

Faith that Works: Accepting the Wrong Friend Request

James 4:1-12

March 6, 2016

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~The conflict in your life stems from accepting the wrong friend request~

Please open your Bibles to James 4. If you don't have your own Bible you can use the one in the pew in front of you, you will find James 4 on page 855.

[Pray]

If you have been with us over the last several weeks you know that James has been describing the lives of two different people. Both people might claim to know who Jesus is and be following Him, but one of these people lives a life that is consistent with their belief and the other does not. And James has been pointing out that the way we live our lives, the tangible things we do, tell us what our faith is worth. It is either dead and worthless, or, if our deeds are consistent with what we believe, then we have faith that works.

For the last two weeks James has brought this into the realm of the spoken word. And his point has been what we say matters just as much as our deeds. So we can't just shoot off at the mouth, we can't be okay with having a pattern of anger or gossip or bitterness in our words and be Christ followers. James says there is no such thing as a Christian who just has a small problem with their tongue on the side. If olives are growing on your fig tree or salt water is coming out of your mountain spring it isn't a small problem, it's an identity issue, you've got to ask who your daddy is. And that's because God's fig tree grows figs all the time; it is Satan's fig tree that grows forked fruit.

And then last week we talked about the foundation at the bottom of these two kinds of lives. Everything is dependent on what kind of wisdom we are following. So there is a wisdom that comes from heaven and there is another that comes from earth. And the way we can see which wisdom we are following is by what we do with two theological concepts that lie at the very centre of the Bible.

So the first of these is that God is God's first love. This means that the most important thing to God is not you. Now yes He loves us and wants good things for us, but He hasn't focused His entire life on us. God is fundamentally committed to centering His life around the most important thing in the universe and He refuses to get distracted. And the only thing worth His focus and worship is Himself. So God is most concerned with His own glory.

And this means God is not an idolater. He has got no other Gods before Himself. And it's a good thing that God is God's God, because this means that we can make Him our God too. We can join Him in centering our lives around the most important and most wonderful being in the universe.

And this brings us to the second theological idea which is that God has wired the world such that we find our greatest joy when we join Him in loving God first. So when we live our life the way we were designed it is the best thing for us. The rules our Maker has laid out for us aren't there to make us miserable, they are there to show us how we work best.

So when God told Adam and Eve, don't eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, He wasn't keeping something good from them, He was keeping them from something bad. And when they ate anyway while they got something they didn't have before they were poorer for it – actually they are dead for it. Alternatively when we submit our lives to the Designer's rules we don't find ourselves in bondage, we don't miss out on some secret treasure He was trying to hide from us, we find ourselves free and full of joy.

And James calls the person who bases their life on this understanding “wise” – they make choices that lead them to what is ultimately best for them. And this is the same thing Solomon spoke of a thousand years earlier. He said:

The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One *is* understanding. (Proverbs 9:10 NKJV)

That means that when we make the central thought of our lives “I want to live in a way that honours God, I want to do what He says” then we are wise. We are doing the one thing that will be best for us both now and for eternity.

In contrast, when we say “I know what God wants, but I'm going to do it my way instead.” Then we aren't innovative or out of the box thinkers – we aren't creators of our own destiny, or spiritual entrepreneurs; we are foolish and stupid. And James says a life spent foolishly investing in so called “earthly wisdom” is fraught with bitter envy, disorder, and all manner of evil practices and ultimately results in bringing harm on ourselves and those around us.

And James is staying with this idea as he moves into chapter 4. And so like the kind of wisdom we follow dictates whether our life is full of joy or misery, now James says **The conflict in your life stems from accepting the wrong friend request.**

So let's pick it up in James 4 verse 1.

[Read James 4:1-3]

Now if your life is perfect and totally devoid of all conflict and quarreling then you can feel free to tune out today. But if you ever find yourself at odds with your spouse, or your coworkers or friends, or your brothers and sisters here at church, then James says this is for you.

And he says these fights and quarrels come from our “desires” which are battling within us. And the word desire here has the same root as the word “selfish ambition” in 3:16. So there’s the link to last week’s earthly wisdom. And this problem is something that originates in us. So James says friend, your troubles aren’t the result of your surroundings or the crazy people in your family or in your church or your lack of sleep; your problems are because of you and your desires and your selfish ambition. Basically they come from the way you see the world.¹

So one kind of person looks out at the world and sees God at work everywhere. This ability is a gift of grace, and it is something that is fostered.² These people have disciplined themselves to see that:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights (James 1:17)

And so they don’t take things for granted. When they are healthy they praise God for it. When they have some spending money in their pockets they acknowledge that it isn’t simply because they are a hard worker, but because God has provided. When their relationships with their family and friends and co-workers are going well they see God’s involvement. And even when things aren’t going well they praise God for His allowing them to grow. This isn’t an impossible idealism, James says:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2-3)

And as this kind of life becomes a pattern it grows into a completely God-exalting life of gratitude. Do you know anyone who is inherently grateful? Aren’t their lives full of joy? Now this doesn’t mean bad stuff doesn’t happen to them – it does. But isn’t it fun to be around someone with the ability to see God at work?

Now the very opposite of gratitude is an attitude of entitlement. So grateful people see every good thing as a gift from the Father, and they don’t view themselves as deserving these things – they are gifts, not wages.

¹ Ideas about those who see God’s grace and those who don’t adapted from <http://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/detail/worldliness--godliness/> (Accessed March 3, 2016)

² John 6:44 “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them...”

So grateful people don't think they deserve good health or spending money or a good marriage or a stable family. God doesn't owe us anything. These are gifts of grace. And so when they are taken away it's not injustice, it's just life and the opportunity to grow.

But an entitled person feels just the opposite. And our culture is a breeding ground for entitlement. So have you ever been told "Hey you deserve that"? "You've worked really hard, you deserve that vacation. You deserve to finally drive a new vehicle. You deserve the retirement you've worked hard for. You deserve to finally have a nicer house than the one you have been putting up with. You deserve it!" Have you heard this? Have you said this?

This line of reasoning lies at the very core of capitalism. And it is the lie that we deserve what we get. If we are hard workers and upright citizens then we deserve to enjoy the fruit of our labours. And those people around us who don't have what we do, well we don't say this to their faces, but they deserve what they are getting too. If they would just quit drinking and start working then they could have what we have.

We go on like this until something bad happens to one of us "good" people. So right now there is a 25 year old man in the city who is married to the daughter of one of the pastors here in town. He got married a year ago after passionately meeting Jesus a short while before that. And then six months ago he was diagnosed with cancer and his athletic body began wasting away. And today he is in hospice waiting to die. 25 years old, and a brand new Christian. If you are tempted to feel like God isn't being fair you are part of a large group of people. But this idea comes from a heart of entitlement.

If you've fallen into this then you look at the things other people have and we say "I deserve that. I deserve a romantic relationship. I deserve good health. I deserve spending money." And when you are thinking this way, instead of growing in gratitude you grow in contempt and jealousy. And instead of living a life of joy you find yourself being miserable no matter what happens. And you get mad at God because He's not giving you what you deserve.

And so you try to barter. You have heard people in tough places say "If you get me out of this problem, then I'll follow you for the rest of my life." But God doesn't negotiate with terrorists. He's not up there saying well, if you do the things I want then I will do the things you want. And this is a good thing. If He gave us what we deserved we'd all be hopelessly damned.

After all none of us have anything God needs or live in the way God demands. We all fall short.³ And everything we have is His, and He can take it back if He wants. So we don't have any bargaining chips.

³ Romans 3:23

I've had Christian friends who got mad at God when things didn't turn out the way they wanted. They said "I've been doing everything right. I've been going to church for decades and giving money and being good and now I get this?! Following God's not worth it." So they bail.

They tried bargaining but when that failed they proved they really just wanted God's stuff – His blessings – they were never interested in God at all.

And so James says having an attitude of entitlement and trying to get God to work for you isn't some alternative way to be a Christian. It's a fundamental problem. So look at verse 4.

[Read James 4:4]

James says when we do this we are being adulterous. Now this is a really strong word, and one that God uses several times throughout the Bible to describe people who are getting their relationship with Him wrong – this is the opposite of righteousness. So for example God described Israel saying⁴:

But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,
so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to Me,"
declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 3:20)

The picture is that our relationship with God is like a marriage. And so sin isn't simply having a little off colour fun, God says it is like cheating on your spouse when your spouse is God.

Now in human relationships "cheating" primarily describes sexual unfaithfulness, but adultery happens long before the physical act of cheating takes place; it happens when we break our promise to be faithfully our spouse's. And this is something all of us have done with God.

So think back to a time when you told God "I'm never going to do that again." But even as you were saying this you were anticipating that tomorrow or next week you were going to be right back in the same place. "God, I'm never going to look at porn again, but I'm going to keep using the internet late at night when no one is looking." But when we say this we are only deceiving ourselves. And yet we make promises like this all the time. Jeremiah understood this and said:

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? (Jeremiah 17:9 NLT)

So I think the idea that adultery means breaking a promise makes sense, but the language of friendship in verse 4 is a little troubling. And that's because friendship in our culture isn't anything like it has been for the vast majority of human history and even in most of the world today.

⁴ See also Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 1-3

So when Nikki and I lived in Korea we would consistently see small groups of 70 year old men sitting together outside a neighbourhood restaurant – they were everywhere. And one day I asked about them – who are these guys? – and I learned that they had been friends since kindergarten. They had lived in the same block their entire lives and grown up together. This is super common all across Korea, and really all across the world. It's only us in the West where we move all over the place that we don't have these kinds of friendships.

We have different kinds of friends. So with the internet we can stay connected with everyone we have ever met. I can literally find out what my friends in South Africa and New Zealand ate for dinner last night with the click of a button.

And as I stalk my 651 “friends” that Facebook says I have, I get this sense that I know these people when in reality they are hardly casual acquaintances. So I've got friends I haven't seen or talked to in a decade. I've got friends who used to be married to each other but now are divorced and hate each other. But I'm still friends with both of them – their conflict causes no trouble for our Facebook friendship.

But James knows nothing of this kind of friendship. When he uses the word “friend” it is much closer to the Korean idea than the Canadian. And it was the same with Jesus.

So Jesus was a pretty popular guy. He was often surrounded by crowds of thousands.⁵ Houses were so packed when He showed up that people had to vandalize the place in order to get to Him.⁶ 500 people gathered at one time after He had risen from the dead.⁷ And there were the 72 disciples that He empowered and sent out at one point.⁸ And of course there were the 12 that He spent most of His time with, but really it was Peter, James and John who were Jesus' friends. These were the guys He shared His deepest moments with.

You see you can't really have 651 friends. So there are three men in the city that I share my life with. I'm accountable with them. They know when I'm up and when I'm down. They know what I struggle with and where I'm strong. They challenge me and keep me on the right path, and I let them speak hard words to me because I know they love me. They want the best for me. They are my friends. And there is a certain amount of exclusivity when it comes to this kind of friendship. I can't have this with everyone and I don't even want it. And I won't be friends with anyone who hates one of these men - I'll be cordial, but I'm not interested in your friendship. That's normal.

⁵ Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:29-39

⁶ Mark 2:4

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:6

⁸ Luke 10:1-23

And as an aside this is why the children of divorce find themselves in such a weird place. They are stuck loving mom and dad who don't love each other. That's not the way the system is designed to work!

But this is what James says we are trying to pull off. He says friendship with the world means enmity with God. When we ungratefully allow our desires to dictate our pursuits; when we view the world through entitled eyes and grow contemptuous of God what we are doing is accepting the world's "friend request", but James says in order to do this we have to "unfriend" Jesus in the process. (If you don't think that's a word look in any dictionary that's been written in the last 10 years.)

But don't look right now. Instead look at verse 5:

[Read James 4:5-6]

There are two sides of God pictured here – His jealousy and grace. And these are both huge concepts to get our minds around.

So let's deal with His jealousy first. Jealousy is almost always a bad thing. So a jealous boyfriend is an insecure man who is afraid his girlfriend is going to find someone better than him, so he restricts her from talking to anyone. That's jealous. Or an immature child looks over at the cookie their younger brother has and wants it; if they don't get it they tantrum. That's jealous.

But God's jealousy is totally different. So He isn't jealous of anything we've got, because He's got it all. He made everything. So there is absolutely nothing we have that He covets. And second He is so secure in who He is that our rejection doesn't hurt Him. God's joy is dependent on Himself, not on us. Remember last week – we aren't God's God, God is God's God. So we do not hold His joy captive. He will be joyful with or without us.

So God isn't like an immature child who wants something they don't have, nor is He like an insecure boyfriend who wants to make sure His lover doesn't find something better. So how is God jealous?

Pastor John Piper has some brilliant insight here. He says:

God is jealous like a powerful and merciful king who takes a peasant girl from a life of shame, forgives her, marries her, and gives her not the chores of a slave, but the privileges of a wife—a queen. His jealousy does not rise from fear or weakness but from a holy indignation at having his honor and power and mercy scorned by the faithlessness of a fickle spouse.⁹

⁹ John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-lord-whose-name-is-jealous> (Accessed March 4, 2016)

So this is what we have done. We've been ransomed from the gutter – saved from eternal damnation. Cleaned up. Given great honour – we are called children of God, and joint heirs with Christ! We are pictured as God's bride. And then from there we've run back and prostituted ourselves. We've had everything God has to offer, and we've traded it in for a .25cent lollypop from the sin circus. We are adulterous fools!

And this provokes God to jealousy; we've traded in the "Spirit He has caused to dwell in us" for cheap tricks. So He's jealous for His glory that is being shamed. And He's jealous for us who bear His image and yet aren't experiencing the joy He designed us to have. Can you see why this would make God angry?

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So what does God do? How does He respond to our adulterous blasphemy? What does God say when we say "I'm not interested in You being my God, I want to center my life around this sickly pathetic sin habit I've developed." What does He say?

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He says verse 6! He gives us more grace! This is not what an insecure boyfriend or a selfish toddler does when they get jealous. But God is so full in Himself that even when we spurn Him there is grace. Do you find hope there?

Friends, this is the most beautiful thing. No matter where you are at, or how far you have fallen God's grace is bigger. He's got enough for you. He wants to woo you back. He wants to put the ring on your finger and kill the fattened calf and reinstate you as His son or His daughter.¹⁰

So brothers and sisters don't arrogantly think that your sin is too big for His grace – you aren't that big! That's not humble, it's just wrong. Instead admit that you are lost without Him, and ask Him to bring you back. That's humble, and that's who He saves. So no matter how you've fallen, and how ever many times you've fallen God has more grace and He wants you back – not because He needs you, but because He gets glory when He proves He's big enough to give sinners what they don't deserve.

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If you can see that; if you recognize that you are someone who has received what you don't deserve from God, then the question is "how do I respond to the gift of the Merciful King?"

James tells us; look at verse 7

[Read James 4:7-12]

There are ten commands in these verses, ten verbs that tell us how we should respond to God's infinitely longsuffering grace, I'll draw out three.

¹⁰ Luke 15:11-32

First, resist the devil. You've got to unfriend the devil and "re-friend" Jesus. Now the devil will tell you that this isn't necessary, but Jesus demands it. He will extend grace, but it's always grace on His terms. If we will come back to Him He will always take us in, but He won't change His demands. He is the powerful and merciful King, and we are the peasant girl. And He will be God in our lives, or He won't have anything to do with us at all. That's His terms.

So break of your friendship with the world. What is it in your life that you are holding on to that doesn't please Jesus? Where are you saying "I know this is bad, but I don't want to give it up because I don't really believe Jesus has anything better for me." Let it go. Or perhaps you have tried to quit this sin, but it just seems too hard – you keep going back to it. If that's you there is hope. The Apostle Paul said:

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

So yes unfriending the world is hard, but it's no impossible, you just have to resist the devil. So drop your sin circus lollipop, let it go.

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Second, come near to God. Make Him God in your life. And the promise is when you return like the prodigal son the Father is always waiting. So get up. Get into the word. And get clean. Set some safe guards in place so you stop wallowing in the mud. And start hating your sin. Weep about it. Be disgusted by it. Don't view it as a little off colour fun, recognize it as adultery against a merciful king who loves you and wants the best for you. When you do this God will lift you up.

And finally don't slander your brother or sister. If you've tasted God's grace after being an adulterous fool don't look down your nose at someone who is going around the loop for another bender. This was you yesterday! So if you've received grace then give it away to the people around you.

Brothers and sisters, if we will do this then the fights and quarrels that go on in a place like this will dissipate. Now there will always be another war to resist. We are still all sinful people. But if we are quick to own the problem and quick to apologize, and quick to forgive, then we will quickly become the Christ-glorifying community of saints He designed us to be. So unfriend the world and re-friend Jesus.