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Surrender to Win

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James, the brother of Jesus, has done it again. John Nixon said it right. “The more I get in to this book, the more I love it. It just smacks you in the face.” That’s why we had to divide it up over the year. Right after hitting us with the way to spiritual wisdom in doing what you know, James begins meddling some more. The difference between preaching and meddling is that preaching is something you can take generically or generally, while meddling is when you agree with what you’re hearing, to the point of having to make some changes in your own life.

“¹What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You 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. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴You 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. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.” James 4:1-10 (NIV)

Good, clean, Christian infighting - Nothing like it! A fight always sidetracks a hockey game. Granted, some people love to see the punches fly. But it does get in the way of the game. And so too can fights get in the way of the church’s main purpose which is to see people dead to real life come alive in Christ. In some cases, punches fly, but mostly church fights use words, “prayer requests”, and hidden agendas to get the job done.

Rodney Dangerfield quips that he went to a boxing match and a hockey game broke out. I don’t know about you but I’ve been to some church business meetings where I wish a hockey game would break out...at least then the offenders could be thrown in the penalty box, and we could get on with the game.

Instead, energy is given over to arguing with people who voted yea, nay, or over my dead body. The Church, the gathering of men, women, and children who belong to Jesus the Prince of Peace, that church, is too often weighed down with, as James puts it, fights and quarrels, (literally “a state of war” and “skirmishes” or “individual battles”). Do you remember the last verse we studied last week? “*Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*”...What happened?

James doesn’t say exactly. But the fall out is much worse than we realize. So what can we do? What can we do if we find ourselves in the middle of a fight, or if we’re not fighting, how can we head one off at the pass? What about those among us who are good fighters? That’s what James wants to address. He jumps right into

it in the beginning of chapter 4. He asks “*What causes fights and quarrels among you?*” In other words, what is it that’s breaking you apart? What’s dragging you down? What in the world could be so important to keep you from leading people to life in Christ?

Fortunately, he answers. It’s “*your desires that battle within you*”. James names their desire as coveting, wanting to have what you don’t really need. That’s what’s making you fight so hard that you would be willing to kill. It’s no mistake that James uses the language of war. Because this is a life and death issue. Now remember who James is talking to here. To people who say they belong to the God who brings peace through Jesus. And what is peace, but to be whole. So if you and I are whole, that is, complete in Christ, then why would we want anything else to satisfy us and fill us up? But such is the logic of coveting.

Some cartoon strips make great theology. In Parker and Hart's "The Wizard of Id" comic strip, one monk is putting up a sign on the bulletin board in front of the church while another monk watches. The sign reads "Thou Shalt Not Covet" and the visiting monk says, "Boy, I wish we had a signboard like that at our church". The dangerous thing about coveting is that on the surface it can seem so noble, but underneath there may be something devastating in development. Desires and coveting may not seem all that bad. But the brew is more poisonous than we know. The Greek word for these desires is *hedonon*, literally hedonism, which is making pleasure your chief goal in life.

Mix hedonism with coveting and you get a war. And then we fall for the oldest line in the book – literally the first lie - that we can’t trust God to meet all our needs. We think He’ll only go so far, and leave us empty, so we look for more. It’s what the serpent sold Eve – that God was holding out on her and there was something better out there. Interesting that it’s the 10th and final commandment, after God gave all the others about how to relate to God and to others around us, God says “Do not covet.” But we think something else will fill us up – even church things. Here are some things I am tempted to think will fill me up: “if only we could pay our debt down now, I’d be satisfied...if we only get 60 more new members here, we’d be fixed...if we only sing a few more contemporary songs here... if we only get a few more choir members... if we only had more singles here... or young people... if only we had more money... If only I could experience God more,... or whatever.) It works the same in the rest of our lives. “If I only had \$1000 more dollars a month... if I only had a better job... if I only had better looks... if I only had better talent... better discipline... more time, if I only had a better spouse (last night, after seeing all his handiwork at the auction, my wife was coveting Dan Teare. She wanted to bid on *him*, not just his stuff)...”) The point is, we covet what we don’t have, thinking it will satisfy us, or save us from the boredom or lack of purpose we feel, when in reality there is nothing that can be added to God’s perfect plan and what he has promised you and me.

So we’re miserable, either because we can’t get what we think we want, or because we actually do get what we want, and wind up more miserable than before. James reminds us that the correct way to have your legitimate needs met is by asking God. But he points out, one reason you may not be getting what you ask for is that even in your prayers you ask with the wrong motives. God will never meet your needs by providing squandering pleasures you lust after.

Many of us have set ourselves up for fights and conflict, because we ignore the major differences between the worldly life and the Christian life. I guess the Christians James was writing did the same thing: “*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.*” We stick with God, but like Eve, we’re still looking for more, in case God doesn’t ultimately satisfy us.

You’ve seen the daring circus performer riding two horses at the same time. He has one foot firmly planted on the back of each horse. He can do this because they are so close together. If the two horses begin to move apart from each other, though, the performer must pick one or the other to ride.

It’s the same thing with our spiritual journey. At first these two life views don’t seem that far apart. But when we look again, like James is forcing us to do, we start to see the contrasts. We see how they are dramatically different – even totally opposite. (James says when we dabble with that other horse, we wind up enemies of

God! So let me ask: are you dabbling? Can you name the extra horses are you leaning on? How many of us are living as enemies of God?) As we move along in our journey, our two horses move further and further apart, and now may be the day when you have to choose – which horse will you ride? Remember what Paul wrote to the Colossians (2:8): “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*”

James doesn't just stop with the fights and quarrels, because some of us still don't realize James is talking to us. Some of us spiritualize it. We pray about it. But like those James is writing to, our prayers are selfish, “*that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*” Talk to God about it. He's more deeply aware of our spiritual needs than we are. He wants the very best – the only best, for our lives. He will do nothing else. But we sure miss it in our praying! We ask God for good things not for God to be made more famous, but for our own satisfaction. We even get to the point of asking God for bad stuff!

But listen: “The only things *really worth having* are those we can ask God for, and if we ask for them completely ‘in Christ's name,’ God will grant our prayer.” (Minton).

The human spirit we have in us yearns to envy, but God gives more grace. “*God opposes the proud, but to the humble God gives grace*”. The cure for all the outward conflict is a humble spirit which is rewarded by God's favor. Why does our spirit have to be humble? Because, if you're full of yourself there's no where for God's Spirit to be poured! Because God's not going to pour into you more grace than your level of humility can sustain! Why is the Holy Spirit jealous? Because the Holy Spirit earnestly desires to be in control of our lives!

As a solution James gives out 10 actions: Submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change, and humble yourselves. More specifically, *Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil. Come near to God. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. And humble yourselves before the Lord.*” 10 New Testament Commandments that James offers to the fighters among us. 10 New Testament commandments leading to harmony and holiness. First, “*Submit to God and resist the devil.*” You are on the front lines of the Kingdom of God: when you submit to God as your leader, you turn at the same time to face the devil and take a stand against him. And with your heart submitted to the proper authority, he will flee! Resisting the devil means we fight off the desire to assert ourselves. We do everything we can to walk away from a good fight in the church, because when we push and shove and fight, Satan wins. If you haven't been running into the devil, perhaps it's because you two have been moving in the same direction. Think about that!

“*Draw near to God and he will draw near to you*”. In the Old Testament “drawing near” almost always means approaching God in worship and praise. By drawing near and offering yourself, you are giving God every opportunity to move in your life. But remember – to draw near to God means you must be cleansed by him. James' call for the Christ-followers to “*Wash your hands*” and “*purify your hearts*” refers to Hebrew ceremonial cleansing. And if you're anything like me, you know how badly you need to be cleansed from all the crud you allow in your life.

When I recognize how much I need to be cleansed, I can't help but feel grief. Allow yourself to mourn, even to wail. We must stand (or fall) before him and confess. Pour it all out. It's part of the cleansing.

Finally, James says the way up is down. The lowly one becomes the lifted one. You can't be full of God when you're full of yourself. Only when you and I empty ourselves of everything else will God's Spirit move in and fill us. *Ru'ah* is the Hebrew word for God's Spirit. It also means wind. And wind travels from high pressure to low pressure. So does God's Holy Spirit. Until you and I empty ourselves of ourselves and set up a low pressure pattern, God's Spirit won't naturally enter in.

Maybe you're a fighter. Maybe you're frustrated. Maybe you're a futile pray-er. James says it plainly – *humble yourself*. Quit thinking you know a better plan than God's for your life. No more double horses. No more hockey games breaking out in your life. No more fights out of sheer frustration. Don't fight back.

Instead, humbly seek the Lord and his power and how to make him famous. Humbly seek to speak it, to live it out, and to share it.

Do you honestly believe that there is something out there better than what God through Jesus Christ is offering? If so, I challenge that belief. Show me that horse. But, if you believe that God promises all you'll ever need, then get out of your state of war by getting off whatever "your other horse" is, and come to God in repentance. Change your mind. Go from living in darkness to walking in the light. Go from guilt to forgiveness. Go from ways of war to ways of peace. From no hope to hope. From no purpose to purpose. From living for yourself to living for Christ. It's the ultimate paradigm shift. Change your mind at its deepest level. Determine to know nothing else but Jesus Christ. Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will lift you up.