

Chapter 4

4:1-6 The source of infighting in the Church is never that which is good – in fact, James identifies the reason for disagreements as being sin in the people themselves. We fight amongst ourselves, James says, due to the fact that we “desire and do not have,” and “covet and cannot obtain” (4:2). As always, context is key to any interpretation, and this passage is no different. James has just spent his time preceding this discussing the dangers of the tongue and the need for wisdom. It is due to “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (3:14) that many of the problems within the Church have arisen. As such, James will go on to note how the “passions” of the heart are what drive wedges deeper between Christ followers. Fights don’t just randomly spring up among those who are inhabited by the Holy Spirit. Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 14 that “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace” (14:33). Paul is speaking of the disorder that is often found in Christian services where the gifts of the Spirit are used without any sort of order to their use, but the basic application of Paul’s words rings true here as well: when His will is being appropriately followed, order and civility should be the order of the day. It is when the will of God is not being followed most closely that His people find strife among themselves.

James once again echoes the words of Christ Himself in v.2, especially as recorded in Matthew 5:21-30 and Matthew 15:10-19. In the latter passage is where Jesus will note, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” James makes the same case in 4:2-3, using four examples of sin:

- 1) Murder – Murder, James says, arises because we “desire and do not have.” This is certainly consistent with the motive for Cain’s murder of Abel in Genesis 4. Abel had the favor of God, and Cain did not; consequently, Cain chose to murder his brother rather than attempt to work on bringing himself to a place of righteousness and humility that would make him pleasing in the sight of God. Cain desired and did not have the favor of God, and it led him to murder as a result.
- 2) Quarreling – Fighting comes about because of covetousness and inability to gain that which is coveted. It is unknown exactly what is being coveted by the recipients here, but one would assume this does not involve any sort of spiritual blessing which God has poured out on another. After all, if we see long for the ways of God, we strive for them rather than simply coveting those qualities of God which we see in others. Most likely, therefore, those to whom James is writing are fighting amongst themselves over possessions or some similar issue. This would bring additional clarity to James’ comments about equality in chapter 2.
- 3) Not asking God – Quite surprisingly, James will even go so far as to label a *lack of* prayer as a sin in its own right. James does not overtly label these issues as sinful, but the clear implication is that these actions (or inactions) are considered thus. It is through prayer that we “present [our] requests to God” and God works in our circumstances (cf. Phil 4:6; Jas 5:13). Consequently, not asking is the direct cause of our not receiving. We do not have that for which we do not ask God. Part of prayer is communicating with God about our needs and desires. This is not to say that God will grant us material things (although who knows?), but that God will grant us that which is needed and which He deems to be good. To reemphasize what was said in a previous sermon, when we pray, we would do well to pray the words of Scripture back to God. In so doing, we ensure that we pray in line with His will.

When our hearts are in line with the will of God, our prayers are powerful and earth-shattering.

- 4) Asking wrongly – Not asking is problematic for James, but so is asking with the wrong heart. This is why we are careful to qualify God’s promises when we talk about asking for material things – are we asking because we genuinely need them, or because we want to “spend it on [our] passions” (4:3)? It is most likely that our requests for the material are for this reason. However, those requests for God’s provision of the material can be granted when asked in a spirit of humility, just as much as any other prayers can be granted. It all depends on why it is being requested (selfishness vs. selflessness). One excellent example of this is a friend of mine who belonged to a refugee family who fled Venezuela. They were at the end of their rope and asked God to provide them with the money they needed for rent that month, unsure of what would happen to their family otherwise. No checks were expected to come for a few more weeks, and they had no idea how they were going to make it. They prayed their prayer in desperation and out of love and concern for their children. When they arrived home, a check sat on their step for the exact amount they needed for rent that month. God can provide whatever our needs may be; the variable is the spirit in which they are asked for.

On the other hand, even the most spiritual of requests can also be denied for this same reason. When we pray for prophecy or wisdom or anything else, do we do so because we genuinely desire to build up the body of Christ, or do we request these things because our wisdom or ability to prophesy would bring greater attention to ourselves? Again Paul comes to mind here in saying, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” Even the most elaborate of spiritual gifts means nothing without a heart chasing after God to back it all up. We see it even today, when the most eloquent and powerful preachers fall left and right because their hearts become corrupted. What are our motives for the things we desire – glory for self, or glory for God?

“Friendship with the world,” James says, “is enmity with God.” “Enmity” is not commonly used these days, but the word is also used of Eve when God speaks of the distance He will place between her and the serpent. “Distance” does not necessarily accurately encompass the full meaning of the term, however; “hostility” would be much closer. Friendship with the world can only result in hostility toward God. James follows this to its natural conclusion in the sentence which follows: “Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” Yet the mindset of many in the modern age would lead us to conclude that this could not be possible! How could someone be an enemy of God if God is love, after all? This seems to be a mindset which James attempts to counter even in his original audience, based on how he follows this up.

Interestingly, James does not quote any known biblical reference in 4:5 when he says that “the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that He has made to dwell within us.’” It can be difficult, therefore, to discern exactly what James means here. In fact, scholars themselves remain quite divided on the nature, translation, and origin of this quote. J. William Johnston, in his study of this verse, has this to say on the variations in translation:

“Disagreement among translations and commentators reveals the difficulty of determining the structure of verse 5. Three major views of the structure of this verse dominate the discussion:

View A: One question: Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us’?

View B: Two questions: Do you think the Scripture speaks to no purpose? Does the Spirit/spirit lust to envy?

View C: Question plus a statement: Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose? He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us.”

One can see from a quick glance at these three variations that there are numerous ways to understand what James says here, not only in their general phrasing but in their core meaning as well. In my own opinion, this is not intended to be a direct quote, but a summarization of what the scriptures say on the topic of the jealousy of God. Wesley himself seemed to support such an understanding, saying in his explanatory notes, “St. James seems to refer to many, not any one particular scripture.” We do this quite frequently, giving the basic message of the scriptures instead of quoting them directly. One obvious example would be, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” No piece of Scripture says this quote outright, but the overall message of Scripture certainly attests to this idea! In like manner, it is quite possible (and, I would think, quite likely) that James is simply saying, “Scripture attests to the idea that God desires that which He has placed within us.”

In attempting to discern the meaning of this passage, it is also important to note that the identity of the spirit/Spirit is uncertain. Is this the Holy Spirit, or is this the spirit of human beings which God has placed within us? Evidence could be cited to lend credence to either viewpoint, and yet it would seem that both statements could hold true: God gives His Holy Spirit to His people in Christ Jesus, which makes Him long for that part of Himself within us. Alternatively, we know that God longs for our hearts as well. Both statements would be fair, accurate, and biblically/theologically sound understandings of the text.

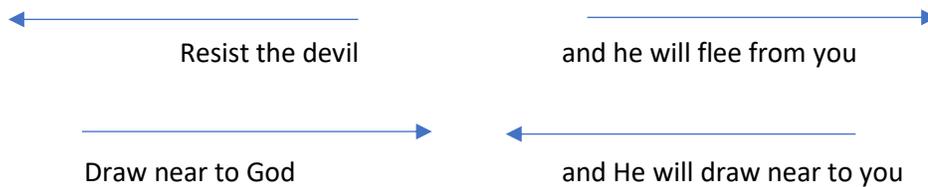
It is important for those being reminded of their own sins and shortcomings to also be reminded that God is a God of mercy, and so James reminds his readers that “He gives more grace.” Yes, we often find ourselves cozying up to the world, putting us at odds with our Creator. When we come to our senses and recognize His faithfulness and the worthlessness of the idols of the world, it is in that moment God “gives more grace” to us. Just as James informed us earlier, so he reminds us now: mercy triumphs over judgment (2:13).

We must be reminded that this grace is given to those who recognize their sin, repent thereof, and choose to walk a different path. “God opposes the proud” – in other words, those who flaunt their sin and refuse to walk in repentance – “but gives grace to the humble” – meaning He is merciful toward those who acknowledge their iniquity before Him and are willing to walk in the light of the grace He offers.

4:7-10 It is as a result of God’s grace, poured out on the unworthy who humble their hearts before Him, that we are to submit ourselves to God. James essentially says, “Since it is the case that God

opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble, we should submit to Him!" Submission to God is an act of faithfulness.

Although the verse numbers do not pair these two statements together, it is clear from the way in which they are phrased that the latter half of 4:7 is intended to be read in tandem with the beginning of 4:8 – "Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." There is clear intentionality in the imagery James uses here:



It is as a result of God's willingness to draw near to the humble that James exhorts his readers to "cleanse [their] hands" and "purify [their] hearts" (4:8). Friendship with (and faithfulness to) God requires purity before Him. Here James alludes back to one of his opening statements by referring to the sinner as "you double-minded," as he did in 1:8. We would do well to walk in humility before God, which is why James tells us to allow our laughter to become mourning and our joy to be gloom. This is quite reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 2:2, where the author laments that laughter "is folly" and must ask of pleasure, "What use is it?" This is not to say that Christ followers are without joy or laughter – far from it! James is instead referring to the foolish laughter that often results from our descent into revelry and the enjoyment of our sin. This ought to bring us to repentance. When we indulge our sinfulness, this is when our laughter ought to become mourning. It is not folly to laugh or to enjoy life; it is folly to revel in sin. Consequently, James reminds us one final time to "humble [our]selves before the Lord, and He will exalt" us as a result.

4:11-12 As James has been on the overarching topic of controlling ourselves (our tongues, our impulses, etc.), here he continues by telling us to gain control over judgmentalism and slander. Quite often the local church is the central place to hear the hottest gossip on who's doing what with whom, and yet the church ought to be the exact opposite. We must be careful, James says, to avoid judging one another so that we do not ultimately judge something greater than ourselves. His statement in 4:11 can be confusing: "The one who speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law." It is entirely possible that those with less mature faith are speaking ill of those with more out of jealousy (sensible, given James' previous emphasis on jealousy, both in 3:16 and implied in 4:1-3). Consequently, James condemns this speech and reminds the believers that those who speak ill of those within whom God is clearly at work are actually speaking ill of God Himself and the good precepts which He has given to us.

We are reminded that God alone is the Judge and Ruler of all the world. Judging others who follow His paths ultimately passes judgment on God Himself – and that's not a good place to be! Here the emphasis of Christ on the Law rings true, where He shows that the most important laws are to "love the Lord your God" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37-39). To violate a law against our brother or sister is ultimately to commit sin against God Himself. So is

judgment upon our brothers and sisters in Christ ultimately judgment against God. Consequently, we must be careful not to pass judgment on others so as to avoid bringing judgment on ourselves! James therefore ends with the reminder, through a rhetorical question, that we are all tainted by sin – “But who are you to judge your neighbor?” Remember here Jesus’ teaching on the speck in your brother’s eye versus the plank in your own – although we are eventually called to remove the speck from the eye of our brother, we are first to make sure our own sin is dealt with. Many lack the introspection necessary to recognize their own shortcomings. It is often helpful to go to an unbiased third party to see what we have in our lives that causes us to stumble, as others see us differently than we see ourselves. In psychology, this is known as “third window” feedback, which comes from a model called the “JoHari Window.”

<p>Window 1:</p> <p>What I know about myself What others do not know of me</p>	<p>Window 2:</p> <p>What I know about myself What others know about me</p>
<p>Window 3:</p> <p>What I do not know of myself What others know about me</p>	<p>Window 4:</p> <p>What I do not know of myself What others do not know of me</p>

Window 3 feedback is that which we do not know about ourselves, but others do. A simple example would be having something on our faces that we cannot see, so someone points this out for us. Often our sin is either in the first window (known only to us, kept hidden from others) or the third window (something others can see, but we don’t see in ourselves). Sin is often best dealt with, however, when we place it in window 2: we know it ourselves and we let someone close to us know about it as well so that we can deal with it appropriately. That which is done in darkness will be brought to the light. It is in recognizing that there is a part of ourselves of which we are unaware that we can more gently deal with sin in ourselves and others. It is because of our frequent inability to see sin in ourselves that James reminds us of just how unworthy we are to judge our neighbors.

4:13-17 Here James puts much of life into perspective for his readers. We know that life is fleeting, and yet James reminds us that even tomorrow is not promised to us. What we have is today, and therefore we should make the most of it. James calls us “mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (4:14). We are to view our lives, according to 4:15, as gifts of God. It is by the will of God that our lives continue, and it is by His will that they end. James herein emphasizes the

sovereignty and supremacy of God, which we as Wesleyans tend to downplay a bit more in the interest of emphasizing free will. Yet it is clear from James and many, many other sources in Scripture that the world turns by the very will of God. It is in knowing this that James tells his readers to be more cautious in their words. Taking tomorrow for granted is still a part of James' effort to tackle the problems with human pride and boasting that he began earlier in the chapter.

Boasting in ourselves at any point, according to the overarching message of Scripture, proves a fruitless venture. It is when we boast in God, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, that we boast appropriately. Paul is in turn referencing Jeremiah 9: "Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.'" All other boasting is evil, says James.

4:17 summarizes all of what James has been saying up until this point in a succinct conclusion – knowing what is right and choosing to do otherwise is sin. This not only summarizes all of what James has been discussing in this chapter, but goes even farther to say that a basic definition of sin can be "knowing what is right and doing the opposite." This includes both sins that we actively commit (e.g. lying or theft) and those which are sins of omission. Jesus gives an illustration of what it means to commit a sin of omission in His parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Those who are faithful to God are commended by Jesus, but must ask, "When did we ever see you sick or in prison..." and so forth. Jesus' response is that what they did for the least, they did for Him. Contrariwise, for those who failed to visit the sick and imprisoned, who provided no food or drink to those in need, Jesus tells them that what they *did not* do for the least, they did not do for Him. In fact, it is their inaction that leads to their condemnation. What we fail to do can be every bit as problematic as what we do with evil in our hearts. The Second Vatican Council (in 1965) would affirm this, saying that "the Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation." We must likewise be diligent in the development of our piety.