

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

### SUBMITTING OURSELVES TO GOD

Read James 4:1-10

#### **Introduction**

What is the result of living by the wisdom of the world, rather than the wisdom of God? What should Christians do when they realize that's the path they've been on? James answers those questions in chapter 4. This passage continues to build on the end of chapter 3. Previously, James described the so-called wisdom of the world: figure out what you really want out of life (bitter envy) and plan to get it for yourself at any cost (selfish ambition). He described this earthly, unspiritual, demonic philosophy as the source of disorder and all sorts of evil in the world (James 3:15–16).

James has been writing to Jewish Christians of the first century (James 1:1). Here, in chapter 4, James says to these very readers that a worldly, unspiritual road is the very one they have been following. This is what causes fights and quarrels among them. When people follow this road, they try to get what they want for themselves, frustrated by the people standing in their way. So, they fight, quarrel, even kill. Instead of trusting that they have a loving heavenly Father to provide in His perfect timing, worldly-minded people insist on fighting to get what they want.

James elevates our awareness of how serious this problem is by putting a sharp label on it: adultery. Are you following the wisdom of the world, while claiming to be a Christian believer? If so, you're cheating on God with this world system of serving yourself first and at all costs. You can't do both. If you make yourself a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.

#### **Fights and Quarrels**

*“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.” (vv1-2)*

James accurately described strife among Christians with the terms: wars and fights. Often the battles that happen among Christians are bitter and severe. We define the terms used by James here:

- **Wars**, Greek *polemos* (verse 1) -- literally "war, battle, fight," then figuratively "a state of hostility/antagonism, strife, conflict, quarrel"
- **Fights**, Greek *machē* (verse 1) -- "fighting, quarrels, strife, disputes."
- **War**, Greek *strateuō* (verse 1) -- "serve in the army," then figuratively, "to engage in a conflict, wage battle, fight" (James 4:1; 1 Peter 2:11).
- **Murder**, Greek *phoneuō* (verse 2) -- "murder, kill." Jesus compared unrestrained anger with murder (Matthew 5:21-22), since anger is one of the roots of murder.
- **Covet**, Greek *zeloō* (verse 2) -- in a bad sense, "to have intense negative feelings over another's achievements or success, be filled with jealousy, envy"

The source of wars and fights among Christians is always the same. There is some root of carnality, an internal war within the believer regarding the lusts of the flesh. No two believers who are both walking in the Spirit of God towards each other can live with wars and fights among themselves. You will agree with me that almost all who have such a critical and contentious attitude claim they are prompted and

supported by the Spirit of God. James makes it clear that this contentious manner comes from your desires.

The types of desires that lead to conflict are described. Covetousness leads to conflict (you lust and do not have). Anger and animosity lead to hatred and conflict (murder). Again, James looked back to the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus also used murder to express more than actual killing, but also as an inward condition of heart, shown outwardly by anger (Matthew 5:21-22).

***Yet you do not have because you do not ask.***

The reason these destructive desires exist among Christians is because they do not seek God for their needs (you do not ask). James reminds us here of the great power of prayer, and why one may live unnecessarily as a spiritual pauper, simply because they do not pray, or do not ask when they pray.

This points to the futility of this life lived for the desires for pleasure. Not only is it a life of conflict, but it is also a fundamentally unsatisfied life. This helps us to rationally understand the folly of living life after the lusts of the world and our animal appetites. You are tempted to fulfil a sinful desire because you think (or hope) that it may be satisfied, but it will never be satisfied. Why not accept your lack of such satisfaction now, instead of after much painful and harmful sin?

### **Selfish Desires**

*You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (v3)*

After dealing with the problem of no prayer (you do not ask as stated above), now James addressed the problem of selfish prayer. These ones, when they did ask, they asked God with purely selfish motives.

Everyone wants to be happy. But seeking personal happiness as our main goal in life means -- by definition -- (1) that we are not living to love others and seek their good when it conflicts with our own, and that (2) we have not surrendered our lives to fulfill God's will for us. Pursuit of personal happiness is selfishness, pure and simple. But it is so common a personal philosophy that we take it for granted. A great many Christians are more committed to their own personal happiness than they are doing God's will. And that may sometimes include you -- and me.

We don't have what we want, James says in verse 2, because we do not ask God. Why is that? Sometimes it is because we are afraid to bring God into our lives too much since we might not like what he would say. We prefer to go it on our own rather than be obligated to God. One of the reasons God doesn't give us what we ask for is because of our heart selfishness, literally, "you ask badly or wrongly." Our motivations are wrong. We ask not for a good purpose, but for an evil one, a self-centered one, to spend it (*dapanaō*) on our hedonism. The Greek verb *dapanaō* means "to use up or pay out material or physical resources, spend, spend freely"

Our selfishness, our pleasure-serving, can and does block answers to our prayers.

### **Flirting with Spiritual Adultery**

*“Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (v4)*

This is a rebuke presented in Old Testament vocabulary. God spoke this way in the Old Testament when His people were attracted to some form of idolatry (Jeremiah 3:8-9, Ezekiel 6:9, Ezekiel 16:32, Ezekiel 23:37, and Hosea 3:1). As James saw it here, their covetousness was idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and friendship with the world.

The addition of adulterers was probably from an early scribe who thought James meant literal sexual adultery and didn't want to exclude men from the rebuke. But James used the phrase you adulteresses to give a specific spiritual picture. According to this picture, God is the "husband" and we are His "wife" (as in Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 3:20, and Exodus 34:15-16). The Jews, because of their covenant with God, are represented as being espoused to him; and hence, their idolatry, and their iniquity in general, are represented under the notion of adultery.

James recognizes that we cannot both be friends of this world system in rebellion against God, and friends of God at the same time (Matthew 6:24). Even the desire to be a friend (wants to be a friend) of the world makes that one an enemy of God. The strong statements James made here remind us that all was not beautiful in the early church. They had plenty of carnality and worldliness to deal with. While the New Testament church is a clear pattern for us, we should not over-romanticize the spiritual character of early Christians.

### Envyng Intensely

*"Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?" (v5)*

This phrase is a little hard to accurately translate. Is it God jealously yearning for the devotion of our spirit which He put within us, or is it the Spirit within us jealously yearning for the full devotion of our heart? Either way, the sense is much the same. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit has a jealous yearning for our friendship with God. The Spirit will convict the Christian who lives in compromise.

James agrees with the many passages in the Old Testament that tell us God is a jealous God (Deuteronomy 32:16 and 32:21; Exodus 20:5 and 34:14; Zechariah 8:2). "The idea is that God loves men with such a passion that he cannot bear any other love within the hearts of men." Think of the inner pain and torture inside the person who is betrayed by an unfaithful spouse, who must reckon with the truth, I am faithful to them, but they are not faithful to me. This is what the Spirit of God feels regarding our world-loving hearts.

### Grace to the Humble

*"But He gives more grace. Therefore, He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (v6)*

"Grace" is a word you'd expect to find the Apostle Paul using. But here it is in James. God's grace helps us in our struggles with sin, in our struggles with the pleasure principle. God's Spirit woos us to him and, as we recognize our sins and humble ourselves in repentance, we receive grace.

It seems that too many conversions these days take place without a deep repentance. There is often a sense of need, an emptiness, answered by a trust in the Lord that fills us with joy and hope. And that is good. But at some point -- or points -- God needs to humble us so we are willing to turn away from our ingrained sins. Often that requires the pain of self-discovery and finally a heartfelt repentance. It's best when we can fully repent at the beginning of our Christian walk, but often there are some deep humblings as we mature, as God lovingly strips back layer after layer of selfishness and trains us to be his holy ones, his disciples.

I've struggled with pride in my life. So, when I encounter this passage: "God opposes the proud," I find myself distinctly desiring not to set myself up as God's opponent. How about you? Where does your stubbornness (an alternate word for "pride") place you in relation to God?

## Submitting Yourself to God

*“Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” (vv7-10)*

In light of the grace offered to the humble, there is only one thing to do: submit to God. This means to order yourself under God, to surrender to Him as a conquering King, and start receiving the benefits of His reign.

We will continue and study these verses and the rest of James 4 next week.