

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”

JAMES – Chapter Four

BIBLE STUDY PRESENTATION @ SESSION #6

(In this and subsequent study sessions, three translations of the Holy Bible are used; they are identified as THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE [AMP], THE MESSAGE [MSG], and THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION [NRSV].)

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION to this chapter/session –

In this chapter, James asks his readers to consider the source of wars and fights among themselves. He identifies the problem as their own desires for pleasure which wage war within themselves. Undoubtedly exaggerating, for the sake of emphasis, James describes their lust and coveting – even to the point of committing murder – for things they do not have and cannot obtain. His claim is that it renders their prayers fruitless, for they have only selfish motives in mind. Almost like an Old Testament prophet, James charges them with adultery for trying to befriend the world. He says that becoming a friend of the world leads to enmity with God, who jealously desires us. But James also asserts that if they are willing to humble themselves, God is willing to show them more grace. (James 4:1-6).

The apostle, therefore, counsels them to draw near to God in humble submission, with clean hands, purity of heart, and true contrition. He warns against speaking evil of brethren and judging one another, lest they become judges and not doers of the law. The fourth chapter ends with a call to make plans with the Lord’s Will in mind, for we have no idea what tomorrow holds and life is short. Otherwise, we boast in our arrogance and sin when we fail to do what we know is good. (James 4:7-17)

A) TRUE RELIGION DOES NOT BEFRIEND THE WORLD (JAMES 4:1-6)

.... IT IS THE SOURCE OF WARS AND FIGHTS (vss. 1-3)

[AMP] *“What leads to strife* (discord and feuds) *and how do conflicts* (quarrels and fighting) *originate among you? Do they not arise from your sensual desires that are ever warring in your bodily members? ²You are jealous and covet* [what others have] *and your desires go unfulfilled; [so] you become murderers.* [To hate is to murder as far as your hearts are concerned.] *You burn with envy and anger and are not able to obtain* [the gratification, the contentment, and the happiness that you seek], *so you fight and war. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³[Or] you do ask* [God for them] *and yet fail to receive, because you ask with wrong purpose and evil, selfish motives. Your intention is* [when you get what you desire] *to spend it in sensual pleasures.”*

[MSG] **“Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don’t have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn’t yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it. You wouldn’t think of just asking God for it, would you? Any why not? Because you know you’d be asking for what you have no right to. You’re spoiled children, each wanting your own way.”**

Facilitator’s Comments:

1. Conflicts and disputes among believers are always harmful. James tells us that these quarrels result from evil desires within us – we want more possessions, more money, higher status, greater recognition. When we want these things badly enough, we fight in order to do so. Instead of aggressively grabbing what we want, we should ask God to help us get rid of our selfish desires and trust him to give us what we really need.
2. A survey of the Greek words **POLEMUS** and **MACHE**, translated respectively into English as “*strife and conflicts,*” also “*wars and quarrels,*” will help to further understand the context in which they are used by James. **POLEMUS** means the chronic state or campaign of a war, while **MACHE** means the separate conflicts or battles in a war. The Greek word for members is **MELOS**, which means a “*limb*” such as an arm or leg. N.T. Christians are compared to the members of the body collectively; that is, the body itself as the seat of the desires and passions. Putting this all together, we are led to the probable conclusion that the words were addressed to members of the early Christian church – those who were members of one body – who were fighting and quarreling among themselves.
3. Further clarification is provided for the ancient biblical words that in English are translated “lust” or “covet” or a synonym. **HEDONE** translated “*lust*” means only sensual pleasure and by implication, desire. A different Greek word is used to denote intense craving or coveting for something.
4. Essentially, James makes use of an ‘economic’ illustration. Scarcity of goods leads to an increase in demand, and increased demands leads to disregard of other persons, even to the extent of inciting war. One way to solve the problem is by increasing supply. But to seek to increase supply by asking God for what we need is futile until we remove ourselves from the common economic way of thinking altogether. We receive what we need by no longer seeking it for our own benefit. We only gain when we give away!
5. This is not exclusively a biblical concept. The great philosopher, **Plato**, wrote: “*The sole cause of wars and revolutions and battles is nothing other than the body and its desires.*”

6. James here asserts that the craving for pleasure can effectively 'shut the door' on prayer. He identifies these as the most common problems in prayer:
 - Not asking
 - Selfishly asking for the wrong things
 - Uncaringly asking for the wrong reasons
7. A parallel thought occurs in **1 John 3:21-22**: "*Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*"
8. So, the ultimate choice in life lies between pleasing oneself and pleasing God; if we choose to make ourselves the main objective, we effectively separate ourselves from other satisfying human relationships and from God. James point is that a world in which the first aim of humans is to please themselves is a battleground of division and savagery.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. Quarrelling and fighting still occurs in today's church. What causes it? Why does it continue? Will it ever stop? When?
2. Do you talk to God at all? When you do, what do you talk about?
3. Do you ask only to satisfy your desires?
4. Do you seek God's approval for what you have already planned to do?
5. How might your life be enriched by making changes in the way that you pray?

Continuing further under point “A” ... TRUE RELIGION DOES NOT BEFRIEND THE WORLD)

... **ACTUALLY FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD IS ENMITY WITH GOD** (vss. 4-6)

[AMP] **“You [are like] *unfaithful wives* [having illicit love affairs with the world and breaking your marriage vow to God]! *Do you not know that being the world’s friend is being God’s enemy? So whoever chooses to be a friend of the world takes his stand as an enemy of God.* ⁵*Or do you suppose that the Scripture is speaking to no purpose that says, The Spirit Whom He has caused to dwell in us yearns over us and He yearns for the Spirit [to be welcome] with a jealous love?* ⁶*But He gives us more and more grace* (power of the Holy Spirit, to meet this evil tendency and all others fully). *That is why He says, God sets Himself against the proud and haughty, but gives grace* [continually] *to the lowly* (those who are humble enough to receive it).**

[MSG] **“You’re cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way. And do you suppose God doesn’t care? The proverb has it that “he’s a fiercely jealous lover.” And what he gives in love is far better than anything else you’ll find. It’s common knowledge that “God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble.”**

[NRSV] **“Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? ⁶But he gives all the more grace: therefore he says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”**

Facilitator’s Comments:

1. **“ADULTERERS”** (see NRSV above) uses the feminine form of the word in the Greek text. The reference, however, is not to physical but spiritual adultery. The whole conception based on the common O.T. idea of YHWH as the husband of Israel and Israel as the bride of God. (see Isaiah 54:5 – *“For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name.”* see also Jeremiah 3:20 – *“Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel.”* This spiritual concept carried over into the early Christian church with the ‘picture’ of the Church as being the bride of Christ. (2 Cor. 11:1-2; Eph. 5:24-28; Rev. 19:7; 21:9).

2. The N.T. often uses the Greek word **KOSMOS** (*world*), in the sense of ‘*the world apart from God.*’ Two passages illustrate what James means:
 - a) **Romans 8:7-8** “*For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law – indeed, it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*”
 - b) **2 Timothy 4:10** “*...for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*”
3. The best commentary to employ here is undoubtedly that of Jesus! **Matthew 6:24** “**No one can serve two masters.**” There are two attitudes that constantly vie for our attention. We may be so dominated by the things of this world that it becomes our master. Or, we may so use the things of this world to serve fellow humans and thereby prepare ourselves for eternity.
4. The passage citing a quotation identifying **God** as “**Jealous Lover**” (vs. 5), has long been a source of puzzlement to serious students of the Holy Bible. It cannot be specifically found in modern Bibles. Either, it is quoted from some book, now lost, which James considered scriptural; or, it may be a summation, on James’ behalf, of what he considered the essential message of the O.T. on this issue.

Jealous comes from the Greek **ZELOS**, which has within it the idea of burning heat; the thought is that God loves humans with such a passion that he cannot bear the thought that humans can carry any other love in their hearts. In modern times, we rarely connect this word with God; it has acquired a much lower significance. Nevertheless, the thought remains that God is the supreme lover of humans, and that love must be diffused among all His creation.

Use at several places in the O.T. helps to clarify that meaning:

- a) **Deuteronomy 32:16**, Moses says of God – “**They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods.**”
 - b) **Exodus 20:5** “**I the Lord you God am a jealous God.**”
 - c) **Zechariah 8:2** “**Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy.**”
5. James next asserts that **If God is our Jealous Lover**, how can we possibly give him the devotion he demands? The answer is that if God makes a great demand, he also gives us a great **GRACE** to fulfill it; and the greater the demand, the greater the Grace God gives.
 6. Grace, however, has a common characteristic – humans cannot receive it until they realize their need for it and come humbly to God for help. Thus, James concludes that the cure for evil desires is **humility**. Pride makes us self-centered and leads us to conclude that we deserve all we can see, touch or imagine. It creates greedy appetites for far more than we need. We can be released from our self-centered desires by **humbling ourselves before**

God, realizing that all we need is his approval. When the Holy Spirit lifts us, we realize that this world's sensual attractions are only cheap substitutes for what God has to offer.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. There is a sense in which “love” must be shared among all people; but, there is also a sense in which love gives and demands an exclusive devotion to just one person. In today’s society, can the concept of God being “jealous” of all our ‘love’ regain any traction?
2. How might one explain “God’s Grace” to someone who has not known it?

+ MOVING TO ANOTHER NEW THOUGHT ADVANCED BY JAMES +

B. TRUE RELIGION DRAWS NEAR TO GOD (JAMES 4:7-17)

.... BY SUBMITTING TO GOD’S AUTHORITY (vss. 7-12)

[AMP] ***“So be subject to God. Resist the devil [stand firm against him], and he will flee from you. ⁸Come close to God and He will come close to you. [Recognize that you are] sinners, get your soiled hands clean; [realize that you have been disloyal] **wavering individuals with divided interests, and purify your hearts [of your spiritual adultery]. ⁹[As you draw near to God] be deeply penitent and grieve, even weep [over your disloyalty]. Let your laughter be turned to grief and your mirth to dejection and heartfelt shame [for your sins]. ¹⁰Humble yourselves [feeling very insignificant] in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you [He will lift you up and make your lives significant]. ¹¹[My] brethren, do not speak evil about or accuse one another. He that maligns a brother or judges his brother is maligning and criticizing the Law and judging the Law. But if you judge the Law, you are not a practicer of the Law but a censor and judge [of it]. ¹²One only is the Lawgiver and Judge Who is able to save and to destroy [the One Who has the absolute power of life and death]. [But you] who are you that [you presume to] pass judgment on your neighbor?*****

[MSG] **"So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet. Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. God is in charge of deciding human destiny. Who do you think you are to meddle in the destiny of others?"**

FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:

1. Although God and Satan are depicted as being at war, we don't need to wait until the end to see who will win. God has already defeated evil. Satan is here now, however, and is constantly trying to win us over to his wicked cause. With the Holy Spirit's power we can resist the devil and he will flee from us.
2. In James' thought the ethical demand of Christianity is never far away. Although he has talked about the grace that God gives the humble which allows humans to meet God's demands, he is sure something more is needed beyond asking and passively receiving. He is sure that moral effort is of prime necessity.
3. James' appeal is addressed to those who are identified in the Greek as **HAMARTOLOS**, which means the **'hardened' sinner**. His demand is for reform that will embrace both outward conduct and inner desires; **"clean hands and a pure heart."**
4. **"Cleanse your hands"** once denoted only a ceremonial cleansing which made a priest fit to approach the worship of God. But, it soon came to stand for much more, (i.e. moral purity). Biblical thought demands a 4-fold cleansing:
 - Cleansing of the **lips** (Isaiah 5:5,6)
 - Cleansing of the **hands** (Psalm 24:4)
 - Cleansing of the **heart** (Psalm 73:13)
 - Cleansing of the **mind** (James 4:8)

Words, deeds, emotions and **thoughts** must be clean! Inwardly and outwardly a human must be clean, for **"only the pure in heart shall see God"** (MT 5:8)

5. James gives 5 ways to draw nearer to God:
 - a) Submit to God. Realize that you need his forgiveness and be willing to follow him;
 - b) Resist the devil; don't allow evil to entice and tempt you;
 - c) Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts – that is: lead a pure life;
 - d) Lament and mourn and weep in sincere grief for your sins;
 - e) Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will lift you up!

6. **Humbling oneself**, means recognizing that our real worth comes from God alone. It is working with his power and guidance, not with our own independent effort. He reaches out to us in love and gives us worth and dignity, despite our shortcomings.

7. Let God be the Lawgiver and Judge:
 - a) Do not speak evil of one another and judge one another
 - Otherwise you speak evil of the law and judge the law
 - Otherwise you are not a doer of the law, but a judge
 - It is a breach of the Royal law that we should love our neighbor as ourselves
 - There are few activities in which the average person finds more delight than to tell or listen to a slanderous story about someone else!
 - b) When there is really only one Lawgiver who is able to save and destroy.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. **As Christians are we never to judge actions or behavior of others?**

2. **Can we judge others and yet not sin?**

3. **What about jurists in our civil and criminal courts, and those called to "jury duty;" Do they sin when carrying out these civil duties?**

(Continuing further under point “B” ... TRUE RELIGION DRAWS NEAR TO GOD)

... BY SUBMITTING TO GOD’S WILL (VSS. 13-17)

[AMP] ***“Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city and spend a year there and carry on our business and make money. ¹⁴Yet you do not know [the least thing] about what may happen tomorrow. What is the nature of your life? You are [really] but a wisp of vapor (a puff of smoke, a mist) that is visible for a little while and then disappears [into thin air]. ¹⁵You ought instead to say, if the Lord is willing, we shall live and we shall do this or that [thing]. ¹⁶But as it is, you boast [falsely] in your presumption and your self-conceit. All such boasting is wrong. ¹⁷So any person who knows what is right to do but does not do it, to him it is sin.”***

[MSG] ***“And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, ‘Today – at the latest, tomorrow – we’re off to such and such a city for the year. We’re going to start a business and make a lot of money.’ You don’t know the first thing about tomorrow. You’re nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing. Instead, make it a habit to say, ‘If the Master wills it and we’re still alive, we’ll do this or that.’ As it is, you are full of your grandiose selves. All such vaunting self-importance is evil. In fact, if you know the right thing to do and don’t do it, that, for you, is evil.”***

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. It is good to have goals, but goals can disappoint if God is left out of them. There is no point in making plans as though God does not exist, because the future is in His hands.
2. Life is short no matter how long we live. Humans must not be deceived into thinking that there is lots of remaining time to live for Christ, to enjoy loved ones, or to do what you know you should. Live for God today is the message! Then, no matter when life ends, you will have fulfilled God’s plan for you.
3. We tend to think that doing wrong is sin. But James tells us that sin is also not doing right. (sins of commission and sins of omission)

FINAL DISCUSSION BREAK:

What would you like to be doing 1 year from now? 10 years from now?

How will you react if God steps in and rearranges your plan?

With what qualification can one make plans for the future?