

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.

Questions On The Text

Where do wars and fights originate?

Verses 1-2: This letter is addressed to the church, not society in general, so he is referring to what’s happening there. According to James, conflict in the church comes from the conflict that is already taking place in the inner life of the believer. This is a conflict between the knowledge that God demands total allegiance, and the desires for other things.

It is not that God doesn’t want us to experience pleasure. (See 1 Timothy 6:17.) Clearly, God wants us to enjoy what He gives us. The problem arises when that desire for our own personal pleasures is more important than our desire for God’s Kingdom and His righteousness. (See Matthew 6:33)

The person James describes has various desires (lusts means desires), covets what someone else has, is unable to get what they want, and then that leads them into conflict with others.

What is the key to getting what you want?

Verses 2-3: Christians don’t have because they don’t go to God in prayer and ask for what they want. Then when they ask, they don’t receive because they pray selfish prayers aimed at satisfying their own desires. The key, then, is to ask for what we want, and to want what is in the best interests of God’s Kingdom.

Why does James call them adulterers and adulteresses?

Verses 4-5: The reference to adulterers and adulteresses (many versions follow a different Greek text and omit adulterers) is an allusion to imagery used in the Old Testament. For instance, Jeremiah 3:20 says, “‘Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,’ says the LORD.”

All this simply means that James is addressing people whose allegiance to God is no longer undivided, and so they are guilty of spiritual adultery, i.e. idolatry. Their own pleasure is more important to them than the will of God. Unfaithfulness towards God (idolatry) means putting the pleasures of this world first.

The “world” is the current world system which is under the devil’s influence. This is made clear in 1 John 5:19. So putting the pleasures of this world first makes us friends with this present world system, placing us in Satan’s camp (see again 1 John 5:19), and making us God’s enemies.

James aims to show them how their compromised allegiance to God is causing their prayers to be unanswered. When we are unfaithful, God's Spirit is jealous as God is a jealous God. See Exodus 20:5. He will not be second to anyone or anything.

Why is humility important?

Verse 6: Humility is essential if we want to receive God's grace as He only gives grace to the humble. Despite idolatry, God's grace is still available, but it is only available to the humble. Human pride is met with God's resistance. "More" grace is literally "greater" grace.

What is God's solution for the problem of pride?

Verses 7-9: First, submit to God. Humility means submission to God and His ways, and submission to God means resistance to the devil. A person cannot be submitted both to God and the devil at the same time.

The next step is to draw near to God. This is necessary because the idolater has distanced himself from God and become a friend of the world. However, when someone takes steps to draw near to God, He promises that He will then draw near to them too.

Cleansing of the hands is symbolic of a change in the things we do. Changing our ways is essential, but useless, if we don't also purify our hearts. James refers to the "double-minded" which is the same word as in James 1:8 and literally means two-souled, referring to their attempt to be on good terms both with God and the world.

In addition to the cleansing and purifying, lamenting, mourning, weeping, mourning and gloom (meaning a casting down of the eyes), are all in the language of repentance. Genuine repentance means experiencing sorrow over sin. (See 2 Corinthians 7:10) In short, God wants to see a genuine attitudinal transformation. See God's promise for the person who sows in tears in Psalm 126:5-6.

What happens when we humble ourselves?

Verse 10: When we humble ourselves before God, He lifts us up. See also 1 Peter 5:5-6.

Further Questions For Discussion:

Have you observed how people create conflict because they want to fulfil their own pleasures? Discuss this in the light of the thought that "getting your own way" is a kind of pleasure.

Do you think Christians often fail to bring their needs to God in prayer?

Have you ever been aware of not having your prayers answered because they were selfish?

What sorts of things can be idols in your life, thereby making you unfaithful to God?

If God's Spirit within us is jealous when we are unfaithful to God, what do you think He is doing while we are being unfaithful?

What is humility?

What is godly sorrow?

Can you recall a time when God lifted you up when you had humbled yourself?