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Friend of the World or Friend of God? (James 4:1-12)

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Continuing our journey through James, we come to another passage that is so practical, yet so important. The themes in this paragraph are massive and point our attention to some of the most crucial choices we all must make. Open your heart to God's Word now and ask Him for spiritual eyes to accurately see yourself and Him in these words.

James 4:1-12 - ¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² 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. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. ¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

I. THE DANGER OF A COVETOUS FOCUS (4:1-3)

This chapter starts with very direct language addressing our sinful nature as humans. Which one of us has never coveted or desired something for the wrong reasons? How many of us have taken matters into our own hands to get what we wanted? How many of us have even sacrificed relationships on the altar of selfishness? James knows that we are all capable of this kind of dangerous thinking and attacks this attitude openly.

Sin creates a war in us. These verses also point out that our inner struggle often spills out to damage our contact with others. If you believe in Jesus Christ, following and obeying him, there are two natures at work in you. One you were born with and will never fully defeat here on earth. The other is the new nature created by the Holy Spirit that indwells you now that Christ is your hope and joy. Consider how this war is described elsewhere:

1 Peter 2:11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Romans 7:22-25 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

We all must be aware of this war if we are combat these desires. James reminds us that not only will relationships suffer from covetousness, but our prayers will be off base. Selfishness causes one to pray with tarnished motives, which cannot and will not be honored by God. This infidelity in prayer leads to our next point.

II. THE DILEMMA OF CHOOSING FRIENDS (4:4, 5)

I've got a twelve-year-old daughter. One of the ongoing topics of instruction her mother and I give her is the importance of friends. The people you choose to get close to will determine much about your life. Choose the right friends and they will influence you for good and solidify your correct choices. If you choose the wrong friends, you will have no reinforcement of right decisions. In fact, they will work against good decisions and lead you astray. It is not overstating the truth to say that our choice of friends will help determine the direction of our life, for good or bad.

Psalm 37:3, 4 Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Nowhere is this principle more crucial than spiritually. The inner battle we've already discussed presents a choice of friendship, two options of influence. It's a moral choice – the choice between right and wrong. But let me warn you again that the standard of morality is not just what seems right to you. Your heart will deceive you. How could David know if he was "befriending faithfulness" in the verses above? He makes it clear in another Psalm.

Psalm 19:8, 9 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.

If we are to make an informed, confident choice of friendship, the Word of God must guide us. Left to ourselves, we will make the wrong choice every time. Your earthly friends will help shape who

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you are (and vice versa), but your choice of spiritual friendship will determine your eternal destiny. James is candid when he says that there are only two choices – friendship with the world, which means hostility against God or friendship with God, which means rejecting the world and its influence.

Notice, too, the attitude God has toward all this. If you follow him, he is envious for your allegiance according to verse five. The word “yearns” is a strong word meaning “to pursue with love”. God isn’t jealous as a vain person wanting more attention. He knows that our friendship with him is the best for us and his pursuit of us is the highest form of love he can show. What a shame it is when that love is rejected for the cheap substitute of friendship with the world.

III. THE DELIGHT OF CLOSE FELLOWSHIP (4:6-10)

The next five verses describe the actions and attitudes needed to maintain the closeness of friendship with God and avoid being his enemy. Just let your eyes scan them and you will see ideas such as humility, submission, nearness, cleansing and repentance. Who wouldn’t want to rest in that kind of love?

There is so much to consider here, but let’s look at what some of our responsibilities are and what will result.

CHOICE: Humility RESULT: Grace from God

This is the key to the previous section of choosing to follow God rather than the world. You cannot choose your own way in pride, defiantly rebelling against God and then expect his favor. He resists the proud, but for the humble, the one who submits to his will and his ways, there is grace. Think of it. God’s merciful kindness will be given to the person who understands that the human heart is deceptive and that God’s ways lead to our deepest joy.

CHOICE: Resist the Devil RESULT: He will Flee

This is not turning away like one turns from a piece of unwanted pie. This is intentional and, by design, violent. Remember we are at war. Many times, Scripture presents turning from Satan as killing sin.

Colossians 3:5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

The word for “resist” is the same word used for “withstand” in these key verses for fighting evil.

Ephesians 6:11, 13 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

What a promise we have that our actions will affect what the devil will do. Resisting him, with help from the Lord, will become more of a pattern in our lives if we seek to please God and not ourselves.

CHOICE: Draw Near to God RESULT: He will Draw Near

It is the same in any friendship. We spend time with a friend. We care what that friend thinks. The closer we get, a true friend will reciprocate. But this isn’t just nearness. “Near” in this context means “to join together”. There is more of a oneness that we experience as we get near to God. This is the kind of unity Jesus requested for his followers.

John 17:21 ...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

IV. THE DESTRUCTION OF CRITICAL FEELINGS (4:11, 12)

One more aspect James presents as the proof of friendship is how we view and speak of others. A critical spirit that finds expression in judgmentalism reflects friendship with the world. A friend of God understands that he is the only One who can see the heart of people and can judge fairly what is in their minds. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave this warning:

Matthew 7:2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

We all deserve judgment, so making ourselves the judge of others is clearly presumptuous.

JUDGING OR SLANDERING OTHERS IS THE ANTITHESIS OF THE HUMILITY JAMES COMMANDED HIS READERS TO MANIFEST (4:10). THOSE WHO HABITUALLY ENGAGE IN SUCH BEHAVIOR CAST DOUBT ON THE GENUINENESS OF THEIR FAITH.

- JOHN MacARTHUR -
