

Introduction:

“You adulteresses!” How would you feel if someone wrote you a letter and in the middle of it accused you of being an adulteress? That probably wouldn’t go over too well. And yet, that is exactly what James does in the middle of his letter. In our last lesson, we examined why and discovered that the Christians to whom James was writing, while apparently still hanging on to God with one hand, were reaching out to their own passions and pleasures with the other. The wisdom they were following was not from God and was therefore producing quarrels and fights among them. James explains that these seemingly minor infractions that we often overlook as merely common among people were an indicator of a much deeper problem. They were struggling with idolatry. Their own passions and pleasures were waging war with their devotion to God and it was causing them to be stained with the world. James baldly explains that this cozying up to the world in order to feed their passions and pleasures was the same as the idolatry of the Old Covenant Israelites. And so he accuses them of adultery just as God did Israel (**Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16**).

But James has advice for these Christians. He begins in **James 4:6** by quoting the Septuagint of **Proverbs 3:34**, which says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Then he gives seven directives building back up to that idea of being humbled before God to show what a friend of God does to develop and maintain the relationship. Each of these statements is an imperative. That is, they are commands highlighting the urgency and necessity to fulfill the statements. These are not pieces of advice to get to someday. They are commands to jump on immediately. If we want to avoid friendship with the world and instead pursue friendship with God, we need to pursue these seven commands.

Discussion:

I. *Submit yourself to God:*

- A. In his first key, James continues the adulterous bride imagery. As a bride is to submit to her husband (cf. **Ephesians 5:22**) instead of playing the harlot with other men or following the lead of other men, God’s friends remember who our God is. As part of Christ’s church, we are the bride and He is the head (**Ephesians 5:23-24**). You may have the same question Marita did after the last lesson. Why did all of the rebukes about adultery seem focused on the women? The reason is that these passages we are reading aren’t specifically rebukes about physical adultery. But rather, it is a rebuke of members of the bride of Christ for idolatrous adultery. Thus, the prophets we referred to and this passage in James is treating us, whether men or women, as the bride of Christ because that is what we make up. And when we give our submission to our own passions and pleasures, we are an adulterous bride.
- B. As a husband has every right to be jealous over a wife who is getting cozy with other men, our God has every right to be jealous when we get cozy with the world (**James 4:5**). As a wife should conduct herself in a way that does not provoke this jealousy, we are to conduct ourselves in way that does not provoke God’s healthy jealousy. (While I understand earthly husbands may sometimes be overly sensitive to this and be unhealthy in their jealousy, there is a healthy jealousy even for earthly husbands. That being said, God never has unhealthy jealousy.) When we entered the covenant relationship with Jehovah through Jesus Christ, we claimed Him as our God. James explains we need to live like it.

II. *Resist the devil:*

- A. I know it is awkward to view this in terms of the adulterous bride when we are talking about both men and women who long to be God’s friends, but that is still the imagery James is using. There are some affairs that happen almost accidentally. A man and woman, struggling in their respective marriages, are thrown together through life circumstances, perhaps work or their kids are on the same baseball team. Because they don’t have healthy boundaries, they form emotional connections that incrementally lead to an affair that shocks them as much as it does everyone else. That is not the picture James presents for these friends of the world.
- B. This is a picture of seduction. We are the bride of Christ, but there is another trying to seduce us away from God. That one is the devil. Sin is not accidental. It is purposeful seduction by the devil who is competing with God for our hearts. And we need to see it that way. What must we do? Like Jesus in **Matthew 4:1-11**, we must resist the advances of the devil. We must develop healthy boundaries against the devil’s advances like a wife

who longs to stay faithful to her husband. That means we start cutting off the temptations as best we can. As a wife who wants to be faithful to her husband won't spend time with a man who gives her that little flutter of emotional connection, we must stay away from the places, people, and objects that turn our eyes from God. When Satan sneaks in to seduce us anyway, we take a page from Joseph's book and flee no matter the consequences (cf. **Genesis 39**).

III. *Draw near to God:*

- A. By contrast, as we resist the advances of God's competitor, we draw near to God. God's friends work on developing their relationship with God. Many who have committed adultery have found that when they try to draw near to their spouse, their spouse will not draw near in return. Rather, they push them away because of the hurt. Praise the Lord, our God does not take that approach. Despite our betrayal and His hurt, He wants us to be His. He wants us to return.
- B. On multiple occasions, God explained to Israel, His adulterous bride, that if she returned to Him, He would return to her. See **II Chronicles 30:6-9**; **Zechariah 1:3**; and **Malachi 3:7**. James's point is despite our adultery, God wants to welcome us back. He doesn't want to cast us out or divorce us. Thus, if we will draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. Consider what God said to Josiah in **Jeremiah 3** regarding Israel's adulterous idolatry. Note especially **Jeremiah 3:12-23**. Draw near to God. Confess your idolatry. Follow the shepherds He gives you. Do the things that build your relationship with Him. Communicate with Him via prayer and Bible study. Spend time with His family. Meditate on Him and on His will. As we often sing and discussed recently in a previous lesson, we must "Take Time to Be Holy."

IV. *Cleanse your hands:*

- A. In **Isaiah 1:12-17**, God explains that if we are lifting blood-stained hands to Him, He will not accept the worship we offer. He comes back to that again in **Isaiah 59:1-8**. This ties in nicely with our context in James because James is talking to those whom he has called murderers because of their quarreling and disputing. While they had likely not committed actual murder, they were like those John spoke of in **I John 3:11-15**. They needed to cleanse their hands. That is, they needed to lay aside their deeds of violence.
- B. God's friends get rid of their disputing and quarreling, their infighting, their backbiting and devouring among one another. This is parallel to Paul's advice in **I Timothy 2:8**. We must lift holy or clean hands to God without anger or quarreling. As Jesus explains in **Matthew 5:21-26**, before we bring our gift to God, we must resolve the struggle between us and our brethren.

V. *Purify your hearts:*

- A. We shouldn't be surprised to see purifying our hearts connected with cleansing our hands. **Psalms 24:4** explains that those who dwell with God are to have clean hands and pure hearts. In **Lamentations 3:40-41**, Jeremiah writes that those who had cheated on the Lord must lift their hands and their hearts to Him, confessing their sinfulness. God's friends are not simply concerned with the externals of clean hands, but also with the internal of a purified heart.
- B. We grasp what this means more from James's follow-up statement, calling those who need to purify their hearts, the double-minded. Certainly, purifying means to remove whatever defiles or dirties the heart, but in this case what defiles the heart divides the heart. Or rather, what divides the heart, defiles it. In other words, if we want to cleanse our hearts, we must first make them singly devoted to God. After all, Jesus explained that the greatest command is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, not with part of it while the rest of our heart loves our own passions and pleasures (**Matthew 22:37-38**).
- C. As **James 1:5-8** demonstrates part of this single-minded devotion is faith, faith that God is the giver of all good gifts, faith that He is the blessing giver. Faith that any pleasure not from Him is not a blessing at all, but a curse. Remember, this is what made Abraham a friend of God (**James 2:23**). Build your faith in God and you will purify your heart.

VI. *Turn your laughter to mourning:*

- A. This seems odd. Is James saying God's friends aren't allowed to be happy and have enjoyment? Certainly not. After all, later in the letter he will say, "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (**James 5:13b**, ESV). James is saying that the laughter and joy they had been having in the midst of their sin needs to turn to mourning and gloom. As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:4**, those who mourn are blessed. That is, those who mourn because of their sinfulness and poverty of spirit are the ones God blesses.
- B. As Paul said in **II Corinthians 7:9-10**, we must have a godly sorrow. That is, we must not have a sorrow that is merely about getting caught or a sorrow that is merely upset about the consequences. Rather, friends of

God have a sorrow that stems from recognizing the betrayal against God, our friend. Our idolatrous pleasures and passions must not be the subject of our joking and entertainment. We must rather recognize the horror of our sins. The amazing nature of God's grace must never make us dismiss the serious nature of our sins. Rather than minimizing our sins, we need to remember our sins put Jesus on the cross. The only way to truly cause the cleansing we've been talking about is the blood of Christ.

- C. In fact, all this work we've been doing, trying to resist the devil and draw near to God, cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts is likely reminding us of how powerless we are to even accomplish those things. What else will we be able to do but mourn? Even as Christians we find that we really have nothing to offer God to deserve salvation. And we are driven to mourn. And yet, we remember what we learned earlier from **Matthew 5:4**, those who mourn are blessed by God because He will comfort us. As God spoke of Israel in **Jeremiah 31:13**, when we turn our joy to mourning, God will turn our mourning to joy.

VII. *Humble yourself before the Lord:*

- A. James has been building to this. He quoted **Proverbs 3:34** explaining that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. And these steps have been leading us to the humility that experiences God's grace.
- B. This actually hearkens back to **James 1:9**. The "lowly brother" of **James 1:9** is the noun form of the verb for "humble yourselves" in **James 4:10**. This perhaps helps us recognize what was at the heart of the quarrels and disputes among the brethren: covetousness, greed, materialism, jealousy and arrogance sparked by social class and material goods. The lowly and humble are those who will be exalted by the grace of God. And in this connection we see the awkward aspect of Scripture that often gives us trouble, blending together the concepts of material poverty with spiritual poverty. For instance, Luke simply records, "Blessed are you who are poor" and "Woe to you who are rich" in **Luke 6:20, 24**, but Matthew records, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" in **Matthew 5:3**.
- C. We know that simply having money and many material goods doesn't mean one is automatically lost because **I Timothy 6:17-19** gives instruction to Christians who are rich in the present age. But we must not be so quick to ease our wealth-seeking consciences that we forget what Jesus said after the one we often call the rich young ruler rejected Him, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (**Matthew 19:23-24**, ESV). This is not because the wealthy cannot be saved by fiat, but because wealth wages war against the humility it takes to turn to God. As the parable of the Great Banquet in **Luke 14:16-24** demonstrates, those who have many goods and great wealth rarely see themselves as those in need of the exaltation of God. That is given to the poor, crippled, blind, and lame because they see their need. The wealthy find it hard to have that kind of humility. It is not impossible, but it is rare.
- D. The point is not that anyone with any goods must get rid of all of them (though for some that may be the case), but rather that everyone must realize that, having been guilty of this spiritual adultery, we have nothing to offer God in exchange for the forgiveness and exaltation we need from Him. We cannot buy it or earn it in any way. What we ultimately need is His grace. He only gives that to the humble. Like the tax collector of **Luke 18:13-14**, the friend of God comes to Him recognizing that all we can do is ask for mercy and grace, casting ourselves on His love because we have nothing with which to barter for God's mercy. But let us ask in faith. And the one who asks of God with faith, humbling himself before God will be exalted.

Conclusion:

When all is said and done, we have only two options before us. We can love God or we can love the world. We can't do both. We can be a friend of God or we can be a friend of the world. We can't be both. If we try, we are nothing more than adulteresses like Israel before us. If you are like me, this has the possibility of being a really discouraging lesson. But I hope we are able to see the real balance that is in this passage. We have nothing to offer God that we might be exalted. We can only be exalted by His grace. He wants us exalted so badly, He sent Jesus to the cross so that we can be. However, we must never pervert this exalting grace into sensuality, denying our Master and God. We would not understand a wife who viewed her husband's love as permission to commit adultery. Let us not do that with our God either. Rather, let us choose God. Let us with single-minded devotion, like Abraham, be friends of God, amazed by His grace and love that He has bestowed on us in Christ Jesus.