

Faithful Conflict

Do you remember the Peanuts cartoon character named Pigpen who was always surrounded by a cloud of dust and looked unkempt? He was a good kid, but he was marked by an obvious flaw. That's us!



Michael K. Olmsted

James is talking in this week's passage about and to "church people," sometimes referred to as "little Christs," disciples, believers, God's elect and "the church." There is a cloud that follows us around, a cloud James describes as "those conflicts and disputes among you" that "come from your cravings that are at war within you" (v. 1). This confrontational text is asking us, Do we really know the difference between the world's thinking and God's thinking?

James says our conflicts are born within our heart and translate into selfish actions, even to "murder" in some instances (v. 2). Covetousness produces "disputes and conflicts" (v. 2). He writes as though we are listening in on a conversation between a parent and complaining children: "You do not have, because you do not ask," and you don't get what you want. Why is that? "Because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures" (vv. 3-4). Here is the core of the problem in human conflicts: we struggle within ourselves with self-centered motivations and that conflict spills over into the lives of those near to us. As God's people we do not live in isolation from the world. All the conflicts, injustices and tragedies of this life impact us. Sadly, all too often we forget we are God's people, and in the grace of God, we can confront and overcome life's challenges and tragedies.

Why does James describe us as adulterers (v. 4) when we fail to live as followers of Jesus? He is most likely reaching back to Old Testament stories such as Hosea, the prophet who lived out a real-life parable (Hosea 3:1-9:1). Hosea married a woman who was unfaithful, ended up as a slave on the auction block and was bought back by the prophet as a testimony to the reach of God's love for a wayward people. What a remarkable story of loss and redemption! James' biting question is: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (v. 4). What is this enmity, this adultery? It is substituting our desire for position or possessions in the place of God's love. This warning is right on target as we read today's headlines, hear harsh political rhetoric and note the adulation heaped on those who use power and wealth for their own gratification. Success, power and money constitute the world's holy trinity. These are not necessarily evil or corrupting – until we shape them as our life and societal gods.

In the middle of so many strong words of judgment and warning, James zeroes in on our hope: "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us ... he gives all the more grace ... God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (vv. 5-6). We always have a choice between the deceiving trophies of this world and God's gracious love. The only way to get beyond the flawed promises of this world is to "submit yourselves therefore to God" (v. 7). This decision of personal faith includes: "draw near to God ... cleanse your hands ... and purify your hearts" (v. 8) This willingness to put aside worldly trophies and accept God's love moves beyond religious sentiment to practical

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Scripture: James 4:1-12

living. Note the contrast at the heart of Christian faith: 1) resist the devil and he will flee from you (v. 7), and 2) draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (v. 8).

What James teaches here is directly built on his earlier statement: "faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." (Jas.2:17) He gives us a thorough listing of ways to demonstrate faith in God:

- submit yourself to God
- resist the devil
- cleanse your hands
- purify your heart
- lament, mourn and weep (for your sins)
- humble yourselves before the Lord
- do not speak evil against one another

This considerable list turns our attention back to the beginning of the text which confronts a former life of selfishness and rejection of God's love. The standards of the world are a flawed spiritual and moral law. "There is only one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (v. 12).

Church statistics in the U.S. are not positive. Major denominations are all in decline. Church attendance is down. We are seeing Christian missionaries coming to our country. There is a collaboration between organized religion that has adopted methods, ideas, attitudes and organization from a secular model. There is also the popular idea that being a "Christian" carries with it no moral or ethical foundation. As God's church it is time for us to "turn our laughter into mourning and our joy into dejection" and "humble ourselves before the Lord." These are days of conflict for the faithful ... but if we will seek the Lord he will bless and empower us to make a difference.