

WARNINGS AGAINST WORLDLINESS AND STRIFE

James 4:1-10

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It seems that wars have always been with us. In the six thousand or so years of recorded history, mankind has had almost 15,000 wars—an average of about 2.5 a year. Of an estimated 185 generations of men, only 10 have not seen war. There have been major wars—such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Israel and the Palestine that has lingered for ages and presently the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

A preacher once said, “*the number one problem we have in the church is that we don’t know how to get along with each other*”. This statement struck me because the statement is true in the past, and it is still true today. Many divisions exist within our fellowship in the past it is still happening today, between congregations, ministers, leaders, and the like. I remembered hearing of vibrant, growing churches “*shooting themselves in the foot*” with some needless disagreement, controversy, or split. But we will see from our text, **James 4:1-10**, that such is only a symptom of the problem and not the problem.

*Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ²You 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. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴Adulterers 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. **James 4:1-4***

James says that “*wars and fightings*” come from within. They do not come from disputed border boundaries. They do not come from the necessity to help the economy. They do not come from the need to improve the human race. They come from within—from the “*pleasures that war in your members.*”

At the conclusion of the previous chapter, James discussed *peace*, and he noted that that, too, has its origins from within. In verse 17 he said, “*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable.*” In verse 18, he added, “*And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for them that make peace.*” Peace comes from those who have the wisdom from above, who are peace-loving and peace-making. But war and fighting come from those without that wisdom, who are motivated by lusts or wrong desires. It may be lust for power, lust for pleasure, lust for prestige, lust for position, lust for possessions.

Once a father was trying to occupy his young son. In a magazine he found a picture of a globe of the world and tore it into several pieces to make a homemade jigsaw puzzle. He gave it to this son with the instruction to piece the picture back together. Because of his

son's lack of familiarity with the globe, he thought this would keep him occupied for some time. To his surprise the son was soon finished. "How did you do it so quickly?" asked the father. "It was easy," replied the boy. "I found out that there was a picture of a man on the back and I put together the man. When the man came out all right, the world came out all right." If we could but correct the hearts of men, we could eliminate war from the world!

The full question at the start of the chapter reads, "Where do wars and fights come from among you? His great concern is for fighting among members of the body of Christ. We may be hesitant to admit it but through the years there have been "wars" in the context of the church—often battles for the truth, but sometimes battles with less worthy motivations. In the days of the apostles there were battles over keeping the Law of Moses and over the nature of Christ.

Wars between nations are tragic, but nothing is more tragic than a religious "civil war" with brother arrayed against brother. But again, if you listened carefully to the reading of the first four verses of chapter 4, you also noted that James' emphasis is not really on war, but on the pleasures or lusts that produce "wars and fightings. His focus is on worldliness.

1. THE CURSE OF WORLDLINESS (James 4:1, 4)

I can summarize the curse of worldliness by saying, "Worldliness hurts—hurts everybody and everything." One author noted that three different wars are discussed in this text. First, there is war with God. This is suggested by verse 4: "Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God." You are either in God's army or Satan's army. If you are not fighting the devil, you are fighting God.

Then there is war with others (especially those in the church) as expressed in verse 1: "Whence come wars and whence come fightings among you?" And finally, there is the most crucial war of all—the war within the individual himself. As verse 1 closes, it speaks of the "pleasures that war in your members." The "members" spoken of here are the parts of the physical body. James is here speaking of the battle that takes place within the individual—the same battle Paul speaks of in **Romans 7:23ff**. These three categories—God, the church, and self—summarize how worldliness hurts.

First, worldliness hurts God and His cause. "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?" (v. 4). Nothing hurts the cause of God like those who are supposed to be His children living no differently from those in the world.

Second, worldliness hurts the church. Someone has said, "It is a beautiful sight to see a boat in the water; it is a saddening sight to see the water in the boat. Even so, it is an inspiring sight to see the church in the world; it is a saddening sight to see the world in the church!" Jesus said that His followers are to be "in the world" (**John 17:11**), but not "of the world" (**John 17:14**). Many people become dissatisfied with what the world has to offer, so they come to the church to see what the church has to offer—but far too often all they find is more of the world!

Third, worldliness hurts the individual himself. Persisted in, it will damn his soul! But perhaps we should pause here to ask, what is this "worldliness" that causes "wars and fighting," that hurts God, the church, and the individual?

2. THE CAUSE OF WORLDLINESS (*James 4:1-5*)

The first four or five verses of our text give us the cause of worldliness. Read again verses 1 through 4, notice the emphasis on *self*. Fourteen times in four verses, the second person pronoun “*ye*” or “*your*” is used in the KJV while in NKJV, “*you*” or “*your*” is used thirteen times. All that is necessary to become a worldly person is to elevate *self*.

First, *want things for SELF* (vv. 1, 2a).

In verse 1, James speaks of “*your pleasures that war in your members.*” In verse 2, he says, “*you lust*” and “*covet.*” In the original language, each of the words translated “*pleasures,*” “*lust,*” or “*covet*” is a different word. The first word (v. 1) is the word from which we get “*hedonism,*” living for pleasure. The second word (v. 2) is the usual word for “*desire.*” Here it refers to *unlawful* desires. If I desire my own wife, that is not lust. If I desire someone else’s wife, that is lust. The third word (v. 2) is the word for being “*jealous*” or “*envious*”—I am jealous of another and want what he has.

The picture is of a totally selfish person who is not concerned about others or God; he wants what *he* wants, to gratify his every wish. “*I don’t want much,*” says the imperialist, “*just the land that adjoins mine.*” “*I don’t want much,*” says the worldly-minded person; “*just give me my own way and we’ll get along fine.*”

Second, *elevate SELF above God* (v. 2).

And how does the worldly-minded person attempt to satisfy those desires? By any means at his disposal. We have already noted that these lusts or pleasures result in “*wars and fighting,*” according to verse 1. Again verse 2 says, “*you kill*” and “*you fight and war.*” In this context these words are used figuratively for the infighting that takes place when someone wants his own way and will cut down anyone who stands in the way. John said, “*Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer*” (**1 John 3:15**).

Third, *think only of SELF in your prayers* (v. 3).

In verse 3, James seems to anticipate an objection. He has just said, “*You have not, because you ask not.*” One can then imagine someone responding, “*But I did ask. I asked God to give me that raise. I asked God to give me that promotion. I asked God to give me a bigger house . . . a lakeside cottage . . . a boat. So don’t tell me I didn’t ask!*” James’ response is that when you *do* ask, you ask with the wrong motives: “*You ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that you may spend it in your pleasures*” (v. 3). It has been well said that the purpose of prayer is not so much to get our will done in heaven as it is to get God’s will done on earth.

Unfortunately, some think of God as an indulgent old grandfather whose only purpose is to satisfy their every whim! Their prayers are totally self-centred—not concerned with others, not concerned with the will and work of God—but concerned with what they desire: “*You ask amiss [or wrongly], that ye may spend it [or waste it] in your pleasures.*”

Fourth, allow SELF to be deceived by the world (v. 4).

James gets to the heart of the problem in verse 4: *“Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.”* Adultery, an illicit sexual relationship, is severely condemned throughout the Bible. Adulterers shall not inherit the kingdom of God (**1 Corinthians 6:10**).

Physical adultery is not what James is primarily concerned about. The KJV has *“ye adulterers and adulteresses,”* but the original text has only *“adulteresses.”* Why does it have only *“adulteresses”*? Is it because only James’ female readers are guilty? No, rather because James is using the word *adulteresses* in a figurative sense. He is writing to members of *the church* and the church is pictured as *the bride of Christ*.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: *“I have espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ”* (**2 Corinthians 11:2; see also Romans 7:1ff.; cf. Ephesians 5:31, 32**). James is saying that the church, Christ’s bride, has been unfaithful to Christ, has been guilty of *spiritual adultery*. The margin of the ASV has this note: *“That is, who break your marriage vow to God!”*

But in what way were James’ readers *“unfaithful”*? By directing their affections to this world instead of to God. Let us continue in verse 4: *“Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world maketh himself an enemy of God.”* James places the world on one side and God on the other. If you love the world, he says, you hate God. Which implies, on the other hand, if you love God, you will hate the world. The two are diametrically opposed. You cannot love them both. Satan does not mind a divided loyalty, but God does! *“Ye cannot serve God and mammon”* (**Matthew 6:24**).

A married man works in an office in which there is an attractive woman. They visit; they talk. One day they go to lunch together. He finds her easy to talk to; they can talk without all the responsibilities of married life intruding. They have other lunches together. On a pretty day maybe, they take part of the lunch hour to walk through the park. On another day he perhaps goes shopping with her. When word reaches his wife, she confronts him with the situation, and he acts offended! *“Why we’re just friends—just good friends!”* he protests—and maybe adds, *“What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?”*

If that man is not deliberately unfaithful, he is terribly naive! No, I am not saying that the wife at this point has “grounds” for a scriptural divorce (**Matthew 19:1–9**), but I am saying that the man is *wrong* and that at some point he passed casual friendship and is flirting with an illicit friendship that can only lead to disaster. He is sinning against his wife and against God!

But is not the same thing true with regards to this world? How many want to flirt with worldliness? How many want to be friendly with the world, not planning to cross over the line! So teenage Christians go to the prom—not to dance but *“just to watch.”* So, members of the church of all ages watch R-rated movies, read suggestive books, listen to licentious music. *“But it doesn’t really affect me,”* they say. Thus, some continue to run

around with their old boozing, foul-mouthed, dirty-minded crowd. “They won’t influence me” is the protest. “*What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?*”

Trying to be friendly with the world without being harmed by the world is like a mouse being friendly to a mousetrap, a deer being friendly to a hunter, a young lady trying to be “just friendly” with a man trying to seduce her? “*Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?*” says James.

3. THE CURE FOR WORLDLINESS (*James 4:5–10*)

⁵Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”? ⁶But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble...”

Man desires selfishly, but God’s Spirit yearns for us for our good. “*But he [God’s Spirit] giveth more grace. Wherefore He [the Holy Spirit] saith, . . .*” (KJV). God “*is a jealous God*” (**Exodus 20:5**), who desires and demands faithfulness on the part of His spiritual bride! As Paul told the Corinthians: “*For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ*” (**2 Corinthians 11:2**).

The cure for worldliness is in our depending on, and exaltation of *God*:

First, accept the grace of GOD (v. 6).

Frankly, if we had only our own strength on which to rely, the situation would be hopeless. But we have the grace of God, His unmerited favour, to help us meet the challenge. Verse 6 begins:

“But he [God]8 giveth more grace.” It was through grace that we were saved initially (**Ephesians 2:8**). But the need for God’s grace did not cease once we were Christians. Now we need God’s grace to *stay* saved. So God gives “*more grace.*” Writing to those already Christians, the Hebrew writer said, “*Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need*” (**Hebrews 4:16**).

As proof that God will give us needed grace, in the last part of verse 6, James quotes from **Proverbs 3:34**: “*God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*” However this passage not only teaches that God gives grace, it also teaches that we must qualify for that grace. God resists the proud, the self-sufficient, but gives His grace to the humble, the ones who recognize their needs and come to rely on God. If we would take advantage of the cure for worldliness, we must first humble ourselves so we can accept God’s grace.

Second, be obedient to GOD (v. 7).

The result of this humility will be submission to God. Verse 7 begins, “*Be subject therefore to God.*” The word *subject* comes from a military term that means “*to stand in rank,*” to recognize one’s rank and act accordingly. In other words, if you are a buck private, don’t try to act like a general! *God* is our spiritual Commander-

in-Chief; let us submit to Him, obey Him without question!

An important part of this submission is to decide whose side we are on. Verse 4 implied that we have to decide between God and the world. But the one who is using the world to lure us away from God is the devil. So now James not only says that you must *“be subject therefore to God,”* he also says, *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* The word *resist* is not a passive word. It refers to *active* opposition. It is another military term that literally means *“to set in battle array against.”*

The picture is of the Christian soldier in his place in the army of God, fighting with all his might against the forces of evil. Unfortunately, too many members of the church have never decided whose side they are on and are opposing nothing. If you do actively oppose the devil, *“he will flee from you”* (last of v. 7). Our enemy is formidable, but not irresistible.

Third, become more like GOD (v. 8).

We have noticed several military terms that are used in our text. We should hasten to say, however, that we are not suggesting there should be the distance between ourselves and God that would normally exist between a private and a five-star general. Rather there is to be a closeness between ourselves and God. James suggests this as he begins verse 8: *“Draw nigh [or near] to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”*

What a promise! God as our close personal companion! But this is conditional upon our first *“drawing nigh”* to God. How can we draw nigh (or near) to God? A number of things could be mentioned. We need to follow the New Testament with its better hope (**Hebrews 7:19**). When we fall short, we need to repent (**Psalms 34:18**). We need to come to God in prayer (**Hebrews 4:16**). Every possible suggestion, however, can be summed up by saying that *we need to become more like God.*

To do this a great many changes have to come into most of our lives. This change is expressed like this in the last part of verse 8: *“Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye doubleminded.”*

Fourth, humble oneself before GOD (vv. 9, 10).

Tied so closely with cleansing the hands and purifying the heart is the matter of penitence. It is with this that James closes his discussion of how to cure worldliness: *“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall exalt you”* (4:9, 10).

These are sad words. Is James against one being happy? No, for in the next chapter he says, *“Is any cheerful? let him sing praise”* (5:13). The wise man said, *“A cheerful heart is a good medicine”* (**Proverbs 17:22**). What then is James saying? He is making the same point Ecclesiastes 3:4 makes: There is *“a time to weep, and a time to laugh.”* **2 Corinthians 7:10.**

Conclusion

We started this lesson by considering James' opening question: "*Where do [a]wars and fights come from among you?*" We have spent most of our time considering the curse, cause, and cure of worldliness. We noted that the primary cause of worldliness is the elevation of *self*—"I want what I want when I want it." Then we noted that the cure for worldliness is the elevation of *God*—serving Him, obeying Him, putting Him first. No one should think, however, that we totally abandoned the topic of "*wars and fightings.*" *It is almost impossible to pick a fight with someone who has died to self and who lives only for God.* It is hard to fuss with one who turns the other cheek (**Matthew 5:39**), who goes the second mile (**Matthew 5:41**), who is willing to suffer loss rather than hurt the cause of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:7), and who is not overly concerned with his own "*rights*" (**1 Corinthians 8–10**).

References

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