

How Life Works

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Have you ever noticed how attracted we are to things that work together? We see things synched up, we see things in harmony, we see things, maybe sometimes choreographed, but it just is a beautiful scene when individual things work together. I can remember a time of prying open the back of a wristwatch, and for the very first time seeing all the little pieces in the gears and the intricacies of all these spinning and ticking and tocking pieces in the back of a watch. I was so amazed by that and we know we're amazed by that because, probably several in this room even have watches today that are clear on the front, just so you can see the visual of all of those pieces working together to bring about a perfect time. When we hear the honking of geese, we start looking, we start pointing, you might even be inside your house and run outside, and we're driving along and you see the formation of geese and the "V" and you're just amazed. We pause long enough to just think about, "Wow, look how they are flying together. Look how they're working together." I remember that thought several years ago when our family watched the Blue Angels fly in Pensacola. You take a jet fighter that weighs thousands and thousands of pounds, flying hundreds of miles per hour, yet five of them would line up from ground perspective what looked like just a few feet apart and move beautifully together through the air with power and with harmony. Sometimes we pay for visuals like that. We go see people dance, we witness the beauty of hundreds of people all moving in the same motions. We watch the Olympics and we see synchronized swimming or the pairs ice skating. Different bodies, different people, but moving in motion together and it's beautiful. In ways, we find it therapeutic. In ways, we find it peace-giving.

Imagine relationships like that. Imagine homes that work together. Imagine couples that work together. Imagine teams that work together. Imagine churches working together. The beauty of that, the power of that, the attraction of that, where a lot of different people with a lot of different ways come together and work together. Can you imagine your family being that way today? Can you imagine your relationships being that way today? Maybe this past Christmas or the Christmas before, we received a Christmas card from a family that could be here in worship today. But this Christmas card is there and we "ooh-ed" and we "ahh-ed" over it and I laid it where Carla could see it and we talked about the pose and the scenery and what a beautiful family. And Carla's looking and all of a sudden she goes, "Wait, they have five children." And we look at that picture and we're counting, I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah." And she starts naming them, and she says, "Where's the little girl?" And we looked long enough and all of a sudden Carla's starts laughing because you realize with this perfect pose, laying over beside a tree by herself, was the little girl just in the picture like this. I thought, "That's real life

right there. That's picture day in reality right there." I mean, we've gotten past, "Everybody smile, act happy. It's Christmas time. We've got to spread cheer. Get in here."

Imagine working together. Imagine strife free life. Is that too big a promise? James, he's writing to us about the possibility of a strife free life. He's following right up with what Jesus said and did. Jesus came that we might have life. Jesus came that we might have eternal life. Jesus came that we might have what he called not only eternal life but abundant life. In John 3:16 we're told that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. And knowing that Jesus came that we might have life, James, his brother, as the first pastor with the first century believers, writes and shows that this new life in us will have an impact on life around us. New life in us will have an impact on life around us. We're calling this journey through James, How Life Works. Not just any life, but how eternal life works in everyday life. And James shows us that when eternal life is working in everyday life, we can have a strife free life. Let's look at verse one, James chapter four. It's blunt. It's clear. It might even seem a little terse at times. Let's read verse one.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions^[a] are at war within you?^[b] ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴You adulterous people!^[c] 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. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Before we go any further, can I just say to you that I find this passage of scripture incredibly hopeful. Incredibly hopeful because James, though very pointed and very blunt and specific and clear, he gives to us a picture of hope that in relationships between believers, they can operate with harmony, they can operate with peace, they can operate with fullness of abundant life. Imagine today that if you're in some relationship or you've come from some place in your everyday life where there is great strife, James is saying to us that by the grace of God, that can change. That can be different. The Prince of peace can bring peace in your home, in your relationships, in your life.

What we are dealing with today is spiritual work. What happens today in this text, even though we're told to do some things, it takes a spirit of God to bring about the fruit of these things. I

kept thinking this week where James was saying, "Be wretched and mourn and weep." I was just like, "How do I make myself weep?" How did you just, "All right, I'm going to cry now. I'm going to weep now." Is that what he means? We'll talk about that as we go along. But the picture here is that you and I, right here at the beginning, beyond sermon illustrations, beyond sermon exposition. What you and I need to do is submit our minds and our hearts right now to the spirit of God and ask him to work. Ask him to bring peace, ask him to protect us from strive, ask him to give victory for our church, for relationships, Spirit of God, do your work.

James comes and he diagnosis the trouble, and then he identifies the cause, and then he prescribes the medicine. And in about 20 minutes we're going to walk out of this room and we've got to decide, like we do every time we go to earthly doctor, we've got to decide, are we going to practice the regimen? Are we going to take the medicine? Are we going to be obedient to what the spirit of God is saying to our heart today? The first thing James does is he diagnosis the trouble. And it's in verse one, he gets right to it, he says, "what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" That was the trouble. These were believers, it's 12 to 15 years after the death of Jesus, and already James sees fit to write into their relationships. They were dispersed believers, living in different cultures, living in different countries from where they had been, and now as believers, scattered. And it's as if James is pointing out, "It's not like you're having trouble getting along with the Gentiles or having trouble getting along with the Jews who don't believe. You're fighting and quarreling among yourself as believers." The two words there in the ESV, quarrels and fights. I like the way the King James Version translates those Greek words or refers to them as, "Wars and fighting." What causes wars and fighting among you? The word quarrel there, different than the word fight there, it's the word for wars. It's a picture of an enduring and overriding mood of being at odds with someone. It's just what's present. There's this mood of war, there's this mood of opposition. There's this presence of tension that's just there all the time

And then there's fights and that's the flash points. That's when the emotions overflow, that's when it becomes words and it becomes argument and it becomes a visible strife going on in whatever relationship that we're a part of. Whatever arena we're in. James is certainly addressing here, conflict between believers, maybe in their church gatherings, maybe among their neighbors, maybe among their family members. James is really going hard at this. You bear the name of Jesus and you've been reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus, but that's not showing in the way you're living with one another. This life you have in Jesus should impact the life you have with others, and that's the trouble. I'd ask you for just a few minutes to think about this question of quarrels, fighting, opposition, lack of unity, a lack of peace, a presence of strife. Then James goes on and he identifies the cause. Where's that come from? Where's all the arguing come from? Where's all the strive come from? He asked a second question. Verse one, "Is it not this? That your passions are at war within you." Your passions, your pleasures, the things you love are battling on the inside. And so James hits quick, he's saying these quarrels

and fighting's, this warfare that's going on among you as believers didn't start out here. It's because of something that's happening in here.

We need to pause long enough right there to think about how we approach arguments, how we approach strife. And so many times in our flesh and our pride, our first reaction is to go to that person about how wrong they are, how much they've messed up, how ridiculous they're being about a situation, how ignorant they are being about a situation. And we point at that person in our conflict about what's wrong with them. James comes back and he says, "Is it not this?" And he gives three reasons, three identifiers of the cause of the conflict. And this first one is internal passions. "Is it not this, that your passions are at war," Where? Within you. Within you. There is a battle for the throne of our life. There's a battle for our affection. There's a battle every day for what you and I will love. Who will be on the throne? Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." And that battle rages over and over and over again for who we will seek first. That's why in our purpose statement, we have it right there written in that we want to be wholehearted followers of Jesus Christ. We want to be all in, wholehearted, seek him first above all things. That's the drive. That's the goal.

But there's a war. and the war is with these internal loves. I say to you that an argument on the outside, according to James, is evidence of the war on the inside. And when we're talking to one another, we're in some kind of disagreement with one another and we're trying to figure out what in the world is going on. According to James, It's something that started inside long before it became something outside. So what's fighting there? Flesh, desires, covetousness. We feel like we're not getting what we want, and he goes right there. He says, "You desire and do not have." It's a lack of contentment, that you desire and do not have, so what do you do? You murder. It's possible that James had gotten word that within some location where the believers had scattered, someone had killed someone over some disagreement. It's also very possible that this is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus had taught that if you hate your brother, it's like committing murder. And he says you desire and you don't have so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so what do we do? We fight. We quarrel.

"You do not have because you do not ask." That's the second identifier there, that the cause is not only internal passions, but secondly, inappropriate prayer. You see that in our homes, in our relationships, in our churches, in our fellowship with other believers. One of the reasons that there can be conflict and strife is because of inappropriate prayer. And he goes from our passions that battle on the inside, things that we are trying to figure out, what we love most on the inside, straight to prayer. It says, "You do not have because you do not ask." And it brings to mind that oftentimes in conflict, in battles that we have over wars that are being waged on the inside, that the last thing, if we ever get to it, that we do is praying about it. There's conflict, there's strife, there's pain, there's division, and when we check just a little bit and take inventory, we realize, "I haven't prayed about it." Think this morning, that conflict that you're in, that argument that you're in, that war that's going on between you and that other person, have

you prayed about it? Have you taken it before the Lord and asked him to do his work to provide what you need, not just what you want, to work out in this situation? He says, "You have not because you ask not." There's been a lack of prayer many times in arguments. You look around, you're trying to work through some situation, if someone there would just say, "I got to pray. We got to pray. We've got to take this to the Lord."

I remember a story from years ago of a conversation going on in a group of leaders in a church where they were divided over particular issue. They were going back and forth about one issue and one of the guys in the room brought up a Bible verse and said, "Well God's word says this." And one of the other guys in the room said, "Well, don't bring the Bible into it." It can get like that in our conflict where we're like, we're not even willing to bring God into it. And James is saying, "Start here, and maybe there's strife there because you've not asked God to work and bring peace there." But secondly, you may be praying, you say, "Well I prayed about it." He says, "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly." There's a wrong way to pray. There's a wrong way to go to God for something.

He said, "You ask wrongly to spend it on your passions." There's no doubt that James is speaking here to some kind of financial situation, some kind of money situation, where he is saying, "You're in conflict over something. You're wanting and you're arguing over this. You've gone to God and asked him, but he's not answering because the only thing you're asking him for is something that would fund your passions that are different than Him." And he says you want God to work in this lustful prayer and give you what you're asking for, because you're going to take that, if he gives it to you in his grace, and use it for more of your affection, of your pleasure, of your passion that has pushed him way back. James, if he's not been blunt already, he really just goes all in. Verse four, "You adulterous people." You adulterous people. "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" That means hostility. You're showing hostility toward God. "Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." These were believers, followers of Jesus Christ, first century believers, and James rebukes them. He tells them, "You've developed a friendship with a world." It's almost like he could see you've gotten a different culture. You've gotten in a different system. You've gotten, maybe away from Jerusalem where you are all linked together, and you've gotten out here and you've allowed the world to become your friend. You're going after things first instead of going after God first. And the picture here is of spiritual adultery.

That New Testament picture develops over time where we began to see that believers were the bride of Christ and Jesus the groom. And when we go after passions and affections that pushes Jesus back, what we're doing is committing spiritual adultery. And he said, "Even in your prayer life, if you're going to ask God to give you things that would fund your spiritual adultery, how can you expect him to bring peace to that situation?" Paul David Tripp gives the illustration of how strange it would be for us, for a person in the family, a spouse in the family, to go to the other spouse to ask them for money only to in turn take that money and use it to be unfaithful

to them in some way. That would seem so wicked, wouldn't it? And James is saying that it's like that. When you pray and you're seeking things for your passion, for your pleasures and God is pushed back, you're asking him to provide for you to love someone else. James says that's the cause of conflict. That's the cause of quarrels and warfare.

So I think we can identify three causes here. It's internal passions, it's inappropriate prayer, and it's friendship with the world. The friendship with the world is a hard one. It's like, how do we live in this world? How do we not let the world get in us when we're in it? How do we not befriend the world? We are not talking about everybody packing up and moving to 10 acres and living right there where no others can get to us. This isn't a call to the monastery life. He's talking about a relationship that develops to where the world has sway over us. There's a diagnostic question I'd give you that would be helpful, I think, in this case, to figure out friendship with the world. What's happening with us when it comes to befriending the world would be this: In your relationship with Christ, are you growing less comfortable or more comfortable in this world's system. In your relationship with Christ, as a believer in Christ, are you growing more comfortable or less comfortable in this world's system? Friends, if we're living in this world and we find ourselves day by day by day growing more and more comfortable, more and more satisfied, more and more content with the world system, when we just like it. We're in trouble, because friends, listen, this is not our home.

It's not.

As we grow in Christ, and we walk with Christ, and we get to know Christ, and we think about heaven, the picture James gives us here is that we actually become more and more dissatisfied, more and more uncomfortable in this world system. Not that we're pulling ourselves out, but just living in it, we find ourselves thinking that it just fits less and less.

Finally, the remedy. It's not easy, but it's clear. Verse five, we find out that God is jealous for us. Think about this. Verse six, he says he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Just before that, verse five, "Do you suppose it is no purpose that the scripture says he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made dwell in us." So when we come to the remedy for our strife, the first place of position for us is to realize our God is jealous for our devotion. God is jealous for you. He wants you to love him more than leisure. He wants you to love him more than pleasure. He wants you to love him more than this world's system. He wants you to love him more than houses or jewels or treasurer, power or authority in this world. He's jealous for your spirit. And then, verse six, he gives grace for our good. He gives grace. He's jealous for us. That's the position, that's the father that we're working with. And then verse seven, James just begins to fire it off as one commentator says, with the terseness of telegram. He just makes these statements. Here's what you've got to do. Submit to God. Number one: verse seven, submit to God. Listen, we're talking about the hope of a strife free life. Submit to God, that means to place or align ourselves under his

authority. Just right here in this room. Don't wait until later. Right now you could say, "Father, I want to align myself under your authority. You're Lord, you're in charge. You're sovereign. I'm not. I submit to you."

Resist the devil. The Greek syntax there has a sense of urgent action. He saying that in the devil's attack, when the temptation that comes, like he talked about in chapter one, stand against the enemy. Stand against the opposition. Stand against the devil. Resist the devil, and here's the promise, he will flee. Crawford Lauritz said a few days ago on a little sermon clip I was watching, he says, "I've discovered that in life, it's not that we stumble into sin too many times. We walk right into it. Eyes wide open." James is saying, "No, resist the devil." Draw near to God. Does that take a lot of the explanation? What does it mean? What does it look like to get close to someone? You do those things with God. You get where he's being taught. You get in his word. You get where you can hear him. You spend time with him, then cleanse your hands. That's outward confession of the sin that the spirit of God convicts you of. Cleanse. Stop doing those things. Outward cleansing. Purify your hearts. That's inward cleansing. He says, "Purify your hearts, double-minded." It's a word that literally meant, "two-souled". He says, "Purify your hearts, you two-souled people." Figure out who you love. Go with God, be single-hearted. And then a description of, we'll just call it, lamenting your ways. And he shows that repentance involves emotions. Pain, sorrow, be wretched, mourn, weep. "Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." We have to come before the Lord and lament our sinfulness.

Finally, verse 10, humble yourselves. Humble yourselves. I call your attention to the three words after humble yourselves, "Before the Lord." Before the Lord. If you and I want to live a strife free life, it will be us over and over and over and over again, coming before the Lord. Get in front of him. Matt Chandler says that no one ever goes to Mount Rushmore and stands in front of it and flexes their biceps and says, "Hey, take a picture. Look how strong I am." You see what happens when we get before God? We don't stand in front of him and flex. When we get in front of God, we humble ourselves, and it puts him on the throne.

Father, would you help us today to submit to God? Resist the devil. Lament our ways. To come before you in humility. And Lord, thank you that you're a God who is jealous for us, and that you're a God that gives grace and I pray you bring great hope, healing. You'd give us the joy of experiencing life working together. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.