

All About... Love and War

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[0 : 00] November the 30th, 2022, so just some 10 months ago or so, some technology was unleashed in the world that would change the world forever, and definitely change students' lives forever.

University students, you know what that technology was? ChatGPT, that's right, okay? No longer will university students think for themselves, but that's another story.

ChatGPT, is there anything that it cannot answer, anything it doesn't know? Any question you throw at it, it seems to know and spew out an answer within three seconds, right?

And yet, despite artificial intelligence, there's some questions of the human heart that are deserving of more than just an artificial intelligence answer.

More, they deserve more than just a passing comment or reflection by AI. Questions such as, what is the meaning and the purpose of life? Where do I find hope?

[1 : 07] How can I be free from the fears that grip my heart? What's wrong with the world? These are real questions that deserve more than just an AI answer.

Well, we as a church are working through the book of James, and James is the younger brother of Jesus, and the author of the letter that we've been studying the last few weeks.

And James asks us one such question like this. It's a question that ChatGPT certainly has an answer to, but it deserves more than just an AI answer. It's a question that challenges and provokes and confronts.

It's a question which, possibly now more than ever in the history of the world, deserves more than just a passing reflection. What is this question that James asks us?

Well, let's listen to the reading of God's Word as James asks this question and then helps us answer it. So, Soda, can I invite you to come and read James chapter 4 for us.

[2 : 07] Thank you. Thanks, Kev. Good morning, church. The scripture reading today is in James chapter 4. You can find the scripture on the screen or your own Bible or follow along on your bulletin.

James chapter 4, starting in verse 1, we read. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not these, that your passions are at war within you?

You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet 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 wrongly to spend it on your passions. You adultery people. You adultery 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. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the scripture says he yearns jealousy over the spirits that he has made to dwell in us?

[3 : 17] But he gives us more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, 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 wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the law and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters.

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 judge. He who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? This is the word of God.

[4 : 20] Thank you, Soda. Hey, let me pray for us and then let's dive in. Heavenly Father, as we come to your word this morning, we want to hear you speak to us.

God, James raises this pertinent question that actually affects all of us and is so real to all of us. And we want to hear your wisdom, God. We want to know what you have to say. So God, won't you speak to us?

Won't you, by your spirit, come and take the words of your scripture and write them on our heart, Lord? Help us to see our own hearts and our own lives and help us to respond to you. I pray this in your wonderful and gracious name.

Amen. I meant to say it earlier. If you have your Bible, open it up to James 4 and keep it open.

We're going to look at a lot of the scripture. If you don't, in the bulletin, you would have seen there's a kind of piece of paper you can pull out.

Have that in front of you. We're going to work through it. I'd love for you to watch where we're going as we look at the scripture. So let me ask you this question. When was the last time you were involved in an argument, a disagreement, a conflict with somebody?

[5 : 27] You don't need to raise your hand, but I wonder if some of us might have been in the last hour or two, right? On the way to church or something like that. But maybe a conflict with a colleague or a friend, with a family member.

Maybe the neighbor across the hallway or the management company of your apartment block. The truth is we live in a world that is not immune from conflict, full of conflict.

Whether it's geopolitical, Russia invading Ukraine. Whether it's social, one ethnic group or group of people against another in society. Or whether it's more commonly interpersonal, one person against some other.

Conflict is an all too common part of our lives and our story and the world in which we live. And unfortunately, it doesn't end when you step into church. The conflict that we know and see and experience out there all too often spills into the church as well.

This is obviously what's going on in the church where James is writing. James is writing to a bunch of people who were part of his church, then dispersed. And he's now concerned because he's hearing reports that there's conflict in the church.

[6 : 41] And so he writes and he asks him this question. What's causing this quarrel and the fights that are going on amongst you? It's a question, as we said, that is worthy of more than just a passing reflection.

Friends, what causes the fights and the quarrels and the conflict in our own lives? In this passage, James is going to say four things. And he's going to help us to understand the nature of conflict and then how to resolve it.

The nature of conflict and how to resolve it. So four things. The first thing is this. What causes conflict in our lives? Look at what James says here. Well, firstly, actually, think about a recent conflict you've had.

What would you say is the cause of that conflict? Now, there might have been a bunch of superficial things. So there was power dynamics. There was ego at play.

There was maybe misunderstanding, some miscommunication, maybe a lack of empathy. Somebody have different values, different understanding of what should or shouldn't happen. At first glance, it seems the answer to that question is quite straightforward, right?

[7 : 46] It's my irritating family member. It's my immature colleague. It's that person across the hallway that plays music at 2 a.m. in the morning. The problem is them, right?

If they would just sort themselves out, peace would reign. They are the problem. But look at what the scripture says here. Now, James tells us that behind all our interpersonal conflict is the problem of self.

Self. Self-centeredness. Self-righteousness. Sometimes maybe just one party, but often both parties. This longing to put myself first.

Look at what he says there. He says, what causes these quarrels and fights amongst you? Is it not this? Your passions or your desires are at war within you. You desire something, but you cannot have it.

So you murder. You covet something. In other words, you intensely long for something, but it isn't yours. You cannot obtain it. So you fight and quarrel with each other.

[8 : 50] James says that almost behind almost all of our conflict is this insatiable desire for me to get what I want. Another word for that is entitlement.

It's my self-righteousness. My self-protection. My self-promotion. There's unquenchable longing in my heart to put myself first. And if you think about it, that's so true, isn't it?

Isn't that true for many of our relationships? Think about, again, a recent conflict. What was going on underneath the surface? Was it that somebody snubbed you? Somebody didn't honor you?

Somebody took something that you thought you were entitled to or belonged to you? And how did we feel? Yes, frustration. Yes, disappointment. That's fine. But was there more to it than that?

What caused the anger? The words that came out of our mouth? James' point is that at the heart of conflict, it's not just disappointment and frustration, but entitlement.

[9 : 48] You desire, but you do not have, so you murder. I don't think he literally means in the church they were murdering each other. That wouldn't be a very good church. Okay? Sorry.

How's that? Church membership goes down from 150 to 100 because of a lot of funerals in church. Okay, that's not what he means. He's using the word murder the way Jesus used the word murder, which is this hatred in our hearts.

He says you covet and you cannot obtain, so you fight and you quarrel. As we so often have said, the problem is not just out there, the problem is in here. Something inside of me. And then look what he says.

He says you have, you do not have because you do not ask. In other words, when there's this longing in your heart, rather than coming to God and saying, God, I'm really trusting you for that promotion.

Lord, I'm really trusting you for this relationship to work out. Rather than coming to God in prayer, what do we do? We clamor and we fight. We think it's a zero-sum game. Either I get ahead or they get ahead and I get left behind.

[10 : 54] And so I've got to climb on top of those people to make sure I'm at the front of the pile. Have you ever seen something where there's a free giveaway? You know, maybe food or candy or some voucher?

What happens, right? Get out my way. I need that thing. Rather than somebody coming and saying, hey, can I have one of those, please? Climbing on top of each other, making sure you get to the front.

James says the reason we don't pray about these things is because our heart feels like I must have this. Oh, but sometimes we do pray about it, right? Look what he says in verse 3.

Even our prayers are infected with self-centeredness. Look at verse 3. You do ask sometimes, but you do not receive. Why? Because you ask wrongly simply to spend it on your own passions.

Even our prayers are sometimes saying, God, I must have this thing. Please give it to me. Friends, does this ring true of you? Does this sound familiar?

[11 : 53] I must confess, this is all too familiar in my own life, my own heart. Almost all my conflict is because there's something inside of me that's been, I want to get ahead.

Now, look at verse 11 and 12. We won't read it, but James gives us one more warning here. He says, verse 11 and 12, he says, The temptation is to think, yeah, that's right.

Actually, selfishness is at the problem of all conflict. I wish my sister was here to hear the sermon, right? She really needs to hear it. James tells us that when we go around pointing the finger at everybody else and thinking they are the problem, what we do is we exclude ourselves from the community of sinners and we sit above everybody else in judgment.

But when we sit above everybody else, what are we doing? We're actually playing God. No, James says, why don't we bring ourselves into the community and say, God, this is true of me.

So what's the cause of conflict? James says under conflict is this self-centeredness, this preoccupation with self. Okay, but what's the cause of our self-centeredness?

[13 : 04] Well, glad you asked. Last week, Neil showed us that our tongues, what we do with our tongues reveals what's going on in our hearts. Our tongues are the symptom of a deeper reality.

James does the same thing here. Remember, Jesus says out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Now, just by the way, these days, Jesus would have said out of the abundance of the heart, the fingers tweet, right?

What you type on WhatsApp messages or that nasty email to that person or what you put in social media, it's a reflection of our hearts, right? James does the same thing here.

He says, what is the root behind conflict? It's self-centeredness. But what's the root behind self-centeredness? Actually, James says it is a spiritual problem.

Look at what he says in verse 4. You adulterous people. Now, throughout the letter, James has been very gentle and wonderful, right? My beloved brothers and sisters.

[14:05] Here, James kind of gets in our face. What's he saying? You adulterous people. Well, the literal word there is actually female.

He actually says, you adulterousers in the Greek language here. You unfaithful wives is what he's saying. Many years ago, people thought the problem that was going on in the church is the women in the church couldn't control their passions.

And so that's why he says in verse 1, what's causing conflict amongst you? Your passions are at war amongst you. And many years ago, people thought it was the women that were the problem. If only they could look after themselves, things would be fine.

Well, that's not what's going on in James. James is not a misogynist. He's not against women. But, again, that's not what's going on. What's James saying here? James is saying that underneath our moral problems is actually a spiritual problem.

Underneath our self-centeredness is a spiritual problem. And the breakdown in our relationships with one another horizontally is because there's first a breakdown in our relationships spiritually, vertically, with God.

[15:10] James is using familiar language in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God's people were often referred to as the bride of God or God's wife. So in Isaiah 54, he says, God's people are pictured as God's bride, his wife, his chosen one that he's entered into covenant community relationship with.

And so in the Old Testament, you often hear this refrain, I will be your God, you will be my people. It's kind of like on a wedding day when you stand at the altar and you say, I now forsake all others. And with all that I am and all that I have, I give myself to you. God's people were meant to forsake all other gods, all other lovers, all other things that they hope and trust in and be devoted to God himself.

Friends, if you're a Christian this morning, when you became a Christian, you said, God, you are my one true delight. You are my highest treasure. I now forsake all others and I serve you and love you supremely.

James is showing us here that when self-centeredness grips our hearts, when there's something that we lock onto and say, I must have that thing, when we're even willing to fight others, climb over others, push others aside, James shows us it's not just that we're being selfish, it's that there's some treasure, there's some God, there's some idol that has stolen the affections of our hearts.

[16:40] There's something that in that moment, something or someone that has become more important to us, more precious to us than even God himself. And so this thing becomes the highest priority, the God that we push God aside and say, I must have that thing, I must have that promotion, I must have that honor, I must get that bonus, I must get that esteem.

And God, even if I have to push you aside or climb over other people, that becomes my highest treasure. You see what he's saying? When James says you're adulterous people, he's saying something has become more precious to you, more lovely, you've fallen in love with something else more than Jesus Christ.

And so our horizontal problems emerge because actually there's a problem in our relationship with God. Does that make sense? Look what he says in verse 4, he continues, he says, Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Whoever wishes to be a friend with the world actually makes himself an enemy of God. Now, James is not saying that, okay, Christians should retreat into their holy little hubbles and bubbles and not engage with the world.

No, we love the world, we love Hong Kong, we want to engage with the city. But think about what is a friend? A real friend, not a Facebook friend. What is a real friend? A friend is somebody that you have not just shared interest with, okay, you like tennis, I like tennis.

[18:01] It's somebody that you have shared values, shared principles, maybe shared goals or aspirations. It's somebody that you can rely on.

And you know that they committed to you and you committed to them. James is saying that when we take on the values and the principles of our culture more than God, when that becomes more

important to us, more valuable to us, more wonderful than us, actually we've pushed God aside. And what happens? We end up climbing over and causing conflict and pain in our relationships. James tells us that when self-centeredness grips our hearts, when we're fighting for ourselves to get our own way, refusing to forgive others, when we're demanding to be treated away, honored a certain way, it's a sign that something has stolen the affections of our hearts.

Something has become more precious to us than even God. Okay, so do you follow the flow of thought here? What causes conflict? Self-centeredness. What causes self-centeredness?

Something has stolen our hearts, become more precious to us than even Jesus. Now, how do you feel about this? When I think about this, I have two responses.

[19 : 11] My first response is, it's true. How does James, this guy who lived 2,000 years ago, how does he know my heart so well? I mean, he's amazing, right?

When I think about this, I think James is absolutely right. He's like a master physician that has peered into my heart and he knows exactly what's going on. Friends, when I think of the conflict, when I think of my angry words, my nasty emails, my sarcastic responses, my lack of empathy towards other people, lack of understanding, what's going on in my heart?

95% of the time, there's some self-centeredness, some self-righteousness, some self-importance that I'm holding onto that I don't want to let go. James is absolutely reading my life.

But the other thing I think is, he's absolutely right because nine times out of ten, that happens when my relationship with God is somewhat fuzzy, when it's mediocre, when my time in God's word has been dry.

When my relationship with God is not vivid and passionate and alive, what happens? I become more self-important. And then my relationships feel the impact of it.

[20 : 22] So I think James is absolutely right. But the other thing I feel is this. I feel a sense of despair, if I'm honest. Because the roots and the tentacles of self-centeredness go so deep into my heart.

It's like, how do I even root them out? They're so deep. How do I change? God, how am I going to change and become less self-righteous, less self-centered? Where is there hope for somebody like me?

Where do we find the catalyst for change? I don't know if you know Paul's words in Romans chapter 7. I resonate with this so much. Paul writes to him and says, I have the desire to do what's right, but I don't seem to have the ability to carry it out.

For I do not do the good that I want to do, but the evil that I don't want to do, it seems to keep on happening in my life. When I want to do what's right and good and honest, all evil is right there close by.

Oh, I resonate with that. So where do we find the power or the catalyst to change? You know, most religions, and even many Christians will tell you, enroll in this course.

[21 : 30] Do this program. Do these five steps to change. But James tells us something different. Before James tells us to do anything, he tells us firstly who God is and what God has done.

He's going to tell us to do some stuff, but firstly he tells us what God has done. And what has God done? Well, look at verse 6. He gives more grace.

He gives more grace. Thirdly, the catalyst for change. James has been talking about the fact that the reason these Christians in this church are at each other, and there's conflict, and they're fighting, and they're not able to forgive one another.

The reason that is because actually they're in a dark place. But rather than saying, come on, Christians, pull yourself together, sort yourselves out, do better, rather than telling them to do better, what does he say?

He washes them with who God is, and he says, this God in heaven gives more grace. In the Bible, grace is not just forgiveness of sin or pardon for wrongdoing.

[22 : 42] Grace is the way that God relates to the undeserving in such a way that it changes the relational dynamic. Okay? God's grace in Christ is not only forgiveness for sin, it's a relational dynamic that transforms our hearts and draws us into relationship with God.

Okay? Does that make sense? I think that that makes sense when you think of relationships. So think of the scenario. I don't know if you've ever had this. Let's say you make some epic mistake. Okay? You mess up badly, and there's serious consequences for it. Maybe you say something stupid, and you hurt someone, and the relationship is now fractured. You make a mistake at work,

and you cost the company a lot of money or maybe a client.

You do something, and now there's serious consequences. And you've got to face your boss or your friend or your family member and be held accountable. And you're worried and you're anxious because this person is going to tear into you.

And so with trepidation, you face your boss or your friend or your family member, and you're expecting them to tear into you and tell you what a lazy person you are and what a scoundrel you are and how could you do this.

[23 : 56] And instead, they treat you with undeserved grace and kindness. Okay? Have you ever experienced that? And they're not soft. They're not wishy-washy. They hold you accountable, but they don't give you what you deserve.

They treat you with kindness, and they say, it's okay. We'll get through it together. I'm on your side. And you expect to get fired, and rather they say, it's okay. We'll work through this.

Don't worry. Let's learn from this. What happens with that relationship? How do you relate to that person? Don't you love that person and respect them even more?

Don't you want to throw your arms around them and say, I love you. You're amazing. That's what grace does. Grace transforms the relationship and draws us into the person.

In the gospel, when we see our depth of despair and the depth of our sin because of our rebellion against God, and when we see how God responds to us in grace by going to the cross for us and taking our sin upon himself and saying, yes, you're a sinner, but it's okay.

[25 : 06] We're going to get through this together. God's grace doesn't just forgive us. It transforms us, and it transforms our hearts, and it transforms our relationship with him. Think of the story in the Bible of Zacchaeus, right?

Remember Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus is the scoundrel, right? He's a thieving, greedy tax collector. He's breaking relationships. He's turning his back on his own people, stealing from the Israelites so that he can enrich himself.

A bunch of guys are going off to a wedding. Okay? This is Zacchaeus, this thieving, conniving, greedy guy. And one day he encounters Jesus. And what happens?

His whole world changes. What are his next lines? God, 50% of all that I have I want to give to the poor. And if I've taken anything from anyone, I'll pay them back four times what I've taken.

Grace changes people. Well, think of in Acts chapter 11. There's this amazing line. It says, when Barnabas came to Antioch, he saw the grace of God, and he encouraged them to remain faithful to the Lord.

[26 : 12] How do you see the grace of God? I mean, do you walk into church and say, there's the grace, and there's the grace, and there's the grace? How do you see the grace of God? You see it in the transformed lives, how God has changed people.

This person used to be so self-centered, and now they're not. This person used to live for themselves, and now they're living for others. Or think of Paul's words to Titus. He says, the grace of God appeared, offering salvation to all people, teaching us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions.

And now to live self-controlled, upright, godly lives. God's grace doesn't just forgive us, it changes us. I think the greatest example of this in modern history, John Newton, right?

John Newton was this captain of a slave ship. He was engaged in the African slave trade, going to Africa, taking people, like packing them on the ships.

Many of them died, didn't care, taking them to England so that they could be shipped off to America. Many of them died on his ships. When he was too old to be a captain of the slave ships, he then invested in the slave industry, made money from it.

[27 : 19] One day he encounters the kindness of God and the grace of God, and his whole world changes. He becomes a leading voice to end slavery in the British Empire. And of course you know how the story ends.

He writes that amazing hymn, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.

It was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed. Friends, grace doesn't just forgive sinners like us, it changes us.

And it changes when we see what God's grace does to us, it changes our relationship with God, and it humbles our proud hearts, but that then changes the way we relate to others.

Grace changes people. Grace isn't just a concept or an idea, it's a relational dynamic between a living God and living people that changes our hearts.

[28 : 23] Christ's grace is dealing with people not as we deserve, but as we don't deserve. And that's so powerful, it won't leave you the same. It can't. But God's grace changes people.

Friends, God's purpose for humanity is that we live in deep, secure, loving relationship with Him. And out of that relationship, we overflow into love for others.

And yet, because of our rebellion against God, we've pushed God aside, we've forsaken Him, and we've gone after other lovers, primarily ourself. And this relationship is fractured, and now this relationship is fractured as well.

But in the gospel, Jesus Christ comes to people like us, people like you and people like me, people like John Newton, people like Zacchaeus, people like the Apostle Paul, people like tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners.

Jesus comes to us and treats us not as we deserve, and He gives more grace. God's grace. As the Apostle Paul said in Romans chapter 5, where sin abounds, God's grace super abounds all the more.

[29 : 28] Friends, God's standards is high, but oh, His grace is higher. He gives more grace. The catalyst for change.

How do we change? You don't just hear the pastor saying, be a better person, be a better Christian, stop acting like that. You encounter the grace and the kindness of God. James has got one last thing to say to us.

The question is this, how do we take hold of this grace? How do we actually access it? What a tragic thing to come to church and hear, grace changes you. Okay, go home. And not actually know, how do we access this grace?

James wants us to know how to access it. And so he tells us the last thing, the condition for grace. Okay? The cause for conflict, the cause of selfishness, the catalyst for change.

Fourthly, the condition or the criteria for grace. How do we obtain this grace? Who are the recipients of this grace? Well, it can't be the deserving or those that have got it all together, because that goes against the very nature of grace itself, right?

[30 : 29] Grace is for the undeserving. So who accesses this grace? Look at what he says. But God gives more grace, verse 6. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

So what is the one condition? The one criteria? Humble yourself enough to admit that you need this grace. It's the one thing. It's the only condition.

God's grace is for everybody and anybody on one condition? That you see that you need it. Look at how he says this. God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

Verse 7. Friends, if these words, sound harsh or offensive, it's because James wants us to feel the seriousness of what he's saying.

He wants us to feel the despair that our only hope is in Christ and Christ alone. And so in this section, James gives us 10 commands. Humble yourselves. Draw near to God.

[32 : 00] Wash your hands. Purify your hearts. Draw near to him. Resist the evil one. But all of this is saying one thing. Let God be your God.

Don't resist him. Don't fight him. Don't push him off for another day. Don't say, yeah, I'll get to that next week. I'm just looking after my own interests for now, but I'll get to God.

No, no, friends. Let God be your God. Draw near to him. Let him be your God. Relinquish your own self-sovereignty. And let him be your king and your ruler.

Friends, God's transforming grace is available to all people. Whether you think you deserve it or not, none are too far gone. None are too far undeserving. Available to all who admit they need it.

God's calling is high. His grace is higher still. So what about you? Where are your relationships like at the moment? What's causing conflict?

[33 : 02] Agony. Despair. James reminds us, it's not just the circumstances of our lives. The economy, pressure at work, not enough sleep. James says there's something going on in our hearts.

But the reason for that is actually we've lost sight of God. We've forgotten who he is. But even though that's the case, God gives more grace. And he moves towards us when we were moving away from him.

It's now he calls us to do one thing. To draw near to him. To humble ourselves. And to receive the grace that we so desperately need. He gives more grace.

So friends, why don't you come to him? Why don't you come to him today and surrender? Why don't you bow down before him? Why don't you admit that you need him? And you need his grace? He'll change your heart.

He'll change your relationship with him. But he'll also change your relationship with others. Let's pray together. Oh, heavenly father, we come before you now.

[34 : 02] And we confess and admit, God, it is so true. We need you. God, the state of our relationships.

James is right. It's a reflection of the state of our hearts. And the state of our hearts, God, is a reflection of our relationship with you. God, I pray for each one of us, Lord.

I pray that you will help us to see our hearts. But God, also you'll help us to see your grace. Jesus, when we were lost, you moved towards us. You left the throne room of heaven.

And came to die on a cross to reconcile us, to pour grace into our lives. God, won't your grace draw us in and change us?

Won't you humble us, God? God, won't you rid us of the self-sufficiency in our hearts? And help us to see how wonderful and beautiful and glorious you really are.

[34 : 58] Christ, I pray, help us. In your great and gracious name. Amen. Amen. Amen.