

“*AUTHENTIC: Friend or Foe?*”

James 3:13-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 14, 2017

OK, quick show of hands, how many of you have ever been in an argument? Not many. Good. How many of you are seated *next* to someone who has gotten in an argument? Now how many of you just decided to have an argument later today? When we get into a fight one of the things we want to do is blame. We want to declare whose fault it is. And it's never *our* fault. It's always someone else's fault.

Think about that last argument you had. What started it? Chances are you each wanted your own way about something. Those competing desires caused conflict, which sometimes can get heated. We learned last week about the two kinds of wisdom – worldly wisdom or conventional wisdom and godly wisdom. James says that worldly wisdom tells us to get all we can however we can. Success is the goal and it's measured in dollars and stuff. Godly wisdom, in contrast, sacrifices to serve other people without expecting recognition.

This morning James continues looking at these two ways to live. He begins by pointing out the main problem of the selfish worldly system – conflict. “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” Then he answers his own question by saying that it's selfish desires that cause the fighting. “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Scholars have pointed out that most of human history can be summarized as conflicts resulting from selfish desires. Wars break out or people are exploited because of a desire for power or money or natural resources. Sadly, much of the history in the Bible is also a record of selfish desires and jealous envy, beginning with Adam and Eve.

James says twice that the problem is our “passions.” The word he uses translates literally as *hedonism*, which is “the pursuit of pleasure or sensual self-indulgence.” That seems like a fitting word to describe the age we're living in. Society tells us “if you want it you should have

it. You deserve it.” And we believe it. Even Christians. That's why James is so bold here. He really wants to get our attention. Notice that he says that our passions, our hedonism, is “at war *within* you.” The problem is not primarily our conflict with other people. It begins inside each one of us. The Apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans 7: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”

Every Christian faces this internal struggle. We have desires. We want the recognition we think we deserve. We want a nicer car or a bigger house or a unique experience. Eventually, when we make personal pleasure or happiness our aim in life our own wants will come in conflict with someone else's wants. Sometimes it gets so bad we're willing to murder. Some people really do murder to get what they want. But we need to also remember that Jesus equated being angry with another believer or calling a fellow Christian a fool was as bad as murder. We call that character assassination.

One of the results of this life of self-seeking indulgence is that we separate ourselves from God. It begins with a breakdown of your prayer life. James says in verse 2, “you do not have, because you do not ask.” Despite what you might see on TV, this is not proof of the “name-it-and-claim-it theology.” This verse doesn't mean you can have a new car or big screen TV just because you pray for it. Actually it means the exact opposite. When we interpret the Bible and apply it to our lives, we must always look at a passage in its context. The context here is the very next verse, verse 3: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” What James is saying is that when you are focused on yourself, you will not pray as often (if at all). And if you happen to be praying for your selfish desires, James says you shouldn't expect those prayers to be answered.

He goes so far as to say that claiming to be Christian while trying to live by the world's

system of envy and ambition is the same as adultery. "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world (meaning the world's way of doing things) makes himself an enemy of God." What a terrifying thing to think about being an enemy of God.

There's one more point I want to make before we get to the remedy to this problem. James is writing to churches. He was originally addressing conflicts within the church that were the result of pride and greed. If you've ever been through a church fight or split, and I know some of you have, you know that it can be one of the most painful experiences of your life. Because a church is like a family and the fights can be painful. Friends, let me just say that there is no place in Christ's church for pride or greed or lust or envy or arrogance. They will destroy the fellowship of a church. Even the desire for the benefits of Christian community can be a problem. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his wonderful little book, *Life Together*, describes true Christian community. He says that if we love *our* dream of Christian community more than the Christian community or fellowship itself, we will ultimately destroy that community.

That brings us to the solution, which is found in verse 6: "But God gives more grace." No matter how bad our sin, God gives more grace. No matter how messed up we are, God gives more grace. James is not primarily talking about saving grace here. He's talking about the grace that God gives us to get through whatever situation we find ourselves in. He's talking about the grace to put aside our selfish desires and sacrifice for someone else.

Here James quotes Proverbs 3, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And that's the key. Humility is the antidote to self and the key to humility is submitting yourself to God. It seems to me that the word "submit" is kind of a dirty word in our day while pride is a virtue. We watch the news and see people violently protesting because they're offended by something that was said by someone they've never met. The word "submit"

literally means to "arrange under." The idea is that we willingly live and act under God's rules, with the wisdom that comes from above. Sometimes it will seem very strange because it's not the wisdom of the world. Submitting means we live according to God's plan anyway.

Submitting to God ultimately means exchanging your pride for humility. What does it mean, though, that God opposes the proud? Think of God's grace like a fast moving river and you are in a canoe or row boat. The humble person submits to the flow of the river and paddles with the current to move downstream. The proud person, however, does not submit but instead tries to paddle upriver. Chances are good that no matter how hard you paddle you won't make much progress because the current is too strong. For the proud person, God's grace is not beneficial. It actually works against him because he's trying to go the opposite direction. But when you humble yourself before God, recognizing your true standing before Him and seeking forgiveness, cleansing your hands (which is your actions) and purifying your heart, James says God will exalt you. You will get to your destination, which is friendship with God for eternity.

Let me finish by sharing with you a short poem by an unknown author called "The Difference:"

I got up early one morning
And rushed right into the day;
I had so much to accomplish
That I didn't have time to pray.
Problems just tumbled about me,
And heavier came each task.
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered.
He answered, "You didn't ask."
I wanted to see joy and beauty,
But the day toiled on, grey and bleak;
I wondered why God didn't show me.
He said, "But you didn't seek."
I tried to come into God's presence;
I used all my keys at the lock.
God gently and lovingly chided,

"My child, you didn't knock."

I woke up early this morning, and
Paused before entering the day;
I had so much to accomplish
That I had to take time to pray.

James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee
from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw

near to you." Today and every day you get to
choose which way you will go – closer to God
or further away from Him. If you choose to
draw near to Him, you will find him drawing
nearer to you. In fact, as you begin to move
toward God you will find He's been there all
along.

Amen.