one circumstance in which God will not give to us. He will not enable our selfish desires.

But what drives these selfish desires? We desire what we love. James’ second question is: “What does your heart love?”. Here James uses some very strong language indeed. In both the Old and New Testament, the imagery of marriage is used to describe the intimacy of our relationship with God. As God’s people, we are His beloved, His bride, His cherished wife. God loves us deeply. But in both the Old and New Testament, we see that we do not always remain faithful to Him. Jeremiah put it this way:

*... the LORD said to me, “Have you seen what fickle Israel has done? Like a wife who commits adultery, Israel has worshiped other gods on every hill and under every green tree. Therefore, go and give this message to Israel. This is what the LORD says: “O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again, for I am merciful. I will not be angry with you forever. Only acknowledge your guilt. Admit that you rebelled against the LORD your God and committed adultery against him by worshiping idols under every green tree. Confess that you refused to listen to my voice. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Jeremiah 3:6,12,13)*

Here James applies this same picture to Christians who have allowed other things to come between themselves and their God. He tells them that their evil desires come from a heart that has been seduced away from God. They not only think the way that the world around them thinks, but they love the things that world around them loves. And the world around them is controlled and manipulated by Satan himself. When they follow the world, they are really following Satan. James uses strong words to grab their attention and shock them into realising how far they are drifting from their true love – God. James does not have this condemnation for the world - they are just doing

what comes naturally as sinners. But why are the believers allowing themselves to love the things of the world more than God? They must choose to follow God wholeheartedly; they cannot have it both ways. James' words echo Jesus when He said:

*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.  
(Matthew 6:24 NASB)*

### **God's passionate desire**

James desires his readers to let go of their love of the world and love God completely. And this is what God desires too. He loves us deeply and desires us to respond to His love. James says that *"God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him"*. (v. 5) The "spirit" James is talking about here isn't the Holy Spirit, but our spirit – that part of human beings which God made to be able to have a relationship with Him. Some translations say that God is "jealous" for this – jealous in a positive way that demonstrates His deep desire for a relationship with us. He doesn't want anything to come between our hearts and Him. And to enable this to happen, *"he gives grace generously"*. (v. 6) When we are faithful to Him, nothing stops His giving and our receiving!

I think it is helpful to notice that before James starts to talk about what we need to do to put things right with God, He assures us that God is reaching out to us to enable us to reach out to Him. His grace comes first, then we respond in the power of His grace. It is not about us trying harder, but about learning to accept His grace and walk in it. It is about humbly receiving His love, even when we don't deserve it, and giving it back to Him.

### **Our humble response**

James tells us that a humble attitude is the key:

*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. (v. 7)  
Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour. (v. 10)*

But what does this humility look like? James gives us some ideas about this. First, we must change our allegiance. We need to *"submit to God"* and *"resist the devil"*. This involves a conscious choice. Submit and resist are words of the will. We must choose to come under God's authority and choose to turn against Satan's influence. We can only do this through God's power at work within us, but if we make this choice, we are promised that the devil cannot hold on to us, in fact, he will flee from us. This is because when we submit to God, we come under his protection and the devil cannot fight against God.

Secondly, we must renew our relationship with God by choosing to come close to Him. This involved choosing to spend time with Him by reading His Word, praying and fellowshiping with His people. We can help each other come close to God as we worship and learn together. This also comes with a promise – that as we choose to come close to God, He will come close to us. I am reminded of the story Jesus told of the return of the Prodigal Son, whose father was watching eagerly for his return and when he saw him in the distance, he ran to greet him. When we make the slightest move towards God, He comes running to meet us with open arms.

But the closer we come to God, the more we become aware of our own sinfulness and need for cleansing. The final two steps relate to this. We need deep cleansing – we need to cleanse our hands which have done sinful things and we need to purify our hearts which have not loved God as we should. How wonderful the words which assure us *that "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). And as we become more aware of our sinfulness, it will always lead to sorrowful contrition for what we have done. When David was led to see his sin for what it was he repented with great sorrow, which is

why he was a man after God's own heart. He penned the words which have guided God's people for centuries as they have sought to express their contrition to God.

*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love.  
Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.  
Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.  
For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.  
Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight.  
You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just.*

...

*You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one.  
You do not want a burnt offering.  
The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit.  
You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God. (Psalm 51:1-4,16,17)*

Although we can rejoice in our forgiveness which God freely bestows on us in His grace. We must never take our sins lightly. We sin because there is a part of our hearts, however tiny a part it might be, which longs after the world's ways. There is a part of us which is still pursuing our own selfish desires instead of being totally submitted to God's will and God's way. But there is hope.

### **A new hope**

God's gracious and generous giving never ends. Although James has had to say some strong things to his readers – both his original readers scattered around the Roman Empire and his readers today: us! He doesn't leave us in the depths of despair and sorrow. He finishes by giving us a new hope and a promise of a fresh start.

If we humbly submit to God and draw close to Him, acknowledging our sin and asking God to cleanse us, He will respond in love. God delights in lifting us up out of our sin and failings. He loves to share His honour with us and restore us in the joy of fellowship with Him.

We will continue to deal with our sinful, selfish hearts as long as we live in this sinful world. We will always be vulnerable to the lure of the world around us. As one hymn puts it:

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee:  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above.  
(Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing)*

But God is greater than our weakness. He is willing and able to meet us where we are and draw us closer to Himself, forgive us, and enable us to love Him more and walk closer to Him. He is in the business of changing hearts.

As we conclude this section of James' letter, I'd like to go back to the verses at the beginning of our reading today.

*But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favouritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness. (3:17,18)*

Doesn't this make your heart yearn for something better? This is what I want to characterise my life. It is a community that is characterised by these qualities that draws me and I know will draw others

– whatever their age, ethnic or religious background. It is this kind of community which would shine God's light and bring glory to Him.

Our vision for our church is to be a community which BELIEVES, LIVES and SHARES God and His great salvation. This year we have been focusing on the middle one – LIVE. We explain this by saying that “We walk with Christ as He changes us to be like Him”. In saying this, we acknowledge that we are not perfect – we need to be changed! We acknowledge that we need God to bring about this change and that it is a process which will take a lifetime. We agree with Paul that our ultimate goal is to be “transformed into Christ's image” (2 Corinthians 3:16) - to increasingly become like Christ who walked on this earth as a perfect picture of the righteousness of God.

This transformation involves two things. Individually, we want to nurture our new life in Christ. We take responsibility to draw close to God and to open ourselves to fellowship with Him and His transforming work. But we also believe that God has brought us together as a church, a community of His people. We commit ourselves to strengthening this life together as the Body of Christ. God's plan is that as we individually grow closer to Him, we will grow closer to each other and together we will display His righteousness in ways we cannot do so individually. As we relate to each other in love, we build each other up and this will overflow to those around us.

As I look at our community, I am blessed by what I see. I do not see significant areas of concern in our corporate life. But we are a community of changing, but still imperfect people. None of us – myself included! – are all that we could be. We are on the journey to become like Christ and even though many of us have been on this journey for a long time, we are far from being a clear reflection of God's love and righteousness. There are times when all of us love the world more than we love God; when we are more influenced by the wisdom from below than the wisdom from above.

This week, I'd like to encourage you to spend some time with God, asking Him to show you your heart. Where are you more aligned with the world around us than with God? An adulterous heart doesn't always show itself in extreme negative behaviour. You may not be plotting to kill someone in order get their spouse! You may not be quarrelling and fighting with someone in the church. But does your life display God's wisdom and love? Do you spread peace wherever you go? Is your life characterised by gentleness, mercy and good deeds? When people look at you, do they see a life producing the fruit of righteousness? None of us will get it right all the time, but all of us can grow closer to God. There is no heart that God cannot change and no life that cannot become more like Him. Let's ask Him to change our hearts. Let us choose to love Him today and then to love each other, building each other up, glorifying our God. May we, individually and corporately, become a stronger, clearer reflection of God in this community.