

James 4

Introduction:

1. You were warned in chapter 1 against being a hearer and not a doer of God's word. Then obey this chapter!
2. Chapter 3 just ended with six verses contrasting devilish wisdom and godly wisdom: keeping this comparison in mind will shed light on the covetous and envious fighting in the first part of this chapter.
3. The Spirit further attacked the cursing, bitter, envying, and striving spirit that had been introduced (3:9,14).
4. Godly men are peacemakers with a very different spirit (3:17-18), but these Jews were known for fighting.
5. James identified his audience as beloved and born again Jewish brethren scattered through the world (1:1,18-19; 2:1-2,15-16; 3:1,9; 5:7), so we take the harsh language of this chapter figuratively; we do not look into history to find literal wars, fighting, and killing between unsaved Jewish factions or rebellions against Rome.
6. We understand this chapter to warn against the hateful and murderous spirit of envy and strife described of churches like Corinth and Galatia (I Cor 1:11; 3:1-4; 6:1-8; 11:18; II Cor 12:20; Galatians 5:15,19-21,26).
7. The Lord condemned unjustified anger or name-calling as breaking the Sixth Commandment (Matt 5:21-26).
8. There are other warnings throughout the New Testament against an envious and violent spirit (Phil 1:15; 2:14; I Tim 6:4; Titus 3:2-3; I Pet 2:1).
9. The exaltation and exhortations regarding love are the single most emphasized point in the New Testament.
10. James elaborated in this chapter on the origin, seriousness, and cure for envy and strife among Christians.

The Outline of James 4

- 1 A warning about strife (4:1-12).
- 2 A warning about plans (4:13-17).

Meditative Readings

Ezekiel 16:1-63

Exodus 34:10-17

Isaiah 46:5-11

Ruth 2:1-23

Matthew 6:19-34

Acts 16:6-15

Hosea 1:1-11

II Samuel 10:6-14

II Samuel 15:31-37

Matthew 5:21-26

Numbers 11:24-30

1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

- A. Returning to his condemnation of cursing and devilish wisdom 3:9-18, James identified their origin.
- B. Believing church members may have *wars and fightings* occur among them in churches of Christ.
 1. We do not reject such things happening among saints, thus forcing us to interpret these verses as describing unregenerate or reprobate Jews in literal wars and fights with Rome or Gentiles.
 2. James identified his audience earlier (1:1,18; 2:1; 3:1), and there is no change here (4:1,11; 5:7); these are brethren in the Lord, who have been born again and follow the religion of Jesus Christ.
 3. Language similar to *wars and fightings* is used in the New Testament for church members i.e. brawlings (I Tim 3:3; Tit 3:2), striking (I Tim 3:3; Tit 1:7), swellings and tumults (II Cor 12:20), divisions (I Cor 1:10; 3:3), contentions (I Cor 1:11), disputations (Mark 9:33-34; Acts 15:7,39; Rom 14:1), provoking (Gal 5:26), clamour (Eph 4:31), evil (I Thess 5:15), hatred (Tit 3:3), malice (I Cor 5:8; Col 3:8; I Pet 2:1), wrath (Col 3:8; I Tim 2:8), and strife (I Cor 3:3), etc.
 4. Women can be brawlers and contentious – pity their poor husbands (Prov 19:13; 21:9; 25:24).
 5. We should soberly consider every relationship and the potential for fighting or strife to be there.

- C. The *lusts that war in our members* are the cause of such wicked spirits and actions among Christians.
1. James had explained to his readers that our sins begin with the lusts in our own hearts (1:13-16).
 2. These *members* are features of our wicked old man (Romans 7:5,23; Gal 5:19-21; Col 3:5-11).
 3. These sinful propensities in the depraved and profane part of our being *war* against our souls to take us captive under sin (Rom 7:23; I Peter 2:11).
 4. The only reason Christians fight and war in churches is due to the sinful lusts of their old man.

2 *Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.*

- A. The *lust* of covetousness creates painful discontent for craving things you cannot and will not have.
1. The desire for others' things eats the soul (Job 5:2; Pr 13:4; 14:30; 21:25; 27:4; Ec 5:10; 10:15).
 2. This debilitating sin craves things that it can never rightly have (II Sam 13:1-2; I Kings 21:1-4).
 3. We should not divide this lust for things from the envy in context – lusting for things of others!
 4. Covetousness and discontentment will never let you rest, for it tortures the heart day and night.
- B. The lust of covetousness will *kill* others by envy and hateful thoughts and actions related to murder.
1. We do not understand kill here to be any more literal than bite, devour, brawl, and other verbs that are used figuratively for strife in other places (Gal 5:15; Titus 3:2). See explanation of 4:1.
 2. We do not understand kill here to be any more literal than the adultery two verses ahead (4:4).
 3. We understand it as the murderous spirit of malicious envy and rage at the advantages of others.
 4. The Lord condemned unjustified anger or resentment of others as murder (Matthew 5:21-26).
 5. Though the persons killed and desired to have, they did not obtain, as literal murder would allow.
 6. Consider the envious strife between Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brethren, David and Uriah, Ahab and Naboth, and so forth – it will kill!
 7. But for all these wicked thoughts and actions toward others, you still cannot get what you desire.
 8. We will see shortly that adultery is the word used to describe friendship with the world (4:4).
- C. In spite of your *fighting and warring*, you do not obtain what you need or want, because you *ask not*.
1. The terms for strife here are no different than what was already written in the first two verses.
 2. Instead of carnal, evil, and worldly means of getting things, Christians should ask their Father!
 3. Asking without faith will not work (1:6-7), neither asking while fighting (Ps 66:18; I Tim 2:8).
 4. As with wisdom, asking is the key, for He is a good Father (1:5; Luke 11:5-13; John 16:24).

3 *Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.*

- A. When you ask in prayer for something, you ask incorrectly by being motivated even partially by lust.
- B. God did not promise according to your will, but according to His (Prov 15:8; 21:27; I John 5:14-15).
- C. There is no way in the world you can be asking correctly, if you are bitter or striving with anyone.
- D. If you protect these sins or any sin, God will not hear you (Ps 66:18; Pr 1:20-31; Is 59:1-2; Mic 3:4).
- E. James continued to identify these believing Jews throughout the world as very carnal Christians.

4 *Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.*

- A. The *adulterers and adulteresses* here are guilty of spiritual adultery, not wholesale wife swapping.
1. The sin here is clearly friendship with the world, not widespread violation of the marriage bed.
 2. The subject before and after this verse is envy and lust for the things of others – carnal living!
 3. God has often used the imagery and power of adultery to describe His children being enamored with the things of the world and its religions (Exodus 34:10-17; Rev 2:20; 17:1-6; etc., etc.).
- B. *Friendship of the world* makes God your enemy by minding earthly things above heavenly things.
1. What is a friend of the world? It is a person enjoying the world's thinking, fashions, activities, or priorities over the commandments and priorities of the living God declared plainly in the Bible.
 2. Men know the feelings, if their wives were affectionately and personally befriending other men.
 3. Make the analogy accurate and complete of a wife flirting with and loving her husband's enemy!
 4. God is furiously jealous when you befriend the world: He demands all your love (Deut 6:4-5).
 5. If you even flirt with the world's thinking, fashions, activities, or priorities, He burns in jealousy!
 6. Paul charged those minding earthly things as belly-worshipping enemies of Christ (Phil 3:18-19).
 7. True grace teaches self-denial against conforming to the world (Romans 12:1-2; Titus 2:11-15).
 8. Jesus Christ made it clear in a context of things – you cannot love God and them (Matthew 6:24).
 9. If you love the things of this world, which are based in lusts, you cannot love God (I Jn 2:15-17).
 10. It is easy to tell ... How often do you read your Bible? How often do you pray? What music do you listen to? What television do you watch? What do you wear? Who are your friends?

5 *Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?*

- A. This is a rhetorical question assuming a negative answer – your sinful spirit indeed lusts and envies.
- B. Where does the scripture say this? It does not say it specifically in any one place, but it teaches the point generally in many places (Genesis 6:5; 8:21; Job 5:2; Psalm 37:1; Prov 14:30; 23:17; 27:4; Eccl 4:4; Romans 1:29; Titus 3:3).
- C. The spirit considered here is the spirit of man, the old man of the flesh that is slave to lust and envy.
- D. It is envy that causes strife, and our wicked spirits love to lust and envy (Jas 3:14; I Cor 3:3; Tit 3:3).
- E. The scripture does not condemn and warn in vain – man has a real problem with envy and lust.

6 *But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.*

- A. God *gives grace* sufficient to defeat the evil lusts of the old man to covet, despise, envy, and fight.
1. The scripture's condemnation of our envious spirits is not hopeless (4:5), for there is grace.
 2. Who gives grace? God. How does He give more? More than what? More than our evil spirits!
 3. The gospel of Jesus Christ exhorts to mortify and crucify these evil lusts (Col 3:5-8; Gal 5:24).
 4. The gracious power of the Holy Spirit in us is greater than the spirit of this world (I John 4:4).
- B. God *resists the proud*, because He hates the pride of devils and men, and he will punish them for it.
1. This quote is taken from Solomon's instruction to his son; Peter also used it (Pr 3:34; I Pet 5:5).
 2. What causes wars, fightings, killings, and envies described earlier? Only pride (Pr 13:10; 21:24)!
 3. Pride leads to demotion and destruction, humility to gain and honor (Pr 15:33; 18:12; 29:23).
 4. Pride cost the devil his exalted position in heaven, for he envied the great advantage of Another.

- C. He will *give grace to the humble*, to provide strength over envious spirits, and to lift them up.
1. The man who comes to God with a broken and contrite spirit will be accepted and lifted up.
 2. Here is a rule we should never forget – get down for God to lift you up (Isaiah 57:15; 66:2).

7 *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

- A. Here is a *therefore* drawing a conclusion: if there is grace for the humble, then submit and get down!
1. Put down your pride and crush it, and come lowly and meekly to God for grace to live holily.
 2. Learn contentment with godliness, for it great gain (Philippians 4:11; I Timothy 6:6; Heb 13:5).
 3. Trust Him alone for anything lacking in your life, and give up your pride and demand for things.
 4. You submit to God by confessing your sins and His right in your life in all things (Job 33:27-28).
- B. The devil, which is the source of the devilish wisdom, will flee from those who resist Him in Christ.
1. The devil is the spirit behind the lusts of covetousness, pride, and strife (3:14-16; John 8:44).
 2. The Lord Jesus Christ resisted the devil with three answers of scripture, and he left Him alone.
 3. Paul clearly gave a description of this resisting effort and the means to do it (Eph 6:10-18).

8 *Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.*

- A. God's grace is available to all His children, who will draw nigh to Him: He will meet you halfway!
1. Consider the sober words that Azariah the prophet spoke to King Asa (II Chronicles 15:1-2).
 2. We do not draw nigh to Him geographically, as Catholics with their pretentious temples think.
 3. We draw nigh to God by confession and repentance, humble prayer, fervent meditation, preparation for ordinances, and by the spiritual efforts of revival in the next verses (4:8-10).
 4. There is no fellowship with God or spiritual prosperity in sin (Job 33:27-28; Pr 28:13; I Jn 1:9).
- B. How does one draw nigh to God? He must cleanse himself from all heart attitudes and evil conduct.
1. God gave seven promises of fellowship to Corinth through Paul based on holiness (II Cor 7:1).
 2. *Cleansing your hands* is confessing, repenting, and forsaking sinful activities (Ps 24:4; 26:6).
 3. *Purifying your hearts* is confessing, repenting, and forsaking all evil hypocrisies (I Peter 1:22).
 4. A *double minded man* here is one who is claims to be a Christian while befriending the world.
 5. By the grace of God we want to pray for and seek for being united in heart (Psalm 86:11-12).

9 *Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.*

- A. True repentance despises sins and grieves for having sinned, which does not allow laughter and joy.
- B. If you are not living the godly life you should, it is time to afflict yourself (Ezra 8:21; Is 22:12-13).
- C. Rather than the sackcloth and ashes of the Old Testament, a broken spirit is enough in the New.
- D. Consider wisely how texts like this are NEVER preached in a seeker-sensitive or mega-church, for such instruction is diametrically and totally contrary to their positive you-are-beautiful message!

10 *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.*

- A. If you get down before God in humble repentance and tremble before His word, He will receive you.
- B. The fastest route to promotion in the sight of God is to get down, as Jesus had taught (Matt 23:12).
- C. He will not despise the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart (Ps 34:18; 51:17; Isaiah 57:15; 66:2).
- D. But beware hypocrites, for this is in His sight! He sees your thoughts and intents (Hebrews 4:12-14).

11 *Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.*

- A. Having condemned warring and fighting and given a spiritual cure, James made another argument.
- B. Here is further evidence that the warring and fighting earlier was internal strife in the body of Christ.
- C. It was a common sin to condemn and despise others in their liberty, especially for Jews, for it is the law of liberty that is under consideration here (1:25; 2:12; Rom 14:1-4,10; Col 2:16-23).
- D. Every man thinks his way of doing things is better than others' and closer to God's righteousness.
- E. How does speaking evil of your brother speak evil of the law and judge the law? By two ways.
 - 1. The law by requiring love of neighbor forbade all critical, cruel, harsh, and merciless treatments.
 - 2. If you judge others for things inside scripture more harshly than scriptures allows, you judge it.
 - 3. The law by allowing a neighbor his liberty condemns those arrogant judges who judged liberties.
 - 4. If you judge others for anything outside scripture, you judge the law as being carnal and weak.
 - 5. If you condemn your brother in any way contrary to the law, you declare the law as inadequate.
 - 6. If you declare or even imply the law as inadequate, then you declare yourself a judge above it.
- F. If you judge the law, you declare it inadequate and insufficient, then you are a lawbreaker and judge.

12 *There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?*

- A. We do not have the right to judge others, for God Himself is the Judge, Who declares right or wrong.
- B. Your opinion on a matter is utterly worthless in contrast to God's opinion on a matter (Ps 119:128).
- C. If we judge another for anything outside the law, we add to the law and make ourselves evil judges.
- D. If we judge another for anything in the law, we are to do so in a spirit of humility (5:19-20; Gal 6:1).
- E. It is our duty to obey the laws that God has made, not to make laws and then seek to enforce them.
- F. Anything not addressed specifically in scripture is a matter of liberty denying you the right to judge.

13 *Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:*

- A. The words, *Go to now*, are an emphatic one of transition to get your attention for what will be said.
 - 1. The apostle demanded their attention due to the error of boasting among these carnal saints.
 - 2. James will use it again in a few verses, and Solomon used it talking to himself (5:1; Eccl 2:1).
 - 3. Variations of these words are used in other places in scripture (Genesis 11:3,4,7; Isaiah 5:5).
 - 4. We might say, "Hey, you!" or "Get a load of this!" or "Listen to me!" or "Here it goes!"
- B. The error was planning things in their lives without full and formal submission to God's providence.
 - 1. The great God of heaven, who rules over all things right down to sparrows, expects recognition.
 - 2. The arrogance and unjustified confidence of the believers were corrected by the apostle's word.
 - 3. Ambition or planning is not condemned here, but rather the lack of submission to God's will.
 - 4. It is part of faith-based living (we walk by faith, not by sight) to acknowledge our faith in God.
 - 5. It is part of worship to speak of our plans only in context of the overriding will of the great God.
 - 6. As James explained in the next verse, the boasters did not have a clue as to the next day's events!
 - 7. This presumptuous and profane boasting and confidence are sins, and he rightly rebuked them.

14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

- A. They boasted of their plans of today or tomorrow, as if they had both days fully under their control.
- B. As we have learned painfully many times over, we truly do not know what may come tomorrow.
- C. There are nearly an infinite number of things that could occur tomorrow, and you cannot see them.
 - 1. Our blessed Father in heaven sees the end from the beginning ... not just tomorrow (Is 46:9-11)!
 - 2. If Tamar had known, she would have begged her father or brother to protect her from Amnon.
 - 3. If the goodman had known, he would have surely saved his house from the thief (Matt 24:43).
 - 4. You could get sick, be in a car accident, get fired, have a fire, meet an old friend, get mugged, lose your wallet, forget an appointment, have insurance cancelled, be tempted by a strange woman, get sued by an enemy, be drafted, family members get sick, an employee quit, etc., etc.
- D. There is even the possibility of death tomorrow, for life is far too short and uncertain to boast of it.
 - 1. James by the Spirit had already described the rich brother's certain and inglorious end (1:10-11).
 - 2. Life is short; death is certain; and after that is the judgment (Ps 89:47-48; Eccl 8:8; Heb 9:27).
 - 3. God has determined longevity for over 3000 years at about 70 years, 80 if strong (Psalm 90:10).
 - 4. Our breath is in our nostrils – we are fragile, weak, and exceedingly temporal (Isaiah 2:22).
 - 5. Man at his very best state is altogether vanity; men of high degree are a lie (Psalm 39:5; 62:9).
 - 6. Job and Jacob both described long lives as of few days and much trouble (Job 14:1; Gen 47:9).
 - 7. The shortness and speed of life is compared to a vapor (4:14), a tale told (Ps 90:9), a weaver's shuttle (Job 7:6), wind (Job 7:7), a post (Job 9:25), swift ships (Job 9:26), an eagle (Job 9:26), a flower (Job 14:2), handbreadth (Ps 39:5), a sleep (Ps 90:5), smoke (Ps 102:3), a shadow (Job 14:2; Ps 102:11), a shepherd's tent (Isaiah 38:12), and grass (Ps 90:5-6; I Pet 1:24).
 - 8. Therefore, we should live each day as if it was the last and with all the holy zeal we can muster.

15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

- A. Please see the specific cure for the correction going before – clearly submit your plans to God's will!
 - 1. He did not condemn ambition or planning, as long as ambition and plans were submitted to God.
 - 2. If God permits in His sovereign government and providence, you will live and keep your plans.
 - 3. Without the will of God, even the best-laid plans will not result in their desired effect or profit.
 - 4. There are no chance events in the universe, for the Lord rules them all (Pr 16:33 cp I Kgs 22:34).
- B. Solomon wisely taught us to devise plans in our hearts, but God directs the details (Proverbs 16:9).
 - 1. Naomi and Ruth planned to survive by gleaning, but they trusted God for outcome (Ruth 2:2-3).
 - 2. When enemies surrounded Joab, he divided his army and turned it over to God (II Sam 10:9-12).
 - 3. When David was chased from Jerusalem, he admitted total submission to God (II Sam 15:25-26).
- C. Paul often submitted plans to God's will (Acts 18:21; Rom 1:10; 15:32; I Cor 4:19; 16:7; Heb 6:3).
- D. Take careful note that this use of the Lord's name is a mild form of swearing in His name (Jas 5:12).

16 But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

- A. These carnal Christians took great delight in boasting about their plans without acknowledging God.
- B. It is evil and sin to make plans, talk about them, or rejoice in yourself, without submitting to God.
- C. Let us learn the humility and wisdom of godly saints and submit all our plans meekly unto the Lord.

17 Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

- A. Here is a general principle of righteousness – knowledge creates greater responsibility before God.
 - 1. There are sins of ignorance, and they are less than presumptuous sins (Ps 19:12; Luke 12:47-48).
 - 2. Presumptuous sins are those where you know the will and law of God and disobey them anyway.

- B. Here is a general reminder of two kinds of sins, both of which leave us condemned before God.
1. There are sins of commission, in which we commit positive acts of rebellion against God's will.
 2. There are sins of omission, in which we fail to do those things that God has commanded of us.
 3. Since James has now taught godliness in submitting plans to God, failing to do is evil and sin.
- C. Here is a specific principle of righteousness, our whole lives should be publicly submitted to God.

Conclusion:

1. You were warned in chapter 1 against being a hearer and not a doer of God's word. Then obey this chapter!
2. The lessons are simple – (a) stop envying and fighting brethren, (b) hate friendship with the world as spiritual adultery, (c) seek God alone with deep humility and repentance, and (d) publicly submit to His providence.

For Further Study:

1. The sermon outline, "[Love Is the Greatest](#)," provides a simple reminder of God's emphasis on brotherly love and unity.
2. The sermon outline, "[Spiritual Adultery](#)," details God's hatred of religious and worldly compromise as whoredom!
3. The sermon outline, "[Pride](#)," shows from the Bible this terrible sin and the deadly corollaries and consequences.
4. The sermon outline, "[Pride Again](#)," adds to the above sermon in considering the horrible sin of pride in our lives.
5. The Proverb commentary, "[Proverbs 16:9](#)," explains the role of your choice and God's providence in the details.
6. The sermon outline, "[What Is Your Life?](#)" reviews the brevity of life and what you should do with each day of it.
7. The sermon outline, "[Christian Liberty](#)," teaches Christians against judging others by anything scripture is silent about.