

The Heart of the Matter

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, please do sit down and please turn in your Bibles to James chapter 3 and we're going to read our scripture reading for this evening.
- We're looking at the first part of chapter 4 today, but I'm going to begin reading from chapter 3 and verse 13. That's on page 1012 in the Blue Bibles.
- Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.
- This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but it's earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.
- But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.
- [1 : 2 3] And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?
- You desire and don't have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.
- 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.
- Or do you suppose it's to no purpose that the scripture says he yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us? But he gives more grace.
- Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God.
- [2 : 3 5] Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hearts, you sinners, and purify your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-pullers.
- Be well-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.
- Well, this is the word of the Lord. We praise him for it. We'll be looking at this passage in a little more detail in a few minutes' time. My father and his friend caught a rabbit.
- I say my father and his friend. My father was present when the rabbit was caught. But being of biggish, second row forward sort of build, and not all that quick in his feet, it was not him, but his friend who caught the rabbit.
- They were camping. I think they were about student age. They came across a rabbit. And extraordinarily, my father's friend managed to creep up on the rabbit without disturbing it.

[3 : 48] I don't know if the rabbit was particularly deaf or not very well. And when he was close enough, he leapt upon it, and amazingly, having made a great grab, managed to catch the rabbit.

And being brought up in an age when Boy Scouts were taught to do such things, they killed it and had it for tea. Every time I see a rabbit, I think to myself, I wonder if, and then I think, no, impossible.

I have never got anywhere near a rabbit, certainly not near enough to be within striking distance. The truth is that if you want to catch a rabbit that way, you have to creep up on it very carefully indeed.

Some things need to be crept up on very carefully. And if you don't creep up on them carefully, you can't catch them. Well, welcome to James chapter 4.

For three chapters now, James has been creeping up carefully on a problem in the lives of his readers. And now he is ready to pounce.

[4 : 59] But before we get to the pounce, the grab, let me remind you of how the creeping up has worked. Just turn back to chapter 1, would you? We're going to take a quick tour through James.

James talks about trials and temptations.

He talks about riches and poverty. Those are the things everyone has to deal with in life. He talks about God's generosity halfway through the chapter. He talks about the life that God has given to us through the gospel, verse 18.

He talks about the crown of life that God will award in the future to those who stay faithful to him, verse 12. He does talk about the possibility of responding badly to trials, but he doesn't enlarge on that greatly.

He also talks, verse 20 and 21, about things like anger and filthiness and wickedness, but not at any length.

[6 : 07] He talks, verse 26, about the possibility of deceiving yourself, but he doesn't go into any detail about what that might be like. It's all rather general in chapter 1.

It could be addressed to, well, nearly anyone. In chapter 2, he moves in a little closer. He gives a couple of hypothetical examples of rather unpleasant behavior in church.

Speaking nicely to the rich and nastily to the poor, or seeing a brother in need but not doing anything to meet the need. Two examples. They're introduced as though they're hypothetical.

Suppose this should happen one Sunday, he says. Or suppose that should happen next week. Although they do have a rather uncomfortable edge to them. 2.5, it's getting a bit personal.

You have dishonored the ones God has chosen. 2.18, show me your faith without your works there. We get a bit more personal in chapter 2.

[7 : 11] In chapter 3, he edges closer still. Why do so many of you want to be teachers, he says? You don't really want to do that, do you?

Think about your speech for a moment. Think about what comes out of your mouth. Blessing God and cursing people. Chapter 3, verse 9. Do you really want to rush into being a teacher with a mouth like that?

No, 3.15, that isn't the healthy teaching we need. That's just worldly ambition dressed up in spiritual clothes. Now, in chapter 3, many negative behaviors are described.

Destructive speech, cursing human beings, jealousy and ambition, boastfulness, disorder, and every vile practice, as James puts it. He has been gently moving in on his prey, creeping up on this kind of destructive behavior.

And at the start of chapter 4, he's near enough to jump right on top of it. 4.1, what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

[8 : 21] Now we are getting to the point. Quarrels, fights, hostility towards one another. This is why James has written this letter. This is the filthiness and wickedness mentioned oh so briefly in chapter 1.

Now it's expanded on. He has his prey cornered and is moving in for the kill. Before we get to the pounce, let's just think about that approach for a moment.

Why on earth is he so slow to come to the point? Some of the behaviors mentioned in this letter are really gross behaviors. Why is he so slow to come to the point?

Why not just get them out on the table straight away? Be direct. Why not just move straight from chapter 1, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 1? It could go like this. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion.

Greetings. What is this I hear about fighting and quarreling among you? What on earth do you think you're doing? Could start like that. Why doesn't he? Well, because some sorts of behavior are very resistant to correction.

[9 : 37] What is the first thing we tend to do when accused of doing something wrong? Well, we can deny it. Don't be ridiculous. What you've heard isn't the truth at all.

We can justify our behavior. Yes, I have said things that I'd rather not have said. But honestly, if you knew what was going on here, you'd think quite differently. Or we can take offense.

What right have you got to just come barging in from over there into a situation you don't know and tell us what to do? Shows how much you care. Why does James take so long to get to the point?

Because he does not want them to be able to brush off or ignore what he has to say. And so he spends a great deal of time sidling up to the problem.

Gently introducing the big issues. Showing them that he does care about the people he's writing to. But showing them that he really does understand what's going on.

[10 : 40] That he really does know what's being said and done. And that he can't just be ignored. It's carefully done. In chapter 1, the arm is pally round the shoulder.

In chapter 4, it has established a firm grip round the neck. And the fist is about to go in. Now let me say what this carefulness shows is that he really does want these people to be won back to what is good and right.

When we hear of bad behavior among believers, it is so easy just to express disdain from a distance. To want to look superior. To gossip.

Have you heard what's going on over there? It's shocking, isn't it? James is not interested in that. His main concern is that these people should be won back.

He is not interested in righteous denunciation of wrongdoing. He is not interested in scoring a few points to make himself look superior. In fact, that's the kind of thing his hearers are all too interested in.

[11 : 49] Look right on to the end of the letter, would you? The very last two verses. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

That is what James wants. That is what James wants. People to be brought back. That's why he's written the letter. Even people like these whose behavior is tiresome, irritating, malicious, unkind.

There is a great loving concern behind this method, this creeping up on the issue. Love for unlovely people.

That loving concern is demonstrated in the method. It's a subtle approach. But when he gets to the point, chapter four, there is admirable directness. Correctness. Can I just say there are some issues that if you go straight at them, you probably won't get the desired result.

Because we human beings are very adept at wriggling out of the grip, finding ways of avoiding the truth, of dodging the punch which is coming at us.

[13 : 11] I take it then that the things James says here in 4, 1 to 10 are things that he knows his hearers would far rather avoid than listen to.

That's why he's taken the time to get to them. Three things that Christians behaving badly would far rather avoid.

Let's look at them. Number one. They would far rather avoid the real cause of their behavior for one. What causes quarrels?

And what causes fights among you? Is it not this that your passions are at war within you? You desire and don't have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. Now, the word passions appears in verse 1 and again in verse 3.

[14 : 15] It is more literally pleasures. It is more literally pleasures. It's the word that we get our word hedonism from. These people are pleasure seekers. Your pleasures are at war among you, he says.

These people desire things. What sort of pleasures do they have in mind? Well, at first sight, the following verses, 2 and 3, might suggest that we're talking about material possessions.

Verse 2. They desire things they don't have. They covet things they can't get. And there's no doubt that in this letter, there is a real desire for riches going on.

We've seen a number of examples of that as we've worked our way through. But in the context here, I think there may be something else in view. Chapter 3 started off, not many of you should become teachers.

James discourages them from taking that role on. And it seems that there's an issue here with people wanting leadership positions in the Christian community.

[15 : 23] Look at 3.14. There are people who are jealous and ambitious. They want to be teachers. And so it may well be that 4.2, the desire, the covetousness, the pleasures that these people want, is the pleasure of being recognized as being a person of status within the Christian community.

Now, of course, the truth is that people who covet status covet other things as well. There's a very close link between material possessions and power, a very close link.

Do people desire power and influence in order to gain material possessions? Or do people desire material possessions in order to gain power and influence?

The truth is that whichever one you have, the other one tends to come along with it. If you're a rich person, you tend to have power and influence.

If you're a powerful person, you tend to acquire riches. In this letter, the two cannot be separated from one another. There's a longing for stuff and a longing for status that seem to be going together.

[16 : 45] Now, remember, this is in church. The longing for stuff and for status often competes in church with that which is genuinely spiritual.

John Sun was a very famous evangelist in China in the 1920s to 40s. He's been known as China's Wesley.

He was a brilliant student, a brilliant chemist. He gained a PhD in a very short time in chemistry in the USA. On his way home on the boat to China, he wrestled over whether to be an academic with all his great credentials or whether to be a gospel preacher.

His biographer writes this.

This was later framed and hung in his old home.

[18 : 29] The Reverend W.E. Cole saw it there in about 1938. Dr. Sung noticed Mr. Cole looking at it one day and said, things like that are useless. They mean nothing to me.

The symbols of status and achievement he knew could bring him great rewards, huge material reward, as well as a massive position.

He is a great example of consciously relegating to a lesser position. All those things that the world craves.

James' readers, on the other hand, are not doing that. And that is what is causing the fights and the squabbles. Verse 2. You desire and do not have, so you murder.

You covet and cannot detain, so you fight and quarrel. I don't think he means by this that they're actually killing one another physically yet. What he's doing, I think, is looking at the attitude beneath the bad behavior.

[19 : 35] There's genuine malice going on here. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Well, it's because you want things and position.

How easy it would be to answer that question rather differently. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Well, you could say, the reason we fought is because that person did something really thoughtless to me.

Or the reason I got so angry is that person behaved in a terribly aggressive manner. Or the reason I can't bear to talk to that person is because they were unkind to a member of my family. James says, no, that isn't the reason.

The reason you're behaving as you are is because other people are getting in the way of your desire for stuff and for status. Either you view them as competing with you for what you want.

Or they've disrespected you, put you down. Or they've snatched the limelight. Or they've taken something away from you which you deeply desire. Edward was teaching us this morning about identity.

[20 : 43] And that if we find our identity within ourselves, we end up alone. Well, this is a good example of it. This kind of ugly behavior is what happens if we're in the identity building business.

Stuff and status makes us feel special. But it also makes us fight. The cause of our bad behavior is within us. It might well be provoked by things from outside.

Other people can behave badly too. But the truth is that if I am behaving disgracefully towards another human being, it is I that am behaving disgracefully towards another human being.

No matter what they might have done. It's an uncomfortable truth. And we are often desperate to avoid it. Second thing they'd rather avoid.

They'd rather avoid the dreadful consequences of their behavior. Verse 4. You adulterous people. Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

[21 : 53] Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it's to no purpose that the scripture says? He yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us.

The dreadful consequence of this behavior is that these people have made themselves into God's enemies.

Adulteresses, literally, says James. And he uses this feminine form, I think, in order to call to mind the behavior of the people of Israel in the Old Testament.

And so often in the Old Testament story, the relationship between God and his people is portrayed in the language of marriage. God is the bridegroom. His people are the bride. And Israel turned out to be a faithless bride.

Adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? You're doing what they did, says James. You're longing for stuff and for status.

[22 : 53] That's jumping into bed with the world. It's not being friends with God at all. And God is not friends with that behavior either. As the whole of the Bible story so eloquently testifies.

Verse 5. Do you suppose it's to no purpose that the scripture says? He yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us. Now, let me say, you can search your Bible from front to back and not find those words quoted anywhere.

This is not a quotation from one place. What he's saying is, the Bible says everywhere, does it not? That God, our creator and rescuer, wants us for himself.

Do you think the Bible is joking, says James, when it says in so many ways, in so many places, that God wants the whole of us, not just a bit of us?

Verse 5 is a little bit difficult to translate. I mention this because there may be different translations here in the room. If you've got the ESV, the ESV has, he yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us.

[24 : 09] In which case, the spirit would be our human spirit. The spirit that God has given us. He wants us for himself. If you have the NIV in front of you, as some may, it reads like this.

Do you think it says without reason that the spirit he calls to live in us envies intensely? In which case, the spirit in question would be the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that God has placed in us longs for us to be holy gods.

It's impossible to decide on precisely the right word order for the translation. But whichever of these, James is asking his readers a very important question. Guys, are you in any doubt that the scripture says that God wants and deserves to have us in our entirety for himself?

He did not make us human beings. In order for us to chase after stuff and status rather than wanting to know him.

He did not make us for that purpose. He did not rescue Israel in the Old Testament in order to have her doubt his love and chase after other sources of security.

[25 : 27] That's not why he made her a nation. He did not send his son into the world to die for sins not his own. In order for the lives of his rescued people to be characterized by mistrust in him and an ugly preoccupation with self.

That is not why he sent his son into the world. He did not pour gifts and abilities into our lives and give us all the time we have in order for us to squander those things in pursuit of things and the status they bring.

That is not what God made us for, rescued us for, gave to us all the things he's given us for. Now we naturally want to think that we can belong to God and also pursue our own personal career of self-promotion and self-establishment.

You can almost hear James' readers protesting, look, we do love God. We're not two-timing him really. James says, no, you are. I can see it from your squabbles and fights.

The only place that comes from is an intense affection for things or for position. If you didn't have that, you wouldn't be fighting.

[26 : 54] Your behavior towards one another shows your unfaithfulness. That's the second truth they'd rather avoid. That they're fighting with one another shows that they've jumped into bed with the enemy rather than being on God's side.

Here's the third thing they'd rather avoid. They'd rather avoid the radical response that God's grace demands. Now verse 6 is very comforting.

A wonderful but. But God gives greater grace. And I think the point that's being made here is that God's grace is bigger than our human unfaithfulness.

Big enough to conquer it. And let me say that is our only hope in life and in eternity. If you know anything about yourself, you will have found the last few minutes very uncomfortable indeed.

For I guess you don't have to look very far. I do not have to look very far to find within myself the seeds of precisely the sort of unfaithfulness that James is talking about.

[28 : 07] Our only hope is God's kindness, God's generosity, God's forgiveness, God's desire to have us.

And that that is more powerful than our waywardness. It's a wonderful statement, verse 6. God gives bigger grace, greater grace.

It's the great glory of the gospel message that. That fundamentally it's about God and what he does. And if he doesn't do it, everything is lost.

But he's big enough to do it. And he wants to do it. So all is not lost. He is bigger and more powerful than our waywardness. This is very comforting indeed.

It is our only hope. But notice that James does not stop with the first part of verse 6. Here he turns to scripture again, this time to a specific quotation from Proverbs 3, verse 34.

[29 : 14] Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And he applies that scripture very pointedly.

If God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble, there is only one thing to do. Stop behaving proudly and humble yourselves.

And that's precisely what he instructs them to do. God's grace demands a radical response. Humble yourselves then before God.

If God gives grace to the humble, now would be the time to climb down off your high horse and submit yourselves to him. And James unpacks that further in a series of, if you do this, this will happen responses.

Resist the devil. And he will flee from you. The activity that they've been engaged in has already been described by James, chapter 3, verse 15, as devilish activity.

[30 : 24] That boastful pursuit of power and possessions. That's devilish in its inspiration. You have to resist him, says James. In other words, you have to stop doing that.

And he will flee from you if you do. Second, draw near to God. And he will draw near to you.

What a contrast that is with verses 2 and 3. Verse 2 and 3, you do not have because you do not ask. You're not drawing near to God. When you ask God, when you do draw near to him, he doesn't answer.

He doesn't draw near to you because you're asking wrongly to spend it on your pleasures. But, says James, draw near to God humbly, having put away that devilishly inspired stuff you have been doing, and God will answer you.

He will help you in that enterprise. He will give power to your repentance. He will give the wisdom you need to turn away from wrongdoing. Next.

[31 : 31] Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Notice he doesn't say, be washed, be cleansed.

He says, wash yourselves. Clean up your act. Stop acting double. Start acting single. Stop sleeping in the world's bed. Stop longing for what the world wants, and behaving as the world behaves.

Grieve, mourn, and wail, he says. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom. Don't be happy. Isn't that an extraordinary command?

Don't be happy. Be sad. Don't hear about God's grace and smile and say, how lovely that is, how glad I am about that. Don't be trivial about what you've done.

Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. Don't be sad. It's easy to sing about grace and have no sadness at all and not turn away from anything. But it finishes off verse 10 with a great promise.

[32 : 32] Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. It started with humbling yourselves. It ends with humbling yourselves.

James here is looking down the line to the last day. God is the opponent of proud, unkind, malicious behavior.

But those who humble themselves before the Lord will in the end be lifted up. Grace is a trendy word amongst Christians.

It's a great Bible word. It's a Christian word. No doubt about that. But it's a very trendy word amongst Christians. And it is easy to believe in grace and yet not think that grace demands anything too radical.

James does not want his hearers to think that. God acts generously towards us in order that we should belong entirely to him and not for any other reason.

[33 : 38] Three things then that James knows his readers will find difficult to take on board. They'll find it difficult to take on board the real cause of their behavior.

They'll find it difficult to take on board the real consequences of their behavior. And they'll find it difficult to take on board the radical response that God wants from his grace.

And so James has to creep up on them. By the time we get to chapter 4, his arm is well around the neck. And they can't escape. Three truths that need creeping up on.

Three truths the person behaving badly towards others would far rather avoid but desperately need to hear. Now let me say a few things by way of closing.

First, can I say something to the person who knows that they are behaving badly towards their brother or sister? There may be somebody like that this evening here. These things happen to us from time to time.

[34 : 51] If we are behaving badly towards our brothers and sisters, we must realize the real cause for that behavior. Yes, circumstances may be provoking.

They may be. But when we are squabbling and fighting with our brothers and sisters, bitterly angry, speaking maliciously, vying for control, getting in a fuming rage, that shows deep down that we love what the world loves.

The things that somebody else is taking away from us. Our stuff, our status, whatever it is. That's the cause of the behavior.

We need to take on board the dreadful consequences. We've jumped into bed with the enemy. Like adulterous Israel with two-timing God made ourselves his enemies.

God is deeply opposed to that. God opposes the proud. And third, we need to hear desperately that the grace of God demands radical action.

[35 : 56] We need to humble ourselves. And that means stopping doing what we've been doing. Stopping singing happily about grace without doing anything about it.

And turn back to the Lord in real repentance. If you are in that position this evening, now is the time to do something about that.

Now is the time. If we're not in that position, we also need to hear this preventatively.

Because the time will come when we find ourselves wanting to speak maliciously about our brother or sister because of something they've done to us.

And the time will come when we'll want to think that that isn't such a big deal to do that. And we'll want to think that we can keep on doing that.

[36 : 51] And nothing bad will happen. Preventatively, we all need to hear this. It's a difficult thing to hear, isn't it? And that's why it's been crept up on carefully.

Let's pray that we might not wriggle out. Let's pray together. Why don't we just have a moment or two to respond to this passage in the quiet ourselves.

Whatever we see or one another see, God sees everything. Let's pray together.

God yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us.

And he gives greater grace. God yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us. God yearns jealously over the spirit that he's made to dwell in us. It's so difficult for us to believe deep down, Heavenly Father, that you love people like us.

[38 : 51] That you want people like us. That you want to share your love and your being with people like us.

Amen. In this Easter week, we're reminded of the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world. For a world like ours and people like us.

And no matter how hard that you love us. And no matter how hard that is to believe, we pray that you would help us to believe it from the heart.

That you want us. That you want us. That you want us for yourself. That you want us for yourself. That you want us for yourself. That you want us for yourself.

That you want us for yourself. That you want us for yourself. And we pray that you'd help us to believe and behave as though this is true.

[39 : 50] We pray especially for our relationships with one another and the rest of our human family and friends and neighbors.

We pray that we pray that we might live the life of those who've been given a status not to do with our own power or possessions.

But rather a status based on Jesus. Who he is. What he has done. The forgiveness that he has given to us.

The righteous life that he has lived. Help us to believe this from the heart. And may that overflow in the way we relate to one another and to the world outside.

Have mercy on us. If we need to repent of things that we've said and done to others. Of attitudes that we've harbored. Please help us to do that.

[40 : 50] If we think we could never fall into this kind of behavior. Please deliver us from that thought. And help us to cry out for your mercy in those times.

May we humble ourselves before you. We thank you for the promise that you will lift us up.

Hear our prayers for we ask them in Jesus name. Amen.