

Marks of a Faith That Works

A Faith that Works... Draws Close to God

James 4:1-10

I seriously doubt there is a single person in this auditorium who does not want to be close to God, if not in this life at least in the next. Our problem is not that we don't want to be close to God. Our problem is that we want to be close to God on *our* terms, rather than on *his* terms.

Have you ever gotten on the web, think you found a great deal (maybe for an airline ticket, rental car or that special gift for your husband or wife)...and *then you read the terms and conditions*. The other night Mary Alice and I were on the web, looking for a cheap landscape trailer. I constantly have branches or bark dust or other assorted items to either haul away or haul to the house. Our eyes caught an advertisement for a free trailer. Wow! That sounded pretty good. So with a click of the mouse we had a picture of it...exactly what we were looking for. And all you had to do to get it was to fill out a short survey...or so we thought. But then came the terms and conditions. Sure the trailer was free, but the headache of meeting their terms and conditions made us look elsewhere.

The Bible says that we don't come to God on our terms, but on his terms. As we take steps of faith to draw close to God, we soon discover that His terms, although demanding, promise more than we could have ever imagined.

This passage in James 4:1-10 is all about drawing close to God. Look at God's unconditional promise in verse 8: "Come close to God, and God will come close to you." Just what does that mean? How can I experience that? What keeps me from experiencing that?

I. WHAT KEEPS ME FROM DRAWING CLOSE TO GOD? (4:1-5)

James answers that question in verses 1-6 of chapter 4. The atmosphere of these verses can be summarized in one word: *conflict*. James asks in verse 1: "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you?" And then in verse 2 he says, "you scheme and kill...you fight and wage war." James is talking about conflict in our relationships. In fact, I could have entitled the message: "How to avoid arguments," or maybe better, "How to avoid nuclear warfare!" The verbal arsonists of chapter three are now at work in the community...the Body of Christ.

We don't wear battle fatigues; drive armored tanks or fire M16s, but *we are at war*. We are at war *within* ourselves. The Spirit longs to draw us close to God. But the flesh is constantly moving us away from God. Some believers are at war *among* themselves. And some are at war with God. And as General Sherman said as he burned confederate cities to the ground on his notorious march to the Sea, "War is hell!"

The hell of such conflict touches all of us. None of us are exempt. It definitely touches our marriages. Before marriage you're looking for the ideal, then it becomes an ordeal and before long some a looking for a new deal! (It's been said that all marriages go through three stages: Stage one, happy honeymoon: Stage two, the party's over; Stage three, let's make a deal. At

Stage three you have to learn how to handle arguments because it's going to happen. There are going to be conflicting desires. Frustrated feelings cause fights.)

Some of you may feel that way this morning. The conflict within, the conflict with others and your own personal ongoing conflict with God *is hell*. You don't want it, you feel you didn't ask for it, and you don't know what to do with it. But it is there. James gives us some insight.

In these first six verses James addresses several issues that fuel this conflict. The conflict in us and among us is really only symptomatic of deeper issues. And James cuts to the chase. Let's read these verses noticing what lies behind the outward symptom of conflict.

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and killⁱ to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong – you want only what will give you pleasure. James 4:1-3 NLT

A. Selfish Pleasures (4:1-3)

What creates conflict within ourselves, among ourselves and between us and God, keeping us from drawing close to Him? The first thing is this: *selfish pleasures*. This is what Paul in his letters calls the “flesh.” Battles in the corporate Body (fights, quarrels, division) come from battles within our individual bodies (our personal wants and desires).

“What causes fights and quarrels? They come from your *evil desires*,” James says in verse 1. As we saw from chapter 1, the downward spiral of temptation begins with our desires. But these desires are not necessarily evil. God has given each of us legitimate desires and these desires can potentially move us closer to Him. Remember, our real problem with temptation is not that our desires are too strong, but that they are too weak. We are too quick to settle for the counterfeit offered by sin, rather than allow our deepest desires to find their true satisfaction in God alone and in what He provides for us.

(Our desires move in basically three directions: to have, to feel and to be. The desire to have. Things are not evil in and of themselves. Most things are designed to be used. People are designed to be loved. But when we begin to love things and use people, we're in trouble. Someone asked Howard Hughes one time, "How much does it take to make a man happy?" He said, "Just a little bit more.")

Remember, *temptation is the enticement to fulfill a basic need in my own way or in my own time*. Temptation in and of itself is not sin. Sin is birthed in the explosive connection between *desire* and *deceit*. We all have natural, God-given desires, but we can all also be deceptively enticed to develop our own strategies for fulfilling those desires apart from God.

The word that James uses in this verse for “desire” is not the same word found in chapter 1. It is the word from which we get our word *hedonism*. What is hedonism? The dictionary defines it as the belief that personal pleasure or happiness is the highest good. For the hedonist, only what has pleasant consequences (“pleasant” being determined by our senses) is good and is to be pursued.

Paul refers to hedonists when he speaks of those who are “Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:4).

In the context of James, what are these hedonistic desires? They include the desire to get out from under difficult circumstances, the desire for prestige and status, the desire for material wealth, the desire for sensual fulfillment. Bottom line, it is the desire for relief from the deep ache in our soul which comes from living in a fallen world. But rather than letting that ache draw us closer to God, we devise selfish strategies for relieving it ourselves. And that’s where we become sensual hedonists. Whether it’s conflict in the church, in our marriage, with our children, or with our colleagues at work, it is all fueled by an insatiable desire to avoid the ache and to satisfy self.

And according to James, this even affects the way we pray. “You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” Jill Briscoe puts it well:

When we pray for ourselves, our petitions usually center around what we think we need or what we are sure so-and-so needs. God sees needs in our lives that are far more urgent than those we have written on our heavenly supermarket list and daily present to our "Need-Meeter" in the sky. Our need for changed attitudes, a new acceptance of someone we have been rejecting, our need to be "cut down to size"--these are not things we pray for too readily. On the other hand, we do find we can pray these things for other people!ⁱⁱ

We don’t have what we’re looking for because we are looking in all the wrong places. Just like in chapter 1, we need to ask God for wisdom to discern what can ultimately satisfy.

Our selfish pleasures, our “flesh,” keep you and me from drawing close to God. But there is also something else: *worldly practices*. This is the topic of verses 4-5.

B. Worldly Practices (4:4-5)

You adulterers! Don’t you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. What do you think Scriptures mean when they say that the spirit God has placed within us is filled with envy? James 4:4-5 NLT

James begins with a scathing rebuke: “You adulterers!” More literally he says, “You adulteresses” speaking in the feminine. Why? Because we the church are the bride of Christ.

When you became a follower of Jesus, you became a member of his bride.ⁱⁱⁱ When you became a Christian, you stood at the altar and took Christ as your husband. You are his bride. Jesus made a covenant with you, saying “I Jesus, take you, sinner, to be My Bride, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, for time and eternity.” And you responded, “I do”?

So when you are not close to God, guess who has moved? And how do we move? We move by pursuing selfish pleasure and worldly practices. In doing this, we are like an adulteress wife, turning elsewhere for companionship, intimacy and fulfillment.

Men, how would you feel if your wife, needing help with a particular need or money for a new outfit went to another man? Or worse yet, how would you feel if you found your wife in the presence of another man in an intimate setting? It would break your heart. It is the same with Christ, whose bride we are. When we pursue the ways of the world, it breaks God's heart. We are essentially saying, "God, what you provide for me is not adequate. I need to have my deepest needs met elsewhere."

This is what it means to be influenced by the world. What is the world? It is the entire complex of attitudes, traditions, values and institutions that are consciously or unconsciously opposed to God.^{iv} You can go that route, trying to satisfy your desires. You can become bitter in difficulty, rather than grow through difficulty. You can give into temptation rather than turn from temptation. You can disobey God's Word rather than obey God's Word. You can adopt the world's values of favoring the wealthy and popular rather than the weak and impoverished. You can adopt the wisdom of this world with its pride and arrogance. But the awful consequence is that you will find yourself being opposed by God. You will become an enemy of God. You and I can take this route, seeking to have our needs met elsewhere, but the terrible consequence is that we become enemies of God. To emphasize the point, James repeats it twice (verse 4): "'Don't you know that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world you make yourself an enemy of God.'" And as an enemy of God you will not last. You will perish. That's why John tells us:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. 1 John 2:15-17

There is no DMZ for Christians. You're either a friend of God, walking in intimacy and humility, or you are an enemy of God, proudly going your own way. To go your own way grieves God deeply. So James asks (verse 5):

What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the spirit God has placed within us is filled with envy?

What is James referring to? There is no passage of the Scriptures that says this. It could be a loose paraphrase of Exodus 34:14 "Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." Or maybe James is giving a summary of many Old Testament passages where God is seen as being jealous when His people turn to move away from him rather than draw close to Him.^v God longs for your nearness. And he is jealous when you – as His bride – go looking elsewhere to have your needs met.

C. Demonic Persuasion (3:6, 15; 4:7)

What lies behind our inner conflict, our relational conflicts, and ultimately behind our conflict with God? It's driven not only by our selfish pleasures and worldly practices, but also by the demonic. James hasn't said much about the devil up to this point. In 3:6 he refers to *gehenna*, hell, as the cause of our tongue trouble in the church. Then in 3:15 he says that the wisdom of

this world finds its source in the demonic. And finally, he comes right out and says it bluntly – we are to resist the devil (4:7).

And these three influences – the world, the flesh and the devil – hold you in me in bondage far from God. It's like a rope with three strands. Within me is the prompting of the flesh. Around me are the allurements of the world. And both are ultimately manipulated and maneuvered by the whispers of Hell. How do we break free from such bondage? James cure for the ongoing conflict is quite straightforward: *Draw close to God* (verse 8).

II. HOW DO I DRAW CLOSE TO GOD? (4:6-10)

Here we have James cure for the conflict and compromise in our lives and in the church. This is his recipe for humility. We are given a choice. Two ways are clearly set before us: The way of earthly wisdom or the way of heavenly wisdom. We can choose selfishness or selflessness; self-exaltation or exaltation by God himself.

What is the solution to selfish pleasures, worldly practices and demonic persuasion in our life? James says, "Come near to God" (verse 8). When you and I are far from God, God hasn't moved. James has already reminded us that God isn't capricious, ever-changing. His goodness never fails. He stands ever ready to give us His good gifts (James 1:17). You and I simply have a problem with understanding what is good! We get it all confused. We somehow think that goodness can be found in our earthly, silly pursuits.

The psalmist Asaph struggled with this problem in Psalm 73. He looked around and saw how those who were far from God seemed to prosper. They seemed to be able to satisfy the ache in their soul with material things. And then he gets angry with God and he's ready to "throw in the towel." But finally, when he comes into the sanctuary of God, i.e. when he takes the steps necessary to draw close to God, he realizes that he had it all wrong. He gains new perspective. He began to view the present in light of eternity. And he finally concludes, "But as for me, it is good to be near God."

Let me ask you: Is that the highest good in your life, to be near God? George McDonald has written, "Lord, in thy Spirit's hurricane, I Pray, Strip my soul naked--dress it then thy way."^{vi} That's what it means to draw near to God. It means to let God strip you soul naked...and then dress it his way. Remember, we don't come to God on our terms, but on His terms. What are they?

A. Rearrange your life under God's leadership (4:7a)

In his typically practical way, James outlines for us the steps. First, humble yourself before God. More literally he says (and maybe your translation reads this way) "submit yourselves to God." To submit means to place or arrange under in proper order. If your life is out of order it's because you and God are not in the right order. When you submit to God you arrange your life, desires, passions and priorities under God's leadership. Essentially you say, "O.K. God, I no longer call the shots in my life." You are now in the driver's seat. I place myself under your command. Rather than placing myself under the influence of the world, the flesh and the devil, I place myself under *your* influence.

Henri Nouwen states it this way:

Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part.^{vii}

Such “downward mobility with Jesus” is extremely difficult for you and me. And there is one thing that makes it so difficult. It’s called *pride*. Pride says, “I will be the god of my life.” That’s why the essence of sin is pride. No wonder James says, “God *opposes* the proud.” When we are proud we are at war with God. And remember, “war is hell” and motivated by hell. What a stupid thing to be at war with God. Who could ever ultimately win such a war? Why not stop now and hold up your white flag of surrender? Why not arrange yourself, your life, your desires under God’s leadership? This is the first step, submit to God. Humble yourself before God. Pride hinders the flow of grace.^{viii} Grace is the power to change, and there is only one way you get grace – you humble yourself.

B. Resist the devil (4:7b)

The second step is this: *resist the devil*. Some of us do just the opposite. Instead of submitting to God and resisting the devil, we resist God and submit to the devil. You see, hiding behind the selfish pleasures and worldly practices of our lives is the devil himself. He ultimately inspires all that would draw you and me away from God.

Peter says this: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...” (1 Peter 5:8-9). Satan is prowling around in your life 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. His desire? He wants nothing more than to destroy you. His deception leads to disobedience which leads ultimately to death.

How do you resist the devil? The same way Jesus did, through verbal confrontation using God’s Word. You see, the devil’s schemes with Jesus were no different than what he does with us. Just like Jesus in Matthew chapter 4, we often find ourselves in the desert wastelands of life. We are dry. We are hungry. We are thirsty. We ache. *And we are vulnerable*. We are so vulnerable to try and satisfy our thirst in our own way and in our own timing. And that is what Satan tried to get Jesus to do. How did Jesus respond? He said three times, “It is written.” He reminded himself and Satan of the truth of God’s Word which alone holds out the answer to our deepest needs. Jesus resisted and Satan hit the road. And he will also in your life.

C. Repent of your sin (4:8b-10)

Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. James 4:8-9

“Wash your hand, you sinners.” That speaks of our actions. “Purify your hearts.” That speaks of our attitudes and motivations. And then James calls them “hypocrites,” meaning that our loyalty is divided between God and the world.

“Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy.” This is not simply remorse or regret. This is a deep repentance that is overwhelmed with the terrifying fact that I have sinned against a holy God and arrogantly turned away from the One who alone always has my best interests in mind.

We become like the prophet Isaiah who, when he saw the holiness of God, said, “It’s all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips and I live among a people of filthy lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

Changing laughter to mourning and joy to gloom indicates that the sinful strategies we follow to find happiness and joy must be abandoned. We have to recognize that such strategies not only are a dead-end street, but grieve the Holy Spirit as well as hurt ourselves and the believing community.

What about you? Do you desire to draw close to God? If you do, there is an awesome promise in this passage. In fact, there are three promises. First, for the one who takes these steps, God gives grace. “But he gives us even more grace,” James reminds us in verse 6. Depending on God’s grace, you take the first step. And you’ll find that there is even more grace to come. God’s grace is there for you at each step of the way.

Second, God will come close to you (verse 8). You come close to God and he will come close to you. And you will discover as Asaph did and as millions of others down through the centuries that the nearness of God is your good. Nothing else and no one else can satisfy that ache in your soul.

Third, God will lift you up in honor. This is not the honor the world offers. It is the honor of hearing those words “Well done, good and faithful servant,” when you stand one day before God.

In what areas of your life are you at war within yourself? You know the right thing, but up to this point, you haven’t been willing to do it. Or maybe you’re at war with someone else and you need to humble yourself, repent of your pride and ask forgiveness. Will you do that this morning? Don’t put it off. God’s invitation to draw close is for you, *right now*.

ⁱ Did they actually kill others? Some try to take this metaphorically. But it is probably best to understand it literally. Didn’t David murder in order to get what he wanted? Didn’t professing believers in Rwanda murder in order to get what they wanted? There were many poor in the church to which James is writing who were being shunned and neglected by the rich. The rich, in turn, were influenced by Roman rule and culture. The division and animosity had grown to such an extent that there probably were cases where lives were taken.

ⁱⁱ Jill Briscoe in Before You Say "Amen." *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, no. 12 as cited on www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is the whole premise of the OT book of Hosea (cf. Jer. 3:7-10) viewing Israel as God’s wife. The expression is always used in the Bible of those who assume that they have a genuine relationship with God.

^{iv} David P. Nystrom, *James in The NIV Application Commentary*, 226.

^v *Ibid.*, 227.

^{vi} George Macdonald in “Diary of an Old Soul.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, no. 12 as cited in www.PreachingToday.com.

^{vii} Henri Nouwen in the *New Oxford Review* (April 1987). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 5 as cited on www.preachingtoday.com

^{viii} Proverbs 13:10 “*Pride leads to arguments.*”