



“Beware of Cosmosis”

(James 4:1-6)

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We’re going to be looking today at the opening verses of James 4. This is the first installment that James gives us on the third and final section of his letter, the section where he deals with anger. He told us back in chapter 1 that we ought to be slow to anger, and he’s going to be elaborating on that in chapter 4.

James is going to expose a common Christian disease, one that I am going to call *cosmosis* (and yes, I invented the word from the Greek text; no applause, please). We are going to learn today what it is, who gets it, what the symptoms are, to what degree we are infected by it, and what to do about it. But let us begin by a reading of our passage.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 4:1-6

1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that wage war in your members? 2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in wars and fights. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

4 You adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “THE SPIRIT WHO HAS TAKEN UP RESIDENCE IN US YEARNs JEALOUSLY [FOR US]”? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore he says: “GOD RESISTS THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.”

BLOWING THE MISTS AWAY FROM THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

I should begin by reminding you that this is a letter written to Christians. We have seen many evidences of this all through it so far that I think it is beyond dispute. Yet this little paragraph is so severe in its criticism that many who study it stop right here and immediately refer this language to people who are not believers. And that is unfortunate. Nothing is gained by pretending that Christians cannot fall into such faults as these. And I need to add something important on this issue.

One of the curious features of modern church life is the way we tend to romanticize the first century church. People often say how they wish they could have been a part of it. We long for the days when our faith was exploding around the Mediterranean world, and we admire the tremendous growth that took place then. Certainly those early believers deserve huge respect for what they did.

I think I understand all that. In many ways those are noble aspirations. The apostolic church, living under God's direction during the lifetime of the apostles, made our faith global in an incredibly short time, even in the face of opposition and persecution.

By the end of the first century, defenders of the Christian faith could write their Roman opponents and say, "You shouldn't be too quick to resist the progress of our faith. You probably have no idea how many of us there are, and we are everywhere. We are in your Senate; we are in high positions in the army; we are in your law courts and in your private schools. And everywhere we are, we are a force for good." And all of that was true.

But today we have a bit of a rose-colored haze that tends to make the apostolic church look like it was free from problems, too, and that is certainly not accurate. The easiest proof for the notion that the early church had its own issues—and very substantial ones at that—is the New Testament itself. Practically every epistle of the New Testament was written in response to some failure or disobedience on the part of the Christians involved.

In thinking about our text for today, I went back just to one letter, the first letter to the Corinthians, and listed the church's problems that caused Paul to write them. There were other issues, but these are the top ten that he identifies and that he corrects:

1. Divisions and factions in the church
2. A general spiritual immaturity and failure to grow
3. An arrogant resistance of apostolic (particularly Pauline) teaching
4. Open immorality in the church
5. The tolerance of open immorality in the church
6. Members engaging in lawsuits against each other

7. A complaining spirit
8. Excusing sinful behavior by pleading extraordinary temptations
9. Abuse of the Lord's Table, including drunkenness during it
10. Misuse of spiritual gifts (three chapters)

As I say, this is a partial list from just one church. There were a great many other problems that are equally evident from a perusal of other letters. So we don't want to read James or any other letter through the rosy glow of early church growth. It isn't too much to say that the early church accomplished great things for God in spite of having clay feet.

And in light of the list above, it is illuminating to discover what James lodges as his most serious complaint against the Christians that he is writing.

CHIEF COMPLAINT

The chief complaint that he lodges is similar, though not exactly the same, as the first complaint Paul lodged against the Corinthian believers. These churches were characterized by internal hostility of members. In fact, they did more than fight. They engaged in ongoing wars. The fights ended, but the wars they were part of did not. They just kept on going from week to week and from month to month.

SYMPTOMS

He lists three chief symptoms of their condition. And remember that he is writing to Jewish Christians (there are no Gentile believers at this time) who are scattered about Judea, so many different congregations are involved here. So what are the three symptoms that are feeding their ongoing hostility and wars? Well, first comes...

Murder

You see this in verse 2: "*You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder.*" That is, they can't obtain the possessions or the prestige that they want. And right away everybody wants to know, "Did these believers commit actual murder in efforts to gain wealth or some other advantage?"

I doubt seriously that that is the case. He's using a figure of speech here for emphasis. They probably didn't engage in literal wars, either. But the metaphorical wars and murders were bad enough. James is probably taking a page from the Sermon on the Mount here, where Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without cause shall be in danger of judgment*" (Matt. 5:21-22). The apostle John will later write, "*Whoever hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15). So hostility and hatred are the crimes that he has in mind. He probably uses the exaggerations, the hyperboles of murder and war, to get their attention.

And, of course, the problem is just as evident in more recent times as it was in the New Testament era. Benedict Spinoza, the seventeenth-century rationalist philosopher, grew up on the edge of a Christian community near Amsterdam, Holland. He commented on what he saw going on around him in Christian churches this way:

I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion—namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men—should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.¹

Another symptom of the problem was...

Coveting

This one fits well with the notion of hatred because it is a symptom of the heart. God gave the Israelites a great gift when he provided them with the Ten Commandments. It was a window into the things that really matter for living in a world with fallen people in it. The first nine commandments are certainly not easy, but God in his wisdom really got down to issues with that tenth one: “*You shall not covet*” (Exod. 20:17).

This last commandment is a world apart. The first nine are, within certain limits, doable. They all have to do with actions. Don’t bow down. Don’t steal. Don’t lie. Don’t murder. Honor your parents. Don’t commit adultery. Not easy, but doable.

But when you get to that tenth one, suddenly you’re in a different realm. God is telling them to be sure and not just *do* the right actions; they also have to be sure that they do them from the right motives.

Coveting is a process of the inner person. It can’t be seen by anybody but God, but its products are lethal. The meaning of *covet* is not obvious to us. In a context like this, the word really means “delight in, focus on, yearn for.” It’s a word about cravings. It’s a word about what you think of and dream about. God says in this very strategic place, “Don’t dream about other people’s possessions.” Can you imagine what kind of a world we would have if people took that prohibition seriously? It would wreck the American economy in about two weeks. Think of all the things we would never buy! At the same time, it’s worth the risk.

If the first nine commandments are about how you behave in the world, the tenth one is about how you look at the world and what you dream about. God says that you have to above all else be careful what you crave in the secret place of your heart. If you look at the world and see something in it that you absolutely have to have, you are coveting. If you can’t live without it, your affections and your innermost longings are out of kilter. That is because there is only one person entitled to occupy that honored place, and that is God himself.

If you're coveting, you're infected with cosmosis.

Closely related to coveting is the third symptom...

Prayerlessness

You see this in verses 2 and 3: "*You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*"

Even though he's criticizing the conflicts and hostilities of his readers, he knows that they don't engage in such things because they enjoy them. They really are driven by internal motives. They crave what they don't have, and then try to gain it by methods that dishonor God, and that includes intimidation and hatred. If they had only asked, they would have received what they wanted as a gift from God; but they didn't bother. That would have meant elevating God back into that high place that only he should occupy.

That's why deciding what you are really after in life is such a critical thing, and yet few people really sit down and try to provide an answer to that most important question. I have been studying the Gospel of John in the original text for years, and until the last decade or so there was one verse that really sort of stumped me. The very first disciples of Jesus were Andrew and John. They had been disciples of John the Baptist for some time, but when the Baptist pointed out Jesus to them, they left him and began to follow Jesus. In John 1:38, the text says that Jesus saw them following and he stopped, turned around, and asked them a question. It's usually translated, "*What are you seeking?*" That's what Jesus said to them. It sounds so tame; and yet it's loaded with importance. More recent translations do a better job of rendering it. They translate it, "*What do you want?*" Or, "*What are you after?*" Jesus wanted to know on the very first day whether they had an answer to the question. Have they decided what they really want from life? What is their highest aspiration? That's what he asked them. What are your cravings? Let me ask you a question: If somebody came to you and said, "I can give you the thing you want most in life—but you have to know what it is," what would you say?

No question is more important.

Those two early disciples got it right. They said, "*Rabbi, where are you staying?*" They wanted to be with him—end of discussion. That's the right answer. Wherever you are Lord, that's where I want to be. Again, the answer sounds so bland, but it isn't. It's the greatest answer they could have given. They just want to be where he is. That will satisfy the cravings of their hearts. Anything beyond that is gravy.

And that answer is the missing ingredient in the lives of a lot of believers, as James says. So many don't really know what they want. So, what do they do? They want what everybody around them wants. They become like everybody else. It's

that dangerous disease that with tongue in cheek I call cosmosis. It's what James calls friendship with the world. Look at how he diagnoses it.

DIAGNOSIS

Cosmosis is marked by two characteristics. First is...

Wayward affections

He starts by addressing them in verse 4: "*Adulterers and adulteresses!*" And right away we know he's talking about Christian believers. He certainly isn't talking about unbelievers here. In addition to all the passages that we've studied thus far, here you have terminology that can only apply to Christians. An adulterer is someone who is unfaithful to a pledge of ongoing affection and loyalty. Unbelievers make no such pledge. They are out there on their own. They've made no commitments to the Lord. Only Christians do that.

But of course, these words are loaded with overtones, too. They are about the hurts that come when people become disloyal. These are people who have fallen into a very serious hole of defection. It isn't just that they have done wrong; they have deprived the Lord who loved them and sent Christ to die for them of their affections. He is entitled to them, and they have given them away by trying to get what they want from the world.

The other mark of cosmosis is...

Enmity toward God

You see this also in verse 4: "*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*" That's an interesting question. Do we know that? I'm not sure we do. We may think of it as merely a peccadillo. We may think of it as a simple way of getting what we want.

But James says that it's dreadfully serious. Friendship with the world—buying into its priorities, conforming to its loves—is a declaration of war against God. It makes him our enemy. Can you imagine? Who wants God for an enemy? Yet that's what we do when we turn away from our love for him and say, "The world has what I need to satisfy me. I'm going to do what it takes to acquire it." That means we are after the coin of the world system—money, or wealth, or fame, or prestige, or pleasure, or some combination thereof.

James isn't sugar-coating the problem of worldliness, is he? He sees it for what it is. It is a sure path to wrecking your life. And it's short-changing yourself. All the promises of the world are lies. The world dangles the bait but does not deliver. Or if it does deliver, there's always a bitter aftertaste.

When I think about the people in Scripture who became God's enemies by going after the world, two names stand out. One is Samson. He went after pleasure and

got it; but he ended up blind and a figure of ridicule. The Philistines would play with him. They would bring him out of prison just so they could jeer and humiliate him. He lost his wife, his strength, and his honor in the believing community. The avenue he chose out of it was suicide—the only divinely approved suicide in the Bible. God gave him grace when he humbled himself—at least he humbled himself to a degree.

The other example is Saul. Saul became a spiritual adulterer. He sought guidance from a necromancer. He was dabbling in witchcraft. The prophet Samuel appeared to him in a vision the night before he died and asked Saul a pertinent question: “*Why do you ask me what to do, since the Lord has departed from you and has become your enemy?*” (1 Sam. 28:16). But the Lord didn’t take the first step; Saul did. By seeking friendship with the world, he made himself the enemy of God.

Wayward affections and enmity toward God are the key characteristics of this disease of worldliness. So what is the prescription for it? How do we turn it around and get back into a healthy relationship with God and end all of our craving-provoked hostilities?

PRESCRIPTION

The text gives us two parts to the prescription. First, there has to be...

Repentance

There has to be a new direction. That’s why that question is so critical. What are you after? If you’re honest, and you have to admit that you have been going after the world’s offerings: wealth, fame, pleasure, etc., then you cannot move ahead until you turn away from all that and say to yourself, “I’ve been looking in a dry well. What I need to do is what Jesus said to do: ‘*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you*’” (Matt. 6:33).

The key word is *first*. What occupies the top of your want list is the most important thing of all. We have to start by recognizing that it isn’t all about us. God is offended and hurt when we become spiritual adulterers. “THE SPIRIT WHO HAS TAKEN UP RESIDENCE IN US YEARNS JEALOUSLY [FOR US].” Our God is a jealous God, and it’s a good thing. He doesn’t whistle a merry tune when we go astray. He comes after us to help bring us to our senses. Repentance is what happens to us when we do that and begin to see the infinite importance of what we have been missing.

The other part of the prescription is...

Humility

In spite of all our adulteries, in spite of all our evil cravings and all our prayerlessness, he gives more grace; but he gives it to the humble. Another way to put this is

to say that God gives special grace to people who have learned to be content with his gifts. He resists the proud person, who says, “Nah, I can get what I want on my own.” The humble person says, “I’d rather have what God gives me than what I concoct for myself; in the end, I know that his gifts are the best.” Proverbs 10:22 establishes this principle: “*The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.*”

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NOTES:

1. Benedict Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 6, quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 16 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985.