

Abiding Faith

James 4:1-10

Introduction

As I was preparing for this sermon, I read something that John Stankey, the CEO of AT&T, said back in 2022 with the acquiring of HBO concerning his goals for HBO that I think was very perceptive.

It's not hours a week, and it's not hours a month. We need hours a day. You are competing with devices that sit in people's hands that capture their attention every 15 seconds. I want more hours of engagement. Why are more hours of engagement important? Because you get more data and information about a customer that then allows you to do things like monetize through alternate models of advertising as well as subscriptions.

There's a reason why social media platforms, streaming services, etc. are called "attention merchants." They are working hard to capture our attention. Some people also call it "adhesiveness." The longer they can get us to stick around, the more money they make.¹

Stankey rebranded HBO to HBO Max, and under his leadership, subscriber growth more than doubled from 36 million to 76 million.

Social media platforms rely on sophisticated algorithms to decide which content appears in your feed and in what order. These invisible gatekeepers shape your online experience, curating what you see and when you see it, all with the aim of keeping you engaged for longer periods.

What is my point? My point is that there are pressures that you are both aware of and unaware of that seek to influence you. There may not have been the kinds of algorithms that we have today in the day, and age, James wrote his epistle, but they were no doubt there. There is a system that is spiritual that is opposed to God that wants to do all that it can to draw you away from Him, and that system is what the Bible calls the "world." We were not made for the world, but for God. It is the tension we face as Christians to be pulled by the world or to draw close to God that he addresses in these verses.

Going with the Current of the World is Friendship with the World (vv. 1-5)

We gravitate towards the kinds of things James lists in verses 1-5. It comes naturally for us as a species to fight against each other. Remember what James wrote in 3:14; he said, "**But if you**

¹ Ayad Akhtar, "The Singularity Is Here," *The Atlantic* (11-5-21)

have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart...” your jealousy and selfish ambition is, **“earthly, natural, and demonic”** (v. 15). Then in 4:1, James informs us that the source of our fighting with one another comes from that part of us the apostle John described: **“All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world”** (1 John 2:16).

What James means by World is the ethics and principles that are motivated by a desire to dethrone God. The wisdom of the world encourages those who live in it to cater to what you want, give yourself everything your eyes desire and live life your way to get the most of it. This is the wisdom of the world that James warns us of in chapter three, and it is here in chapter four that shows us how it affects everything around us.

The Greek word for “quarrels” can mean battle, fights, strife, or conflicts. What instigates this kind of fighting with one another is what James calls our “pleasures.” This is another Greek word that you knew without knowing that you had it in your vocabulary (last week it was the Greek word “*zēlos*” that the NASB decided to translate “*jealous*”); the Greek word of “pleasures” is *hēdonē* from which we get the word “hedonism.”

What is hedonism? You may think that it is the pursuit of pleasure, and it certainly is that, but at its core, hedonism is the pursuit of joy. In fact, what we learn from the Bible is that we were made to pursue and experience joy. There are scores of verses in the Bible I can show you, but for now, three should do:

“Rejoice in the LORD always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4)

“You will make known to me the way of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” (Ps. 16:11)

“Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials...”
(Jas. 1:2)

The Word of God encourages us to pursue joy. Blaise Pascale, the famous philosopher, observed: “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”²

We even acknowledge that we were made for joy in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” However, what we were not made for is a joy that excludes a

² John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books; 2011), 19.

relationship with God. The kind of worldly wisdom and joy-seeking that leads to conflicts is a secular wisdom and the Godless pursuit of joy. This kind of joy seeking is secular hedonism, and it is, “**earthly, natural, and demonic**” (3:14).

What is the fruit of secular hedonism? James provides us with a list in verses that follow:

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| Fact + result | “You lust and do not have... so you commit murder.” (v. 2a) |
| Fact + result | “You are envious and cannot obtain... so you fight and quarrel.” (v. 2b) |
| Fact + reason | “You do not have... because you do not ask.” (v. 2c) |
| Fact + result | “You ask and do not receive...” (v. 3a) |
| Full reason | “...because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures.” (v. 3b) ³ |

What kind of joy seeking is James describing? It is one where the pleasure and joy seeking is rooted in a world that is hostile towards God. Secular hedonism is self-centered joy seeking that makes the one pursuing it the center of his/her universe. So James accuses those who pursue such pleasures in verse 4 as “adulteresses.” Why? Because he is writing to Christians who should know better that the only joy we were created for and the one that is lasting, is a joy that can only be found in God. To seek your pleasure from this world, is to align yourself with the world by becoming its friend. To this, James states emphatically: “**do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God**” (v. 4).

What do we do with verse five? What does James mean? There is much debate over the way this verse should be translated and some of the main versions of the English Bible show that. Theologians are divided over whether the Greek word for “Spirit” is referring to the immaterial part of us that we also call our soul or if it is the Holy Spirit that every Christian receives at the moment he/she becomes a Christian. Here is what I think James means by the statement: “**Do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, ‘He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us’?**” I think what he means is what we have seen in verses 1-4, and that is: we were made for a joy that can only be satisfied in God and the reason why He gave us a soul is the same reason He gave us the Holy Spirit, and that is to use our lives and to find our joy in Him. In other words, we were born on this earth to know God, but because we are dead in our sins, God caused us to be born again and has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us to live for Him for the purpose of finding our joy in Him (remember that James is writing to Christians).

³ Daniel M. Doriani, [James](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 130.

Abiding in the Word is Friendship with God (vv. 6-10)

So what is the solution for the kind of problem James lists for us in verses 1-5? He provides us with the answer in verses 6-10. It's really found in verse 6; let's read it slowly and thoughtfully: **"But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says..."** What says? from the same Scripture in verse 5 James referred to: **"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."**

God created you; you did not create Him. Of all the gods that people worship, there is only One who is the Creator and we were made for Him just as the apostle Paul testified before a group of idol worshipers at Mars Hill:

"He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might feel around for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His descendants.'" (Acts 17:26-28)

God created us to know Him, but humans are fallen, sin-cursed, and spiritually dead! What hope is there for a humanity bent on finding their satisfaction and joy in anything or anyone but the One who created mankind in His image? James doesn't need to explain the gospel again to his readers because they have already heard it and received it, all that he needs is one word, and that word is "grace." Christian, how is it that you have gone from death to life in Jesus? How is it that you have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light? How is it that you have been born again and are now sealed by God's Holy Spirit and are a child of God? Just one word will do! **"He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"**

Because you have received a "greater grace" there is a greater joy available to you. Remember what it was that brought you to the cross of Christ: You came to Jesus because you were poor in spirit, you came to Him because you mourned over your sins, you came to Him because you could not save yourself. There is no coming to Jesus if you are not willing to humble yourself before Him; it is Jesus alone who is able to save and it is only by grace that you are born again today.

Because there is a greater grace, there is a greater joy to be experienced through God. James explains where one can experience that joy through a series of imperatives. Let's read the passage and break these imperatives (commands) down so that you can see the point James is making: **"Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you" (vv. 7-10).**

The word “submit” comes from a Greek word that also means to attach yourself to the thing or person you are submitting to. To submit to God is not just to bow before Him, but also to attach yourself to Him. There is another word that the Bible uses for that same idea, and that word is “abide” which comes from a Greek word that also means to “remain in.” Attach yourself to the One you were made for! In verse 8, we are told to **“Come close to God...”** So what happens when we submit to God? We come close to Him. This is how I can resist the devil so that he will flee from me (v. 7). This is also how I can cleanse my hand and purify my heart.

Listen, there is no getting closer to God if you are not willing to submit to God. There is no lasting joy if you are not abiding in Him. There will be no victory over sin in your life if you are not humbling yourself before Him (v. 10).

What will happen as you submit to God and draw closer to Him? You will see your sin for what it is, but instead of coasting further from Him, you will run to Him because that is where grace is to be found in your time of need! This is the point of verse 9-10, **“Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”** What does it mean for God to exalt those who humble themselves before Him? He will give you the kind of joy you were made for, a joy available only through His Son.

You were made for joy, but not the secular and godless kind that our world strives after. You were made for a joy and pleasure that can only be known in God by abiding in His Son. The question I have for you is this: “What or who is it that has your attention and your heart?” Aren’t you tired of pursuing lesser “joys”? There is a greater joy before you, but it can only be experienced by submitting yourself to God by drawing closer to Him.

Let me close with something Jesus said that I think will make more sense to you in light of James 4:1-10,

“I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and dries up; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in Me, and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; remain in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and remain in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” (John 15:5-11)

What Jesus describes and what James addresses is the kind of faith that abides in Him.