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The Sinister and Singular Cause of All Sin

James 4:1-6

I don't like oversimplification. I don't typically give much credence to those who try to reduce complex problems to a single cause. But I'm going to make an exception to that this morning. And I'm making an exception because James does. Or I should say, God does through the writing of James.

Now, before I explain more what I mean, let's be honest and acknowledge that *sin is a massively complex and multifaceted phenomenon*. We typically define sin as the immoral and ungodly energy in the human soul that results in willful violation of God's law. Sin comes in a wide variety of forms and expressions. There is lying and stealing and cheating and slandering others and lusting. Sin in the human heart comes to expression in arrogance and pride and greed and envy. You may recall how the apostle Paul describes sin in Galatians 5. He calls them "works of the flesh" and proceeds to mention "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these" (Gal. 5:19-21a).

How serious are such sins, you ask? Well, Paul says in the very next sentence: "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21b).

So, as I said, sin is a multifaceted and complex energy in the human soul that if not acknowledged, confessed, and repented of will exclude a person from the kingdom of God. What this means is that I'm treading on thin ice when I say that all sin, in whatever form it occurs, can by and large be reduced to one simple and single cause: *selfish desires that are the fruit of a steadfast refusal to believe and trust in the truth that God alone is able to satisfy the human soul*.

I realize that I have just overly simplified a massively complex and intricate issue in human experience. But I believe I'm justified in doing so. Stop for a moment and consider a few of the other attempts to account for human behavior:

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I am a victim of the sinful behavior of others.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I was emotionally or verbally or sexually or physically abused by others.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I was deprived of a good education.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I've never been given the opportunity to develop my talents and succeed in the world of business.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I've been slandered and undermined by other people.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I'm not as physically attractive as others and I have to compensate for that in some manner that works.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because I've lacked the money to achieve or obtain what I most wanted in life.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because my parents failed me in every conceivable way.

I'm sinfully acting the way I do because society is stacked against me.

I may not have covered all the possible options, but you get the point. Now listen carefully. Every single one of these explanations for your behavior may well have validity. Each of them may well be true. But none of them is sufficient to account for why you and I sin in the ways we do.

Sin begins with the steadfast and stubborn refusal to believe that God alone can satisfy the longings and desires of the human soul. This act of rebellious unbelief fuels the selfish desires that we have to satisfy our longings in someone or something other than God. Again, why do we have selfish desires to find satisfaction and meaning and joy and peace in something other than what God is for us in Jesus? The answer is because we do not believe that in God's presence (alone) is fullness of joy and at his right hand (alone) are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).

All sin, including those mentioned by James in this chapter, comes from rejecting God as our highest treasure and our ultimate satisfaction and our supreme love. God created you so that he, God, might be your all-consuming, supreme love and satisfaction. So when James says that all manner of sin comes from unsatisfied desires, you must not write him off as offering some quasi-psychological analysis of the human predicament. What he means is that ***all sin comes from rejecting God as our greatest treasure and our supreme satisfaction and our most passionate love and instead turning to anything or anyone else for the fulfillment of our selfish desires.*** This simple but undeniably profound truth is at the heart of what James is saying in James 3:1-6.

A Brief but Important Excursus on Abortion

Before we go any further let me wander off into something of an excursus, but an important one nonetheless. Some of you may know that for many years John Piper would preach a sermon on Right to Life Sunday that addressed the epidemic of abortion in our land. As I was perusing those many sermons, I was caught off guard when I noticed that once he based his message on our passage here in James 3:1-6. His argument based on James 3 is powerful. Here is what he said:

“The issue of murder in this text is rooted in unsatisfied desires. ‘You desire and do not have; so you commit murder.’ We could spend a long time here examining all the desires and longings that an unplanned pregnancy threatens: [such as] a pleased boyfriend or husband, education, financial solvency, career, freedom from morning sickness and diapers and runny noses and the terrible twos and sleepless nights and homework help and sports and band and drama and transportation and teenage moodiness and college expenses. You desire all these things and all this freedom, but along comes a baby, and your desires are threatened, and you are tempted to get rid of the troublemaker, the baby. That’s where abortion comes from. . . .

If we found in God what God really is, if we were not willfully blind and rebellious against him as our all-supplying portion in this life and the next, we would not abort our children. ***The root cause of abortion is the failure to be satisfied in God as our supreme love*** (emphasis mine). And, for all the great legal work that needs to be done to protect human life, the greatest work that needs to be done is to spread a passion – a satisfaction – for the supremacy of God in all things.”

So precisely what, then, are the desires that lead to the “murder” of the unborn? Piper answers:

“More financial security perhaps or more leisure or more education or more unrestrained teenage sex activity or more career options or the avoidance of a child who may be handicapped, or perhaps just less hassle for the next 18 years. We desire, and the desires may be good or bad.

But then comes the pregnancy—the beginning of a divine work of person-forming in the womb. And the result? The desires are threatened. We desire and then, because of the pregnancy, we cannot have. The child is going to cost money; or cramp our travel plans and our leisure; or keep us out of school; or hinder our career advancement; or consume

thousands of hours with a possible handicap; and limit our freedom in a hundred ways for the next 18 years or more.

Now what? James says, ‘You desire and do not have; so you kill.’ We kill marriages and we kill unborn babies because they cut across our desires; they stand in the way of our unencumbered self-enhancement. And we live in a culture where self-enhancement and self-advancement is god. And if self-enhancement is god, then the One who is at work in the womb shaping a person in his own image is not God and the assault on his work is not sacrilegious, but obedience to the god of self.”

Now, to be sure, John would not argue that abortion is what James had in mind when he wrote these verses. But the principle articulated by James is most certainly applicable to the subject of abortion and why people choose to terminate the lives of the unborn. [You can read his two sermons on this at www.desiringgod.org, “Where Does Child Killing Come From?” January 25, 1998; “Abortion: You Desire and Do Not Have, So You Kill,” January 18, 1987.] So, that is my brief but very important excursus today. Let’s now turn again to the text and see what James has to say.

A Theology of Sin

In order to help us follow James’s argument, I want to point out what I believe is the basic structure or outline of what he says.

Note first of all in v. 1 how ***James identifies the fundamental cause or source of our sin: it is our “passions” or “desires” that wage war within our souls.*** Then note how he turns to give three examples of how these sinful passions express themselves: (1) You desire or want things but you do not get them. The result is that you commit “murder” (v. 2a). (2) You covet and cannot obtain. The result is that you engage in fights and quarrels (v. 2b). (3) You don’t have what you need most, because you don’t ask God for it in prayer. And when you do finally get around to asking God, you don’t receive it because your motivation is to spend God’s gifts to satisfy your sinful passions and desires (vv. 2c-3).

Let’s begin where James does, by identifying the fundamental cause and source of our sin. ***Quarrels and fights that break out among God’s people are not the primary problem. They are the symptom of a much deeper and more pressing problem.*** By the way, “quarrels” and “fights” could be of a wide variety: verbal disputes, arguments over theology, competing with others for power and recognition, jostling for authority, accusing others of treating you unjustly and your demand that they be called to account. This would also include bitterness towards others and

lingering unforgiveness in your heart. It's possible that physical fights on occasion broke out as tempers flared and things spun out of control.

But the important thing for us to note is the cause of it all. Let me say first of all that we must take note of what James does **not** say. He does not say that the cause of our sinning is Satan. He doesn't say that you fight and engage in bitter conflict because Satan is at war within you. Neither does he say that the cause of our sinning is the world and its corrupt ways. Nowhere does he suggest that the cause of our sin is the dysfunctional family in which we were raised. The cause of all our sinning are those "passions" or "desires" that wage war within us.

Let's look at how this same idea is expressed by the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:11 – ***"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul."*** Note that the "soul" of a man or woman is the place of godly thinking, living, and choosing. That is why fleshly passions wage war against it. The enemy is not your soul. The enemy is your flesh! The enemy is not your mind. The enemy is your flesh!

But it is an enemy that with the help of God's grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit we can defeat! A command such as this implies that inward desires are not beyond our control, are not simply "who we are" or something to which we must acquiesce and yield but are in fact to be ***consciously controlled***. Such desires are not simply a given that we must embrace fatalistically.

Well, Peter clearly believed that we must never yield or give into the way we were born. He clearly believed that one can exercise control over one's desires. One need not slavishly and passively yield to them. Note well: Peter does not say that we should refrain merely from the outward expression of those desires (although that is surely included in 1 Peter 2:12). ***Rather, we are exhorted to abstain from and even to kill the desire itself. Put to death passion. Put to death evil desire. Put to death covetousness. Put to death illicit sexual impulses.***

The Apostle Paul was in complete agreement with Peter on this point. In Colossians 3 he says, ***"put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry"*** (Col. 3:5).

Secular theorists find this untenable because they don't believe a person has any power on which to rely other than the strength of one's own will. One simply cannot resolve or determine or will oneself to cease desiring. All such desires, they say, are a given of human nature and cannot be altered or overcome and for the sake of your emotional health you simply need to give in to them and express them in whatever way you find most satisfying.

But the counsel of both Paul and Peter is based on their belief that the Christian is energized, animated, and empowered by the Holy Spirit (cf. Col. 1:29)! No desire or passion or urge is so entrenched in the human soul that a person indwelt by the Spirit cannot conquer it. But even if you can't conquer it or change it you can, with the Spirit's help, choose not to indulge in it.

Many contend that you can't simply choose to suppress certain passions. In fact, they argue that it is psychologically dangerous to attempt any such thing. Venting our desires, giving them full and fetterless freedom, is the counsel we most often hear. "Be yourself! Embrace your longings!" And above all else, never judge or condemn someone for their expression or attempt to find fulfillment of these inward urges.

I'm speaking only for myself when I say that *I don't want to "be myself"*! I want to be like Christ. When I look within myself I see evil passions and selfish desires and uncleanness and covetousness and I want nothing of them. *These are violations of my true self.* These are invasive enemies from which I long to be delivered by the grace of God. *I have no desire to affirm all that is within me.* I rather choose to defy much of what is within me. I choose by the grace of God to oppose it, defeat it, and live in true freedom from its enslaving power.

In Ephesians 4:22 Paul referred to this as "*deceitful desires.*" These "passions" or "desires" that Paul, Peter and James all mention will always lie to you. They will try to deceive you into believing that by indulging them and giving them sway in your life and by making room for them in your experience that you will find real and lasting joy. Don't believe them! They lie! They are "deceitful" desires. Fight them with reminders of truth. Fight them by laying hold of the truth of Psalm 16:11.

As we come back to James 4:1 we see that his language is the same as Peter's and Paul's and his theology of sin is identical. The problem that each of us faces are the sinful passions that wage war within us.

An Application to Marriage and Family

The truths that James articulates here are relevant not merely to life in the church but to life in general, especially in the marriage relationship. So listen closely.

I strongly suspect that many of you, upon reading the question James asks in the first half of v. 1, think that you have the answer. Look at it again: ***“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?”***

Many of the women here today answer by saying:

“Well, goodness, that’s easy. My husband and I quarrel and fight because he is so utterly insensitive to my needs. On occasion he treats me with utter contempt. Sometimes he just ignores me. He doesn’t appear to have any idea how much I’m hurting. He only cares about himself. We only get to watch *his* favorite TV shows, never mine. When it comes to vacation, we always go where *he* wants to go, never where I’d like to go. And he’s so darn critical of virtually everything I do. Nothing seems to be good enough for him. He takes for granted everything I do. I feel so unappreciated. So you can imagine why we have so much angry energy in our home.”

Now, let’s give equal time to you men today. I can hear some of you answer James’s question along these lines:

“She treats me with such disrespect. I work hard all day and all she does is complain that there’s never enough money. She picks at all my shortcomings as if she’s in the yard pulling weeds. No matter how hard I try, she rarely seems to appreciate it. My goodness, she gives ‘nagging’ a bad name. Sometimes I wish I were totally deaf, but no, I hear every critical word she speaks. And then the fight gets ugly and may go on for days.”

First of all, I want to go on record as saying that ***the way both of you treat the other is sinful***. But the fundamental reason why you fight and argue and fail to love one another as you should is deeper than that. The cause of the friction and chaos and arguments and angry words is not because your spouse ignored you or treated you unfairly or took advantage of you or let you down. The reason for the dysfunction in every marriage, family, and all other relationships is the ***sinful passions and desires that are at war within you***.

Didn’t you notice that after James asks the question he provides the answer? Think of it this way. It’s somewhat ***analogous to what happens when you go to the doctor***. The first thing that happens is that you tell him/her where it hurts. You point to the pain. You show him/her the swelling or the cut or the bruise. That is analogous to what James refers to as “quarrels” and “fights” (v. 1).

The second thing that happens is that the doctor identifies for you the underlying cause of your pain and discomfort. The pain and the swelling and the discomfort are only symptoms of a far more serious and underlying disease or infection. That is what James does in the second half of v. 1. He says:

“People. I’m going to answer my own question. The real problem isn’t that you fight with each other and criticize each other and undermine and betray one another. That’s a problem, to be sure. But the real problem is more than that. There is a cause for your acting and speaking in the way you do. It’s called evil, fleshly ‘passions’ that ‘are at war within you’” (v. 1b).

If I once again may be allowed to simplify things, here is what James is saying. All your problems, all your struggles, whether in your relationship with others or in your battle with temptation in the world, can largely be reduced to one thing: *selfish desires*.

Look at how James unpacks this in v. 2. First, he says that **“you desire and do not have, so you murder”** (v. 2a). I think that if James had literal, physical murder in mind, he would have said far more about it than he does. He probably means something along the lines of: “you are murderously angry,” similar to what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:21-26. There he warns us against being “angry” with others in our heart. The Apostle John put it this way: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15).

Then again he says: **“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel”** (v. 2b). Notice what is happening here. James says in no uncertain terms that the reason you fight and quarrel and undermine each other and compete for power and position is that you have selfish desires within that, when not satisfied, frustrate you and anger you and lead to bitter, divisive, and destructive outbursts. John Calvin said it beautifully:

“When a man allows his appetites free rein, he will never come to an end to his lust. Even if he were given the earth, he would long to have new worlds made for him” (296).

People, please listen to what I’m saying. Listen to what James and Paul and Peter are saying. **Your most basic and fundamental problem in all of life, mine too, is that we are selfish.** We desire this. We have passion for that. And when we don’t get it, we explode. It isn’t always a verbal or physical outburst, but we vent our anger and frustration at others in all manner of ways. Fights and quarrels and division and the harm we inflict on one another is because we are selfish. Period.

Don't try to rationalize your behavior on some other grounds. Don't try to excuse your bitterness and your resentment and your unforgiving attitude by appealing to a bad education, or bad parents, or a bad society, or some bad example, or a bad Satan, or a bad world. The only "badness" that is needed to explain our sinful behavior is what resides in our own hearts and it's called selfishness!

Let me expand a bit on the principle that James articulates. The underlying problem, once again, in all our relational and marital struggles is ***not something outside us***. It's not other people. It's not your boss or your spouse or your child or your neighbor or your mom or dad. It's not another person who frustrates your goals or who undermines your plans or who fails to come through when you expect them to. ***The fundamental, underlying problem is inside us: passions, desires, demands, and covetousness. I want convenience! I desire more money! I need respect! I have a passion for pleasure! I covet what you've got! I want to be loved! I demand obedience!***

And when others don't come through to fulfill our desires, passions, needs, and demands, we fight. We argue. We criticize. We seek revenge. We cut them off. We steal. We lie. We get even. And we turn our attention to someone else, anything else, other than God, to satisfy those raging desires within.

And how does all this relate to prayer? And it does, as vv. 2b-3 clearly indicate. Here is what James is saying:

“If you don't have what you think you need it is because you don't come to God and ask him for it. And when you do come and ask you pray with wrong motives. You want God to give you things so that you might use them to satisfy your selfish desires. You don't pray for what you need to experience more of God, or so that you might be less selfish and more giving, or so that you might be a blessing to others. In order to get what you selfishly want and covet and desire you turn to God and ask him to supply it.”

This is stunning. James portrays men and women wanting something (or someone) that satisfies, and then coming to God not because *he* satisfies, but only to ask him for the means to get something else. Once we get it we turn away from God to find our satisfaction in whatever thing he gave us. This is why James will describe people in the next verse as “adulterous” (v. 4a)!

In essence, James portrays God as our heavenly husband to whom we come asking for money to pay for a visit to a prostitute! “God is our husband,” says Piper, “and the world is a prostitute luring us to give affections to her that belong only to God” (*A Hunger for God*, 74).

James has in mind people who use prayer to try to get from God something they desire more than God. Again, as Piper says, “We are like a wife who asks her husband for money to visit another lover” (356). We will look at this in considerably more detail next week.

Conclusion

So what is it that we *should* desire and long for? For what *ought* we to be passionate? This brings me back to my comparison of this scenario with your visit to the doctor. Remember the first two things that happen: **first**, you explain the problem, the pain; and **second**, the doctor identifies the underlying cause or disease. But if that is where things ended you would be in trouble. What would happen if your doctor said: “I’m so sorry, but there’s no cure. Your disease is terminal. There’s nothing that I or anyone else can do for you.” That’s not what you want to hear! You need a cure! You need a prescription. You need a remedy to the underlying disease.

And what is the cure or the remedy or the answer to our selfish and frustrated desires? God! The only way to defeat one passion is with the superior and more satisfying power of another. Fill your mind with things that display the superior beauty of God. Meditate on things that exhibit the superior greatness of Christ. Resist the allure of fleshly passions by flooding your soul with godly ones. Study God. Sing about Christ. Rely on the Spirit. Read the Word. And be absolutely ruthless to ***amputate*** from your life anything that draws you away from God or dulls your appetite for him.

Ladies, if you were altogether satisfied with the goodness and grace of God and enthralled with how he loves you and enjoys you would your desire for your husband to treat you with sensitivity and understanding be as intense as it is? Would the pain in your heart be so unbearable? Would you be as inclined to manipulate him or to pick a fight and argue and quarrel? That isn’t to excuse what he does. What he does is sinful. But it doesn’t have to kill you!

Husbands, the same applies to you. Why do you not love your wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25)? Because ***you really don’t know what it means to say Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. For many of you, it’s only a verse of Scripture. It hasn’t yet become a dominant force for change in your life, a truth in which your soul can fully rest and rejoice.***

Simply put, both of you desire and demand and expect the other to do for yourself what only God can provide. You hurt and grieve and get angry and fight and try to get even because ***you selfishly desire from the other what only God can give you.***

So what would it look like if you were captivated by the splendor of God's love and kindness and sovereignty and grace? How would it affect your relationships in life if you were altogether overwhelmed with the realization that you deserve eternal damnation but have instead been given eternal life and happiness? What would happen to those sinful, selfish, evil passions and desires that incline you to make self-serving demands of others? I'm not saying you should stop desiring. Passion isn't evil. Passion that seeks satisfaction in anything or anyone other than God is evil. ***God built you with passions and desires. He wants you to want. But he wants you to want him so that he can glorify himself by satisfying your soul in ways that no other human being or earthly experience ever could.***