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The Book of

Session Nine:
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James 4:1-6—The Battle for First Loves

❖ The Text (NRSV)

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ¹² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.”? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

❖ What’s going on here?

-v.1-2—James ended Chapter 3 with an ideal vision of life lived under God’s wisdom—the “wisdom from above.” And the culmination of that vision was the poetic and almost proverbial promise of a “harvest of righteousness...sown in peace for those who make peace.” This is the wholeness that such godly wisdom yields and in some sense captures a glimpse of the genuinely good life, the life of completion, that James sees God willing for all creation.

But immediately following this glowing vision of peace comes language of *war* and conflict—the NRSV’s “conflicts and disputes” softens the intensity of the Greek, which is more like “wars and fightings.” The contrast could not be more extreme—rather than the way of peace, some in James’ audience have been led into the divisive way of “earthly wisdom,” which is the way of “selfish ambition” and “bitter envy” (3:14). And James wants again to highlight the contrast

between these two wisdoms. The joyful vision James holds out clashes with the sad reality of factionalism, division within the faith community, and people bent in on themselves. James calls this reality as he sees it—it is a situation of “civil war” within the church, a deadly fracturing of the body of believers that mirrors the fracturing inside individual people that James has lamented before as being “double-minded” (1:8).

So what is the cause of the violent divisions within the community? James identifies it as “cravings” or *desires*, and in the beginning of 4:2, he fleshes this out. The problem is not so much that various groups or individuals are merely *passionate* about what they want (or even about what they think is “right”). After all, James has plenty of passion in his desires toward his audience’s discipleship. James seems most alarmed about groups using ‘any means necessary’ to get what they want. Rather than being ruled by the “law of liberty” (2:12—the law of neighbor love) and finding wholeness of life in God’s kind of humble and loving wisdom, they act as a law unto themselves, driven to get what they want from life on their terms. For these people, the ends (getting what they desire) justify their means (even violent, divisive ones), and James once again declares that for the community of Christ, the ends can never be divorced from the means.

It’s not clear whether James is addressing literal “murder” (i.e. physical violence) in his community, or whether this is meant to be a figurative way of highlighting how severe the conflicts in the community really are. Some commentators find it impossible to imagine such an early Christian community seeking to use violence. They assume, then, that James is using a rhetorical exaggeration to make his point. This could be supported by James’ stress in 2:8-11 on keeping the whole law—there, James says that transgressing the law at one point (for example, acting with selfishness toward one’s neighbor) is just as severe as at any other point (for

example, committing murder). On the other hand, if the conjecture of the Zealot conflict in the background is reasonable, it is certainly possible that among James' Jewish Christian community are some Zealots (or former Zealots) who are more than willing to spill Roman (and others') blood if it will win their nationalistic desires. Some scholars do follow this line of thinking; they also point out that the example of "murder" comes up repeatedly in James, enough to think that real physical violence was a live issue in James' community. Whether or not actual murder is in mind, James wants to underscore how severe the consequences of these divisions, these "wars," are.

-v.3—James addresses those who "do not have" what they want in 4:2b and follows up in 4:3 with the same train of thought in mind. The ones who "covet something and cannot obtain it"—why are they lacking and led to envying what others have? James says they are not asking (presumably asking *God* in prayer), and so they do not receive. And immediately, he qualifies that statement to make it clear that their asking needs to be rightly motivated. God is not a genie, James insists, and will not give us things that lead further away from the way of life that is the "wisdom from above."

In some ways, this is the upshot of James' insistence in 1:33ff that God does not tempt us. God refuses to give us those things that will lead us away from him. On the other hand, James has pointed out, God *does* and *will* give wisdom to all who seek it. And for James, this wisdom—as a whole way of life re-oriented toward God's rule—is really the only gift worthy receiving for now. (One should remember that "wisdom" is not separate from other categories like "love," "humility," and "faith"—all of these touch on this whole way of life.) The other things one might ask for—material possessions, wealth, and power—are all fated to fade away eventually anyway

(1:9-11). Here, James' emphasis seems to be on asking God for the gift of godly peacemaking (3:17) wisdom—this is what we most desperately *need*, even if our inner desires or our external factions tell us it's not what we think we want.

-v.4—What a way to begin a sentence: "Adulterers!" (Rarely does James seem to be interested in the subtle or smooth transition.) More precisely, the word is feminine, "adulteresses," and its thrust is to call to mind the recurring image in the Hebrew Scriptures of God's people as an unfaithful spouse (almost always a wife in the Old Testament). Time and time again, Israel turned away from fidelity to YHWH (that is, to God) and instead committed spiritual adultery with other gods, with their pursuit of their own security and stability, and with status as a prosperous and powerful nation. The prophets continually cast Israel's divided loved (between God and its own ambitions) as marital infidelities, and here James alludes to the same figure to expose the pursuits of warring factions as unfaithfulness to God. James compels his audience to ask what their truest love is for—God and God's ways, or their own desires and the world's means of getting them.

This leads James to another broad and bold contrast—alignment with God versus alignment with the world. We might prefer a more nuanced, less black-and-white contrast that appreciates the world as created good by God (which James would seem to affirm—see especially 3:9). But James is relentless in making us ask what our truest, most basic love is for. If we are ultimately concerned with wealth, power, national pride, or anything else that is not God, then we have made an idol. Again, the marital imagery is helpful—to be married to a person is an exclusive relationship, and only the beloved has the lover's supreme love and fidelity. So rather than advocating a retreat from the world or even a hatred toward the world, James wants us to be perfectly clear that our

desires for anything other than God cannot claim our ultimate allegiance. Similarly, by playing by the world's rules—devolving into warring factions and being consumed by bitter envy—we are being unfaithful to God and to who God has called us to be. A self-centered divisiveness is simply not compatible with the life of faith—a life which like Abraham's, leads one to be the “friend of God” (2:23).

-v.5—To support his point, James alludes to an authoritative source. Now things get muddy—what is it that he is quoting or making reference to? James uses the technical word translated “scripture”—that is to say, a religiously authoritative source, so he sees whatever he is quoting as more than good advice. But we do not know whether he is quoting some book outside our canonical Bible that he considered to be authoritative, some different translation of the Hebrew Bible that we no longer have access to, or perhaps whether he is simply making a loose paraphrase of a more familiar Old Testament text. In any case, the thrust of the quotation is on God's jealous love—a theme that recurs throughout the Torah and the prophets (see especially Ex. 20:5, “...for I the LORD your God am a jealous god...”).

Once one gets beyond the question of the source of James' quotation, there are sticky problems with translating this verse (again, if we knew what James was quoting, we might have a better sense of the context and could make better sense of the verse). The word “God” is not in the Greek—it is supplied by translators to make sense of the sentence; also, the specific “spirit” is not clear, either: do we have the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, something else? And for that matter, is the ‘jealous yearning’ a good thing (like God's jealous love of us) or closer to the “bitter envy” and “coveting” James has earlier condemned? All of these depend on our translating—who is doing

the yearning? Whose spirit is it? These are all tough questions that are not easily resolved. If we follow the NRSV's translation, the sense is that God yearns and longs for us to live in faithful relationship and will continue to seek us back when we have turned to other “loves.” God will not let us persist in divided love—we are God's beloved, and that relationship is not easily severed. When we are unfaithful and live in ways at odds with God's will for us, God doesn't leave us on our own to suffer our own destinies at a distance. Rather, God jealously seeks to gather us back. Regardless of the translation, this basic concept is probably in James' mind, and it comes to mind for him in light of all the ways his audience is turning from God—seeking their own pleasures and being willing to be divided and conflicted to get them.

-v.6—With 4:6, Lutherans who have been squirming their way through James at last find surprising relief—James mentions “grace.” And once again, it is important to give James his due in terms of his theology of grace. For whatever jealousy God has when we are unfaithful, that jealousy is never bitter toward us—it always reaches out to us with an undeserved, freely given love. And for whatever commands God calls us to live by—however *strict* God's ways for us seem to be—we are never abandoned to our own devices to live them out. Having just declared that friendship with the world (or more specifically, with the look-out-for-#1 ways of the world around us) is incompatible with love for God, James offers the hope that we don't have to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps to live in the ways God wants us to live. God gives the gifts that enable this life in the gift of wisdom, and indeed the life of love for neighbor is understood to be grace itself, too.

James alludes also to the recurring Old Testament image of God opposing the proud (the “opposing,” by the way, is the same as the “becoming an enemy” in 4:4) and instead showing special concern for the broken and contrite heart—for the “humble.” When we set ourselves up against God by turning to other loves or rejecting God’s *ways*, God opposes us and smashes our pretenses. But this act of judgment, this opposition to the self-deluded “proud,” even this is grace, because once all of our illusions are knocked down and cleared away, there is room for God to come in and pour out grace on us.

For Lutherans, who tend to understand grace generally in terms of forgiveness for past sins, this may be a new sense of the word. But indeed, for much of the Hebrew mindset, the “grace” of God is a broad generous giving in God’s character. James seems most interested in “grace” as the gift of God in the whole way of life—grace is the ability to live as God’s new creation. For James, all of the life of faith is *grace*. So indeed, for whatever else life throws at us, God gives grace all the more.

Connections: Getting What You Want

- James tells us that “you do not have because you do not ask.” Is this a blanket promise from James that God will give us anything we want? This is reinforced by several invitations by Jesus to ask for anything “in his name” with the guarantee that it would be received. What does it mean to ask for something “in Jesus’ name”? What does James mean by “asking wrongly”—what would it mean to ask “rightly”?
- Have you ever prayed for something specifically and not received it? Have you ever prayed for something and gotten exactly what you have asked for? What do both of these realities say about the character of God?
- Will God *only* give us what we need if we pray for it? Is receiving what we need dependent on how much or how good a job we do of asking? What leads you to your answer?
- James seems to think that there are some things really worth asking for and some things that are essentially empty—what is really worth asking God for in your mind?
- What is “grace”? What is the most basic definition you can think of? How do you know what “grace” is, and where do you see it in your life?
- Think about a time you have seen when groups were torn apart by different desires of what people and factions want? What caused the division? What might James see as a solution?
- James warns us about being “friends” with the world, and yet he seems to see the church living right in the midst of the world. Other scriptural voices remind us, too, that God loves the world. So what does it look like for us to be in the world but not of the world?