

## ***A God-centered Perspective on Unity***

*James 4:1-6*

As far as I can tell, I'm the only guy in my neighborhood with a stock tank. I didn't get my stock tank so I could feed livestock (or breed mosquitos). I live "in town." I got it because I do a type of woodworking that requires wood that is still "green" - wood that hasn't dried out or been kiln dried. When I get a white oak log, I use part of it and soak the rest of it in water to keep it from drying out; that way I can use it up to a year later. In the past I've submerged a log in a friend's pond. But I decided to get a stock tank so I could have it right out back when I needed it.

Here's a PHOTO:

But I had a mysterious problem. I fill up the stock tank with water using a hose. But sometimes (not every time) I'd come back the next day to find that some of the water had drained out; sometimes only a couple inches of water had drained out, but other times the tank was half empty. I checked for leaks and didn't find any; plus, I couldn't figure out why it sometimes stayed full, and other times lost water. It was a mystery wrapped in an enigma.



Some of you have already figured out what was happening (because you're smarter than me). It turns out that when I was finished filling up the stock tank, I would sometimes leave the hose in the tank. Since the water faucet I use is one of those "frost free" water spigots that allows the water to drain out and since that spigot was lower than my stock tank, the hose acted like a siphon. If the end of the hose was submerged two inches, it siphoned off two inches of water.

The point is that the hose was inadvertently functioning as a siphon. I didn't know that's what was happening, and I didn't want it to happen. But it did. In a similar way, there are things that can inadvertently siphon off the vitality and unity of a church. We may not realize that's what happening, and we sure don't want it to happen. But it does. Instead of experiencing unity, fruitfulness, and life, a church inadvertently experiences disunity and fruitlessness, and there's anxiety in the air.

Today's passage has the potential to give us the same type of "aha moment" I had about the hose in my stock tank. James 4:1-6 gives us a perspective on unity that we might never have considered. All of us sometimes approach Scripture with "confirmation bias," looking for Scripture to confirm what we're already thinking (a.k.a. "proof texting"). But if we're teachable, Scripture often presents an entirely new way of thinking and acting that we've never considered. That may be the case for many of us in James 4:1-6.

### ***The Source of Disunity. (James 4:1-3)***

Notice in verse 1 that James uses the imagery of warfare to describe infighting in the church.

1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

Our answer to the first question is often, “Those people over there! They’re wrong. And they’re stubborn. If they would just agree with me and admit it, everything would be fine.” That may actually be the case in some situations, but that’s a rather superficial answer. James wants us to look much deeper.

He asks, “Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?” The “pleasures” James mentions could be about anything from the pleasures associated with sexual sins to materialism, revenge, anger, or slander. Of course pleasure isn’t inherently sinful; God created pleasure. The problem comes when our pleasures and desires dominate our lives and enslave us.

James says that conflict comes when our pleasures “wage war in [our] members.” “Members” is a term that the NT often uses for “members of the body.” When our pleasures/passions dominate the members of our bodies, we sin against each other with our thoughts, words, and actions. The result is “quarrels and conflicts” (which are basically synonymous terms).

There’s obviously a place for healthy disagreement among believers. Since we deal with life and death issues in the church, there will always be disagreements between sincere followers of Christ in relation to doctrine and practice. For example, over the next few weeks and months we will have to make a series of decisions about when to resume meeting in-person here at the church building; and when we do, we’ll need to decide what guidelines we will follow. As you might imagine, some are more cautious than others and some have stronger opinions than others. Disagreement on such issues is just a fact of life.

James is pointing out that such disagreements turn into open warfare when sinful pleasures dominate in our lives. Notice in verse 2 how the war **between** people is caused by the war **within** people:

2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.

The term lust simply means a “strong, intense desire.” The idea is that we sometimes want something so badly that we would do anything to have it. James is probably speaking metaphorically when he says you would even “commit murder” to obtain what you want. Jesus said that anger is basically murdering somebody in your heart. We get angry and say and do all sorts of things that injure other people.

The second and third sentences in this verse may just clear up a mystery akin to the mystery of my stock tank. James says “you are envious” (you want what somebody else has - position, influence, authority) “and cannot obtain it.” In James’ mind, you have two options at this point. One option is to ask God for what you want. You could go in Jesus’

name (you know, the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given) to the throne of grace (i.e., the presence of God Himself)!

Sadly, James says that when they lacked something they wanted, instead of asking God and receiving, James says, “you fight and quarrel.” This is so true to life, isn’t it? Instead of leaving our requests with God, we “take matters into our own hands” and fight and quarrel to get our way. Mystery solved.

James advances his argument further in verse 3 by saying:

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

James says that when you do pray, instead of praying with God’s interests in mind (1 John 5:14), you pray with a view toward your own personal pleasures and interests. In His wisdom, God doesn’t grant our requests that will only fuel our self-centeredness. We can’t always figure out why God doesn’t answer our prayers as we pray them. But **SOMETIMES** God refuses our request because our motives are wrong. Any good parents would do the same.

James is painting a picture of a church that embodies the world instead of the gospel. Worldliness involves conflict, quarreling, jealousy, bitterness, arrogance, slander, gossip, etc. Such worldliness is observable all over the world in every generation.

James’ comments about prayer suggest that you can tell a lot about a church by looking at its prayer life (or the lack thereof). Is prayer a last resort and focused on **our** desires? Or is prayer our first impulse that flows from a passion to see God’s reputation grow and swell?

Honestly, establishing a healthy culture of prayer has been one of the most challenging things we’ve ever attempted here at Faith. We want to be people who pray in secret as individuals (Matthew 6), who pray in small groups (Acts 13), and as an entire church. We want to be a praying church because praying is one of the primary ways of expressing our faith/confidence in God. People who really pray are desperate for God to do things we cannot pull off in our own strength.

This evening (Sunday evening) at 5:30 we’re going to have an Online Prayer Gathering. We did this last month, and it was fantastic. Some people like it better than the in-person prayer gatherings we’ve had in the past; you don’t have to clean up and drive to the building. You log on and join in. We’ll all gather in the same Zoom meeting; after some brief instructions, we’ll be sent out into groups of 4 or 5 people where you pray together for a few minutes for a specific topic. Tonight we’re going to pray in light of the names and attributes of God. It’s really amazing the way it works. We had 20-something people last time; I’d love to have three or four times as many people join us tonight. The details for logging in can be found in last week’s eBlast.

God-centered praying is one thing that fuels our unity. Back to James 4. . . After discussing the causes of disunity, James talks about a God-centered approach to unity.

### **A God-centered Perspective on Unity. (James 4:4-6)**

At this point in his argument James doesn't suggest "five easy steps to resolving conflict." Rather James presents a God-centered perspective on conflict, or more accurately a God-centered perspective on the source of our conflict (i.e., our misaligned desires and pleasures).

In verse 4 James introduces a very thought-provoking category: "friendship with the world."

4 You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

When James calls his readers "adulteresses," he is picking up on imagery that's common throughout the Old Testament. There we find that God is depicted as a husband and His people are depicted as an unfaithful wife. In Hosea, for example, God told the prophet to marry a prostitute as an object lesson about Israel's unfaithfulness. In this verse, James depicts the church's infighting as evidence of spiritual adultery, unfaithfulness to God.

James describes this unfaithfulness as "friendship with the world" and therefore "hostility toward God." The things that had caused disunity were characteristic of the world, instead of characteristic of children of God. The world is characterized by bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, arrogance, unbridled lusts, and a commitment to personal pleasure. By contrast, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called 'sons of God'" - bearing the family resemblance.

James reminds us that we can't have it both ways. If we're friendly with the world, we're being hostile/unfaithful to God. (See 2 Corinthians 11:1-3 for a similar challenge from Paul.)

Look at verse 5:

5 Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"?

James isn't quoting one specific Scripture here; he's probably making reference to a cluster of Scriptures such as Exodus 20:5 in the Ten Commandments in which God says that He is a "jealous God." Jealousy is normally viewed negatively in Scripture. But there are times when jealousy is fully appropriate. When you enter into the covenant of marriage, for example, you **should** be jealous if your spouse is flirting with someone else. And when we enter into the new covenant in Christ's blood, God is appropriately jealous over us. It's appropriate that He doesn't want to be one of several "gods" we

worship. No, God has put His very Spirit to dwell within all who believe; therefore He jealously desires that we be faithful to Him.

In verse 6 gives our only hope of putting away worldliness: humility that invites the grace of God.

6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

In mentioning that God gives a "greater grace," James is probably saying that God gives grace that is greater than our sin and our unfaithfulness. God's grace - his unearned, unmerited favor - is our only hope of genuine lasting unity. Paul alludes to Proverbs 3:34 when he writes that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Everything James mentioned that causes disunity fits under the umbrella of pride. If we walk in pride toward each other, God opposes us. For our own good He blocks us when we "lust and do not have, and so we murder each other (even if only in our hearts). He blocks us when we "are envious and cannot obtain, and so we fight and quarrel." He blocks us when in pride we care more about our will than His will. God is opposed to the proud.

But the good news is that God "gives grace to the humble." When we humble ourselves before each other and before Him, God lavishes us with all sorts of grace:

- \* Sometimes God will vindicate you and rescue you from others' accusations.
- \* Sometimes God gives you the grace of contentment; you honestly don't have to win every argument anymore.
- \* Sometimes God gives the grace to overlook an offense (Proverbs 19:11)

Our only hope for genuine unity is to walk in humility in a way that invites the grace of God. That's our only hope.

One thing I've noticed over the years is that almost everybody has a "church horror story." If you don't you're either really young or you haven't gone to church very much. I have church horror stories from growing up in South Mississippi and from my time here in Manhattan. If you read the New Testament you will find church horror stories. Read 1 Corinthians when you have the chance - oh my goodness: factions, doctrinal disputes, lawsuits against other church members, a guy sleeping with his step-mom (apparently nobody cared), pride over spiritual gifts, etc.

Some people get so wounded by the church that they drop out and give up. I understand it, but it grieves me. Sometimes I wonder what hope we have of not being "that church"? ***Our only hope for genuine unity is to walk in humility so that God lavishes His grace upon us.*** That's our only hope.

One more thought. . . Our goal in pursuing unity isn't merely to avoid being somebody's church horror story. The goal is to cultivate a type of supernatural unity that the world cannot ignore. This the vision from Jesus' prayer in John 17:

22 “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

Jesus prayed that we would have the same unity that He has with the Father. He prayed that we might “be perfected in unity” (have such maturity in our unity) . . . “so that the world may know that the God sent Him, and loved them. . .” In other words, our unity is supposed to lead people to faith in Jesus.

Francis Chan wrote a very convicting book entitled “Letters to the Church” in which he points out that this verse about our unity leading people to believe in Jesus just doesn’t make any sense to many of us.

*How could our unity result in the world’s belief? How could seeing us love one another make someone believe that Jesus truly came from heaven? It feels like saying two plus two equals a thousand. Just remember that Scripture is filled with impossible equations. Marching around a city seven times doesn’t seem as if it would result in its walls collapsing, but then it happened (Joshua 6). Church unity doesn’t seem as if it would result in people getting saved, but it actually did happen (Acts 2:44-47).*

*(Letters to the Church, p. 77)*

What is at stake in our unity is God’s reputation. People have a right to look at the way we treat each other and decide whether or not they believe that God sent Jesus and that He loves them. The stakes couldn’t be higher.

I hope you can join us next week because in the next passage James explains a series of choices that we need to make if we want to put away the sins that siphon off our vitality so that we can walk in humility, experience God’s grace, and therefore exhibit the type of unity that convinces others to believe in Jesus.