OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Life's Ultimate Either-Or

David Anguish

In the 1830s, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States to observe the new republic and compare it with the European aristocracies. According to Timothy Keller, one of de Tocqueville's conclusions was that there existed in the new nation,

> a "strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants … in the midst of abundance." Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because, de Tocqueville added, "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart." This strange melancholy manifests itself in many ways, but always leads to the same despair of not finding what is sought (Keller 2009, x; citing de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, 296, as quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation of Hope*, 3).

Keller reminds us that 200 years later, the "strange melancholy" has remained a problem. It was tragically evident in suicides that followed the stock market crash in 1929, a tragedy repeated in the deaths "of formerly wealthy and well-connected individuals" after the global economic crisis that began in mid-2008. They included the chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the chief executive of the real estate firm Sheldon Good, and an executive of the collapsed Bear Stearns firm who learned he would not be hired by JP Morgan Chase when they purchased Bear Sterns (Keller 2009, ix–x).

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But it is not just the very wealthy who suffer de Tocqueville's melancholy. Nor is despair its only manifestation, as James illustrates when he highlights the connection between our priority choice and behavioral outcomes. After stressing that there are only two life-directions, worldly wisdom or the wisdom from above (3.13–18), he turns to a specific demonstration of the earthly, unspiritual, and demonic form.

A Disagreeable Display

As noted previously, the community depicted in James 4.1–3 was not a place most of us would willingly join. There were "quarrels" (πόλεμος, *polemos*) and "fights" (μάχη, *machē*) that came from "passions" ἡδονή (*hēdonē*) that were "at war within you." People's desires were "waging war" (NASB; στρατεύω, *strateuō*) "in your body parts" (NASB 2020), a phrase that, along with "among you" earlier in verse 1, is better understood to refer to interpersonal disputes between people than to inner conflicts within individuals. But interpersonal conflicts do not arise from a vacuum; individuals with opposing desires were clashing and strife was the result.

The problem was compounded by a failure to ask God along with the practice of some to "ask wrongly to spend it on your passions [*hēdonē*]" (v. 3). The first group did not take God into account; the second thought "the gift-giving God [could be] manipulated as a kind of vending machine precisely for the purpose of self-gratification (see 1:26, *apartōn kardian*)" (Johnson 1995, 278).

The Wrong Choice

James's response is pointed: "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (Jas 4.4 NASB).

"Adulteresses" (NASB) better translates the feminine plural vocative form of μοιχαλίς (*moichalis*)[1] than "adulterous people" (NIV, ESV; but see the latter's note) or "adulterers" (NRSV, NET). But in using the term, James is not introducing the issue of sexual sin (cf. Moo 2000, 186; *contra* e.g., Hort 2006). Rather, he is reminding his readers of "the whole OT tradition of Israel as God's unfaithful wife denounced in the prophetic books" (Davids 1982, 160) where the adultery figure stood for Israel's infidelity (cf. Jer 3.1–25; Isa 1.21; 50.1; 54.1–6; 57.3; 62.5; Ezek 16.32–43; 23.45). The most notable example was Hosea who compared Israel to his "wife of whoredom" (Hos 1.2) and then indicted the nation as follows:

> For their mother has played the whore;
> she who conceived them has acted shamefully.
> For she said, 'I will go after my lovers,
> who give me my bread and my water,

[1] The UBS apparatus's "A" rating indicates the editors' view that μοιχαλίδες is the certain reading, but the majority of MSS have μοιχοὶ καὶ μοιχαλίδες (McCartney 2009, 209, n. 8).

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my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink' (2.5).

And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals
when she burned offerings to them
and adorned herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers
and forgot me, declares the LORD (2.13).

Rejoice not, O Israel!
Exult not like the peoples;
for you have played the whore, forsaking your God.
You have loved a prostitute's wages
on all threshing floors (9.1).

Jesus also used the adultery figure when he denounced Israel's rejection: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous [*moichalis*] and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8.38; cf. Matt 12.39; 16.4).

James utilizes the figure to underscore that his readers were practicing "friendship [φιλία, *philia*] with the world," a priority choice that left them in a state of "enmity [ἔχθρα, *echthra*] with God." While *philia* typically meant "affectionate regard," it did at times "slide over into the semantic range of sexual love (cf. Prov. 5:19 LXX)."[2] James thus "implies that flirting with the world is akin to spousal unfaithfulness" (McCartney 2009, 209). His readers' "friendship" was putting the world in God's place and submitting to its values and morals. By prioritizing their own desires, they were honoring the creature, not the Creator. Thus, like Israel of old, they were "spiritual profligates" (McCartney 2009, 209).

But Is It Really Idolatry?

McCartney correctly observes that "coziness with the world and its values is not unknown in the church of our day either" (McCartney 2009, 210). But "coziness" as generally understood is not a strong enough word to describe the real issue. Because we do not pay homage to literal images, we are sure that we in our enlightenment have moved beyond the literalistic rituals of the cultures of the biblical era and less informed third-world cultures of our time. But that conviction underestimates the real nature of idolatry for, as Keller writes,

> Our contemporary society is not fundamentally different from these ancient ones. Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its 'priesthoods,' its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines—whether office towers, spas, gyms, studios, or stadiums—where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster (Keller 2009, xi–xii).

[2] The LXX uses *philia* twice in Prov 5.19, for the words translated "lovely" and "love" in the ESV.

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As we reflect on Keller's assessment, it is worth noting that, even as he employs the figure used by the prophets in their condemnation of idols, James makes no reference to statues or images. That's to be expected for, as Ezekiel showed in confronting Israel's elders with the sin, idolatry is not ultimately about statues. Babylonian culture with its pervasive syncretism surely brought its temptations to the people, but Ezekiel, under the LORD's direction, declared that the real problem was that Israel's elders had "*taken their idols into their hearts*" (Ezek 14.3). The prophet did not use the words, but it's clear that those elders were "friends" with their world and were therefore at "enmity" with God.

Conclusion

Ezekiel's emphasis shows both the nature and ultimate danger of idolatry. For, as the seventeenth century English minister David Clarkson wrote, "'Though few will own it, nothing is more common.'" Envisioning the soul as a house, he continued, "'idols are set up in every room.'" The reality against which we must always guard is that "we prefer our own wisdom to God's wisdom, our own desires to God's will, and our own reputation to God's honor" (Keller 2009, 154; quoting Clarkson, "Soul Idolatry Excludes Men from Heaven," in *The Practical Works of David Clarkson*, volume II [Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865], pp. 299ff.).

As he always did, James remembered Jesus's teaching and knew there can be no compromise. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt 6.24 NASB). If we will have life, our idols must be replaced.

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Additional Thoughts on James

"While the feminine term ['adulteresses'] sounds odd when referring to men and women together in a group, in keeping with the biblical tradition James personifies the entire church as the 'bride' of Yahweh or Christ. At best she has become distracted from and at worst unfaithful to her groom."

~ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Zondervan 2008), 189

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