

Living Wisely

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[0 : 00] Now, so that not many people ask me afterwards, this is because when I was 12 years old and growing up just over the hill below the primary school and there weren't many houses there and we were one of the few houses in our street, I was playing tennis on the street and perfectly safe to do but I went up for a tall one and lost my balance and fell back and landed with my hand outstretched like that and cracked it across there.

Then my father who was a doctor, so I went rushing in and my mum who was a doctor, she couldn't do all of this these days I think, but gave me a shot of morphine in order to dull the pain and then took me in to see my father in at the children's hospital who set my arm and I blame him for what has happened ever since.

No, it's not true but as a result whenever I do lots of typing or whenever I do repetitive things I get a very deep pain in it so I'm just trying to protect it.

So if you see me with that on that's what's going on so that means I don't have to answer all the questions later on. Friends, but I want to start with a quotation. It comes from a man whose first name according to whichever language you use was Bento or Baruch or Benedict but his second name was Benozza. He was born of a Portuguese Jewish family in the 17th century and he was a lens grinder by trade but he was also considered to be one of the most important philosophers of the modern period. He was known for his opposition to Orthodox Jewish faith.

However, at one point in his life he wrote these very telling words about Christian faith. He said this, I have often wondered that persons who make boast or professing the Christian religion, namely love, joy, peace, temperance and charity to all people, should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily toward one another such bitter hatred that this, rather than the virtues that they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.

[2 : 23] Now friends, you may disagree with the strength of Spinoza's charge. Nevertheless, it is a very telling statement, isn't it? And there is an echo of truth in it.

Christians can be very rancorous. They can be quarrelsome amongst each other. They can tear each other apart.

And even the Apostle Paul knows this. In Galatians 5 verse 15, he warns that the Christians in Galatia should not bite and devour each other or they will be destroyed by each other.

Nevertheless, he labels that attitude, even though he sees it present amongst Christians, as belonging to the flesh and not of the spirit. Friends, I want to talk today about the issue of divisiveness and quarreling amongst Christians.

And I do that because it's the focus of chapter 4 verses 1 to 12. And you can see this in chapter 4 verse 1, which speaks about fights and quarrels amongst Christians.

[3 : 26] Verse 11 talks about slandering other Christians, speaking against them. Verses 11 and 12 talk about judging one another. So there's the context.

There's the passage itself. There's what we're going to do today. I need to tell you that we are not going to do the whole of chapter 3 verse 13 all the way through to verse 17 of chapter 4, just 1 to 12.

But I need to set the context for you because you will see that I skipped over a little bit in James. So let me just tell you about those verses in between what we did last week about the tongue and what we're going to do this week.

Verses 13 to 18 are sort of a little hinge, a way of tying together the bit about the tongue and the passage that we're going to look at. It's a sort of overlap between the talk of the tongue and the talk about Christian divisiveness.

In one sense, verses 13 to 18 look back toward the tongue and give an answer to how it might be used. And the answer is in humility that comes from wisdom, which comes from God.

[4 : 32] In another sense, verses 13 to 18, a point forward to chapter 4, which we're going to look at because they speak of selfish ambition and envy. And then chapter 4 verse 1 and 2 speaks about desiring and coveting and their results.

I'm sorry I don't have time to cover in detail 13 to 18 of chapter 3, but you'll see that there's enough for us to grapple with in chapter 4 verses 1 to 12.

So first thing to notice is verse 1 in chapter 4. So follow with me in your Bibles will be really helpful. Look at what James says. He says, The word that is used for physical combat or fighting between two persons.

It can mean a very heated dispute. So James is clear. He's saying there is dissension here. There is division. There is conflict. Those conflicts are fierce.

They are ongoing. And they are full of bitterness and animosity. In other words, he's saying there is some truth in what Spinoza has said. Now I need to say that James doesn't say what those divisions are about.

[6 : 07] There's no more explanation about them. Just they're there. And I think that's because it's not his main concern to really tell us what the details are. His main concern is what causes such quarreling.

And to track down the cause, you only have to go to verse 2. James uses three words that point to the source of quarreling. In our translation, they are desire, covet and want.

James says, Friends, can you hear his point?

The thrust of what he's saying is this. If you trace disputes, fights, quarrels and divisions back to their source, what will you find?

If you find, you will find desire, want, jealousy and envy. Now friends, is that not so true?

[7 : 11] So often when we boil down our disputes and our divisions, what do we find? Well actually, perhaps I should say, who do we find? We find us, don't we?

We find ourselves, our desires, our envy. And you can see it in families, you can see it in churches, you can see it in denominations. It is the most rudimentary, it is most rudimentary and unsophisticated version is found with children and toys.

And we have all seen it, haven't we? You know, the child is growing up, it's just beginning to walk or even before it begins to walk, it sees a child that has something that it wants.

And it goes over to that other child and it snatches it off. When they get a bit older, there's a hit or two in order to get what they want. Underneath it all, what is it that's driving them to fight?

It is envy, desire, jealousy, want. It is, I want what you have, so I will do whatever is necessary to get it.

[8 : 16] Now, I guess we might be a little more sophisticated, but our disposition is exactly the same as that, we just have become more sophisticated at hiding it. At the root of so many of our fights and disputes and battles is plain old desire and envy.

And if it is not dealt with, it can result in murder. That's what James says, look at verse 2. You desire but do not have, so you kill. Friends, that disposition in us, that envy, that desire, that desire for something else, has a real risk attached to it.

So envy and desire for possessions or for position or for what others have, has an associated risk. And that risk is violence.

Real violence. Or it's psychological equivalence. Let's move on to the second half of verse 2. We don't have. And verse 2 says we don't have because we don't ask.

But as soon as he says this, James has to qualify it because it looks like a blank check, doesn't it? He says the sort of asking that I'm talking about is not driven by your rank covetousness and envy and desire.

[9 : 30] No, it is asking that is driven by right motives. God-given desires. Friends, within scripture itself, Jesus tells us to ask, to seek and to knock, doesn't he?

And he promises that we will receive, find and the door will be open to us. But the promises are, but the premise is that we are after good things.

We are after the things that are for God and good. The things of the kingdom. Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness and these things will be added to you.

That is, the asking that we are after are things that promote and sponsor righteousness. If we are seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness, then these other things will be added to us.

So with that in mind, let me suggest a cure for divisiveness. It has two fundamental steps to it. First is to change our thinking. Now, in order to understand this bit, we need to do just a little bit of Old Testament background.

[10 : 32] In the Old Testament, God talks about being the husband of his people. That is, he wooed them out in the wilderness. He brought them to himself and he's now in covenant relationship with them.

They are in covenant relationship with him. And therefore, to breach that relationship is tantamount to adultery. It's to go off after someone else. Similarly, Christians are in covenant relationship with God.

They are the bride of Christ. And therefore, a breach in that relationship is tantamount to adultery. And that explains verse 4. Look at it. You adulterous people.

Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

And a Christian who becomes entranced by the world, engaged to the world, is in the process of committing adultery against the God with whom they are in covenant.

[11 : 39] Can you see what he's saying? First, he's charging the people with being unfaithful to their relationship with God. He's saying that friendship with the world equals spiritual adultery.

In other words, being wedded to pleasure and desire equals friendship with the world equals a spiritual adultery. So you can see the progress, can't you?

Fighting and quarreling with each other is linked with desire, is linked with spiritual adultery. So choosing to be a friend of the world alienates you from God in the end.

It causes you to be an enemy of God. And that's why the Bible talks about people who have drifted away from the faith, because they have loved the world. Do you remember Demas, who's mentioned in the New Testament?

He drifts away because he's loved the world. You see, being a lover of the world will in the end make you an enemy of God. Friends, that's very serious stuff, isn't it?

[12 : 38] It explains verse 5. Look at verse 5. The God who is wedded to us in Christ Jesus, we're told, is a jealous God. That is, he's a God who demands total, unreserved, unswerving allegiance to him.

God is jealous for us, for we are his spouse. And all good husbands are zealous, jealous for their spouse. God has given us of himself.

He has given us his spirit. He has devoted himself to us. And he seeks us to respond in devotion. Now look at verse 6. Follow the argument that James has been pursuing.

We have fights and quarrels. James says these fights and quarrels come out of our desire and envy. Underneath all of that are doubts about God's generosity, grace and benevolence.

In other words, you see, if we're constantly after something else, we're no longer believing that God can supply our needs. There are doubts as to whether God can and does meet our needs.

[13 : 40] But scripture is clear. God has and does give us everything that we need. In Christ, he is gracious. He gives us more grace. Therefore, desire and envy imply that we doubt that God is going to supply our needs.

It implies arrogance and pride on our part. And arrogance and pride will result in judgment. And James points this out. Look at the second half of verse 6. Scripture says, he says, that God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.

So there's the first cure for divisiveness. We need to change our thinking about God. God is meant to be all for us.

God is all for us. We are meant to be all for him and not fixated on our own needs. We are to be fixated on God. Now, but we need to change more.

You see, it's not just our brains that need to change and our orientation that needs to change. We need to actually do something. We need to change our actions as well. And we need to repent.

[14 : 42] That's what changing your actions is about. And change. That's the main thrust of the remaining verses about repentance, even though the word repentance is not used. Instead, James uses the word submit to start off.

Look at what he says. He says, we're to submit ourselves to God. But what does it mean to submit ourselves to God? James tells us. And he tells us by telling us what submitting to God looks like.

And he gives us it to us in pairs. Have a look carefully. You'll see some wonderful pairs coming up. First, we are to resist the devil. And if we do, God promises the devil will flee from us.

Okay, so no to the devil. And as soon as we do that, he will run away. He'll flee from us. That's the first part of the pair. The second one is that we are to come near to God.

And he will come near to us. Can you see the orientation of this double reference? Resist the devil. He will flee.

[15 : 42] Draw near to God. He will come near to you. Friends, there are cosmic and powerful forces within our world seeking our devotion. And we need to make choices about them.

That's what this is about. And the first way is we are to submit to God. Second way is listed as fleeing and drawing near. And the next way is another matching pair.

Can you see it? As sinners convicted of sins, we are to wash our hands of impurity. And the matching pair with this one is to acknowledge our double mindedness and purify our hearts.

So can you see the things you to do something with your hands? That is no longer use them this way. You do something with your heart. Wash hands of sins. Purify hearts of double mindedness.

Have pure hands. Have a pure single focused heart. Friends, we are people whom sin seeks to dominate. But we must make choices.

[16 : 44] Daily choices. Choices to purify our hearts and our hands. The third matching pair is in verse 9. We are to grieve, mourn and wail at our sinfulness.

Friends, again, we live in a world of hedonism. Where the greatest good is to enjoy and imbibe, isn't it? That is our world from beginning to end.

But not for us. It shouldn't be. See, the greatest good is God. Him we are to enjoy. Him we are to be devoted to.

Him we are to take in with all our being. And we do this by acknowledging sin and grieving at it and then soaking up the forgiveness available in Jesus. And when you come to confess your sins, as we do every week, do you come earnestly?

I mean, those words, grieve and mourn, are earnest words, aren't they? Do you grieve at your failures? Do you mourn at your sinfulness? James urges us to be really serious about this business.

[17 : 52] After all, it's God with whom we have to do. That's the thrust of verse 10. Look at it with me. James says, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

And in fact, when we do the confession of sin here at church, that's exactly what we do, isn't it? We humble ourselves. We say we've sinned. And then we come to God and say, please forgive us. And then we announce a declaration of forgiveness.

That is, God lifts us up. You see, we are sinners. And so often devoted to ourselves and our own interests. James urges us, recognise that.

Come before God. Submit to him. Submit to his will for us. Be like the tax collector in Luke's gospel. Do you remember the tax collector when compared with the Pharisee? The tax collector can't even look up.

Must look down. Beats his chest. And says, have mercy on me, the sinner. Friends, we have no greater need than the need to cast ourselves humbly at God's feet and beg his forgiveness, which he will amply supply in Jesus Christ.

[19 : 00] Now let's turn to verses 11 and 12 because James finally has got back to the tongue. Friends, understand this. We all of us stand under God the judge.

And we are therefore not to judge our neighbour or slander him or her. Listen to James carefully. Take him seriously. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.

Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you're not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it.

There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbour? In other words, let God do it. Let God do it.

Do not take it upon yourself to do it. Friends, think through what James has said and its implications for us as a church. Let us be taught by James and taught by God.

[20 : 02] Let's ask ourselves, what it is that motivates us? Is it the glory of God and his kingdom? Is it that God alone grows in glory and in splendour?

Or are we tainted by the fixation of our own culture? Are we focused on everything being for us? On what there is for us?

Friends, so easy in our world, isn't it? For the world to sneak into our hearts. And to thereby sneak into our church. Our desire can be for our own needs.

For recognition. For prestige or position or worth. For our own will to be done. And these desires sneak into how we relate to each other.

And they often cause conflict, dissension and division. But James is clear. Us and our desires are not to be the basis of how we relate or who we relate to.

[21 : 07] We, where we are kings and queens. God is dethroned. And is no longer king of our lives.

No. God, not our wants and desires. Is to be our God. He alone has the right to the centre of our affections. He wants to be enthroned, if you like, in our lusts and our desires.

He wants all of us. All of our being. And he can supply our need. And satisfy our deepest longing.

So friends, if God has found you out today. Then take the advice of God through James. Resist the devil. And he will flee from you.

Draw near to God. And he will draw near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts. We double-minded. Grieve at sin.

[22 : 06] Mourn it. Wail at it. Don't be sucked in by our hedonistic culture. Humble ourselves before God. And he will lift us up. And then turn to our neighbour.

And act rightly in a God-focused way. My friends, just one little footnote on all of this. One of the things that I delight in, in Holy Trinity.

Is that we are relatively unified. There are not huge quarrels among us. There's not huge dissension. But these passages come to us. As a forewarning.

We are always a church. Because of our desires. And our wants. And our envy. We are always a church at risk. So let's heed these words as a word of forewarning to us today.

That we need to make sure. That God alone is at the focus. Of all of our attention. He is our one true desire. And if we get that right.

[23 : 12] Then we'll remain united as a church. Because we'll all be focused on someone outside of ourselves. Let us pray and ask God that this will be the case. Father we pray that you'd help us to resist the devil.

Knowing that he will flee from us. Help us to draw near to you. Knowing that you will come near to us. Help us to wash our hands as sinful people.

And to purify our hearts which are often so double minded. Help us to grieve at sin. And mourn it and wail at it. To not be sucked in by our culture.

Which says we must have everything that we want. Help us to humble ourselves before you. Knowing that you will lift us up. And help us to turn to each other. And act rightly.

In a God focused way. Father we pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.