

## Godly Behavior

**Lesson Text:** James 4:1-12

**Background Scripture:** James 4:1-17

**Devotional Reading:** Proverbs 3:13-18

### James 4:1-12

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. <sup>3</sup> When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

*<sup>4</sup> You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? <sup>6</sup> But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."*

*<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

*<sup>11</sup> Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup> There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?*

### Today's Aim

- **Facts:** to explore a passage from James that rebukes worldliness and advocates godly behavior.
- **Principles:** to teach principles of holiness and justice
- **Application:** to encourage Christians to reveal Christ to the world through their godly ways.

### Introduction

James Taylor's popular song "You've Got a Friend" touches a chord in everyone. We all need friends.

We tend to want lots of friends, to be popular. This kind of casual friendship, however, does not really satisfy our intense longing for deep, lasting friendship—the kind of friendship that is mutual, intimate, unswerving. We will be very blessed to find this kind of friendship in one or two people in the course of our lives.

Today's lesson poses the attractive idea that God wants to be this kind of friend to us. In bonding with God in this way, Christians should be prepared for their lives to be revolutionized with regard to the world and with regard to other believers.

### **Lesson Background**

In James 4:1–12, the epistle's criticism of its audience comes to a climax. James's readers expose the inadequacy of their Christian faith by the mean-spirited way they treat one another in the community of the church. This leads to the demand made in 4:7–10 for repentance and recommitment to God.

People can hardly claim to be God's servants when they portray attitudes and behaviors that attack other servants of God. To put God's house into such disarray is disgraceful. Those who conduct themselves in this way not only alienate themselves from others, they make any kind of genuine relationship with God impossible.

### **Hindrances to Godly Behavior (James 4:1-6)**

James asks an important question in verse 1 by asking "*What causes fights and quarrels among you?*" He then proceeds to answer his own question with another question, "*Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*" This is meant to be a rhetorical question, a question in which the audience does not answer directly but considers the answer in his or her own hearts.

James is telling the readers that although they were believers, they were not acting like they had the faith. "*Fights*" are continuing feuds; "*quarrels*" are outbursts of anger. Neither of these are signs of a healthy church. James challenges Christians to recognize that behavior is determined by whether or not we are able to win the internal war with our lusts.

The Greek word behind *desires* comes into English as hedonism. This points to a lifestyle that is committed to indulging in worldly pleasures. This passage says that believers have within themselves cravings for these self-indulgent pleasures. If not controlled, this will result in destructive behavior toward the others in the church.

#### ***1. What was the source of the fights and quarrels among James's readers? (James 4:1)***

Improper relationships and desires are also accompanied by improper methods. It seems best to divide this verse into two parallel parts. The first would read "*You desire but do not have, so you kill.*"

Kill, along with fights and quarrels of the previous verse, is best taken figuratively. It seems inconceivable that Christians were involved in actual combat and murder without any mention of any governmental intervention. These strong words were chosen to stress the seriousness of their acts.

Jesus equated unjustified anger towards a brother with murder (Matt. 5:21-22), and John said frankly, "*Whoever hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15).

The second part of James 4:2 could be translated, "*You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.*" Envy leads to strife; thwarted ambition seeks revenge. Yet through all this a void remains: "*You do not have because you do not ask God.*" These readers had not

prayed for things they desired, perhaps because they knew they were not in God's will. Yet determined to have them, they resorted to unworthy methods to get them.

## ***2. What improper methods did they use to fulfill their desires? (v. 2)***

Some may have objected that they did pray but it did no good (v. 3). To these James replied that they asked improperly, seeking only to gratify their selfish pleasures. They displayed yet another evidence of worldliness—improper motives. It is possible to pray for good things for bad reasons. We may pray for a public ministry, expanded attendance in Sunday school or church, a larger place of worship, or bigger offerings. But whose glory do we seek in this? God knows our motives!

## ***3. What happened when James's readers did ask in prayer? (v. 3)***

James makes a bold statement in verse 4 calling his readers spiritual adulterers and adulteresses. He wanted to ensure that he included men and women in his statement. When a believer accepts Christ as Lord and Savior, he or she has made a vow to be committed to Him forever.

Keep in mind that the Church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-27), so a believer's confession is the same as him or her making a wedding vow to Christ. As a result, Christ takes a believer's confession very seriously. Failure to remain committed to Christ is like a wife cheating on her husband in her husband's presence. Nothing that a Christian does is hidden from God since He is all knowing.

If a person is not fully walking with God, then he or she is messing around with the devil. There is no middle ground. James' readers were very familiar with his allusion, for Old Testament Israel was likened to the unfaithful wife of the Lord (Jer. 3:20; Hos. 9:1).

## ***4. What did James call those who were worldly? Why? (v. 4)***

There is fine line between thankfully enjoying a well-prepared meal and gluttony; between appreciating the attractiveness of another person and lusting; between pursuing righteousness wholeheartedly and being prideful at being more righteous than others. Christian service can be either devoted to God or used as a means to gain a reputation for self.

To keep the adversary from gaining a foothold in our lives, we can daily open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to show us those areas where we are moving toward enemy territory (1 Corinthians 4:4). James declares that a double-minded approach to life is unstable (James 1:8).

## ***5. What are some ways that we cheat on God today? Which of our attitudes or actions indicate that we believe we can be both Christian and one who can sample all the world has to offer? How do we overcome this problem?***

The seriousness of worldliness is made evident by James's challenge: Did his readers think that the Scriptures spoke in vain (v. 5)? Their deliberate descent into worldliness implied that they were not taking Scripture seriously. They took its admonitions against worldliness lightly, as if they had nothing to say to them.

The second half of James 4:5 can be interpreted several ways. It seems best to take it not as a quotation from Scripture but as an additional statement to make the readers consider the seriousness of their disloyalty. It may read as follows: *“that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?”* This speaks of divine jealousy, a familiar doctrine to these Jews (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Zech. 8:2). *“Dwell”* (Gr katoikeo) differs from the word which signifies a temporary dwelling. The Holy Spirit’s indwelling in the believer is not transient, but He, as it were, makes His residence within us. *“Longs for”* (Gr epipotheo) speaks of intense desires, which explains why the charge of spiritual adultery was made in the previous verse. Its counterpart, spiritual faithfulness, measures the believer’s love for the Lord. Friendship with the world exposes one’s spirituality.

#### **6. What point did James make to demonstrate the seriousness of worldliness (v. 5)?**

##### ***Exhortation to Godly Behavior (James 4:7-12)***

A sharp contrast exists between worldly and divine jealousy; men want revenge, but *“he gives more grace.”* That statement plus the quote (Prov. 3:34), assure the repenting sinner that no offense is too great for God’s forgiveness.

If people who are God’s servants have made enemies among fellow servants in the church, a remedy for their situation exists. This remedy calls first for abject repentance before God. Next comes reformation in how people are treated, with a new emphasis on respect for them as well as respect for God, who created them.

#### **7. What does God provide for those who want to depart from a worldly life? (v. 6)**

Verse 7 is one of the most misquoted scriptures in the Bible. Often, it is quoted, *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* However, there is a condition that must be met before we can resist the devil. We must first *“submit yourselves, then, to God.”* It is God who gives us the strength to resist the devil; we can’t do it in our own strength. God will give us the strength we need when we wholeheartedly surrender to His will. Once we resist the devil through God’s strength, then the devil must flee from us.

We are then given further information on how the walk with God is restored: *“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”* (Jas. 4:8). *“Come near”* speaks of approaching Him in worship. If we want to worship Him acceptably, we must take the first step. But having done that, we find Him drawing near to us at the same time, ready to forgive, just as the prodigal’s father welcomed back his wayward son (Luke 15:17–24).

Restoring the relationship also entails cleansing, for worldliness pollutes the soul. The command to sinners to cleanse their hands indicates the need to forsake evil deeds, which they commit with their hands. The exhortation for the double-minded to purify their hearts speaks of a similar need to forsake impure motives of the inner person. Double-minded persons must exchange divided allegiance for wholehearted loyalty.

#### **8. So what must the repentant sinner do to flee from Satan and his unholy influence on our lives? (vs. 7,8)**

Repentance becomes evident through inner feelings and outward display. “*Grieve, mourn and wail*” refers to a sense of wretchedness that accompanies consciousness of sin.

It is also seen in one’s demeanor: “*Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom*” (Jas. 4:9). “*Laughter*” pictures the inappropriate revelry of a worldly way of life; this is to be replaced by mourning as the Holy Spirit convicts of sin.

This does not mean Christians should never be joyful or merry or that they should normally look downcast. James was addressing people who needed to put aside their superficial hilarity and re-examine their lives with seriousness. Humility is the only proper response (cf. Job 42:5-6; Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8; Acts 9:5-6).

### ***9. What kind of attitudes and actions reflect genuine repentance? (v. 9)***

James tells his readers that God will lift up those that choose to humble themselves to Him. However, as long as we aspire to recognition, we will have no standing with God. But when we accept the reality of our unworthiness, God exalts us by His grace. This was one of Jesus’ major themes (cf. Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14), and it was repeated by Peter as well as James (1 Pet. 5:6).

### ***10. What is God’s view concerning humility and exaltation? (v. 10)***

It seems very easy for Christians to condemn others who have fallen based on their behavior, but James tells us not to do so. There is nothing wrong with a Christian telling another Christian that their actions are wrong, but Christians are to focus on the act; not slander the person who committed the act. Only God has the right to focus on judging the person as He is the lawgiver and the one who holds the power of life and death.

When we judge other Christians, we are telling God that His justice is not good enough, and we put ourselves above God’s law. We should not worry about judging God’s people; we already have enough things to worry about in this life, anyway. When we allow God to judge His people, we can then enjoy peace.

### ***11. Why is it arrogant folly to be a judge of one’s brother? (vs. 11,12)***

#### **Conclusion**

No one finds it easy to apologize, even when we know we are wrong. It is embarrassing to let down our guard of pride and make ourselves so vulnerable to another person. Yet, if we truly want to be God’s servant, we must admit our sinful behavior and attitudes toward others, both to God and the people we have harmed. It is the only way forward into a deeper relationship with God and with others.

**Prayer** - Lord, convict us today of our worldly attitudes and actions, drive us to our knees before You, and lift us up into Your powerful arms of trust and commitment. We offer our prayer in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

**Thought to Remember** - Our deepest needs are not met by self-seeking but by humbly acknowledging our total dependence on God!