

## James 4:1-10

After discussing the subject of words in chapter 3, James now moves on to talk about conflict:

**James 4:1:** "From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"

Although this seems like a new topic, James is actually building on something that he said earlier. In the first chapter of his letter he explained where temptation comes from:

**James 1:13:** "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:

14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.

15 Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."

The source of temptation is *desire*. The reason we can be tempted is because we want things. Satan uses that against us by tempting us to sin in order to get the thing that we desire. As it turns out, conflict comes from this very same source. Just as temptation stems from desire, conflict also stems from desire. James is very clear about this: wars and fightings stem from our own desires. In other words, the reason we fight with people is to get the things that we want.

One of the key themes of the Bible is the idea of controlling our desires. Not all desire is evil, but there are many desires that do not come from God. Jesus made it plain that we can either serve Him or serve the world:

**Matthew 6:24:** "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

If we desire the things of God, then we will be about the Father's business. We will seek His will, His Word, and His decrees. Then we will have godly desires. That does not mean that we cannot be tempted, but it does mean that Satan's opportunity to tempt us is much more limited. If all we want to do is honor and glorify God then there are many things that will not have any appeal to us.

The apostle John warned us that we can either love God or love the world – but not both:

**I John 2:15:** "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."

These verses should make us pause and re-evaluate our life. What are our priorities? What things do we desire in our life? Does our heart belong to God, or does it belong to the world? Are we about the Father's business, or are we about our own business? What things really matter to us? If we

were to make a list of all the things that we wanted in life, what sort of things would we find on that list? There are so many things that we would like to have – and so few of them have anything to do with God or His Kingdom.

Our desire for things that don't really matter can get us into all kinds of trouble:

**James 4:2:** “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.”

Here it may seem like James is going a bit overboard. What child of God would ever murder someone in order to get the object of their heart's desire? It may seem unthinkable (and perhaps it ought to be unthinkable), but it has happened. Do you remember what King David did when he wanted to hide his sin with Bathsheba? He arranged for the murder of her husband:

**2 Samuel 11:14:** “And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

15 And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

16 And it came to pass, when Joab observed the city, that he assigned Uriah unto a place where he knew that valiant men were.

17 And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab: and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also.”

David – a man after God's own heart! – actually *murdered* someone in order to hide his sin. David was drawn away by his own lusts, and enticed, and that lust brought forth sin – and it led him to murder one of his own servants. This is the terrible power of sin. Not only does it tempt those who do *not* know God, but it also tempts those who *do* know God. We may think that we are above such things and that we would never stoop to such a terrible act, but the truth is that the only difference between us and David is the grace of God. David sought God with all his heart; he loved the Lord and served him with passion. Yet sin found its way into David's life, and it caused great destruction. After his sin with Bathsheba his life was never the same: his own son Absalom led a rebellion against him and tried to kill him.

Do not think that you are immune to sin, or that you are somehow above being tempted. Many pastors have seen their careers ruined by sin. Temptation is a very real thing, and it is something we should take seriously. If we do not get the better of sin then sin will get the better of us. Sin has led men as great as King David to murder.

Why do we lack things? Because we do not ask for them. Jesus Himself said that if we want something we should ask for it:

**Matthew 7:7:** “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

9 Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?

10 Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?

11 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”

There were a number of times in the wilderness when Israel found themselves without food or water. Instead of asking God, however, they complained. They could have just asked God to supply their needs, but instead they chose to yell at Moses:

**Exodus 16:2:** “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:

3 And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

All Israel had to do is cry out to God and He would have supplied their need. God had just delivered Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand. He had punished their enemies and shown His great power. He had amply demonstrated His love and care for them. But instead of doing that, they accused Moses of trying to kill them. They didn't ask; instead they complained.

James said that wars and fightings come from our lusts – and here we can see that in action. Israel wanted food. Instead of asking for it, however, they went straight to fighting. Their desire (which was not evil in and of itself) led to conflict. Instead of asking, they attacked. Instead of seeking God, they murmured against Moses.

God is not stupid. He knows what we need before we even ask for it. God is also not cruel or heartless. As Jesus said, even people – wicked as we are – know better than to give their children a poisonous viper when they asked for some fish to eat. Do we really think that God is going to rain down fire from Heaven and consume us all when we humbly ask Him for our daily bread? Why do we doubt the Father's ability to bless us with good things?

Yes, it is true that God does not always grant our requests. There was a time when the apostle Paul begged God for something, and God turned him down. But God did not do this because He was heartless or because He secretly enjoyed seeing Paul suffer. He had a good reason for it:

**2 Corinthians 12:7:** “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

God gave Paul a tremendous amount of divine revelation – so much that Paul risked being exalted above measure. In order to keep Paul humble God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh. When Paul asked God to remove it, He refused – but He didn't leave Paul empty-handed. Instead He did something else: He gave Paul the grace to endure.

The thorn in the flesh was not given out of malice; it was a blessing. Yes, it was a hard blessing, but it was a blessing all the same. Jesus told us that everyone who asks receives, and we see that illustrated here. Paul did not receive what he asked for, but he did not go away empty-handed. Instead

God gave him *grace*. After this incident Paul said that he would actually *rejoice* in his infirmities so that the power of Christ could rest upon him!

If you ask you *will* receive. You may not receive what you expect to receive, but never doubt the goodness or love of God. He knows far better than we do how to give good gifts to those who ask Him!

Sometimes, though, our requests are simply bad:

**James 4:3:** “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”

When we ask God to fulfill our sinful desires, we should not be surprised when He tells us no. If King David had asked God to kill Uriah to hide his sin with Bathsheba, do you think God would have listened to him? Of course not! God isn't going to honor that kind of request. That whole idea seems ridiculous – but how many of our prayers are along those lines? How many times do we ask God to glorify ourselves, or further our own kingdom, or fulfill our sinful desires? How many times are our requests about God, and how many times are they about ourselves?

God is not a magic genie who will grant anything that you request. If you ask amiss then you will most certainly *not* receive. God has no desire to fulfill your sinful desires or to turn your heart away from Him:

**James 4:4:** “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.”

There is more going on in this verse than it seems. As you may recall, James wrote this book to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1) – in other words, to Israel. Israel had a long history of disobedience. God sent them prophets to warn them to turn back to him, but they did not listen. They would not stop serving false gods or stop burning incense to idols. Because of this God promised to send terrible judgment:

**Ezekiel 6:13:** “Then shall ye know that I am the Lord, when their slain men shall be among their idols round about their altars, upon every high hill, in all the tops of the mountains, and under every green tree, and under every thick oak, the place where they did offer sweet savour to all their idols.”

Since Israel had worshiped idols on every high hill and under every green tree, God said He would pile up their dead bodies in those same places. In God's eyes Israel was guilty of adultery because they had forsaken their love for Lord and had given their heart to false gods. God condemned them for committing adultery with their idols on every high hill and green tree:

**Jeremiah 13:27:** “I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe unto thee, O Jerusalem! wilt thou not be made clean? when shall it once be?”

**Jeremiah 2:20:** “For of old time I have broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands; and thou saidst, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot.”

**Jeremiah 3:6:** “The Lord said also unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? she is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot.”

What did Israel do upon every high mountain and under every green tree? She served idols and worshiped false gods. That was the adultery that she committed.

James is pointing out that by seeking after the things of the world, believers are also guilty of adultery. They have given their heart to a false god and are just as guilty as ancient Israel. We are faced with a choice: we can be friends with God or we can be friends with the world. We can love God or we can love the world. *But we cannot have both.*

The people that James were writing to had chosen to side with the world. Their desires tempted them to sin, and in order to get what they wanted they fought with each other. They abandoned God and lusted after the things of the world, and that led to a great deal of trouble in the church. James is reminding them that lusting after the things of the world is a form of adultery against God, and God takes that very seriously.

In our time the call of the world is strong. There are many people who have decided to abandon God in order to become friends with the world. For example, the world today celebrates homosexuality and praises it. In order to win the praise of the world, many churches have stopped calling homosexuality a sin and instead welcome it, even going so far as to appoint homosexual ministers over their churches. God calls it a sin, but they would rather have the praise of the world instead of the praise of God, so they are calling evil good and good evil. They are putting their stamp of approval on sinful behavior because it wins them friends.

Of course, individuals do this as well. We may fail to take a stance because of what it will cost us, or we may side with sin because we want people to think highly of us. We are willing to compromise what the Bible says because we know that people don't like it. In our time doctrine is not loved; people seek to distance themselves from it and instead embrace the idea that “it's all good”. Rather than standing up for the Word, they stand up and defend sin. That may win them the friendship of the world, but it earns them the enmity of God.

Jesus Himself said that if you follow Him the world will hate you:

**John 15:19:** “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”

That is the choice that we must make. Whose side are we going to be on? It is impossible to be neutral. If you stand up for what is right then the world will hate you – there is no getting around it. You may win a lot of friends and admirers through compromise, but the cost is very high. Is it really worth losing your soul? Do you really want to be God's enemy?

Yes, it is true that we have a natural inclination to the things of the world:

**James 4:5:** “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?”

It is true that we have a sin nature. But it is also true that the power of God is far greater. God has not left us helpless in our struggle against the flesh. He has given us a powerful weapon – the

weapon of His grace:

**James 4:6:** “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.”

This echoes what the apostle Paul said when he talked about our struggle with sin:

**Romans 5:20:** “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:  
21 That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Notice what Paul says! Where sin abounded, grace abounded *even more*. Where sin reigned to death, grace reigns *through righteousness* unto eternal life. God has not left us defenseless against the enemy. He has not entered us into a contest that we cannot possibly win. He has given us His grace, and His grace *is* powerful.

God does not give His grace to everyone, though. James points out that while God gives grace to the humble, He resists the proud. You see, God hates pride:

**Psalm 12:3:** “The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things:”

**Psalm 119:21:** “Thou hast rebuked the proud that are cursed, which do err from thy commandments.”

**Psalm 138:6:** “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.”

**Proverbs 15:25:** “The Lord will destroy the house of the proud: but he will establish the border of the widow.”

**Proverbs 16:5:** “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.”

**Proverbs 21:4:** “An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.”

Do you see how much the Lord hates pride? A proud heart is sin; it is an abomination to the Lord. God hates the proud so much that He has cursed them, and will destroy them and their house. God doesn't even want to get near the proud; we are told that He knows them “afar off” – in other words, He keeps His distance from them. If you want to have a relationship with God then you cannot be proud. You must humble yourself and be lowly. You must come to God as a bankrupt sinner and beg Him for His forgiveness and grace.

In other words, you must submit to God:

**James 4:7:** “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee

from you.”

That is the difference between the proud and the humble. The proud make much of themselves; the humble make much of God. The proud praise and honor themselves; the humble praise and honor God. The proud look to their own strength; the humble look to God for strength. The proud look to themselves for deliverance; the humble look to God for salvation. The proud do as they please; the humble obey God.

If you want to please God then you must obey Him. You must submit yourself to Him. We live in a generation of people who care very little for the Word of God. They have no interest in obeying the Scriptures or following the commands. They think nothing of committing adultery. They approve of homosexuality. Lies, deception, and cheating do not bother them. They love themselves, not their neighbors. They have thrown out God's commands and have decided to do that which is right in their own eyes. All of this is an abomination to God. We *must* humble ourselves before Him. We *must* obey Him. We *must* submit ourselves to His commands. We must be about *His* will, not ours.

How do you overcome evil? By resisting it. How do you make the devil flee? By resisting him. In other words, you *fight back*. You refuse to submit yourself to sin. You refuse to give sin free reign in your life. You refuse to follow the lusts of the flesh. You refuse to seek your own will. If you fight him, he will flee. If you draw near to God then He will draw near to you:

**James 4:8:** “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.”

The question is, do you *want* to draw near to God – or are you too busy trying to make friends with the world? Do you *want* to glorify God – or are you too busy trying to glorify yourself? Do you *want* the things of God – or do you instead want the things of the world? If you truly want to draw near to God then cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Repent of your sins and ask forgiveness for them. Stop being double-minded; stop seeking the things of the world and the things of God. Become single-minded in the pursuit of God's glory and in the service of God's kingdom. Take advantage of the grace of God and serve righteousness instead of sin. If you draw near to God then He *will* draw near to you. That is a promise. If you humble yourself before God and seek Him then He will lift you up:

**James 4:9:** “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.”

If you turn from your pride and seek the Lord then He will lift you up. God will humble those who exalt themselves, but He will exalt those who humble themselves. If you weep over your sins and pride and cry out to God for forgiveness and grace then you will find it.

If you do this then things will change. Then you will find yourself closer to God. Then temptation will not seem as tempting as it once did. Then you will find a love for righteousness and a love for God's word. Then you will find less conflict and more love. If you truly want to change and find a better way, this is the only way to do it. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.