

Infighting and Strife Among Early Christians

James 4:1-10

James 4:1-10 - *“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ² You 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. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers 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. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?*

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

Background Notes

When you read these verses you would think for sure that James was writing to unbelievers, right? After all, verse 1 mentions war, and verse 2 mentions murder in verse two -- and verse mentions adultery! In James 1, however, we saw that the epistle was addressed to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” -- that is, to Jewish believers who were dispersed though out the Roman Empire. In fact, the term “brethren” is used 15 times throughout this epistle. Note verse 11 here in this chapter, for example: *“Do not speak evil about one another, brethren.”* So James was writing primarily to believers. Obviously many of the passages can bring conviction to the unbeliever, but the epistle is addressed to believers.

We might think that the early Christian were in pretty bad shape to need the exhortation we find in James 4! But wait a minute -- couldn't this exhortation be applied to many Christians today? Look at all the infighting and strife that goes on in many churches, even as we speak! Think of the strife that exists in Christian ministries and in Christian families.

Now we believe that the term “murder” (v2) is used primarily in a figurative sense. Anger and jealousy and fighting are murder in seed form. The “adultery” of verse 4 is speaking of spiritual adultery -- even though there certainly were (and are) cases of literal physical adultery, even in the church. Just as Israel, God's people in the Old Testament, committed spiritual adultery when they turned away from the Lord and worshiped foreign gods, so God's people today commit spiritual adultery when friendship with the world takes priority over full commitment to the Lord.

The sins of strife and spiritual adultery that were present among the early Christians are certainly present among Christians today, and it is a serious problem. These sins destroy churches, ministries and families! In Galatians 5:15 Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia that *“if you bite and devour one another beware lest you be consumed by one another.”* Many churches and ministries have had to close their doors because of the bad fallout of the sins of strife and spiritual adultery.

Doctrinal Points

1. The source of strife is ungodly lust.

Verses 1-2: *“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You 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.”*

What is “lust?” Lust is any kind of strong selfish desire. The ultimate source of strife is strong selfish desire -- and that is certainly true in the Christian community. There is lust for pleasure and possessions. It’s easy to understand why an unbeliever would lust for the pleasures and possessions of this world -- that’s all there is for them. You know the saying, “You only go around once!” Of course unbelievers think that we should “get all the gusto” we can out of life now -- even fight for it, so we can get more than the next guy.

But this attitude should **not** characterize the Christian! If it does, it’s no wonder our prayers are not answered! *“You ask and you do not receive because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures”* (v3). Did you know that there are actually Christians who **pray** for more pleasures and possessions in their lives? Is that convicting for you? Of course they mask their lust with statement that sound spiritual, such as, “The more I have, the more I can give to the Lord!” Ever hear that before?

Then there is the lust for power and prestige. The worldly lust for power and prestige is not found only in the corporate business world -- it’s found within the Christian community as well! It’s within the church. Think of the way “wars” can erupt in churches because of this strong desire. These fights don’t get started because everyone wants to be the top dog and or the limelight. No, this strife often comes because we can’t stand others who are in the limelight or in positions of authority over us. We crave independence! We may think and say, “I’m willing to be a servant” – but that’s only true when we don’t have to be subservient!

Is that your attitude? No wonder there’s strife. Our strong selfish desires have a number of paths that lead to strife. The source of strife is ungodly lust.

2. The solution to strife is humble submission.

Verses 6-7: *"But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."* And verse 10, *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."*

We've seen that the source of strife is our own ungodly lust. We still have those strong desires for pleasure, possession, prestige and power because we still have our fallen sinful natures. But -- praise God -- we are not left to overcome our ungodly lusts in our own strength!

First, we have the Holy Spirit at work within us. This seems to be the thought in verse 5. And then we have the great promise of verse 6: *"but God gives more grace"*! We can be sure that no matter what problem is causing the strife, God's grace is sufficient to overcome that problem! And God's grace will be there, because Hebrews 4:16 says that God will give *"grace to help in times of need."*

But to overcome problems that are caused by our sinful nature, we must submit to God: *"Therefore submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you"* (v7). If we resist the devil's suggestions and temptations, the devil will flee from us. How do we resist the devil? We resist the devil by knowing and using Scripture and by a committed prayer life. You've heard the expression "The devil trembles when he sees, the weakest Christian on his knees." That's not a Bible verse, so don't try to look it up in the concordance -- but it is a biblical truth. If we draw near to God (v8), He will draw near to us. What a promise!

Humble submission to God means that we will cleanse our hands and hearts from known sin. Verse 8: *"...cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded."* In this life we can't become sinless, but we can sin less.

If you are going to humbly submit to God, you cannot be double minded (v8). In James 1:8 we saw that *"double minded people are unstable in all their ways."* What does it mean to be double minded, anyway? It means to live with mixed motives.

Do you have mixed motives? Do you want to serve the Lord, or do you want to make more money? If you say you want to do both, you're double minded! Remember Matthew 6:24? The Lord Jesus said there that you **cannot** serve both God and money! Many Christians disagree with the Lord on this point, and as a result they're involved in strife at the family level, at the fellowship level, at the church level. That's the way it is when you're double minded. We could use examples other than money, because there are many areas in which we tend to be double minded -- right?

Verse 9 is does not mean that laughter is wrong or that enjoying life is wrong, or that we should be sad and gloomy all the time! No! After all, 1 Timothy 6:17 says that *"God gives us richly all things to enjoy."* Verse 9 is saying that if we humbly submit to God, we will go need to through a time of real soul searching, a time of serious confession and consecration. Have you come to that place in your life yet? Have you literally cried before the

Lord about your lack of commitment, and about the strife and problems you cause? That's what verse 9 is all about.

The solution to strife is humble submission. The solution to strife is humble submission before the Lord.

Practical Application

Remember the way up is the way down.

Verse 10: *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."* The world certainly doesn't agree with *"Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up"* -- in fact, that's not the way some Christians think. Some Christians have actually told me that if you're humble, people will step on you and climb up over you!

But **God** says that if you humble yourself, **He** will **exalt** you! Do you believe that? If we try to exalt ourselves by making friends with this world, we not only make ourselves enemies of God (v4), but God may have to humble us and bring us down. Proverbs 16:18 says that *"pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall."* It's better for us to humble ourselves before God has to do it for us!

1 Peter 5:6 says, *"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time."*

Remember, the way up is the way down!