

22. Friendship With the World

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he causes to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

(James 4:4-6)

Adulterous People

In the previous verses of the letter, we see how James addresses the churches of his time about the fights and quarrels that were taking place, and about the envy and desires that lay behind all the turmoil. Even prayer—the most intimate fellowship with God—had become skewed and corrupt.

That which follows in 4:4 is a rather strong outburst: “You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?” I do not think that this is a rhetorical question, but that James expresses amazement here that the people of God do not consider what friendship with the world truly means. They are fostering a friendship with the world, at the same time believing that they are also faithful members of Christ's church. This, however, cannot be. We cannot be both a friend of the world and of God, because friendship with the world inevitably leads to hatred for God.

James begins 4:4 with an alarming expression: “You adulterous people.” Imagine our reaction, if the minister addressed us in such a manner from the pulpit on Sunday! James means “spiritual” adultery, that is, not serving God alone or not serving him rightly. In the Bible, especially in the words of the prophets of old, this is termed adultery. It is like breaking a sacred relationship or trust. Just as a marriage does not allow the involvement of any third party, so the relationship with the Lord does not allow for any other “gods”, and must be kept pure. In this chapter, we will focus on the fact that friendship

with the world is hatred toward God. We will see that the Lord demands undivided love and that he gives abundant grace.

Friends in the World

We must first carefully consider the expression “friendship with the world”. The original text actually says simply, “love for the world”, but it is indeed a love that seeks out and wants to have a relationship with the world, a close bond and an active friendship. Note carefully that the text does not say friendship with *people* in the world, but with the world *itself*. It does not speak of friendships *in* the world, but friendship *with* the world. This goes far beyond having a few worldly friends because it denotes a very strong bond with the world itself. We will get back to this point farther on.

With these remarks, I am not suggesting that having friends of the world is possible for Christians. It is true that we need to have certain relations in this world. Paul explains in I Corinthians 5 that we cannot escape contact with those who are of this world, even outright sinners. Otherwise, he writes in verse 10 of that chapter, “[we] would have to leave this world.” We should not try to isolate ourselves from this world—as some do—for we live in the middle of it and have a task in it. We are not of the world, but we are certainly in it! And so we will have important contacts in this world, in our work, business, and public activities.

A business associate, however, is not a friend. Friendship goes much deeper than just a necessary association. It means seeking someone out, trusting in one another, and doing things together. How can a Christian have such a bond with an unbeliever? In the same letter to the Corinthians, Paul warns, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (1 Cor 15:33).

Some may argue that there are many “good” people in the world, even friendlier and more pleasant than certain church members. I do not doubt this for a moment, and members of the church can indeed be harsh and callous, but that is not the point here. The point is that, as children of God, we cannot sustain a worldly friendship. There are two different starting points, two different directions, and hence two different roads on which we are traveling. This is always true, and especially so when we seek a husband or wife. We must seek a spouse who is totally committed to the Lord in every way, also when it

comes to worship and church life. We need to seek and nurture friendships within the communion of saints.

What is the World?

As I mentioned previously, however, the text does not mention people. It reads, “friendship with the *world*,” and that goes much deeper. The “world” means here the sinful world that has become corrupted in every way. It means the world of darkness that is the realm of Satan, the prince of darkness. How can we love this world that lives in defiant rebellion against its Creator and King? How can we love what this world has to offer, when every bit of its culture is deeply opposed to God?

Again, we must be careful. Some have taken this so far that they do not even admire the beauty of natural things. For example, a Puritan and a Calvinist were walking down a road when they chanced upon a beautiful flower along the roadside. The Calvinist said, “What a beautiful flower!” But the Puritan sadly shook his head and replied, “Ugly thing, everything in this world is evil.” This is merely an example, but it clearly shows us that we must carefully distinguish what “friendship with the world” really is. We must not despise all the wonders and gifts that the Lord has laid in his creation for us to discover and admire, for “the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1).

James is writing about the world of sin, the ungodly culture that prevails in it, the corruption evident in it (especially manifest in Satan’s influence and power), the extreme and total rebellion against God, and the hate for all that is pure and holy. This includes all that the world has to offer in the lust of the eyes and the deception of its pleasures. It is the world that Satan once proudly displayed as his world to Christ, as “the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor.” “‘All this I will give you,’ [Satan] said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me’” (Matt 4:8-9). It is also the world with its diseases, despair, and desolation, a place that offers only false and temporary relief for yearning souls.

Then we can understand that love for this world means hatred toward God, for the prince and the kingdoms of this world have one thing in common: their rage against the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth. There is a deeply-rooted, never-ending despising of God, because the creature will not bow before the Creator, nor will the servant serve his master. Hatred towards God is not a superficial thing, such as mere indifference, but it goes very deep and is one

of the most consuming of all emotions. Every act is governed by this hatred towards God, and, conversely, love for the world and for oneself.

Enemies of God

James writes, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?” He phrases it as a question because some Christians are not fully aware of the fact that there is no neutral territory, that we cannot be both a Christian and a cosmopolitan. We either belong to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of this world. We are a servant of Christ or a slave of the devil. Sometimes we try to combine that which cannot be combined, for we want it all. We desire the sinful pleasures of the world *and* the assurances of the Lord, but the two do not go together and cannot co-exist.

Look at James’ next sentence: “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” Someone once suggested to me that this is an excellent proof-text for the *Arminian* teaching of the free will. I do not, however, read the word “freedom” here. By writing, “Anyone who *chooses* to be a friend of the world,” James describes a process in which we are involved and held responsible. We do not become friends of the world against our own choice. We must not think that we do not have to exercise the functions of our will and control the flow of our desires. It is easy to go along with sin, and doing so quickly grows on us. As God warned Cain, “Sin is crouching at [our] door; it desires to have [us], but [we] must master it” (Gen 4:7). God wants undivided love, and we must be aware of that, to work at it and give it the best we can.

Let us also note James’ use of the verb “becomes”. Becoming an enemy of God is a process. We do not become full-fledged enemies of God overnight. By nature, we are complete enemies of God, but we are also taken up in God’s covenant, making us his people, his cherished possession. This is not an indelible status, but it must be a living relationship. Relationships mean work. If not, there is a process of estrangement that leads to a destruction of the relationship. In time, we become enemies of God.

Sometimes we can see it happening before our very eyes. Someone who is a member of God’s church makes certain decisions against God’s revealed will, choices based on a love for the present world. This may be due to an unwillingness to give up worldly benefits and pleasures, as is written of Demas, one of Paul’s former fellow-workers. Sometimes when we address a

person on this path, he is not even aware of being on the wrong path, or does not want to be reminded.

We make choices everyday. Decisions are a part of daily life. On what basis do we make them? We must watch out for a process that systematically leads us away from the service of the Lord. Satan, though he has little of it, does use time, and he thinks, "I'll get you in the end, yes, I will!"

God Envies Intensely

We may not postpone commitment or dedication. We may not say, "Well, not right now, Lord, but later I will deal with the question whether I will serve you whole-heartedly." There are people who say they do not have time for God at this moment, or that they will not break with a certain sin just yet, because they have to find their way through it first. Do we know how dangerous this is, how offensive to God?

Let us look now at 4:5: "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" This is a very difficult passage from an exegetical viewpoint. It is not easy to translate the original and explain it exactly. There is no other specific Bible passage containing these exact words, so James is here summarizing a Biblical teaching. He is illustrating a basic covenantal line, evident in all the Scriptures, that the LORD our God is a jealous God.

Some question whether the word "spirit" in this verse should have a capital 's' or not, to indicate either the human spirit or the Holy Spirit. In other words, does this verse mean that God wants control over our human spirit, the life he breathed into us, or that the Holy Spirit poured out in us wants full control? I lean towards the latter. Either way, however, it is not too important, for the general gist is quite clear: the Lord envies intensely. He wants full control of our lives. He wants our spirit to be directed to him. That is why he created us after his image, and personally breathed in us the spirit of life. That is also why he sent his only-begotten Son to purchase us with his precious blood. That is why the Holy Spirit is poured out over the church, into our lives, so that we might be fully and wholly dedicated to God alone.

God envies intensely. Remember the law: "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (Ex 20:5). He will not give his glory to another. He demands that we serve him, and him alone. There is to be no friendship with the world. The service of the Lord is to be central, the focal point of our lives, for God

will not settle for anything less. He gave all in Jesus Christ, in total love, and now he demands all from us.

Do we understand this? The LORD our God is patient and long-suffering, but he will not let anyone string him along. We need to make the right decisions and choices, in accordance with his Word, and he tells us not to delay. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8). Since God envies intensely, there is a certain urgency in the call to believe and repent, every day again.

The Demand and the Promise

The Lord demands undivided love, but that does not mean we can give it. As sinful people, bound to this world in so many ways, we tend to follow our natural inclinations. There is so much sin in the world that fascinates us.

Sin fascinates us. But are we not new people, born again, risen in Christ to a new life? If so, how can sin still fascinate us? The *Canons of Dort* remind us in the first article of chapter V that God has certainly set us free from the dominion and slavery of sin, but not entirely from the flesh and the body of sin in this life. We are indeed free, but not fully. We can still be wrongly influenced. We have weak flesh and a sinful body. Sinful inclinations must be resisted on a daily basis. We live in a world that constantly seeks to entice us. There is a devil that is very cunning and knows exactly where our weaknesses lie.

How then can we ever serve God with undivided love? It is not possible, is it? God has great jealousy that we serve him fully and completely, but from our side, we cannot live up to this expectation. Notice, then, James’ next words: “But he gives us more grace.” God has intense envy, but he gives more grace. His grace far outweighs his envy.

He gives more grace. The Lord knows how difficult it is for us to love him with undivided love. To do so, we need to be strengthened by him and enabled by his grace. Sin can only be overcome by grace, and the Lord God gives it abundantly! This means that if we need more grace, God will give it. If we say, “Father, I cannot handle this sin on my own, so please give me more grace,” will the Lord refuse? Of course not, for his demands are high, but his promises are higher.

The promise of more grace makes possible the demand of growing in undivided love. There is sometimes a question about the relationship between demand and promise in the covenant, also in the preaching. What comes first, the demand or the promise? What a sad dilemma. There is no preaching of the demand (undivided love) without the promise (he gives more grace).

The promise of more grace underscores the demand of undivided love. It is even so that the promise comes first, for how could we ever begin to fulfill God's commands if he did not, in his grace, give us the desire and strength to do so? Let us not cast asunder what God has united together, the demand and promise in unbreakable unity. This is truly covenantal thinking.

God Gives Grace

The Lord always gives us what we need, also in the battle against sin. James does not just make a bold statement in 4:6, but he is careful to again refer to the Scriptures on this crucial point, and now to a specific text: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." This is a passage from Proverbs 3:34, also quoted in 1 Peter 5:5. We may be sure that this matter of pride and humility was very important in the apostolic church.

The context in the letters of James and Peter is similar. In James, the passage from Proverbs is quoted to illustrate that we should not fight amongst each other out of envy. In 1 Peter, it is used to show that older and younger members should show humility to one another, not being rebellious or lording it over others.

Pride always means that we elevate ourselves above others and look down on them. We think that we know it better and conduct ourselves more properly. Pride gives people certain haughtiness and disdain for others. Proud people are therefore not sensitive to the feelings of others, ensuring only that they have their own say and way. They have no understanding of their own sinfulness. Proud people believe they are always right and everybody else is always wrong. They may feign humility, but it is a thin veneer. No one can stand in their way. God, however, does oppose them, Scripture says. Their source of strength is not from above, and therefore they cannot last.

God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. We should not misunderstand the word "humble", as if it denotes people without backbone or inner strength. The word "humble" here means knowing our limitations and knowing also where to go for help. In humility, Christians have done great things. Our Lord himself withstood the devil in the desert. The next verse already comes into view about "resisting the devil." The humble know that the devil is not all-powerful, for God gives them grace to withstand him. The grace of God is more powerful than the temptation of sin.

God will grant grace according to need. This is a tremendous truth. Herein lies the strength of the Christian church. God's covenant people of old already knew of this: "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the

proud he knows from afar” (Ps 138:6). We do not think that we can stand on our own, but we know there is abundant grace that we may tap into by faith and through prayer. As Lord’s Day 45 reminds us, “God give his grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who ask.” The humble know how to pray. Weak in themselves, they can be strong in God’s grace.

Do we know our own limitations? More so, do we know the abundant grace of God? Do we, in faith, ask for grace in time of need? Do we believe that God gives grace to the humble, and that we are therefore more than conquerors? This has been the strength of the church throughout the ages. God has always given grace in time of need. It is still our strength today. Let us humbly go to our Lord, and every day receive from him what we need to stand firm in the good fight of faith. There is no need so great that God’s grace is not greater.