

Our Own Worst Enemies

James 4:1-5
雅各書 4:1-5

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Standing in the Middle



I believe God led me to today's text because you, me, and everyone in our congregation needs to hear it again.

In some ways, I feel like the lone, ronin samurai caught between two powerful armies in Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* / or Clint Eastwood's western version of the character in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* / or even Bruce Willis' gangster caught between two gangs in *Last Man Standing*.

All three of those characters lived dangerously in the middle, potentially shot at by both sides.

At the end of the western, when Eastwood's character has survived, he asks the saloon keeper, "You mean the Mexican government on one side, the U.S. on the other, and me in the middle? Unh, uh! Too dangerous!"



Standing in the Middle

And yes, preaching from this text may not be the smartest thing I've ever done, but I sense it is God's word for all of us, today.

I can think of times when I was angry at someone or about something and my mom would say, "It sounds to me like you're your own worst enemy."

My own reactions were pulling me back, holding me down.

My own attitude was causing me to think and to do things that were either already hurting me or would eventually hurt me worse than anything I could conceive for the people I believed had hurt me.

An Old Story



To help you understand this idea of becoming your own worst enemy, I want to tell you an old story of a television show my brother David reminded me of.

A famous film director named Alfred Hitchcock (who unfortunately had a profile somewhat like Pastor Johnny's) was known for films like *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Vertigo*, and *Rear Window*.

When Hitchcock decided to try directing television, he found a fascinating script about a clock-maker who was convinced that his wife was cheating on him.

He knew that a man was visiting her while he was at work and for several days had come just before four-o'-clock.

He decided to get revenge on both of them by building a bomb to blow up at four-o'-clock while he himself was at work.

An Old Story



He went into the basement, set the bomb, and was just about to leave when two burglars came in, tied, and bound him.

They didn't know about the bomb, but the clockmaker had to sit there helplessly and watch the clock tick toward four-o'clock.

When the other man came in and met his wife, shortly before four, he overheard the two talking and discovered that the man was her brother, recently released from prison.

The two decide to go to the clockmaker's shop and tell him the secret she had kept about her criminal brother.

They leave before four and leave this jealous, vengeful man to watch the ticking clock close in on his own doom, a circumstance of his own making. He was very much his own worst enemy.

And that's what James is warning us about in our text today—how we become our own worst enemies. Let's read James 4:1-5, first in Chinese and then, Pastor Johnny's English translation:

James 4:1-4

James 4:1 *Where [is the source of] the wars and where [is the source of] the fighting among you? Is [the source] not located out of your hedonism [putting yourself first] prosecuting a military campaign [essentially, plotting and strategizing] in the midst of your limbs?*

2) *You strongly desire but you don't have, you murder and you're jealous, and you're not able to attain [what you desire], [so] you fight and you war. You don't have because you don't ask.*

3) *You ask and you don't receive because you ask with evil motives [lit. badly] in order that you spend money on your hedonism.*

4) *Adulteresses, don't you know that the love of this world order is hostile to God? Therefore, if anyone wants to be a friend of this world order, that one proves herself/himself to be the enemy of God.*

5) *Do you not think that it is empty that Scripture says 'For He jealously, strongly desires the Spirit Who lives within us?'*

Key Words in James 4:1-4

Now, the first thing you're going to notice is that my translation uses some harsh language that has been softened in a lot of modern translations. I use the words: war, hedonism, military campaign, murder, evil motives, adulteresses, hostile, and enemy.

1. Wars and fighting (v. 1)

2. Hedonism (passions) (v. 1)

3. [Military] campaigning (v. 1)

4. "Murder"/Jealousy (v. 2)

5. Wars and fighting (v. 2)

6. Evil motives (v. 3)

7. Adulteresses (v. 4)

8. Hostile and enemy (v. 4)

Softer Translations!

Where I'm talking about war — factions going against factions, divisive, violent, and destructive—the NIV speaks of fights and quarrels as though this is relatively minor dissension. The NASB speaks of quarrels and conflicts as though this is all verbal. The Good News Bible has the same idea as the NIV and the Common English Bible seems to make it primarily a verbal dispute. But wars destroy, alienate, and kill.

- NIV = “What causes fights and quarrels among you?”
- NASB = “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts within you?”
- GNB = “Where do all the fights and quarrels among you come from?”
- CEB = “What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes?”

Metaphors of War

James may not be talking about literal wars in the church, but he's talking about differences that can kill the spirit, divide the church, destroy the church's witness, and alienate God's people from the church.

A lot of people are shocked by the idea of church fights, but they are very real.

They are, as James notes, a consequence of the desire for pleasure—putting your desires above everyone else's.

In our text, James is talking about why the church has lost its power, why the church isn't effective in prayer, and why the church is losing the battle against sin.

But the same things that made the early church ineffective are keeping us from being what we need to be.



The “Pleasure” Principle

And that root cause is our passion!

The Greek word is the word from which we get the English word “hedonistic.”

The idea is to be totally given to physical and mental pleasure.

In the early 19th century, there was a philosopher named Jeremy Bentham who built an entire philosophy around the idea of pleasure.

He wanted to develop a calculus by which a person could deduce right from wrong, so he measured actions in terms of the amount of “hedons” (units of pleasure) created versus “dolors” (units of pain).

By the way, this is the same guy who ordered his dead body to be dissected in public for the edification of those who wanted to study the human body and then, taken to the taxidermist to be stuffed like an animal head in a hunting cabin. It’s still in a cabinet at University College London. Apparently, Bentham was obsessed with the material world. And the way he measured “hedons?” It was the intensity of the pleasure multiplied times the duration of pleasure.

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)
- Developed principle of measuring the “utility” of an action by the “hedons”
- Hedon was a measure of pleasure
- Intensity of pleasure * duration of pleasure = # of hedons

The “Pleasure” Problem

This isn't exactly what James was warning about, but it's close.

He was warning about those who measured their actions and ideas by how much pleasure it would bring them.

Even the resources they spent, according to verse 3, are spent to provide pleasure. It's all about what I want and it doesn't consider God or others—merely what one strongly desires.

James doesn't define the passions here.

He doesn't say whether they are overeating, using blasphemy, swindling people out of money, taking advantage of people sexually, using destructive drugs, gossiping about people, or beating them up.

He simply says that strong desires, those impulses that put me first, create destructive wars both among the fellowship of God in the church and, by implication, within the bodies and lifestyles of the individual members.

The word used for making war among your own body parts is the Greek word from which we get strategy.

It means to direct a military campaign.

It means to have an “us vs. them” attitude that doesn't care about the casualties on the other side.

We don't care who we hurt, as long as we get our desires met.

Unexpected Consequences

But military campaigns don't always work out like you think they're going to.

When the Allies defeated the Central Powers at the close of World War I, the victors thought it was the end of the "world to end all wars,"

but even this little California paper (printed about 40 minutes from where I was born) recognized there was a problem. The peace terms pretty well guaranteed that Germany would be back.

And when we are determined to get our way, when we keep doing what we want to do regardless of how it affects others, we don't realize what we're doing to ourselves.

Like the guy in the old television show, we're our own worst enemies.

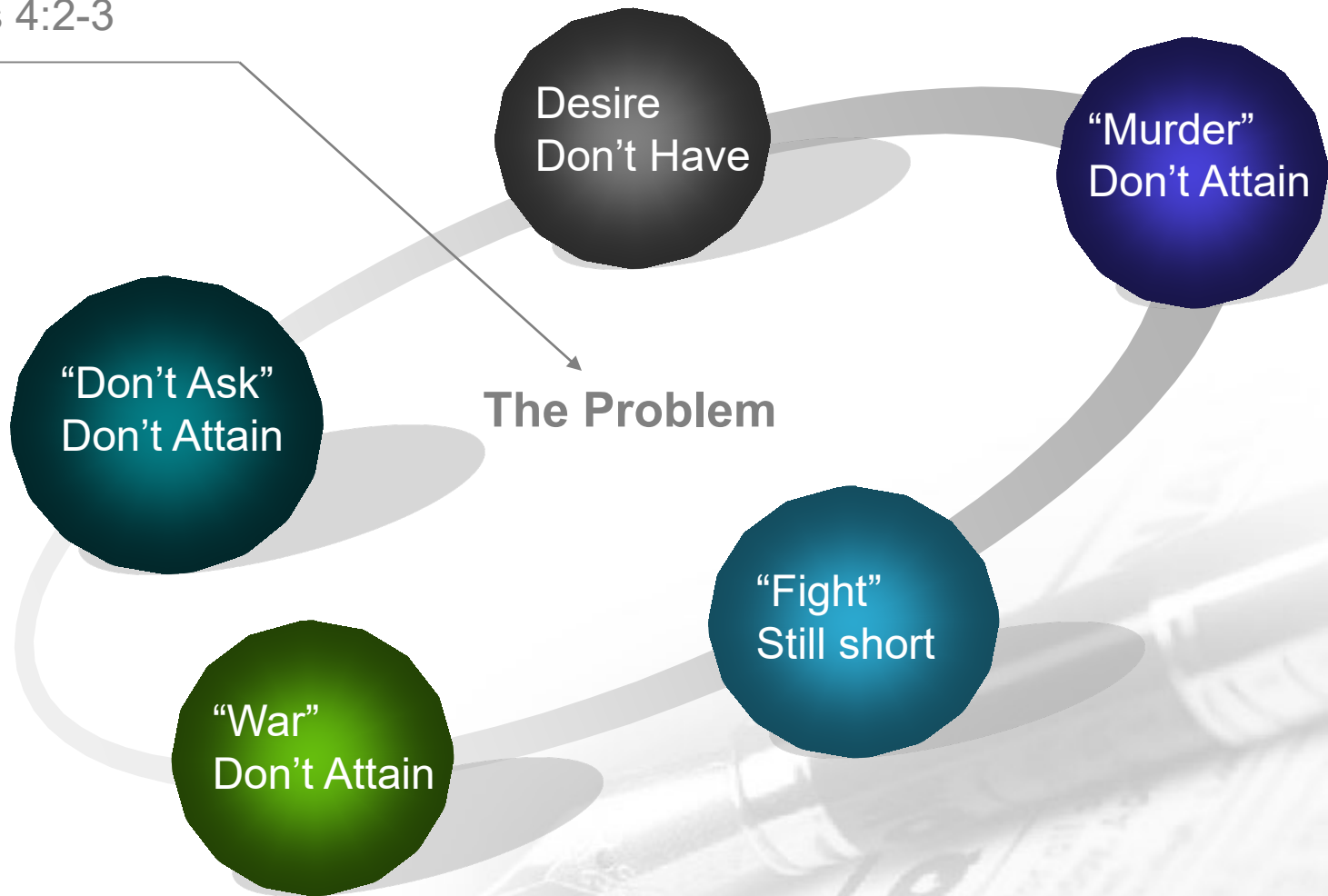
We think our church leaders are out of touch, our parents don't understand, our bosses are clueless, and our friends are hopeless.

The truth is that we find ourselves doing self-destructive things and church-destructive things when we think about what we want in isolation.



The Dirty Circle

James 4:2-3



The Dirty Circle

Desire
Don't
Have

"Don't Ask"
Don't Attain

"Murder"
Don't Attain

"Fight"
Still
short

"War"
Don't Attain

And, James uses the next few phrases to demonstrate the dirty circle that shows why being totally absorbed in self doesn't work. "You strongly desire [something] but you don't have it."

He says that fighting, causing dissension, causing trouble, and causing bad things to happen in your life and in those of the people you're supposed to care about **all stems from dissatisfaction**.

I want something whether it's good for me or not.

It can be carbs, popularity, alcohol, intimacy, wealth, or power that I want, but if I don't care what happens for me to get it and who I hurt, that's **not** finding the best that God wants for me and that means I'm dissatisfied.

If I'm truly dissatisfied I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get what I want. I may lie to people who trust me. I may get other people to cover for me. I may take advantage of someone who can give me what I want. James uses the terms "murder" and jealousy here. But we still come up short.

The same with fighting and creating dissension (making war). We still don't get it!

We don't have what we want because we don't want it for the right reasons and don't ask for it for the right reasons.

The First Murder



What caused the first murder—where Cain kills Abel?

It was his envy of his brother. What did God warn him about?

God said that if you keep stewing on this jealousy, it will be like a demonic creature crouching at the door and ready to jump on you and take control of you.

And sure enough, Cain does the unthinkable and kills his brother.

I really believe James used the term for “murder” here as a warning that when we are totally “me-oriented” and driven by our desires, our passions—we are likely to do things that we can’t even *imagine* ourselves doing. Ever heard someone say that it was like they weren’t even doing something; it was like they were watching themselves do it? That’s the kind of attitude where we would even do despicable things to get our way.



Didn't Want to Ask

But sometimes, we don't ask because we simply don't think God will give us anything good. We think of God as being like the parent who holds out on us for our own good, the parent who doesn't trust us and takes all our privileges away.

Here's my ice cream parable.

When I was a pre-teen, we were visiting my Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe was the kind of guy who was always full of mischief. I thought we were going for a drive, but Uncle Joe was taking us to the local dairy where we would get something new he'd discovered, a slushy. It wasn't exactly a 7-11 slush, but kind of a cross between a slush and a milkshake.

Suddenly, I was worried. I hadn't know where we were going and I hadn't asked mom or dad for any money. I was broke and when we drove up the driveway to where guys came out to take your orders, Uncle Joe started going around the car to find out what we wanted. I lied. I said I didn't want anything. Well, Uncle Joe was not the kind of guy who took "No" for an answer.

He asked, "Have you ever had a slushy before?" I had to admit that I hadn't.

"Well, then," said Uncle Joe, "we'll get you a slushy. What flavor do you want, orange, strawberry..."

I opted for the orange and it was probably the best ice cream treat I'd ever had up till that day.

The point is that I was afraid to ask and if Uncle Joe hadn't been so generous, I wouldn't have had it.

And I should have asked politely. I should have been able to tell it was expected of me.

And that's what James means. We should have a sense of what God expects from us.

Of course, if I'd asked Uncle Joe for a cigarette, a bottle of vodka, or a hit of heroin, it would have been a completely different situation.

Why Do We Want That?

James is essentially suggesting that there were members in the church who were so selfish and so full of the wrong kind of passion that they couldn't ask because they knew what they wanted was wrong.

How do we avoid asking for evil things?

I think that's going to become clear at the end of verse 3, but the first thing we need to ask ourselves is, "Why do we want..." whatever it is that we want?

Do we just want it to feel good? Do we just want it to show off? Do we just want to scratch an itch?

And the second thing we need to ask is, "How will my getting this affect others..."

The Jazz Parable



We are asking badly if we don't consider how our actions will affect others.

If there are any jazz fans in our congregation, you'll know one of the greatest jazz sax players ever was Charlie "Bird" Parker.

But Bird died young with complications due to his heroin addiction.

In one account, Parker discovers that his white trumpet player, Red Rodney, has become a heroin addict, too. He says, "Oh, no, Red! Not you!"

And the trumpet player answers that he took up the habit to be like Parker.

The positive news is that Rodney had the addiction in the 1950s, kicked the habit and even ended up making some of his best recordings in the late 1980s, but the fact is that he lived through hell trying to be like Charlie Parker.

Of course, I don't think we have any heroin addicts in our congregation, but James' point still holds.

We need to think about why we're asking and think about who it's going to affect.

Sister Fact

A precious church member, not in this church, had two daughters.

One of the daughters went off to study for a year in England and became sexually involved with a young man.

Later, the young man and one of his friends came to the U.S. to visit her.

Her younger sister knew that her older sister had been sexually active and so, when they double-dated, guess what?

The younger sister got pregnant.

The older sister thought she knew how far she could go, but she didn't know how far her younger sister would go.

That's just a crude example of the way we affect each other.

Parable of the “Letter”

And that’s why James pulls out the big guns and calls them “Adulteresses!”

He puts the big scarlet letter for adultery on the congregation much like the prophets of old did to Israel. An adulterer or adulteress is someone who cheats on someone they are supposed to love.

God’s people cheat on God whenever they become so “me-focused” on their passions that they don’t care about God, their brothers and sisters in Christ, their families, their loved ones, and the people to whom they are called to serve in whatever capacity.

I’m a realist. It doesn’t have to be sexual sin where we become enemies of God, where we actively work against God’s plan, but it can be.

But we can also be adulteresses by being lazy, by being selfish, by being destructive, by being violent, by being addictive, or giving in to any of a number of things that are somewhat accepted by the world order, but not accepted by God.



The Hope of Victory

There's a great promise a few verses down from our text: "Resist the devil and he will be routed from you."

If we're going to be true to what James told the early church as it applies to us, we need to admit to God that all of us have been adulterers and adulteresses.

I'm not saying we are sexual cheaters, but that we spend too much time thinking of what's desirable in the short-term instead of what God wants for us in the long-term.

We are too much friends of the world order instead of friends of God.

Please, please don't leave this service as an enemy of God.

We don't have to wear the scarlet letter.

God can remove it from us with the blood of Jesus on this very moment.

We only have to ask, and ask for His glory, not ours.