

Series: Faith that Makes a Difference

“Faith that Is Humble”

Introduction: One of the most prominent images the biblical writers use to describe our relationship with God is that of a marriage. “For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name,” the prophet Isaiah proclaims (54:4). And a bit later, “...as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (62:5). Jesus tells a parable about his return being like a bridegroom coming for his bride, a sentiment picked up and affirmed in the final chapters of the vision that is Revelation (Ma. 25:1; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9). In-between, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul describes the love that should be shared between husband and wife as like the love that should characterize the love between Christ, the groom, and the church, his bride (Eph. 5:21-33). This marital image reveals both the depth of love God has for us, as well as the way he is committed exclusively to us. It reveals that he not only wants us to follow him as a sheep would a shepherd, he want us not only to obey him as a citizen would a king, but he also wants us to enjoy him as we would the love of marriage.

Sadly, what we hear about this morning is our propensity to wander away from this love. James does not mince his words: “You adulterous people...” is his charge (v. 4). This “spiritual adultery” comes straight out of the prophets. As Jeremiah puts it, describing the idolatry of Israel: “But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me” (3:20). Parallel to this is Jesus’ description of those who have rejected him as “a wicked and adulterous generation” (Ma. 12:39; 16:4).

To be sure, these are hard words. No one likes to be called an adulterer, or to remain mired in an unfaithful relationship. Fortunately, James doesn’t leave us there. He helps restore us by first having us consider what causes us to wander, and then giving us directions for finding our way back. The key prescription in it all is found in humility, in having a faith that is humble.

I. What causes us to wander (vv. 1-5)?

A. The cause of our wandering from the loving embrace of God is that we are being lured by the embrace offered by the world around us. “Friendship with the world,” is how James puts it. The way of the world he highlights here is simply the way the world operates and behaves, the pattern of the good life that is held up for us, the things that we are supposed to pursue and long for and dream about, the way the world understands power. All that surrounds us and communicates to us, from the shopping malls we walk through, to the magazines we read, to the shows we watch, to the promotions that flood our email, lead us to, as James puts it, “spend what we get on our pleasures,” for our pleasures, we are led to believe, are where true happiness is found.

B. But as James taught us last week, the wisdom of the world doesn’t lead to happiness but disorder and every evil practice (3:16)! Accordingly, what we see as chapter 4 opens, is a picture of a broken marriage (though it also sounds like the temper tantrum of a two-year-old!), a picture of how that worldly wisdom leads to fights and quarrels among us as people, and then ultimately to a fracturing of our marriage relationship with God. Such flirtation with what the world has to offer affects even our prayer life as we end up praying for what we want, not what God wants. Not surprisingly, such flirtation arouses Gods jealousy, his desire that we be wholly devoted to him, not because he needs us but because he loves us and wants what’s best for our good, and also for the good of others.

II. How can we find our way back (vv. 6-10)?

A. So, how can we find our way back when we discover that we have been wandering into this ugly and broken territory of spiritual adultery? It begins with that little yet powerful theological word, but: “*But* [God] gives us more grace.” If grace—God’s undeserved favor—is what brought us into the marriage, if it’s what enabled us to enter that relationship with the living God, then ongoing grace is what’s going to sustain that relationship. And the good news is that God has got plenty of grace; there is more to go around, and he loves to dish it out! To access such grace, and to benefit from it, we need to tap into it. This process is somewhat like a tree that has been tapped for maple syrup. You can walk by the tree, stop in front of it, look at the bark and the leaves and recognize it as a maple tree, even take a nap under the tree, but until you tap into it, what flows from within will not do you any good. We tap into God’s grace through the key of humility which brackets what follows: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (v. 6), and “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up” (v. 10).

B. In between these brackets James gives us a pretty full picture of how we are to humbly submit ourselves to the Lord so that we might receive the grace he offers and have our relationship with him restored. There seem to be three sets of instructions.

1. Resist the devil and come near to God (vv. 7-8a). This means that we need to take the adversary, the spiritual power that seeks to lead us away from God and his purposes, the ultimate source of worldly wisdom (3:15), as we saw last week, seriously. Perhaps you’ve heard of the woman who brought home a very expensive dress she had just purchased. Her husband asked why she had bought it. She said, “The devil made me do it. I was just trying it on in the store and he said to me, *I’ve never seen you look better!*” To which her husband replied, “Why didn’t you say, ‘Get behind me Satan!’?” “I did,” the wife responded, “and he said I looked good from there too!” There are lots of devil jokes, probably because the whole thing makes us uncomfortable and we really don’t want to take him seriously. But James does and encourages us to as well, using a word, “resist,” from the military realm that encourages troops to stand fast in the face of an enemy attack. At the same time, James doesn’t want us to freak out, going on to remind us that if we draw near to God, if we resist the enemy by declaring his defeat by Jesus on the cross, this devil won’t hang around; he’ll know he’s been defeated by grace and he will flee.

2. Wash your hands and purify your hearts (v. 8b). Here, James is drawing from the ceremonial washing a priest would undergo before he could come into the presence of God in the Temple (Ex. 30:19-21). It was an act that signified the holiness and purity of God and the cleansing needed, even by a priest, to approach him, to acknowledge where he had been “double-minded,” befriending the world while also trying to follow God. That the cleansing James mentions is of the hands and the heart speaks to both an outer and inner cleansing that we need, a recognition of how we have sinned against God and befriended the world through both our deeds and our disposition, in both our doing and our thinking. Such an acknowledgment makes room for God’s grace to wash us clean and restore us to life with him.

3. Grieve, mourn and wail. And in case we missed it, change our laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom (v. 9). This is not a directive to go around all day long being miserable, though some of you, I know, grew up in churches like that. Rather, it’s a call to take our sin seriously and not pass it off as something inconsequential that God isn’t really bothered by and will just kind of forget, we hope. It’s a call, really, to lament, to be honest before God and one another, to acknowledge the pain and suffering of another that we in some way have participated in and helped bring about.

Those who have been writing about lament in recent years (cf. *Prophetic Lament*, Soong-Chan Rah), observe that the American church struggles with lament, in part because of our “can do” spirit. It’s a spirit that prefers a “muscular Christianity,” a faith that is always seeking to celebrate victory and the ways we believe we have conquered the world. But we also tend to avoid lament, Rah and others comment, because underneath it all we struggle with humility. We don’t like to acknowledge where we have been wrong or hurtful. Instead, we often prefer to skip right over Good Friday and head straight to Easter Sunday. But we can’t have one without the other; they must go together.

I think that these thoughts on lament offer us a challenging word, a word that can help surface those places where we have been flirting with spiritual adultery.

It’s a word that calls us as a nation not to put “make us great” on our t-shirts, but “give us grace” in our hearts. It’s a word that calls for God to give us grace to see that our nation was founded on the premise that all men were created equal, but that this really didn’t include those who had red, black, or brown skin, or women of any color skin, and how that reality has filtered down and affects so many so negatively and hurtfully, even today. We need to lament, to grieve, mourn and wail that tragic part of our history.

It’s a word that calls us as a church for God to give us grace to see the places and the times when the church has been, and maybe still is, quiet in the face of racism, or refusing to advocate for justice for all who have been created in the image of a marvelously diverse God. We need to lament, to grieve, mourn and wail, that sad reality.

It’s a word that calls us as individuals for God to give us grace to recognize where we have supported policies or politicians that are selfish at the core, that do not serve the common good but continue to discriminate against those who are different than us, but still those to whom God extends his kindness and compassion and hospitality, just as he has extended it to us. We need to lament, to grieve, mourn and wail, where we have been blind and need to see.

C. Perhaps through it all, this call from James for a faith that is humble comes out of that arresting parable that I’m sure he heard his brother Jesus tell more than once, that of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk. 18:9-14). The one who was able to lament, to grieve, mourn and wail, to see and acknowledge his sin, was the one whom God declared to be back in right and good “marriage” with him. Even more, God did not leave this one in his mourning and in his gloom but exalted him, restoring many-fold, I would imagine, his laughter and his joy.

May God help us learn, as a nation, as churches, and as individuals, such honest humility. Then, so humbling ourselves, may God by his grace not only bring healing to us, but, through us, to many others.