

Disruptive Friendship Pastor Morgan Murray West Valley Church

James 4:1-12 NRSV

4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 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 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."

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

When Someone Loves You Enough to Risk Offending You

I was having a very difficult time with the leaders in my church. My list of complaints and frustrations were long. In Kirk, I had found a sympathetic ear. He had been a pastor and seen the best and the worst of how church leaders could behave. Now that he was working for a ministry that helped pastors and their churches become more missionally effective, he was not only an executive coach for me. He was also a friend.

So after listening to me rant for several minutes on the patio our favorite lunch spot, Kirk interrupted me. "I hear ya, Morg. But I need to ask you a question: Will you allow me to love you enough to risk offending you?"

It wasn't a rhetorical question. Before Kirk would go on, he needed me to give him permission to, as he liked to put it, "do a belly flop in my pool." He was about to say something that he

knew I didn't want to hear, but that I *needed* to hear. And because I trusted him, because I knew that he had the best intentions for me, and because *I really did want to hear the truth even if it was hard to hear*, I said yes. The conversation that followed changed everything about how I saw myself and approached my work with that church from that point on.

We might wish that James had asked this question before he launches into this scathing rebuke. But it seems clear to me that "permission to offend" had been asked for and given between this shepherd and his diaspora flock. While never denying the hardships and the persecutions they faced, James loves them enough to risk offending them. He does so because the stakes are just that high. They may be saying Jesus is Lord with their words but based on their actions, it's the World that calls the shots. This is what has brought them to a crisis point, not religious persecution! One can only wonder if James believed that this fledgling community was about to become extinct or, worse yet, become utterly irrelevant.

Extinction or irrelevancy-- As a pastor, and as a disciple, this is what keeps me up at night. When I think about the church in the United States, I wonder: If Jesus were to ask, *Will you let me love you enough to risk offending you?* what would we say?

Programs for Happiness

James' first readers are not very different from us. We human beings will do anything and everything in order to get power, security, and esteem for ourselves. Thomas Keating called these efforts our "Programs for Happiness." They always fail.

This is what James means when he says his readers "do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." They have turned their prayer lives into programs for happiness. When our prayers only center on getting problems solved or our wishes fulfilled, we almost completely miss what prayer is really about. Prayer that works is prayer that embraces the opportunity to collaborate with God in Christ's work in the world. Prayer that leads to Real Presence isn't about getting God on the same page with us. It's praying *Thy Kingdom come*, while also saying in our hearts: *And my kingdom go*.

As harsh as James' rebuke feels, he isn't doing it to shame the church. He is speaking negatively in order to wake them up to a Grand Positive.

The Grand Positive

When I was in college, the pastor at the local Presbyterian church preached a series on the 10 Commandments. Knowing that many people think about the 10 Commandments in terms of the negative – all the "Thou Shalt Not's" – the preacher decided to remind us that each negative commandment could also be framed as a Grand Positive. For example, what might be the Grand Positive of "Thou shalt not murder?" It must certainly be, "Thou shalt see all human life as worthy of care and protection." The preacher's point was: When we are so busy doing the positive, we won't have to worry about not doing the negative!

It feels to me that we should take a similar approach to this text. James isn't pulling any punches with his listeners – calling them murderers and adulterers because they quarrel with each other and covet what other people have. He wants to wake them up and instill a sense of urgency. And urgency was surely needed then, just as it is now.

Unfortunately, we have spent so much time using the concept of Sin as a way of judging, shaming, excluding, or controlling ourselves and others that James' *thou-shalt-nots* fall flat. If we tune them out or rationalize them away, how much more will our culture do so? I wonder how far I got into reading our text before you noticed your mind drifting, your eyes glazing over, your body tensing up! So before we go any further, let's notice the Grand Positive that compels James to write as he does.

Here's the Thou-Shalt-Not:

Thou shalt not make friends with the World.

Last week we unpacked what James and the Apostle Paul teach to be the three sources of evil: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil. We learned that, in our modern terminology, we can replace "the World" with "the System." Don't get too cosy with a system creates a never-ending craving for more, for bigger, for better. Don't buy into a system that *inspires* you to *conspire* against your neighbor.

So here's the Grand Positive:

Thou shalt cultivate a deep friendship with God.

What does this look like? James draws on Exodus 20:5 and elsewhere when he says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." Friends of God are able to perceive God's passionate desire for them and turn toward it. James quotes Proverbs 3:34, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humility is posture that makes receiving grace possible. Indeed, God's friends have become so accustomed to grace and so aware that ***it is all grace*** that they don't feel the need to judge themselves or their neighbors. They just aren't interested in the constant comparing and competing anymore. Can you think of anything more disruptive to American culture than that? They have washed their hands of greed and corruption, keeping their hearts focused only on receiving what God provides instead of what they can grab for themselves. If sin is *wanting the right things in the wrong way*, then they have turned away from sin by only wanting God's best, wanting it God's way, and patiently waiting on God's timing.

Our nation has lots of *Fans* of God, but not near enough *Friends*. There are lots of people who want God's favor, but don't share God's values. Our nation needs Christians who love what God loves, and have their hearts broken over what breaks God's heart. Our nation needs Christians who are awake to the influence of the World, The Flesh, and the Devil on their lives, who recognize that that even good people can be caught up in bad systems. The world needs Christians who are compassionate to people but hard on institutions. The world needs Christians who, in

all the small ways, resist the glittering false images of the devil and instead pursue the Real Presence of God.

I'm afraid that the first prayers we need to pray are the ones James calls for: Prayers of Lament. America is never going to be the nation God intends it to be until God's people have their hearts broken over what it has become. Humble yourself before the Lord, James says. Why? Because only then can you know what it's like to be lifted up! Dear friends: Be friends of God!
Amen.