

# *Sermon for August 3, 2014*

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

II Chronicles 15:1-2, James 4:1-10

“We are the world?”

Our lives are filled with choices. Some are insignificant, like which car insurance would we choose. Some are very insignificant: Israel or Palestine, Russia or Ukraine, on immigration let them in or send them home. We take our stand and we stick by our choices. Those choices become very clear for us, even if it isn't necessarily clear for everyone.

Today we are given a very clear choice in James. Last week we saw the choice we could make between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. You should have received in the enews the first of 7 in our series of what does the wisdom of God look like and I addressed purity. Today James continues this theme but puts it in terms that are very clear, we can draw near to God, or we can choose to pursue the world and be at odds with God.

Nobody here would say they consciously choose the world and see God as their enemy. You wouldn't be here today if that was your view. But what James helps us with today is to see how we subtly choose the world without even realizing it, and so turn our back on God.

Let's go to our first Scripture reading to start out today. We find the prophet Azariah given a message by God to be handed to the King. The message is one of those that is fairly simple and straightforward. King, you have a choice. The Lord is with you and will be with you as long as you are with him. If you look for him, you'll find him. But if you abandon him, if you choose to make decisions on your own, if you allow the pressures of this world to make you lose sight of who you got here in the first place, and you abandon God and go your own way, God will abandon you.

Does this sound different from what you are used to hearing from God. Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for thou art with me. Even if I descend to the depths of Sheol, Lord you are there. I will not leave you or forsake. Be strong and courageous, as I was with Moses so I shall be with you.

We are used to hearing God telling us, you know, you don't have a choice. Even if you want to leave me, even if you turn your back on me, I'm going to be there, I'm not leaving you. Not here, not in Chronicles. To us today that means that our relationship with Jesus Christ has everything to do with our desire to be in a relationship with him. If you want to love Jesus and want him to be your Lord and Savior, then he will be both, your Lord and your Savior. If you want him to be your Savior, to save you from your sin, but not your Lord because you would

rather run your own life, that too is possible. He will save you from your sin, but your life is going to be a mess. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The fundamental premise that the Lord lays out for us in Chronicles and James picks up on it, is that we have a choice, we can follow the Lord or we can follow the world. So he begins these 10 verses by calling our attention to whatever conflicts or disputes we may have in our life are the result of the choice that we make to follow after our cravings. This word cravings in the Greek is *hedonai* which gives us the English word *hedonism* which means the pursuit of pleasure or the fulfillment of desire.

So, the conflicts that we have, James states, is a result of our choice to pursue pleasure which can manifest itself in so many different ways. Now, I want you to be aware because it is at this point of the sermon where you may think you know where I am going with this. When we talk about the choices the world has to offer we almost always go after those easy targets of pleasure and materialism, and all the other bad things that people like us behind pulpits like these constantly preach against. Even Jesus says very clearly we can serve only one master and the idols that we create in life are numerous.

But that is not the direction that James takes us. He removes the individual approach and judgment against our person materialism and hedonistic ways, when he says in vs. 4, how does he begin it? Adulterers. Not something you would like to be accused of, certainly not in public. Remember this is a letter to a church and he is calling out a church. But what you don't know is that he actually didn't say Adulterers. No, the translation is wrong. It is the feminine singular so it should really read Adulteress. I don't want to slip into a Dan Brown conspiracy theory here, but who in the world is James talking to, which woman is he singling out as an adulteress?

In the Old Testament we read about Hosea who married a harlot so that the representation of Israel as being unfaithful to the Lord could be revealed. Throughout the Old Testament Israel, the people of God, God's chosen ones, are called the beloved, the bride of God and are depicted as constantly being unfaithful to the Lord. But that is the Old Testament. We don't have any of this imagery of the bride of Christ in the New Testament do we? Yes, we do, the church. And so who does James single out as being the adulteress? The church.

We have spoken repeatedly in James how our faith is reflected in how we live. Now it is no longer the choices we make how we live, but rather the choices the church makes in its decisions and its testimony. He calls out the church, bride of Christ, First Presbyterian of Strasburg, Presbyterian Church (USA), Protestants, Catholics, evangelicals and liberals, all those who call themselves part of the church, we have sold out. We have become so accustomed to the

ways of this world that those who would come to love Jesus refuse to because they want nothing to do with those who call themselves Christians.

The historical examples of the church being the adulteress is legion. From Constantine killing those who were considered heathen, to the Crusaders who were no different from the Jihadists today, to the inquisition who reveled in using techniques that are not as foreign to us as we had hoped, to Hitler supported by the Lutheran state church in Germany, to apartheid supported by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in South Africa, to Christians today blindly supporting Israel while Palestinian Christians are being massacred in the Middle East.

Dear church, dear First Presbyterian, what is our recent history? Have we been a place of peace over this past decade, a place where families could come and raise their children and not worry about people being critical of each other or not see glances of disapproval as those in our family go through difficult times.

James tells us we have a choice, we can act like the world does, or we can draw closer to God. There is no in between. The more we act like the world the more we become an enemy of God. I saw those kids on their bikes the other day. I asked them to design a ramp and a jump and something one of them called a bunny pole. I got them talking to me. We talked for 20 minutes. I found out one of their big brothers is in juvenile detention. You know how they found out about us? One of their moms comes to get food from our food bank. He has two little sisters who came to VBS here two years ago. These kids are ours, they don't belong to the world, they belong to the bride of Christ. And I'm afraid the bride of Christ is going to kick them out into the world to fend for themselves because the bride is concerned about its nice white wedding dress. We always have choices, we are not the world. We are the church, we belong to Jesus.

James 4:5 states that "God yearns jealously for the spirit he has made to dwell in us." The jealous is attributed a lot to God. We hear in the 10 commandments that the Lord our God is a jealous God. In the Hebrew it means that he is burning on fire. This God is on fire. God burns with fire so that his spirit will direct our actions and instill within us a desire to do his will.

When I was in Alaska I spent a lot of time with a friend of mine that I've known since 1986. We attended Philadelphia College of the Bible together our first year. I then went on to Swarthmore and he went on and graduate from UWV and then got his PHD at NYU. He has a very successful consulting business in Anchorage. We went from praying on our knees when we were teenagers beseeching the presence of the Lord, to fishing and catching salmon together on the Kenai River.

He no longer believes in Jesus Christ. Now his work focuses on helping kids get the most out of their high school education. He does great work and has a huge positive impact on a lot of youth, not just at the local level, but through policy which affects the entire state. He's a great guy and a lot of fun to be around. He would make a great Christian, but he can't stand the hypocrisy. It drove him from the church, away from people like us.

He doesn't understand how people who say they represent a God of love can say things to each other, in the paper, or make policy that is hateful and hurtful. James is right in line with my friend when he calls the church an adulteress. But James tells us in verse 7 to submit ourselves to God. We have to submit. Verse 8 tells us to draw near to God and God will draw near to us. We have a measuring stick now for all the decisions that we will make here at the church. Will it draw us closer to God or will it cause others to draw near to Him?

Everything we do has to pass the litmus test of whether it is drawing us closer to God, or are we doing it because the world says we should. James ends by calling sinners, those who have embraced the world, to lament, mourn weep. He isn't telling those who are seeking the Lord to be sad or to have a demeanor of depression, now we are to be filled with joy. But James does give us a real choice, a desire for God will give us a closer walk with God and a desire for the world will lead us, all of us, to the world and away from God.

I have decided, I'm going to follow Jesus, and I'm taking you with me. No turning back.