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SPIRITUAL ADULTERY AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS

James 4:4-6

By

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James Lesson 15

Spiritual Adultery and Resolving Conflicts James 4:4-6

It's obvious that James never had the opportunity to attend the Robert Schuller Institute for Church Growth. If he had gone there, he never would have written the shocking words of our text. He would have learned that the church needs to be seeker-sensitive. If you want to attract seekers, you never should say anything from the pulpit that might offend or confront the seeker about his sin! If you want to attract customers—excuse me—seekers, you've got to give them what they want. When a seeker comes to church, he wants to hear upbeat stories that encourage him and build his self-esteem. The last thing he wants is to be called a spiritual adulteress! Clearly, James could have used a seminar on how to build a seeker church!

In the context, James is confronting the problem of conflicts in the church. Rather than the idyllic picture of the early church that we often have, the churches to which James wrote were at war. There was jealousy and selfish ambition (3:14, 16). Members were angrily quarreling with each other. As James points out (4:1-3), the source of their conflicts was selfishness. So he devotes 4:1-12 to the theme of resolving conflicts by repenting of selfishness and humbling yourself before God. There are four sections:

1. To resolve conflicts, judge your selfish motives (4:1-3).
2. To resolve conflicts, turn from all spiritual adultery and humbly entreat God's grace (4:4-6).
3. To resolve conflicts, submit to God, resist the devil, and repent of all your sins (4:7-10).
4. To resolve conflicts, stop judging others and submit to God's Word (4:11-12).

Today, we come to 4:4-6, which may be summarized:

To resolve conflicts, turn from all spiritual adultery
and humbly entreat God's grace.

What is the connection between spiritual adultery and resolving conflicts? If you go to a Christian psychologist and complain

about a relational conflict, he will give you some techniques to help resolve the problems: Use a win-win approach. Negotiate an acceptable compromise. Listen without judging the other person. Use “I feel” statements rather than accusations.

All of these relational principles (which you could find, by the way, in *Reader's Digest* or “Dear Abby”) may put a Band-Aid on interpersonal conflicts, but they represent the best of man’s wisdom. They overlook the root problem in relational conflicts, which is the entrenched selfishness of the combatants. And you can’t deal with selfishness unless you truly enthrone Christ as Lord. In other words, all relational conflicts are rooted in a spiritual problem: the combatants are not in a right relationship with the living God.

In 4:1-3, James confronted selfishness as the source of conflict. Now he ties in selfishness with worldliness and shows that at the root of it all is spiritual adultery—unfaithfulness to God:

1. To resolve conflicts, turn from all spiritual adultery (4:4-5).

First James shows that...

- A. Spiritual adultery consists in friendship with the world (4:4).

After repeatedly addressing his readers as “my brethren,” “you adulteresses” is a bit of a shock! (The KJV reading, “You adulterers and adulteresses” is based on weak manuscript evidence.) He is referring to spiritual adultery, not to marital unfaithfulness. Verse 4 brings out four truths:

- (1) Believers are married to Jesus Christ.

James is picking up a familiar theme from the Old Testament, that God is the husband and His people are His wife. For example, Isaiah 54:5 states, “For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts; ...” In many passages, God accuses Israel, sometimes in graphic language, of spiritual adultery because of their unfaithfulness to His covenant love (see Isa. 1:21; 50:1; 57:3; Jer. 3:1-20; 13:27; Ezek. 16:35-39; 23:1-49).

Perhaps the most moving text of all is when God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer (Hosea 1-3). After bearing him children, she was unfaithful to him. In spite of

her adultery, Hosea continued to support her, but she thought that it came from her lovers (Hos. 2:5, 8)! Eventually, Gomer ended up on the slave market, totally degraded. God commanded Hosea to go and buy back his errant wife out of slavery and restore her as his wife! What a picture of God's love for His wayward people!

The New Testament picks up the theme of God as our husband when Paul says that the marriage relationship is an earthly picture of Christ and the church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19, 21). He is our Bridegroom and we are His bride. This means that when we turn away from Christ and embrace the world, we are sinning against His great love that bought us out of the slave market of sin.

That's why the apostle John contrasts the love of the world with the love of God: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:15-16). If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, you belong to His covenant people. We are His bride. You must turn from this evil world and be faithful to Him.

- (2) Just as marital adultery is a serious sin, even *more so* spiritual adultery is serious sin.

Shockingly, James calls his readers "adulteresses"! He means to jar them from their spiritual complacency. He wants them to drop their excuses and squarely face the magnitude of their sin. They were playing politics in the church, attacking one another and rallying others to their cause. They were squabbling in their homes, but shrugging it off as just normal behavior. James says, "Yes, it's normal in the world, but you're *not of* the world! You're the bride of Christ, and to engage in selfish conflict is to commit spiritual adultery. Face the seriousness of your sin!"

Sometimes we're like the proverbial mule that needs to get hit with a two-by-four to get its attention. We mistakenly think that love is always nice and mild-mannered. Jesus was not nice, but He was speaking in love, when He said to Peter (Matt. 16:23), "Get behind Me, Satan!" He was speaking in love when He said repeatedly to the Jewish religious leaders, "Woe to you, scribes and Phari-

sees, hypocrites" (Matt. 23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25). He spoke lovingly when He said to them, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" (Matt. 23:33). And, James speaks with love for these believers when he says, "You adulteresses!" Love is not always nice!

I'm not suggesting that we go around lashing out at others with prophetic vehemence! We need to balance this with Paul's admonition to be kind, gentle, and patient, even when people oppose us (2 Tim. 2:24-26). But even Paul (and the verse before specifically says that he was filled with the Holy Spirit!) said to Elymas the magician (Acts 13:10), "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?" Then he struck him with blindness!

Sometimes love must speak boldly to confront the person who is destroying himself and others by his sin. Before you speak, check your motives, to make sure that you're seeking God's glory and kingdom alone. Make sure that your flesh does not delight in blasting the other person. But if your heart is right and Christ, not self, is on the throne, there are times that love may need to shock the other person out of his sinful ways. We need the boldness to show those we love that spiritual adultery is a serious sin.

On several occasions, God has used someone's boldness to get me out of a spiritual rut. When I was in college, I had just begun to grow in my commitment to Christ when I was challenged to attend a ten-day Campus Crusade Leadership Training Institute. Since I was working my way through college and this would mean giving up two weeks of summer employment, I began to make excuses for why I couldn't go. The man who was urging me to go looked me in the eye and said, "If you're committed to Christ, you need to quit making excuses! Go to the conference and trust God for the money!" Pow! Right between the eyes! I went to the conference and God used it greatly in my life.

So James is saying that if you know Christ, you are married to Him. Just as marital adultery is serious sin, even more so spiritual adultery is serious sin.

- (3) Friendship with the world and friendship with God are mutually exclusive.

James draws the line in the sand (4:4): "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." Take your pick: Are you married to God or to the world? Can you imagine a couple that gets married, and a month later the husband tells his wife, "I'm going out tonight with my old girlfriend"? "I love you, but I want to keep in touch with her, too!" Needless to say, that marriage is in big trouble! When you get married, you vow to forsake all others and be devoted exclusively to your spouse.

In the same way, when you come to Christ as Savior and Lord, you say goodbye to the world. It used to be your companion and friend. You spent many hours running with it. But you can't bring it into your marriage to Jesus Christ. He brooks no rivals. You are either friends with the world and an enemy of God, or friends with God and an enemy of the world. And how frightening to make yourself the *enemy* of the living God!

But, you may wonder, what does it mean to be a friend of the world?

- (4) Friendship with the world means living to please yourself apart from God rather than living to find pleasure in God Himself.

When I think of "worldliness," I think of a place like Las Vegas. It epitomizes the world and all that it has to offer. It has big-name entertainers who croon to you or tell raunchy jokes while you drink yourself drunk. It has raw sex shows, or if that is too bold for you, it offers more socially acceptable sexy dancers and stage shows. On the street, vacationing women dress in seductive clothes that they would never dare to wear back home. There is gambling in every hotel and restaurant. Walk through any casino at any hour of the night and you find grandmas from Kansas playing the slot machines. The few times I've been there, I've thought, "*This* is the essence of the world!"

But all that you see in Las Vegas is only the outward trappings of the world. At the heart of all of the glitz is the fact that all of

these people are *seeking pleasure apart from God*. To get drunk is to seek good feelings or escape from problems apart from God. To engage in sex outside of marriage is to seek pleasure apart from God. To gamble is not only to be a bad steward of the money that God has entrusted to you. It also is to think that having more money and more things would satisfy your soul. It is to be greedy and the Bible equates greed with idolatry (Col. 3:5). It is to seek fulfillment in material possessions, rather than in God.

As John Piper has aptly pointed out, the Bible is not against us having pleasure. Rather, it is against us finding pleasure in the wrong things or in wrong ways. Knowing God is the ultimate pleasure. The Psalms often proclaim this truth:

Psalm 16:11: "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

Psalm 36:7-9: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light."

Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart."

There are many more such verses. But the point is that the world is the evil system that competes with God. It offers you pleasure *apart from* God. But true, lasting, eternal pleasure is to be had only in God Himself! As God says (Jer. 2:13), "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." Friendship with the world means trying to satisfy your thirst in man-made, broken cisterns that leak. Every time you go for a drink, they're dry. Only God is the fountain of living water that satisfies the soul!

This is a main reason that I oppose so-called Christian psychology. It has imported into the church supposed "solutions" to your problems that leave God out. I've been asked, "If psychology can help people with their problems, why not use it?" The answer is, "It doesn't help them crucify self and seek God alone as the

soul's satisfaction." I've talked to numerous people who have gone to Christian psychologists. They've learned that they're angry because their parents didn't love them. I heard one such counselor say that he told a client to go pound a pillow as he thought of his father, to get his rage out! They've learned that they're depressed because they have been too focused on others and they need to draw boundaries and start loving themselves. They've been told that they need to build their self-esteem.

Do any of these ideas come from the Bible? None! I've asked people who have gone to these counselors, "Did they direct you to Scripture?" No! "Did they pray with you?" No! "Did they talk to you about your walk with God and the need to love Him with all your heart and turn from your sin?" No! Did they explain how the Holy Spirit can give you love in place of anger, joy in place of depression, and peace in place of conflict and anxiety? No!

It's worldly counsel because it directs people to meet their needs apart from knowing, trusting, and loving God. It focuses them on loving self, not on loving God and others. At the heart of worldliness in whatever form it takes is, living to please yourself apart from God. That is spiritual adultery!

B. Spiritual adultery provokes God to jealousy (4:5).

James 4:5 is the most difficult verse in James. Some scholars call it one of the most difficult verses in the entire New Testament. So we must not be dogmatic in our interpretation of it. There are two basic options, with several variations within each option. These stem from several ambiguities in the Greek text.

Some (KJV, NIV) translate the verse, "The spirit which He has made to dwell in us lusts with envy." In this sense, the verse is warning against the propensity of the fallen human spirit towards the sin of envy. In favor of this view is that the word translated "envy" is never used elsewhere of God.

Others (NASB, ESV) translate, "He [God] jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us." A variation of this translation takes "spirit" to refer to the human spirit, not to the Holy Spirit (James has no other references to the Holy Spirit). In this translation, James is referring to God's holy jealousy for His people. The Greek grammar and the context argue in favor of this

view (Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James, Pillar New Testament Commentary* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 188-190). In verse 4, James has warned against spiritual adultery. Verse 5 would naturally, then, refer to God's holy jealousy as our Husband, which yearns for our faithfulness in our spirits to Him.

But there is a further problem in verse 5: James seems to be quoting Scripture, but the Old Testament has no such verse. The best solution is probably that James is referring generally to the many the Old Testament references to God's jealousy for the undivided devotion of His people. For example, in the second commandment forbidding idolatry, God says, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God ..." (Exod. 20:5; also, Exod. 34:14; Zech. 8:2).

In a godly marriage, there is a healthy form of jealousy which a husband should have for his wife. If he found out that she was seeing an old boyfriend on the sly, he would rightly be jealous of her affection. If he shrugged it off and said, "She's entitled to have her old boyfriend and me, too," we would rightly question whether he loved her.

Of course there is also a sinful form of jealousy in marriage. I knew a couple where the husband would check the odometer on the car and grill his wife every night about where she had been. He didn't want her to talk to any men at church, even in plain sight. He didn't trust her, even though he had no reason for such behavior. That was not godly jealousy, but rather a selfish attempt to control her. Sadly, that marriage ended in divorce.

So as I understand verse 5, James is saying that we must give total allegiance to God. He is a righteously jealous Husband who tolerates no rivals. We cannot dally with sin and follow Christ, too. We cannot live for self and yet make claim of being Christians. We cannot claim to be the bride of Christ and then run to the worldly "man next door" for comfort in our trials and counsel with our problems. James is saying that if we are having conflicts in our relationships, the place to begin is to turn from all spiritual adultery and be exclusively devoted to God. Living for self and seeking pleasure apart from God is to commit spiritual adultery.

2. To resolve conflicts, humbly entreat God's grace (4:6).

The flow of thought between verses 5 and 6 is, "If God's demand of absolute fidelity seems impossible, know that with the demand He gives the grace to obey it." In fact, He gives "greater grace" than we need. But, we need to understand (here James cites Proverbs 3:34) that God does not give grace to the proud, self-reliant, self-righteous person. He opposes the proud. Rather, He gives grace to the humble, who admit that they are empty and ask God to fill them. As Psalm 107:9 puts it, "For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good."

Conclusion

If you have drifted from God into any form of spiritual adultery, don't miss James' words, "He gives a greater grace." You may be thinking, "But you don't know what I've done!" True, but God does, and His Word plainly states, "He gives a greater grace." As we often sing, it is "grace greater than all our sins." And, it is grace greater than all of our trials and burdens. It draws us to the Lord Jesus Himself as our all in all. Annie Johnson Flint wrote,

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

If you're in conflict in any relationship, consider the shocking possibility that you're living for self, which is the essence of worldliness. Turn from such spiritual adultery, humble yourself and entreat God's grace. As Paul said when addressing the conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, "For He Himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14). Let Christ be your peace in conflict!

Application Questions

1. In the message, I said that the essence of worldliness is seeking pleasure apart from God. Can you think of other aspects of worldliness? Consider 1 John 2:15-17; John 17:15-17.
2. Should Christians ever use such bold language as “you adulteresses” when confronting someone in sin? If so, what safeguards must be in place?
3. Where is your biggest battle when it comes to worldliness? How can you guard against it?
4. What is the essence of biblical humility? Can a person know when he is humble?

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