

SPECIAL MESSAGES

PRAY YOUR WAY TO A NEW LIFE

James 4

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

We want to talk about prayer today and this passage, James 4, is right at the heart of the book of James. It may very well be the heart of the book. In it, you don't notice at first, but James is talking about prayer. He is talking about the absence of prayer. He is talking about the wrong kind of prayer, asking with the wrong motives. He is attaching it to a number of relational problems.

As he discusses this, it opens a door for us to see something really phenomenal about the nature of prayer itself. **There is a transforming power that we experience when we pray, hence the title: "Pray Your Way to a New Life." I really believe that scripture teaches that God tells us that we grow and change and we are renewed, we are transformed as we pray, and as we learn to pray.**

Jesus taught us to pray and we have the model prayer, the Lord's Prayer:

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*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

Then we often know an ending which is not found right in the gospels: “For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

There is an invitation to the kingdom of God coming. The first half of the prayer really invites us to focus on God, to worship him, to pray for his name to be honored and glorified, for us to be in awe of God, for the glory of God, the kingdom of God, the will of God. In that context, then, we are invited to pray for our own needs. But even as we pray for our own needs, there is an invitation to personal transformation and renewal. So we pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

I was walking into a little retail store here in Coral Springs and I saw a man that I knew from years and years ago. Our sons played golf together literally 15 years ago. He said, “Brian, Brian, Brian! I’ve got to tell you – I remember you telling me something about prayer and I’ve been living on it ever since.” I said, “Really, what was that?” He said, “Well, you don’t remember this, but I was going through this business deal that was falling apart. We just ran into each other on the golf course and I told you, “I’m really anxious. I’m really fearful about this, but I don’t feel like I can pray about it because I’m so blessed. Yet, I’m really concerned.”

So I said to this gentleman, “Well, you have to pray about that, man. This is what’s on your heart. You’ve got to open your heart and pray. He said, “Yeah, but I just don’t feel like I can.” I said, “Listen, listen. Jesus told us to pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ And your daily bread is this – I know it seems strange, but it’s this multimillion dollar business deal that you think is going to fall apart and you’re going to lose your job. It’s your need.”

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It was literally a 15 second conversation and he said he's been living on it 15 years. Wow, that's impressive, isn't it? Sorry. Jesus is teaching us to pray. Imagine a small child learning to write and the teacher placing his or her hand on the child's hand and they are tracing the letters. Jesus doesn't just give us a prayer to recite. He is responding to the request of the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray." So when you look at Matthew 5, Luke 11, Luke 18, Jesus teaches us to pray, but he actually gives us this model.

When we get to the second half of the prayer, there is this invitation to personal transformation. So, yeah, we pray for our needs, and they may be large, but at the same time, the way Jesus phrases that, there is a simplicity about it – an invitation to a simple contentment, living by faith, relying on the Lord, not living in anxiety so that we might live a generous life. I'm seeing all of that in: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Then as we pray to be forgiven, we are not just asking the Lord to forgive us, but we are wanting the Lord to renew us and transform us – to make us gracious, gentle, kind people that are forgiving towards others. When we get ready to close out this prayer, we are acknowledging that we live in a spiritual battle: "Lord, lead me away from temptation. Protect me from evil. There are spiritual forces at work and I'm humbling myself before you. I'm doing spiritual warfare and I'm asking you to help me. I'm not assuming that my marriage is fine and my kids are fine and my job and this and all that. I'm calling out to you. I'm trusting you." Do you see how we are being renewed in our walk with God? We are not just getting something from God, okay?

Now, I felt in the fourth quarter of last year, as we entered into the New Year, I just believed that this is a year that by God's grace we are experiencing growth as a church. We are just wanting to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. We want them to know the Lord. We want people to experience the love of the Lord through the love of his people. I really had this conviction that in order to do that, we needed to do two things.

- **One, we needed to have a specific plan to reach out, and that is Alpha.** You'll be hearing more about Alpha, but in September we are going to launch Alpha here as a part of our desire to tell people about Christ and to show them his love. That's not the only thing we are doing, but it's a specific step.

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- **Then the second thing was I felt very strongly that we needed to pray.** We really need to pray because whatever we do, we need it to be sustained through God's work, the Spirit of God.

In doing that, I've wanted to emphasize what I've called kingdom prayer, transforming prayer. We are not just trying to get something from God, but this is how we experience renewal. This is how we experience transformation.

To do that and build out that theme a little bit, we are going to look at James 4. You need to know something as we go into this passage: James is like a wisdom writer. I would put this in the classification of New Testament wisdom literature. Here's what I mean. It's like reading the book of Proverbs.

It's shocking. It has this kind of punch to it. When you think about wisdom, you think about skillful living, living with knowledge and applying that knowledge, living skillfully. Many times that involves being able to see the consequences of what I'm doing now. The choices I make now will lead to certain results, and a wise man or woman is able to anticipate and to choose now and to build in a certain way toward a desired result. Wisdom is really the means and the end. How I get there matters and where I land matters.

To do that, to anticipate, sometimes I just have to see it from a different perspective. I just need to go over and look at it from a different angle. That's what proverbs kind of do for you. When you hear a proverb, it helps you see something in a very concise way that shifts your perspective.

My dad was like this. My dad, who passed away last year, had a way of saying the craziest things that made you think about life in a different way. They were sometimes abrasive. Sometimes they were jarring. He just had this wisdom about him. He was really like an Old Testament prophet. It was like having John the Baptist in your home. We have volumes of stories about the craziest things Dad did that proved to be right, just how God was using him. That's James.

Did you hear the language? "You adulteresses." This is not something you say to people. He talks about them murdering one another. I really don't think you walked into church, stepped over dead bodies piled up because they are literally killing one another. There is this hyperbole; this type or style of speech. And if you don't grab ahold of that, you are going to wonder, "How do I even understand this scripture?" Because when he gets to the end, in the last few verses he talks about

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weeping and mourning. There is a perspective that's offered to you that invites you to really invest yourself in a certain activity -- in this case, repentance.

With that being said, two points. Verses 1 through 5 talk about the wrong kind of prayer. They talk about praying, "My kingdom come." Then verses 6 through 10 are the remedy. They are "Thy kingdom come."

I. My kingdom come, verses 1-5.

Let's look at the text. He begins with:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Here's the problem. The existence of friction and quarrels and fighting James traces to this conflict of passion, of unmet desires. He says, "This is reflected in your prayer life. You don't pray. You have not because you ask not. Or you pray in order to fill the wrong passions, the wrong motives. You pray with the wrong motives.

James describes that in verses 1-3. There is conflict. He is really, I think, building on what Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount. I'm speaking generally, but the anger we have in our hearts is murderous. Remember? Jesus taught us about how it's not just literal murder, but it's on that continuum. Again, that's offering to you a different way to deal with your emotions and to take stock and evaluate.

Here's what's interesting. This is where there is real value in this kind of literature. What does God think about that? What does God think when your life is pursuing something other than God, so much that you don't even dare ask God? Or you ask God and God is not happy because he knows what's really going on in your heart.

Here is God's reaction in verses 4 and 5. He calls it spiritual adultery. He says, "This is what you are doing. You are coming to God. You are the wife. God is the husband. You are the bride of Christ

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and you are saying: “Would you pay for me to have another lover?” Hmmmmm. How does that work? If you’re married, just imagine your own marriage. How is that going to play out?

He says, “To be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God.” Again, understand the nature of the language. There is a jarring effect so that we’ll look at it a little different way. He is not using “friend” here in the way we think of Facebook friends. He is talking about deep loyalty and unity. He is talking about a “best friend.” He is saying to us, “If we pray to God as just a way to be more like the world and to be more worldly, that’s really an offense to God. God jealously yearns for the spirit, the life that he has put in you to be his, to be in love with him.

So, we can step back and say, “Okay, wow, prayer reveals the loves of my heart. It reveals what I really want, what I really deeply desire.” Scripture invites us to be transparent with God, because God knows. Here’s the question I want to stop at and ask for a second: **Do you and I want transformation?** I mean, why do I want to pray kingdom prayer? Why do I want to pray, “Thy kingdom come?” Maybe I want *my* kingdom.

Of course, we are told here that’s an offense to God. That’s a bad thing to do. It’s dangerous spiritually and eternally. But why? Why do I want that? Well, think for a moment, friends. **When we are praying for God’s kingdom to come, we are praying for God to bring transformation. We are praying for God to make the world a better place. We are praying for God to make us better people, to renew us, to make us like Christ.**

If you remember when we did our study, if you were here when we spent three months studying the Sermon on the Mount, this teaching talks about what it looks like to be a part of the kingdom. What does a citizen in the Kingdom of God look like? Just a little refresher -- that whole section in Matthew 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 begins and ends with a description that Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom. He did, really, two things. He taught what it looked like to be part of the kingdom in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 – the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous sermon ever, the greatest sermon ever. Then in chapters 8 and 9 – miracles, deliverances -- God’s power coming to help suffering people.

So, church, this is you. This is what God calls you to do. He calls you to experience the renewal of Jesus Christ and for you to share that message, to live as a citizen, and to then help a suffering, broken world experience the restoration that’s in Jesus. Kingdom prayer invites you into that

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world. You begin to experience the renewal, the restoration, the renovation of your heart and your entire life so that you begin to be a channel of God’s blessing to other people.

Paul will deal, for example, with issues like: What can you drink? What can you eat? Can you have a glass of wine? Can you do this? How do you celebrate certain days? In Romans 14, the Church was experiencing friction over those things. They were in disagreement about celebrating certain days and dietary things – all kinds of secondary issues they couldn’t agree on.

This is what churches will typically do today. They’ll tell you the answers to all those questions. The church will tell you that you can have a glass of wine. There are the wine drinking churches and the non-wine drinking churches, right? Do you want to know which this is? I don’t look that stupid, do I? Don’t answer that. It’s rhetorical.

Paul does not legislate rules. He invites them into a community of love where they walk in their freedom. He gives them the freedom to have a glass of wine – spoiler alert. But he then says, “But your brother is more important, so consider your brother. Love them. Don’t exercise your freedom in a way that hurts them.” Then he ends with this: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

So I want to ask you: **Is your life characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy?** Your relationships may be falling apart. Your marriage may be falling apart, but you can know righteousness, peace, and joy. You can know peace in the midst of tremendous trial and difficulty. The reality is: You will not know those things in your own kingdom. And I’m saying to you: The Sermon on the Mount started with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” **The way to a happy life, the way to fulfillment, the way to eternity, the way to joy, the way to peace is through Jesus Christ. It’s in Jesus Christ. It’s by Jesus Christ. It’s in his kingdom. I’m inviting you to say, “Okay, Lord, I don’t want to pray “my kingdom” prayers. I want to pray “thy kingdom” prayers.** Let’s look at that.

II. Thy kingdom come, verses 6-10.

What do we see in this part? *“But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* This verse has been so transformative for me. Here James teaches

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us that God resists you when you are proud. It's not that he just doesn't help you. He actually comes against you. But when you humble yourself before the Lord, God helps you.

I remember starting ministry as a youth pastor at this church 31+ years ago. I remember lying flat out on my office floor, crying out to God, saying, "God, help me. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have this figured out. I don't know how to pastor. I don't know how to be a husband. I need you.

I have the conviction that I'm alive today, I'm married today, I love my kids, and my kids love me because of God's grace. My wife has asked me to tell you something. She doesn't do this very often. We've told our story about the challenges in our marriage early on. They were a long time ago. We've not had any challenges in 20+ years. It's been smooth sailing for decades now. We are really happily married. I'm looking for an "Amen" from the front row, but it's not coming.

She said to me: "Sweetheart, listen. I love the fact that you are transparent about the struggles we went through, but we are really happy together and you need to be clear about that. Tell them about all the good stuff." So that's what I'm going to do today. It's going to take a while, but let's get started. Actually, we would say we have a supernatural marriage, and it's God's grace.

I trace the fruit of that to this verse, because I was locked in such a me-centered focus early in our marriage. It's not that I'm saying I was the only one that needed work or growth, or it was all me. I don't want to be falsely humble in that sense. But I really didn't understand that in my arrogance and how I was treating my wife, God was actually resisting me. I'm going to say it like this: God hated the arrogance of my heart. He hated it so much that he poured his wrath out on his Son to forgive me.

For me, there was this kingdom moment. You see, I believed this lie. I believed that my wife had to act in a certain way for me to be happy. It was like the Lord lifted the veil and said, "You know what? She doesn't make you happy. I make you happy. Joy doesn't come from her. She's not God. Your marriage is not God. Ministry is not God. Set all of that aside. Bow to me in your heart. Humble yourself and I will help you.

And I did. I did it so grossly imperfectly, terribly imperfectly. "No, no, Brian. You did great!" Complete agreement all of a sudden. This is the truth. I am telling you, this is not an exaggeration. Within months, my wife spoke about me in glowing ways that were an absolute embarrassment. There was a complete flip in her heart and in my heart. It was nothing but God's grace. And I'm

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going to tell you, I believe this. I said that. I prayed it. And I did it to about 3-5% effectiveness. But God poured out his grace.

Do you understand that when God's winds fill your sails, you are going?! You are going to be above the water. The reality is, when it's me, my kingdom, we are living in this imagined world. We want a marriage that doesn't even exist with people that don't exist. We want ourselves to be exalted, and God is saying, "Listen, humble yourself and in due season I will exalt you. I will put you where you need to be.

Then as he does this, he really is offering a mode of prayer where he says in verse 7:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

What in the world is he saying? **He is saying, "Listen, you enter into the prayer closet. You seek not just to get from God. You draw near to God and you say, "I need to change! Transform me. Start with me! Start with me.**

In marriage counseling the most challenging thing, by far, is to get the two individuals to start looking at themselves and to stop looking at their mate. That's the hardest thing for us always in conflict, right? This is the invitation that's before us in prayer. I want to say that this translates into so many different roles: Parenting, leading, serving -- where we are constantly ready to say, "Okay, God, bring your kingdom here and let me be a vessel of that blessing to other people."

Friends, I'm asking the Lord to bring his grace and love and salvation to South Florida. I, along with other pastors, am praying for churches to double, for the number of followers of Christ to double in our entire region. Twenty-five years ago as a young pastor here at Riverside, we had a prolonged season where we had prayer meetings every day at 6 in the morning and at noon Monday through Friday. They were small groups. Some of you were here and you remember. In those prayer groups we asked the Lord to bring unity to the Church in South Florida. We asked for the Lord to bring revival to South Florida. They were prayer meetings for quite a season where we asked God just to do a work of grace.

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Some of you remember that we were on Riverside Drive, and right down the road from us was 1st Presbyterian of Coral Springs, just a few blocks from us. That church went through a difficult time. They were in a building project. Some of you were there and you were a part of that church. In one of those prayer meetings, one of the people at the prayer meeting said, “You know what? I know that that church is bigger than ours and they probably have more resources, but I believe God has told us to give them a financial gift. We had \$30,000 in the building fund, I believe, and we took a tithe of that. We took \$3000. I wrote a letter to that pastor. I didn’t know him. We sent it to him and we gave it to that church just as an expression. It flowed out of prayer for unity in our city. That was 25 years ago.

Today, by God’s grace, Church United is in its fourth year. The Executive Director of Church United is a member of Riverside and one of my best friends, and I’ve been invited to be on a leadership team to participate in helping, serving. I’ve met people all over this city who were praying for the Church to be united 10 years ago, 15 years ago -- churches, pastors. **Do you know, people, that prayer brings transformation?** That’s the point.

And, because of the way God works that power in prayer is hidden. It’s hidden because God is invisible and we don’t always see that it’s actually God working. Also, God’s timing is such a shock to us. Because of the delay we forget that 25 years ago we were asking God to do this! And we didn’t know it, but a lot of other people were asking God. Can I tell you...I’m going to sound crazy to you...I believe that the number of Christ-following people is going to double in Broward County. I believe that South Florida is going to flourish in Jesus Christ; that schools and marriages are going to improve. They are going to experience the coming of the kingdom of God. I’m believing God for crime rates to fall. If you sell drugs, you better go somewhere else, because it’s going to be tough to do right here in South Florida. Just get saved before you leave.

God answers prayer. And here’s the delight: He transforms you. That’s where he starts. Amen?

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