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## **God Gives Greater Grace!**

### **James 4:4-6**

There is a radio commercial that I hear several times a week here in OKC. If you don't listen regularly to sports talk radio you probably aren't aware of it. Quite honestly, I can't even tell you what product or service is being promoted, but I do vividly remember the opening comments that are designed to grab the listener's attention. The spokesman says something along the lines of: "Few have mastered the art of name-calling." He then plays a recording of one particular local sports talk radio host who on occasion, when provoked, refers to people who call into his show as: "Sissies. Gutless Amoebas. Yard birds." Now, to be fair to this man, he doesn't describe all his listeners that way; just the ones who ask silly questions or attack him without reason.

In any case, I couldn't help but think of this radio commercial as I was reflecting on the opening words of James 4:4. Up until now James has spoken with deep, heartfelt affection about his readers.

He has referred to them as "brothers" on numerous occasions (1:2; 2:1, 14; 3:1, 10, 12) and even "dear brothers" (1:16, 19; 2:5) in three texts. That is why it comes as something of a surprise and a jolt when he describes them in James 4:4 as "***adulterous people***"! More literally, he uses the feminine plural of the word: "adulteresses"! I'll explain the reason for that in just a moment. But for now I simply raise the question of whether James has, for whatever reason, resorted to name-calling. Later in James 4:8 he will call them "sinners" and charge them with being "double-minded" (v. 8).

So what could possibly account for or justify the use of such inflammatory language as this? It's bad enough to call someone a sissy or a gutless amoeba or a yard bird. But to accuse certain members in a local church of being "adulteresses" is something else altogether! What has happened that would lead James to speak this way? And could it be that we ourselves might behave in such a way that we too are deserving of this charge?

To help us understand what is going on, let's back up a bit and remind ourselves what has been said in the first three verses of this chapter.

### *Selfishness (vv. 1-3)*

In vv. 1-3 James boldly and pointedly identifies the underlying cause not only of the squabbles and fights and division among these Christians but also the ill-will that follows: things such as bitterness and resentment and unforgiveness and the temptation to get revenge. That cause he identifies in v. 1 as “your passions” that “are at war within you” (v. 1b).

We looked closely at this last week and discovered that the relational problems that occur in the church and in marriages and in all our interactions with other people are merely the visible symptoms of a spiritual disease that goes much deeper. That disease is called ***selfishness***. We “desire and do not have,” says James (v. 2a). We “covet and cannot obtain,” so we “fight and quarrel” (v. 2b). So what's the underlying cause of our sin and relational dysfunction? Simply this: ***selfish desires and passions that are frustrated and go unsatisfied.***

I briefly pointed out last week how this relates to prayer, and it clearly does as James makes the connection in vv. 2b-3 – “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

It's as though James says, “You hunger for satisfaction, but are seeking it in the wrong place. Why not try prayer to God?” If they say they do pray, he replies: “Yes, but when you finally do go to God for help ***you ask him to give you things so you can enjoy things more than him.*** You say: ‘God, please provide me with things to enjoy ***more than I enjoy you.*** Give me whatever I need so that I can be satisfied with everything ***other*** than you.’” In sum, here is what James is saying:

“If you don't have what you think you need it is because you don't come to God and ask him for it. And when you do come and ask you pray with wrong motives. You want God to give you things so that you might use them to satisfy your selfish desires. You don't pray for what you need to experience more of God, or so that you might be less selfish and more giving, or so that you might be a blessing to others. In order to get what you selfishly want and covet and desire you turn to God and ask him to supply it.”

This is stunning. James portrays men and women wanting something (or someone) that satisfies, and then coming to God not because ***he*** satisfies, but only to ask him for the means to get

*something else*. Once we get it we turn away from God to find our satisfaction in whatever thing he gave us. This is why James will describe people in the next verse as “adulterous” (v. 4a)!

Allow me to repeat what I said last week. *James portrays God as our heavenly spouse to whom we come asking for money to pay for a visit to a prostitute or to purchase gifts for a mistress!* “God is our husband,” says John Piper, “and the world is a prostitute luring us to give affections to her that belong only to God” (*A Hunger for God*, 74).

### *The Theology and Role of Prayer (vv. 2b-3)*

Last week I only briefly touched on what James says here about prayer, so today I want to back up a bit and look again at James 4:2b-3.

This passage is a stinging indictment of *presumption* in the Christian life. You are probably tired of me saying this by now, but it warrants constant repetition: ***Don't ever expect God to do for you apart from prayer what he has promised to do for you only through prayer.*** Sadly, almost no one, myself included, pays attention to this principle.

We sinfully and arrogantly presume that God will provide whatever we need even if we ignore and neglect the means that God has ordained by which he is pleased to grant us what we need. Once again, the mistake we typically make is in forgetting that ***God does not accomplish his ultimate or final will apart from intermediate steps or means.*** If you want a steak prepared medium well, you must actually take steps to cook it. Merely wanting it medium well or declaring it to be such will not make it so.

Perhaps you'd prefer a biblical example. Consider Paul's perspective on evangelism and salvation in Romans 10.

“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:13-17).

Here we see that we can never simply assume that if God wants someone saved they will be saved regardless of the response of other Christians to take the gospel to them and share it verbally. Faith is required for salvation. And if there is to be faith there must be a message proclaimed. And if there is to be a message proclaimed there must be people who go to the lost of the world and make known the gospel of Christ.

We must never lose sight of the crucial, indispensable role that prayer plays in God accomplishing his purposes. Our problem is that we are happy to acknowledge that prayer may be crucial, but *we don't believe it is indispensable*. We say to ourselves:

“Hey, I'm happy to pray when I have the time and when I feel inspired and energized to do so. But if I fail to ask, God will eventually give it to me anyway. It may take a while. He'll be patient and wait for me to ask him. He'll even hold out to the bitter end. But he's God. He's good and compassionate and generous. And he won't let my dereliction of duty in failing to pray get in the way of bestowing on me and others the things we need most.”

***There are things that you don't have for no other reason than that you failed to ask for them.*** That doesn't mean that merely asking will always guarantee that you get them. There are other reasons that may account for why your prayers don't appear to be answered in the way you had hoped.

For example, we may ask God for something we believe to be good and godly, but he knows far better than we do that such things would be damaging to our spiritual walk and relationship with him. When I pray and ask God for something, I would much prefer to trust his wisdom as to whether or not it is best for me than to trust my own judgment.

This raises the question of whether God ever actually says “No” to our requests. Whereas most would say, “Yes, he often says ‘No’,” I'm not so sure. ***When it comes to the children of God there is no such thing as “unanswered” prayer.*** We must have confidence from the start that our heavenly Father, whose wisdom is infinite and pure, always reserves the right to respond to our petitions for help in what he knows to be the best way and at the best time. Thus, J. I. Packer insists that “when we speak of unanswered prayer, we often mean not answered according to the terms of our asking. But to call that ‘unanswered’ is misleading and irreverent” (*Praying*, 58).

God always reserves the right to answer the requests he knows we *should* have made in regard to a particular need rather than the one we actually did make. To conclude that God is not answering your prayers unless he matches his answer precisely to the terms of your original request is wrong-headed.

We must learn to think of prayer less in terms of a manipulative means of getting from God what we want and more as *the means by which God gives us the good things that he purposes to give but that we are not always in a fit condition to receive*. Let me give you a personal example.

In 1998 Mike Bickle announced that he would soon resign his position as Senior Pastor at Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City. He believed God was calling him to start what is now known as the International House of Prayer. I was as certain as certain can be that God's will was for me to be the next Senior Pastor of the church. So that is what I prayed for, and I prayed fervently and sincerely, and I hope with humility. And it never happened. At the time I thought it *should* have happened. I don't believe it didn't happen because I wasn't qualified or called or sufficiently committed to that local church. But it wasn't until several years later that I realized that what appeared to me at the time to be a "No" from God in response to my prayer was in fact God saying: "Hold on, buddy. Yes, you could do this. But I have something ahead that you could do even better. It isn't the right time for you to serve the church in this way."

As things turned out, I ended up on the faculty at Wheaton College teaching theology and historical theology. And if God had instead answered my prayer the way I thought he should have answered it, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be your pastor at Bridgeway. So, was my prayer **un**answered? No. It seemed at the time as if it were. But God chose to answer it in a different way at a different time in a different place at a different church, and all for the better!

We must also remember that any notion that our prayers coerce God into doing something on our behalf that he otherwise knows not to be in our best interests is to twist and turn the biblical teaching in a direction never intended by its author. Says J. I. Packer:

"God's **yes** is regularly a case of 'Your thinking about how I could best meet this need was right'; his **no** is a case of 'Not that, for this is better'—and so is really a yes in disguise!—and his **wait** (which we infer from the fact that though we have asked for action, nothing yet has changed) is a case of 'Wait and see; I will deal with this need at the best time in the best way. Whether or not you will be able to discern my wisdom when I do act, that is what in fact I am going to do. Keep watching, and see what you can see'" (*Praying*, 173-74).

What I'm arguing for is that when we pray in confidence that God has our best interests at heart, when we pray with a robust faith in his goodness and greatness, and when we humbly pray with expectations that are biblically authorized, all, mind you, with his ultimate glory in view, his answer to us is never going to be altogether negative. *From God's perspective he is always responding positively*. It may be that his answer is of a sort that we actually receive something

better than what we had requested. Or it may be that the timing of its fulfillment is different from what we had hoped but clearly more suitable to our need.

We should also be open to recognizing a positive answer, though it appears negative to us, in which God's strategy for fulfilling our petition *takes such a mysterious turn* that it doesn't look like an answer at all. Be assured that it is an answer. Be assured that though we may not comprehend what God is doing there may yet be a day when he enables us to see the greater good that his plan has accomplished.

#### *Why Does James Call these People Adulteresses? (v. 4)*

Why does James use the feminine *"adulteresses"*? In the OT God's people Israel was frequently called God's "wife" and "bride" (see Isa. 54:5-6). Thus all sin and especially idolatry were portrayed as an act of infidelity or adultery (Jer. 3:7-10, 20; Ezek. 16:38; 23:45). God's people are described as "playing the whore" (Hos. 9:1). Sin is spiritual fornication.

Since the Church is also called the Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-24) James is correct in his description of those who, as it were, *jump into bed with the world*, as "adulteresses". If you don't find God, your heavenly husband, attractive and appealing and satisfying but instead turn to the world as your lover and seek in its arms rather than in his the satisfaction you desire, you have committed spiritual adultery. To be "a friend of the world", then, is to commit spiritual fornication. But what does it mean to enter into *"friendship with the world"* (v. 4)?

First of all we need to understand what James means by the *"world."* He doesn't mean the physical earth itself or the natural creation or the world of human beings. He has in view an ethos of life and belief; the "world" is the collective system of unbelief and rebellion against God: its institutions, values, customs, organizations, etc. This is what the apostle John had in mind when he said, "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19b).

O.K., so what does he mean by the word *"friend"*? He doesn't mean a casual acquaintance. We speak of people we barely know as "friends" but in the ancient world of the Bible it meant something far more intimate and intense. In the world of James and his readers it would describe people who share all things in a spiritual and physical unity.

In what ways had they become "friends of the world"? We don't need to speculate. Earlier statements in this epistle give us the answer. They had befriended the world by their prejudice and discrimination (chap. 2), by their critical and judgmental use of the tongue (chap 3), by their

bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:13-18) and by elevating their own selfish desires above serving and sacrificing for others (4:1-3).

If the world and its ways and practices becomes the object or focus of one's affections and energy, then God becomes the object and focus of your enmity. The enmity is not primarily on God's part as directed against us. It is we who by a divided loyalty commit spiritual adultery with the world and thus set ourselves against God. And note that this is a deliberate and calculated decision on the part of the individual. The word translated "wishes" is better rendered "counsels" or "determines" or sets oneself up to be a friend of the world. This is not an involuntary sin. It isn't that we are duped. We know what we are doing.

But to do this does in fact provoke God as well. We know this because he will say in v. 6 that he "opposes the proud." Unfettered pride is spiritual adultery. It is to trust in our abilities and wisdom rather than in God's. And for God to "oppose" someone is for him to become their enemy.

What is "worldliness" or being a friend of the world? Among other things: (1) Acceptance of its values as superior or preferable to those of God's Word. (2) We embrace its language. (3) Its standard of success becomes ours rather than judging success or failure by God's Word. (4) Its criteria for determining virtue and value are embraced. (5) Its moral vision or concept of what is good and evil, and why, is embraced. (6) In view of vv. 1-3, James may specifically have in mind the world's view of desire and covetousness, the passion for and pursuit of whatever will satisfy our selfish desires.

#### *God is a Jealous Lover (v. 5)*

So why does God care so much about whether you and I are friends with the world? What does it matter? Why go to such lengths as to charge Christians with spiritual adultery who flirt with the world or even sleep with the world? That seems a bit extreme, doesn't it? No, not once you realize that God is a jealous lover!

The translation of v. 5 is extremely difficult and controversial. Here are the options:

- (1) God yearns jealously for the [human] spirit that he caused to dwell in mankind at creation.
- (2) God yearns jealously over the [Holy] Spirit that he has made to dwell in us at conversion.

(3) The Holy Spirit whom God has given to indwell us at conversion jealously yearns [for the full devotion of our hearts].

(4) The [human] spirit that he caused to dwell in us is one of jealousy and envy.

I think any one of the first three is possible, but not the fourth. The point, then, is that ***God is jealous for the full and undivided devotion of your heart. God will brook no rivals in his love relationship with you.***

When we were in Hebrews you may recall that I preached an entire sermon on the fact that God is a jealous God. I don't want to preach it again, so let me quickly summarize what I said.

We must begin with the understanding that ***jealousy can be both good and bad***. Jealousy can be driven or motivated both by holy and righteous motives as well as unholy and unrighteous ones. Jealousy can be a sign of both sinful weakness and strength, of both wounded pride, on the one hand, and genuine love, on the other. Jealousy is sometimes the expression of an excessively possessive spirit, and at other times the fruit of care and concern for the welfare of the one who is loved. Jealousy is often the result of deep insecurity in a person's soul, but also a reflection of commitment and devotion to the person that you love.

We all know this, and we've all undoubtedly felt the surge and sensation of jealousy in our hearts at some time or another during the course of our relationship with certain individuals. My guess is that we often times can't even discern whether or not our jealous rage is righteous or wicked. The so-called "green-eyed-monster" is on occasion a cute, cuddly pet, while at other times it can be a vicious and carnivorous creature that devours and destroys. That is why Christians are often stumped and confused when they read all through the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, that ***God is a jealous God!*** If that sounds offensive to you, consider these texts:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:4-6).

Remarkably, it isn't to his righteousness or holiness or justice or majesty or sovereignty or any other attribute that God appeals, but to his jealousy.

"For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, *whose name is Jealous*, is a jealous God" (Exod. 34:14; see Num. 25:11).

Holy jealousy is central to the fundamental essence of who God is. Jealousy is at the core of God's identity as God. Jealousy is that defining characteristic or personality trait that makes God God. Whatever other reasons you may find in Scripture for worshiping and serving and loving God alone, and there are many of them and they are all good, paramount among them all is the fact that *our God burns with jealousy for the undivided allegiance and affection of his people*. Here are a few other texts:

"You shall not go after other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are around you – for the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God – lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth" (Deut. 6:14-15; cf. 4:24; 29:20; 32:16,21; Joshua 24:19; see also 1 Kings 14:22; Psalm 78:58; Ezek. 16:38,42; 23:25; 36:5ff; 38:19; 39:25; Joel 2:18; Nahum 1:2; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Zech. 1:14; 8:2; Ps. 79:5).

God is an emotional being. He experiences within the depths of his being genuine passions, contrary to those who would affirm the doctrine of divine impassibility. The Bible is replete with references to divine joy, mercy, love, compassion, kindness, hatred, just to mention a few. But what of jealousy? The fact that we balk at the suggestion that God might be truly jealous indicates that we have a weak, insipid view of the divine nature. *At the very core of his being, in the center of his personality is an inextinguishable blaze of immeasurable love called jealousy.*

*To say that God is jealous certainly does not mean that he is suspicious because of some insecurity in his heart. This kind of jealousy is the result of ignorance and mistrust.* Such is surely not true of God. Nor does it mean he is *wrongfully envious* of the success of others. Jealousy that is sinful is most often the product of anxiety and bitterness and fear. But surely none of this could be true of God. Sinful jealousy is the sort that longs to possess and control what does not properly belong to oneself; it is demanding and cares little for the supposed object of its love.

Divine jealousy is a zeal to protect a love relationship or to avenge it when it is broken. *Jealousy in God is that passionate energy by which he is provoked and stirred and moved to take action against whatever or whoever stands in the way of his enjoyment of what he loves and desires.*

*The intensity of God's anger at threats to this relationship is directly proportionate to the depths of his love.*

James wants us to understand that ***God is jealous for the devotion and wholeheartedness and loyalty and love of his bride, his people.*** Just as a husband cannot be indulgent of adultery in his wife, so also God cannot and will not endure infidelity in us. What would we think of a man or woman who does not experience jealous feelings when another person approaches his/her spouse and threatens to win their affection? We would regard such a person as deficient in moral character and lacking in true love.

*God Gives Greater Grace (v. 6)*

But this all feels a bit overwhelming. How can I possibly live a life that won't provoke God to jealousy? How can I possibly measure up to his expectations of me? The answer is given in v. 6.

The thought is that God's grace more than supplies what is needed for people to remain faithful to him and not to become friends with the world. God's demand for loyalty is huge and all-encompassing. But the good news is that his grace is sufficient to enable us to remain true to him. When he says that his grace "is greater" he means greater than the allure and appeal that comes from the world. God requires the full devotion of our hearts and provides us with the grace to embrace and fulfill it.

And what, precisely, is this "grace" of which James speaks? ***Grace is the living, abiding, energetic, always active, life-changing, sin-killing, pulsating power of God himself at work in the heart of a Christian.*** And to those who humble themselves rather than give themselves to self-exaltation and sinful pride, God promises to give even more grace than we already experience by virtue of having been born again. This is a rock-solid and utterly unbreakable promise of God. If you seek him in humility, if you bow in submission to his authority and devote yourself to his praise and honor, he will fill you, flood you, overwhelm and empower you with even greater and unimaginable waves of grace upon grace.

You ask, ***how is this grace "greater"? In what sense is it "more"?*** It is greater than all our sin, greater than all our shame, greater than all our failures, greater than any power on earth, greater than any power in heaven, greater than Satan and his demonic hosts, greater than the influence of nations and armies and nuclear arsenals. It is more than enough to sustain you and satisfy you, more than all that this world can provide, more than money can purchase, more than anyone else

can give, and so much more than you can ever imagine or envision in your wildest dreams or hopes.

Are you weak? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater than your weakness. Are you sick in your body? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater than physical affliction. Are you depressed? Ask for more grace, a grace that is greater than your despair and despondency. Are you feeling hopeless? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater than all the tragedies and disappointments that have caused you to lose sight of what he will do for his children. Is your marriage broken? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater than whatever division and anger and unforgiveness may exist in your relationship with your spouse. Are you in the grip of an addiction? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater than the power of alcohol or drugs or sex. Are you under the assault of temptation? Ask God for more grace, a grace that is greater in its power to help you resist than is the capacity of your flesh to succumb.