

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

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We're continuing together in our series in the letter of James. My message today is on the subject "The Secret of Inner Peace."

Before we begin to read James 4, we might just take a moment to review where we've been in these first three chapters. There is a term that I heard in my growing-up years, over and over again, in the church. It's the term I don't hear much anymore. It's a term I myself haven't used in a while. It's the term "backsliding." I guess the reason why I have not used it much in later years in my own life is that, in the churches I grew up in, I got saved so many times because I backslid so much. Those of you who grew up in a non-Calvinistic church, will understand the importance of getting saved over and over again. The downside to that is you never felt secure about your relationship with God. The upside is that you were constantly being forced to re-evaluate your commitment to the Lord. I think it's always appropriate that we do that.

But backsliding really comes out of an analogy of the Christian life being a mountain-climbing adventure. We're either gaining ground going up the mountain, or we have started to slide back. In our Christian experience, we are either saying, "Lord, stamp thine own image deep on my heart," and we're being more inwardly conformed to the nature of Christ, becoming more like Him in disposition and emotions. Or we're becoming less like Him. We could be moving back, toward the kind of person we were before we ever found Christ. Or maybe if we found Christ as a child, we may find ourselves becoming like the nature that is without God, which we never even have experienced before in our lives, because we've been Christians all of our life. There is such a thing as backsliding.

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

When you open the letter of James, you find James facing this phenomenon within twenty years of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It had taken the church only twenty years of its existence, and people were already becoming cold in their faith. In these first three chapters of James, he has articulated nine different marks of a person who is moving along in a backslidden condition.

The first thing he has indicated is that such a person has instability in the face of trials. One of the things trials manifest to us is whether or not our faith is genuine; whether we simply adopted the Christian faith because somebody talked us into it and we thought it would be nice to try it for a while. These believers, many of them, were proving unstable in trial.

A second mark was that many of them were living by the world's sense of values rather than a Christian sense of value and wealth. Verses 9–11 speak of that. There were some in the Early Church who were judging that their spirituality was dependent upon whether they were doing well financially. And they were priding themselves on being good Christians, if they were in such a condition.

The third thing that marked the backslidden condition was losing sight of our eternal reward. We live in an era in which it is not popular to talk about deferred pleasure. We instead have deferred payments. We have credit cards, which have taught us that whatever we see, we can get now and pay for later. We do not like to wait for things. Unfortunately, in the Christian life, there some things we need to wait for. We do not always see a resolution for our problems. We, many times, do not see even immediate help when we are going through difficult times. In fact, there may be some situations we face that, until we stand in God's presence, we will not see that reconciled or brought together. Therefore, we cannot be serving the Lord simply on the basis of what's in it for

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

me now. The early Christians were reminded not to lose sight of their eternal reward (James 1:12).

The fourth mark of moving away from the Lord is blaming temptation on anyone other than ourselves (1:13–15). We either blame God or other people for what has happened to us, rather than assuming responsibility. It may be that something very awful has happened to us, something for which we ourselves are not personally responsible. Yet we are responsible for our reaction to what has occurred to us.

A fifth mark of moving away from the Lord is not obeying God's Word as we read it or are taught or hear it preached. It is easier to be a connoisseur of sermons or a debater of theology than to be one who does the Word and not simply listens to it.

A sixth mark of falling away is an insensitivity of the needy. James 2:1–13 talks seeing the Christian life as one that simply provides us social opportunities to have all kinds of good friends. There are people as well that see the body of Christ, the church, as a good place in which to do business. One of my lesser-liked responsibilities as pastor is to sort the mailing list of the church, to guard the church against those who would use the church solely from an entrepreneurial angle—to use it to get something from it. And, thereby, show insensitivity to needy people.

The seventh: behavior that is unaffected by Christian belief (2:14–26). James is indicating that there were those who said, on the one hand, they believed certain things about the Lord. But on the other hand, they were not doing these things. That also is a mark of falling away.

Eighth: a tongue that is out of the control of the Holy Spirit (3:1–12).

Then last week we looked at the ninth characteristic of a life moving away from the Lord. That is a life that is guided by worldly wisdom. Guided by Dr. Ruth or *Seventeen* magazine or

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

Cosmopolitan or *Ann Landers* or whatever. Sometimes these people may have a good-called shot on some particular advice, but the philosophy is moving away from where the Scriptures are. I don't think it takes us any degree of imagination at all to realize it's not recommended for the Christian life, a life guided by the wisdom of this world.

It's not surprising, therefore, that when we open to James 4, we find that the consequence of personal backsliding impacts our relationships and our fellowship with other people. We find this chapter opening with the phrase, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" (James 4:1, NIV). Another way to translate this, and one that more adequately represents what is happening, is to say, "What causes wars and battles among you?" A war is something of long-standing nature. It's been going on for who knows how long. A battle is a specific outburst of antagonism. James is saying that, in the life that is moving away from God, there is a higher level of engagement of internal and interpersonal friction and hostility. What causes fights and quarrels? What causes this long standing hostility and animosity between two people, which from time to time has its pitched battles?

So, as the proverbial saying goes, of the couple that was married for fifty years: "What is the secret of your marriage? Have you ever argued or had any fights?" To which the husband replied, "We have had only one fight. It began shortly after we married and it has been going ever since." There are relationships that have that dynamic to it. No relationship, if it's of long standing, has been free of conflict. You cannot have a long-standing relationship and be totally conflict-free. The key is what you do with that conflict. What causes long-standing conflict, and within that long-standing conflict, pitched battles. The question makes us stop and think and kind of look within us and say, "With whom am I in an adversarial relationship and how did I get there?" The way that we find easiest to answer that question: "What causes fights and quarrels

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

among you?” is to say, “Lord, You know it’s that person I live with! Or my friend, or that business associate. If You’d just given me different people to be around, things would be different.”

So we come to James and find he doesn’t agree with our easy assessment of what the problem is. The problem is not located within someone else. It’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. One of my shortcomings in life is my Pollyanna-ish view of life. Everything’s going to work out fine. If we just wait long enough, everything will ultimately come out as roses. I don’t like to see the bad side of life. I remember when I first became aware of how Pollyanna-ish I was, as a college freshman. I worked on the maintenance staff during the year at sixty cents an hour. Then, summer came along, and I had the chance to get a fulltime job for the summer that paid the astronomical sum of a dollar an hour, and I couldn’t turn down a good wage like that. I was given the task that summer of cleaning the women’s dormitories. I thought, “Wow! I’ve got it made. These pretty girls!” I’d never seen a girl at Evangel College that just wasn’t put together. They may not have all been beautiful, but they all seemed put together. In those days, we had dress codes and the like as well. I thought, “What a snap! I’ll just walk around and whistle a lot this summer.” My idea went right out the window as I cleaned the women’s dorms and saw that indeed there was such a thing as clumps of dirt under the bed, lint all over the drawers, spilled fingernail polish all over everything, unclean porcelain in the bathrooms. They were worse than the guys’ dorms. After that, I cleaned the guys’ dorms and forgot about the girls dorms. It was a tremendous shock to my idealism; because I had this Pollyannaism view that everybody lives clean.

I think I carried that over into my relationship with people. I am not a suspicious person. I believe the best about people as a general rule and I don’t tongue lash people. For example, in

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

my messages, I hope that they are uplifting and inspiring. I think God knows that we all have enough discouragement through the week that we don't need to come to church on Sunday and have the preacher pound away on us. But if I am true to Scripture, here's my conflict, I want to be Pollyanna-ish, I want to believe that all the beautiful people I'm looking at have absolutely no clumps of dirt under their beds of life. Everything's ok with everybody, and we all go home and everything is ok.

But the fact is, we've still got some sides to us that we don't like to look at. They're uncomfortable to look at. If I didn't go through Scripture, I'd probably never look at them, because I'd just find nice things to say. But James says, "Don't fights and quarrels come from your own desires that battle within you?" Or as Pogo eloquently interprets James, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Our desires! That's where we're getting our problems. That's where the battles and the fights are coming from. Not my mate. Not my kids. Not my parents, not my brother, not my sister, not my friends. The problem is in me.

I don't particularly like to hear that. They come from the desires within. This word for "desires" is a very interesting word. In the Greek language, it comes across directly into the English language as a word in English. It's the word *hedonism*. It comes from our hedonistic tendencies. The modern translator of the hedonistic philosophy is Hugh Hefner, who shows us that one of the ways to go in life is to simply give way to your own desires and just use people like Kleenex, and when you're through with them, you just throw them away like you casually toss away a Kleenex. It's a philosophy of life that says "Me first!" It's self-seeking. It says, "If it feels good, do it. If it brings pain, avoid it. If it makes you walk through conflict, if it makes you work things out, if it calls you to sacrifice, if it calls you to steadfastness, walk away from it. But if it puts you first and makes you feel good, then do it."

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

What a contrast this is with Jesus' language, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it" (Matthew 16:24).

Where are most fights and quarrels taking place today in the body of Christ? It doesn't take a prognosticator to know the answer to that. The long feuds and the pitched battles are fought mostly in the Christian home. Yet today we have more books on Christian marriage, more teaching, more counseling, more marriage enrichment opportunities than ever in the history of the church. But unless there's an altar or a cross in our life, then all the other resources will not help. If we are asking within our homes, "What am I getting out of this marriage?" Or, "What am I getting out of this family (if you're a child)?" Then that is really the wrong question. It is the kind of question that the hedonists asked: "What am I getting out of this?" The biblical and Christian question is not "What am I getting out of this?" But, "What does God want to do in our marriage" or, "What does God want to do in our family?" Or, if you're a single person, "What does God want to do in my life and my relationships?"

A cross is not a decoration to be worn. It is a pain to bear. And the Lord calls us to the way of the cross. Not the way of self-fulfillment, but the way of the cross.

Clarence Jordan, who created the Cotton Patch version of the New Testament, was visiting a friend of his, a pastor, and the congregation had just built a lovely new church. The pastor was taking Jordan on a guided tour of this church. All the while, the pastor proudly pointing out all the niceties of the facility. They stepped outside. The sun had just set as they stepped outside. There was a spotlight that had gone on that illuminated the church steeple which had a beautiful cross. The pastor looked at Jordan and very proudly said, "That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars." To which Clarence Jordan replied, "There was a time when Christians could get them

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

for free.” You don’t have to look very far in your own life and relationships to discover where you can freely get a cross.

I. What are the consequences of a self-dominated, hedonistic lifestyle? James gives us three.

A. In verse 2, such a lifestyle sets people at each other’s throats. “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight” (James 4:2, NIV). “You kill”—strong words. This doesn’t mean that early Christians were committing homicide on one another. James is using the word like the Lord himself did in Matthew 5, where in essence He said, “In the old law it says, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ That’s the sixth commandment. But in the new law that I’m giving to you, the law of deeper righteousness, you’re not to have long-standing anger against anyone. You’re not to insult them. You’re not to character assassinate them. You’re not to denigrate them in any kind of a way. To do so is to be in violation of the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’” Therefore, the Lord says, “When you’re in a place of worship and remember there that somebody has something against you...” It doesn’t have to be a big thing, it just has to be something, that something is that which would involve breaking the sixth commandment. That something is one which has been directed against us in anger. In turn, we want to throw that anger back, strike at that other person. Jesus says, “If you remember something, then seek to be reconciled.”

What is it that we want? We want something and don’t get it. In a marriage, it may be someone wanting a person to do something a particular way. Maybe you want that person you’re married to to be like your father or to be like your mother. Maybe you want sex. Maybe you want more love and affection. Maybe you want more money. Maybe you want more trust. Maybe you want more time. What do you want? “You want,” James says, “but you cannot have what you want.” Why is that so? Because the more you demand something, the further it moves away from you.

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

You can never get anything you demand. You can never get anything you insist upon. You can never accomplish anything with a closed fist. The cross showed us that the only way was to open the hand and receive the nail. We cannot get what we want by demanding it. By nagging it. By insisting upon it. By being angry and defensive about it. It's like mercury. It'll slip away from us. James says that very flatly. That a lifestyle that says, "I have got to be satisfied and pleased and my will has got to prevail upon this matter," that lifestyle finds that you do not get what you want. I think we all, who are in relationships in our life and have given any thought to those relationships, whether it be a friend or family, can realize the validity of what he's saying here. He makes a profound, psychologically valid point here.

B. The second thing that he says about a hedonistic lifestyle is that it not only fractures relationships and sets people at each other's throat, but it also, secondly, shuts the door to prayer (4:2–3). "You kill and covet, but cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (NIV). James is saying we pay a price for our hedonism. For our self-domination.

The human price is destruction of relationships and the spiritual price is a breach with God. We do not have what we ask for, why? Because we're asking, "God, change the other person. Change that circumstance." And God doesn't do it because He wants to work on us. Or we may, within that vantage point of being dominated by our self and emotions, ask amiss. The Lord doesn't answer that request because, again, He wants to work on us.

C. The third thing that James says that manifests the consequences of a hedonistic lifestyle is that our relationship with God becomes shattered. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (James 4:4–7, NIV).

There is nothing harder on a marriage than adultery. I don’t know if you’ve ever been with a person, when the news has been broken to them, that their spouse has been unfaithful to them. It is an awful weight to bear. And if a person is to forgive, there needs to be lot of grace. And if they’re ever to trust the other person again, there must even be more grace. James takes that analogy and says that is how our covenant love with God is. God feels toward us when we have begun to live a self-dominated lifestyle, a hedonistic lifestyle. God begins to feel toward us as one who’s an injured party, against whom adultery has been committed. He feels that. God is not the God who is just the mathematical genius who upholds by the principles He has enunciated in physics, which keep everything together. He is the God of feeling. The God who cares. The God who lets things get to Him personally.

James gives a term which is not too complimentary, “You adulterous people” (verse 4). I don’t think that James would have gone to too many church growth clinics. You don’t get church growth out of saying things like that to an audience. He probably led the Small Church clinic. But there is a refreshing honesty to the Bible. An honesty which sometimes those of us in the pulpit evade, because we have this tremendous desire to have crowds listen to us preach. Because we have a desire to see the kingdom grow. And because, sometimes, in that desire, we think that the only way the kingdom grows is if we get more people quantity-wise, rather than looking at what is growing in us qualitatively.

Here’s a refreshing candor that says to us that when we move away from the Lord in our life, the Lord sees that as an act of adultery. And He knows, He who created us, that that act has been

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

produced because the spirit that lives in us tends toward envy. It tends toward the selfish lifestyle. But then we're given a great word of hope, "God gives more grace" (verse 6). That is, when we have been at our worse and when we've done our worse, God is there, overriding that with His grace, choosing to enfold us back in a relationship with Him and choosing again to trust us.

These opening six verses of James 4 diagnose why we do not have inner peace. It's not a comfortable diagnosis. James cannot malpractice as an apostle. He needs to put the bread out on the table. What's the cure for this kind of lifestyle?

II. He gives a cure. The gospel has both a negative and a positive. We're told what's going wrong and why it's going wrong. But we're also told the positive.

A. The first positive we're told: Submit to God. What does that mean? It means, "Just give up and let God have His way in your life. Just do what God tells you to do. If it's a command in the Bible, do it. If it seems difficult to do, do it. If it seems unreasonable to do, do it. Submit to God. Give it up. Lay it down. Give it to Him." Submit to Him.

Abraham is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. There are two moments in Abraham's life where God, above all other moments, calls him to submit. His submission makes him the man of faith that he is. One moment is when God first calls to him and says, in Genesis 12:1, "Get thee out..." God is asking Abraham to cut himself off from the past and says, "Abraham, you walk away from your past and now you trust Me." It's a radical call to submit. And it's the same call that we hear when we choose to follow Christ. Leave the past and submit to Him.

The second great moment when God touched Abraham was when He required of him that he laid his son Isaac on the altar. In that moment, Abraham was being called, not to surrender his past, but to surrender his future. His future was in one boy, Isaac, through whom the descendants

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

would come that would fulfill the promise that Abraham's children would be as unnumbered as the stars in the heaven. What God was saying to him was "Lay Isaac on the altar. You surrender your future. You give it up. You obey Me. You lay it all on the line." That's a tough word for us who live in a social security society, who live with IRAs and all that. We're security-conscious. The Lord says, "Lay all that security down." I know there are times in life when to obey means you aren't going to figure out how this is going to work out. One of the things we like to do is have everything figured out, see it all down the road. But in obeying Christ, we may not see how it's all going to work out, and the Lord calls us, in that act of obedience, to even lay our future on the line and to obey Him, whether we see what is coming next as a consequence of our obedience or not. Submit to God.

A couple years ago, I developed a spot on my back, about the size of a quarter, that was an itchy rash. It was localized. I thought, "What could this be? Maybe it's some awful thing." I went to get it checked out. My doctor told me something I didn't really want to hear. He said, "You have what I would call a stress spot. When you get under a lot of pressure, this stress works out in a localized way on your body, on your back, and it breaks out in a rash, and you need some cream to put on it." When I am chewing too much on the future, when I have let too much get into my life and I am not submitting sufficiently to God, I need to just open up and say, "I don't have any way of living beyond today. Help me not to get into the future. The future is Yours. I can't see it today. Help me to just grab hold of what I need to today and be content with that. Let me submit to You this day. If I can submit to You this day, I know it will carry me through." So with that help, submit yourself to God.

We all have stress spots in life, don't we? The Lord calls us, "Submit!"

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

B. He does a very important thing, secondly. He says, “Resist the devil” (James 4:7). Why does He say that? After we submit to God, why does he say to resist the devil? Because what the devil is going to do after we’ve submitted to God is come along immediately and whisper in our ear and say, “That is the dumbest thing you have ever done! Why do you want to go the narrow way? Why do you want to buy into this way of the cross? Why not do what you want to do?” And the devil is always going to tell us why serving God won’t work. Why doing it His way is the wrong way. And he’s going to focus our attention on the downside, on the worst that’s going to happen.

You can always tell the difference between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the devil. The voice of the devil will leave you with no hope and feeling worthless. The Holy Spirit may convict you of things you’ve done wrong, but He’ll give you an out. He’ll give you an up. He’ll point you to a solution. Resist the devil.

The word for “resist” is not a word that’s used in military language for offensive military action. It’s used specifically for defensive military action. Don’t go out hunting the devil. There are enough things to do in life without hunting him down. He knows where you’re at and will pay a call. So when he pays that call, resist him. Fight him off.

How do you do that? You do that with the Word, the Scripture. You do it like Jesus did. You quote God’s Word right back at him and say, “That’s not true.” I think the devil is one person we can say to, with all biblical authority, “Go to hell!” That is his place of origin, and that is his place of destiny. God is never going to reconcile with the devil and neither are we. So we must resist him. Therefore, to submit doesn’t mean to become passive, milquetoast, spineless, spongy kinds of personalities. It means we’re filled with some authority in our life. Resist the devil.

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

C. Then the third thing we are told to do is to get close to God. “Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:8–10, NIV). How do you get close to God? James gives us, in these few verses, the three steps to being close to God. One is simply through cleansing. “Wash your hands and wash your hearts.” Hands represent the outer actions. The heart represents the inner life. So wash your life of its wrong deeds and its wrong thoughts and wrong intents.

Outside a Muslim mosque, there is running water of some kind, worshippers coming to purify themselves. They wash themselves symbolically, indicating, as they go into worship, that they’re in a state of ritual cleanliness. It’s this concept of cleansing before worship that is part of the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice. The priests were to cleanse themselves.

So in the New Testament sense, we’re taught—as we come to God—to seek cleansing. Then to have genuine contrition (verse 9), “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning, your joy to gloom,” suggesting that we get a place apart by ourselves somewhere, where we just let out a good primal scream to God. Talk to God out of your gut. Don’t just talk to God cerebrally. Don’t just say nice words to God when there’s pain in your life. Bring that pain to God. That’s what Hannah does in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1). She is beside herself because she has no child. One day, she’s in a place, praying, and she is lamenting before God, and the priest can’t even understand what she’s saying, because she’s so beside herself. He asks her if she’s drunk and she says no. She has been pouring out her soul to God (1 Samuel 1:15).

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

I believe that's a good thing scripturally for us to do as well. There are times in life when we're in such a condition that something other than ordinary conversation or ordinary tone is appropriate in our language to God. Genuine contrition.

Then humility. James says that's the third way of coming close to God. Instead of self-assertion and self-indulgence and self-will, we have the security that we are right with God because God will oppose the proud and give grace to the humble. To say, "I'm wrong," to say, "I'm sorry," is one of the most humbling things I know of. God tells us to have that kind of humility as a step to draw closer to Him.

D. Then the fourth thing that we are asked to do, in addition to submitting ourselves and resisting the devil and drawing close to God, is not to slander another person (verses 11–12). "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11–12, NIV).

What James is speaking of here is that we, after being cleansed by God, are not to go out and speak ill of another person. If we do that, if we go out and speak ill of another person or use downing language on them, then we're violating God's law in two respects. We're violating the law of love of our neighbor. And secondly, we're violating the law which says that God alone is the Judge. We're not in a place to judge another person.

So the bottom line of this passage today is, it forces us to ask, "What's the greatest problem we're having in relationships? Who's the person we're having the greatest friction with? We cannot control their response. Nor can we take responsibility for their actions. But we can examine our own life. Are we in any degree responsible for the rupture? Does the diagnosis fit

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

within us that it's our own desires that war and battle within us? If so, then the cure applies to us as well. The steps to inner peace are: Submit to God; resist the devil; draw near to God; and do not speak ill of another person.

Closing Prayer

Father, we take Your Word today into our lives. We want to be that dry ground that receives the rain of the Word of God gladly. We also want to bring to You, in this moment of prayer, those wars and battles which we fight on an interpersonal level. The world would say, when we go through wars and battles, that we walk away from people, we don't work through things, we simply escape from them and get out of them. But we thank You, Lord, for Your Word, which calls us to a higher way. A way of sacrifice, a way of devotion, of subordinating our own interests to the interests of You who called us. Lord, I pray for friends and families today that are here, that are going through quarrels and fighting in their relationships. Lord, each one needs the presence of Your Spirit to have power and authority in their life. Each one of us needs to come to You and submit our own will to You and to ask of ourselves not what we want to get out of life or out of family or out of friendships, but what You want to gain from them. You've reminded us that, as long as we judge the success of our relationships on the basis of what we want to get, that we will be left short. But it's when we come to You, when we remember that You are committed to us in covenant, You are committed to us in marriage, You are committed to us, even when we are unloving and unlovable. Your grace doesn't stop simply because we're churlish or even when we have become friends with the world, which You regard as adultery. But Your grace continues for us. We want to thank You for Your amazing grace toward us. That You still trust us. That You still love us. That You always seek to repair what's broken in us. That you see the good in us when the devil would only remind us of our weaknesses and failures. We want to

THE SECRET OF INNER PEACE

James 4:1–12

thank You for that. And we want Your life to be present in us. Forgive us for our failures, when we have failed to live by what You've taught us. But do stamp Your own image deep in our hearts. Do that. We pray in Your name, and we open ourselves to You, that You might work out Your perfect will in our hearts and lives, and in our circle of family and our circle of friendships and in the circle of the body of Christ. We ask, through Jesus, who loves us. And who gives more grace. Amen.