

The Believer and Worldliness

James 4

Overview – Worldly Conflict: *James 4:1-10*

Source of Strife

One thing is certain, since the fall of man there has always been strife in this world. The earth has seen its share of wars and bitter feuds. Like the Jewish believers, we are not exempt from this problem. It is possible the early believers argued and fought over positions in the church, seeing how James already dealt with personal ambition (*James 3:1-2*). In this passage James addresses the source of strife. To put an end to any problem we must know where it originated. Simply telling people to stop fighting does not cut it. Knowing the source allows us to deal with the issue.

Strife and war are products of lust, setting our sights on worldly treasures and pleasures. In this case, the believers desired but did not have. Their fleshly longings produced discontentment. Soon, that which was desired was taken by force or deception, and although they murdered and envied they still did not obtain. Remember, murder does not necessarily mean killing, hatred is murder (*1 John 3:15*). It was their envy that led to fighting and warring. Selfish desires resulted in strife, so there was no contentment to be found only troubles. When all was said and done they remained unsatisfied because their lusts were never fulfilled. We are reminded that it is possible to have the world's treasures and be unfulfilled. They even prayed and still did not receive. Ungodly and wicked men are fond of prayer when facing difficulties or wars. In this world we find that the contentious are often religious. They seek after that which will gratify their lusts, like success or material possessions, and this ruins their prayers. Motives need to be examined when we pray or when prayers remain unanswered. If we seek the treasures of the world in order to enjoy the world, God is correct for denying our requests.

*"Most men desire the gifts of God, not God himself."
Anonymous*

This passage also offers a warning concerning our relationship with the world. Loving the world is considered to be adulteress because affections are given to the world instead of God. (*Hosea 3:1; Isaiah 57:3-7*). This friendship produces enmity with God, because they are in direct opposition (*1 John 2:15-17*). To love the world means to desire and long after its teachings, philosophies, methods, amusements, etc. When this is done, one may appear to be religious but will live like anyone else in the world. Notice, it matters not if you belong to a church or not, but how you live your life. One cannot be a friend of the world and a true believer (*Matthew 6:24*). James sums it up by referring to our

Chapter Outline

- I. Worldly Conflict: *James 4:1-10*
 - A. Source of Strife: *James 4:1-4*
 - B. Source of Success: *James 4:5-10*
- II. Worldly Conversation: *James 4:11-17*
 - A. Belittling Conduct: *James 4:11-12*
 - B. Boasting Conduct: *James 4:13-17*

The Believer and the World

We can be friends with the world.
James 4:4

We can conform to the world.
Romans 12:2

We can love the world. *1 John 2:15-17*

We can be condemned with the world. *1 Corinthians 11:32*

lustful spirit, it is natural for us to look upon others and desire what they have. Often it is this sinful desire that drives us to achieve and excel, either to have what others possess or do what others accomplished. This leads to worldly behavior and is the source of strife.

Source of Success

The only way to deal with the world is with God's grace. The Lord is able to provide what is necessary to live for Him. In this passage we find that He gives more grace; more than what is deserved or expected. God's grace is His unmerited kindness towards believers. It begins with salvation, which is by grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Lord continues, by grace, to bless the believer in their life. With God's grace we can overcome our sinful passions. To receive this grace, we must be humble because God resists the proud (Proverbs 8:13, 16:18). The humble seek after God and His ways instead of living in opposition to Him. Humility begins with submission to God, yielding to what the Lord has determined and done. It requires one to be content with God's direction and satisfied with His decisions. A humble person willingly submits to the Lord, knowing He will always do what is best (Romans 8:28).

It is also vital to resist the devil. Do not yield, submit, or compromise in any way, but stand firm and resist his attacks (Ephesians 4:27). This is a conscious decision. Believers must decide to resist the devil and when they do, he will flee. The devil has no interest in one that is submitted to God because he is no match for God's grace. With God all things are possible, including defeating the devil's attacks (Philippians 4:13).

James also challenged the readers to draw nigh to God. In order to do this we must separate from this world. Sinners must cleanse their hands. For the Jews, cleansing the hands was symbolic of setting aside sin (Psalm 26:6; Matthew 27:24). The thought is that we must seek cleansing when we approach God (Psalm 26:6). If our hands are not cleansed of sinful deeds, our efforts to please God will be in vain. Then James went further and directed them to purify their hearts. One may display humility but possess a proud heart and if the heart is not cleansed, nothing else matters. Our conduct is a reflection of our heart's condition (Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 12:34; Mark 7:21). When sin is found in a heart it should produce mourning and weeping. It is important to recognize our guilt before God and seek His forgiveness (1 John 1:9). God will revive the spirit of the humble (Isaiah 57:15). He is willing to forgive and exalt. He alone is able to replace the anguish with joy (Psalm 51:12).

Overview – Worldly Conversation: *James 4:11-17*

Belittling Conduct

James returned to the subject of speech, evil words in particular. Evidently there was a problem with slander amongst the Jewish believers. That is not surprising, since misspoken words have plagued every church at one time or another. Why is this? Perhaps it is easier to talk about people instead of to them and more convenient to talk about a problem instead of dealing with it. Because of their inappropriate words, they became judges of the law. They spoke against the law of liberty and established rules and regulations for believers to follow (James 1:25, 2:12). Rules that God did not set. This conduct placed them above the law. It made them superior to what God decreed. This is dangerous because it assumes authority that was never given instead of focusing on obedience. Those that establish laws quickly become filled with pride and are often lacking in obedience before God.

There is only one lawgiver, God (Romans 14:4) No man or church has authority to make laws. We are limited in power and knowledge, and are prone to be personal (Romans 14:13). How can we make laws when we cannot even live according to God's law (Romans 3:10, 23)? It is best to submit to God and encourage others to do the same. He alone possesses power to save or destroy (Matthew 10:28). God will judge correctly due to His holiness. This does not promote anarchy but reminds us that God is the supreme ruler. Any law that is made contrary to God's word, is a man made rule that He is not bound to honor. Men can make all the laws their hearts desire, but God remains superior. Set aside the evil words and praise God with your tongue.

"The church hath not power to make and unmake scripture at pleasure, but only to communicate and hold forth the truth."

Thomas Manton

Boasting Conduct

Self-confidence has always been a problem for men and women. It is in our sinful nature to believe we control our future, but that's not the case. We possess no power over tomorrow and have no guarantee of seeing it. Yet, many presume to know the future and are certain they will have it. James provided an example of this presumptuous nature, with the planning of certain businessmen. These powerful men were confident the future belonged to them, so they treated tomorrow as if it were today. But how could they be sure they had tomorrow? The arrogance continued, these merchants were certain of their journey and future residence, but how could they be sure they would make it? They were also positive of their success; however, that is never guaranteed. Great plans have failed miserably and profit has eluded many diligent businessmen. James did not reprove planning, business, or profit. He pointed out the folly of self-confidence concerning these areas. These merchants lived with the false notion that the future belonged to them (Proverbs 1:32, 27:1). There was no dependence upon God.

Life is a mystery. There is nobody that knows what the future will bring. Life is also short and compared to a vapor, which lasts for a moment (Job 7:7; Psalm 102:3). So before we get overly confident, it is good to remember that life is fragile and often ends suddenly (1 Peter 1:24). Each day is a blessing from God. Every breath taken is a gift from the Almighty. He is in control of life. If the Lord will, we shall live. He also oversees this world. If the Lord will, we shall do this or that (Hebrews 6:3). Recognition of God's authority produces confidence in God and not self. It causes one to look to God for strength and praise Him when blessed. Any boasting is evil. There is much bragging in our world today, great words that exalt self. Even churches have become houses of self-promotion instead of places to worship God. Beware of becoming dependent upon self instead of trusting in God (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Since the truth is known, it must be applied. It is wrong when we refuse to do that which we know to be correct. In this case, it concerned self-confidence instead of living by faith. But this principle can be applied to any teaching found in God's Word. Let this be a warning to individuals that persist in their wrong ways and churches that ignore Bible teachings.

Questions for Consideration

Why do prayers remain unanswered?

What is it to ask amiss?

How does James characterize the friendship of the world?

Why does God resist the proud?

Why does God bless the humble?

Why does the devil flee when resisted?

What should be our attitude towards sin?

What does James compare life to?

How should we make plans for the future?

Why is boasting a sin?

Points to Ponder

What is it to love the world?

It is to seek after the world in order to enjoy its pleasures. When this occurs one will look for the world's approval and desire its applause. Eventually they will choose the fellowship of worldly people instead of seeking the Lord. Basically, it is to copy the world and become like it.

Who are the proud?

The proud are those filled with self-esteem. Because they highly regard their importance and self-worth they become conceited. Their pride is evident in many ways, with their talents, achievements, etc. Sadly, pride is even found amongst believers.

Who are the humble?

The humble have a proper understanding of their condition. They do not claim any greatness or importance because they recognize God's work in their life. Instead of lifting up their heart, they seek after the Lord and allow Him to exalt them.

What's wrong with planning?

Nothing, as long as we look to God in the process, plan according to His will, and trust He will allow us to see things through. When God is considered in our plans, self-confidence gives way to living by faith. It is no longer about our desire but God's will.

How are we to live?

One day at a time. We usually number our life in years. Perhaps it sounds nicer and makes us feel younger. But we are to count the days and use them correctly. It is wise to live one day at a time because nobody is promised tomorrow. Serve the Lord while you are able.