

James 4 • Overcoming the Flesh

Introduction

So often we hear the phrase, “Christians are supposed to live **IN** the world, but not **OF** the world”. What does that really mean and how is that even possible? That’s precisely the topic that James tackles by first identifying our primary enemies, and then exhorting us to be aware of and repent of their three most damaging weapons of choice. When open quarrels and conflicts become apparent in any body of believers, be assured that what James speaks of is occurring both within the individual and the congregation at large. Things are no longer operating according to the Spirit, but the flesh.

¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ²You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious 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 with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: First of all, is it our physical bodies which are sinful?

A: It is the fallen nature of man due to the introduction of sin into the world that is the problem, not our physical bodies in and of themselves.

Q: Is the word “lust” limited to referring to only sensual passions?

A: It could also be translated “desire”. There are many desires at work within, some of which are obviously sensual passions, but not exclusively limited to them.

Point: Just as the world is human society apart from God, the flesh is human nature apart from God. It seeks only to satisfy itself.

Q: How does the invisible battle of lust and envy within us become visible?

A: In that we come to fight and quarrel openly with others. The internal battle is evident because of external conflicts.

Q: What is James suggesting is supposed to be done in the midst of such conflicts with the flesh?

A: The reference in v.2 is a reference to prayer.

Q: What is the amazing insight revealed in James’ assertion in v.3, “You ask and do not receive”?

A: The flesh can encourage someone to pray, albeit for all the wrong and selfish reasons!

Point: We have to resolve issues of the flesh if we’re going to successfully engage in spiritual things. It’s like Jesus taught, “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” (Matthew 5:23-24)

Application: Our first enemy is the flesh. How has the flesh attacked/is it attacking you? Do you see the root causes of lust, envy, and/or pride? What are the corrective steps you need to take?

⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”?

[Read v.4-5]

Q: Why does James call them “adulteresses”, the feminine form of “adulterers”?

A: The church is supposed to be the bride of Christ. Spiritual unfaithfulness is equated throughout all of Scripture as marital unfaithfulness.

*Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.
2 Corinthians 11:2-3*

Q: So why does friendship with the world have such a detrimental effect on our relationship with God?

A: The Old Testament example of idolatry – always termed “adultery” – robbed God of the people’s devotion. Likewise, such activities by New Testament believers grieves the Holy Spirit given to them, who jealously yearns for their love.

Point: *There are four dangerous steps which take a believer into a wrong relationship with the world:*

- *Friendship with the world. (James 4:4)*
- *Being stained by the world. (James 1:27)*
- *Love of the world. (1 John 2:15-17)*
- *Conformity to the world. (Romans 12:1-2)*

The result is that the compromising believer is judged with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:32)

Application: *Our second enemy is the world. What particular things of the world provide the strongest calling to you personally? If you had to give up every possession, every relationship, every activity, what immediately makes you nervous at the prospect of its loss? What are the corrective steps you need to take?*

⁶But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.”
⁷Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

[Read v.6-7]

Q: So what is the natural result for a Christian who lives for the flesh and the world?

A: They become proud.

Point: *This is at the root of all sin and Satan’s character himself. Pride is one of his main tools against us.*

Q: What does God desire to give us which Satan can’t? What often prevents Him from doing so?

A: God wants to give us “a greater grace”, but our personal pride often prevents it.

Point: *A proud Christian is someone who refuses to repent of sin and humble their self. They must first submit to God so the devil can be effectively resisted.*

Application: *Our third enemy is Satan. Do you have any issues of pride you can think of which Satan can exploit? Is there some sin which you’re reluctant to admit on your part? What are the corrective steps you need to take?*

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Summary of the First Part

A Christian's natural enemies are the flesh, the world, and Satan.

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked **according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.** Among them we too all formerly lived **in the lusts of our flesh**, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*

Ephesians 2:1-3

Self-examination is critical to determine if any of these enemies are defeating us. How would you evaluate yourself at this point?

[Read v.8-10]

Q: What is James warning against? Which sin is he calling to repentance?

A: Pride.

Q: What does it mean to “cleanse your hands” and “purify your hearts”? What is James saying should be done?

A: It's being completely rid of the pollution of sin by repenting of the sinful works of one's hands as well as ceasing to be “double-minded”, that is spiritually unfaithful and instead devoted to God alone. It's obedience both from one's heart and in one's behavior.

Q: Where does true humility come from? What personal recognition most motivates someone to humble themselves?

A: It comes when a person recognizes that they truly are “in the presence of the Lord” and that their behavior is having a personal effect on their Savior.

*Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,
1 Peter 5:6*

*“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”
Luke 14:11*

Application: Apparently the antidote to pride is being sober and serious, putting sin out of our lives. What do you need to do to heed James' warning against pride?

[Read v.11-12]

Q: What is James warning against? Which sin is he calling to repentance?

A: Criticism.

Q: James is speaking of what we might call “undue criticism” or “slander” or even “trash talking”. What is the correct biblical approach to evaluate others?

A: We're supposed to have Christian discernment, not reckless judgment of another's heart or motives.

⁸Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

¹¹Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

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But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world...They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1 John 1:1, 5-6

Point: *We are never to ignore out-and-out, provable sin or doctrinal error; but everything else is subjective and off limits.*

Q: *But even when we DO detect sin in others, what does Jesus establish as our first obligation before helping others conquer that sin?*

A: We must first judge and deal with our own sinfulness.

“Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

Matthew 7:3-5

Q: *Why does James go out of his way to state the obvious in v.12 that, “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge”?*

A: Because when we judge others without love and mercy, we are taking God’s place, making our own self into the lawgiver and judge. The only one who can do this is “the One who is able to save and destroy”.

Application: *Apparently the antidote to a critical spirit is being more concerned about your own obedience to God’s Word and ways than anyone else’s. What do you need to do to heed James’ warning against having a critical spirit?*

[Read v.13-17]

¹³Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Q: *What is James warning against? What sin is calling to repentance?*

A: Arrogant self-confidence.

Q: *How is this a kind of proof, or end result, is this of a life troubled by pride and criticism?*

A: They come to believe that by their own work, by their own force of personality, success has been achieved. There’s no room for allowance that their blessings have come from God instead of themselves. They come to believe they’re in control of their own destiny.

Q: *What is the biggest clue given that reveals the presence of sin in their attitude?*

A: It’s based on money. They are equating material success as being the same thing as spiritual success.

Point: *Ultimately pride deceives a person into believing that success is measured by the world’s standards, not God’s.*

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Q: How does v.17 summarize the whole of James' teaching in this chapter?

A: James points out that we can sin by neglect just as easily as deliberate action. These things are not limited to just what we **DO** ("sins of commission"), but what we **DON'T** do ("sins of omission").

Application: Apparently the antidote to arrogant self-confidence is knowing how to say, "If the Lord wills" as plans are made day-to-day. What do you need to do to heed James' warning against arrogant self-confidence?

Epilogue

James follows up establishing our three foremost enemies...

- *The flesh (v.1-3)*
- *The world (v.4-5)*
- *The devil (v.6-7)*

...with three exhortations to repent from the most damaging effects of these enemies...

- *Pride (v.8-10)*
- *Criticism (v.11-12)*
- *Arrogant self-confidence (v.13-17)*

This is not just a lesson exclusively for us as individuals, but together as His church. These enemies bring division to destroy Christ's intention of a single, unified body of believers.

*"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, **that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them**, even as You have loved Me.*

John 17:22-23

The whole point of the spiritual gifts is to defeat these goals of our enemies in order to establish us united in His Word.

*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; **until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are **no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine**, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;*

Ephesians 4:11-14