

James 4: To Be the People of God

A Bible Study on the Epistle of James

Study Bible Studies Not stated

James 4

Introduction

In Chapter 1, James talked about trials and temptations and the urgent need for internalising God's word and practising it. In Chapter 2 he cautioned us against discrimination and advised affirmation of faith in God. More exhortations followed in Chapter 3, cautioning us against irresponsible talk and the irreparable damage it can bring about.

Today we will look at Chapter 4, in which he continues his dos and don'ts under four headings:

- Warning against our intense lust for what is of this world
- Need to come closer to God
- Warning against judging fellow Christians
- Warning against boasting

Warning Against Our Intense Lust for What Is of This World

1 From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? 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. 3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. 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. 5 Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? 6 But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

Where does all the shocking quarrels and wars come from? None of these "just happen". All these are the result of us wanting our own way and fighting for it, at times resulting in bloodshed. We lust for the things we do not have, and our unquenchable desire to possess what we lust after is the reason why quarrels and trouble break out.

Verse 1

Covetousness, pride, and ambition make people overbearing and hurtful.

(1) Covetousness makes us argue with those who have anything that we covet. This results in injuries and annoying lawsuits between neighbour and neighbour.

(2) Pride in us only breeds quarrels. In Proverbs 13:10 we read, "Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom." Pride can endure no equals.

(3) Ambition is another reason for disagreements. Remember, even the disciples quarrelled about who would be the greatest amongst the twelve.

(4) We envy the success of others. In Genesis 13:7 we read that the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot fell out.

Verse 2

Worldly desires usually result in disappointment: "Ye lust, and have not." God loves to deny desires when they are inordinate. Sometimes this is out of mercy. It is a blessing to be disappointed in the ways of sin; you cannot have a worse judgment than to have your worldly desires fulfilled when it is for the fulfilment of a sin. We know how unhappy people are when God leaves them to themselves without restraint!

When the heart is too much set on anything, it is the sure way to miss it. The fool talked of bigger barns, and that night his soul was taken away. Affections should rise according to the worth of the object: "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed" (John 6:27). We should not always be troubled when we cannot have what we want; such a desire may not be right in the eyes of God and will eventually be harmful to us. It is a mercy when such worldly desires are disappointed. God knows what is good for us.

Verse 3

James goes on to tell us that we should consider our motives in prayer—not just the manner, not just what we are asking for, but the purpose. It is not enough to look for intensity of feeling when we pray; we must also consider our reason for asking something in prayer. So long as the purpose is acceptable in the eyes of God, our prayers are answered, invariably according to His will and not ours. But if our purpose is strictly worldly and falls short of the standards of God, we are then really trying to cheat God. If all we want is our own way, right or wrong, flirting with the world every chance we get, we end up on the wrong side of God.

Verse 4

Worldliness in Christians is spiritual adultery. It dissolves the spiritual marriage between God and us. There may be adultery by desire when the body is not defiled; unclean glances are a degree of lust. The children of God may have some wandering and trailing thoughts; when the devil is at their elbow, the world may be increased in their esteem and imagination. But those who have surrendered fully to the will of God soon correct themselves and return to God's arms.

Verse 5

Though sin is natural to us, it is not therefore less evil. Poison by nature is more than poison by accident. Similarly, David says in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." That being so, it is all the more reason for us to fight our inherent sinful nature and to come closer to God.

Verse 6

Those who want to have grace must go the right way to obtain it. God, who has decreed the end, has decreed the means. That is why we not only have promises in Scripture but directions as well; it calls to account those who want to have the blessing but do not want to use the means. Most people content themselves with lazy wishes; they want to have grace but lie on their beds of ease and expect to be snatched up to heaven in a fiery chariot, or for grace to drop on them out of the clouds. God, who says He will give grace, says something else also—that you must be humble in order to receive it.

Need to Come Closer to God

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. 9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

Verse 7

Here James applies the promise and by inference emphasises the duty specified in it: "Submit yourselves therefore to God." James tells us that anyone who wants to seek God's friendship must unconditionally submit to Him. He speaks about getting in with God, which must be in a humble way. There is an infinite distance between God and His creatures; therefore we must come with reverence. But we are not only creatures, but guilty creatures; and therefore we must come with holy fear and trembling to God. It implies a humble approach to God. That is,

we should lay aside our pride and stubbornness, and humbly acknowledge our sins. Come as lost, undone creatures lying at the feet of mercy itself.

Thus we see there is a threefold submission: our worldly hearts to His holiness, our proud hearts to His mercy, our stormy minds to His sovereignty, that we may be obedient, humble and patient.

We must know that Satan has almost as great a power over wicked people as the Spirit of God has over holy people. The same words are used to describe the efficacy of Satan and the influence of the Spirit. God "worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), and Satan is the spirit "that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

But we know that Satan is a foiled adversary; Christ has overcome him already. All that is required for victory is a strong "No." Do not give him any further reply. To resist him, not to yield to him, is the only way to be rid of him. We have a promise: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We need not doubt our Lord's help; though Satan is the "accuser," Christ is our "advocate." The Spirit of God strengthens us against the suggestions of the evil spirit, and the good angels wait on us (Hebrews 1:14).

Verse 8

James returns to the main issue—the success of humbly addressing God, showing we shall not lack divine help if we will just make way for it. God never lets us down until we first let ourselves down.

God will be near those who are careful to hold communion with Him. "The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth" (Psalm 145:18). Let this encourage us to come to God—indeed, to run to Him. When we apply ourselves to seeking God, He is near to counsel, to give life, to defend—ready with blessing before our imperfect desires can be formed into requests.

"Cleanse your hands, ye sinners." From the connection of this precept with the previous one, we note that unclean people can have nothing to do with God. We must be holy before we can come near to Him; conformity to His will is the ground of communion: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

"Cleanse your hands." This indicates good works—just as pureness of heart implies faith and holy affections. Washing the hands was a sign of innocence, just as Pilate washed his hands in connection with Christ. The Lord has required not only holy hearts but holy hands. The goodness of our hearts must appear in the integrity of our behaviour.

Verse 9

James now prescribes another remedy against worldly affections and practices.

If we do not want to be afflicted by God, we should afflict ourselves for our sins. Voluntary humiliations are always the best; they please God the most, and they do us the most good. The angels rejoice at the creature's repentance (Luke 15:7). Holy tears are the sponge of sin; a hard heart must be soaked, and a filthy heart must be washed in this water. We are most considerate when we are most pensive. Besides all this, the final outcome of it is very sweet. God will revive the spirit of the lowly.

"Let your laughter be turned to mourning." An excellent way to moderate the excess of joy is to mix it with some weeping. He is speaking to those who are drunk with their present happiness, and his aim is to awaken them out of their senseless stupor. The way to lessen one passion is to let in the contrary one. There is danger in abundance; therefore in our gaiety, rather than getting carried away, let us think of the difficult times in our lives.

Verse 10

We must know that it is not the outward expressions that God looks for in mourning, but the humble heart. When we confess sins, it is not words and tears that God looks for, but a deep shame of the evil of our nature, our iniquities of life, and our defects in obedience.

In 1 Peter 5:6 we read, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." That expression implies a motive or consideration to enforce the duty.

This tells us how to be humble in our addresses to God: get as large and comprehensive an idea of Him as we can; see His glory if we want to know our own wickedness. People are feeble in their duties because they have low thoughts of God. Submission and humility are the true way to exaltation. This is often repeated in the Gospel: "For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11; and also Matthew 23:12). We are all by nature proud and want to be exalted; but the way to rise is to fall. God gave us a pattern in Jesus Christ: first, He "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name" (Philippians 2:7-9). So then, do you want deliverance? Humble yourself!

Warning Against Judging Fellow Christians

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

Here the apostle comes to dissuade us from another sin—detraction and speaking evil of one another.

"Speak not evil one of another, brethren." This implies any speaking that is prejudicial to someone else, whether it is true or false. Scripture requires our words to be appropriate to love as well as truth. Speaking evil of one another is not appropriate for Christians. There are several kinds of evil-speaking. They may all be ranked under two heads—whispering and backbiting. Whispering is a private defamation of someone among those who think well of him or her; backbiting is more public, in view of everyone without discrimination. Both may be done in many ways, not only by false accusations, but also by exposing others' secret evils, by belittling their graces, by increasing or aggravating their faults, by defrauding them of their necessary excuses, by depraving their good actions through supposing they have sinister aims, by mentioning what is culpable, and by enviously suppressing their worth. So then, if all this is inappropriate for good Christians, do not give way to it in yourselves or listen to it from other people.

"He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother." In the word "judgeth" the apostle shows what criticism amounts to—seizing God's function and passing sentence on others. Censuring is judging; we arrogate to ourselves an act of power that does not belong to us. When we are promoted to the chair of arrogance and censure, we should check ourselves by this thought: "Who gave me this superiority?" The question put to Moses may well be asked of ourselves, on behalf of the wronged: "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian? And Moses feared, and said, Surely this thing is known" (Exodus 2:14). Paul asks a similar question: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4).

"Speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law." How can this be? Every sin is a kind of affront to the law that forbids it; for by doing quite the contrary we in effect judge the law to be not fit or worthy of being obeyed. For instance, in the present case the law forbids rash judgment and speaking evil of one another; but the person who detracts from someone else approves what the law condemns, and so in effect judges that law to be not good.

Verse 12

God alone can give laws to the conscience. "For the LORD is our judge,

the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us" (Isaiah 33:22). Taken in a spiritual sense, the words are exclusive: God, and no other, is our exclusive Judge, our only Lawgiver. God knows the conscience, and therefore God only must judge it and give laws to it. God only can punish the conscience for sin, and therefore only He can declare an act to be a sin.

Warning Against Boasting

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: 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. 15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. 16 But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. 17 Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

Having spoken about people who held the law in contempt, he now speaks against those who hold providence in contempt, promising themselves a long time in the world and a happy ending to their worldly projects, without any sense or thought of frailty or the sudden strokes of God. In these verses he gives a most accurate representation of their thoughts.

Worldly hearts are all for worldly projects. People are what their desires are. "The liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand" (Isaiah 32:8). Worldly people are projecting how to spend their days and months buying and selling, making a profit, and accumulating wealth. The fool in the Gospel is thinking of enlarging his barns and pulling down his houses to build bigger ones (Luke 12:17-18); this engrosses all his thoughts. Gracious hearts are occupied with gracious projects and how they can be more thankful: "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?" (Psalm 116:12)—how they can be more holy, more useful for God, more fruitful in every good work—what they must do to inherit eternal life. Remember, we were sent into the world not to grow great and pompous, but to enrich our beings with spiritual excellence.

We most often focus on stock exchanges and markets, always talking about commodities, trading, profits and wealth, without any thought of God. Recent times have shown us how futile such plans are. On our business trips we must remember to take God along with us wherever we go. In our business let us be mindful of God and of God's providence and our own frailty—so that we are neither too much in the world, nor too confident in our own work.

Having revealed the worldly presumption, James now disproves it by two arguments: first, the uncertainty of the events of the next day; and second, the uncertainty of our lives. Both give a notable check to such foolish confidence.

We have no assurance of our lives and comforts, or of the events of the next day. So then, let every day's care be enough for itself; live every day as the last day. It is a sad thing to promise ourselves many years and to have our lives taken away that very night. Wicked people want to live longer in the body; their worldly projects are never at an end, but suddenly God comes and snatches away their lives.

Verse 15

In verse 15 James proceeds to put things right by urging us to remember with reverence God's providence and our own infirmity.

All our undertakings must be referred to the will of God—not only religious ones, but secular actions as well. Our journeys must not be undertaken without asking His leave. It is not enough if God allows us to live; He must also by the same will allow us to act. We must not only look up to Him as the author of our success but as the director of our action. It is by His direction and blessing that everything happens. Even our will and wisdom are subject to divine control, and He can turn them as He pleases: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Proverbs 21:1). Therefore, we must not only commit our ways to His providence but commend our hearts to the instruction of His Spirit.

Verse 16

We have no cause to rejoice or glory in our worldly confidence. It seems to come from a noble bravery, but actually it comes from lowness and wickedness of spirit. People dare not lay it to heart because they do not know how to fortify themselves against it. Faith (true confidence) always supposes and prepares for the worst but hopes for the best; it meets the adversary in the open and vanquishes it. The fool in the Gospel dared not think about his death that night (Luke 12:16–20). This is the baseness of worldly confidence, to put off trouble when it cannot be put away.

Verse 17

In this verse the apostle deals with the objection by which people might evade his warning. People might say, "We have no need to be taught such a plain lesson; we know that life is short and that God's providence rules everything." The apostle says, do you know all this? Then you are all the more obliged to subject your desires to God's will and pleasure. Often we find that people who know a lot are apt to be enslaved by their appetites, by the lower and more brutish faculties. They are keen

against errors but indulgent to vices. Some are ignorant of God in their minds and deny Him in their lives. Others question the truth of religion and deny the power of it. We are apt to say, "I know this well enough already." But do we practise it? Is this not a new hint from God to convince us of our negligence? Surely God sees that we do not live up to this new knowledge, and therefore the same truth, this common truth, is brought back to us as a strong reminder.

Learning

As Christians, we belong to Jesus. He has purchased us through the blood He shed on the Cross for us. Our focus should be on matters related to His will and not on lusting after the perishables of this world.

The primary aim of all Christians should be to come closer to Jesus. In order that we are able to do that, we must cleanse ourselves and make room for Him in our hearts.

Judgment is the prerogative of God alone. We have no right to judge our neighbours in any manner.

Attributing our achievements in the secular space to our own capabilities would be tantamount to boasting. Nothing ever happens without the grace and blessings of our Lord. All our plans can come to naught if we do not seek His blessings. We must carry Him in our hearts all the time and live our lives a day at a time.

Amen.