

WHO HOLDS OUR HEART?

James 4:4-5

(ISV) You adulterers! Don't you know that friendship with the world means hostility with God? So whoever wants to be a friend of this world is an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think the Scripture means nothing when it says that the Spirit that God caused to live in us jealously yearns for us?

INTRODUCTION

There's no substitute for faithful love. **Proverbs 20:6** (NIV) says, "Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?" The Hebrew word for "faithful" means "trustworthy in providing support that can be counted upon." An insurance agent told a husband, "You've filled in this application all right except for one thing, Mr. Perkins—where it asks the relationship of Mrs. Perkins to yourself, you should have put down 'wife', not 'strained.'" One Sunday after the morning service, a respected leader in a church he'd attended for 25 years told his pastor, "I've got something to tell you. I've never told this to a soul and it's extremely difficult to tell you this now, but my wife and I have had a fight every day for the past 30 years of our marriage." The pastor was taken aback! He asked the man, "Every day?" "Yes," replied the husband, "every day." "Did you fight today before you came to church?" "Yes." "Well, how did it end up?" "She came crawling to me on her hands and knees." Thinking this was good sign, the pastor asked, "Well, what did she say?" She demanded, "Come out from under that bed you coward and fight like a man!"

"Unfailing love" translates a Hebrew word used almost exclusively to describe God's "lovingkindness." No one English word captures all that God's "lovingkindness" means. It is "faithful love in action; persistent and unconditional tenderness, kindness, and mercy." The Old Testament often cites the "lovingkindness" God expressed in His covenant bond with His "wife" Israel, as in **Hosea 2:19-20** (NASB): "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD." In **Psalms 63:3-4** (NASB), King David joyously basked in God's faithful love: "Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You. So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name."

Earlier sermons from **James** revealed **Jesus'** half-brother wrote this letter earlier than any of the four Gospels. When persecution drove most Christians from Israel, James wrote with a pastor's heart to provide these early believers, many of whom were new Christians, with the comfort and guidance they needed to remain faithful to Christ. In the portion of his letter that is our text for today, James tackles the issue of spiritual adultery within the context of faithfulness to one's marriage vows. Our two Outline points are The Lord's Marriage-Quality Love toward Us and The Quality of Our Marital Love toward the Lord.

I. THE LORD'S MARRIAGE-QUALITY LOVE TOWARD US

James' reference to "adulterers" in **vs. 4** echoes **Hosea 3:1**, "Then the LORD said to me, 'Go again; show love to a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the Israelites though they turn to other gods. . . .'" Old Testament prophets used marital imagery to convey the depths of God's covenant relations with Israel, whom He collectively embraced as His bride. **Jeremiah 3:20** (NKJV) says, "'Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,' says the LORD." "Jealousy" in **vs. 5** recalls God's words when Israel embraced a marriage-quality covenant with Him at Mt. Sinai. In **Exodus 20:1-17**, God's Ten Commandments specify conditions for Israel to honor this covenant. God also warned of His jealousy should they stray in their devotion to Him: "'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery. ³ Do not have other gods besides Me. . . . ⁵ You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers' sin, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands.'" The Israelites pledged faithful devotion in their vows to the LORD, as summarized in **Exodus**

24:3-7: "Moses came and told the people all the commands of the LORD and all the ordinances. Then all the people responded with a single voice, 'We will do everything that the LORD has commanded.'⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. . . .⁷ He then took the covenant scroll and read it aloud to the people. They responded, 'We will do and obey everything that the LORD has commanded.'"

In modern weddings, the prospective bride and groom make great vows to each other of the devotion and care they plan to shower upon the other, but in their hearts many expect to receive far more than they are committed to give. Allan, age 10, when asked, "How does a person know who to marry?" said, "You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming." English-born Robin Skelton (1925-1997) served with the Royal Air Force in WWII, founded the Creative Writing School of the University of Victoria, British Columbia, and published many books, including *A Devious Dictionary* in 1991. Here are a few choice definitions he presents for *marriage*: "a word that should be pronounced as 'mirage'; "an event which is called 'tying the knot' – unfortunately, the knot can be a noose"; "a word which always means commitment – but so does insanity"; "a condition where no wife gets what she expected, and no husband expected what he was getting."

Jesus Christ called Himself "the bridegroom" (**Matthew 9:14-15; 25:1-13**). He sacrificially and lovingly chose the Church (composed of believers across all time) to be His bride (**Ephesians 5:25-32**). Just as there was a betrothal period in Biblical times during which the bride and groom remained separate until the wedding, so the bride of Christ is now separated from her Bridegroom during the Church age. Our responsibility during the betrothal period is to be faithful to Him; to demonstrate He owns our heart regardless of how long it is before He returns to fulfill His promises to us. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy, because I have promised you in marriage to one husband—to present a pure virgin to Christ" (**II Corinthians 11:2**). At Christ's Second Coming, the Church will be united with the Bridegroom and the official "wedding ceremony" will take place, when the eternal union of Christ and His Bride will be celebrated by "the marriage feast of the Lamb" (**Revelation 19:6-9; 21:1-2**).

The wife of a Baptist minister wrote to *Reader's Digest*: "I have seen many marriage licenses. On one, after the blank for number of marriages, the groom had written: 'First.' The bride entered the word: 'Last.'" This cute story captures the depth of Christ's commitment toward us, by embracing us individually and collectively by His marriage-quality love. Should we be equally committed to faithfully love **Jesus**? Yes! Years ago, a man mailed a marriage proposal to his sweetheart in which he promised he would never bother her again, should she decline. Unknown to him, his letter fell behind the mailbox where it lay for more than 30 years. Finally, someone found the letter beneath a sheltering shrub behind the mailbox and mailed it. The woman had never married; convinced this man was the only man in the world for her. She received his letter and saw the date when he had written it. Judging by the aged, yellowed paper, she realized what must have happened and promptly wrote back accepting his proposal. He'd never married, knowing in his heart God had created this woman for him, despite her apparent rejection. Within weeks, these lovers who had remained true to each other despite the heartbreaking delay they'd endured, were joyously married!

II. THE QUALITY OF OUR MARITAL LOVE TOWARD THE LORD

"You adulterers! Don't you know that friendship with the world means hostility with God? So whoever wants to be a friend of this world is an enemy of God.⁵ Or do you think the Scripture means nothing when it says that the Spirit that God caused to live in us jealously yearns for us?" Rather than taking these startling words of James as an appeal for personal holiness in which we rid ourselves of ungodly, worldly habits, let's hear these words within the context of marital fidelity, in the sense of spiritual adultery, as James intended.

The Greek text of **vs. 4** uses a plural feminine noun properly translated "adulteresses." Use of a feminine term sounds odd today to refer to men and women of a group. But James, as an observant Jew prior to trusting in **Jesus** as the Messiah, was steeped in the Old Testament tradition of including all the Lord's redeemed

people as His Bride, as in **Isaiah 54:5** (NIV): "For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth." James also knew the Hebrew Scriptures did not hesitate to apply the word "jealous" to the Lord, as in **Deuteronomy 32:16** (NIV): "They made Him jealous with their foreign gods and angered Him with their detestable idols." In **vs. 5**, "hostility" and "enemy" are from the same Greek root word describing a "hateful" and "hated opponent." Very strong language, but appropriate to describe the impact of flagrant infidelity toward one who "yearns" ("passionately longs") for our exclusive devotion, as does the LORD. James makes two emphatic points in these two verses: (1): As our Creator and Savior, the LORD will not tolerate any rivals for our loyalty; and (2) Our relationship to the LORD is not like the distant relationship of a king and subject or of master and servant, but like the intimate relations between a husband and wife. When we sin, we break God's heart, as the heart of one partner in a marriage may be broken by the desertion of the other, morally or physically.

A man once wrote: "Dear Abby, I am in love and I am having an affair with two different women other than my wife. I love my wife but I love these other women too. Please tell me what to do, but don't give me any of that morality stuff." Signed: "Too much love for only one." Abby's answer was classic. She wrote: "Dear Too much love for only one. The only difference between humans and animals is morality. Please write to a veterinarian." The New Century Version aptly translates **James 4:4-5** as, "So, you are not loyal to God! You should know that loving the world is the same as hating God. Anyone who wants to be a friend of the world becomes God's enemy. Do you think the Scripture means nothing that says, 'The Spirit that God made to live in us wants us for Himself alone'?"

"Friendship with the world," within this context, is anything we allow as Christians to weaken, undermine, or lure us away from full and true devotion to Christ. It's not living up to the vow we make when we are married, "and forsaking all others, I will keep myself for him (or her) alone." When we truly give our hearts to someone in marriage, we don't need a manual or list of rules telling us what *not* to do to honor our vow of faithful love. We know instinctively, if we are honest with ourselves and with God, if we're allowing ourselves to stray from our mate by what we allow ourselves to watch, to think about, to do, or by the close friends we keep. As common sense preacher Vance Havner (1901-86) explains, "A wife who is 85% faithful to her husband is not faithful at all. There is no such thing as part-time loyalty to Jesus Christ."

CONCLUSION

The Alibi Agency, based appropriately in Blackpool, England, has the slogan, "We serve those who stray." Its web site boasts, "[W]ith modern communications, and media, it has become increasingly difficult to be able to carry on . . . a temporary dalliance" [code for "sexual infidelity" or "adultery"], "without risk of detection.... We offer a Service that can help to protect your loved ones from undue anxiety and help ensure the stability of a long term relationship by offering secure and professional handling of 'Alibi's' for you. For instance: we can provide you with invitations to corporate events to cover your absence, or ticket stubs for the theater performances you were supposed to have attended.... If someone tries to contact you, our receptionists will handle the call in the manner pre-arranged with you, as if by a hotel receptionist or a golf club secretary." The web site offers a lot more "alibi" assistance, but you get the picture. It's expensive, costing up to \$10k. But in the first months alone, they received 1800 requests for their services; 33% from women.

You may want to scoff, laugh, or even to cry to think people would expend this much money and effort to conceal their infidelity; to deceive the spouse they claim to love. Or, we may wonder that these unfaithful partners would be so foolish to think they will never be caught. Yet, spiritually, Christians sometimes stray more deceitfully than those who contact the Alibi Agency. Those wedded to our spiritual Husband, **Jesus Christ**, can never hope He will never know. He always knows. He always feels betrayed. He is always broken-hearted!