

James 3:13-4:10
"Friendship with the World"
18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20B)

September 22, 2024
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"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" (James 4:4).

What a fine way to begin a sermon! Do I have your attention? Today, we conclude our Epistle series on James as he – *as inspired by the Holy Spirit* – continues addressing our conduct in the church.

Today's epistle text can be seen multiple ways. It can be seen as proverbs with its various gems, reminiscent of Solomon's Book of Proverbs, or it can be understood as stern law preaching. Either way, the Holy Spirit inspires James to guide his readers in what it truly means to be Christians in a profoundly un-Christian world. Today, James calls on us to live in this world, but not be of this world.

The expression ***"You adulterous people!"*** likely caught your attention and likely for the wrong reason. Is James indicating that these people he is writing to are breaking the Sixth Commandment: *"You shall not commit adultery"*? Are his original hearers not living sexually pure and decent lives? Well, what is the context?

No! James is not accusing them of having adulterous sexual relationships. But he is still accusing them of adultery. But instead of sexual adultery, he is accusing them of spiritual adultery, that is, giving love and attention first to something other than the one true God.

You see, for God, He pictures Israel as His bride and He as Israel's husband. For God, for Israel to disobey Him is like breaking the marriage vow. It means that all sin is against love. It means that our relationship with God is not like that distant relationship of a king and a subject or a master and a slave or a boss and an employee, but our relationship with God is like the intimate relationship of husband and wife. It means that when we sin, we break God's heart, just as the heart of one partner in marriage may be broken by the desertion of the other.

Jesus says in Matthew 6: ***“No one can serve two masters”*** (Matthew 6:24). We can use the world or be used by it. We can live in the world by loving God and serving our neighbor. Or we can be used by the world as it controls and dictates our life and in doing so, we become an enemy of God.

The triune God speaks of Himself as a jealous God. He says:

- ***“You shall have no other gods before Me” ... “for I the Lord your God am a jealous God”*** (Exodus 20:3, 5).
- ***“For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”*** (Exodus 34:14).

In the Old Testament times, God often lamented the way faithless Israel despised His love and chased after the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah. Now, James’ readers were probably no longer tempted by Baal worship, but Satan still arranged that there would be plenty of new idols to take Baal’s place. So, just as the Old Testament prophets accused Israel of infidelity, James indicts the church of the “New Israel” as unfaithful to the Lord who redeemed her to be His bride.

In the Old Testament, God redeemed Israel through the exodus to be His wife, and although her promiscuity would lead to the exile as a kind of divorce, God would marry her anew. The Prophet Isaiah expresses this marriage relationship: ***“For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you”*** (Isaiah 54:6-7). Jeremiah the prophet also told of the Lord’s remembrance of their exodus nuptials: ***“I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown”*** (Jeremiah 2:2). Every Old Testament prophet considered Israel’s rebellion against God to be adultery.

Then we come to the New Testament era as Christ, the Bridegroom, purified His Church to be His virgin bride as He suffered and died for His bride. Christ cleansed His bride, the Church, through the washing of water with the Word. And this wedding will take place upon His return.

Although the Church is betrothed to Christ, our status as a pure virgin is in danger through the seduction of the serpent known as Satan and the seduction of the fallen world. Satan tempts us to disregard God’s Word. And as evil as Satan is, James is more concerned with the fallen world, which also is under Satan’s control.

Again: ***“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”*** (James 4:4).

Now, this friendship with the world doesn't mean that Christians cannot be friends with unbelievers. What “friendship with the world” really means is conforming to the fallen world. It means having misplaced trust.

Martin Luther speaks of the human heart as an “idol factory” that is ready to trust the newest god on the block. That newest idol could be money and possessions, so you feel secure. It could be your children or grandchildren. It could be your cat or dog. It could be sports. It could be an athlete, politician, or celebrity figure. Now, all those things are not evil in themselves, but how often do those things become an idol – a false god? An idol becomes an idol when those things become more important than God Himself.

Another way of looking at “friendship with the world” is living your life for the Facebook likes and shared posts. Or you live your life following the winds and ways of this fallen world. “Friendship with the world” is a life devoted to wealth and selfish ambition that has no room for God. “Worldliness” has no love for your neighbor. “Worldliness” is wisdom that is ***“earthly, unspiritual, demonic”*** (James 3:15).

The fallen world and its prince Satan are at war to wound and kill Christ's bride, the Church. The fallen world wants mass casualties. The fallen world desires that the Church prostitute herself to the world through acts of false doctrine, including redefining marriage, redefining humanity, and saying all roads lead to heaven.

Satan and his fallen world are coming after us and our sinful nature often just eats it up. There is a war going on inside us. So, what are we to do? James gives us seven healthy, humble attitudes to replace the poisonous, sinful attitudes of selfishness and pride:

- First, ***“submit yourselves therefore to God”*** by fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. We do that by acknowledging Him as first in your life and subordinating your will to His.
- Second, ***“resist the devil.”*** Armed with God's Word, you are stronger than Satan and he will flee from you.
- Third, ***“draw near to God.”*** Through the miracle of God's grace, a repentant sinner is *never* turned away.
- Fourth, ***“cleanse your hands.”*** Faith in Christ gives Christians clean hands.

- Fifth, ***“purify your hearts”*** by being single-mindedly devoted to God as our faith influences our day-to-day life.
- Sixth, ***“be wretched and mourn and weep.”*** Repentance affects the whole person, so grieving, mourning and wailing are appropriate for people who have previously found joy in sinning.
- Seventh, ***“humble yourselves before the Lord.”*** There can be no spiritual health and soundness in a person until he acknowledges sinful failures and asks God for mercy instead of demanding wages.

But no matter what, God refuses to lose us to this war going on within us. He refuses to lose you! Remember, our God is a jealous God. But He’s not like a jealous boyfriend or girlfriend, who may be someone to get away from. God is not abusive. He is not controlling. But He is jealous. But for Him, to be jealous is to say that He wants you all to Himself, and He wants no one else to have you – *no false god or false idol, no false doctrine, no false hope, or even the devil himself to have you.*

Jealousy, in most cases, means that the jealous person does harm to another, because keeping you is all for *my* benefit. But God’s jealousy is a protective jealousy. A guardian jealousy. An exclusive on loving you with a perfect love, with no exception to treating you kindly. And that’s for your benefit. This is why James, talking about God’s merciful and holy jealousy, puts it in terms of grace: ***“But He gives more grace ... God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”*** (James 4:6). We, humbled by our sins, are seen by our God who wants us only for Himself, and He, without hesitation, gives us more grace, so as to strengthen the relationship.

Our evil foes – *Satan, the fallen world, and our own sinful nature* – will certainly continue to accuse us before God, but God’s jealousy for us triumphs. Christ’s forgiveness is crucial. Each day our forgiving Lord calls us to go to those against whom we’ve sinned and to seek to be reconciled, and the devil’s chaos gives way to God’s order. Forgiveness is God’s wonderful way of neutralizing the devil’s accusatory protests against us and having him flee from you and me.

Our jealous God is greater than any sin you have committed. Jesus is proof of that! His cross is His payment for your well-deserved punishment. His empty tomb is your guarantee of eternal life. Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +