

## **Sermon: The War Within**

**Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley**

**Scriptures: James 1:17-27; John 14:1-14**

Introduction to Theme:

Today, we continue with our “Fruit of the Spirit” series, discussing each of the virtues Paul lists in Galatians chapter 5. As a reminder, there are nine manifestations of this thing Paul calls the “Fruit of the Spirit”—and I’m going to say these out of scriptural order, and instead in the order we are covering them: faithfulness, goodness, self-control, patience, gentleness, joy, peace, kindness, and love. Each week all the way to June 11, our worship will feature a different feature of “The Fruit of the Spirit.” The first week, we talked about faithfulness, reminding us to look to God’s steadfast example as we model faithfulness in our lives and relationships—not just with God, but with others. Last week, we shifted to goodness, centering on Jesus’s sermon in which he called his disciples to be the salt of the earth and light of the world. We arrived at the inspired scriptural notion that we are already good, we just need a bit of help getting that good out.

This week, we turn our focus to self-control—a virtue I’m sure we all wish we had in greater abundance. Before we begin, we will listen to an excerpt from the Letter of James, in which he touches on this very thing, as well as a passage from the gospel in which Jesus reminds us of his role in our lives and our salvation. In the shelter of this safe space, let us listen.

Sermon:

I have a problem. Well, I have many problems, actually, but today I’m going to speak of one in particular. That problem is that I am easily distractable. Now, part of this has to do with ADHD, something I have always struggled with but, like many women, was only alerted to later in life. To give you a clue as to how easily sidetracked I am, I’ll tell you that even as I wrote this portion of my sermon, I noticed dirt on my keyboard. I couldn’t get that dirt out of my head, so I went to get a wipe to clean it, but then saw there was dust at other places on my desk, so I took some time to wipe down a bunch of spots

where it had accumulated. Then saw some mugs loosely sitting in a box and thought, well, with my clumsiness, those are going to get broken. So I packed that box. Then, since I was packing coffee mugs, I decided I'd really like a cuppa tea. Cut to about an hour later, when I finally sat down with a cuppa and went back to writing.

Distractibility is an issue in my life and work. I get a lot done, but I usually don't go from point A to B at the usual rate or in the usual order. I have never written a sermon right through from introduction to conclusion, but sometimes end up jumping around when I new thought pops into my head. I never read just one book or working on just one project. I forget things all the time, including twice this week leaving my keys in the door, because my head is so busy. I find it hard to memorize things for the same reason.

Why do I bring this up, you ask? Well, because, as with many people who are easily distracted, there are implications for my ability to practice self-control. The impulse to clean my keyboard for instance, is probably one that could have waited until I was done writing, right? But in that moment, I could not quite control the urge to take care of it NOW. Then the dusting. Then the packing. Then the cuppa.

Even without ADHD, however, plenty of people get distracted, especially in an era when we always have at our disposal, a tiny hand-held device that connects us to the entire world in an instant. Smartphones are wonderful, but they also divert us from more important things in our lives, especially if we use certain types of apps on them. How many of you are guilty of getting sucked into a google, YouTube, or social media rabbit hole? How often do we scroll our Facebook newsfeeds or Instagram stories or Twitter feeds or news apps for what might be considered far, far too much time?

What is so appealing about these apps is not simply that they connect us with people, plenty of other methods, after all, can accomplish that. The thing that keeps us coming back is also that they allow us to participate in something with a degree of anonymity. Because we sit at a distance from people in these spaces, they allow for much more to be shared than perhaps should be (TMI, anyone?) and even draw us into manufactured drama between people who might otherwise have no drama at all. There's something about social media that seems to lower our inhibitions and our threshold for self-control, causing us to, without thinking, utter unkind words and share all kinds of clickbait

articles and misinformation, no matter the consequences. Worse, sometimes we exist in those spaces in such an echo chamber that we do not think about who we might be hurting by sharing what we share or even by simply consuming the media we consume.

The way we use words in this realm of social media—wherever that may be—can be a major problem. Words have power; we can use them for good or for evil. This is a fact that the writer of the letter of James knew all too well. Now one editorial note here: I am going to refer to the author of this letter as James, brother of Jesus, even though scholars have serious issues with this more traditional view of its authorship. For the purposes of our discussion today, James wrote the letter of James.

James has a particular view of the world and understands that those who hear/read his work, share that view. He begins this section in chapter one by appealing both to the world of Greek Philosophy and that of Jewish law. He knows that, for the Greeks, every being has its origin in the Highest Being, (that being may also be called Source, Life, Light, Good, Truth, and Idea). Within Greek philosophy, there is a hierarchy—so you have the Highest Source at the top, and other beings in descending order, each of which receive their energy from the being directly above them. The closer you are to the source or the higher you are on the hierarchy, the brighter your light, greater your gifts, etc.

Knowing his audience well, in verse 17, James calls God the “Father of Lights,” which is a very direct reference connecting the Christian God and the idea of the Highest Being in Greek philosophy. By doing this, he is helping the readers to understand that every life-giving gift to Christians comes from their Source, which is God. But then he diverges from Greek philosophy by writing that within the body of Christians there is “no variation or shadow due to change.” In other words, he tells the people that we receive our gifts on a level-playing field. God bestows gifts equally without regard for any humanmade hierarchy. There is no hierarchy in Christianity, and ought not be on in the world. James wants us to understand that I am no better than you and you are no better than anyone else.

James also knows that in Greek cosmology, there is a cycle wherein all good proceeds from or finds its origin in the Highest Good. All good comes from the same place. But then, at the end of the cycle, that good returns to the Source from which it came. In Christianity, however, James is pointing out that the gift of life from God extends life-giving gifts to others—it is not returned to God in the way Greek cosmology understands. So we, as Christians, are set apart by *doing*, by becoming a source of life, light, and goodness in the world. We receive our good from God and share it with others. To tie it back to last week's discussion, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are called to be the salt and light, sharing that good with others.

James spells these ideas out in the first few verses of this pericope or section of scripture and then advises his readers, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness." Here, he is saying, act with self-control where your words are concerned, because he knows that no words spoken in anger or wickedness or evil will produce good fruit. They cannot produce good because they do not come from God. They will not extend life-giving gifts to others, but they will destroy relationships.

Our words are one of the clearest indicators of our motivations, intentions, beliefs, and emotional well-being. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can also hurt, folks. Words are used in all kinds of ways. They can name, blame, label, and describe. We use them to argue, to sell things, to preach or lecture, and to teach. We choose different words to explain, persuade, console, love, and counsel.

We also use words to denounce, deceive, alarm, degrade, and silence others. The words we employ say a lot about who we are and what's happening inside our heads. James is saying here that we cannot share God's goodness in the world with words that are laden with evil or revenge. That will only lead to destruction. He does acknowledge that there is a constructive kind of anger, which can lead to protest and change, but that is when anger is *transformed*, not when we are still acting from that place of blind rage. This is why he says to be *slow* to anger, but quick to listen. He wants us to cultivate the life-giving gifts that will help us discern the way forward—we cannot do that if we are

constantly shouting one another down or sharing harmful or hurtful memes or the rants of talking heads on our news programs.

It's very easy to get sucked into the Facebook rabbit hole—but that can easily become a black hole, a vortex that sucks us in, preys on our worst instincts, and makes it far too easy to act on angry impulses. In that space, there is no room for light and salt has no value. We must get control of our anger or evil speech, otherwise it only serves to poison the well. It is destructive. It is not life-giving and it is certainly not from God.

The war of words present in our daily lives via social media is emblematic, I think, of the war we all fight within ourselves as we live and act in the world. We cannot help but observe what is happening around us. When we're worried or scared or find things that we strongly disagree with or feel especially judgmental, sometimes we will have impulses that are not so good. Acting on those without thinking carefully, leads to impulses that are far worse than the impulse to get up and clean a dirty computer keyboard or make your tenth cuppa tea for the day.

James wants us to understand the power of our words, control ourselves, and be more than mere hearers of the word. He exhorts us to be doers of it. He tells us quite rightly, that actions speak louder than words. We should be doing the things that matter rather than spending our time in spaces where the only results will be time wasted and feelings hurt. It's very easy to let ourselves get carried away with the mob mentality. And it's even easier to forget that behind the screen name we're arguing with (or trolling) is an actual human being with feelings and struggles just like us. We get to choose how we behave and what we say and what we do. Every. single. thing. we say and do matters, so why on earth would we use our words and actions to cause pain, provoke division, or harm ourselves or others? We're to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Can you see him doing any of those things?

James ends this section of his letter by drawing us back to our morality: "If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." Religion that matters, that is pure and life-giving, that is righteous as God is righteous, is the kind that enlists self-control, listening and doing more than it says. He mentions caring for orphans and widows as examples of the type of goodness we

are called to put out into the world. That goodness comes from the Source of our goodness. That goodness comes from God. We are responsible, friends, for our emotional selves, for our religious belief, and, above all, for our behavior. We have potential to build up or to tear down. How we use that potential is up to us.

Anne Frank, the German-born Jewish girl, who left a diary recounting her life as she and her family hid from Nazi persecution in Amsterdam in WWII, wrote this, “Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness. People are just people, and all people have faults and shortcomings, but all of us are born with basic goodness.” In the months before her death, as her family waited in ultimately false hope for the end of the war and a return to the lives they knew, Anne reflected on goodness. All the true evil happening in her world at that time could not keep her from the certainty that goodness was in all of us, if only we can find a way to act on it, rather than on our worst instincts. Self-control may seem like a buzzword used in the diet industry, but it is a vital discipline for a life that is not marred by the worlds wickedness, one that shares what is good, and just, and right with everyone we encounter.

As we leave this place today, I want you to remember that all that you have comes from God—it’s meant to be taken out into the world and used to extend God’s goodness to others. Will we use our self-control and the guidance of the Spirit to discern our actions, bearing good fruit in the world? Or will we let ourselves be overcome with anger and hatred, giving into our worst impulses simply because we can?

The beauty and the tragedy of life is this: it’s our choice. We are free to do with our language and actions as we please. Let us live by the words of James and of Anne today. Let us remember we have God’s goodness within us. We have the privilege and responsibility to spread that goodness around.

Oh, what a world we would have if all of us more regularly made that choice!

Amen.