

Who is your best friend? (James 4:1-10)

Sunday School - August 23, 2009

{Bring in a match, mirror, and a grass flower}

It was gracious of Allen to give me the opportunity to teach in his absence this morning, and thanks to his exegesis of James 3:1 last week, I feel an extra measure of stress due to the higher level of judgment that teachers will receive. We should always approach the Word of God with a heightened sense of respect and anticipation. I appreciate the point that Allen made two weeks ago from James 2:19 - even the demons tremble at God's power, perhaps even more than us.

When James opened this letter (James 1:10,11) he reminded us that a rich man is like flowering grass, here today and withered tomorrow. At the end of today's passage, he reminds us that we are each like a vapor that appears for a little while before vanishing away (James 4:14). Regardless of how strongly you hold to things of this life, they are quickly gone. We've spent a lot of time in nursing homes over the past few years, and I can tell you that, regardless of how strong you might feel today and what you might believe about the Bible, in the end, people wither and die. Many lives fade away with increasing fear and decreasing pleasure, a sad testament to excessive earthly investments (Ecclesiastes 12:1-5).

Now that I've launched us into depressing territory, I'd like to remind you of what Pastor Johnny said a few weeks ago, that "real wealth is something that money cannot buy and death cannot steal." Most of us (even those of us who are currently unemployed) are genuinely rich. Today's lesson begs the question of whether our riches made us more like Jesus, or have they simply entangled us (Hebrews 12:1)?

James 4:1-3 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Many of you in this class can remember John Lennon telling the world (in 1969) that "all we are saying is give peace a chance." Recently, we've seen the bumper stickers and tee shirts suggest that various dogmatic groups should "COEXIST." Across our lifetimes, we've seen slogans come and slogans go, but our world is still

not a very peaceful place. In fact, we find some pretty mighty battles underway inside the church (and dare I say, Sunday School?) as well.

The Greek word for "pleasure" in verse 1,3 is "hedone" from which we derive our English word "hedonism." Jesus referred to the impact of this kind of pleasure in **Luke 8:14**, showing that such pleasure chokes out life from the seed of His word. There are battles underway all around, and those battles emerge from the fundamental battle underway within. The obvious examples of such battles are fought between nations and ideologies in order to capture land, possessions, or followers. The big wars are underway constantly, often emerging as battles which lead to quarrels, fights, and murders.

The less obvious battle is underway within each of us. **Romans 6:12,13** provides more clarity on the battle for our mortal bodies (the only remaining place where sin can find the believer vulnerable). When we choose to present our members to sin, it leads to "practical atheism" based on prayerlessness (or self-centered praying).

James 4:4-6 You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Perhaps you came to class today looking for a comfortable way to spend a Sunday morning. Let me apologize in advance, but I might be about to rock your world. James reminds his (largely) Jewish audience that God is our beloved Bridegroom, and when we go after something else, we are committing adultery (**Hosea 9:1**). This is a hard lesson - we have to make a conscious choice to find our pleasure in the things of this world or in the things of God.

I suspect that, while we all recognize this theoretically, we really struggle to apply it in practice. But listen to the scriptures: **John 2:15; Romans 8:7,8; Matthew 10:37-39**. Back in Chapter 1, James reminded us that God's word is like a mirror. When we look out our reflections in it, we only benefit if we are moved to act on what we see. So what do you see?

As we faced some pretty significant decisions last week, Susan and I spent a lot of time talking about this. We decided that the fundamental question here is this: do I really believe the Bible is true and that God's promises are directed toward me

personally? You see, when you face the decision of whether to follow God or to follow the world, it's not enough to simply have a half-hearted, emotional interest in the Bible. Note that He "jealously" desires His Spirit to dwell in us. When you accept God's "proposal," you've got to be willing to walk away from all other suitors fix your desire upon Him.

Fortunately for us, we are not solely dependent upon our personal ability to stay committed to God. If that were the case, we're all in trouble. When we humble ourselves before His throne, He brings "greater grace" into our lives. Greater than what? Greater than the enemy who desires to pull us away: **Romans 5:20!** Now that James has exposed the disease of our heart, he gives us a prescription to appropriate the cure of God's grace.

Remember that God is more interested in who we are than simply in what we do. But while the heart is exposed through our actions (Matthew 15:19), our actions also can ultimately shape our character ("Sow a thought, and you reap an act; Sow an act, and you reap a habit; Sow a habit, and you reap a character; Sow a character, and you reap a destiny." Charles Reade).

James 4:7-10 Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

As Allen would say, here's the "take away" from this passage - James gives a series of commands to follow in order to receive God's grace. As I put each one on the board, I'd like to hear your one-line statements regarding how you apply this in your life:

Submit to God - In keeping with the military metaphors above, James uses a term here that means "to line up under" (a commander). I always liked what Steve Brock shared regarding the difference between commitment and surrender. When we commit to someone, we bring something to the table that the other party needs, but when we surrender to someone, we fall helplessly into their hands and are fully at their disposal. Perhaps the biggest time of "dishonesty" during each church service comes at the end when we all stand and sing these words: "All to Jesus I surrender; Humbly at His feet I bow, Worldly pleasures all forsaken; Take me, Jesus, take me now."

Resist the Devil - the opposite of submission is resistance. When we choose to line up under God, we must choose to resist His enemy, our defeated foe. Check your life: do you find yourself resisting God? Identify the areas of your life where the devil has a stronghold and resist him - he will flee (**Hebrews 2:14,15**).

Draw near to God - The Christian life is not about slavery; it's about pursuing an intimate, loving relationship with our gracious Father. Make it a priority to know Him, seek Him, love Him (**Psalm 63:1-3**).

Cleanse your hands - Like an Old Testament priest approaching God, we must cleanse the outside of our bodies from actions that distance us from our Holy God (**Exodus 30:19-21**).

Purify your hearts - Remember that the outward actions flow from the condition of our hearts. Check your inner thoughts, motives, and desires and ask God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within.

Turn laughter into mourning - Misery, mourning and weeping will be the result when we are truly broken over our sin. According to MacArthur, the word laughter is "used only here in the New Testament and signifies the flippant laughter of those foolishly indulging in worldly pleasures." Sinclair Ferguson likens this process to that of the withdrawals through which a drug addict goes as he abandons his habit. This part of the text reminds us of the beatitudes in which Jesus proclaims blessing upon those who mourn over their sin (**Matthew 5:3,4**).

Humble yourselves - Like Isaiah, who thought he was pretty good until in the presence of God (**Isaiah 6:5**), we need to get a clear perspective of who we are in relation to who God is. When we really recognize that our greatest achievement and most brilliant moment is but a speck compared to God's power and wisdom (time, space, dimensionality, purpose, etc.), we can begin to really receive His grace (verse 6).

(If you'd like to see some additional study material on the second half of James 4, check out the Men's Bible Study notes for the lesson entitled "Faith and Planning.")