

Friends of the World

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:4b).

Devotional

Having outlined the difference between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom in 3:13–18, James goes on to show his audience in 4:1–3 that far from living according to the wisdom from above, they were in fact living according to the wisdom of this fallen world. Their quarrels and strife demonstrated that they were acting according to those same things that characterize earthly wisdom.

The prophets in ancient Israel condemned the people of their nation for their mistreatment of the poor and for living according to the same covetousness, ungodly jealousy, and selfish ambition characterizing the audience of James' epistle (for example, Zechariah 7:10). Although he certainly would have been justified in doing so, James has not yet offered these same denunciations. He has stood with his audience as a "brother" (1:19; 2:1, 14; 3:1) and has slowly built a case against them both with direct exhortation and the indirect indictment of sin that we read in 4:1–3. Thus far, James has been merciful with his audience given the nature of their problems.

Beginning with today's passage, however, James speaks just like the prophets of old. In verse 4, he condemns his audience as an adulterous people. The old-covenant prophets often likened the relationship between God and His people to a marriage (Isaiah 54:5), making Israel's dalliances with idolatry tantamount to infidelity (Ezekiel 16:30–34).

The unity of the people of God under both covenants means that when new-covenant members are unfaithful to God, they too commit adultery. This happens, James tells us, when we make ourselves friends with the world (4:4b). This is no casual use of the word friend; James is referring to a fundamental compromise with the values and methods of fallen humanity. When we live according to the desires produced by earthly wisdom, we have become friends with this world and enemies with God. Our Lord is jealous of His Spirit that He has put within us (4:5), and so by making friends with the world, we turn away from God. As John Calvin says, "So great is the disagreement between the world and God, that as much as any one inclines to the world, so much he alienates himself from God."

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

If someone were to look at your life and values would he say that you are a friend of God, or would he say that you are a friend of the world? Consider your relationships and ask yourself if the problems you might have stem from the ungodly jealousy and selfish ambition characteristic of the world. If so, there is but one solution: repentance and trust in God's sanctifying power. As Calvin says, we must "renounce the world, if we wish to serve God."¹

Open it

1. Were you ever in a fight or quarrel as a child? What caused this escalation between you and the other person?

Read it

JAMES 4:1-6

Explore it

2. What issue is James concerned about at the start of chapter 4?
3. What is waging war against each of us?
4. Despite our sin, what does God give to His children?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/friends-world/>

Apply it

THE GRASS ISN'T ALWAYS GREENER

Sometimes we idealize the early church. We think, “It must have been great to be a part of the first-century church! It was so dynamic and powerful. They had such sweet fellowship!” But the reality is, the early church was made up of people, and people haven’t changed over the centuries!

Many (if not all!) first-century churches wrestled with conflicts between the members. The Corinthian church had divided into factions. The Philippian church had two women who couldn’t get along, and the conflict was severe enough that Paul singled them out by name in his letter. The Galatian believers were biting and devouring one another (Galatians 5:15). Paul began the practical section of Ephesians with an appeal to unity, tolerance, and love between the members (Ephesians 4:1–16). On a personal level, even Paul and Barnabas had a serious disagreement that led to a parting of ways (Acts 15:36–40).

So it was not a unique situation when James addressed the problem of quarrels and conflicts among the believers to whom he wrote. The section here runs through 4:12, and it applies to all of our relational conflicts, whether in the church or at home.²

5. How does knowing that the early church struggled with the same issues that are alive and well in churches today encourage us? How can their examples serve to help us in our day?

James asks (4:1), “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?” The Greek reads literally, “From where wars and from where fights among you?” “Wars” may sound a bit extreme to describe the squabbles in your relationships, but James’ point is that if you do not deal with minor squabbles, they can easily escalate into all-out wars.³

6. Looking back to the previous three chapters of James’ letter, what issues or realities might have made quarreling a problem in the church?

² Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/081405M.pdf>

³ *ibid*

7. How do quarrels and strife affect a church's mission and purpose?

QUARRELS AND FIGHTS AMONG YOU

James has posed a passionate rhetorical question, “From where wars and where fights among you?” And he answers it with a second rhetorical question that takes us to the heart of the subject: “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” (v. 1b). The obvious answer is, “Yes!” In fact, this is the answer to all questions about conflict in the church. One word here bares the heart of this verse—the word “passions.” In the Greek this is (*hedone*), from which we derive the English word hedonism, the belief that pleasure is the chief good in life. Its primary sense here is pleasures. . . . **Pleasure is not sinful per se, but what is wrong is a driving desire for pleasures.** The only other uses of this word in the New Testament suggest this idea: Luke 8: 14, where Jesus describes those who fall among thorns as “choked by the . . . pleasures of life,” and Titus 3: 3, which refers to people as “slaves to various passions and pleasures.”

James' emphasis is on a feverish search for one's own pleasures and gratifications. In the phrase “passions [for pleasure]. . . at war within you” (v. 1c), **James is explicit about how this searching for pleasure works misery in one's life. As a person is victimized by conflicting desires, his or her inner life becomes a battleground.** The old nature, with its self-seeking focus on personal pleasure, battles against the new nature (cf. Romans 7: 21–23; Galatians 5:17), and selfish pleasure-seeking dominates. This in turn fosters a self-focus that naturally diminishes the importance of others and enthrones one's pleasures as the goal of life. **This brings relational war with those around us, especially others in the church. Such narcissistic embrace of one's own pleasure as the chief end of life, whether it be sensual, materialistic, professional, or positional, is the bane of the church.** James' insights come down hard on us Christians who live in a profoundly pleasure-seeking culture.⁴

8. What is it about our selfishness that produces quarrels and fights with others?

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent. *James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word)* (pp. 148–149). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

9. What are some areas of selfishness that bring strife into churches today?

10. If strife or its lack is an indicator of the spiritual health and vibrancy of a church, how does your church do in this area? Do you help or hinder the unity of the church because of preferences and selfishness?

SELFISHNESS ERODES ALL RELATIONSHIPS

James emphasizes four times in these three verses that yielding to your sinful pleasures does not get you what you thought it would. He says (4:2, 3a, italics added), “You lust and *do not have*; . . . You are envious and *cannot obtain*; . . . *You do not have* because you do not ask. You ask and *do not receive* . . .” Sin always makes enticing promises, and in the short run, it seems to deliver. But over the long haul, you come up empty and frustrated, if not totally destroyed. The bottom line of seeking your own way is always, “you do not have.”⁵

11. James shares in verses 1–3 how our selfishness can impact three important relationships, namely our relationships with self, God and others. How can our own selfishness cause us to miss the blessings of these relationships?

James’ language sounds so extravagant, so exaggerated in our ears, that we feel we must positively refuse to see our small-time disagreements and occasional squabbles as meriting such a description. **But if we take this line we only show how imperfectly our thoughts have been brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.** When the Lord Jesus undertook to explore the length and depth of the sixth commandment, He spoke of anger, derogatory, dismissive remarks, name-calling. He illustrated His

⁵ Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/0814,05M.pdf>

done: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Prayer is not so that we can use God; it is so that God can use us.

To receive from God, ask with the proper motives. Jesus plainly taught (Matthew 7:7), “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” He did not say, “Ask and it will be given to you *instantly*.” He may have good reasons to delay the answer. Often the delays strengthen and test our faith. He knows the right timing as to when to answer. But our responsibility is to ask, but to ask with the right motives.

Your main reason for asking God to bring peace into your home or into some difficult relationship should not be so that you are free from the hassle. I know, you’re weary of the hassle. Peace would feel so good! But, if you pray for peace so that you can be relieved of the stress, you’re missing the big picture. **The main reason you should pray for peace is so that God might be glorified. He is not glorified by strife and quarreling. Christ is not magnified by constant conflict. He is glorified in His people when they crucify self and allow His love to flow through them, even toward those who treat them wrongly. Ask God to be glorified in your relationships, and He will answer!**⁷

14. How do we strike a proper balance between asking God for provision and not being selfish in our prayers?

15. When have you seen God use a delay in answering your prayer requests to strengthen and mature you?

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

By the “world,” James means, of course, human society apart from God. The whole system of things in this society of ours is anti-Christ and anti-God. Abraham was the friend of God (James 2:23); Lot was the friend of the world. Lot ended up in a war, and Abraham had to rescue him (Genesis 14). A Christian gets involved with the world gradually. . . . First, there is “the friendship of the world” (James 4:4). This results in being “spotted” by the world (James 1:27) so that areas of our lives meet with the approval of the world. Friendship leads to loving the world (1 John 2:15–17), and this makes it easy to conform to the world (Romans 12:2).

⁷ Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/0814,05M.pdf>

The sad result is being condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32), our souls saved “yet as by fire” (1 Corinthians 3:11–15). Friendship with the world is compared to adultery. The believer is “married to Christ” (Romans 7:4) and ought to be faithful to Him. The Jewish Christians who read this letter would understand this picture of “spiritual adultery” because the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea used it when rebuking Judah for her sins (see Jeremiah 3:1–5; Ezekiel 23; Hosea 1–2). By adopting the sinful ways of the other nations, and by worshipping their gods, the nation of Judah committed adultery against her God.⁸

16. What makes it so easy for Christ followers to be drawn into a “friendship with the world”?

James draws the line in the sand (4:4): “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.” **Take your pick: Are you married to God or to the world?** Can you imagine a couple that gets married, and a month later the husband tells his wife, “I’m going out tonight with my old girlfriend”? “I love you, but I want to keep in touch with her, too!” Needless to say, that marriage is in big trouble! When you get married, you vow to forsake all others and be devoted exclusively to your spouse. In the same way, when you come to Christ as Savior and Lord, you say goodbye to the world.⁹

17. What things must we forsake in the world as Christ followers? How are we to balance being in the world but not of the world?

18. If someone were to look at your life and values, would he say that you are a friend of God or a friend of the world? Why?

⁸ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Mature (James): Growing Up in Christ (The BE Series Commentary)* (p. 130). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/081405M.pdf>

GREATER GRACE

To realize that the awesomely holy God who transcends the universe and is wholly other and self-contained is at the same time personally and passionately and lovingly jealous for our affection—this realization ought to stop any of our “affairs” with the world and cause us to prostrate our souls adoringly before Him. How we are loved! And how we ought to love! For as John informs us, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4: 19). Though God is the author of all true pleasures and desires us to enjoy life, the illicit tugging strings of self-centered hedonism constantly pull at us. **And many of us have become friends of the fallen world order and are thus God’s enemies. What are we to do?**

The answer is to remove the question mark from the middle of verse 6 and put it at the end of verse 5 where it belongs, and then read the opening words of verse 6 not as a question, but as a declaration: “But he gives more grace.” That is the answer—more grace! This is not saving grace, for every believer has that. Rather, it is literally “greater grace”—**God’s gracious supply to live as we ought in a fallen world. As Augustine put it, “God gives what He demands.” There is always, for the believer, greater grace.**

This is without doubt one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture. This verse means there will always be enough grace regardless of our situation or need—always. The writer of Hebrews confidently tells us, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4: 16). We have no need that outstrips His grace, and we never will! Even if we fall into abject sin there is a stream of grace, as Paul said: “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20b). “For daily need there is daily grace; for sudden need, sudden grace; for overwhelming need, overwhelming grace,” says John Blanchard. John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” knew this well: **Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come: ’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home. There is always more grace.**¹⁰

19. When have you experienced God’s greater grace in your life? How does God’s grace promote humility instead of pride?

20. In what ways can you grow in your friendship with God? What things must take a backseat so that you might “dwell with your God”?

¹⁰ Hughes, R. Kent. *James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word)* (p. 158). Crossway. Kindle Edition.