

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi  
Deo Volente  
Sermon Preached at Stouffville United Church  
By the Rev. Capt Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

# "On Smothering the Spirit"

*June 16, 2024*

*Father's Day*

*21<sup>st</sup> in Sermon Series*

**James 4:1-17**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCtEe-zsCtQ>

It doesn't take much to make a difference and be a positive influence. If a dog can have such a positive influence just imagine what you can be. We all influence people. A mother took her young son shopping. After shopping in one store, a clerk handed the little boy a lollipop. "What do you say?" the mother said to the boy, to which he replied, "Charge it!" Parents do influence their children in certain ways. What do you do today that one of your parents did when you were a kid? Do you do anything just like they did? Do you have any of their habits?

And old TV commercial used to show a father walking along with his little boy. The little boy was probably about 3 years old. The dad picked up a rock and threw it. The boy did the same thing. The father sat down against a tree, lit up a cigarette and laid his pack of cigarettes on the ground. And the last scene showed the little boy picking up that pack of cigarettes. Stephen Spenders poem, "I think continually of those who are truly great". Do you know it? Some of you would because I spoke of it last week. It is a wonderful poem that speaks of ones "lovely ambition".

"I think continually of those who were truly great,  
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history  
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns  
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition  
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,  
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song.  
Who never allowed gradually the traffic to smother,  
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.  
And those who in their lives fought for life  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour."

People for whom James would say, God has given honor and glory and immortality, and eternal life. It was because they did not allow gradually the traffic to smother with noise and fog the flowering

of their spirit. Theirs was a lovely ambition, as Spender would say. And they left the vivid air signed with their honor.

Now that was what James was speaking about in this morning's Scripture. He was telling us that the way we live either smothers the flowering of our spirits or causes it to flourish.

## I

I want to begin by asking three questions. First, **“What is it you are after?”**

*“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?”*

In 1985, Ivan Boesky addressed a group of business students. He told them, “Greed is all right by me. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.” He said it so well that he got a standing ovation from the students. not long after, he received a jail sentence and was fined \$100,000,000.

The Broadway play *Serious Money* and the film *Wall Street* were loosely based on his life. An astute reviewer said, “it was a portrayal of temptation.” A scandal about junk bonds, and the savings and loan disaster driven by selfish ambition.

Our Scriptures this morning spoke of this selfish ambition that denies the truth, and obeys untruth and unrighteousness.

For when we sow a thought, we reap an act  
Sow an act, we a habit  
Sow a habit, reap a character  
Sow a character, reap a destiny."

What is it that you are after? What is it that you are sowing into the soil of your life? Is it smothering you. Choking off the life that is in you. Is what you are doing slowly sapping you of strength; stealing from you dignity. That is what James is saying, “

*<sup>8</sup> Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”*

The Mossad, the Israeli secret service, tells us that they can get nearly anybody by one, or some combination, of three things, power, women, or money. That is a way of telling us that many people are after. Secret Service uses the term M.I.C.E. Money, Ideology, Compromise and Ego.

One of the earliest documents ever written was found and it was written by a Roman centurion, and on it, it said, “In this life you can either have love or power, but you can't have both.”

What is it that you are after? I know many people who are after the approval of people. And very often they will do anything to get it; even things that they would never do otherwise.

A fellow-journalist of Malcolm Muggeridge said to him in an open air cafe in Vienna, "Malcolm, sometimes I wonder if I am licking the right boots." Licking the right boots? This would cause one's spirit to be smothered--this selling one-self-short. Yet, people do it all the time. They settle for power, and so must expect never to have love for it is hard to have both. Or they want justice and not mercy--and if that is so, you had better never make a mistake. If you believe that life is a rat-race you mustn't look for dignity. If you what settle for security, forget about ecstasy. For life is moral and we do reap what we sow, the chickens do really come home to roost; and whatever you chose has its cost.

Yet, I have so often found that people don't know what they are after. They just fill their lives with things hoping that they can have it all, and that somehow something they have placed into their life

will bring meaning and fulfillment. Yet, often they leave of the only things that do, and so they live diminished lives – lives that rarely bloom or blossom, because they have been smothered by the fog and noise of life.

Stephen Covey was at a conference on time management and he took out a large jar. He placed three large rocks in the jar. He then asked the question; "Can I get anymore in the jar?" The answer was no, for they thought he meant more large rocks. They he put in a large amount pebbles and asked the same question. People were sure this time nothing more could get in. So Covey took out sand, and poured that in. He then asked the same question. Can anything more fit in? This time the audience had finally caught on and said yes. He pulled out a jar of water and poured that in. He asked what does this illustrate. One man stood up and said, "I think it means that if I look, I can always find time to put more things into my life." Covey said, "Wrong!" It illustrates, he said, "that if I hadn't put the three large rocks in first, I wouldn't have gotten them in."

So often we leave the important things out of our lives--real commitment to God, and our commitment to our wives or husbands, and children--and we fill our lives up with things that sap our energy and smother the flowering of our spirits.

I remember a conversation I had with Rev Sylvia Dunstan that I visited often who was dying. She said, "There is wonderful freedom in dying. No, I wouldn't wish it on anyone. But, as a believer in Jesus, I see things now in a way I didn't see before. I see more clearly now that I'm dying, what is really important. All those meetings I used to see as so important--their dust, all those positions I held--their refuse; all that prestige and importance--garbage. I see now in with clarity of vision I have never had, that my faith in Jesus and my family are what are important. Take it from me, no one who is dying is ever going to say, I wish I had spent more time at the office. They are going to say, I wish, I spent more time getting to know God--if they fear death, or I wish I spent more time with my family. Never neglect your faith or your family John." And I've worked hard at not doing so. We do so, at our peril, and at the cost of smothering your spirit with noise, and your sight with fog.

## II

What is it you are after? **What is it costing you?** James said "*You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.*"<sup>3</sup> *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*"

There is a wonderful poem that is called the Dream-Pedlary. The poem tells of a person who sells dreams. And the poem goes on to ask what would you buy if you could by a dream? It then says that some cost only a sigh, and others your whole life. And they do, for they cost us every second, minute, hour, day, year, decade, we put into it, for after that time is gone – it's gone. It cannot be recovered; so what you are spending is your life.

That is what it is costing you . Is what you are living your life for worth it? Will you be able to say as Spender did that you signed the vivid air with honor, or that the traffic and noise smothered the life out of you.

Richard Rich wanted power. To get it he lied, and because of his lies, Sir Thomas More, "The Man for All Seasons," knew that he was a dead man. For his perjury Richard was made Attorney-General of Wales. Sir Thomas had earlier told him that he couldn't handle power, and shouldn't have it, but that he would make a fine teacher. But Richard didn't want to teach. Even if he taught well, no one would know it. Sir Thomas replied that his students would know, Richard would know and God would know. Sir Thomas thought that that was a good audience. But Richard would have none of it. So he sold his soul and wore the emblem of his betrayal.

Sir Thomas said, "Ah, Richard, is this what they have given you? Richard, what does it profit a man that he should gain the whole world, and loose his soul. But Oh Richard! Wales? It's not even the world." Some sold themselves for less than Wales.

### III

What is it that you are after? What is it costing you? And finally, **was it worth it?** James said, "*4 You adulterous people,<sup>[a]</sup> don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us<sup>[b]</sup>? 6 But he gives us more grace.*"

When you look ahead to your future or pause to look at your past; if you're normal, you want to have had a measure of success and look forward for some in the future.

In fact, the desire for success drives many of our most important decisions. Something that will make us successful, we do, and something that will make us unsuccessful, we try not to do. We live our lives in such a way as to lead to success. There is nothing wrong, of course, with wanting to be successful. However, the world's view of success and the biblical view of success are often opposite each other. That is why he said, be careful that what you are after doesn't lead only to "wrath and destruction."

In 1966, about a year before he died, the brilliant physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer said, "I am a complete failure!" This man had been the director of the Los Alamos Project, a research team that produced the atomic bomb, and he had also served as the head of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Yet, in looking back, he saw his achievements as meaningless. When asked about them, he replied, "They leave on the tongue only the taste of ashes."

The number of people who commit suicide after experiencing the fame and fortune of worldly success is astonishing. Multimillionaire George Vanderbilt killed himself by jumping from a hotel window. Lester Hunt, twice governor of Wyoming before being elected to the U.S. Senate, ended his own life. Actress Marilyn Monroe, writer Ernest Hemingway, and athlete Tony Lazzeri represent a host of highly influential and popular people who became so disenchanted with earthly success that they took their own lives.

Alexander the Great was not satisfied, even when he had completely subdued the nations. He wept because there were no more worlds to conquer, and he died at an early age in a state of debauchery. Hannibal, who filled three bushels with the gold rings taken from the knights he had slaughtered, committed suicide by swallowing poison. Few noted his passing, and he left this earth completely unmourned. Julius Caesar, 'staining his garments in the blood of one million of his foes,' conquered 800 cities, only to be stabbed by his best friends at the scene of his greatest triumph. Napoleon, the feared conqueror, after being the scourge of Europe, spent his last years in banishment.

James understood this, for he reminds us that only a lovely ambition is worthy of the cost of our life. We are paying for our life not in dollars and cents; but rather in days and years. For as Kierkegaard said, "the most painful memory in life is remembering the future. You think about that. Amen.