

Illus: As I begin my sermon this morning, I want to share a road rage story with you, but before I share mine, I want to give you a few moments to share yours. Take the next minute to turn to someone around you and share a story where your experienced, or exhibited, road rage.

The latest road rage incident I witnessed took place on Friday afternoon, just past the 200th exit on the #1 Highway. Anna and I were coming back from Chilliwack and when the HOV lane opened up, we merged left to avoid some of the traffic. There was one car about 50 metres in front of us, but moments later there were two.

A black Dodge Charger came ripping into the HOV lane, but immediately applied the brake—the driver in front of him wasn't travelling at his breakneck-speed. The Charger promptly swerved left, as though he was going to pass the car on the left hand shoulder, then he swerved right, but the lane to the right was now occupied by another vehicle. He swerved left again, then right, never more than a few feet from the other car's bumper.

When the lane to the right opened up, the Charger hit the gas, pulled alongside the slower moving vehicle, gave the driver a long glare, then rocketed forward, swerved back into the HOV lane, and hit the brakes hard. Thankfully an accident was avoided; moments later, the Charger took off.

When he drove away, I was immediately struck with two thoughts: **(1)** *That guy is such a clown;* and **(2)** *What must be happening in his life that is generating such anger?* There are likely a number of

things missing in this gentleman's life, peace and patience chief among them. But for this morning's purposes, what I want to highlight is his lack of "**restraint**". He was out of control, he acted impulsively, putting himself and the rest of us in danger. Unfortunately, rage, and the lack of restraint, isn't restricted to the road; it follows us everywhere we go because the problem isn't "*out there*" it's "*in here*".

This morning, we're going to continue in our preaching series through *James*. James was the younger, half-brother of Jesus, and shortly after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, James became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem.¹ The book of the Bible that now bears his name is actually a letter, written to Jewish Christians who had been scattered from Jerusalem due to persecution. The churches they belonged to were largely small, oppressed, and poor.

With pressures on every side, we can understand how—and why—these people had a difficult time getting along, but James understands that people without restraint are always in danger of destroying themselves and others. We're going to explore what James has to say in 4:1-12; if you have a Bible with you this morning—either paper or electronic—please turn there with me. If you are using the Blue Bible from the dead rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 979.

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you

¹ Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18.

ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

*4 You adulterous people,² don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.'*³

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

11 Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?"

I've entitled this morning's sermon *Restraint, Repentance, and Restoration*—the title is meant to be descriptive of what our text

addresses. And while I want to address each of these three elements, at a more basic level, our text can be broken down into two parts—James outlines the problem, and, offers a solution. Let's begin where James does, with the problem.

1. What's the Problem? (vs. 1-5, 11-12): Years ago now, on an icy, Winter's day, my father-in-law slipped while stepping off the curb, and his ankle exploded in pain; he went immediately to Lions Gate Hospital in order to seek treatment. We are so blessed to live in a country with both trained medical personnel and access to healthcare.

When a patient is blinded by physical pain, typically their first priority is stopping the pain; a doctor or nurse has a different priority. In order to manage our pain, they might administer morphine, but their priority is to determine the root cause. Once they diagnose a shattered ankle, they can address the real problem, not merely treat symptoms. I trust this analogy will help to shed light on what James writes.

The problems that James addresses has at least three layers. The first layer is plain for all to see—people at one another's throats, arguing, fighting, manipulating. This lack of restraint can happen in a friendship, marriage or family; it can happen on a sports team, or in a business; it also happens in churches.

The word-picture that James paints is stark—*fight, quarrel, battle, kill*. To quote John Motyer, James uses the language of war “not

² James follows the Old Testament prophets in likening the turning away from God to adultery (unfaithfulness) in a marriage; cf. Hosea 3:1.

³ Psalm 18:27; Proverbs 3:34, etc.

because there is no other way of saying it, but because there is no other way of expressing the horror of it.”⁴

Most of us fancy ourselves as problem-solvers. When someone does something wrong, we tell them to “stop it,” and pat ourselves on the back for offering such helpful advice. James’ churches were arguing and fighting; “*why don’t they just stop fighting?*”, we wonder. If it were that easy, the problem wouldn’t exist, or at the very least, it would be easy to solve. In most cases, there’s the problem we can see, and then there’s the problem beneath the problem.

After addressing the first-layer-problem, James reveals the second-layer-problem. Vs. 1-2 says, “*What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can’t get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them.*”

What is true in the medical field is equally true in relational environments; when we confuse symptoms with the root cause, the real problem remains unaddressed. The fighting is a problem, no question, but the deeper problem stems from the desires that rule our hearts. There’s nothing inherently sinful about desire in itself, but all of us have a sinful nature, and our desires are twisted by that nature.

I’ve said this before but the notion of “*the common good*” has largely

⁴ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, 141.

⁵ Motyer, 142.

disappeared from Western Culture; it has been replaced by a singular good, namely, “*what’s good for me.*” Motyer writes, “All our desires and passions are like an armed camp within us, ready at a moment’s notice to declare war against anyone who stands in the way of some personal gratification on which we have set our hearts.”⁵

We cannot address the first-layer-problem without acknowledging the second-layer-problem. The problem isn’t just **out there**—*she’s the problem; he’s the problem; they are the problem!* No, the problem isn’t just out there, the problem is also **in here**; our hearts, our selfish desires, are the problem.

But James isn’t finished, there’s a third-layer-problem that is rooted in how we relate to God (vs. 2-4). We are so focussed on getting what we want, we have little use for prayer, and if we finally get around to praying, it’s often little more than asking God to aid us in our selfish pursuits.

God hears every prayer we pray and He always answers but sometimes His answer is “No,” because our motives are wrong. One author writes, “Prayer itself...is defiled by the insistently self-centred heart, so that we must either cleanse our hearts or stop our prayers.”⁶ And this is where James is taking us—to the cleansing of our hearts, but there is one final charge against us.

Vs. 4. “*You adulterers! Don’t you realize that friendship with the*

world makes you an enemy of God?” Public problems, like fighting, always find their root in private causes, like self-interest. And here is the crux of the issue, it’s not that we care too little about others—though that they may true—it’s that we’ve removed God from the centre and the Self has been seated on the throne. When the Self takes centre stage, other people become a means to what we want, or a barrier to what we want. And if we are people of faith, we might even attempt to use God’s wisdom or power to serve our own ends.

James doesn’t mince words—it’s adultery, pure and simple. To push God off to the side, in order to pursue another love—be it love of self, or any other love—is to break our covenant vow. When we live with a primary commitment to self interest or self-promotion, we demonstrate an alignment—a friendship—with a world that has set its face against God. This kind of friendship turns us away from God; He doesn’t treat us like an enemy but we are no longer positioned to receive from Him.

Let me recap. *What’s the problem?* We act without restraint—we fight, quarrel, and hurt people around us. *Why?* There is something wrong with the desires our hearts; we are committed to Self above others, even Self above God. After revealing the problem, James points to a solution that is founded upon God’s grace. Let’s take a closer look at vs. 6-10.

⁷ The Voice Translation.

⁸ New Living Translation.

⁹ Cf. Romans 6:17-18; Jesus says the same thing in John 8:34

¹⁰ Romans 6:6-7.

2. The Solution (vs. 6-10) It’s important to note that the solution begins, and ends, with God. In vs. 6 we read, “*You may think that the situation is hopeless, but God gives us more grace when we turn away from our own interests.*”⁷ Vs. 10 says, “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour.*”⁸

The problems James reveals are real, they run deep, but our situation is far from hopeless—we are invited to fall into the never-ending grace of God. And it’s important that we begin with grace, any other starting place will lead in the wrong direction.

It’s not as though we can make our selves right, clean up our own lives, and earn God’s favour. We can’t. If it was as easy as stopping our own bad behaviour, we would have done it a long time ago. The Apostle Paul talks about Sin in terms of a sinister force at work within us, enslaving us with a power we can’t break.⁹ Until Sin is met with a greater power, we are powerless to break free. This greater power was demonstrated by God when Jesus died on the cross.¹⁰

When, with the Holy Spirit’s help, we turn from selfish interests to God, we are met with a grace that is greater, higher, deeper, than all of our failures. When we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will raise us up, remove our guilt, and cleanse us from shame. His grace knows no limit, His patience is beyond measure, and He continues to

pursue us until our last breath. There is always more grace than we have need.

“*Submit yourselves...to God,*” James writes. There’s no question that this is a command, but when we look beneath the surface we can see that this command has do with our identity. God has rescued us from sin and death, He’s given us new life, He calls us a son or daughter—we belong to Him. To “submit to Him” is to “stop resisting Him;” after all, God is not our enemy—He’s the One who loves us. Instead, we are called to actively resist our real enemy, the devil, who has nothing but destruction in mind for us.

In vs. 8 James writes, “*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*” James isn’t suggesting that God is absent until we are obedient, but rather, that our obedience opens us to God’s grace, forgiveness, and transformation. **God’s grace**, if we receive it, **leads to repentance**. God offers mercy and we turn to God; this turning away from sin—from self—to God is what the Bible calls repentance.

If you think about our current cultural milieu, repentance is the Bible’s alternative to the “Self-Help” movement. We are regularly told to believe in ourselves, love ourselves, promote ourselves, prioritize ourselves, and even indulge ourselves. We are invited to take control of our lives, after all, it is our life to live. We are told that we can be, and do, whatever we put our mind to; our potential is limitless. Tony Robbins writes, “We can change our lives. We can do, have, and be exactly what we wish.”

It’s not surprising that self-help thinking dominates the landscape; in the absence of God, there is nowhere else to turn but to the Self. James doesn’t tell us to take control of our life, as though we can

unlock the key to our own transformation. The witness of Scripture is consistent: **the Father creates; the Son redeems; the Spirit transforms**. We are not the major player in our own transformation, our life is the canvas upon which the Triune God paints.

James invites us to “*wash our hands and purify our hearts,*” and this phrase is explained by what comes next: “*Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*”

illus: Many of you know that I love to watch, coach, and play the game of soccer. And while I enjoy watching Manchester United and Bayern Munich, the Vancouver Whitecaps are my team. This past season Luke and I attended 10 or 12 games, we watched the rest on TV, and in the offseason we follow the player trades with interest. The Whitecaps season came to an end last Sunday; in spite of some good wins and flashes of brilliance, they weren’t strong enough to get into the playoffs.

This past week, as the players move into the offseason, the divided locker room is what’s making the headlines. The coach was recently fired, fans are clamouring for Lenarduzzi to be fired, and players are expressing their frustration. One of the local sports reporters offered an insider’s observation that struck me with force—**everyone is pointing the finger, but no one is taking responsibility**. Everyone see the problem, but no one will admit their part in the problem.

Are we any different? We are quick to recognize the brokenness of the world—war, arrogance, greed. But though we lament what is wrong with the world, we are quick to deny personal responsibility.

Given the exaltation of the Self, someone else needs to take the blame. If I could sum up the collective response of the individualist West, it would be with the following phrase: “*I’m not my own fault!*” We are quick to point the finger in blame, but slow to raise our hand and take responsibility. James reminds us that the problem isn’t just **out there**, the problem is also **in here**; our hearts, our selfish desires are the problem.

Fleming Rutledge writes, “*Something is wrong and must be put right.* When we feel in our bones, when we admit that something is wrong not only with the whole human situation in general but also with one’s own self in particular, then God is at work bringing us to the cross of Christ.”¹¹

Grieving is an important part of repentance; to grieve is to express sorrow over what has been lost. It’s appropriate to mourn what is broken in the world; it’s equally appropriate—and vital—to mourn what is broken in us. **Grace leads to repentance, and repentance leads restoration**; James writes, “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*”

Do you want to be released from guilt and shame? Do you want to be restored and transformed? Confession and repentance is a vital part of God’s prescribed path to transformation.

Conclusion: As I conclude this morning, I want to facilitate a time of silent confession and repentance. But before we turn to God in prayer, I want to offer one last thought.

All of us are on a continuum when it comes to a sense of our own broken desires or sinful behaviour. You may tend to externalize the problem, pointing a blaming finger at everyone but yourself; or, you may tend to internalize the problem to such a degree that you live with chronic shame and self-hatred. Both ends of the spectrum are to be avoided.

The purpose of confession is to open us to God’s mercy and forgiveness, so that He can deal with our guilt and free us from shame.

I’m going to give you a few moments in silence and then I am going to pray a corporate prayer of confession and repentance. You will not be asked to say anything out loud, but as I pray, if you are willing, agree with me in your heart before God.

- Silence
- Corporate Confession:

Father, **where we have wounded the body of Christ** with our words, attitudes, and motives, we repent and ask for your forgiveness. Where we have not reconciled with those we have offended, we commit to do what we can to make it right, and to partner with you to restore unity to these relationships.

Where we have judged one another harshly, spoken critically, or withheld forgiveness in order to punish, we repent and ask for your forgiveness. We commit to being gentle, patient, and bearing with one another in love as we move forward.

¹¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, 166.

Lord Jesus **forgive us for our pride.** We ask you to be Lord over our possessions, our titles, our achievements, our reputation, our ambitions, our knowledge, our skills, our health, our relationships. Jesus, we humble ourselves before you; come and be the centre of our lives.

Holy Spirit, **we confess that at times we have embraced our culture's values uncritically.** We confess the sin of comfort, unholy habits in our entertainment, materialism, and for pursuing our desires and rights at the expense of others. Holy Spirit, we humble ourselves before you; come, shape our thoughts, emotions, and desires.

Amen.

1 John 1:9 says, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" We have made our confession, the Lord has heard it, now receive by faith the forgiveness of God.

Worship (*Be Thou My Vision*): At this time I'd like to ask our worship team to come and lead us in a final song. We have humbled ourselves before God, and we now lift our eyes to God, asking Him to lead and guide us. Please stand.

Benediction