

James 3:17 - 4:6

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[0 : 0 0] I want you to picture the scene. It's Thursday night, and Question Time is starting on BBC One.

I don't know if many of you are fans of Question Time, but even if you're not, try and picture yourself in that circumstance. David Dimbleby is in the chair there in the left, Nicholas Sturgeon and Boris Johnson. Just mentioning those names surely has engaged some of you in one way or another, be it positive or negative. So, please don't change the channel, but just imagine yourselves at the start of the program. And David Dimbleby begins with the first question, and his opening salvo is something along these lines. We'll start with a question from Matthew from Tunbridge Wells. This is a very topical one. What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Now, I wonder how the esteemed guests on the panel would answer that question. Imagine if that question was posed to the people I've mentioned. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Nobody could deny it's a topical question, a topical question, a relevant question, but I wonder how that question would be answered. I say it's a topical question. Indeed, it's always been a topical question, ever since the Garden of Eden. We are, as a race, as a fallen race, a quarrelsome people. Nations squabble and fight.

In families, there are squabbles and divisions and conflicts among friends, husbands and wives.

In playgrounds and schools up and down the country, people squabble and fight and quarrel. I don't think anybody could deny that that is our reality. So, the question that James poses at the beginning of chapter 4 is a very relevant and topical one. What causes fights and quarrels among you? It's a good question, but what's the answer? Now, James goes on to give an answer immediately, and he gives an answer by posing another question, really a rhetorical question. Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? And we could begin there by considering what he means by that, but we're not going to start there. What I want to do is to take the totality of what James has to say in verses 1 to 6 there in chapter 4, and I would encourage you, if you do have a Bible, to have it open at James chapter 4 because we're going to be in and out of these verses, and we're not going to be following it in the order in which it is found in the passage. And so, it will be helpful for you to be able to, when I mention a verse, to have a look and just check that I've got it right and that you're following what is being said. So, I'm going to take the totality of what James says in these verses, and I suppose reorder the material in a manner that I hope will help us get to the root of the problem, this problem of constant fighting and quarreling and squabbling, get to the root of the problem, and also, crucially, provide a way forward or identify a way forward that will stop the fighting, that will stop the squabbling. Wouldn't that be a good thing? So, that's what we're going to try and do this morning. Now, one other prior point or by way of introduction is to note that here in this letter, and very particularly in these verses, James is speaking to Christians, to disciples of Jesus, to members of the Christian community. And what he says is particularly relevant to those who he is speaking to, to Christians, to us. That said, the truths that we'll discover relating to this matter of squabbling and quarreling are relevant to all. I suppose you could look at it this way. They serve as a challenge to Christians and an invitation to those who are not as yet

[4 : 26] Christians to trust in and commit to Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who can help us be peacemakers, help us to leave behind a life marked by, dominated by, quarrelling and squabbling and fighting of one kind or another. So, I've ordered what I'm going to say in these six verses of James chapter 4 under three headings, and I'll tell you what they are, and then we can think of each of them one by one. First of all, I want us to notice in the passage what I'm describing as our precious privilege as disciples of Jesus. As Christians, we enjoy a very precious privilege that is touched on or implied or implicit in what James says, and I want to hone in and identify that to begin with. I'm then going to identify what the passage very clearly speaks of as our recurring sin, a sin that is so often one that we are guilty of.

And so, we'll identify what the sin is, but we'll also identify what the consequences of this sin are, what this sin leads to, which is really what James begins the chapter by identifying some of the consequences of this sin, fights and squarrows and squabbling. So, that's the second thing. First of all, our precious privilege. Secondly, our recurring sin. But then the third thing that I want us to look at or notice is what I'm calling our way back home. How can we get back to where we're meant to be?

And I think the passage also helps us in that regard. So, let's start by thinking about what I'm calling our precious privilege. What is our precious privilege? Well, the privilege that is ours as believers is, and we can put it in this way, we're married to God, and it's very much a corollary of this, we're loved by God. But we're going to think of these two things separately, even though they're so intertwined. We're married to God, and we're loved by God. So, what about the first thing that I say there, what I've stated there as a truth? We're married to God. And some of you might think, well, hey, come again. Well, what's that about? We're married to God. What does that look like? Is that even true? Well, you heard me right. We are married to God. Now, you don't need to believe me.

Listen to James. And listen to how James addresses the quarreling and covetous believers that he's writing to. So, he's writing to believers. He's addressing this letter to those who are Christians, and notice the language he uses to describe them there in verse 4. You adulterous people.

Now, it's very strong language. You might say it's almost inappropriate language. It's very harsh. How can you use that kind of language to address people, you adulterous people? But let's think about the language he uses and what it implies. That little expression there in verse 4, adulterous people, is one word in Greek, the language in which James wrote the letter, and in Greek it is in the feminine form. So, the believers here are being described by James as, or compared to, perhaps more accurately, compared to an adulterous wife, which then begs the question, who's the husband that this adulterous wife is cheating on? If you're an adulterous wife, then there must be a husband who is the victim of your adultery. Now, that would be true if it was the other way around, if it was the man who was cheating on his wife. But as it happens, in the passage, the believers are addressed in this way as an adulterous wife, or compared to an adulterous wife. So, who is their husband who they are being unfaithful to? Well, very clearly, it is God who is being portrayed as the husband who his people are being unfaithful to. And this becomes crystal clear in what follows in that same verse, because notice what James goes on to say. He says, you adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? So, you have these two parties. You have God, for whom you should be bearing love and loyalty, and then you have the world, who's this very exciting lover that you're flirting with and dallying with. And as you do that, well, you're being unfaithful to your husband. You're being unfaithful to God. And so, it is accurate and appropriate for James to address these believers in this very strong language, you adulterous people.

[9 : 22] Now, this picture of God as married to His people is one, of course, that has a rich Old Testament background. And it is imagery that is employed by James, but it's not original to James. We don't have time to go through all of this in the Old Testament, but we can just say very simply this, is that God in the Old Testament is presented as the God who chooses a people for Himself, a God who has joined Himself to His people in the Old Testament, the people of Israel, the New Testament, the church, and He has brought His people into a covenant relationship with Himself that is compared on a number of occasions to a marriage relationship. A serious, covenantal, formal relationship has been established, and one that demands mutual loyalty from both parties, much like a marriage relationship, hence the use of the picture. Let me just mention a couple of occasions or read a couple of verses where this language is used in the Old Testament to reinforce what I'm saying. So, in Isaiah chapter 54 and verses 5 to 7, the prophet is speaking to

God's people, and how does He express Himself? He says this, For your Maker is your husband. The Lord Almighty is His name. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer. He is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit. A wife who married young only to be rejected, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. And then in Jeremiah chapter 2, and I'll just mention or read one more verse to note how in the Old Testament this picture is employed.

So, in Jeremiah chapter 2 and verses 1 and 2, the word of the Lord came to me, Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, I remember the devotion of your youth. How as a bride you loved me.

This is God speaking to His people. How as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. And then God goes on to say other things to His people. But you see the way how this picture is employed to illustrate the relationship of God with His people. He is the husband and His people are His wife. Jesus, of course, also uses this same picture. Not so explicitly, but He uses the very language, in fact, that James uses here in verse 4 when He speaks of the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Israel as belonging to a wicked and adulterous generation. Again, the employing of the language of adultery is harping back to or echoing this relationship between God and His people. And because His people have been unfaithful, they are portrayed as having committed adultery, of being unfaithful to God. This is our precious privilege as God's people. And just pause and let that so can. God sees, views His people, us, you and me, as His bride, the one He has chosen, the one He loves deeply, the one to whom He has made an eternal commitment, the one with whom He has entered into this covenantal relationship. We're married to God, or certainly the relationship we have with God can be compared to a marriage. Now, what follows on from that, of course, and very evidently, but I just want to develop it separately, is that we're loved by God. If God portrays Himself as our loyal and committed husband, an obvious implication is the love that He has for us as His bride. But what kind of love does a husband have for his wife does a husband have for his wife? Well, one aspect of a husband's love for his wife is that it can be described as jealous love. Jealous love. And it's the jealous love of a husband that will not share his precious bride with another. We tend to think of jealousy as being a bad thing, and so often it is a bad thing. The way we employ jealousy so often is sinful. But there is a legitimate place for jealousy. It is right that a husband should have a jealous love for his wife.

It would be a very sad thing if a husband was indifferent, if his wife was sleeping around, or we could invert it. It would be a very strange thing if a wife was unconcerned about her husband's affairs. Oh, it doesn't matter. I still love him. No, there is a right and proper place for what we might call a jealous love. And God's love for His people is a jealous love. It is pure in character, but it is jealous in nature. And of course, James refers to this jealous love of God for His people in this passage. Notice what he goes on to say in verse 5. Now, just read what it says and then explain what is being said because it is not immediately apparent. So, James 4, verse 5, Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the Spirit He caused to live in us end these intensely? Now, it has to be acknowledged that the Greek that James employs here in the construction of this sentence is quite complicated. And as a result, the Greek has been translated in different ways. But I think what best captures what James is saying is found in the footnote of that page in your Bibles.

[15 : 38] If you have the church Bible, you'll notice that there's an alternative translation, another way to try and capture what James is saying. And let's read what that alternative is.

Do you think that Scripture says without reason that God jealously longs for the Spirit that He made to live in us?

What does that mean? Well, the Spirit that He made to live in us is simply a reference, I would argue, to our core identity, who we are as men and women made in the image and likeness of God. God created us for friendship with Himself. He made us that He might love us and that we might in turn love Him.

And this love that we are to bear towards God is multifaceted or in any case is described or compared to in different ways. It's the love of a child for their father. But it's also, as here, the love of a wife for her husband. And God is jealous for our loyalty. He is jealous for our love. He is jealous for our fidelity and for our friendship. He jealously longs for the Spirit that He made to live in us. He jealously longs for us. He's not indifferent when we wander. He's not indifferent when we sleep around and when we look for other lovers who seem more exciting and more attractive to us. No, He bears to us what we could call a jealous love. His jealous love for us is, in the nature of a jealous love, it is intense and passionate and tender. And again, as we think of this as our precious privilege, I would ask you,

Christian friend, believer, to pause and let that sink in. This is who you are, a child of God and the bride of God, deeply and jealously loved. How important it is to know who we are. If we are to live as we ought, we need to, first of all, know who we are. That our life and our actions would reflect who we are. If we don't know who we are, then we're going to have difficulty living as we ought. So know who you are. But perhaps this morning, you're not a Christian. Well, you too can know and experience being loved by God in this deep and intense way that James is speaking of. You are invited to become part of the family of God by the way that He has set out, which is by trusting in His Son, Jesus, as your Savior and Lord. And if that is something you have not yet done, then I would encourage you and invite you and urge you so to do, that you might know what it is to be a child of God, to be described and compared to God's beloved bride. So our precious privilege. But the second thing that I want you to notice in what James says here is what I'm calling our recurring sin. If our privilege is to be married to God, what is our recurring sin? Well, let me split this in two questions. What is the sin and what does the sin lead to? What is this recurring sin? Well, it's adultery. That's the way it's described by James. You adulterous people. And adulterous people are people who are guilty of adultery, which is a sin. This is our recurring sin. We cheat on God. We two-time the one who loves us with an eternal love. We oh so easily jump into bed with our lover. But who is our lover? Who is the one who lures us away from loving God? Well, James tells us. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? The lover who lures us away and who we are so happy to be lured away by is described here as the world. This adulterous condition that we are in is described as being a friend of the world and so consequently an enemy of God. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be a friend of the world? Why is that such a bad thing? It is to adopt or embrace or flirt with the values and desires of the world. James at the beginning of this section talks about how it is our desires that lead to all these problems. And what are these desires? These desires of the world that we flirt with? Now, contrary to what you might imagine, this is not about sex, drugs, and rock and roll or any other alternative list of bad stuff. It goes much deeper than that. And at heart, it's about adopting selfishness and the pride that accompanies it as our controlling instinct or default position, that which governs our thinking and our actions, being selfish. We see this in the passage when these desires are spoken of. We go to the beginning of the chapter, what causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? Okay, and what are these desires? Well,

[21 : 14] James goes on to tell us, you want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. And so it goes on. You see, the problem, the problem is that we are selfish. The problem is that we want to get our own way. We want to be the ones whose opinion dominates. And that leads to all these squabbles and fights and quarrels that James is referring to. Selfishness is at the heart of the problem. And selfishness, to be selfish, is the way of the world. It's how the world operates. It's about looking after number one. The world operates on the principle of, I want. This is what I want. And so I will live my life in order to secure what I want. That's the way of the world. And what James is saying is that in being unfaithful to God, what you're doing is you're adopting, you're re-embracing values that you should have left behind. They don't belong to you now as God's people, and yet you're clinging on to them or re-embracing them and living your life governed by them, these worldly desires.

This is the problem. Those who have been brought into the family of God behave as those who are enemies of God. We are tempted to and guilty of spiritual adultery. Our recurring sin is adultery, friendship with the world, clinging on to or re-embracing values and desires that are the antithesis of who by grace we have become. But what does this recurring sin of spiritual adultery, what does it lead to? Well, James identifies how it wreaks havoc with our relationships.

And we can identify three relationships that are affected by this adultery. First of all, our spiritual adultery leads to a cold and distant relationship with God. Now, that ought not to surprise us. If we're being unfaithful to God, it's hardly likely that we're going to be in a very warm and close relationship with the one. We are being unfaithful to. But how does this evidence itself, this cold and distant relationship with God? Well, one evidence of this is explicitly mentioned by James. Notice in verse 3 when he says, or in verse 2 in the second half, you do not have because you do not ask God. You don't speak to God anymore. You don't take God into account in making your plans, and in determining your priorities, and in establishing your ambitions. You don't speak to God. You don't ask God. You don't say, God, what do you think I should be looking for? What do you think I should, how I should behave in this situation? Because the relationship with God is necessarily, if you're being unfaithful to Him, it becomes a cold one and a distant one.

And so we don't speak to God. And maybe that's something that we can use as a means of self-examination. Are you speaking to God? Do you pray to God? And if you don't, might this be the reason that the very condition that you're in, the very spiritual adultery you're guilty of, has distanced you from God? And so it's no longer something you want to do. It's no longer something that you're drawn to at all. You don't want to speak to the one you're being unfaithful to. It's awkward. It's embarrassing. It's shameful. Or if we do speak to God, and we're picking up on what James is saying here, our conversation is all about us and our desires. There in verse 3, when you ask, if you do ask, when you ask, you don't receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. So even when we do speak to God, even when we do engage with God in some way, it's all about us. It's all about securing our desires. And remember, these desires are the ones that we've embraced from the world. Selfish desires, our own pleasures.

Now, just think about that. How ugly is that? We're cheating on God, and yet when we pray, we're looking for God to validate our adultery by granting us our selfish desires.

[25 : 50] It's a bit like a cheating wife asking her husband for new clothes so that she can look good for her lover. You'd say, well, that's just outrageous. You know, how could she possibly do that? It's bad enough that she's cheating on him, but she's actually going to him and saying, okay, I need some money because I want to look good for him. She might not say it, but that's her intention. And of course, this could be inverted of the husband doing the same. And so, spiritual adultery affects radically and obviously our relationship with God. It leads to a cold and distant relationship. But secondly, it results in a fractious, hostile, quarrelsome relationship with others, which is where the chapter begins. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Friction and hostility between Christians is what James has in mind. But why is there this conflict? Well, it's grounded in our insistence on getting what we want and on satisfying our selfish desires, on wanting our opinion to prevail.

This is where our adultery takes us. It doesn't just affect our relationship with God, which it necessarily does, but it then also affects our relationship with others because we've abandoned God's values that would cultivate peace and hope and harmony and joy and love, and we've embraced the values of the world that lead to quarreling and squabbling and fighting and violence.

And so, this is a second relationship that is affected, our relationship with others. We find the root cause of the problem addressed by the question that is posed by James at the very beginning of the chapter, what causes fights and quarrels among you? But also, and we could put it this way, this spiritual adultery not only affects our relationship with God, not only leads to a fractious relationship with others, but it also results in a miserable relationship with ourselves.

Here in the picture that's being painted by James, it's not a pretty picture. He says, don't they come, these fights and quarrels, don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

What does he mean by that when he speaks of your desires that battle within you? It could be the idea that there are many of these worldly desires that are just causing havoc in your mind and in your thoughts. It could be that, but I think the reference rather is to the battle between our desires and our core identity as members of God's family and the bride of God. And so, there's this conflict between who we are and these desires that are battling to take control where they should have no place.

[28 : 39] But there they are. They want to take control. They battle within us, and that battle produces wounds in ourselves, in our very being, in our very identity. The language that James also employs here of this Christian who wants but can't get. You don't get what you want. You cannot have what you're looking for.

I remember when I was a wee boy, and I suppose like all wee boys and girls, one of the most common sentences that I would pronounce would begin with the words, I want. And that's true of all of us, isn't it? I want. And the answer that I would get, and I'm sure you've heard this answer given, you've heard it, you've maybe proffered that answer yourselves. I want doesn't get.

And James seems to be suggesting this is the experience of some of these believers. They want, they want, they want, and they don't get. So, they're frustrated. They're resentful. All these things they want, they're not getting. They're not happy. But, you know, even when you do get, you're still not happy. I want sometimes does get, but what it doesn't get is happiness.

But it doesn't get is peace. It gets stuff. It gets all kinds of things it can get, but it doesn't get happiness. And so, this spiritual adultery also impacts on ourselves, our inner being.

To cheat on God, to use the picture that James is using, to cheat on God is not just sinful. It's clearly sinful. It's stupid. It doesn't make us happy. In fact, it messes us up big time.

[30 : 32] If I can go back to language that James uses in the previous chapter in another connection, but that applies very much so to what we're looking at now, my brothers, this should not be.

There in chapter 3 and verse 10, my brothers, this should not be. He's saying it is, but it should not be. So, we have a precious privilege, but we also foolishly have this recurring sin.

But then finally, we have our way back home. And I want to draw that out from what we read in verse 6, but He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So, we just remind ourselves where we are. We're married to God, for our relationship with God is compared to a marriage. We're loved deeply by God. We're part of this serious, permanent, exclusive relationship with God. That's who we are. But we often cheat on Him as we flirt with the world and adopt its values and desires. And this spiritual adultery really messes up everything, as we've seen. It messes up our relationships with God and with others and with ourselves.

And the question is, is there a way back? Is there a way back? Does our adultery lead to an irretrievable breakdown in our relationship with God? Well, I have good news. There is a way back.

Our adultery, your adultery, does not destroy your relationship with God. Now, just listen and stand in awestruck and grateful wonder and joy at the depth of God's love for you. Because there, James tells us about God's love at the beginning of verse 6, but He gives us more grace. You say, you're guilty of this really obnoxious sin, of this horrendous disloyalty, of this shameful faithlessness, but He gives more grace.

[32 : 41] He doesn't discard you. He doesn't throw you away. He doesn't say, I'm going to have nothing to do with you. I don't love you anymore. No, He doesn't do that. He gives more grace. And what is this grace that He gives?

More of. Well, He gives us the grace that forgives. He forgives us our adultery. He forgives us our unfaithfulness. As we come in repentance to Him, He forgives us. The grace that forgives. But also, I think here in this verse, James has in mind what we might call the grace that enables. As we seek to be faithful to God as our husband. As we seek to be loyal to Him. As we seek to love Him and serve Him in a manner that He is Jew. Now, that's not easy for us. We find that difficult. We find it difficult to resist the temptation to be selfish, because selfish is so much part of who we are. It's so ingrained in our fallen DNA. And so, we find it difficult to be faithful to God. But James tells us that He gives us more grace, enabling grace to help us live lives that are loyal to God and faithful to God and pleasing to God. And so, if that is the grace that you need, then ask Him to grant to you more grace, to live life for His glory and for the good of others. What do you need to do as we close?

Well, there in verse 6, we read, and James is quoting from the book of Proverbs, and these are the words that he quotes, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. What do you need to do? Well, you need to repent of your sin. If you acknowledge that you are proud and that that pride has revealed itself in thinking you know better than God and adopting the values of the world, selfishness and pride, then repent of that. Repent of your spiritual adultery. Repent of your pride. Repent of your selfishness that often has led to the kinds of squabbles and fights and quarrels that James is identifying there in the fellowship that he is writing to. Repent of your sin. But as you repent of your sin, do that hand in hand with receiving God's grace. He gives us more grace, grace that is displayed most wonderfully in the person of Jesus who came into this world to die for sinners, to carry in his own self and carry upon himself the sins of the world, your sin, my sin, your selfishness, your pride, your adultery. All that sin and guilt carried by Jesus, carried to Calvary, where he died for us and bore the punishment that we are due. So, repent of your sin and receive God's grace as it is freely offered to you in the person of his

Son, Jesus. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We come and we confess that we are guilty of being unfaithful to you. And so, often in ways that are not in the eyes of others, perhaps very scandalous, perhaps in ways that are not even visible to others, because it has to do with the way we're thinking and our motivations that others do not see, indeed that we sometimes aren't very conscious of. But we do acknowledge that we are guilty of being unfaithful to you in any number of ways. And we ask that you would forgive us. We acknowledge the consequences of our sin, of how it affects our relationships, and very especially our relationship with you, but also with others. And we acknowledge that this should not be so. And so, we confess our sin. And we ask that you would indeed grant us more grace, more grace to forgive us and more grace to enable us to live as obedient children, as a faithful spouse, loyal to you, and loving you and serving you. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.