

James 4

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] James 4, at the beginning, James, inspired by the Spirit, writes, What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives. That you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God?

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely, but he gives us more grace?

That is why Scripture says God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves then to God.

[1 : 05] Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.

Amen. And we'll turn back to that section of God's Word in just a few moments. Chapter 4 and those first 10 verses.

I want us to imagine this evening James as cardiologist. James as spiritual heart doctor.

As he comes to examine this church. Comes to discover and diagnose the problem that's going on in this church. And then point to the gospel as the cure.

[2 : 08] And as we do that, hopefully we'll be examining ourselves as well. Letting the Word of God examine our own hearts. So let's begin in the first three verses there.

We can call this the initial examination. And as James writes of this church, we immediately see there are some presenting symptoms that he can recognize.

Dr. James has already been examining the church. He's not actually a doctor, but he is for the purposes of this evening. And he's been saying often the problem is the pool as Christians between love for God and love for the world.

Do we receive the values and the wisdom of God? Or do we take in the values and wisdom of our culture? And as we see him examining this church that he's writing to still further, we see this presenting problem right at the beginning of verse 1.

There's fights and quarrels. In verse 2, we see the extent of their anger and the extent of their coveting, their quarreling and fighting.

[3 : 32] It's not clear why. We can take some guesses from the contents of the letter. Perhaps they are fighting for influence and position in the church.

Perhaps they are fighting for wealth or to gain the favor of those who are wealthy. Perhaps they are responding to words that have been said to them.

So in bitterness, they are fighting and quarreling to get even. Perhaps they're simply fighting to be heard. We're not sure, but we can know for certain that this is a serious problem in a church.

When Christians are fighting together, this is not good. But James, our heart doctor, is quick to point out these are fruits and not roots.

This is symptoms, not the deep underlying cause. And so he then moves from this presenting problem of fights and quarrels to identify the deeper heart problem that's going on.

[4 : 37] Second part of verse 1, don't these fights and quarrels come from your desires that battle within you? So there is that desire to love God, but there is this other desire to love and value and to

gain status for self.

And it's leading them towards what Augustine called disordered loves, where instead of putting God first, they are putting themselves first.

And that's having an impact on their relationships within the church. So we see that in verse 1, there's these desires battling within them. And then at the end of verse 3, we see that they are looking to pursue selfish pleasure.

Now, there is nothing wrong with desire and there is nothing wrong with pleasure. But as Christians, we must be careful that we are channeling that in the right direction.

That we are to take pleasure in the things of God, that our deepest desire is to be for God and his glory, for Jesus as our Savior.

[5 : 49] But what's happening here is the same self-promotion, the same selfish ambition that James spoke about in chapter 3.

They are adopting the wisdom of the world, which in their day was saying, well, you need to get ahead. You know, we need to look after number one. That message that we still hear loud and clear today.

And what we see is as James probes under the surface, he begins to also identify how this is impacting their relationship. So we've seen the problem relating to other people.

If somebody is getting ahead of me, therefore I will fight and quarrel to try and get on top. But we also see James talking about the problems that they are having in relating to God.

This battle, this desire that lies inside them and then being pulled in the wrong direction is having an impact on their prayer life. So at the end of verse 2, he will say to them, you do not have because you do not ask God.

[6 : 57] Perhaps they have forgotten the Christian life is one of dependence on God. And instead they're believing their own hype, so I don't need to pray, perhaps. We also see in verse 3 that when they do ask, they don't get.

Why is that? When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. So they want God to give them things to fuel their own personal pleasure.

So they have forgotten that God is good and that he can have no part in their evil, unhelpful, misguided pleasure plan.

Now it's important for us to recognize the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said, Ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find by knocking the door. We will be open to you. And we remember immediately after that, Jesus says, God is a generous father, way more generous than any earthly father. He delights to give good gifts. So we need to recognize that. James is not putting a dampener on the spirit to pray and to ask. Rather, he is saying, when we pray, our motive matters.

[8 : 17] God will answer prayers that are aiming for his glory, absolutely, that are concerned with doing his will in the world. God delights to answer and to give so that we might be a blessing to others, but he will not hear those selfish prayers that are all about personal desire and pleasure.

So James is beginning to identify the underlying problem. Their heart is aiming for love of self rather than love of God.

And because of that, and this is true for any of us, when we place ourselves at the center of our life and we think that we are the most important, inevitably, it will lead us to a mistreatment of other people, a lack of love for others, and a lack of love for God.

And so James wants to show that to the church very clearly. We all aim for pleasure and happiness that motivates our lives, absolutely.

The question we need to ask ourselves is deep down in our heart, do I think that pleasure and happiness is found in living for myself, or do I believe it's found in living for God?

[9 : 51] Is my joy found in pursuing my pleasure or delighting in the pleasures of God? He goes on with his diagnosis.

In verses four and five, we see the problem being exposed to the church, and it's this. It's that there are at least some who have a divided heart.

Now, there's a serious problem we see all through the Bible, and it comes with many names, and James uses a couple or three, actually, in this short section.

The first, at the beginning of verse four, is that language of spiritual adultery. You adulterous people.

So again, we think about the imagery that God uses in the Bible, and one of those images is of God as husband, entering into a covenant of marriage with his people.

[10:53] And again, Jesus in the New Testament picks up on that. He is the bridegroom, and he has come to win his bride. He has come to die to secure a bride for himself as his father's gift to him.

And so there is this covenant language. There is this marriage language within the Bible. In verse five, there's also the language that it calls to mind jealousy.

God is a God who is jealous for his people's heart and love. Like any good husband, jealous for his wife's affection.

But what we are seeing here in the church that James is writing to is that just like Old Testament Israel, here is a community of God's people that are trying, as it were, to have a foot in both camps. So in the Old Testament, it looked like, well, on the Sabbath, we'll go to the temple and we'll bring our sacrifices when we're supposed to, and we'll do that worship, but also we will set up idols.

[12:00] And if we imagine the gods of the nations are giving prosperity and giving security, then we'll chase after those gods too. We'll hedge our bets rather than showing covenant faithfulness.

In the New Testament, Jesus spoke against this kind of attitude when he said that you cannot serve both God and money. Money, that idol that people imagine gives security and status that actually leads to a divided heart among the people of God.

And so James is bringing to the attention of this church the horror that while God has been absolutely faithful to them, gracious to them, having made promises to them, this church has been unfaithful, like a wife unfaithful to a husband.

So spiritual adultery is one of the ways of talking about this divided heart. But there's also the idea in verse four as well of friendship with the world.

He says that a couple of times. Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

[13:21] Now James is not saying here it is wrong to have friends who aren't Christians. That's not what he's talking about here, but he is saying it is wrong for a Christian to take on the values of the world.

In particular, what he's been addressing in the last sections of the letter is it's wrong to take on pride and selfish ambition. Because then we are living for self rather than living for God.

He's writing New Testament wisdom, and so he's presenting that stark contrast. There are two ways for us to live. We are either choosing friendship with God or we are choosing to become enemies of God in the way that we are treating him.

And so here is James delivering a diagnosis to the church on the health of their heart. Now for us, we know physically, when we think about the health of our own hearts, there's many factors that contribute to that, diet, exercise, genetics, and so on.

Spiritually, what are the factors that determine whether our hearts are healthy or not? Well, we need to think about who or what do I love most?

[14:46] Truly. You know, we may acknowledge that we love God, but when it comes to it, is that how our lives go?

What gives me a sense of value? Feeling like I am somebody. Again, like this church, we can acknowledge, well, it's knowing I'm a child of God, but is that really what gives us value?

Or are we looking to our job or to our family or to our financial security to give us that? What drives us? What excites us? What gives us true hope?

Is Christ your life? Is Christ my life? Or is it something else? James' warning about the danger of having a divided heart.

But then, just as any good doctor having given a diagnosis, he then moves on to show there is a cure.

[15:57] So maybe today we are sitting, being examined, and when we see this problem is real, we recognize that temptation within ourselves towards a divided heart, and so maybe we're asking, well, what's the treatment plan?

Is there hope? I recognize that so often I'm pulled in a different direction other than living for the glory of God. What should I do? Let's hear James.

It focuses largely on God's grace and us having humble hearts. And see there in verse six, but he gives us more grace.

That is why scripture says, and he quotes from Proverbs 3, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Our hope begins not with ourselves, but with God's mercy and kindness towards us. The grace of God says that you and I can change. If this diagnosis is bang on the money and we have this divided heart, there is grace, there is more grace for us.

[17:11] So if we're here today and we're not a Christian thinking about the language of the Bible, we find ourselves needing a heart transplant, and that's God's grace in offering that.

That's the promise of the Old Testament, thinking about the new covenant. What would it be like? Well, it would look like God replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh, one that is alive to God, one that beats with love for Father, Son, and Spirit, one that by faith responds to God as the Spirit works in us.

But as Christians also, we need God's grace to change. We don't fight the battle for desires, or we shouldn't fight those battle against our desires, that battle that rages in our heart on our own and in our own strength.

No, we need to rely on God's grace, that God would keep showing us the glory of Jesus, that he would show us how far superior the glory of Jesus is compared to those things that our hearts so often run to.

And what we see in the next verses is that this grace that God supplies also leads the people of God towards action.

[18:37] There's lots of active words in verses 7 to 10, but remember that it's as we are led and as we are empowered by God that these lifestyle changes take place.

first in verse 7, as God gives us grace, we submit ourselves to God.

We need with God's help to submit our desires, to be willing to pray like Jesus, not my will, but yours be done.

We need to be willing to leave self-promoting plans behind because we recognize how much better it is to live for God's glory and greatness and not our own.

We need to submit in terms of having him as our master, as our king, and as a consequence of that, as we submit ourselves to God in verse 7, we will also need to resist the devil, to stop believing his lies, to determine, to not believe the lie of me first, to fight against that pride that wells up in us, to fight against those evil desires that want to promote ourselves rather than honoring Jesus.

[20:11] And when we think about what's happening in this church where they're fighting and quarreling, one practical implication of this is that we should be so busy fighting sin in our own hearts and lives that we get no time to fight with one another.

So we resist the devil. And then in verse 8, there is this call to return to God. And again, that's God's grace that draws us.

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Again, pictured so wonderfully by Jesus as he told the parable of the prodigal son, that son returning with his sense of shame and disgrace and having dishonored his father and sinned against his father and against God.

But as he gets close to home, the father comes running. The father surrounds him with love and clothes him with honor and throws a feast for him.

And the message of the Bible is that when we return to God, we discover a God who offers a loving, welcoming embrace when we choose to leave the old behind.

[21:27] And when we choose to leave behind selfish pleasures for the better way of living to enjoy God, we find a God who welcomes.

We also need to be involved in repenting of sin. And we see that in verse 8 and verse 9.

We see there is in repentance a change of behavior. Wash your hands, you sinners. There are external changes that need to take place.

A part of repentance, that turning away from sin and turning towards God means turning towards the ways of God. So again, as we've looked through James' letter, stop fighting with one another. Stop being jealous of each other. Stop those self-promoting patterns of behavior. Stop showing favoritism. Stop lacking mercy. So there's external change that needs to happen as we repent, as God shows us our wrong words and actions.

[22:41] But there's also an internal change. And James shows us that in verse 8. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. There's another way of speaking about a divided heart, a double-minded person.

There needs to be this deep internal change. So instead of wondering, well, shall I live for God or shall I live for money or popularity or power? Repentance looks like loyalty to God.

Repentance looks like covenant faithfulness. Repentance looks like faithfulness in a marriage, to pick up on the earlier language.

It's dealing with the divided heart that we have. There's a mood to that in verse 9.

There's a sorrow over sin. Not because we've been found out, but because we know that we have hurt the one who loves us most.

[23 : 47] Sorrow because of our rebellion against our Redeemer, our Father. So there is repentance.

And then in verse 10, returning back to the language of verse 6, there is humility. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up.

Rather than seeking to exalt ourselves, we want God to give us honour and to give us glory through being His, being one of His.

So we've been told God gives grace to the humble, therefore we need humble hearts. If we are to deal with the problem that comes of a divided heart, we need humility that runs to God for fresh supplies of grace.

we need a humility that will weep over our sin and that will also sing for joy because of our salvation. So James has very clearly directed the church to consider what's wrong in their behaviour, but that's just a symptom of what's wrong in their hearts and he's shown them the way to respond.

[25 : 15] How will we respond today? How will we respond this week? Perhaps it would do us good to take some time this week to read slowly and prayerfully this section.

Again, to think, how am I tempted towards a divided heart? Where do I struggle to be faithful to God? Where do I not want to be faithful to God? How is that revealing itself in a lack of love?

A lack of love towards other people, perhaps in my family or my circle of friends or within my church. How is it showing it in a lack of love towards God? Do we detect that our worship is going through the motions, that we have no real desire to read the Bible and to pray?

And as we allow God by his word and by his spirit to examine our hearts, remember to take the gospel remedy.

First of all, to consider the perfect life of Christ for you. We struggle to submit, but Jesus perfectly submitted to the will of his Father, even to the extent of going to the cross for us.

[26 : 31] We struggle with pride that Jesus was the humble servant. We are guilty of friendship with the world, but Jesus always lived to enjoy friendship with his Father.

And so Jesus is perfect where we have failed to be, and then Jesus died on the cross for you and for me, for our spiritual adultery, for our misplaced love, so that by faith that we might be washed clean and welcomed by the Father.

And then led by the Spirit, take this daily medicine, be submitting to God, be resisting the devil, return and keep returning to him, repent and keep repenting of sin, that we might not have a divided heart, but we might have a heart that loves and longs for our Father and our Savior and the Holy Spirit in us.

Let's pray. Let's pray.