

James 4

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[0:00] Good morning, everybody. Good morning. Well, it's James 4 today, but just out of interest, I wonder if anyone used the three-second rule! I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up. I was reminded about the three-second rule this past week. I forgot to count three. If you remember, pause for three seconds before responding to an argument. If you did, did it work? Now, if James 3 stepped on our toes as it spoke about the tongue, chapter 4 might well step on our entire foot. James is a loving pastor, but he isn't a soft one, as we've found out. Like a skilled doctor, he refuses merely to treat symptoms. What he wants is to expose the disease beneath them. So this chapter divides naturally into four sections. Number one, the problem of self, verses 1 to 3. Number two, the danger of worldliness, verses 4 to 10. Number three, the sin of judging others, verses 11 to 12. And fourthly, the folly of presuming upon tomorrow, verses 13 to 17.

But running through all four sections is one great theme. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. James 4 verse 6. And everything in this chapter revolves around the truth. So if you've got your Bibles open, we're going to read chapter 4 together. Verse 1, what is the source of quarrels and conflicts amongst you? Is the source not your pleasure that wage war in your body's parts? You lust and do not have, and so you commit murder, and you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility towards God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the scripture says to no purpose? He jealously desires the spirit whom he has made to dwell in us, but he gives a greater grace. And therefore it says, God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Verse 7, submit therefore to God, but resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and he will come close to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Do not speak against one another, brothers and sisters. The one who speaks against a brother or sister, or judges his brother or sister, speaks against the law, and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you judging your neighbor? Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we'll go to such and such a city, spend a year there, and engage in business, and make a profit. Yet you do not know what your life will be like, for you are just a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we live, and also do this or that. But as it is, you boast in your arrogance, and all such boasting is evil. So for one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, for him it is sin.

[4:23] Wow, what an interesting and challenging chapter. Have you ever noticed that most conflicts are really about what they first appear to be? A husband and wife argue over how to load the dishwasher.

Church members disagree over a program. Families fall out over an inheritance. Nations go to war over territory. Now on the surface, those all seem very different. But James says that they often have exactly the same root. The real battlefield is not the dishwasher, the church program, the inheritance, or even the territory. The real battlefield is the human heart, which we've been singing about this morning, which was good. Purify your hearts. James chapter 4 is one of the most penetrating diagnoses of the human conditions anywhere found in the New Testament. He exposes selfish desires, worldliness, pride, judgmental attitudes, self-sufficient planning. But then he goes on to point to the only cure, the grace of God. Do you realize that we all have a war within us?

What causes fights and quarrels among you? James immediately takes us from behavior to motivation and our desires. The Greek word translated desires is the source of the term hedonism. It refers to sinful pleasures and selfish cravings demanding satisfaction. James is saying your greatest problem is not your outside, it's your inside. And Jesus taught exactly the same truth. In Mark 7 verses 21 to 23 he said, For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts. Notice that Jesus doesn't say our greatest problem is our circumstances. The human heart is the source. We often think, if only my circumstances changed, everything would be better. But scripture teaches that changing our circumstances without changing our hearts simply means the same problem reappears somewhere else. If you remember the, when Israel left Egypt, led by Moses, if you think about it, Egypt never completely left Israel. Remember how very quickly the people were complaining that their food was so much better in Egypt. James teaches us that the greatest battles in life are not usually around us, they are within us. So going on, James 4 verses 1 to 3, James begins with a question. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Notice what he doesn't blame. He doesn't blame Rome. He doesn't blame the economy. He doesn't blame politics. He doesn't blame upbringing. He points directly to the human heart. He says, don't they come from your desires that battle within you. Those desires are sinful cravings. Like we want recognition. We want comfort. We want control. In fact, we want our own way. And whenever something blocks those desires, conflict erupts. The heart behind conflict. Think about how many arguments begin. The arguments begin. For example, a husband says, why did you move my tools? His wife replies, why did you leave them there for six months? The argument isn't really about the tools. It's about expectations. Pride, self-interest. The issue behind the issue is usually the real issue. I'll repeat that.

[8:09] The issue behind the issue is usually the real issue. James teaches that external wars arise from internal wars. The battlefield of the church is often first the battlefield of the heart. A little girl was asked, why are you hitting my brother? And she replied, he hit me first. Her mother asked, what happened before that? And a little girl thought for a moment and answered, I wanted my own way. Now that is remarkably honest theology. In truth, many adult arguments could be summarized exactly the same way. I wanted my own way. Remember that famous song from Franks and Archer? I did it my way. Ever since the Garden of Eden, that has been the anthem of the human heart. James is not denying that genuine disagreements exist, but he is exposing the selfish motives that so often lie beneath them. If we looked at Genesis 4 verse 8, the first conflict recorded in scripture was between Cain and Abel. Why did Cain murder his brother? Because he wanted God's approval on his own terms. His way. Jealousy became anger. Anger became hatred. Hatred became murder. How many church disagreements begin with thoughts like these and end up with a church splitting and people getting hurt?

I wasn't consulted. I wasn't recognized. I didn't get my own way. Behind many outward conflicts lies an inward battle for self. The Puritan Thomas Manton wrote, the heart is the forge where all sin is hammered out. If our greatest problem is within, then our greatest need is not better circumstances, but God's transforming grace. James 4.2 says, you do not have because you do not ask. That's a remarkable statement. James has exposed the selfish motives behind their conflicts, but now he exposes something else. Their prayerlessness. Instead of bringing their needs to God, they were trying to obtain what they wanted by their own efforts. They schemed when they should have prayed. They complained when they should have prayed. They worried when they should have prayed. They manipulated when they should have prayed.

James says, you do not have because you do not ask God. That doesn't mean that every unanswered desire is simply due to our not praying. James immediately balances what he means in the next verse. But first he asks a searching question. When something is missing in your life, where is your first instinct to turn?

Do we complain? Do we blame someone else? Do we try to make things happen ourselves? Or do we go first to our heavenly father? Prayer is the language of dependence. Quarrelling is often the language of self-dependence.

These believers believed in God, yet they were living as though everything depended on themselves. They were fighting one another for things that they had never first brought before their father. And how often are we guilty of exactly the same thing? We analyse every possible outcome. We spend hours worrying and only minutes praying. We seek advice from friends, yet we neglect the one who invites us to come boldly to his throne of grace. Paul reminds us in Philippians 4-6, do

not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. You know that God actually delights to hear his children. Every good and perfect gift comes from him. Why then would we try to seize for ourselves what our loving father invites us to ask him for? We have wrong motives. So James balances teaching with verse 3. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.

[12:28] That you may spend what you get on your pleasures. Here's the other danger. Some people never pray. Others pray, but only because they want God to endorse their own agenda. As I've said before, God is not a heavenly vending machine. Prayer is not inserting a request and expecting a product. God is far more concerned with changing our hearts than simply changing our circumstances. So the question is not merely, what am I asking for? What am I asking for? It is, why am I asking for it? Am I seeking God's glory or simply my own comfort? Am I asking for something that will help me serve Christ more faithfully or simply satisfy my own desires? James reminds us that prayer is not a means of persuading God to finance our selfish ambitions. Prayer is God's appointed means of teaching us dependence, trust and submission.

The greatest example is the Lord Jesus himself in Gethsemane. Facing the cross, Jesus prayed, not my will, but yours be done. That is the essence of true prayer. Not getting God to agree with my plans, but bringing my heart into submission to his plans. Spiritual adultery, James 4, 4-6. Having exposed the war within, James now takes us a step farther. He suddenly changes his language. Until now he's been talking about quarrels and selfish desires. Now he says, you adulterous people. Wow, the words sound absolutely shocking. In fact, they were intended to shock. Now James isn't accusing these believers of physical adultery. He is drawing on one of the richest pictures in the whole of the Old Testament.

Throughout scripture, God presents himself as the faithful husband of his covenant people. Whenever they turned away from him to pursue idols or trust in the surrounding nations, God described it as spiritual adultery. It probably wasn't simply that they had broken a rule, it was that they had broken a relationship. Let's look at some of Old Testament background. When we read the prophets, for example, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, again and again, God accuses Israel of spiritual unfaithfulness. Jeremiah records God's heartbreaking words. In Jeremiah 3, 1, it says, you have played the harlot with many lovers. If you remember, Hosea actually lived out that message through his own painful marriage. James is applying exactly the same principle to Christians. Whenever we begin to love the world's values more than God's will, we too become spiritually unfaithful. Before we move on, let me make one observation because this language has sometimes been misunderstood.

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly described Israel as his covenant wife. As I said, through prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, he speaks of Israel spiritually adultery whenever she turns away from him. James is deliberately drawing on that familiar Old Testament picture. Remember, who is James writing to? He began this letter by addressing the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations.

[16:02] These were Jewish believers in the Lord Jesus. They, however, had not ceased to be Jews. They had come to recognize Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah. So James naturally goes back to explore the questions about Israel and the church. As Bible-believing Christians understand, some of those passages differently, and we haven't the time today to go into details, but I'm sure Ray, who's got more expertise than I have, will clarify perhaps on a different day. Thank you, Ray. But one thing should be clear.

James is not saying that God has abandoned Israel, nor is he denying God's continuing purpose for the Jewish people. The apostle Paul makes that abundantly clear in Romans 9-11, where he says, has God rejected his people? By no means. James' concern here is much simpler.

Whether speaking to Israel under the old covenant, or to believers in Christ under the new covenant, God's people are called to wholeheartedness, faithfulness in him. And that is the point James is making.

Spiritual adultery is loving the world more than the God who loves us. So what is worldliness? This is one of the most misunderstood words in the Christian life. Many people define worldliness by a list of external activities. For example, no cinema, no dancing, no cards, no television. Yet a person could avoid every one of those things and still be thoroughly worldly. Worldliness is not first about where we go. It is about what captures our hearts. It is adopting a way of thinking that leaves God out.

It is living as though this present world is all that really matters. It is loving what God hates. It is neglecting what God loves. Paul writes in Romans 12-2, do not be conformed to this world. [18:07] The world is constantly pressing believers into its mold. Its message is everywhere. Success is measured by possessions. Identity is found in achievement. Happiness comes through self-fulfillment.

Truth is whatever feels right to me. James says the Christian must refuse that mold. The world's thinking. Continuing verse 4, now we can look at friendship with the world, what it is. James says, friendship with the world is enmity with God. Notice carefully what he says. He does not say contact with the world. Remember Jesus mixed freely with sinners. He ate with tax collectors. He welcomed those whom respectable society rejected. We are called to be the salt and light in the world. The issue is not contact. The issue is allegiance. Who shapes my thinking? Who defines success? Who determines my priorities?

Who has my deepest affection? A ship belongs in the sea, but the sea must never be allowed into the ship. Christians belong in the world. The world must never be allowed to take possession of our hearts. James talks about the jealous love of God in verse 5. At first, that may sound confusing. After all, aren't we told that jealousy is wrong? The Bible condemns sinful jealousy and envy because they stem from selfishness. They want what belongs to someone else. They are rooted in pride and insecurity. God's jealousy is completely different. It is a holy jealousy, a covenant jealousy, the jealousy of a faithful husband who refuses to give up on his bride. God is never jealous because he is insecure.

He is never jealous because he feels threatened. He is jealous because he loves. Imagine a husband whose wife is being drawn into a destructive relationship. If he simply shrugged his shoulders and said, it doesn't matter. We wouldn't call that love because love cares, because love protects, because love longs for faithfulness. In the same way, God knows that every rival master, every idol and every false god ultimately destroys the people he loves. His jealousy is the jealousy of redeeming love.

[20:38] He refuses to abandon his people to things that can never satisfy. That's why his jealousy is not a weakness. It is an expression of his perfect love. In a nutshell, envy says, I want what belongs to you.

God's jealousy says, I will not lose those who belong to me. The Hebrew word often translates jealous is also translated jealous. The idea isn't petty possessiveness, but passionate covenant commitment. And that's why God can say in the Old Testament that he is a jealous God, while also commanding us not to envy. They're not the same kind of jealousy at all. Verse 6, the bit I like coming to, but he gives more grace. One of the sweetest sentences in the whole New Testament. He gives more grace. What wonderful words. James has shown us selfish hearts, prayerlessness, wrong motives, spiritual adultery. Yet God's answer is not, there is no hope for you. His answer is, he gives more grace.

Not less grace when we fail, more grace. When Peter denied Christ three times, more grace. When David fell into terrible sin, more grace. When the prodigal son returned home, more grace. John Bunyan beautifully wrote, there is more mercy in Christ than sin in us. What a glorious truth. No matter how far we have wandered, no matter how often we have failed, God's grace is always greater than our sin. But notice what James says next.

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Grace is freely given, but it is only received by those who are willing to humble themselves before God. And that is where James is now going to lead us.

[22:36] The road of restoration, verses 7 to 10. So having diagnosed the disease, James now gives us the remedy. These verses contain 10 instructions or commands. They are not 10 unrelated instructions or commands. Together they paint a picture of genuine repentance. Notice that James doesn't merely tell us to feel sorry for our sins. It shows us what repentance looks like in practice. So let's just go through them.

Number one, command. Everything, sorry, submit to God. Everything begins here. The word submit means to place yourself under another's authority. In fact, it's a military term describing someone taking their proper place under a commanding officer. Our culture dislikes that idea. Everyone wants atoning.

Everyone wants independence. Everyone wants the right to define truth for themselves. But that was the very temptation in the Garden of Eden, when Satan said, you can be like God. Ever since

then, humanity has been trying to sit on God's throne. Conversion is stepping off that throne. Repentance is surrendering it again every day. Number two command, resist the devil. Verse 7. Notice the order.

James does not say, resist the devil, then submit to God. He says, submit yourselves therefore to God and resist the devil. Victory over Satan begins with surrender to God. Many people become fascinated with spiritual warfare while neglecting simple obedience. James says, the first battle is not against Satan. It is against our own rebellious hearts. Paul teaches the same principle in Ephesians 6.

The armor of God is worn by those who are walking in obedience to God. When we stand under God's authority, we stand in God's strength. James gives a wonderful promise. The devil will flee from you.

[24:43] He is, after all, a defeated enemy. He is powerful, but he's not all powerful. Christ has already won the decisive victory at the cross. Command number three, draw near to God. Verse 8. What a lovely invitation.

James does not say, hide from God or run from God. He says, draw near to God. And then comes one of the most encouraging promises in scripture. It says, he will draw near to you. Throughout the Bible, we see God's heart towards repentant sinners. The father ran to embrace the prodigal son. Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners. The thief on the cross was received into paradise. The invitation still stands today. Hebrews 4.16 reminds us, let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. The God who commands us to draw near is the very God who delights to receive us. Still in verse 8, the command number 4, wash your hands and purify your hearts. That was a good choice, Joe. Purify your hearts. James now speaks the language of the Old Testament. Psalm 24 asks, who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. Hands represent our outward conduct, our actions. The heart represents our inward character, our motives. God is concerned with both. He is not satisfied with clean hands, hiding a dirty heart, nor with good intentions that never become obedient actions. What he does desire, is integrity. The same holiness on the inside as the outside. Number 5, verse 9, be wretched, mourn and weep. Now these words can sound severe. James is not condemning Christian joy. What he's doing is describing genuine sorrow over sin. There's a world of difference between regretting the consequences of sin and grieving because we have offended a holy God. Paul explains this beautifully in 2 Corinthians 7.

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. Many people regret getting caught. Few truly mourn the sin itself. James calls us to the kind of repentance that breaks the heart before it changes the life. Number 6 command, humble yourself before the Lord, verse 10. James comes back to where he began, humility. This has been the great theme running through the whole chapter. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Throughout scripture God delights to exalt those who humble themselves.

Remember Moses was called the meekest man on earth. David learned humility through failure. Peter learned humility through bitter tears. Above all we look to our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. The king of glory stooped to serve. The Lord of heaven washed his disciples' feet. The one who deserved the highest place willingly took the lowest. And because he humbled himself, God highly exalted him.

James therefore gives us a wonderful promise. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. Notice that James does not say we are to lift ourselves up. That is what pride does. Humility leaves our reputation, our future, our honour in God's hands. It is in his perfect time. He is the one who exalts his people. Instructions number seven. The sin of criticism. James 4.11-12. Having called us to humility before God, James now shows us what humility looks like in our relationships with one another.

[28:42] The person who has truly humbled himself before God has far less desire to exalt himself over other people. So James returns to a familiar subject. The tongue. Apparently chapter three wasn't enough.

Sadly, churches and Christians have struggled with careless words for 2,000 years. I'm not saying you're all old. And very little has changed. Number eight instruction. Why we judge. In Matthew 7, verses 3 to 5, why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye

when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite. First take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Why are we so quick to criticize others? Usually because pride elevates the self while diminishing someone else. We feel better about ourselves by pointing out someone else's failures. Jesus illustrated this perfectly in the Pharisees' prayer, remember? God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. It sounded like a prayer.

In reality, it was self-congratulations. His words revealed his heart. Whenever you become the constant critic of others, you should ask yourself, ourselves, whether pride has quietly taken root. Number nine command to have discernment. James is not telling Christians to abandon discernment. Jesus himself commanded discernment. Paul exercised discernment. Church discipline requires discernment.

False teaching must be recognized. And sin must sometimes be confronted. James is addressing something very different. He's addressing a critical spirit. The attitude that appoints itself judge, jury and executioner. A spirit that delights in finding fault rather than restoring a brother or sister.

[30 : 52] Number 10, a reminder that there is only one judge. Verse 12. James reminds us there is one lawgiver and judge. What a humbling reminder. The judge's seat is already occupied. God has never asked us to sit in it. Our responsibility. Our responsibility is obedience. His responsibility is judgment. When we remember that, it becomes much easier to leave ultimate justice in his hands. Now James will show us the illusion of control. James 4.13-17. He turns from judging other people to something equally common, assuming we are in control of our own lives. He introduces a group of successful merchants, making detailed business plans. Now there's nothing sinful about planning. In fact, the book of Proverbs commends wise planning. The problem is planning as though God did not exist. Listen to all the we wills.

We will go. We will stay. We will trade. We will make a profit. Notice who's missing. God. James exposes what we might call practical atheism. Not denying God's existence. It's simply living as though he is irrelevant. Verse 14. Life is a vapor. James responds with one of the Bible's most vivid illustrations. Life is like a vapor, a mist, a breath. It appears for a little while then it vanishes.

The Bible repeatedly reminds us of this truth. Psalm 90 tells us our days quickly pass away. Psalm 103 compares our lives to grass that flourishes for a season then disappears. Ecclesiastics reminds us again and again how brief life really is. James is not trying to make us pessimistic. He is teaching us to be realistic. Life is precisely because it's so brief. Especially relevant as we get older.

Perhaps this verse speaks differently depending upon our age. Children cannot wait to grow up. Teenagers long for independence. Young adults are busy building careers and families. Then suddenly we begin to ask, where have the years gone? One moment we are starting work. Next we will retire.

One moment our children and toddlers. Next they are grandparents themselves. Life moves with astonishing speed. The older we become the more we realize how true James' words really are.

[33 : 27] Verse 15. Under God's sovereignty. James says, if the Lord wills. Those four words are far more than a polite expression. They describe an entire way of looking at life. Every breath we take depends upon God.

Acts 17.28 reminds us. In him we live and move and have our being. Every tomorrow is a gift. Every opportunity is a gift. Every success is a gift. Remember Nebuchadnezzar? He had to learn that lesson the hard way. He believed his kingdom had been built by his own power and for his own glory.

God humbled him until he confessed. The most high rules in the kingdom of men. That remains true today. We make our plans. My wife is an expert planner. But we should hold them with open hands, which is what we do.

The Christian plans diligently, works faithfully, thinks wisely, but always recognizes that every plan is subject to the sovereign will of God. As Proverbs reminds us, in his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord establishes his steps. Now that's not an excuse for laziness. It is an invitation to humbly dependence upon God, who holds tomorrow in his hands. James 4.17, the sin of omission. James ends this chapter unexpectedly, and he says, if anyone then knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, it is a sin. That is one of the most searching verses in the whole letter. Most Christians are not wrestling with whether murder is wrong or theft or adultery. Our greatest struggle is often neglected obedience. Knowing what God has said and yet failing to do it. Knowing we should pray yet postpone in prayer.

Knowing we should forgive yet holding on to bitterness. Knowing we should encourage someone yet remaining silent. Knowing we should share Christ yet waiting for another opportunity.

[35:33] Delayed obedience is still disobedience. James exposed this in the rich young ruler. The man knew what Christ required. His problem was not ignorance, it was unwillingness. Knowledge without obedience brings greater responsibility. So James has come full circle. Back in chapter one he told us to be doers of the word.

Now he reminds us that knowing God's will without doing it is itself sin. So the conclusion, James chapter four begins with war, it ends with responsibility. And right in the middle stands one wonderful word, but. Don't you love the buts of the Bible? But he gives more grace. And without that word, this chapter would leave us in despair. James has exposed our selfishness, our pride, our worldliness, our criticism, our self-confidence, our neglected obedience. And if that were the end of the chapter, who could any of us stand? But he gives more grace. Grace greater than our pride. Grace greater than our failures. Grace greater than our worldliness. Grace greater than our inconsistency. Grace greater than our regrets. When your heart condemns you, he gives more grace. When you have failed, he gives more grace.

When you feel weak, he gives more grace. When temptation seems overwhelming, he gives more grace. When years have passed and regrets remain, he gives more grace. The Christian life is never sustained by our determination. It is sustained by God's grace. That grace, however, is never an excuse for disobedience. It is the power for obedience because he gives more grace. Submit yourselves to God.

Resist the devil. Draw near to God. Humble yourselves before the Lord and trust in his wonderful promises. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. And the Lord's people all said, Amen.

Let's just close with a word of prayer. And then we're going to sing about grace. Thank you, Lord, for speaking to us through your word today. Forgive us for the pride that you so easily takes root in our hearts and help us to walk in humility before you. Draw us closer to yourself that we may resist temptation. Submit to your will and seek your wisdom in every decision we make. Teach us not to boast about tomorrow, but to trust you one day at a time, remembering that our lives are in your hands.

[38:10] May we leave this place determined not only to hear your word, but to live it, bringing honour and glory to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's in his precious name we pray. Amen.