

Humility

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, at some point, I'm sure we've all been to the doctor. Maybe for some of us, it's been more recent than others. And when you go to visit your GP, what happens is normally after some chit-chat, the GP will ask what the symptoms are.
- And then a discussion about the symptoms will take place. And then the GP will then move on to the diagnosis. In other words, what they think the problem with you is.
- And then after the diagnosis, usually the consultation ends with the doctor prescribing some kind of course of treatment or other. Or if it's a serious thing, then they will suggest you see a specialist.
- And then they will then take you through a course of treatment. Now, all this has got to do with our physical condition. And we're used to seeing that our physical condition is good and our health is good.
- But in James's letter, what he is really concerned about is our spiritual condition, not our medical or physical condition, but our spiritual condition. But as he describes this, he sounds like an experienced physician because he understands our hearts and he understands how we behave and the connection between the two.
- [1 : 1 3] And so it's like James takes us into his surgery for a consultation and discusses the symptoms and the diagnosis and then a course of treatment for us to follow.
- But it's all to do with our spiritual sickness. And here in chapter four, in essence, we get to the very heart of James's letter. We get to the heart of what has gone wrong.
- Because we've mentioned this phrase before, double-mindedness comes up again in our reading in verse eight. And the problem is double-mindedness. And we've described this as his readers are trying to both be friends with the world as well as being friends with God, not being sure who their allegiance lies with, the world or with God.
- And so the fundamental problem, according to James, is adultery. It's a spiritual adultery. It's a mixture between loving God and loving this world.
- But James is saying it can't continue. Why, Bill? Because God is a jealous God, a God who demands our wholehearted devotion. So we can't be double-minded when it comes to God.
- [2 : 2 8] We can't have a relationship with God and give our affections or our love to him whilst also loving other things and giving our affections to them.
- And so that's why James really urges his readers here in this passage is he urges them to repent and to humble themselves before God. And so this text, chapter four, verse one to 12, speaks to our own spiritual condition.
- Whoever we are. Yes, James is writing to believers. He's writing to Christians. But he challenges us all to think about our relationship with God because he alerts us to the sickness of our human condition that plagues every single one of us.
- And if we don't recognize the symptoms and understand the diagnosis, then he's really saying that you're in great danger. And so in chapter four, verse one to 12, James skillfully discusses the symptoms.

He diagnoses the problem and he prescribes the required treatment. And so this afternoon, we're going to look at these, this passage under these three headings, the symptoms, verse one to three, the diagnosis, verse four, and then the treatment, verse five to 12.

[3 : 44] So first of all, the symptoms. James gets straight to it in verse one and two. He says, what causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

You desire, but do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

So fights and quarrels can be seen. They're obvious. But James says they're actually symptomatic of an inner problem. So he asks, what causes fights and quarrels within you?

And then he answers by saying, it is your desires that battle within you. So the outward fighting that is seen in the church amongst the Christians reveals an inward battle.

And it's that double mindedness again, an inner division between belonging to God, but also behaving just like the world does. And so it's the sinful desires or passions within that are causing the problems that James is addressing.

[4 : 50] Now, James isn't talking about minor disagreements here. It sounds like the members of the churches he's writing to are actually at each other's throats. And so he uses military language to describe the relationships in the church, really indicating that the church is at war.

In verse two, he even uses the word kill. Now, there's no indication that they were literally killing each other. It might be that there was something specific that we are unaware of, or it may be that James is alluding to Jesus's teaching on breaking the commandment, you shall not murder.

Well, you can break it by using angry words. He may be referring to that. And after all, that is where angry words can ultimately lead. They can lead to death and murder.

Whatever it is, the sheer strength of James's language highlights the devastating effect of fighting within the church. Because if these symptoms persist in a church, any church, there's no doubt that they will kill the congregation.

And so the idea seems to be that if people don't get their own way, then they become increasingly aggressive in their behavior. James says you covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

[6 : 14] So there's a covetousness and there's a selfishness that doesn't really care about anyone else. And it's a lust that wants more than you have or wants to be more than you are.

No doubt it flows from the envy and the selfish ambition that James already mentioned at the end of chapter three. And so these desires can battle within us.

And before you know it, they quickly boil over and express themselves in fights and quarrels. And so if we, you or I, covet what other people have, be it their money or their power or their influence or their position, their looks, their personality, their relationships or their family, if we covet all these things, then pretty soon we may begin to resent that person for what they have or for who they are.

And if they have exactly what we covet, then we may begin to dislike and to criticize them, which is only a step or two away from quarreling and fighting with them.

But James says you do not have because you do not ask God. Now, perhaps he's suggesting that covetousness can lead to prayerlessness, not asking God for what you need.

[7 : 37] And because you don't, then you want what you don't need. Or it can lead to asking God with the wrong motives. That's what he says in verse three. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

So James is saying that your prayers can be self-obsessed. Your prayers can be self-focused because you're only interested in satisfying your desires.

For example, a prayer might be, dear God, please remove that person from that position in church. And the reason you pray that prayer is because you would quite like their position in church.

Or, dear God, please end that person's relationship. And the reason you pray that prayer is because you would quite like to start a relationship with that person. And these are just extreme examples, I guess.

But the point James is making is that our self-centered and our sinful desires on the inside will eventually bubble up and boil over into fights and quarrels on the outside.

[8 : 45] So these are the symptoms that James discusses. And just like any trip that you may have to the GP, very often the outward symptoms are an indication that something is tragically wrong on the inside.

And so if we're going to be helped towards a cure, then we need the right diagnosis. So that's the first point, the symptoms. Then James moves on to the diagnosis in verse 4.

And the diagnosis is bad. He says, You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Now, James is in no doubt as to what is actually going on here. And he pinpoints the ultimate problem, just like your GP often does when you see them. And the problem for James is it is in a person's relationship with God.

And he says to his readers, this is spiritual adultery that you are committing. And so he picks up, by using this word adultery, picks up on the covenant relationship between God and his people that is described throughout the Bible.

[9 : 56] It's in the Old Testament. It's often described as a marriage where God is portrayed as the husband and Israel, his people are portrayed as the wife. And so this language of adultery is frequently used to describe Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

Now, James calls his readers and adulterous people saying, Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Now, he's not suggesting that believers shouldn't be friends with unbelievers, but that the world is in opposition to God. And so if we think and if we behave like the world, we make ourselves an enemy of God.

And we've said before that this is a bit like trying to have a foot in both camps. James is saying it doesn't work. You can't continue to flirt with sin and pursue a sinful lifestyle and think that God is okay with it.

Any more that you think that as a married person, you can continue to flirt with somebody who isn't your spouse and think that your spouse would be okay with it.

[11 : 13] It's the kind of behavior that displays our hatred towards our spouse. Therefore, it displays our hatred towards God if we love the world, if we're friends with the world.

And so this is in sharp contrast to what James has said about Abraham in chapter 2. If your Bible is open, look back to chapter 2, verse 22 and 23.

He said that Abraham was called God's friend because his faith, Abraham's faith, was expressed by what he did. And now James is saying that you can't be friends with God like Abraham if you're a friend of the world.

If you're a friend of the world, he's saying you make yourself an enemy of God. You're an adulterer because you're not wholeheartedly committed to God.

And so if you're not fully devoted to God, he's saying if instead you're double-minded, then your double-mindedness is going to lead you to a double life.

[12 : 14] The kind of life that is in fact pursued by an adulterer. One that tries to keep the marriage going, which demands exclusive loyalty, whilst pursuing an affair with another lover.

James is saying you can't behave like an adulterer trying to combine your relationship with God with your love for the world. You can't divide your loyalty between God on the one hand and the world on the other because your affections for God will always be stolen away by this other love.

I'm sure James uses the language of adultery here to tell us just how serious this sin is. In case we think that it isn't really a big deal.

And yet being God's enemy surely is a massive deal. And so we're being forced to choose where our allegiance lies. Is it with the world or is it with God?

James is like your GP, your doctor, who, having given you the devastating diagnosis, looks at you in the eye across their desk and says, you've got a choice.

[13 : 30] If you continue living this current lifestyle that you're living, then the prognosis is devastating. You won't survive. And so you need to decide what you're going to do from this day on.

Or in James's case here, he's saying you need to decide who you really want to be with. Just think for us, where does my loyalty lie?

Does it lie with the world more than it lies with God? What am I most attracted to? Am I most attracted to what this world offers? Money, fame, position?

Or am I more attracted to what God gives? How do I spend most of my time? Do I spend most of my time pursuing the pleasures of this world? Or am I seeking God?

Where do I feel most at home? Do I feel most at home in this world or with God? Because it's clear from James that God demands our exclusive loyalty.

[14 : 36] And there's a problem if he doesn't get it. And yet despite the diagnosis being bad in verse 4, there is a hope, there is a cure, and there is a course of treatment to follow.

And that's what James goes on to describe in verse 5 onwards. So there's the symptoms, first of all. Secondly, there's the diagnosis. And then thirdly, there's the treatment in verse 5 to 12.

And so we get the treatment, essentially, in verse 7 to 12. And the treatment is a call to repent. But James first gives us the basis for this in verse 5 to 6.

And the basis, the cure, is the gospel of God's grace. It's the good news of Jesus Christ. So verse 5 says, Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

This is a difficult verse to translate, as the footnote indicates. And essentially, it's whether James is referring to God's jealousy for his people, or he's speaking about human envy.

[15 : 45] And I think the context of adultery suggests that this is about God's jealous love for his people. And so when James states Scripture says, it's not that he's got a specific verse of Scripture in mind, but rather he's giving a summary of what all the Scriptures teach about God and his jealous love for his people.

God is a jealous God. Now when we hear the word jealousy or jealous, we normally think of it in a negative sense. But when jealousy, and rightly so, because jealousy, when it comes to human jealousy, it is to be seen in a negative sense.

But when jealousy is used of God, it is different. Because jealousy is part of God's perfect being. And so it isn't a negative thing. It can't be a negative thing.

But rather God's jealousy is his pure and proper jealousy. Because God wants to possess what is rightfully his. What belongs to him.

He wants his people. In a relationship, he does not want his people as adulterers going off with other loves. He wants his people for himself.

[16:58] And so God's jealousy is expressed throughout the Bible and in the Old Testament in his covenant love for his people. In the Old Testament, for example, in Deuteronomy, Moses said this.

He said, the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. And then he goes on to say, the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.

In essence, he's describing the jealous love that God has for his people. And yet despite his people's unfaithfulness and adultery, God in his jealous love pursues his people in their sin to bring them back to himself.

And that seems to be the tone of James' words here. God's people have been unfaithful. God's people are guilty of adultery. But God's jealous love won't abandon them.

It won't let them go. Instead, we read that God is willing to show mercy. God wants to restore that broken relationship again. And that's how intense God's love is.

[18:12] Yes, he is rightly jealous when we redirect our love away from him towards other things. And that's why he's given his spirit to dwell in us.

Verse 5. God is faithful and he doesn't want to let us go. And so his spirit within us isn't like a flatmate. You know, a flatmate who comes, who shares the flat with you, who's got half of it.

He does his thing and you do your thing. Our flat, as it were, who wants to take over our heart and our life and dwell in us completely. Not for our loves to be shifting and moving towards other things.

He's not going to put up with sharing our love for himself with our love for others. He wants all of us. And that's why this spiritual adultery that James speaks of is so tragic.

And yet, the cure is in the grace of God. And it's there in verse 6. But he gives us more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.

[19:19] So God might rightly divorce us because of our adultery. Because we've been unfaithful to him. Because we've loved other things more than him. He should divorce us.

And yet, we're being told that God's grace is bigger than my unfaithfulness. That his grace is greater than the sin in me or in you.

And yet, God's grace only comes to those who recognize their need of it. Because God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.

So God's grace extends to everyone who humbles themselves before him. And if we're too proud to do this, then God will continue to oppose us.

So just like we'll never discover the cure to our sickness if we don't think there's something wrong with us. That's one of the statistics I was reading recently about how many people, their illness or their condition gets worse and is so bad because they basically thought there was nothing wrong with them for such a long time.

[20 : 28] And had they gone to the doctor sooner, then they could have had more help earlier. And so we can never enjoy God's favor and forgiveness if we don't admit our own sin.

And this is the repentance that James outlines in verse 7 to 12. That word repentance basically means turning around. Turning away from sin and towards God.

And so just like your GP prescribes the treatment to fight off the illness, so James prescribes his treatment for fighting off sin and its influence in our lives.

But unlike your GP who gives you a course of treatment and says something like, well, take one pill three times a day, and after a week you'll be cured, you'll be fine. No, the repentance that James calls for isn't a one-off thing.

Rather, it is a lifelong process. Martin Luther, the German reformer, when he nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenberg, the catalyst for the Reformation, the first of his theses was on repentance.

[21 : 36] He said, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance. Basically saying all of our Christian life should be repentance.

And so James shows us exactly what this looks like in verse 7. The first thing is, he says, submit yourselves then to God. So submitting to God means acknowledging that God has supreme authority over our lives.

Where do we find what God says? Well, we find it in his word. And so submitting to his authority means submitting to what he says. And what he says will be counter-cultural, and it will even be counter to our own heart's desires.

And yet submitting to God says, well, God, you're right, and I must obey you. Then secondly, resisting the devil. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Remember the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve failed to resist the devil. And so we are to seek to stand against the devil's dirty tactics so that we are not led into sin.

[22 : 48] And so this will mean rejecting the devil's lies. But it will also mean avoiding situations where we personally are tempted to sin. And the promise James gives is that, well, if you resist the devil, he will flee from you.

Just like he fled from Jesus when he was tempted in the wilderness. And thirdly, verse 8, come near to God, and he will come near to you.

It's an invitation to return to God. So whenever we sin, whatever the sin is, we shouldn't stay away from God in our guilt and in our shame, thinking there can be no way back for me because of what I've done.

Rather, we're being told, draw near to God. Go back to God. Seek his forgiveness. Because when we do, we're assured God welcomes us back to himself.

Then fourthly, wash your hands. Wash your hands, you sinners. There's an allusion here to the worship in the Old Testament when the priest, before he could conduct worship, had to go and wash his hands.

[23 : 55] And of course, the regulations no longer apply. But the point is the same. We cannot approach a pure, perfect, and holy God as sinful men and women.

We need to be cleansed before we can be in his presence. And so James is not just referring to our external behavior here. Our hearts need to be purified as well, which is the fifth thing there in verse 8.

Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Again, it alludes to the worship in the Old Testament and how our hearts need to be purified because we are dealing with the Holy God.

And our minds, too, need to be purified because of our double-mindedness. And so our hands and our hearts and our minds all need to turn away from sin and towards God.

That's true repentance, turning away from sin with all of our faculties and towards God. That's what repentance means. But what does repentance look like? Well, James tells us there in verse 9.

[25 : 04] Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. He's not saying that laughter is bad, that joy is bad, but that our sin is no laughing matter.

That's why true repentance will mean we feel deep sorrow over our sin because it is an offense to God. And so we'll grieve and we'll mourn and we will wail.

I wonder when was the last time that you wept over your sin or felt sorrow for your sin. Because only when we feel that conviction will we then turn back to God.

That's why James gives us this promise in verse 10. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. And then James goes on in verse 11 and 12 to return to the symptoms that he described at the start.

Verse 11. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks evil against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

[26 : 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? And so if verse 7 to 10 really is connected to a relationship with God, verse 11 and 12 is connected to a relationship with other people.

And so James is saying when you slander someone, you make yourself the judge. And James says you speak against the law and you judge it. And so rather than obeying the law, you're thinking you're above the law.

So the law says love your neighbor, but if we think we can slander our neighbor, we're basically saying I'm above the law. The law doesn't apply to me. We're acting like God in essence when we judge somebody else because we're taking on his role, the role that rightly belongs to him.

Because James says there is only one lawgiver and judge and that obviously is God. And so he's saying who do you think you are that you can judge other people?

You're not God. Leave it to him. And so James outlines the symptoms. He gives the diagnosis and he offers the treatment for our spiritually sick condition.

[27 : 28] And he's writing to a people who needed to be cured of their sinful behavior. And so do we. And so his cure is for them, but it is also for us.

And the cure is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the gospel of God's grace. And so we should never think that we are okay and we don't need it.

We need it if we wouldn't call ourselves a Christian. And we need it if we do. Because the beginning of life as a Christian and the continuing of life as a Christian, they're both dependent on God's grace.

The gospel of grace is the ABC of the Christian life, but it's also the A to Z of the Christian life. So we can't possibly turn away from sin and towards God in our own strength, whether to become a Christian or to continue as a Christian.

We need his help. And that's why God sent Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who has a perfect health record or a record of health.

[28 : 40] Because Jesus lived the life that we could never live, a life without sin, a perfect life. And Jesus wholeheartedly submitted himself to God.

Jesus fully resisted the devil. And Jesus was completely pure. Hands, head, and heart. And so Jesus didn't need to grieve or mourn and weep because he was without sin.

And yet Jesus humbled himself to die on a cross for our sin so that we can come near to God. And that's why God exalted him.

He lifted him up to the highest place. And one day Jesus will return as judge. That's how Jesus is able to save his people.

That's why this gospel of grace humbles us out of our pride and it frees us to openly admit all our sin. Not to try and hide it or deny it, but to admit it.

[29 : 45] Because it's only when we do this, admit our sinful condition and our weakness before God, that we find the cure for our deadly spiritual condition.

And when we've got the cure and tasted the cure and experienced the cure, then we're amazed just at how much God hates sin.

He hates it so much that Jesus had to die for it. And we're amazed at how much God loves us. That Jesus was glad to die for my sin and your sin.

And that's when we have tasted and experienced and see and know, when we felt the gospel of grace impact our hearts, that's when we'll know the joy of sin's forgiven.

And we'll delight in the relationship that God has with us. And we'll go and serve others in his name.