



James 4

Here is an apocryphal story about God and St Francis strolling around Heaven one day:

GOD: St. Francis, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there in the England? What happened to the dandelions, violets, thistle and stuff I started eons ago? I had a perfect, no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honeybees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colours by now. But all I see are these green rectangles.

ST. FRANCIS: It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. The Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers weeds and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

GOD: Grass? But it's so boring. It's not colourful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees, only grubs and sod worms. It's temperamental with temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

ST. FRANCIS: Apparently so, Lord. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

GOD: The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

ST. FRANCIS: Apparently not, Lord. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it, sometimes twice a week.

GOD: They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay?

ST. FRANCIS: Not exactly Lord. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

GOD: They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

ST. FRANCIS: No, sir -- just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

GOD: Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

ST. FRANCIS: Yes, sir.

GOD: These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

ST. FRANCIS: You aren't going to believe this, Lord. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

GOD: What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stoke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. Plus, as they rot, the leaves form compost to enhance the soil. It's a natural circle of life.

ST. FRANCIS: You'd better sit down, Lord. The Suburbanites have drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

GOD: No. What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter and to keep the soil moist and loose?



ST. FRANCIS: After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something which they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

GOD: And where do they get this mulch?

ST. FRANCIS: They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

GOD: Enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?

ST. CATHERINE: Dumb and Dumber, Lord. It's a real stupid movie about ...

GOD: Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.

I have come to the conclusion that my loving heavenly Father does indeed have a sense of humour. For I can almost see the twinkle in his eye and he laughs with that gentle non-destructive approach when he looks at some of my life and behaviour. For so often in real terms I do stupid things and often get things wrong in His Kingdom here on earth.

But in the start of the passage tonight I believe if the Lord was saying it he would be speaking with tears in his eyes.

The first part verses 1 to 5 I have called the Causes of all our troubles.

For James first asks the question. *"What cause fights and quarrels?"* Sitting in this building as a group of people called the church, we could easily give a very short one word answer. And this would be **sin**. The problem is that if we try to talk to those outside this building who do not come to church they won't understand it. When we try to communicate the amazing and wonderful really good news of Jesus that we call the gospel; we may struggle. For so often we will use the language of our faith and the church. They will most likely completely miss-understand this word sin. For certain Sunday papers will often have a headline such as **Actress Reveals her life of Sin**.

So they tend to associate sin with sexual misdemeanours or acts like murder. But we as Christians fully understand sin. Well I am sure we do here at Meadgate with the Alpha course and all the excellent teaching. Nor sure about some sections of the church, but no names mentioned.

I read the magazine Christianity every month. Not long ago was an article dealing with how to communicate or share the good news of Jesus. It pointed out that it was all too easy to use words like sin, let alone words like redemption and salvation. It had a table of such words and alternative words we could use. For sin it suggested selfishness or self-centredness. And this is not too bad for at the heart of much sin is selfish and self-centredness.

I was thinking once about the psychology of why Lucifer fell from his position. And it was his self centred approach that was the cause. He looked at God and he wanted to be like him. He wanted to have God's power and glory. Whereas all creation, whether angels, humans or animals should be God centred. He is the one who has the power and the glory. We should be looking away from ourselves towards him and worship him. That is to express amongst other things what worship means.



But here James says, *You desire but do not have, so you kill*. So it is the fact that we desire or indeed to use the word from the commandments that we covet those things we don't have. It is no surprise therefore that Paul writing to young Timothy says:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. 1 Timothy 6:10 (NIV)

So again we are back to desiring something in this case money. There is nothing wrong with money in itself. But not if we desire it just for itself, or as a means of power and status.

Before I retired, I worked in an IT Department. General most people in IT departments are young and men. I often why in my sixties, I was working on all this high technical stuff amongst such men. Often there talk was of the latest electronic gadget that had just come out. They all wanted and purchased the latest iPod mark 5 or HD Televisions. Often they had the current technology that was working perfectly ok.

I think one of the most pernicious thing on television are the advertisements. Especially many of the car advertisements. They don't tell me whether a car is economical and safe. No they convey an image. If I drive car 'XXX' then I will be a superman, women will be drawn to me or I will be somebody in the world. Doesn't that encourage desire for the car. So if it costs £50,000 I must have it. When a slightly smaller family car under £10,000 might do just a good job.

So often we as people or even as nations, desire those things we don't have. So as James says in verse 2, *'so we quarrel and fight'* I can't help wondering whether the reason we have gone to war in the Gulf region so often is because of the western nations desire for oil the modern 'gold' of industrial and developed nations. But I am not trying to get political but to reflect what James says.

We can of course become religious and start asking God for the new car or the new house etc... But then James says, *"When you do ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures"*

In this case we need to remember what Jesus said about asking or desiring within his kingdom:

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

Even as Christians our desires can be wrong and therefore James warns the early followers of Jesus of this dangerous area in our behaviour.

I must admit as you read James or hear it preached you can easily feel guilty or condemned. When we told to respect the poor and Mones talked about meeting other men in a pub. Or reaching out to those who are not say middle class. I had a slight feeling of how pathetic I am. I really am not putting much of James into practice.



But then we come to verses 6 through to 10. They are like the lighter filling in a thick and heavy sandwich. I have called this section: Come near to God

One of the concepts that shines like a golden thread through the New Testament are the concepts of free gift and Grace, that are so closely connected. So James writes in verse 6, these uplifting and encouraging words: *But he gives us more grace.*

When I feel a bit down I will turn to the beginning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. And I let such mind blowing sentence dwell in my mind such as *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love.* Before he started the vast creation of distance and space he already had you and me in mind. And the couple of verses I just love:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Some will say that my view of the gospel and the kingdom is too full of grace and mercy. That I don't pay sufficient attention to God's judgement and justice. So be it. But around me is a world and people that are being torn apart and dying. I don't deny God's justice and judgement. But I personally think what people need to hear about is God's love. Or if you like mercy and grace. Above extravagant and utterly amazing Grace. My main criticism of the church is not over doctrine or practice. But we have failed to communicate the message of God's overwhelming love for all. We have clouded it with language that is vague and full of waffle. Is not God loves you straight forward and simple enough. And as this practical letter reminds us we need to live it out and actually put it into practice. *William Booth wouldn't tell starving people that God loved them and could save them without also putting some food in their hands. And the Salvation Army is still doing that today.*

And hear James quotes proverbs when he says:

God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble and oppressed.

We need as it says, we need to submit ourselves to God. Is that such a hard thing. Come near to God and he will come near to us. In the story called the prodigal son, when the son starts toward the Father, when a long way off the Father runs to meet the son.

When we make a small and feeble effort to turn towards God, he comes running towards us with his arms of love wide open, and he will give us a big hug of love. We may need to grieve and mourn, yes even wail. Why do some Christians get all religious and complain when people cry out in church and shed tears. Or even for that matter laugh in delight at his rich love and grace. The grieving hear is not walling in self pity but a reflection of repentance. In a previous sermon I set this out as really turning towards God and going in his direction rather than the wrong one. So let us as we work our way through James that often will bring conviction and maybe a little bit of heaviness, read and re-read these words that invite us to Come near to God and be flooded with his presence and above all his Grace.



But the final verses return to practical matters. So verses from verse 11 to 12, I have called Commands of Love.

It is true that James starts with what not to do, when he writes *Do not slander one another*. But surely this is a practical outworking of love. When Jesus summed up the whole of the law he said:

He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself

Luke 10:27 (NIV - UK)

But as Paul points out the law is there to bring us to Jesus. But when we come to Jesus we are no longer under the law. Does that mean there are no rules. Well not in one sense. No longer are we under a set of rules out there. Does that mean we can continue in sin. Some will say my view of Grace and that there are no rules to obey is not only not Scriptural or Christian but will make us willing to sin. But hear what Paul writes as he expounds Grace. I just love Paul. So he starts chapter 6 of the letter to the Roman Christians by saying:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Romans 6:1-2

I think God does an amazing thing in since Jesus came and gave us His Spirit within us. Rather than having a law written externally on tablets of sin, he writes it on our hearts. And that law is summed up by the Royal law of Love.

Jesus said not only were we to love our neighbours, but even more revolutionary and harder to achieve we were to love our enemies. So we are supposed to love those who hate us and might kill us like some terrorists.

But Jesus only gave us one new commandment to write on our hearts. When he said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13:34 (NIV - UK)

How did he love us. He one man laid down his life for all. Where as the law of the terrorist is that one man or woman can kill many. But Jesus says to us Christians that we should lay down our lives for each other. Whilst we love all people including our enemies, our love for each of us, in Jesus, should be stronger and deeper.

One of the ways that Christians break this law of love is by slandering one another. We may not believe we slander but James says that it is when we speak against a brother or sister Christian. We may not think we do this. But Gossip is one of the ways we so often break this in the church. It is said that the church is the only army that stabs itself in the back. And we usually do this with words.



Often such hurtful gossip is wrapped up as a prayer request. As we pass on a message for prayer we share all the details that might embarrass and hurt the person being prayed for, if they think the whole church knows. Why do we need to spell out. God knows every aspect of their lives. It's like when some pray for the sick, they seem to act as a doctor and want to know every detail of the illness. He knows all our needs before we ask. All we need to say is bless and heal my brother or sister in Jesus name. Send the healing oil of the Holy Spirit upon you.

But we so easily pass on things that should be kept confidential or treated with respect. Let me give you a person example.

Sue & I went on an HTB Marriage Course, not here but at Rayleigh Baptist church. Some people queried why after 37 years of marriage we needed it. But we felt it was a bit like an MOT. On the course you listen to a talk on DVD and at various points you discuss just with your partner points arising out of the teaching. Sometimes things come up which you didn't realise. Sue shared with me that her time on the honeymoon was a disappointment, not because of what some one-track minds in the world would think. But when we were married in 1970, I was clinically depressed. And when we went on our honeymoon in Majorca I was suffering badly from depression. So instead of a fun time of walking in the sun, swimming and generally sharing in talk and fun. I was not very good. So I thought about this before God and said to Sue, let's have another honeymoon. We can go where ever you want to go. We just love the Channel Islands and Guernsey in particular. So she found an offer of 5 nights for the price of 4 in a lovely hotel.

I was walking out of the store one Sunday morning after Soaking Prayer one morning when someone said, Did you enjoy your second honeymoon in quite a loud voice. Now this truth was a small golden nugget of intimacy between Sue & me in our marriage. True it is not some dark or shameful secret. But bearing in mind how some people even Christians view a honeymoon it was not something we were going to broadcast around the church. We probably told a few close Christian friends here. But it hurt me in a small way that we pass round information so freely without any thought of hurt or what it might mean.

So James having clearly pointed out that the **cause of our problems is our sin**. Relieves this with the wonderful invitation to **Come close to God** and so be lavished in his Grace and wonderful presence. But finally reminds us of the **Command to Love**, but giving us above a practical outcome not to speak against each other. He has already majored on the destructive and un-controllable nature of the tongue in Chapter 3 already covered. So let us allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us these lessons from James.¹

¹ 3927 words - 22 to 32 minutes say 28 mins