

DAY sixteen
James 4:1-4

“What” is the source? Some translations ask “from where...?”.

But none of them are translated to ask “Who...?”.

Because James isn't writing his brothers and sisters to say “Hey, I heard there's some ugliness among you; who started it? Fess up so we can get back to being family” He doesn't want them looking up from the letter, staring at each other and asking “who?”. He wants them each quietly looking inside themselves and asking “what?”

For James, the issue isn't that some other person is to blame for the fighting and general joy-void; the issue is a recurring thing inside each of his readers, then and now. And that thing, unless we have specifically allowed God access to this part of our maturation, is a raging discontent over the life God has handed us. A war of discontent that's being waged and heightened and can never be satisfied... because satisfaction has to do with contentment.

For some, this discontentment just simmers as low-grade envy of others' success, or a quiet entitlement to a new gadget, or a hope that their number of “friends” on Facebook exceeds Ashton Kutcher's, or it's a roll of the eyes when the prettier girl walks in the room. For some, it's much heavier. It's a perpetual discontent that has them convinced that life won't matter unless his or her name is in lights, or at least on the front of the building, or their house is the biggest, their car the fastest, their waist the thinnest, their wallet the fattest, their words the most respected, etc, etc. And no matter what is acquired or achieved, contentment never comes.

Because discontentment has a slogan. It's simply the word more.

And the cruel truth is that more is never achieved. More is an abstraction and is as untouchable as a rainbow. As soon as you think you have gotten to more, you're left with the reality that more invites your continued dissatisfaction, and invites you to want just a bit more.

More security. More money. More fame. More beauty. More enjoyment. More comfort. More Friends. More respect. More esteem.

And if we continue to let ourselves believe that we lack something, or that we must have more of something, and that to get it we must get it from someone else, or get at it before they do, or at least not have less of it than others- suddenly we have tension, quarrels, fights and all manner of ugliness.

This game is an all-time global favorite. That's why James calls it friendship with the world. Living in accord with discontent is playing the game the world outside of the love and trust of God plays so deftly. And it's in fact, not a game, but an adulterous relationship, where God gets fooled around on as we go chasing more, since what he's bringing to the relationship is no longer satisfactory.

So, should we feel shame and guilt over being driven to succeed in a certain area? Are we condemned for a legitimate entrepreneurial spirit, a seeming gift for generating resources, for having nicer things than we had ten years ago or for having or wanting anything good at all? It can't be said enough that guilt and condemnation are not Kingdom currencies. God just doesn't work that way. The issue is learning gratitude. God wants us, no matter where we are and what we possess (or lack), to embrace a true spirit of thanks. For ourselves, and for how others have been blessed as well.

Without gratitude, life is a large, drawn-out anxiety attack over what we don't have or get. If you were the cosmic Dad, would you want your kids dividing over their internal demands/lusts/entitlements over something as unattainable as more? Or would you want them to understand that the true secret of peace is the thankful heart that can find joy in any circumstance?

Today, find gratitude in yourself towards things you or others called a deficit last week. Experiment with the idea that our lives of tension are something we are allowing ourselves to choose. That the way of discontent is a bottomless pit where loving anything other than ourselves is impossible. Believe today that the old way is inferior to a life where no matter what you are or have, and no matter how it “compares”- your happiness is already available to you, now.

Hmm. More contentment. Let's see if that paradox is possible.

from Jim

DAY seventeen

James 4:5

This is one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament to understand. Translators have a really difficult time with it, and there isn't general agreement over what it means, or even what words should be used when translating it from the original Greek.

“Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?’” (New American Standard translation)

“Or think ye that the scripture speaketh in vain? Doth the spirit which he made to dwell in us long unto envying?” (American Standard translation)

“Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?” (King James translation)

“Do you think the Scripture means nothing that says, ‘The Spirit that God made to live in us wants us for himself alone?’” (New Century translation)

As you can see, really smart people aren't sure if the gist of this passage is about the jealous lusting and longing of our own spirit, and the wrongness in that, or if it's about God's jealous longing for the spirit he placed in us to belong exclusively to him.

So let's deal with both.

Let's say this passage is best understood as God jealously longing for the spirit he placed within us. Then we have to wrestle with our great, Almighty God being, of all things, jealous. What kind of omnipotent being gets jealous?

In English, we confuse envy and jealousy: Envy is longing for what someone else has. Jealousy is an intense effort to retain or get back what one already owns. But, either way, these realities are beneath God. If God envies, then he is as broken and incomplete as the rest of us. If he is jealous, then he somehow feels threatened by us.

These characteristics seem to describe people very well, but not people's Maker.

Yet, many times in the Bible, it is implied or explicitly stated that God is jealous. In Exodus 34:14, Jealousy is said even to be one of God's names. This is a strange way of describing a powerful God who doesn't “need” anything outside of himself. So, perhaps some cultural context will help. In many cases through the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the Bride, and God the Groom. So every act of Israel, or generally speaking, God's people, that seeks life apart from him is metaphorically described as cheating or adultery. It's pursuing life with “another man”.

God, in keeping with this picture, is the jealous husband. The picture and the language are supposed to reinforce the relational nature of our spirituality.

So, God's not jealous in a broken, “hey-what-about-me?” sense. Instead, we are being reminded that our faith is not a concept or an arrangement of facts and commands. It's an interactive relationship where mutual love and fidelity are at the core. Our God's jealousy says more about our state than his.

But what about the other interpretation? Let's say our passage today is about our envy or jealousy.

Now we have to deal with the fact that when we are envious or jealous, it's a statement about not trusting that we have what we need in God. Our envy and jealousy is, in some measure, the beginnings of a departure from Him. Envy and jealousy are a subtle way of saying “God has jipped me, so I should have or be what my brother/sister has or is.” The eyes of the jealous and envious are cheating eyes, looking away from the One that loves wholly. Their eyes wish (or even demand) that they get what has been given to others. God is no longer enough. Now, I need what you have to be happy. And another breakdown of oneness, peace and love ensues.

Either translation turns out to be sides of the same coin. The question is, regardless of how you interpret our passage today, will you remain faithful to the One, True Love? Will your jealousy, birthed out of discontent, lure you away? Will you cause jealousy in the lover of your soul by living your moments pointed at something other than him?

Consider today that you have not just what you need, but also Who.

from Jim

DAY eighteen
James 4:6-10

“To become truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them.”

Charles de Montesquieu

“What makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God”

Monica Baldwin

“We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility.”

Rabindranath Tagore

It's been discovered in numerous cultures, around the world and throughout time. Humility is where great power is found. A childish insistence to flex on others and dominate, however seemingly intrinsic to what we are, is ultimately seen to be weak and gross and unoriginal.

You can only employ humility a moment and decision at a time. Humility isn't a perpetual state that you happen to settle into; it is always a choice. Today, in your meetings, your power lunches, your interactions with others in the store, the classroom or traffic, or your mundane dealings with the ordinary, daily tasks of the home, you must choose humility. Be no more, nor any less, than what you really are. In this, you will find Christ, and simultaneously find life.

from Jim

DAY nineteen
James 4:11-16

Read that last sentence again? Who are you to judge your neighbor?

In the couple sentences leading up to this one, James has referred again to us as brothers and sisters. And he specifically speaks against slandering each other within the family. You don't judge and slander family. You don't take shots at your brothers and sisters within your own church, nor do you judge your brothers and sisters at other churches. We are, according to Christ, going to be known by our love for each other (John 13:35), not for our constant correction and calling each other into account or our penchant for disassociating with those who have arrived at different conclusions. Our oneness is what makes us different. Our divisive, critical dealings with each other make us woefully the same.

So....Do not judge your brothers and sisters.

But, again, that last sentence: it says neighbor. The Greek translated "neighbor" simply means others. As in anyone.

James takes the specific idea of a brother or sister, a family member, and broadens it to others. Any other human, regardless of their proximity to the family of God. Christians. Non-Christians. Anti-Christians. Whether they are followers of Christ, or not, who are we to judge them?

In Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus makes a similar point, once again proving that James struggles a bit with originality.

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Jesus in Matthew 7:1-5 ESV)

Jesus isn't saying "don't ever judge". He's saying that when the impulse to judge arises, first ask, "who am I to judge?" Check your own eye. Ask why you think the way you do. Ask if you might come to a similar conclusion as the other person you are so ready to judge, considering the circumstances. Check and see if you have the grounds to judge on, or if it's just a habitual reaction without much substance. Ask if you have ranked sin correctly, or if it's the old "their sins are worse than mine" trick that religion plays on us.

Judgment is about behavior and principles matching or not matching. Love considers the person behind the behavior, and the spirit of the principle, and carefully moves forward with the Kingdom in mind.

James reminds us that our faith begins and ends with love. Not judgment.

Who am I to judge? is just another way of stopping to love brothers, sisters and others as well as possible...as you would want them to stop and love you.

from Jim

DAY twenty
James 4:17

So what is it?

What is that thing that you carry with you that you know you should do, but have gotten used to putting off? Maybe it's extravagant expressions of love that you know will communicate beauty to your parents, your spouse, your kids, your whoever. Maybe it's subtler expressions of gratitude that you assume is assumed, and so you just don't bother.

Perhaps it's about making something right that hangs in a perpetual state of wrong. It's fixing something you broke. Healing something you hurt.

What is it? Is it big? Is it miniscule?

Maybe you need to hear that sin happens every time we say no to shining light where darkness has crept in, no matter how big or little the circumstances. Sin, or failing the exactness of God's beauty, isn't just moral failure as we think about it. I said this. I misbehaved. I shouldn't have _____ed, but I did anyway.

Sometimes, sin is also being presented an opportunity to bring heaven to earth, to participate in some measure of redemption, and yet finding some reason to walk on by. God wants to work through his people, and so "knowing the good that could be done" is a way of hearing God's whispering voice, or seeing him enthusiastically point across the room, and yet telling him, "No. I recognize good I could do in this moment, but for whatever justification I choose to apply, I will not do it."

[Jesus said] "...There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

"'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered. (Matthew 21:28-31)

There's always time to start doing what you have gotten used to telling God you won't.

So what is it?

Today, tell someone, whether it's face-to-face or via email, just exactly what it is that has been hanging over you as the "good you ought to do" but you haven't, and discuss what step you can take.

And may the heaven that your step of obedience brings to earth inspire us

from Jim