

Spiritual Idolatry and Spiritual Adultery, and the Spiritual Remedy (James 4:3-6)
 Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on December 13, 2006
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James 4:1-6 (Wuest's Expanded Translation): ¹ *From what source do quarrels and conflicts among you come? Do they not come from this source, namely, from your **inordinate passions** which are struggling with one another in your members? You have a **passionate desire** and are not realizing its fulfillment; **you murder**. And **you covet** and are filled with jealousy, and you are not able to obtain. You engage in conflicts and quarrel. You do not have because you are not praying for something to be given you. You pray for something to be given you and do not receive because you pray with [wrong] intent in order that you may use it [for self-gratification] in your inordinate passions. **O, [spiritual] adulteresses** ... do you not know that your friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore would desire ... to be a friend of the world is [thereby] constituted an enemy of God. Or, do you think that the scripture says in an empty manner and to no purpose, The Spirit ... who has been caused to make His permanent home in us has a passionate desire [to control us] to the point of envy [of any control indwelling sin may have over us]? Moreover, **He [God] gives greater grace** ...*

Review: the fuel of every conflict you have is your desires, not *evil* desires (not lusting after something inherently evil), but desires at times for good things that have become *inordinate desires*, as we just read. But there's something even deeper going on in this text, because our conflict-causing desires aren't only imbalanced and inordinate, they're *idolatrous*. The language as we keep reading intensifies from spiritual idolaters to spiritual adulterers, and James calls us both. That's not a very "seeker-friendly" in v. 4, to say to your congregation "*you are adulterers*"! But James' concern is not sounding friendly to the world here -- his concern is that those in the church are *too friendly with the world*, and need a wakeup call!

James uses strong terms for these sins that we don't consider a big deal; worldliness, wanting to be friends with and have the approval and favor of the world, wanting or coveting things that aren't evil. God's Word accuses God's people of being spiritual adulterers (v. 4), spiritual murderers and spiritual idolaters (v. 2). Coveting, killing others in murder, committing adultery, craving idols, all are sins forbidden by the Ten Commandments and all are sins that can take place inside us not just in our outward actions.

Anyone who thinks the OT law has no relevance to the Christian hasn't read much of James or Jesus – the first sermon of Jesus in the NT says He didn't come to abolish but to fulfill, and then He went on to take specific commands from the moral law and to fill out the full meaning, not doing away with it, but deepening its application from external actions to internal attitudes of the heart. The Jews focused on what we do, but Jesus focused on what we desire as well.

James 1 says Christians need to look deeply into God's "*perfect law, the law of liberty, and abide by it*" – and he used the analogy of a mirror. The mirror of God's Law, even those commands that are fulfilled at the cross (sacrifices, ceremonies of priests, etc.), all of God's Law is a mirror that reflects God's moral character. And the moral demands of His Law when we compare our character and reflection in this mirror shows us where we fall short, and this mirror goes deeper than the outside, it helps us see ourselves inside

What are the first two of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20?

³ “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*”

⁴ “*You shall not make for yourself an idol ... [carved/graven image]*”

We fly past those verses, assuming they’re one and the same and they mainly apply to OT Israelites, pagans today, incense-burning statue worshippers, but notice those are 2 different commands: v. 3 is not the same command as v. 4. Carved or graven images, statues, are not the only type of thing forbidden. The first command is to put nothing before God in your life, nothing is to have the place of God, and if it does, that is biblically called a “god” or an “idol.”

Martin Luther’s attempted reforms of the Catholic church were not just concerned with the worship of visible physical gods, statues or saints, Mary-olatry, etc. He wrote on the first commandment, "To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by 'god.' To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in [it] from the heart ... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that, I say, is really your god."¹

Luther rightly understood, I agree, that God’s revelation begins this way in v. 3 because the fundamental problem in law-breaking and all sin is actually idolatry at the level of heart desires. In other words, we never break the other commandments without first breaking this first command, which is really another way to say what Jesus said was the greatest commandment (“love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind”). It’s at the level of thoughts and desires before outer actions

Luther wrote ‘All those who do not at all times trust God [alone] ... but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments ... if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our [external] works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]....’²

Luther’s contemporary Reformer John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that the heart of man is an idol factory, always creating idols. In another place Calvin said ‘The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.’³

If you miss this point, you will miss the profound point of James 4 and the depth of our problem and its solution--desiring good things can quickly become bad. Such desire is the real root problem in us. For example, money itself isn’t evil, but the *love of* money is the root of all manner of evil. The US dollar has “in God we trust” on it, and that’s true of every American – money itself is the god of many! For others it may be work or it may be pleasure or it may be the type of family we want or the types of kids we want. Or career or control over what we do not have control over ... anything good or neutral can take on godlike proportions and devotion in us in a way only GOD is worthy of such consecration and magnification.

God lovingly will have no gods/idols before Himself inside or out:

⁵ “*You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God ...*”

We don't have to go to the NT to understand that the heart of God's law is aimed at our heart, not just external idols and actions. The last of the Ten Commandments is *thou shalt not covet*, and Colossians 3:5 (KJV) adds "*inordinate affection ... and covetousness, which is idolatry*"

Ephesians 5:5 also says covetousness is idolatry. Inordinate affection, cravings in James 4, elevating desires for things that God hasn't given us – it doesn't just result in sin toward those who stand in the way of our desires, it results in sin toward God. *You shall not covet* is the last of the 10 commandments and that 1 sin can cause you to break the other 9!

- Many in many ways have argued that the first half of the Ten Commandments toward God are broken first in this battle within, when we put our desires before God's, when we try to be God, we create our little idols, we dishonor God's name in elevating ours, we make God's day unholy by making it ours
- The fights of children who don't get what they so intensely desire from their parents, when expressed sinfully to parents (Jas 4:1) violates 5th command (honor father/mother - v. 12)
- James 4:2 ties coveting in w/ the 6th command (murder-v.13)
- James 4:4 ties this in with the 7th command (adultery - v. 14)
- The 8th command (stealing, v. 15) also stems from coveting
- 9th command (lying – v.16) also ties in w/ the 10th (coveting).

We've already seen in James 3:14 the warning that the sin of lying and arrogance flows from selfish ambition in a heart. 1 Samuel 15:23 says "*arrogance is like the evil of idolatry*" (NIV). James 3:16 says in context where selfish desire / ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil (if idolatry is evil, and it is, then this verse includes it as a result of selfish desire).

So James 4 begins: *not getting what you want is a root of all evil!* Not just the love of money as your god, but the love of anything more than God besides God is always our root problem.

Tim Keller has written a recent book *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*.

He writes in a similar article: 'let's say a person cheats on his income tax form. Why does he do that? Well, you say, because he is a sinner. Yes, but why does his sin take this form? Luther's answer would be that the man only cheated because he was making money and possessions—and the status or comfort from having more of them [his idol, his god]—more important than God and his favor. Or let's say a person lies to a friend rather than lose face over something she has done. In that case the underlying sin is making human approval or your reputation more important than ... Christ. The Bible, then, does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and a rare sin found only among primitive people). Rather, all our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are at root idolatry—something we make more important than God. There is always a reason for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires ... wrong attitudes and motivations are usually inordinate desires—forms of idolatry ... I ordinarily begin speaking about sin to a young, urban, non-Christian like this: "Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry.'"⁴

In James 4 there's several words for desires that become idolatrous:

- v. 1 'passions / pleasures / desires' -*hedonism*, seeking to be happy (repeated at end of v. 3 as wrong motive for selfish prayer)
- v. 2a 'you lust / desire' (Grk word used for good desires / wants, a very strong craving or desire for an object, usually good in itself)
- v. 2b 'you covet / envy' (Grk *zelo* – we get “zealous” from)
- v. 4 desire to be 'friend of the world,' i.e., deep love for things

We're so zealous for these things (comfort, quiet, kids behaving, compassion, congratulations for what we've done, kind words to us always, cars that stay in a lane other than ours on the freeway, quick and easy solutions to our struggles, etc.) that when we don't get them, we lose it, we fight and quarrel, if not verbally at least internally to begin with, and the lost internal battle goes outward.

Why are you so upset about the traffic? You answer “well, look at it! The traffic JUST makes me angry!” Really? How come this guy over here isn't angry; he's sitting in the same traffic? If traffic really caused of rage, everyone would be expressing rage right now, but many of them aren't. Some are smiling. Look at this lady over here, she's singing praises to the Lord w/ her iPod. Since other aren't responding like you, maybe it has more to do with you than the traffic.

James wants you to know your road rage is rooted in idolatry. God has not allowed you to drive today as king of the road, and He has shown you what's on the throne of your heart at that moment, and He has done it in grace, as a manifestation of the truth of James 4:6. What pride and god-playing to elevate *your desire* to drive a certain speed in *your lane* and never have to step on the brake or to yield to another driver! You need to yield to God that desire and humbly remember God is God and you are not! He's in control and you are not, and anytime you drive at all without dying on the road is an unguaranteed and undeserved mercy He owes no one, ever. The end of v. 2 says “you do not have because you do not ask.”

My application: driving home I had a desire for how a recent night should go. I remembered v. 2 about asking God so I prayed to God about my desires. I asked God and also asked for His help not to elevate that desire but to have the attitude of how I can serve, and if He granted my other desires that evening, that's great grace, but if He has other plans, that's ok, too, “Lord, just help me honor You tonight.” In His grace God granted some of my desires as well that night, and I had to wonder how many times I had not because I asked not. Psalm 37:4 promises if we truly delight ourselves in the Lord alone, He will give us the desires of our heart. Not selfish desires; God gives us new desires in our heart that God will grant.

Seeking delight or pleasure isn't wrong; the problem is seeking it in the wrong place, in anywhere other than our all-satisfying God. And Jas. 4:3 warns to those whose functional god eclipses the real God, even when they pray to the real God, they'll ask in a wrong way, with a wrong motive, for their pleasures, not God's pleasure.

The verb “ask” in Jas. 4:3 is in the Grk middle voice, meaning “ask *for yourself*” (different form than the proper asking at end of v. 2).

Self-centered prayer is a contradiction in terms, but many foolishly and frequently see God as a genie to grant them their wishes rather than a Lord who calls us to die to self and deny family, friends, forsake all, and even hate our own self, pick up a cross and follow. Self-denial, not self-fulfillment is a path to true pleasure (Ps 16:11, see also v. 8 how we must continually set God before us mentally).

God is not the means to an end, the vehicle to obtain what we want (good things that we over-prioritize and even idolize). God's not the means to our end; He puts an end to our means to graciously point us back to Him, the only reality that will ever satisfy our soul

James warns us not to pray with an unchanged heart for what we want; we should ask for God to change our heart and our wants. Don't be like 2 Kings 17:41 (NIV): "*Even while these people were worshipping the Lord, they were serving their idols.*" James 1:6-8 has already warned about prayer with divided loyalty or double-mindedness. Part of proper asking/praying is recognizing where our heart is prone to wander from the first and greatest commandment, where our inordinate desires tend to idolatrous demands, where our prayers to God even are still too much about our gods of this age. Ask God's help, not to get your pleasures, but to keep your pleasures in their proper place, subordinate to God.

Remember Psalm 37:4 and pursue your delight in God!

An important self-examining prayer for Christians in conflict is: "God help me see what personal desire am I trying to protect or to gain? Why is this thing I such a big deal to me? Am I desiring my preferences, pursuits, and pleasures more than seeking to please you, God?" The Word of God is a mirror in James 1; pray as you read for God to show you where it reflects sin within you. Hebrews 4:12 says Scripture gets to thoughts and heart motives, so I want to apply its terms in trying to discern the intents and meditations of my heart (am I being a lover of self, lover of pleasure rather than lover of God, etc.)? If my desires are ruling me, I must pray for God's grace to transform them and turn me from idols to serve the true and living God and not any lesser things. *Look at Psalm 86.*

We should ask God's help to identify and mortify sinful patterns in our thinking, taking thoughts captive, being transformed by the renewing of our mind to please God rather than self. This is where fundamental and lasting biblical change takes place, at this level.

Ask God's help to see your heart's disloyalty or disunity with God, then pray Psalm 86:11b "... *Unite my heart to fear Your name.*"

James 4:3 says it's possible to ask the Lord for something but have a wrong inner motive, coveting, craving things for our own selfish ambition/desires. Luke 12 (NKJV) gives an example of this:

¹³*Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."* ¹⁴*But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?"* ¹⁵*And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness ..."* ¹⁶*Then He spoke a parable to them [the man who wanted to build bigger better barns – listen to his idols in v. 19b] "... **take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.**"* ²⁰*But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'*

²¹ “So is he who lays up **treasure for himself**, and is not rich toward God.” ²² Then He said to His disciples, “Therefore I say to you, **do not worry** about your life ...
 ... ³⁰ For all these things the nations of the world **seek after**
 [temporal, food, drink, clothing, worry about tomorrow], and your Father knows that you need these things. ³¹ But seek the kingdom of God [in other words, first=pre-eminent importance] ...
³⁴ For **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

I hope seeing that theme weaving thru Scripture helps you see yourself in James 4. In the parallel passage in Matthew’s gospel in this context, Jesus added that no man can serve two masters (can’t love two lords); those who try to have two lovers spiritually are rebuked in Jas 4:4: *You adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?*

Being a friend of the world, being too friendly with the world, is a serious sin. We are in the world, but not to be of the world. We are not to love it with *agape* love, not to lust after or long strongly for its things. Live in the world, not for the world, or like the world.

1 John 2:15-16 *Do not love the world nor the things in the world ... all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life ... the world is passing away, and also its lusts* [same desires in James 4:2]

Confessions of Augustine: ‘He loves Thee too little Who loves anything together with Thee, Which he loves not for Thy sake.’⁵

Adultery is strong language for our strong desires in v. 4. Our sins that are more subtle to us this verse says are more serious to God and more deadly to us. Our “respectable sins” are reprehensible. Spiritual idolatry is spiritual adultery, because believers are in a covenant relationship with the Lord like a bride to a groom. Our running off to the world’s refuges instead of Christ is like an affair.

Jesus spoke of very religious Jews as a “wicked and adulterous generation,” because they were spiritually unfaithful, not devoted exclusively. They loved men’s approval rather than God’s. They tried to share affection for God’s righteousness with their own, love for His law *and loving man-made* laws, traditions, religion.

James calls his Jewish readers “adulteresses” (feminine, but not all translations use the feminine form) using imagery of OT Israel and Israel’s covenant relationship to Yahweh as their husband, imagery that also applies to the NT church as the bride of Jesus Christ. If you have too close a friendship with someone in the world of the opposite sex who is not your spouse, your spouse who loves you will be rightly jealous of your affection. God’s that way even more and I think v. 5 further explains God’s jealousy for our affections.

In v. 5 the phrase “Scripture says/speaks” is followed by what’s not a direct word-for-word quote from an OT passage, but perhaps a loose paraphrase, or more likely a summary of the truth Scripture teaches in several places. Usually direct quotes of the OT have “it says” (or some equivalent) which we do see in v. 6, which *is* a direct quote. The translation of the 2nd half of v. 5 varies widely.

Not all your translations / study bibles / commentaries will agree, but I lean towards v. 5 as a reference to God's Spirit within us that is jealous for our whole heart, soul, mind. No competing loves or lords. All our affections, loyalties and loves God "envies" in a good sense for their exclusivity, which seems to fit the marriage analogy in v. 4. This also fits with the 10 Commandments we read earlier which use many of the same terms and concepts and reveal God as a jealous God whose love is too great to allow rivals / idols. His grace in v. 6 can help destroy the idols that would destroy us.

Do we practically live as if Jesus is the way to true joy, true peace, true pleasure, or do we seek it elsewhere? As spiritual spouse of His people the Lord tells us not to seek satisfaction/fulfillment with any other love. God knows that all other idols will not satisfy but will leave you empty.

Jeremiah 2:13 *"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.**"*

Isaiah 55:2 asks why invest your life in, live for, labor *"for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And **delight yourself in abundance.**"*³ *"Incline your ear and **come to Me.** Listen, that you may live; And I will make **an everlasting covenant with you ...**"*⁶ *Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near.*⁷ *Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man **his thoughts** [including idolatrous ones; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For **He will abundantly pardon.***

That's what James 4:6 and following is all about, abundant grace, abounding astounding amazing grace! Greater grace for those who humbly recognize and repent of sin inside and outside, for all who renounce idolatrous thoughts and worthless empty substitutes and delight instead in God above all! Jonah 2:8 warns (NIV) *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs."*

For the great need we have to deal with the desires within us even for good things, desires that are greater than they should be and are the source of our problem, see v. 6: *But God gives a greater grace!*

His grace is greater than what we have inordinately desired and put in His place. His grace is more powerful than the cravings we have for lesser things, grace that can replace the rivals and idols in our heart if we will do what this passage says and recognize them and repent of them and come humbly for grace (v. 6-10). Grace that will pardon and cleanse *within*, grace that is greater than all our sin!

Blanchard: "For daily need there is daily grace; for sudden need, sudden grace; for overwhelming need, overwhelming grace."⁶

But as the end of v. 2 says "you have not because you ask not." There's more than enough grace for any situation any of you face, the question is will you fall on your face and humbly ask for it, and then get up and live actions of humility and obedience to the Word.

If you've never truly repented and experienced life-transforming grace, your soul is in great danger, but God gives a greater grace to all who are humble, v. 6 says, as they do what verses 7-10 say. Come to Christ alone for cleansing and changing you from the inside out. Pray to Him:

“Lord, I know I’m a great sinner, and my need is greater than I can meet or ever pay or earn, but this verse says You give greater grace, so please give me that grace, though I don’t deserve it and never will. Grant me heart-changing grace, soul-saving grace, idol-destroying grace, desire-transforming grace. I know my works aren’t enough, I trust in the finished work of Jesus on the cross, dying the death I deserve for my sin.”

If you pray that and mean it, God gives greater grace and a greater place for all eternity with Him; fullness of joy, pleasures for evermore!

If you're a believer, you still need greater grace as well, each day. Ask for greater grace, “eye-opening grace” (Eph. 1:18, Ps. 119:18) to see how big your sin problem is, and how much bigger grace is.

David Powlison writes in his book *Seeing with New Eyes*: ‘One of the joys of biblical ministry comes when you are able to turn on the lights in another person’s dark room....I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt, self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1-3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts. Why do you fight? It’s not “because my wife/husband...”—it’s because of something about you. Couples who see what rules them—cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life—can repent and find God’s grace made real to them, and then learn how to make peace.’⁷

The good news, the great news of the greater grace God gives in v. 6 has been summarized this way: ‘When the world competes for our love for God, resulting in our divided loyalty, God does not immediately cast us off but continues to give “more grace” ... literally, “greater grace” ... His grace works in them the desire and ability to surrender completely to God’s love and to serve Him with their whole heart. This brief statement has been called “one of the most comforting verses in Scripture.”’⁸

Annie Johnson Flint set this truth to song with these words:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men,
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again.

Romans 5:20 (KJV) ... *but where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.*

¹ F. Samuel Janzow, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 13.

² (Part X. XI) Excerpts from Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520).

³ Cited by C. J. Mahaney in "The Idol Factory," available at: http://www.metronorthpca.org/documents/idol_factory.pdf

⁴ <http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54.

⁶ Cited by Hughes, *James*, p. 178.

⁷ David Powlison, *Seeing With New Eyes*, p 151.

⁸ D. Edmund Hiebert, *James*, p. 234.