

the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil."¹

James, like Jesus, reminds us that, "You cannot serve two masters" (Mathew 6:24). We must be of one heart and mind in faith and service.

Pride is unhealthy, but is not to be confused with healthy self-esteem. At a political rally in Great Britain, a candidate said sternly, "I was born an Englishman, I have lived an Englishman, and I hope before God to die an Englishman."

And an Irish voice from the audience, cried out, "Man, have you no ambition?"

When God is the source of our wisdom, pride is shunned and healthy self-esteem can grow.

The Problem of Envy

Now James mentions another problem: envy. So much of what we see and hear on TV, on radio, in papers, from politicians passes off the message that says "to be" means "to have." To have more means to be more. If you don't have what someone else has, there arises a desire (or demand) to acquire they have. Our culture, it seems, is immersed in envy and it is the seedbed of class envy and class warfare, - never a good thing for Christians. The church is the one - maybe the only - place we truly share. All us benefit from the same programs, same use of the buildings, the same worship services regardless of how much we contribute. Ours is a *voluntary* sharing, not a taxation, for God desires that our hearts be generous and pure. If our contributions are taken from us, then they are not our heart's desire. That is why we operate on a "faith budget" here...faith that God will provide for all this congregation's needs, and most of the provision comes through our hands. Yes, it seems risky, but God asks us to rely on Him in that manner.

Envy can be arbitrary and relative. One mother relates, "My daughter couldn't muster the willpower to lose unwanted pounds. One day, watching a svelte friend walking up our driveway, she lamented, 'Linda's so skinny it makes me sick.'

"If it bothers you," Mom suggested gently, "why don't you do something about it?"

"Good idea, Mom," she replied. Turning to her friend, she called out, "Hey, Linda, have a piece of chocolate cake."²

Envy can lead us to pray, "O Lord, if You can't make me thin, then at least make my friends look fat."³

Envy is a timeless human quality. In James' day even Christians were not immune: their cravings and desires have involved them in quarrels and struggles. They strive for things they think is their due, even if it takes intrigue or violence to gain them. They do not submit their claims or desires to God. Do we? James is addressing the same folks he has addressed throughout this letter: those Christian converts who have taken the gospel as a battle cry against all the injustices, sinfulness, and wickedness they see in society and the government. As he warned them before he warns them again not to engage in reckless and violent activities. Their envy leads to murder. Murder? Isn't that a wild accusation? James may well be a reference to being involved in riots that resulted in death of people. These kinds of violent public demonstrations were not uncommon in cities of the Roman Empire. James may also mean that

¹C. S. Lewis, *MERE CHRISTIANITY* (New York: Macmillan, 1943),109; cited in Jack Kuhatschek, *THE SUPERMAN SYNDROME* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 60.

²Doris E. Fletcher (Kendall Park, NJ) in *READER'S DIGEST*.

³Erma Bombeck

their violent and aggressive behavior has resulted in violent government suppression of other Christians resulting in their martyrdom. These are Christians who are striving for material gain - yet their behavior negates all godly living. Why don't they get what they desire? Because they do not pray for God's provision - "give us this day our daily bread." And if they do receive material blessing they use it for sumptuous living, rather than honoring God with their wealth.

He is concerned that they risk their eternal salvation by their attempts to assert themselves in the world.

Who Can We Turn To?

Since social disruption and violence come from a diseased human heart, how can we possibly avoid the destructive path of pride and envy? James says, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). There is no other healing than an explicit and wholehearted turning to God. If God seems far away it is because we have moved. If we spend less and less time with Him in Bible study and prayer, it is no surprise that God seems distant. Sometimes we make demands on God: "give me what I desire and then I can draw near to You." But God cannot be our servant and still be God. The Mighty One is holy and unchanging - "His steadfast love endures forever".

There is a simple reason for God's distance: it is we who change and allow sin into our lives.

And there is a simple solution for this: cleanse ourselves from sin and God can draw near to us. If you have been actively engaged in sin, you must renounce it. If you have done anything to offend or hurt someone, you must repair the relationship. Purify your heart (Ps. 51:10). Make your thoughts, attitudes, and motives conform to God's will. This is not a matter of trying your best to be a good. That would only be another burden that most of us would struggle to carry. If the message of James to us is simple be good, don't sin and God will draw near to you, it would only be bad news. Fortunately, he gives us another way: submit yourselves to God. This is a matter of availing yourself of the disciplines that prepare your heart to receive Christ, the One who can transform our hearts. We must go to Jesus. Knowing he is the One who can purify us avails us nothing if we do not act to move to Him. He assures us that God is like the loving father who joyously runs to embrace his prodigal son who has repented of his misguided ways and returns home, (Luke 15:20). If we are truly honest with ourselves we will find some of our ways that need to be discarded and areas of our lives we need to submit to God.

Yet the moment we take action to go to Him; in that moment all the power of heaven is brought to our side to resist the evil one. When we go to Him, He *will* lift us up.