

January 13, 2019

## Lesson 7: Submit to God in Love

Scripture: James 4: 1-10

### Context:

While last week's lesson invited us to understand "tough" love, this week's lesson invites us to look at those things that prevent us from loving others. The quick answer is that we ourselves prevent love from being truly shared and cultivated. We are the ones who cause the issues in the world.

The book of James is one in which the author does not mince words. Consistently throughout the book, the author calls attention to unhealthy behaviors in the body of believers. From the deference to the rich and the scorn to the poor, the writer does not shy away from calling out believers for their hypocrisy.

Chapter four gets to the root of their conflicts. It is not just an economic issue that divides them, it is their very attitude and feelings towards one another. Their conflicts and disputes do not come from a red figure with a pointy trident and a spiked tail, but from the "cravings" that are within them. The Greek word the author uses is *hēdonai*, which generally means "pleasures," or "desires."<sup>1</sup> These desires of course refer to power over others.

The author paints the picture that these individuals causing problems in the church are power hungry and intent to obtain power at any cost. They are jealous of certain individuals and fight with them. They ask questions yet have evil intentions so they don't receive what they want, which leads to more conflict.

As those early church members continue to act on their desire for power, they begin to model the behaviors of the world. They are "unfaithful" as instead of acting with the Christian tenets of peace and grace, they act with manipulation and violent tactics. They become power players of the world, but lose their souls in the process.

Moving on from how they have moved away from God with their obsession with power, the author moves into another section with specific instruction. The author goes on to explain that to solve their conflicts and disputes, they need to reexamine their humility and how they relate to God.<sup>2</sup> The author calls for the people to submit to God and to be humble. Instead of focusing on how to get ahead, they are to repent of their behavior and be lifted up by God. They are to be vulnerable, crying out their sorrow and exchanging their joy of superiority for sadness that they should exalt themselves at the expense of others. God will draw near to them and that is the greatest source of power that is to sustain them.

### Application

There are some who would comment that James is too harsh for the church of today. With phrases such as "you unfaithful people," one would not imagine drawing in the crowds for comfort and care. Yet at time, one might see that James is very appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> PHEME PERKINS, "First and Second Peter, James, and Jude," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1995), 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

for the modern church if we are honest with ourselves.

In seminary I had a professor of United Methodist theology who used to harp upon power as one of those buzz words in understanding the Christian faith. The older I get, the more I realize he is right. There is the power of the Triune God and the goodness that comes from the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is power in the ecclesia, in the called out community that is the church. And there is also the power that is present in sin. Power is part of greed, lust, and envy.

Power can be something used for good or bad. In the case of our scripture reading, we hear how power can be used for bad. My experience when conflict arises in churches or family dynamics is that there is the question of who holds power. Sometimes, people are jealous of others who hold power and they are threatened. So they use the power they possess to manipulate or destroy someone else who may be just as gifted or talented. Or they know that someone is a true leader or someone who is self-differentiated and it threatened by that person. And so they attack in various ways through manipulating others against them, scapegoating them, and even slandering them publicly and privately. If anyone questions their critiques or behavior, they hide it with other things like concern for “the bigger picture” or “keeping everyone happy.” But in reality, it is a power struggle and sometimes the biggest loser ends up being everyone involved as feelings are hurt and people stepped upon because of someone’s desire for power.

Instead of trying to hold power or dominate others, we might need to do a little work by looking in the mirror. As our author suggests, we should be humble and look at ourselves. Who are we to pass judgment on others? Who are we to know more about things than others? Who are we to possess control over others and tell them what to do? Who are we to point out the splinters in others’ eyes when there are logs in our own? I have often found that some of the strongest Christians I know are those who focus on their own goals and their own areas of growth than those of others. When we spend so much time trying to box people in or tell them what to do, we lose sight that maybe we need to spend time with ourselves and see the things that we need to work on.

As you think about love, think about the power of vulnerability and being honest in your relationship with others. Instead of using power to coerce, demean, or “keep someone in line,” think about what is truly affirming. Think about your own gifts and graces and how you would feel if someone tore you down over them. Remember the humility of Jesus and how he never sought to destroy or cripple others for his own advancement. Consider those you look up to the most as Christian witnesses and strive to be like them in your behavior. Be humble, be yourself, and the Lord will lift you up to the places you need to be.

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