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## HOW MANY GOLF BALLS IS TOO MANY?

James 4:1-3

Tim Norris lives near the Royal Ashdown Forest Golf Club in Sussex in England. He has a dog, a chocolate lab named Wilson. One day when he came home it was clear to Tim that something was wrong with Wilson. He was obviously feeling below par. While Norris was away that day he had a dog walker come and take Wilson for a walk. The walker had let him off leash as they walked near the golf course. Tim feared that maybe the dog had swallowed a golf ball. He took him to the vet and they x-rayed him. It turned out that he hadn't swallowed a golf ball. He had eaten seven of them! The veterinary nurse said, "I don't know whether the golf balls were covered in something that seemed tasty, but to eat seven he must have liked them." You think? She said that one more ball could have ruptured his stomach, which would have killed him. He underwent surgery to remove the balls, and has since made a full recovery.

Wilson (too bad his name wasn't Titleist or Callaway since he had a sporting goods name) really desired something. Eating golf balls seemed so good to him that he needed to keep eating more of them. But the thing he desired was not good for him at all, in fact, it had the potential to kill him. Seven came pretty close, but the truth is that even one was too many. He desired something that he should not have at all. We need to learn from Wilson, because sometimes what we desire might well be in the golf ball category. We will learn about this in James 4:1-3.

### OUR DESIRES ARE THE SOURCE OF CONFLICT

We saw last week that conflict is a part of the human condition. Everywhere you look in the human race you see conflict. This year has seen an ugly rebellion in the Promenade at La Costa, the little neighborhood where Laurie and I live. Every year we have to elect people to serve on the board of our homeowners association. Oddly, people are not standing in line to sign up for that opportunity. We've had a couple of people who have volunteered to take on the responsibility for a number of years. Kudos to them for bearing the onus of a task nobody else wants to do. This year a woman I've never even met who lives in our neighborhood decided, for no good reason, that the people serving on the board were evil, and she mounted a campaign to remove them from office. She was so convinced of the righteousness of her crusade that she couldn't wait for the annual election. She demanded a special recall election. It turned into an ugly smear campaign full of false accusations and character assassination. Some good people were really hurt by it.

A new family moved into the house next door to us. The husband was really happy to move into our peaceful, calm neighborhood. He learned there was a vacancy on our board due to an earlier resignation. He has experience in managing property and he was unaware of the rebellion, so he volunteered to fill that vacancy. He only lasted a few weeks. He was subjected to such harassment that he quickly resigned, a now thoroughly disillusioned member of the neighborhood.

Is our neighborhood unusual? No, we know of some people who were happy when they moved into their new neighborhood because it seemed like a sort of Mayberry like, friendly, happy place. They have been dismayed by the complaining, grumpy neighbor next door and were appalled when they asked the woman across the street if she could possibly curb her two off leash dogs who were creating problems at their house. They were appalled because she responded by yelling at them and sending them a nice, warm, obscene gesture. Welcome to Mayberry.

Wouldn't it be nice if such things were aberrations? Sadly, they are not. We have a friend who has worked for many years in an office that she loved. But she is planning to leave soon because the people in that office in the past year have changed and the climate there is now quite unpleasant.

Sadly, these things happen in churches. In the world, the constant flood of conflict is sad and makes life harder. But in the church it is a denial of the reality of our faith! This makes it a huge deal. So we must learn how to love each other despite our differences. James tells us to do that we are going to have to come to grips with the effects of our own desires on our relationships.

We saw last week that a major factor that leads to conflict is operating by "earthly" or natural "wisdom," which actually is not wisdom at all. In fact, it is an insidious stratagem of Satan that is now, unfortunately the default setting for fallen human beings. So we learned last week it is imperative that we live not by that default human "wisdom," but by God's peaceful and peace-producing true wisdom, which is Jesus Christ and his way of living.

This week we will look at another aspect of conflict. James tells us that the other major factor contributing to the prevalence of conflict is our own desires. He says, "You desire but do not have, so you kill." He did not mean we literally kill, though in extreme cases that does happen, but that we hurt other people. When we want something and someone blocks us from having that thing we want, we become frustrated and angry. We get angry at whatever or whoever is in the way. That person may be in the way because they get the thing that we want instead of us, or

because whether intentionally or unintentionally they keep us from getting the thing that we desire.

Laurie and I were on vacation, and one day we were sitting by the pool on a spectacular, but quite warm sunny day. We had found a perfect place under a big umbrella that shaded us from the sun that would have been blazing hot were we out in it. As we were relaxing and reading two older women arrived aiming for two lounges near us. It did not go smoothly. One got there first and situated herself on a lounge in the shade. The second woman arrived moments later and said, "Why did you take that lounge? I wanted that lounge." The first woman said, "Because this one is more shaded and I need to be in the shade." The second woman then said, "Well you're making me sit out in the sun. I don't want to be in the sun." The first woman said, "I don't want to be in the sun either. What do you want me to do about it?" They began bickering and sniping at each other as they argued over who should get the shade. Laurie and I were just trying to enjoy the peace of the beautiful place we were in, but it definitely was disturbed by the arguing of these two women. One would think they were old enough to figure out a way to work things out. But the problem was they each had a desire. They desired to sit in the shade not in the sun, but there was only one lounge in the shade. Their desires collided. The fight was on.

I was watching a football game on television recently and realized I was seeing what James tells us here happen before my eyes. There are two teams out on the field, and they both desire something. They desire to score more points than the other team and win the game. That leads to 60 minutes of large, powerful men running into each other and treating each other very rudely.

Every time you have a conflict, an argument, a fight, a quarrel, with another person, every time you feel anger or frustration at someone or something, at the heart of it you desire something, and you believe that person or thing is keeping you from getting it.

#### **OUR DESIRES ARE NOT NECESSARILY BAD**

James makes it sound like all our desires are bad. They are the source of all conflict. There have been, and still are, philosophies and religions that teach that our desires are bad, that the only source of peace is to somehow maneuver ourselves to a place where we desire nothing, then we can be at peace and live in peace with other people.

However, I submit that our desires are important and they are not all bad. There clearly are desires that are evil. The desire to control everyone and everything so that they do your bidding is evil. The desire to hurt other people or to use them for your own ends is evil. But many of our desires are necessary, good or at worst, neutral. I desire to eat. That's not wrong or evil. It is necessary for me to survive. I desired to have a woman that I could love, marry and share life with, and that is a good thing. I desired to have children and raise a family with that woman, and that's a good thing. I desired to be able to support myself and my family and not have to solely rely on others to provide for us, and that's a good thing. Some of our desires are neutral. I desire to have mostly warm sunny days. That is not evil, but it is not an especially good thing either. It kind of just is what it is.

So many, maybe even most, of our desires are not for inherently bad things. Furthermore, our desires are essential if we are to achieve anything or to improve life. At some time in the past someone desired to not be cold, and so that blessed person worked hard to invent heating systems. I am so glad that person did that. Our lives are much better with heating systems than they would be without them. Someone desired to not have to go somewhere in the woods to relieve themselves, but also to not have horrible odors and unsanitary conditions permeate their living quarters, so they invented indoor plumbing. I am so thankful to that person. Apparently his name was John.

For me to do anything, accomplish anything in life, I must first desire to do it. If I desire nothing, I will never even move. I will become an inert mass of mush. In truth, I will die in short order, because if I do not desire to eat I will soon starve to death.

Not only that, but our desires are a part of who we are. They are central to making up our personality and to creating the marvelous diversity of the human race, something that God seems to like. There are some desires that are common to all human beings. We all desire to survive, to love and be loved, to have meaning in our lives, to belong, to have approval (or in the theological description to be declared righteous). But there are many other desires that vary from one person to another.

As we drove through miles and miles of cornfields in the Midwest I had 2 thoughts. First, I am really, really glad I don't live here, and second, I am really, really glad that someone loves living here growing corn. Even in nature we see that diversity is important to the health of our eco-system. Surely we all appreciate that diversity. What if everyone desired the exact same tastes, so there was only one

kind of food? No more Italian, Chinese, Mexican, Thai, Indian, French or American food, just oatmeal. Boy would life be boring.

God actually created human beings with desire being a part of our inherent nature. The first man, though he couldn't identify exactly what it was that he desired, had a desire to have a human companion, and God said that was good. By God's own testimony his desires were good.

### OUR DESIRES CAN BECOME DANGEROUS

The unfortunate reality is that our desires can cause us to come into conflict to others, conflict in which we injure them emotionally, relationally, and at the extreme end even physically, as Laurie and I witnessed with the 2 women at the pool. We know that our desires can even cause us to do damage to nature and our environment. Years ago our family went to Hanauma Bay on the island of Oahu that is an underwater nature preserve. Normally it is an excellent snorkel spot that most of the time is very calm. Posted all around the bay are signs informing people of things they should not do in order to preserve the undersea life there. One important warning was that people should never stand on the reef. When you stand on it you kill the coral. So we entered the water with the conviction that we absolutely would not stand on the reef. The day we went there was a big swell in the ocean and it happened to be coming from just the right direction so it entered the bay. On top of that it was quite windy, so the water got very choppy. All of that to say it made for some rough snorkeling. At one point I was getting quite tired from fighting the swell and the chop and I had problems with my snorkel and mask. I tried treading water while I attempted to fix the problems, but it quickly became obvious I was too tired to accomplish that. I was in water that was about chest high, and I was badly running out of gas. I stood on the reef. I desired to not drown. That's a legitimate desire. I wanted to respect the environment, but if it came down to either a little bit of coral dies or I die, it's bad news for the coral. My desire won out over respecting the environment.

We've already seen that our desires also cause problems in our relationships. Just like we might sacrifice our commitment to the ecosystem if something we deeply desire requires it, so we at times sacrifice loving other people if getting what we desire requires it.

James points out an even deeper issue. He says our desires impact our relationship with God in a negative way! "You do not have because you do not ask." He's talking about prayer. I think he meant we tend to focus on going and getting what we desire rather than asking God for it, because we don't really want his opinion

on the matter. We just want what we want. When we do ask, we don't get what we asked for, James says, because "You ask with wrong motives." In other words, you ask just to make yourself richer, more comfortable and more powerful. You ask just to get what you want rather than to get what God wants. You ask without regard to what is best for other people. Are you listening all you health and wealth gospel people?

Yes, our ability to desire is God given. It is part of being human, and it is key to thriving in life. But our desires can turn to the dark side. They can do it in an instant, and often in ways that seem natural and innocent to us, even urgent and necessary, but may be hurtful to others or even disobedient to God. When do our desires become malignant? It is when our desires become demands. It is when they become something we must have. Yes, I want to protect the coral, but if I have to kill it to protect me then kill it I will, because above all else, I desire to live.

Our desires become dangerous when we think we must have them, without regard to what God tells us or without regard to his will. They become malignant when we decide we will fulfill them regardless of what that entails, even if it means disobeying or disregarding God, even if it means damaging other people in some way. The women at the pool decided that they must have a lounge in the shade even if it meant sacrificing their long established relationship with each other in the process. The shade became more important than the other person.

### IMPLICATIONS

Unfortunately, our hearts want what they want. We can intellectually acknowledge what James says about our desires being the source of our quarrels, then go right out and be controlled by those very desires. They are often so very strong.

Our desires are powerful. Laurie and I recently decided we should cut back on the amount of breads that we eat. Two days later we had a family dinner and Laurie served these rolls that I think are one of the most delicious things on the planet. I want them. I ate 3 of them. I ate them for one reason and one reason alone – I *desired* them. Sadly we all know that our desires seem to be able to overpower us and somehow take control of us so that like Paul, we keep on doing the evil we don't want to do. How can we combat our own desires?

### IT MUST MATTER TO US

We can't just eradicate desire, nor should we want to. If we could somehow eradicate desire we would no longer be truly human. On top of that, with no desire

we will end up being of no use to anyone, either God or people. We will merely be in the way. So we have to figure a way to deal with desires.

We have to start with caring about the effects of our desires. It has to matter to us that they lead to so much disunity, so much hurt, and that they disrupt our relationship with God himself. The human default is to pretty much ignore all that in the mad dash after our own desires because they seem so urgent to us. We wouldn't want something if we didn't think it was necessary or important for us. So we close our eyes to the impact our pursuit of them has and go after them.

James calls on us to care, to see all the fighting as a bad thing, something that is sad for us and dishonoring to God. We have to essentially say not being involved in that is more important than even my own desires.

### WE MUST SEE OUR DESIRES

We must ask God to help us see what it is we are desiring. Any time you have a conflict with another person, any time you feel frustrated, any time you are angry at someone, at the bottom of all of that are some desires. You want something and you are experiencing the conflict or the anger because that person is not cooperating or giving you what you desire. Or in some way you think they are blocking you from it.

It is helpful if we can identify what that is. Often as soon as we recognize what we really want our emotional temperature drops. I was reconciling our bank statement this past week. A cool thing has been happening when I do that every month. I get caught a little by surprise every time it happens. As I look at our deposits for the month each month a royalty payment from one of my books shows up deposited by Amazon. This month it was 70 cents. Sigh. What a joke. I desire to have the novels that I've written take off and become a huge success. Unfortunately my writing career is about as successful as my efforts at athletics was. But what helps is I can identify that desire and recognize that if it was fulfilled it would be nice in some ways, but it wouldn't actually create more joy, more fulfillment or more meaning for my life. It might tell me it will, but it won't and I know it. So I can laugh about my royalties and tell Laurie if we save that money maybe in 5 or 6 months she can use it to get some coffee at Starbucks.

### WE MUST HOLD DESIRES LOOSELY

The night Jesus was arrested, as he prayed he asked the Father if he could pass on drinking the cup that was before him. In other words, if he could skip what was coming next. But then he said, "Yet not my will, but your will be done."

Jesus had a desire. He much preferred not to go through the horror of his arrest, torture and execution. That was an understandable desire. It must have made him sick to think of what he was facing. But he didn't demand that he get what he wanted. Instead he affirmed that what he wanted most of all was to do the Father's will. If that meant foregoing his own reasonable desires, then that was what he would do.

That is the perfect model for us. So many of our desires are fine to have, but we need to choose the will of the Father instead. We must say, "I desire this, but I want your will more, Lord. So I leave it in your hands."

Remember that our desires really become dangerous when they turn into demands. It is when we say, "I want this, and I will get it no matter what" that we begin creating problems for ourselves and others.

#### WE MUST ASK GOD TO HELP US DESIRE BETTER

It's not a very helpful strategy to tell people, "don't desire what you desire." Go back to my problem with the yummy rolls Laurie served. I need something to help me focus on the desires that really matter. That can start with realizing that our desires are not all they're cracked up to be.

In Ephesians 4:22 Paul wrote about what happened when we first came to Christ. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires."

Notice two important thoughts in that verse. First, our desires are deceitful. Some people seem to interpret that to mean our desires themselves are bad in some way. That's not actually what Paul said or meant. He said our desires deceive us. How do they deceive us? They insist that we must have them, that fulfilling them is absolutely necessary for us to truly live. If we do not have them life will be horrible, unbearable, or maybe even will cease to exist altogether.

In years past I had a conversation with a man who was trying to justify leaving his wife and children to live with a woman who was not his wife. He said, "I could never be happy staying in the marriage. I feel alive when I am with this woman, and dead inside when I'm with my wife." When I pointed out he was clearly disobeying God he said, "God will forgive me. God wants me to be happy because he loves me." That man had a deceitful desire. His desire told him the only way he



could be fully alive was to do something terrible to people he was supposed to love.

That one is easy to see because the desire itself was just wrong. But many times our desires will be for something goodly or neutral. The problem occurs when the desire seems so urgent that we can't bear to live without it.

A few years ago The Atlantic magazine published an article that made some interesting observations. In 1900 less than 10% of families in this country owned a stove, had access to electricity or a telephone. In 1915 less than 10% owned a car. In 1930 less than 10% had either a refrigerator or a washing machine. In 1945 less than 10% owned a clothes dryer or air conditioning. In 1960 less than 10% owned a dishwasher or a color TV. In 1975 less than 10% owned a microwave oven. In 1990 less than 10% had either a cell phone or access to the internet. Today 90% of the nation has all of those things. The article concluded, "They make our lives better. They might even make us happier. But they are never enough." Nothing we desire is ever enough. Our desires tell us they will be enough, but they deceive.

So notice the other thing in verse 22. It says the old life was being corrupted by those desires. They lie. They tell us they will give us life, but they will only bring corruption. They can distance us from God, the source of life and they can cause ruined relationships, guilt and remorse. The deceitful desires aren't just obviously wrong things like that guy. They can be the desperate desire to have friends, to be liked, to be accepted, to be successful, to be financially secure, to have respect, to be served the way we long to be served.

Wilson, the dog, was sure he needed to eat golf balls. But golf balls deceived him. They could never give him the nutrition he needed. Even worse, his desire for them corrupted his life. They made him sick and came close to killing him.

I want to point you to 3 verses from the Bible for your consideration. The first is Psalm 16:11. There David wrote, "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence." According to that verse, what is the path to life and joy? It is being in the presence of God. It is knowing him, living with him, following him, seeking to honor him in all things. What we really desire is life. We commonly mistake what will give it to us. So we need to remember where it really comes from and start with living in his presence.

In Matthew 16:25 Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." Again what we want is life. As long as

we live by the equation "fulfilling this desire equals real life" Jesus says what we will do is lose our lives. The way to gain life is to give it up by serving him.

Finally there is 1 Corinthians 13:1. "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." So no matter what you do, if you do the most incredible things anyone could imagine, but you aren't primarily trying to love other people, your whole life is nothing but a bunch of noise. It is sound and fury, signifying nothing. It is a big, fat, empty zero, that will leave you desperate and hopeless.

If you really desire life, then seek to love people. Give yourself up and try to serve them. If you obsess about your own personal desires you will end up frustrated, empty, hopeless and bitter. But if you know God, live in his presence try to serve him and seek in everything you do to love and serve other people, there will be no end of life and joy and meaning.

We need to ask God to change our hearts, to tune them to his heart, so that what we really desire more than anything else is to know him, to serve him in all things, him, to bring him glory, to live in his presence, to love people and to serve them. That's where real life will be found.