
“Friend or Foe?”

JAMES 4:1-6

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

There’s no getting around it, we want what we want. Left unchecked, our desires can lead us to do awful things. But, God is gracious and calls us to humility!

In this passage, James rebuked his church for the sin of selfishness. He call them out for allowing their passions that war within them to cause conflict in the church. Rather than praying about things and submitting them to the Lord, they coveted, fought, even murdered! When they did pray, they prayed in order to squander it on themselves. Thankfully, God gives more grace when we humble ourselves and call sin what it is.

INTRODUCTION

This passage comes after James 3:13-18, which we covered in January to begin the series, Wisdom from Above. There James calls for the “wise” to demonstrate their wisdom by the conduct of their lives. Look at their fruit. There are two types of wisdom: from above and from below. The latter is demonic, unspiritual, & fleshly. It is full of jealousy and selfish ambition; it produces disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

If wisdom from above ultimately leads to peace and peaceful relationships, what causes fights and quarrels?

4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Let’s look at **verses 1 & 2 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.**

THIS MEANS WAR

James uses the language of warfare to describe the relationships between people in his church. **Fights** is literally “wars.” These fights are **among you**, people who would say they’re part of the same church!

Now, not all fighting is wrong. Sometimes you have to fight for the sake of the truth. Sometimes a reluctance to fight comes from cowardice rather than peace-making. Unfortunately, too many Christians fight for the wrong reasons. It is not a noble cause like the life of the unborn, abolition of slavery, preservation of biblical marriage and sexuality, or the truthfulness of the Gospel.

Sadly, many of the issues that have plagued the church from the beginning arise because people's **passions are at war within [them]**. The word **passion** comes from the Greek word from which we get the word "*hedonism*," the philosophy that pursuit of pleasure is the highest good.

There was a war of passions waging *within them* that was causing war *among them*. From where does this "wisdom" come? Every spiritual force of darkness is trying to divide and destroy what God has created. What devious hearts we have that they could use us to do it!

James warns that when our passions are allowed to run amuck, it can lead to awful, unthinkable things, even to **murder**. What?! I want you to let this sink in: God's Word says warring passions, left unchecked, can lead people in the church to murder one another. Is that just exaggeration? Maybe. But didn't Jesus say that if you hate your brother, it's just like murder? John outright said if you hate your brother, you're a murderer. (1 John 3:15). How do you justify harboring resentment or hatred toward a brother or sister?

Your warring passions cause you to **covet** what someone else has because you cannot be content with what God has given you. **Coveting** is taking something of *legitimate* concern and making it an *ultimate* concern. Again, left unchecked, this can cause you to hate the one who has it and even lead to violence against them. **You fight and quarrel.**

IF YOU JUST HAD _____, THEN YOU'D BE HAPPY

You imagine that if you just had that thing or that spouse or those kids, you'd *finally* be happy. But do you not realize that others covet what you have? And the people whose stuff you covet, covet other people's stuff.

I recall hearing the news of a former Miss USA who committed suicide by jumping out of her Manhattan apartment earlier this year. She was an attorney in NYC and a correspondent for Extra TV. She had it all – beauty, success, and money. She was the envy of lots of people. Tragically, her death reveals that no one is really satisfied until they are satisfied in God.

John Piper famously said, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." When we are most content with Him, with His presence, sovereign activity, and provision, that is when God is most glorified in us.

But our passions war within us so we fight with one another. We get bitter. We get angry. We let our feelings get hurt. Think about that for a moment...what is the root cause of much of your anger or bitterness or being upset if not the fact that you didn't get what *you wanted*?

Stephen Feinstein is an Army acquaintance of mine and fellow pastor in California. He tweeted last week, "Sadly in most churches they will not hold each other accountable over sin, but they will judge each other and split churches over preferences. As if liberties and one's interpretation of them is more important than God's actual commands concerning sin and righteousness."

Ouch, right?! There are legitimate reasons to leave a church, to remove people from a church, to passionately confront someone in the church – it's called unrepentant sin. But I think Pastor Stephen is right, that people in most churches are outright unwilling to address sin issues while they are whole-heartedly ready to kill people over their own preferences.

The reason we're so prone to getting upset is that we're sinful people and when we don't get what we want, it wages war in us. But it's really hard to get upset at someone we've determined is more significant than we are, like Paul tells us to do, and over something we're willing to surrender to the Lord. Sadly, we can get so consumed by our selfish desires that we cannot even bring ourselves to pray about them. **Verse 2 says, You do not have, because you do not ask.**

Why do we not pray about the things we desire? Perhaps we don't ask because we don't really think we need God's help. We think we're self-sufficient. If I ever have a need that I don't think I can meet myself, then I'll ask. Until then, I can make it happen. "I don't want to bother Him." Right.

Or perhaps we don't want to hear Him say no. If we pray about something and He says no, what then? Perhaps it's better to ask forgiveness than permission. Does refusing to ask God for something actually hide

it from God? And if you desire something you're trying to hide from God, do you think you ought to be desiring that or confessing it?

Another reason we don't ask is because some of the things we want are just selfish and we know it. "Lord, I really want more money in my bank account so I don't have to trust you as much." "I really wish that my co-worker would be fired so I don't have to deal with her and I can get her job." There are lots of reasons we don't pray.

SQUANDERERS

On the other hand, James knew there were some people who actually did pray, but with selfish motives. He says in **verse 3, You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.** Rather than submitting your desires to Him, you covet, fight, and even murder. When you come around to asking, you do so selfishly so that you can **spend** it on yourself.

The word **spend** literally means "to squander." This is what Jesus said the prodigal son did with his inheritance. James used this word to remind the reader that using what you have on yourself without regard to others is the worst kind of use of stuff there is.

THIS NEXT PART STINGS A LITTLE

Fair warning, this next part stings a little...**verse 4** says, **You adulterous people!** Hold up, did James just call the people in his church adulteresses? Yes, he did and rightly so. All throughout the Old Testament we read of God relating to Israel like a loving husband. Yet time after time we read of Israel whoring herself on every hill under every tree. It's shameful how Israel treated God. Hear God's heart-breaking appeal through his prophet Jeremiah, "*Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord.*" *Jeremiah 3:20*

It gets worse as we read in Isaiah 57, "...*But you, draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial [put your pagan symbols]; for, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed, you have gone up to it, you have made it wide; and you have made a covenant for yourself with them, you have loved their bed, you have looked on nakedness.*" *Isaiah 57:2-3, 8*

Do you hear God's heart in that? He's speaking to Israel the way a husband would speak to his adulterous wife. Do you feel the hurt in those words? The betrayal? This is the language James appealed to with his church. Were they no different than Israel? Are we? How quickly we abandon our first love. How prone we are to wander into the enemy's camp looking for a cheap thrill.

James' readers weren't outright disavowing God any more than the Israelites were. The Israelites just wanted to worship God *plus* the pagan gods so they could get the benefit of both. They wanted the blessing of God plus some side-gods.

NO ROOM FOR TWO GODS

There's no room for two gods in this house, though! James continues in **verse 4, Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** Back then, the concept of **friends** was a little different than today. We might call someone a friend who is just an acquaintance. But in James' day a friend was a person with whom you shared common goals, purposes, and values. It's someone we would call our BFF.

When it comes to our relationship with God, Christians are friends in the BFF sense. When we are transferred into His kingdom and adopted into His family, we're called to accept His kingdom goals, purposes, and values as our own. His priorities become ours.

Unfortunately, James made it clear that some Christians still try to be friends with **the world**. The world refers to neither the physical sphere that God created and called good, nor to the people who inhabit it. **The world** refers to the system of beliefs that rejects God and rebels against Him. If they are so consumed with being accepted by the world, that should be cause for grave concern.

Granted, it is people in the world who embrace this system, but I'm reminded of Paul who said, "*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" *Ephesians 6:12*

To be clear, James is not addressing the occasional sin. He's referring to those who habitually and continually live worldly lives. Those who belong to God can never be called His **enemies**, so James is referring once again to those who claim the faith but have no works that validate the claim. James is warning people in his church that if their lives reflect the world's values, if they can side with the rebels against God, they are themselves his enemies.

Like a wife cannot be faithful to her husband and at the same time sleep with another man, you and I cannot pursue friendship with the world and with the Lord. We are either friend or foe! To be friends with the world is to be at **enmity with the God**.

Last week in James 2:23 we saw "...'*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*'—and he was called a friend of God." Abraham was far from perfect, but he believed God and he was called a friend of God. Don't you want to be called a friend of God? Sure, but there's a problem: we're prone to wander.

HARDEST VERSE TO INTERPRET

James says in **verse 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?** This is one of the most difficult verses to interpret in James. My initial take on this was that He loves us so passionately that He is jealous for us like a husband is for a wife. That's a common interpretation.

Another is that God is jealous over the Holy Spirit whom He has caused to dwell in us, which sort of implies if we go back to the world God will remove His Holy Spirit from us. The rest of the New Testament says we can reject that outright. If you *could* lose the Holy Spirit, if you could lose your salvation, you *already would have*. If you're in the faith, it's because the Holy Spirit put you there and keeps you there.

Yet another interpretation is that the **spirit** is the "spirit of wisdom" (cf. Isaiah 11:2) The message is that if you want to walk in the spirit of wisdom, you must remain submitted to Him. That seems appropriate and feasible as well.

However, where I landed after my study is James is saying that the spirit God gave us, the spirit that represents life in our bodies (cf. James 2:26), the human spirit is pulled toward envy. How did I get there? Well, for one it's also a common interpretation. Two, it seems to fit the context best.

The question boils down to what James meant when he said spirit, *pneuma*, and what he meant by jealousy, *phthonos* (pr. f-thonos). Those who argue that God is jealous for our spirit or for His Holy Spirit have to deal with the fact that *phthonos* is always used to refer to a negative, sinful attitude, what we'd call envy. God is jealous like a good husband is jealous for his wife, but He is not envious. There's a different word for that, *zelos* (pr. zay-los).

What I believe James is saying is that the human spirit that God made to dwell in us is prone to envy. This accords not only with the immediate context of James, but also the general teaching of the entire bible. Human history reveals our natural inclination is to envy, to want what we do not have. To be discontent with what God provides. Think Adam & Eve and the fruit of the one tree they could not eat.

This interpretation also helps make sense of what James said just before. **Scripture says** is sort of troublesome because there is no verse in the bible that says what James said next. Not in a single verse, that is. But the entire body of scripture **says** what I believe James is saying: man is desperately sick. Scripture generally testifies to the selfish and envious nature of mankind.

MacArthur summarizes James' intent this way, "Don't you understand that you yourselves are living proof of the veracity of Scripture, which clearly teaches that the natural man has a spirit of envy?"

If this is the case, it's merely an echo of Jeremiah's assessment of the human condition, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*" *Jeremiah 17:9*

DON'T LEAVE US HANGING

Thankfully, James doesn't leave us hanging when he identified the problem. No, he points us to the solution. **Verse 6 says, "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."** This actually *is* a quote from scripture, Proverbs 3:34.

This lends more credibility to the way I believe we ought to interpret the whole message. It would go like this: **Isn't it clear that Scripture in general testifies that the human spirit God caused to dwell in us, broken by sin, constantly pulls us toward envy? But he gives more grace. Therefore scripture says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."**

What's the message, then, based on this interpretation? The message is that your spirit constantly pulls you toward envy, but God! **But He gives you more grace** and more grace and more grace. Should you find yourself dealing with these sins, take heart, God gives more grace! Are you selfish? Grace. Are you discontent? There's grace for that. Are you angry because you didn't get your way or you don't like something about the church? Grace upon grace upon grace.

Is there a stipulation to receiving this grace? Only one. For some it will be like stepping over a rain puddle; for others like swimming across the mighty Mississippi.

HUMBLE YOURSELF

Here it is: humble yourselves and admit your sin. Call it what it is.

Anger? – that's sin.

Bitterness? – also sin.

Discontentment? – yes, it's sin.

Hurt feelings because you didn't get your way – sorry, but that's sin.

Self-centeredness that causes everyone to avoid you? – you might want to think you're a victim, but it's sin.

Resentful that what God is doing around you isn't what you wanted? – sin. Call it what it is.

Why though? Because James says that **God opposes the proud**. You gotta see this: that's another military term. It depicts a full army ready for battle. God is mounted up for battle against the prideful. The irony is that the prideful think this is no big deal. Oh, foolish pride.

God wars against the proud, the ones who war against one another because of the desires that war within them. Don't you get it? This isn't a game! It's not social hour. It's not entertainment. It's war! And the prideful are going to war not only with other people but also with God.

God wins.

But hear me, God is ready to dispense His grace like Niagara Falls. He is ready to overwhelm you with a flood of grace that will knock you over if you will but humble yourself before Him.

Are you trying to walk the line between faithfulness and self-indulgence?

Are you trying to justify selfishness with your resources?

Are you trying to be accepted by the world by compromising God's Word?

If you find yourself with these sins, the message from James is, "Humble yourself before God."

You will find His grace is sufficient to cover all your sin and meet all your needs.

OH TO BE FRIENDS WITH GOD!

Being "friends" with God means knowing what He's up to and believing that that's what is best and pouring everything you have into it. It's seeking first the Kingdom of God and trusting Him to care for all our needs. It's laying down every false god and every empty dream and every superficial passion and pleading with the

Lord to ignite a flame that consumes you with passion for His glory; a flame that burns longer, and brighter, and further, and wider.

Who's in?

By His grace & for His glory, amen!

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