

Having a relationship with God is not a simple task. That's the basic message that James gives us in our Epistle lesson today. Having a peaceful, loving relationship with another person – another human being – is already hard enough. Having a peaceful, loving relationship with a holy and almighty God is nearly impossible.

Which is unfortunate. Because if we had a perfect relationship with God, we would ask for whatever we need and we would receive it. Because our requests would be righteous and humble and pleasing to the Lord.

But we don't have a perfect relationship with God. We have a very imperfect relationship. Because we're sinners. And sin makes us proud and violent and covetous and selfish and foolish. Such that we don't ask for everything we need, because we're too arrogant to ask. And when we do pray, we don't receive the things we ask for, because those requests come from a heart that is earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic, James says.

Harsh words, but it's the truth. Being in a right relationship with God is an immensely difficult goal. And countless men throughout the Bible found that out the hard way. These were holy, godly men. Who, in many cases, were praised for their righteousness and devotion.

Moses, the man who saw God's glory. David, a man after God's own heart. Peter, the rock, upon whose confession of faith the church is built. And yet Moses refused God's instruction to command water from the rock. David committed adultery and murder. Peter denied his Lord three times. If they couldn't have a perfect relationship with God, what hope do we have?

Having a relationship with God is not a simple task. Which is why God has prophets. In the most general sense, a prophet is someone with a really, really good relationship with God, for they have the Holy Spirit filling their lives and their words. It's still not perfect, because they're still sinners. But it's close.

Close enough that we can trust the message they deliver to us. Which is another way of defining what a prophet is. It's someone who delivers a message from God. But it's even more than that. Because a relationship isn't a one way street. A relationship requires communication that goes both ways. It requires dialogue.

And so a prophet is not only someone who hears God's Word and delivers that Word to God's people. But he's also someone who speaks to God. Someone who prays with the righteous motives that God responds to. If that epistle from James is describing everything you shouldn't be when you pray, a prophet is everything you should be when you pray.

And we see that playing out in our Old Testament lesson. At first glance, this is an odd lesson. Three verses pulled out of the middle of the chapter. No context of any kind. No clear message in it at all. Who in the world thought this would be a good Sunday morning scripture lesson?

But, in reality, this is just one tiny piece of a section that is three chapters long. Now, I'm certainly not going to make you read through all three chapters on one Sunday. Which means, this is as good a place to start as any.

These three chapters are a dialogue between God and the prophet Jeremiah. And it all begins by God telling Jeremiah two things. First, that his people, the nation of Judah, have sinned and that because of that sin, God will not protect Judah when the Babylonian army arrives. They are on their own. And they will be destroyed.

Second, he warns the prophet that the people are not going to like this message. They are going to persecute Jeremiah. They are going to try to kill him. Jeremiah is going to suffer horribly over the next few years. But he must preach God's Word anyway.

But why would they do that? Why would they try to kill Jeremiah? I mean, we all know that shooting the messenger doesn't work. If the people believe what Jeremiah is saying, then they should repent. And if they don't believe what he's saying, then what difference does it make. He's wrong. He's crazy. Just ignore him.

But here's the problem. The people know without a doubt that Jeremiah is a prophet. They know that he has this amazing relationship with God. They know that God listens to what Jeremiah has to say. And, from their perspective, they don't know whether this message of destruction is something that God has told Jeremiah, or something that Jeremiah is praying for.

And so they think, *“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit.”* The fruit is the message of destruction against Judah. Destroy the tree – kill Jeremiah – and you prevent him from ever praying that prayer. You prevent God's wrath. At least, that's their logic. It's wrong, but it shows why they did it.

It also shows how seriously they took the words of a prophet. And they were right to do so. Because Jeremiah, later in that passage, prays for vengeance upon those same people. For something they haven't even done yet. And God grants his request. The people who try to kill Jeremiah are the first ones struck down by the Babylonians.

The words of a prophet are powerful. Because they show the fullest extent of what happens when you have a relationship with God. James wasn't kidding. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

So that's it, right? All we have to do is stop sinning, develop a perfect relationship with God, and then pray for the destruction of our enemies. And God will wipe them out. Right?

Wrong. Because we're right back at where James started, *“You desire and do not have, so you murder.”* Jeremiah prayed for vengeance against his enemies because he knew at that moment it was the righteous thing to ask for. God had already pronounced judgement on Jeremiah's enemies and so what Jeremiah was praying was in complete agreement with God's will.

But God hasn't pronounced judgement on our enemies. And when we pray for our enemy's destruction it's just murdering them in our hearts. It's simply hate that is born out of our sinfulness, not our righteousness.

No, you see, as a prophet, Jeremiah isn't a model for what we should do. Instead, Jeremiah was a model for what Jesus would do.

Jeremiah was a good prophet. He had a good relationship with God. Jesus is a perfect prophet. Because he has a perfect relationship with God. The perfect relationship that comes from being one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And if there was power in Jeremiah's words, there is so much more power in Jesus' words.

And yet, the Word of the Lord that Jesus delivers isn't one of destruction against God's people. And the prayers that Jesus prays aren't ones of vengeance against his enemies. No, Jesus has all the power that Jeremiah had and then some. But he doesn't use it to destroy. He uses it save.

Hear the Word of the Lord that Jesus delivers: *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”* That's the prophetic message of Jesus.

Jeremiah says, “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter... so let me see your vengeance upon my enemies.” It's a message of the power of God to enforce his Law and his wrath. Jesus says, “I will be like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter... but I will rise from the dead.” It's a message of the power of God to offer us his Gospel and his salvation.

That's Jesus' entire ministry in a nutshell. Jesus doesn't need to call down God's vengeance because his Word is so powerful, it can undo any amount of damage that his enemies can do. Even death itself.

And so, for us, a right relationship with God doesn't mean praying for the death of our enemies. It doesn't mean praying for physical wealth or power or pleasure. On the contrary, it means praying as Jesus did.

*“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* It means praying with the knowledge that there is no amount of damage that the enemies of God's kingdom can do to us that Jesus can't undo. Even when that damage is a sinful heart that can't build a relationship with God on its own.

Even then, Jesus undoes the damage. He creates within us a clean heart and a right spirit. And the faith to know that we don't need to call down God's vengeance upon our enemies. Because they can't hurt us.

Instead, we call down God's mercy upon our enemies. And pray for the day that they know what it means to have the relationship with God that we do. That they know the hope of the resurrection. And the joy of humbling themselves before the Lord, so that he might exalt them. Just as he has exalted us. And given us life everlasting. Amen.