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### **James 4:1-12**

#### **A Call to Repent and a Promise of Grace**

I *love* the local church.. The church is where I heard the gospel, became a Christian, and was baptized. It's where I learned to know God, worship Him, pray, and understand His Word. The church is where I've been discipled. It's where I've learned to share the gospel with non-believers and have seen them saved. It's where I learned theology and developed a love for the Bible. The local church is where I've learned what it looks like to follow Christ, live a Christian life, and truly love others. It's in the local church that I've watched grown men and women publicly confess their sins and ask for prayer and accountability in their fight for holiness., even *publicly*. It's in the local church that I've seen Christians love one another so much as to go after the lost sheep that's gone astray, seeking their repentance and restoration. It's in the local church that I've truly learned what it means to repent, *and* what it truly means to forgive. It's in the local church that I've learned what it means to rejoice with those who rejoice, to weep with those who weep; to truly live life together, to truly be a *community, a family*. It's where I've learned to love and be loved. So it's no exaggeration to say that it's in the local church that I've truly learned what it looks like to be a Christian, to love God, His Word, and other people - it's where I've been discipled. It's in the local church that I've seen the love of God on display in real, tangible ways - ways that you just can't get anywhere else. I *love* the local church! And clearly, God does, too!

So why, then, is the local church often the source of so much pain and suffering? To some extent or another, we've all been hurt by Christians and churches before. It's in the local church where many of us have been hurt deeply and developed countless wounds and scars. In the church, we have been sinned against, betrayed, lied to, slandered, and crushed. Some churches are healthier than others - and some of us have been part of some particularly unhealthy churches; we've seen been hurt by false teachers, leaders caught in scandalous immorality, ugly church politics driven by the selfish ambition of worldly values, and even outright division that ended up blowing up and splitting the church. We even have loved ones who have been so hurt by the church that they've concluded all Christians are hypocrites, all organized religion corrupt, and so they're never going back.

So how can both of these experiences of churches be true? It's because every church, even the healthy ones, are still made up of *sinner*s - and when you get a bunch of sinners together, they inevitably sin against each other. Churches have always had problems - even going back to the very beginning, to the time of the Bible. So it shouldn't surprise us that James directly addresses the issue of Christians fighting and sinning against each other here in this passage, James 4:1-12. As we've grown used to by now, James begins the passage with a rhetorical question in v.1: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" When he says "among you" he means among the communities of the local churches that he's writing to; the plural "you" there is addressed to Christians gathered together as a local church congregation. He's asking, "Why do you guys fight and quarrel with each other?" And he doesn't ask *if* there's any quarreling and in-fighting going on: he already knows that there is. He goes on, in verses 1-3, to diagnose *why* this is the case: it's because sinful passions and desires are at war within our hearts, so that every single one of us is vulnerable to falling into strife and enmity with each other. But then, in vv.4-5, we're given the rebuke that when we are enemies with each other, it's because we're choosing friendship with the world over God, choosing to be enemies of God. But James doesn't just expose and rebuke the problem: he offers a real, genuine *solution* for all of us: the path of real, genuine *repentance*. In verses 6-10, we're given a clear call to humbly repent, but also a glorious promise and assurance of God's grace for us if we do so. And finally, in vv.11-12, he returns back to the issue at hand - the problem of fighting and quarreling among Christians in the church community - by taking these principles of repentance and applying it to some specific sins that we're all prone to commit against one another, even in the church.

So my prayer for us this morning, as we meditate on this text together, is that the Lord would use this part of His Word to expose and convict us of the sin in our own hearts, and lead us to genuine, humble repentance that we might draw near to God, humbly receive His grace, and submit our entire lives to Him in faithful obedience. And I pray that as we do so, God will use our repentance to guard *our* church family from the being ripped apart by sin and strife, so that when we and others think of *this* church family, we will not be known for stories of pain and in-fighting, but instead would be flesh-and-blood picture of God's love and grace.

But the path of repentance and grace begins with conviction of just how bad our sin really is. And that's where we have to start...

## I. We Have Relational Conflicts Because Our Sinful Passions and Desires (4:1-3)

After raising the question, “What causes quarrels and fights” among one another in the church community, James gives us the answer in the rest of verse 1: “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” In other words, the answer is simple: we fight and quarrel and argue and wrong each other and get at each other’s throats all because we have sinful, worldly, ungodly passions and desires raging within our hearts. This is true for every single human being, for we are all born sinners and remain sinners to the day we die. And this includes even Christians, we who are children of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit! We have new hearts, we’ve been born again, we’re new creatures with a new nature - and yet, at the very same time, the old, sin nature, our flesh, remains within us. The sinful passions of our flesh *wages war* against the Holy Spirit within us. As Paul says in Gal. 5:17, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Now calling it a “war” implies we’re supposed to *fighting* these sinful passions, waging war against them by the power of the Spirit. But the first step in fighting our sin is to *recognize* our sin - to have it exposed to us, to be convicted of it, so that we might recognize, admit, and confess it, calling it what it is.

And that’s exactly what James helps us do here: he shines a spotlight on some specific sinful passions and desires in our hearts that lead to our conflicts and relational friction with other people - even other believers. He does this in v.2: “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Now, I don’t think this means that James was writing to Christians that were actually murdering each other (or else he’d probably spill a lot more ink on that, right?). So what does he mean? I think he’s referencing Jesus’s words from Matt. 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, where he implies that angrily insulting a brother is like murdering him in our hearts. And one big reason we get so angry with each other is because we desire what we don’t have - we *covet*. To “covet” here means to be envious and jealous of what someone else has, to strongly desire it for yourself to the point that you don’t want the other person to have it. It doesn’t mean just wanting something; it’s to want something so badly that you’re willing to sin for it. That’s why Paul calls covetousness “idolatry” (Col. 3:5). So let’s say you see someone eating a steak burrito and you think, “That looks delicious; I want one, too.” That’s not necessarily covetting. But let’s say you want that burrito so bad that you wait till that guy goes to the bathroom and you walk up grab it; or you go and steal 10 dollars

from your parents' bedroom so you can go buy one with your friends. That's covetting. In fact, even *fantasizing* about doing that kind of thing, finding yourself willing to sin in order to get what you want, is coveting in your heart. So one reason we fight is because, in our sin, we covetously desire something the other person has, we can't get it, so instead, we end up fighting or quarreling with one another, sinning against each other, either to try and get it, or just because we're driven to a jealous rage and bitterness against each other.

Covetting isn't limited to physical stuff. You can covet someone's reputation, position and authority, or even how happy they seem. You may desire to have a great reputation, so you go around spreading rumors and slander about other people, tearing them down, while subtly dropping hints about how great everything should think you are. That'll cause some strife real quick, won't it? Often times, it just boils down to us wanting our own way, so much that we're willing to fight over it; and if both of us are coming at it with such a worldly, selfish, sin-driven perspective, well, then, a fight is inevitable. THIS kind of thinking is the worldly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom that we were warned against last week, from the previous passage. Worldly wisdom is driven by "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" - it's self-centered, making everything about ME. It's because of our worldly ways of thinking and our sinful passions and desires that we fight, quarrel, argue, and sin against each other.

But what about when the things we desire aren't bad, but are actually good and right things? We ask God for it in prayer. The end of v.2 says, "You do not have because you do not ask." We must trust God by asking Him for what we need through prayer. Jesus teaches us this in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matt. 6, that we are to pray and ask God for our needs - our daily bread forgiveness, the ability to forgive others and not give into temptation - and then to trust that the Lord will provide all we need; that if we seek and ask, we will find. SO much of the time, our problem is that we don't pray, we don't trust God, we trust in ourselves instead and take matters into our own hands. But what about when we *do* pray and our prayers aren't answered? When we ask God and still don't get it? WHAT then? James answers this question in v.3: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Sometimes, this is simply because we pray and ask *for the wrong things*. But often, it's because we ask for the *right* things but for *the wrong reasons* - because we desire them out of sinful, worldly desires, passions, and motivations. Now, this isn't the *only* reason we don't get what we pray for - sometimes we never learn in this life why God doesn't grant certain prayers, and we

just have to trust Him with that. But if you've been praying regularly about a specific need or desire, and you're not getting it, and it's even causing contention and sin in your relationships, then it's worth examining your heart and the reasons why you're asking for it. Maybe you've been praying over and over again for something specific - a peaceful home, a better marriage, obedient children, a new job, better health, more money, clarity on a certain decision. Instead of giving up, or growing exasperated with God, stop and ask yourself: is it possible that you're wanting those good things for the wrong reasons? To spend them on your sinful passions? To increase your self-security instead of exercising faith and trust in God? To make yourself look good? To build up your own name and glory instead of the Lord's? To make life more easy and comfortable, rather than making your life a living sacrifice unto the Lord and dying to self daily? It may be that the good things you're asking for have turned into idols for you - and if that's the case, then getting your prayers answered would be the *worst thing for you*; and God loves you way more than that. He's going to do what's *best for you* - and He is jealous for your heart. Which brings us to our second point...

## **II. We Must Choose Between the World and God, Because God Demands Our Whole Heart (4:4-5)**

So maybe you've just been convicted of your sinful desires and wrong motivations, and how it's causing problems in your relationships. But just in case you're already thinking, "Well, that's just how life is; we're all sinners, and it's never going to change," James cuts off that kind of thinking. He underscores just how serious this is by giving us a stern, sobering rebuke in v.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. When we're driven by the worldly wisdom of self-centered pride, bitter jealousy, and selfish ambition, we're choosing to be friends with the world. When we're setting our hearts on worldly values, we're choosing friendship with the world. When we covet worldly treasures or worldly values - like money, fame, power, pleasure, glory, comfort, or anything else - and they become our idols, we're choosing friendship with the world. And make no mistake: to be friends with the world is to be *enemies* with God. There's no middle ground, no compromise to be made.

And this is because the Lord demands our full devotion, our whole heart: the Lord is *jealous* over our hearts. We see this in v.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?'" Now, this

verse is a little tricky. He's not directly quoting a single verse from the Old Testament. So when it says, "the Scripture says," he instead means that he is summarizing a message that is communicated over and over again in the Old Testament, namely: that the Lord is jealous for His people and will not tolerate idolatry in our hearts; in fact, he considers it *adultery*. We see this over and over again in places like Israel, Ezekiel, and especially the book of Hosea: the Lord is pictured as a husband, and Israel, His covenant people, as His bride. But time and time again, Israel lusts after other lovers and commits adultery everytime she chases after the idols and immorality of the pagan nations of the world. Now that Christ has come, God's people, true Israel, is the Church - the bride of Christ, His own body and temple. And the Lord is a jealous husband, like any good husband is. A husband who doesn't care if his wife lusts and chases after other lovers doesn't really love his wife. But the Lord loves us fiercely and perfectly, and He is jealous over our hearts. Everytime we choose the worldliness, demonic ways of thinking, idolatrous desires, and sinful passions over Him, we are committing spiritual adultery and we are stirring up the just wrath of God.

And I also think there's one other possible application to draw here: the context of this passage is about quarreling and fighting within the church community, sining against fellow CHristians. And here we're reminded that the church is the bride of Christ, and that the Lord is a jealous husband. Indeed, the whole church is the temple where the Spirit dwells, and we individuals are just part of it; and Christ identifies with the Church so strongly He calls us His own body. Everybody knows that if you mess with a man's wife and kids, you mess with him. So when we fight and quarrel, when we sin against our fellow Christians, when we cause division and strife in the church family, the household of God, we better watch out, for we're stirring up the wrath of God who is jealous over His people.

Therefore, as we examine our hearts and are convicted by our sinful passions and worldliness, the only proper response is to genuinely, humbly *repent*. Which brings us to point 3...

### **III. God Gives Grace to Those Who Draw Near to Him in Humble Repentance (4:6-10)**

Having exposed and convicted us of our sin, showing us just how serious and terrible it really is, we're now given a clear call to repent of it, and a description of what genuine repentance looks like; but that's not all: we're also given a glorious promise that when we do repent, God will lavish His grace upon us. We see this clearly, starting in v.6: "But he gives more

grace. Therefore, it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Quoting Proverbs 3:34, we’re given the principle of repentance: when we’re driven by the wisdom of this world, driven by bitter jealous, selfish ambition, and the selfish desires of the flesh, we’re full of *pride* - and the proud don’t think that they’ve done anything wrong or that they are in need of mercy and grace. They think they have it under control. But this is the idolatry of self, and this kind of person is an enemy of God - and that means they won’t receive any grace at all. Perhaps, today, you don’t think you’re in need of grace, that you’ve got it all under control and don’t need God’s help. If that’s you, then your heart is in the most dangerous place imaginable, because you’re going up against God Himself, and you’re not going to win. God opposes the proud.

But He gives grace to the humble. As much as His jealous wrath burns against our sin and idolatry, God’s heart abounds with even more love and grace than we could ever abound in sin! No matter how many sins you’ve been convicted of today or have committed this week, or your whole life, God’s mercy is more! His grace is sufficient for you! But he only gives it to the *humble* - to those who humbly repent. Verses 7-10 further flesh out what a truly repentant heart looks like: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.” Let’s take those last couple of verses first, because they’re really saying the same thing as what we saw in v.6: true repentance requires humility, sincere conviction of our sin, being *genuinely broken over it*. These verses aren’t telling us that it’s wrong to be happy and laugh, or that we should be gloomy all the time. Instead, they’re commanding us to be *genuinely grieve our sin* and be broken over it, to have a contrite heart and a broken spirit. We all know the half-hearted apology, “I’m sorry...” because you feel that way, or I’m sorry I got caught. That’s not genuine repentance. We have to stare our sin in the face, see just how messed up it is, to come to terms with how evil we are and how much we deserve God’s wrath and judgment - even the eternal fires of Hell! We must come before the Lord and mourn and grieve our sin, groveling on our knees as we acknowledge that we have been a faithless, adulterous spouse, whoring after idols and our sinful passions! This is the difference between worldly grief and *godly grief*.

And godly grief leads to true repentance: a heart that yearns to turn *away* from sin, the world, and the Devil, and towards God. We must humbly turn to God and submit ourselves to

Him. And the amazing thing is, God promises grace for us everytime we do so! Look at how he pairs commands to repent with promises of His sufficient grace: “Resist the Devil and He will flee from you.” Now there are a lot of weird ways some people might take this verse (like in the 1800s, when some people justified barking the Devil up a tree). But this is simply a call to turn away from our sinful passions and worldly values, to resist the Devil and no longer live according to demonic ways of thinking; yes, temptations are strong, but we’re promises that if we resist the Devil through humbly submitting ourselves to God, he will flee! Why? Because we’re turning *to* the Lord! “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” And that is a glorious, beautiful assurance, isn’t it? When you’re truly convicted of just how sinful and wicked your heart is, drawing near to God may be the very last thing you feel like doing. It’s when you get up in the morning, and you’re crushed with guilt for what you did last night, and instead of sitting down to read your Bible and pray, you think, “God wants nothing to do with me right now.” But Satan wants you to believe that, to keep you from drawing near to God, because if he can keep you walling in your guilt, he’ll keep you enslaved to your sin. So resist the Devil and hear the promise of God: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you!

When humbled in our sin and our need for grace, we can come before the throne of God with a bold confidence that He will draw near to us - not because we’re trusting in ourselves, but because we’re trusting in the sufficient grace of Christ! We can draw near because the blood of Christ has been shed for us on the cross, paying the penalty for our sins once and for all, so that if we turn to Him in faith, God declares us forgiven and justified, accepting us in His presence by clothing us in the very righteousness of Christ! So true repentance because with humbly acknowledging, grieving, and confessing our sin, turning away from it - and then turning to the cross of Christ, firmly believing in the promise that His grace is sufficient and greater, no matter how great our sin may be!

And true repentance doesn’t stop there: as we draw near to God and submit to Him, our desire is to sin no more and to obey God in all things. Or in other words: repentance in our hearts leads to outward expressions of repentance in our actions. We are to “cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your minds, you double-minded.” We must repent of our *actual, specific* sins, not grieving them, not only asking for forgiveness, but also *asking God’s grace* to resist sin and obey Him instead!

And this is exactly what James shows us how to do in the final two verse, leading us to our final point...

#### **IV. A Specific Application: We Must Repent of our Judgmentalism and Evil Speech Against Each Other (4:11-12)**

James now turns back to the matter at hand - the issue of enmity and strife in the church community - and applies these principles of repentance to some specific sins that cause it. We see this in vv.11-12: “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. There is only one lawgiver and a judge, he who is able to save and destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” Speaking evil against each other can happen in all kinds of ways (just think back to our sermon on taming the tongue). He also condemns the sin of *judgmentalism* - where we judge each other in our hearts. This isn't talking about “judging” or discerning whether or not someone is doing what is right or wrong according to God's Law. No, this is *judgmentalism*, where we judge one another according to *our* own values and preferences, what *we* think is right, or where we prematurely pass judgment on someone's motivations. One sign that we're falling into judgmentalism is when we hold grudges, or are quick to criticize others in the church because we're still holding on to what they've done in the past, rather than forgiving them and letting it go. We all know these kinds of sins can destroy relationships and divide communities far too easily. Therefore, we're called to repent of them.

But James doesn't just tell us these are sinful and we shouldn't do it - he shows us *why they are are so wrong*. He lays it on thick here, showing us what it looks like to recognize just how sinful *these specific sins* are, giving us an example of genuine repentance and mourning over sin by showing us how to apply it in this practical way. When we speak evil against our brother, we're speaking evil against the law of God, because we're breaking the law - which is to *love your neighbor as yourself*. When we are judgmental, we're casting judgment on the law by putting ourselves in God's place, trying to make ourself the judge and give our own laws, insisting on our own way. Isn't that exactly what we do in our selfish ambition, jealousy, pride, and anger? But there is only one lawgiver, one judge, one God - He who can save and destroy. But we're not just reminded that God can destroy - but also that He's the only one that can *save*.

The point is so that we will *mourn and grieve and repent of these specific sins* by resisting the Devil, drawing near to God, and submitting to Him through faith in Christ.

So let us examine our hearts today: what sinful passions and worldly desires lurk inside yours? In what specific ways do you sin against others and stir up quarrels and fighting and enmity and strife in your life - be it at home, in the church, or elsewhere? How are your specific sins a declaration of war against God? What idols in your heart are stirring up the jealous wrath of the Lord? Pray that the Lord would show you your sin and to see just how bad it is; may the Lord give us truly broken hearts, to truly weep and mourn our sin, that we may humbly turn to Him!

The most dangerous thing in the world is for our hearts to grow hardened in self-righteousness - for then we are unable to receive grace. But as the Lord convicts us of our sin, may we humbly turn to Him, recognizing and confessing that we can do nothing to save ourselves and that our only hope is His grace! And then, let us look to the cross of Christ and remember the gospel promise: no matter how much sin you have on your hands, Christ has more grace to give; His grace is sufficient, more than enough to deal with every single sin you bring to Him! Mourn and grieve your sin, confess it to God, ask Him to forgive, then look to Christ and have faith that His blood was shed on the cross to cleanse your heart and wash you clean! Draw near to God, every day, and He will draw near to you! Let us resist the Devil and *submit to God* with our whole hearts, praying and asking for the grace and wisdom we need to obey Him completely, day by day. And as you do, rest assured: your sin is dealt with, God is with you, God loves and forgives you and will never stop drawing you closer and closer to Himself.

But maybe you need to repent and turn to the Lord for the very first time today. Maybe you've realized today that you're heart is hardened in pride, and that you've never actually been broken over your sins, that you've never truly drawn near to God and submitted your heart to Him through faith in Christ; maybe you've realized today that you've never received His grace. If that's the case, then I plead with you to come to Christ! Draw near to God by trusting the sufficient grace of Christ, and He will draw near to you! Confess your sins in humble brokenness, ask the Lord to forgive you by accepting Jesus's sacrificial death in your place, and He will! And then turn to submit your life in obedience to Him! And one of the very first outward sign of inward repentance is the baptism, where you make your faith in Christ public. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.