

# James

## Lesson 4

### “James Chapter 4”

**Objective:** To provide an exegetical analysis for this chapter and provide some hermeneutical insights that will be helpful in the application of this text in the life of the Christian living in the 21st century.

**Materials:**


- Commentaries
- Books
- Bible Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Journal Articles
- Greek Text

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## **Procedures**

- 1.** To provide a fresh, literalistic translation of the text.
- 2.** To examine the background and historical setting of the textual world and any imagery used in the text.
- 3.** To unpack the meaning of the text to the original audience.
- 4.** To provide life applications of the text for us today.

There have been questions regarding how this chapter connects to what James has already written in his letter, what purpose does it have in the overall message that he wants to send out. To briefly explore that question, 4:1-12 further unfolds the second main section of the letter body, which is an expansion of the discussion regarding the theme of wisdom and speech. The discussion in 4:1-10 flows so naturally from 3:13-18 that some commentators keep these two subsections together as a single unit. James, having just warned his readers regarding the evils that result from jealousy and rivalry (3:14, 16) now points out what some have allowed those motives to produce - coveting and quarreling - which resembles devotion to this fallen world rather than devotion to God (4:1-6). Verses 7-10 offer the antidote to the evils that have befallen them: resist the devil (it is important to recall the link between the world and the devil 3:15), and submit to God (in line with those who exhibit wisdom from above, cf. 3:13, 17-18). In verses 11-12 the readers are reminded that James has not forgotten the key illustration of the kind of wisdom one manifests, which is displayed prominently for all to see in one's speech. Speaking against one another is the primary



example of how people act on their own selfish ambition. Just as such actions impugn those created in the image of God, such actions implicitly attack God himself (3:9). These actions also oppose God's Law that prohibits slander and false judgement, and amounts to a critiquing of God, who gave the Law in the first instance.<sup>1</sup> It is common today for everyone to critique everyone from world leaders, to movies, to preachers, to fellow members of the church. James says this is the way of the world and not the way of the people of God and for those judging in the church this amounts to putting God himself on trial.

James makes connections in this section with material from still earlier in his Epistle: The lusts of 4:1-3 recall the evil desires of 1:14-15. The "warring" in one's members in 4:1, utilizes the identical term that is used in 3:5-6, of the tongue that proved so dangerous and damaging. The combination of murder and adultery in 4:2 and 4 repeats the pairing in 2:11 of the two commandments from the 10 commandments that prohibit those actions. Becoming the friend of God reminds the readers of a

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 182.

similar commendation given to Abraham (2:23). The humble person who receives grace is reminiscent of the “humiliated” of 1:10, who will be exalted, a thought which is repeated with parity in 4:10. Cleansing hands and cleansing hearts (4:8), makes the application of the language of ritual purity applicable to moral issues just as 1:27 did when it challenged the readers to keep themselves unstained by the world. The command for the wicked to humiliate themselves in repentance (4:9) employs the same concept as in 1:10 when it predicts that the rich person’s pride will be his humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

The rebuke given by James concerning improper judgement (4:11-12) employs the same Greek word group (κριτής) that he uses to censure vacillation in 1:6 (διακρίνω), and discrimination in 2:4 (διακρίνω), and in 3:17 he calls for them to be “impartial.” The declaration that there is only one lawgiver and judge (4:12a) applies the confession of Judaism relating to monotheism, to the giving of the law and to the one who gave it: this is spelled out even more explicitly in 2:19. Many see James turning to a new topic in 4:13-17, but in reality even these verses

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<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 182-183.

continue the theme of proper and improper speech by stressing what people say about their planning for the future.<sup>3</sup> James has carefully crafted his letter and he builds on those themes introduced earlier in his writing here in this chapter.

<sup>4:1</sup> From where do the conflicts and disputes among you come from? Is it not from this, namely, from your desires which are at war within you? <sup>4:2</sup> You lust for things and you do not have, you murder, and you are filled with jealousy, and you are not able to obtain what you lust for, you fight and you make war, you do not have because you do not ask, <sup>4:3</sup> you ask and you do not receive because you ask wickedly, in order that you may spend what you lust for on your own pleasures.

Earlier James talks about being “double minded” (δίψυχος) or quite literally “double souled” (1:8), here in this section he will pick up once again on this theme. There has been a lot of discussion over the meaning of this term (δίψυχος), with some linking the origin of its meaning with the heart (καρδία). In this section James will pick up not only this term (4:8), but the consequences of a life lived in such a state of duplicity. It is likely,

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<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 183.

according to Seitz, that the real antecedent of the notion expressed by the antecedent δίψυχος is to be found in the rabbinic conception of a double heart, or literally two hearts. Such a state, in Jewish, rabbinic, thought, leads to sin causing a person to forsake the true way. Δίψυχος then is the inner disunity of the heart that is referred to by the rabbis using the term “two hearts,” which renders a person vulnerable to the assaults of the tempter and to the influence of “evil desires” that come from an inner vulnerability created by this duplicitous internal wavering.<sup>4</sup>


James in this section will elaborate on the consequences for such a condition not only on the part of the individual, but he will indicate the affect that such a condition has on the wider church too. He begins at verse 1 asking his readers to indicate the source of the conflicts and the quarrels that exist among them. He then goes on to tell them the source of these problems is not from outside, but from within them, from their own passions. James recognizes that these things come from within the person and they are the outflow of a heart that is not wholly, and fully

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar J. F. Seitz, “Antecedents and Signification of the Term ΔΙΨΥΧΟΣ, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 66 (1947), pp. 211-219.

committed to the cause of Christ. It is as if such a person has two hearts, one that is devoted to Christ and his Gospel, while the other is devoted to the world and what it sees as important. There is a war going on inside the person and this internal war spills out into the church and creates conflict and quarreling in the church itself. The affect is devastating and debilitating to the church and hinders it from fulfilling the mission of God.

The inevitable outcome of these passions, these desires is “murder” and “envy.” Here James is not necessarily referring to their actually being murder in the churches to whom he writes, but he is using a rhetorical device to issue a warning to them that will be startling enough to wake them up from their stupor before their battling actually leads to such consequences. The murder spoken of here may even more serious than physical murder because it has eternal consequences. The things that James speaks of here may lead to people being pushed away from the church because of the hypocritical nature of those in the church. This then is not just murder of the body, but of the soul itself (Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). In the context of Scripture, one such example of the connection between envy, jealousy and murder



can be found in the narrative of Cain and Able (Genesis 4). Desire and envy are characteristic features of the world, these have been brought into the community of the church and they have infected the religious piety of the community of believers. Even their prayer life has been contaminated by envy and desire so that their motivation for prayer is wicked; they desire things in order to spend what they receive on themselves. They use prayer to God in order to attain what they envy in others.<sup>5</sup> This is the way of the world and not the way of the church.

James appears to be addressing, very precisely, what has become the central motivation among many Christians even today, which is known as the “Health and Wealth Gospel.” This doctrine teaches that God wants to bless his people and that if his people will name and claim the blessings that they desire God will grant them. The desire for having the things prayed for is in order to be personally blessed by them, the kingdom of God and the will of God is not a priority in such a system, or indeed in such a setting God becomes an idol of a person’s own perception. They would say that of course God wants good things for his

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick J. Hartin, *James of Jerusalem*, Interfaces series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2004) p. 212.

children, he wants to bless them and for them to be healthy and wealthy. Of course there is an element of truth in these words, but the focus of God is not centered upon the material world but upon the spiritual eternal values of his kingdom. Certainly it is the case that God loved his son Jesus, but he did not show his love for him with material, worldly wealth, or with rescue from physical pain, torment, and death. The will of God was that he should suffer and die for the kingdom mission of God. If a person has wealth and health these things should be used for kingdom purposes and not simply for a personal hedonistic agenda. James calls to his readers for a singleminded devotion to the cause of the Gospel.

<sup>4:4</sup> Adulteresses, do you not know that the love of the world is enmity with God? Whoever desires to be a friend of the world, makes an enemy of God. <sup>4:5</sup> Or do you think that in vain the scripture says, the spirit which dwells in you he longs for jealously? <sup>4:6</sup> But he gives greater grace, therefore it says, God opposes the arrogant, but to the humble he gives grace.<sup>6</sup> <sup>4:7</sup> Therefore, be subject to God, and resist the devil and he will flee


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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 3:34 - Although he is scornful to arrogant scoffers, yet he shows favor to the humble. NET.

from you, <sup>4:8</sup> come near to God and he will come near to you.

Cleanse your hands and purify your heart, you that are double souled. <sup>4:9</sup> Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be transformed into mourning and your joy into dejection. <sup>4:10</sup> Be humble before the Lord and he will exalt you.

James now turns to an illustration from marriage with regard to exclusivity of the relationship that is called for by the Gospel toward God. A variety of societies have experimented with polygamy, and even polyamory, but there is something embedded deep in the human soul that seeks to bond with one person above all others. Of course the temptation to stray is powerful, but even in multiple relationships there usually is a tendency, not to multiple simultaneous relationships (or if it does the people most often find themselves torn apart inside), but to a new exclusive bond. The Bible will often use the exclusive partnership of marriage as an image of the exclusive claims of God on the human life. It is in this way that James uses the term “adulterers,” (verse 4) not to accuse his readers of marital infidelity, but to warn them that being friends with the world means being enemies with God. This is an extremely and




powerful concept, and it is meant to shock and startle the readers of this epistle.<sup>7</sup> Note that James indicates that the people doing this make a choice, they decide to be the world's friend and in doing so they become an enemy of God. The choice is clear be a friend of God like Abraham, or a friend of the world and be an enemy of God. There is no fence straddling allowed.

Some might ask the question as to what James means by the using the term the “world” here, and how does this all relate to what he has been saying about fighting, making war and asking for things in the wrong way? By the the term “world” James appears to mean, “the way the world behaves,” the pattern of life, the underlying narrative, the things people want, expect, long for, and dream about. The things that drive people to do what they do with their lives. If a person goes with the flow, the drift of the world without reflecting on what they are doing, just following habits of mind and body from all around them the chances are such a person will then become friends with the world. Such a person will be seen as normal by those around them. It takes

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<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 26-27.




courage to stand out from the crowd and to be different. It also requires determination, and intentionality.<sup>8</sup> Following Christ does not just happen, it takes effort, it is swimming upstream against the flow.

Why is friendship with the world at the heart of the quarreling, the conflict, the hostility? It is this way because in “the world” the ultimate answer to winning an argument is a fist, a boot, a gun, a bomb, violence, force, or power. People may smile and appear to be civil, and even friendly, society may appear open and generous, but just go against society and you will feel the displeasure of that society.<sup>9</sup> This is the way of the world, but the problem for James is that at least some are bringing that same scenario into the church. Someone speaks up, expresses an opinion that the group does not like and there is an eruption of aggression. It may be passive, but it is aggression nonetheless, sometimes directed at the individual, or even at their family through a whole host of time tested and tried worldly, intimidation techniques. To act in such ways is to act as an enemy

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<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 27.



of God. Such people may win the battle, but ultimately they have set themselves up to make war against God and they will lose that war.

To look at this from the other side we might ask the question of what it would be like to be a friend of God? For a start it would mean taming the desires that agitate a person inside. Taming the desire to get what a person cannot, or perhaps should not, even have. Desires that push us to fight, struggle, manipulate, kill, or make war. Taming those desires that lead us to pray for, to long for, things that are simply for our own comfort and pleasure rather than for the glory of God. These are people that claim to be the people of God and yet their spirit of self-centeredness indicates that they do not have an exclusive friendship with God. In particular James highlights the issue of humility. This is something that the world lacks, but there is arrogance in abundance; arrogance that says my desires come first, that say my cause is worth fighting, and even killing for. The cure for this is of course to submit to God (verse 7) rather than to ask God to submit to **me**.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 27-28.

James indicates that God multiplies his grace to those who need it, but not arbitrarily, or capriciously, but to those who are willing and able to humble themselves and accept the grace that God offers (verse 6). He challenges his readers to, in humility, “submit to God”. He also challenges them to “resist” the devil and tells them that if they would resist the devil then he would flee from them. There is no promise that when the Devil flees, life will now be easy and good, we are just told that he will flee. They are then told to draw near to God and that if they do this then the promise is that God will draw near to them (4:8). James returns once again to the issue of purity calling upon his readers to cleanse their hands to remove the filth of their selfishness and to make their hearts pure and single in nature, no longer being double-minded. This issue of duplicity is crucial as a theme throughout the Epistle as James calls for them to have a singleness of mind that is focus intently upon God and upon what is important for the glory of God and not upon self.

In verse 9 James calls for his readers to “grieve” to “lament” to “feel miserable.” Some might question whether God even wants a person to be happy, but it must be remembered that joy

is not the same as self-satisfied happiness. Being of two minds and giving a quick nod, or a Sunday morning, to God and then linking arms with the world once more on Monday morning simply will not do. It may take a lot of time, and a lot of effort on our part, to look God in the face and admit just how far we have been wrong, but that is the path we are called to walk and it is that path that leads to true joy. The call of James here is to a life of humility and focus on those things which are focused upon God and not upon self. We are then given an astonishing promise, which is that if we will draw near to God **he will draw near to us**. God is ready and waiting with open arms to receive us. God is like the father in the Prodigal Son story watching for our return to him, and if we will come to him in true humility he will run to greet us. If only a few people are willing to take these promises of God seriously what a huge difference it would make in our churches and in our world. The power and glory of God is transformative and it will make such a huge difference wherever it resides.<sup>11</sup> If we are willing to humble ourselves before God he will exalt us and this is exaltation indeed. Not the honor and

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<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 28-29.

exaltation of the world, but true godly honor and exaltation that brings us near unto God.

<sup>4:11</sup> Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. The one speaking evil of his brother or judging his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law; and if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but its judge. <sup>4:12</sup> There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and able to destroy; who are you if you are the one judging your neighbor?

James challenges his readers at the point that is perhaps one of the most destructive, sinister and prevalent contaminating forces among not only the church, but among people in general. This is the kind of slanderous talk that eats its way like a cancer through the heart of Christian fellowship and requires urgent and determined treatment or it will prove fatal. Anyone who speaks like this against their brothers is implying that the law which applies to the Christian with regard to loving your neighbor as yourself does not apply to them. They are, in effect, saying they are above this law. They can look down upon these petty standards from their great height and in doing this they are judging the law instead of doing what it says. To take such a

stand is not only foolish and arrogant it is also a usurpation of the role of God himself (verse 12). There is only one who is lawgiver; and only one who is judge, and that is not us. God, as judge, has the power to either rescue or to destroy. This last line is saying that the only one who has the power, authority, and right, to pass this kind of judgement on another, is God. Any human doing this is usurping the place of God. The warning here is not to put ourselves in the place of God.<sup>12</sup> This sin makes a person beyond redemption because of their arrogance. Only once their arrogance is broken may they have hope.


<sup>4:13</sup> Come now, the one saying, today, or tomorrow, I will travel to such and such place and I will stay there a year and we will do business and make a profit; <sup>4:14</sup> You do not know of tomorrow or what sort of life is yours; for you are a vapor that appears for a short span, then vanishes. <sup>4:15</sup> Instead, you ought to say, “if the Lord wishes and we live, then we will do this or that.” <sup>4:16</sup> But now, as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such arrogance is immoral. <sup>4:17</sup> Therefore the one knowing the good he should do and he does not do it, that is sin.

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<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 30-31.

These verses are the second half of the warning that James began in verse 11 and warn against the temptation to put oneself in the place of God. Here James warns his readers of even thinking they might be in control of their own lives. In reality such thinking is an illusion. He returns here to the theme that is so often reiterated in the wisdom literature regarding mankind as, nothing but a vapor, a puff of smoke, before God. This vapor or puff of smoke is here but a short time and then it disappears and leaves no impact other than perhaps a faint memory that it once existed at all. James calls upon his readers recognize their place before God and to acknowledge this in the making of their plans; and even in talking about such plans. Not to do so, represents an arrogance that is described as “boasting” and “evil”. The word that is used here for “evil” indicates that James has in mind someone who is “immoral” or “morally corrupt.”

James also indicates that if a person knows what is right and does not do it, such a person is guilty of sin. This closing verse, has sometimes produced, in those that are sensitive in nature, a continual anguish of heart-searching and questioning of their every action. Perhaps the best thing that can be said to such




a person is that if they are still concerned about this, then the chances are they are doing fine. It is the case that all Christians should search their hearts in order to understand their motives and their heart. Is our focus totally upon God? Is our devotion single in nature? Are we humble in all things? God calls us to these things as we recognize who he is and who we are before him.

# Synopsis

James in this chapter continues themes he has previously introduced in his Epistle and here he deals with the source of the conflicts and desires. They begin in the heart of the individual and they then spill out into the wider world of the congregation and then even bring shame and disrepute on the name of God. The source of these conflicts is reflected in the lusts and desires that people have which are not focused upon God, but upon a desire to have the things of the world and to be like the other people of the world. Such lusts lead to murder, fighting and making war. James says that they do not ask and therefore they do not have what they need and when they do ask they do not receive because what they ask for is for themselves and their own selfish pleasures.


He goes on to accuse his readers of adultery, because of their love of the world. They have two lovers and God will not tolerate such a situation and to be friend of the world is to be an enemy of God. Despite this harsh tone James gives hope to his readers telling them that in such situations there is greater grace available, but not to the arrogant. This grace is available to those



who are humble and seek God. James also challenges his readers to resist the Devil and he tells them that if they will do this the Devil will flee from them. Some have taken this to mean that now they will have a trouble free life, but this is not the promise that is made here at all. James does go on to tell them not only to resist the Devil, but also to draw near to God and then he does make a promise to them and that is that God will “draw near” to them. He challenges them once again to cleanse and purify not only their hands but also their hearts. He challenges them to lament and weep and to humble themselves before God seeking only exhalation from God and not from the world.

James then moves once again to the issue of speech and in particular speech where brothers are speaking evil of one another and judging their brothers. He says that to this amounts to more than just judging the person it amounts to judging the Law itself and more than that to even judging the giver of that Law, God himself. Such speech and judgment is not for mankind to exercise, it is the purview of God alone.


He then moves onto address the arrogance of making plans in such a way that a person actually thinks that have control over



their own destiny, without God. In this section James returns to a common theme in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel recognizing the fleeting nature of life and how insignificant it is in the face of who God is. He challenges his readers to temper their speech and their attitude in a way that reflects their reliance and their faith in God. This challenges is once again to remove the arrogance that separates a person from God and his grace. James ends with an admonition that challenges his readers to recognize that sin is not only what you do it is also often about missed opportunities. Not doing what a person knows is the right thing to do is sin too. The challenge of James in this chapter is a challenge for the people of the church to live a life devoted with single-mindedness to God alone, void of selfishness and worldly desires. Such a life will bring near the presence of God.

# Questions

1. Why do you think James is concerned about conflicts in the church?
2. How does knowing the source of these conflicts help his readers?
3. How is desire related to murder?
4. What is the relationship between asking and having in James chapter 4?
5. How can we avoid spending our money on our own passions?
6. Why do you think friendship with the world correlates to hostility to God?
7. What do you think are the consequences of being an enemy of God?
8. Why do you think God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble?
9. What is grace?
10. What does it mean if a person does not resist the Devil?
11. What are the consequences of being double-minded?



12. Why do you think James calls upon his readers to mourn and weep?

13. How can a person become humble?

14. How did God exalt Jesus?

15. How should the words of James challenge us in our making of plans?

16. How can planning become arrogant?

17. What are some opportunities to do good that you almost missed?

18. Why do people miss opportunities to do good?