

James 4:1-12¹***Authentic Faith: Making Peace with Our Greatest Enemy*****Introduction**

James in his letter is calling his listeners to live out their Christian faith truly in their community and society. They are to do this in an imperfect environment filled with many practical realities and difficulties.

- Trials
- Favouritism
- Relational conflicts

Hence, James often has to describe things as they are in order to help his listeners better understand and deal with their needs and concerns.

V. 1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

V. 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

V. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

V. 4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

V. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

V. 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

V. 7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

V. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

V. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

V. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

V. 11 Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

V. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

¹ 1984 NIV

ILLUSTRATION: I was talking with my mother one evening just before dinner. She has to deal with the frustration over her stroke-induced immobility every day. The challenge for me each day is to speak words of faith and hope into her so that she can better manage her negativism.

As we were talking that evening, she said something that I thought was very unreasonable because it seemed to question my care and love for her. In response, I replied her with something very direct and firm, but I believed I said it with all good intentions.

She became agitated and, in my own opinion, talked with even more unreasonableness. And how did I respond? I believed I answered her even more firmly, but with all the care and love in me.

And this cycle of “dysfunctional” conversation went on and on for a while. We didn’t seem to be able to get out of it.

Then suddenly, my mother said, “I don’t want to talk anymore. I want my dinner now.”

I was rather surprised and even amused, and asked, “Mum, you still have the mood and appetite to eat?”

She replied, “You are my son. I feel safe enough to pour out my frustration on you. And I trust that you will not say unkind things to me.”

When I heard that, the urge to answer back certainly subsided, and I said, “We are mother and son. It’s good that we can voice out our feelings and not bear grudges inside us after that.”

As I was reflecting later on this incident, I realized that even with the best intentions, human relationships can still go wrong. My mother said those things to me with the best of intention—she trusted me enough and she felt safe in confiding in me her inner feelings. However, I labelled her as “unreasonable”. I thought I responded to her “unreasonableness” with all the care and love in me. However, she might have thought that I was somewhat harsh towards her.

To live as authentic Christians is not to pretend that discords and conflicts can never happen in our midst. Rather, it is to acknowledge their presence and to deal with them by tackling first thing first.

I. James calls on us to first make peace with an important person (vv. 1-6).

James asks (v. 1): “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” This signifies that even among God’s people, there are conflicts—passive or active;

in words or in actions. James was only being honest when he described this common challenge facing God's people living as a community.

But why are there conflicts among the saints? James tells us that these are a carrying over of a battle that each person has to fight all the time. Though we are given the new nature in Christ as believers, we do not live it as a natural tendency. Rather, left to our natural tendency, we obey the dictates of the old self.

You remember my conversation with my mother. I thought I was being loving and caring by responding to her unreasonableness with my firm words. But in reality, was I? I might be saying what I said not out of love and care, but out of a will to fight for my own high opinion of myself.

Hence, James says that all fights and quarrels stem not from the new nature in Christ, but from the old nature of self. They “come from your desires that battle within you” (v. 1).

- While the Word of God teaches us to live peaceably with one another, the selfishness in us often leads us into discord with others.
- While the Word of God teaches us to live with proper regard for one another, the pursuit of personal interest often leads us into disregard for others.

In his letter, James is teaching authentic Christian living. And his call here is this—“Be honest with ourselves and admit our own inner struggle in dealing with some desires in our lives.”

James goes on to warn that frustrated desires can lead to two wrongs (vv. 2-3):

- Wrong actions and thoughts. When we don't get what we want, we are capable of the worst things. We “kill and covet” in order to get what we want. Of course, James must be exaggerating. We are Christians. We can never commit ruthless crimes like murder and robbery to get what we want. Right? Maybe so. But in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus says that you don't need to actually murder and rob to be guilty of killing and coveting. To be so obsessed with such thoughts is already sin enough.

Indeed, such thoughts are often the external sign of an internal problem—that of an insecure self. This is a self that is always defensive, reactive, and aggressive. This is a self that is not able to use the strengths of others to complement him, but view these as threats to him being outshone and outdone by others.

- Wrong praying. James says (v. 2), “You do not have because you do not ask God.” There may be some things we desire that we do not ask God. Not because we don't believe in prayer. But because we know

deep in us that these are not quite right in the sight of God. But we desire them so much. So, we avoid asking God for these things but seek to work hard on our own to get them. Are some of these things in your “most-wish-to-have” list?

On the other hand, there may be things that are good and we carry that boldness to ask God for them. But unfortunately, this goodness is “perverted” as James says (v. 3), “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” Wrong motives can pervert one’s whole perspective on prayer—i.e. praying with the motive to get one’s will done, not God’s will; to seek to make use of God and not to be used by God.

But James cautions us not to take “fights and quarrels” lightly because these are more than a problem with self and others. He asserts that it is not just an earthly problem restricted to human beings, but also a heavenly one—it is our problem in our relationship with God before anyone else (vv. 4-6).

James says (vv. 4-5): “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

Immediately, I protest, “Hey! James, don’t use the word ‘adulterous’. Don’t you know I have been faithful to one wife all these years?”

But what James meant to do here is to indict people for their spiritual unfaithfulness. He is indicting believers for befriending the world, and thereby, being unfaithful to God.

Of course, James is not saying that if we love God, we must hate and be an enemy to everyone and everything in this world. The world refers to the system of things in society that is against the principles and values of God. When areas of our lives befriend the system of worldliness, we are in danger of loving the world. All these make it very easy to conform to the standards of worldliness.

Let me ask:

- Who comes to mind when I mention Singapore?
- Who comes to mind when I mention Microsoft?
- Who comes to mind when I mention Saddleback Community Church in the US?

When I mentioned Saddleback, who was thinking of God; that this is God’s church?

The man-centred standards of the world can creep into the lives of Christians. When we first started, we said, “God, this is your work. Build it up for your

glory's sake." And when this work grows and prospers, we change our tune and now say, "This is my work; my achievement."

God is not against success. But when one rises to a position of success, the divine will is that the successful man uses it to make a difference for God, not just a name for himself.

So, James is cautioning that whenever we allow worldliness to arouse unhappiness in us concerning who we are, where we are, and what we have, we are not merely fighting within ourselves and with others. More seriously, we are fighting God before anyone else.

But James goes on to caution that such human desires will never be fully satisfied because by nature, the human spirit in us "envies intensely" (v. 5). It continually and earnestly longs for the pleasures in life. Enough is never quite enough.

ILLUSTRATION: I have a cousin (a lady) who was once married to a man of humble beginnings. On their wedding day, they had a very modest church reception. The man was still trying to succeed in his insurance career. I remember there was not even enough food on the refreshment table for the guests.

But a few years later, the man began to do well. The unfortunate thing is that he also became ambitious; so ambitious that he became less and less contented with what he had. So, he began to gamble here and there—in the stock market, shady businesses, horse races, sweepstakes, and other promises of quick money.

Then his ventures began to turn bad. He got into frauds and heavy debts. And he turned to the loan sharks. But his fortunes continued to slide. One day, fearing for his freedom and life, he ran out of the country.

He left behind a wife (my cousin) and two young daughters to face the harassment of loan sharks. It has been many years since he had gone missing.

I asked my cousin one time why he came to such a state. She lamented, "I guess he was not able to let go his ambition to get rich quick. Instead of letting go his greed, he allowed it to grip him and destroy him."

A Chinese proverb says, "The human heart is like a snake—its stomach is so small, but its appetite so great that it desires to swallow up an elephant." Hence, James calls on us not to seek God for more grants because the human desire for more and more can never be fully satisfied.

Grants make one proud as he shows off what he has, yet he is never truly happy with what he already has. The proud says, “This is not enough. I want more to further reflect my importance in life.”

But we need more grace from God to help us overcome the tendency to envy intensely, to keep us humble and grateful for what we already receive. The humble says, “By His grace, God has blessed me with these for which I am grateful. By His grace, God will provide in areas where I am short. I may not have luxury, but I will not have lack in Him.”

James describes how God deals with the human spirit that is proud and one that is humble—He “opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (v. 6).

In our success-oriented culture, we need more humility and less pride; more of the humility of servanthood and less of the pride of stardom.

Of course, the Hollywood portrayal of superheroes like Superman is very heartening at first sight—someone who is always there to deliver us out of danger just at the very right time. But if you consider carefully, Superman is a one-man army—he can do all things, even the humanly impossible, on his own without the need for anyone else. Superman plays solo all the time and he doesn’t need to be a team player.

In the Body of Jesus Christ, we are not looking for superheroes to do all things on their own. We are not looking for people who have all things already figured out, but people who will continually seek to discern and serve with others as God reveals His way to go.

To live as authentic Christians is not to pretend that discords and conflicts can never happen in our midst. Rather, it is to acknowledge their presence and to deal with them by tackling first thing first.

Each of us is important to God because we are each His child and a part of the Body of Christ. James calls on us to first make peace with an important person—i.e. we are to first make peace with our own self.

Isn’t it true that very often, the greatest battle is not out there in the world, but right here within ourselves? And to win it out there in the world, we must first win it right here within ourselves. We can be our greatest enemy.

When we are not at peace with ourselves, we become our greatest enemy because we are often strayed away and say “no” to God. We then lost our spiritual high ground.

II. James points us to a way to protect our spiritual high ground (vv. 7-12).

James uses a list of verbs (w. 7-10):

- submit
- resist
- come near
- wash
- purify
- grieve, mourn, wail, humble

He speaks of resisting the devil, but before that, he emphasizes submitting to God (v. 7). Many Christians apply this verse without noting the order, and get themselves badly bruised by the devil. Why? It is because they have not done first thing first. They have not first submitted to God before resisting the devil.

The term “submit” is a military term that refers to a soldier of lower rank putting himself under another soldier of higher rank. That’s the way it should be if things are to be in order.

Imagine a private soldier going to war but acting as if he is a four-star general, refusing to submit to orders. What will happen? There will be civil war within the ranks! Civil war means problem settling who is in charge of your life—you or God? Are you praying to be used by God, or using God in the name of prayer? One implies submission to God. The other implies manipulation of God.

Indeed, we must first submit to God, to the Lordship of Christ. Without doing this first, we are resisting the devil on our own and not in God, in our own sinfulness and not God’s holiness. We then resist; take our stand; defend against the enemy from a position of our own weakness, not God’s strength. This is dangerous for it is then very difficult to hold our ground, and very easy for the enemy to overrun us.

The strategy of the devil is to trick us to release our hold on the spiritual high ground in our lives. He will deceive us with such lies:

- “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Everybody is doing it.”
- “Times have changed. It really isn’t a bad thing because the situation warrants it.”
- “It is really a ‘grey area’. You cannot be too dogmatic about it.”

The devil will make us think that we are really foolish and out of place if we hold on to what is very clear in the Scripture. He wants us to think that everything is relative and nothing is absolute. He tempts us to obey the Word selectively rather than unreservedly. He tempts us to substitute what is best in God’s sight with what is good in our eyes.

But when we set out minds and hearts to remain on high spiritual ground, we put ourselves in a strong position to resist the devil. What are the results?

James says the devil will flee from us because he trembles at our resolute will and firm confidence in God.

Not only that, James says God will come near to us when we remain on high spiritual ground (v. 8). This is not surprising because by remaining on God's holy ground, we stay in His presence. God will not give Himself to us any less than we give ourselves to Him.

ILLUSTRATION: You know how bank tellers are first trained to distinguish real currency with counterfeit ones? They are made to run their fingers through real money from day to day. When they are sufficiently familiar with the feel of real money, they will be put to the test. A counterfeit note will be inserted into the pile of money. When the teller runs his fingers through the pile of money, he will be able to feel out the counterfeit note because he is by now very familiar with the feel of real money.

To know the difference between true and false, we must first be very familiar with the real thing. Likewise, to hold and remain on the high spiritual ground that God's Word has commanded us, we must first be very familiar with what God's Word really teaches.

No matter what human philosophy, reasoning and contemporary trends may suggest to us, we stick to the high spiritual ground. Don't make relative what God has made absolute. Don't say "yes" to what God has said "no".

The words "wash", "purify", "grieve, mourn, wail" and "humble" used by James (vv. 7-10) together issue forth a strong call to return to the way and will of God. James is calling Christian to return and to guard their spiritual high ground.

In order to do this you must focus on those things that build or strengthen your relationship with the Lord. It is so easy to neglect those basic disciplines that are essential for a healthy Christian life—things like prayer, Bible reading, fellowship with other Christians, personal and corporate worship, giving and serving.

They seem so basic, and they are. But when we feel that we have moved beyond them, we make a very serious mistake because when we get away from the basic disciplines, our relationship with God is often adversely affected.

- I say this to the young people, "You are never too young a Christian to develop the discipline of personal prayer and Bible study."
- I say this to the not so young people, "You are never too experienced a Christian to graduate from the discipline of personal prayer and Bible study."

You may say, "We can always get the pastor or church leader to pray for us and teach us the Bible. Why do we need to do these personally?"

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The answer is because God delights in relating with you personally. He delights in seeing you intentionally seek to speak with and know Him in personal prayer and Bible study. And God delights in giving you a specific word that speaks to your situation. If you don't develop this discipline of personal prayer and Bible study, you miss this great experience of letting God speak to you personally. There will be many times when God wants to speak and teach His way and will first-hand to you, and not through a third party. Imagine a father and his son can only speak to each other through someone else and not directly one-on-one. How deep can that relationship be?

I once have a picture of the "Praying Hands" in my office. It reminds me of my own need to pray intentionally, not only for others but also for myself. I must not deceive myself to think that just because I am in fulltime Christian vocation, I can pray less or it is easier for me to pray more.

No matter how young or old you are as a Christian, don't ignore or neglect the basic spiritual disciplines. They keep us on God's spiritual high ground. We will then stand on solid ground and not sinking sands when trials of life hit us hard. They keep us God-dependent and not self-dependent, and such a dependency keeps us humble. It keeps us humble enough to be careful of our judgment of others.

Thus, James speaks against judging others for God is the only qualified Judge (vv. 11-12). He is not saying we do not need discernment. Rather, he is calling us to be mindful of our own imperfections, our own imperfect knowledge and our own impure motives. Don't have such a high opinion of yourself and such a low one of others.

ILLUSTRATION: When my wife shops, she has this ability to bargain to the lowest possible price. This made me uneasy and even unhappy with her one time. I pulled her aside and said, "Now, don't be merciless. These people need a decent living." She would reply, "It's not that I am merciless. But these people are often ruthless—they quote cut-throat prices."

As I reflected on this disparity between my wife and me later that day, I realized that I was actually poor at bargaining. Little wonder I had been fleeced by cut-throat salespeople many times. And I hated myself for that.

That one time when I felt uneasy and unhappy with my wife for succeeding in bargaining to the lowest possible price, it is not because what she did was wrong. It is because she reminded me of a weakness in myself. It is because she reminded me of something about myself that I disliked. I was uneasy and unhappy with her because I was not at peace with myself.

That day, I did not look out of the window and saw my wife as the problem. Rather, I looked into the mirror and I saw where the real problem was—it was very much with me!

Conclusion

To live as authentic Christian is not to pretend that discords and conflicts can never happen in our midst. Rather, it is to acknowledge their presence and to deal with them by tackling first thing first.

The Word of God challenges us today to:

- Acknowledge that we can be our greatest enemy. The first person we need to make peace with may be none other than ourselves. May we have the courage to first look into the mirror.
- Acknowledge that we need to first submit to God. This means a return to the way and will of God. May we have the courage to return and remain on high spiritual ground, living according to convictions rather than convenience.

Let's seek the Lord to help us make peace with our greatest enemy—i.e. ourselves—so that we can then move on to God's higher ground for us.