8-4-24

James 4:1-10 (3)

The Holy Spirit, through James, is writing to the brand new Jewish Christian churches; and to us. This letter has, of course, applied to all the church bodies that have existed throughout the last 2000 years. It’s important to see that satan has been attacking the church of Christ since the beginning; and, as Ecclesiastes says, “There is nothing new under the sun.” He works through people, even Christians, using our fallen nature, to damage Jesus’ church. While he certainly fails in the end, he causes a lot of damage and heartache along the way. We must be on guard against him.

Problems arise in the church congregation that manifest as fighting and quarreling. The lusts we have in our hearts and the envy we have when we don’t get what we want lead to discontent and anger. It’s difficult to foster a loving Christian environment when these things are prevalent. James points to our motivations being wrong and our motivation is something we always need to look at. Because of our fallen human nature, selfish motivation is usually lurking somewhere. And that is why we need the covering of Christ’s righteousness for our works to be acceptable to God.

James points out that while these are the symptoms, the root problem is trying to be friends with the world. We simply can’t do that. We can enjoy things in life; we can appreciate the beauty of God’s creation; but we must always understand that the prince of this world is opposed to God. The things the world accepts and desires, the things it holds in high regard, contradict the word of God more strenuously each and every day. To be friends with the world is to commit adultery in our relationship with Jesus; it is to be guilty of idolatry.

God wants His people to be devoted to Him and to no one else. He has given us life and He wants to provide us with eternal life. James is writing to Christians, so each one has been sealed with the indwelling Holy Spirit. Each has become a temple of the Holy Spirit. And God doesn’t want His temple to be defiled. When we turn to the things of the world, we defile God’s holy temple.

But, God has the solution; because He is God. As it tells us in verse 6, “*He gives the greater grace*.” Grace is undeserved favor. When Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross, we didn’t deserve that. When God called us to Himself through Jesus, giving us a chance for eternal life, we didn’t deserve that. And once we have accepted Christ and then turn away from Him in sin, we don’t deserve to be brought back into fellowship with Him; but He brings us back anyway.

James turns to the book of Proverbs and quotes chapter 3 and verse 34: *“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”* All the grace we need; all the unmerited favor we can use, is right there and available from God. He is happy to give it to us. But we have to turn to Him for it; we have to become humble. That’s not easy for us.

Humility is coming to God and admitting that we have sinned, admitting that we desperately need His help, that we can’t accomplish anything worth while on our own. Humility is submitting our will to His, it is following His commands. Humility is loving your neighbor, counting others as more worthy than yourself, not always demanding your own way. As Jesus tried again and again to teach His followers; we are to be servants of others.

God is pleased with a humble heart. He will be generous with His wisdom and pour out grace upon grace. He will keep the humble from being ensnared by the world.

At the same time we must heed the warning in the first part of that verse, *“God is opposed to the proud.”* Notice that it doesn’t say God ignores the proud or just leaves them to their own devices; God actively opposes the proud. He will cause things to work against them. We must ask ourselves, “Do I want the almighty God of the universe to oppose me?” The Bible is clear that God is not impressed with pride and arrogance.

Just one example is in Psalm 75 and keep in mind that the “horn” is a symbol of one’s strength and power:

*“I said to the boastful, ‘Do not boast,’  
And to the wicked, ‘Do not lift up the horn;  
Do not lift up your horn on high,  
Do not speak with insolent pride.’”*

The Psalm ends with:

*And all the horns of the wicked He will cut off,  
But the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.*

Now certainly, those who are proud and boastful and never accept Jesus for salvation will be dealt with harshly by God. But James is writing here to Christians. These Christians have fallen into the trap of pride and if they don’t knock it off, God will oppose them.

Give glory to God, when God opposes His children it is to bring them back from their sin and into a right relationship with Himself and the rest of God’s children. In other words, a Christian’s pride will bring about discipline from their loving Father. Still, we are much better off not getting into that situation. And God will not hold back what needs to be done; if the problem spreads through the church, He will remove its candlestick. None of this means loss of salvation for a true Christian; but it means loss of fellowship with God in this life and loss of reward in the next.

James is now coming to the solution to the whole problem of pride and envy and lust and quarreling in the church: repentance. Verse 7 builds a bridge between the problem of pride and the solution of repentance. Unfortunately, verse 7 is one of those verses that is usually misquoted. This is what we often hear: resist the devil and he will flee from you. I can assure you, if you resist the devil, you will fail. He is far stronger than you. He is not to be taken lightly any more than you would take a roaring lion lightly that you were standing face to face with.

Be sure to get the full verse: *Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* We cannot resist the devil in our own strength; we must have Christ. Submitting to God means to obey Him, accepting His full authority over our lives. The first part of that obedience is to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. Without this step, everything else is futile. Notice that word “Lord”. To have a Lord is to have someone that you are fully committed to; someone who rules over you. As an aside, bear in mind that if Jesus is not your Lord, then satan is.

So, we must submit to God, accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, obey His commands which include loving others as He loved us, and in His strength we will be able to resist satan. Keep in mind that satan will not stay away. We must daily put on the armor of God and be armed with the sword of the Spirit. We must always be ready to resist the devil’s temptations in the strength of Christ. The devil will constantly tempt all of us to be prideful, envious, and to demand our own way. Be firm in your submissiveness to Christ.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, once Jesus had been baptized by John and went through the temptation in the wilderness, He began to preach. And He preached, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* Repent. And as the Bible lets us know, repentance isn’t a one and done deal. Repentance is ongoing because we continue to sin. While a Christian should not be living in sin, we still commit sins daily. We need to repent daily.

James tells us to “*Draw near to God*.” We can’t draw near to God if we have sin. The unbeliever needs to repent and turn to Jesus for salvation. The Christian needs to repent in order to maintain fellowship with God in Christ. This is partly what Jesus was showing when He washed the feet of the disciples at the last supper. He told them that one who has had a bath only needs to wash their feet. That would be from the road dust while walking around.

The picture there is that we are cleansed by the blood of Christ. Our sins are all forgiven once we accept Him and His work on the cross. We are clean. But even as Christians, we sin; we get our feet dirty. A guest would not walk into a host’s house with dirty feet; he would wash them first. We wash our feet by repentance before we come into the presence of Christ. Sin after truly accepting Jesus as Saviour does not affect our salvation; but it does affect our communion with Him and our eternal reward.

That sin can also have an effect on the church; on the body of Christ. And James cuts loose once again to get the attention of those he is writing to; which includes us. The situation in the church was not good; there was quarreling and infighting. Members were operating out of envy and pride. They were destroying the church. The solution was to repent. And keep in mind that repentance is more than just being sorry; it is a complete about-face in behaviour and in thought.

“*Cleanse your hands, you sinners*” is a call to repent over actions. Doing things that might impede what someone else is doing for the church. Things said to cut down another or to cause others to be against them. James reminds everybody that they are sinners; and that applies to us too.

“*Purify your hearts, you double-minded*” is a call to repent over thoughts and motives. Clear back in chapter 1, James warned against being double-minded. To be double-minded is inherently to be unstable. The double-minded in this case is the one who is trying to be a follower of Christ and at the same time seek after the things of the world. It’s pretty obvious that you can’t do that; Christ’s Kingdom and the world are diametrically opposed.

And as Jesus told us, “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other*.” If you try to serve Jesus and the world, the world will win. You will love the world and be devoted to it. You will end up hating and despising Jesus. The reason is that serving the world is spiritual adultery. It is idolatry; and God does not tolerate idolatry. By seeking the world, you will have already broken your relationship with God. The world is what you will have left.

Verse 9 is harsh: *Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.* But it gets your attention. And James is not overstating anything. This is exactly what needs to be done. At the same time, take it in context. James is not saying that the Christian life is to be one of sorrow and gloominess. We are not to be constantly miserable and sad. There are many Christians that walk around with their lower lip stuck out. But this is wrong. How many times does the Bible call us to joy? We are to live in love; and love is not mournful and miserable.

So, what is the context? Repentance. These churches are on the verge of destruction. They have allowed the world into the church. They are to the point of murder. They have become divided; entirely devoid of unity in Christ. They are adulteresses; they are idolaters. If they continue, Jesus will remove their candlestick.

These churches need a time of concentrated repentance. Yes, they need to howl and mourn. They need to be miserable as they allow themselves to realize what they have done to their gentle Saviour. They have sinned greatly. Their feet are not just dusty, they are covered in mud and filth. A simple foot rinsing will not do; they need a good scrubbing.

Don’t mistake this for some kind of penance. Their repentance does not remove their sin; only the blood of Christ does that. What it does is restore their relationship with God; and it resets their lives and hearts. A true repentance will allow the Holy Spirit to work to purify the heart and hands. It makes us once more a profitable servant of our Lord.

I pray that this church will never get to this point. And it won’t if each of us is willing to ask the Lord to search our hearts and show us any hidden sin. Ask Him to open our eyes to any sin we have blinded ourselves to. And when he shows us each as individuals, we need to take it upon ourselves to repent in obedience. As the puritans used to say, “Keep short accounts with sin.” Don’t let a sin go unrepented of. It will only multiply and cause a greater ripple effect in the church.

Now, I skipped some of the precious good news that is back in verse 8: *Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.* Just like the father of the prodigal son ran to meet him when he returned in repentance, so God will come to you. God will bring you back into fellowship with Himself; and there will be no condemnation, no tongue-lashing, He will not be begrudging. God will be genuinely joyous to have you return. No matter how many times you wander, when you return in repentance, He will take you back.

Prayer

Merciful Father, we pray for this Your church, in the name of Your beloved Son, Jesus; our Lord and Saviour. You have brought each of us here as members of the body of Christ. You have blessed each of us with physical and spiritual gifts to be used for this body. Help us Lord, to be content with what You have given us.

You are wise and You don’t make mistakes, so You have given each of us the perfect gifts. May Your Holy Spirit guide us so that we don’t envy another’s gift; help us to trust that You have blessed us perfectly. Protect us, individually and as Your church, from the wiles of satan; we cannot stand against him without You; but in Christ we are more than conquerors.

When we stray, please be quick to call us back. Give us a spirit of repentance and may we use it often. Bless this church; bless us with discernment, with a steadfastness in resisting evil, bless us in a strong desire for unity in Christ. Bless us Lord in loving each other, with wisdom from above and the longsuffering of Jesus.

We pray these things in the precious name of Jesus

Amen