

Wisdom for Wholeness: How to Acquire Wisdom (Part 2)

James 4:1-10

One of the most unsettling and disturbing chapters in the entire Bible is Ezekiel 16. If you've never read it before God speaks to the nation of Israel and describes Israel as a newborn left in the open field whom God found, cleaned up and clothed. Eventually as this child grew, God brought her into a marriage covenant with Him and showered her with gifts and goodness. He provided for her and loved her with a devoted affection and love. The chapter describes in graphic and heart-wrenching detail how Israel took the very gifts of God and pursued other lovers.

It's easy to read about Israel's spiritual adultery and pursuit of idols and be horrified, and we should be. But James is going to point out that we often do the very same thing today. God has given us the ability to want and desire and those desires are meant to be aimed at Him and His glory and the good of others. But instead, our desires are often self-focused and self-centered.

Learning about our desires and being able to accurately diagnose them is necessary for our growth in wisdom toward spiritual wholeness. Keep in mind that we are studying James 4:1-10 and James is teaching us how to put on or acquire the wisdom from above that he defined in James 3:13-18. So, in James 4:1-10 we are looking at **3 steps to acquire heavenly wisdom.**

1. Diagnose Your Desires (vv. 1-3)

The clearest sign of heavenly wisdom is the pursuit of peace in all our relationships, according to James 3:18. In order to intentionally pursue peace we have to be able to recognize the underlying cause to our conflict. This is what James points out in James 4:1-2. Let me read these verses.

The cause of conflict comes from our passions, desires, and our covetousness. To help us diagnose our desires James says we need to bring them to the Lord in prayer. Look at the end of verse 2 and verse 3.

But sadly, so much of the time our desires are aimed at the wrong things. We have to be able to diagnose this and then we must take this seriously. James certainly does and he shows this in our second step to acquire wisdom.

2. Reject Spiritual Adultery (vv. 4-6)

Verse 4 flows from the discussion in verses 1-3. James is very straightforward here. What does it say about us when our desires are self-centered, and our controlling desires are for anything other than God? I understand that we all desire and long for lots of things and many of those things aren't wrong in and of themselves. But all of us live and act out of our controlling desires. What "passion" defines you? What do you want more than anything else? What gets you motivated when you get up in the morning? If some desire other than God has become your controlling and defining motivation, then James's accusation in verse 4 is true of you. Look there.

We already talked about Ezekiel 16 and the picture of Israel as God's wife and God as her husband. This image is given throughout the OT as Israel consistently took the gifts of God, her husband, and used them to pursue false gods. Her controlling desire was for those other gods and so she was committing spiritual adultery.

James uses this accusation because these believers were pursuing worldly, self-centered, desires. They had adopted the affections and loves of the world and longed for the approval of the world. Look at the rest of verse 4.

And here's the thing. You cannot have it both ways. You can only have one controlling desire at a time. If your controlling desire is for comfort in your life, then you will fight for that and use people to get comfort and you will take the gifts of God and twist them and give them to your idol of comfort. The same could be said for power or control. If you want power more than anything else, you are desiring friendship with the world and have placed yourself in the position of an enemy of God.

Friendship is built on mutual love and affection. A friend is someone with whom you have similar hobbies and are headed in the same direction. To be a friend of the world is to want the same things as the world. 1 John 2:15-16 describe the essence of worldliness as the desire for certain things. Matthew 6:24 tells us that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot love the approval of the world and of God and James explains why this is the case in verse 5.

James isn't going to quote a particular passage from the OT here. Instead, he's summarizing a major theme of the OT. What is that theme? God has given us a human spirit and made us creatures who want and He jealously wants our complete and total devotion and love. What is the greatest commandment in the law? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What is the 1st of the Ten Commandments? "You Shall Have no Other gods before me." God can make that exclusive claim of the hearts of Israel because of what He says in Exodus 20 before He gives them the 10 Commandments. Listen to Exodus 20:2. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

God created Israel and redeemed Israel and so He can claim their exclusive loyalty and the same is true for anyone who is a believer in Christ this morning. God created you. He gave you physical life and He sustains your physical life and He gave you spiritual life, so He demands all your love be devoted to Him. He wants all your controlling desires to be centered on Him. Everything else must take second place.

But this is a high demand, isn't it? This is not just hard, but impossible. We have been broken by the fall into sin and so we do not come into this world wanting God more than anything. We don't spend our lives in loyalty to Him. Instead, we are like Israel. We are professionals at taking the gifts of God and exploiting them for our own selfish desires. We may even ask God for things so that we can then turn around and pursue other lovers with the very gifts God has given. The man who is born with the gift of a clear and compelling gift of communication uses that gift to write and argue that God doesn't exist. The woman who is born with strong management and leadership skills uses that talents to work her way up the corporate ladder by crushing anyone in her path. She exploits and manipulates in order to rise to the top. Both have taken a gift, given by God and used it to make much of themselves and this is something we are all born doing.

The Bible is not shy about describing the human condition. We come into this world as friends of the world and enemies of God. Listen to how Romans 3:10-18. We don't fear God and our controlling desires are hardly His glory and fame. Instead, we want self-glory and self-exaltation. We are puffed up in pride and arrogance and so we fight for what we want.

And so, we come to an impasse. God has created human beings with a spirit that is made to long for Him and desire Him, but our hearts are bent out of shape and we want everything but Him. And here's the problem, this is not a God who, in weakness, begs us to come back to Him. God has the exclusive claim on our hearts and to give our loyalty to anything or anyone else is to slap our Creator in the face and it's to invite His judgment.

But here's the amazing and glorious truth that you must realize this morning. Judgment always falls for the cosmic treason of giving our love and affection to someone other than God, but, God, by His grace, sent someone else to take that judgment for you. Look at James 4:6.

Grace. Unmerited favor. Undeserved kindness. What is the grace that God gives to we who are born friends of the world and deserving of eternal judgment? Listen to Romans 5:6-9.

God Himself came to earth and was born a human being. He came and lived among us, God's creatures, we had been broken and bent by sin and were in rebellion against Him. The Lord Jesus Christ came to earth and lived the life we should have lived, the life we needed to live. He lived perfectly free from sin and yet, He gave up His own life on the cross as our substitute. He died for the ungodly, the disloyal, the spiritual adulterers. Then He rose from the dead and won the victory over the powers of darkness and over death itself so that death no longer can claim us.

So, what does this mean for us as we think about wisdom and acquiring wisdom this morning? Well, I'd like to address two groups. First, if you are here this morning and you are a friend of the world because you have never trusted in Christ to cleanse you of your sins, let me plead with you to consider that this morning. Look at the next words in verse 6. God's grace is proclaimed to all people, but only the humble receive it. Humility does not earn us God's grace, but the proud will not acknowledge their need for grace. They will not recognize their friendship with the world or their need for God's grace. They will not turn from their sin and see the serious situation they are in because of God's wrath over sin.

I'd like to read you a little story Jesus told that gets to the heart of the difference between pride and humility. Listen to Luke 18:9-14. The difference in these two

men is the humble recognition of sin and the need for God's grace. God does not shower His grace on those who don't think they need it.

Now, to the second group, those of you who are believers in Christ this morning, but your desires are often aimed at the world and you struggle with single-hearted devotion to Christ. The same word comes to you in James 4:6. This is obviously a quote from the OT, but where in the OT? It's from Proverbs 3:34. Proverbs 3 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible and the whole chapter is an encouragement and exhortation for us to pursue wisdom. James takes this quote from there because that is his goal in this section as well. He wants believers to pursue wisdom and that pursuit requires the rejection of spiritual adultery by humility.

God's grace is not earned in the Christian life. We do not get God to like us more by putting on humility. But humility is the disposition necessary to recognize God's grace and receive it. This quote brings together the pursuit of wisdom with the absolute necessity for humble submission to God's will and ways. God stands ready to give and give. He's overflowing with kindness and grace, but He will not allow us to trample on that grace and use it for our own selfish ends (v. 3).

To be proud is to imagine that we know best. It's to have an exaggerated opinion of oneself. It's to tinker with God's command or downplay their importance in our lives. One cannot be proud and be a friend of God.

Friendship with God requires us to be properly related to Him and as creatures, our posture toward Him is one of humble submission since He is the Creator God.

So, to acquire wisdom we must be attune to our desires and be able to diagnose them. Then, when we find out that our controlling desires are for something other than God, we must turn to Him in humility and seek His face. We must drop the proud and arrogant façade and recognize God as the Creator and sustainer and the one who has given spiritual life.

3. Humbly Repent and Submit to God by Grace (vv. 7-10)