

War and Peace James 4:1-10

Slide 1

As we finish this series, James begins the fourth chapter with the question, *“What causes fights and quarrels among you?”* Have you ever stopped to consider that question?

I read the following information this week regarding national and international wars and their points of origin.

A conflict between two cities in France, about a thousand years ago, started as the result of a conflict over a water bucket. One Chinese emperor went to war because of a broken teapot.

A war broke out between Sweden and Poland in 1654 because of an error involving the number of times the words *“et cetera”* were listed following one of the king’s names.

One of the many conflicts between England and France originated with the spilling of a single glass of water.

In this fourth chapter of James’ epistle, he’s concerned about conflicts which test a believer’s profession of faith. The way a person’s faith was lived out with regard to personal desires.

James stressed that a person couldn’t please God and at the same time satisfy himself. In fact, Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:24, *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”*

James taught that the only way for a person to resolve a conflict, was to set one's devotion entirely on God, maintaining a humble, contrite relationship with Him.

There are six lessons found in our focal passage today that contrast the war produced by our sinful flesh and the peace that can only be found in a right relationship with God.

While the outward appearance of the Scripture may seem complex, the message is clear: We must make a choice.

Slide 2

There is virtue in adventurous living. I have heard it said that an individual had a *"lust for life,"* which was meant as a compliment. Thoreau said that too many men *"lead lives of quiet desperation."*

The world needs more people who go after life with passion. That kind of living gave us men and women like David Livingstone, Lottie Moon, Bertha Smith, William Wallace, and a host of others.

But these aren't the lusts of which James was speaking. The kind of lusts about which James was talking were lusts leading to self-gratification.

James 4:1b, *"Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"*

These lusts are driven by the question, *"What's going to make me feel good?"* In fact, many of the conflicts in the body of Christ originate in fleshly desires and our selfish determination to have things our way.

We like to see our church kept the way we like it and we'll fight to keep it that way. It reminds me of a story I heard.

A poor farmer came to the large downtown church and presented himself for membership the first Sunday that he attended.

The pastor met him during the invitation and suggested he pray about his decision for a week to be *“absolutely sure.”* The farmer agreed.

He returned the next Sunday and presented himself again. The pastor urged the farmer to pray about his decision a second time. A little disappointed, the farmer agreed and left the service.

Finally, on the third Sunday, the farmer made his way to the front and greeted the pastor. *“Preacher, God spoke to me about coming to your church this week,”* the farmer said.

“Really!” the pastor replied. *“What did he tell you?”* The farmer said, *“He wished me luck, because he’s been trying to get in here for years, and he ain’t been able to get in yet.”*

Could our own struggle to assert ourselves be the very thing that quenches the Holy Spirit? I believe that’s exactly what James is suggesting in this first verse of chapter four.

We’re sinful creatures, driven by a host of sinful desires that are forever struggling to make themselves known in our lives.

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Then, in verses two and three, James describes a vicious cycle of desires and actions, all with no satisfaction.

James 4:2-3, *“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. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”*

He describes sin as a sort of bottomless pit, always looking for more but never able to be satisfied.

He begins verse 2 by saying, “*You desire but do not have.*” Have you ever noticed that no matter how much you have, it’s never enough. We humans are like that.

I read the story of a king who was having trouble sleeping. He was told that if he could wear the shirt of a truly satisfied man for only one night, he would be cured of his insomnia.

His officials searched the entire kingdom and finally found a truly satisfied man. There was only one problem, however: the man had no shirt.

As long as we have something, there will always be something else to want. Isn’t this the reason that Satan was able to tempt Adam and Eve so easily in the Garden?

They had everything EXCEPT the right to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Yet, they had everything else. Why was that such a big deal? Simply because they didn’t have it. It isn’t what we have that presents the problem, it’s what we DO NOT have.

Then James tells them, “*So you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want.*” People will even commit murder to fulfill their selfish lusts.

There’s no shortage of murderers on death row, people from all walks of life who’ve taken the life of another for what often seems inconsequential reasons.

If we were to ask any of these death row murderers if they felt satisfied after committing their crimes, how many would tell us that they were?

I doubt few, if any, would tell us that their crimes brought them any satisfaction. That's exactly the nature of sin.

There's a momentary pleasure, but then even that satisfaction's gone, and the need for pleasure returns all over again.

The last clause of verse two says, "*So you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.*" Some people just love a good fight.

Alexander the Great wept, having defeated his last enemy, depressed because he no more worlds to conquer. Some people are driven by a need for conflict.

Are there battles to be fought? Against the devil, yes. Against those who attack the cause of Christ, yes. Against those who deny the Scripture and its claims, yes. Against the world and its influences, yes.

But the battle should never to be among brothers and sisters in Christ who're earnestly seeking to advance the Gospel and reach the lost with the message of salvation. That's the issue James is addressing in this clause.

Verse three hearkens to earlier references in the Gospels in which Jesus told His disciples for whatever they asked God in His name, they would receive the same.

James tells these believers that the things they ask for are not the things they need. That they're driven more by their selfish desires than any hint of obedience to God. How many of us have experienced this very thing?

We're too late for a deadline at work, and we pray for grace. We failed to study for a test, and we pray for superhuman recall.

We pull in the parking lot as the store is closing, and we pray for mercy from the storekeeper.

In every situation, our motives are questionable. We're trying to avoid the consequences of our own failures when in fact we deserve them.

How often, when we pray for miracles, are we asking as James says, "*amiss.*" Most of the time when we do this, it's really just to satisfy our own personal desires and has nothing to do with the will of God.

It's like praying for a cheese pizza to fall out of the sky while lying in a hammock in your back yard. That's exactly how flippant and selfish many of our prayers are, and that's why they often go unanswered.

We've seen the truth of lustful lives and the slippery slope of sin. Now let's look at James' next target. How spiritual adultery keeps us from a right relationship with God.

Slide 4

Look at the words James uses in verse four as he paints a vivid picture of a person having an affair.

James 4:4, "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."

Throughout the Old Testament, God referred to Israel as His wife. In the book of Hosea, God used the adulterous activities of the prophet's wife to paint a picture of Israel's unfaithfulness to Him.

In the same way, the church is called "*the bride of Christ*" in the New Testament. In this example, God accuses believers of spiritual unfaithfulness by our flirtations with the world.

This verse is rife with images of infidelity. Obviously, the word “*adulterous*” needs no explanation. “*Friendship*” and “*enmity*” on the other hand, deserve more interpretation.

The word “*friendship*” used here literally implies flirtation. I envision the lifestyle that’s looking for an opportunity. It’s what tells us to dress suggestively, hang out in the wrong places, and look for an opportunity.

“*Enmity*” suggests hostility, a withholding of affection, even a coolness. It doesn’t deny the relationship, but it does everything in its power to build a wall. It’s as simple as a relationship of appearances.

Think about the implications of both words. I picture a person who gives the outward appearance of religiosity.

This person is a regular church attender, enjoys the social circles of the church, and gives twenty dollars every other week. But hidden behind this façade is a dark side, invisible to everyone at church.

The spiritual adulterer keeps a little wine and beer in the refrigerator “for unwinding in the evenings,” and keeps a little “spicy” reading on hand just to “see what all the fuss is about.”

Never mind the fact that this person is exposing others to alcohol, including children who may have a genetic predisposition to alcoholism.

Never mind that pornography is one of the top-grossing businesses in the United States today, with revenue in the billions.

Never mind that most PG-rated movies today contain more profanity and violence than an R-rated movie of twenty years ago.

James plainly says, *“You cannot be a friend of the world and be in love with God.”* As believers, we’re called to live lives of holiness before God.

It affects what we buy, where we go, what we do, and how we live. We must be careful in every relationship.

No one in the Bible should have ever heard the name of Bathsheba, but we have! *“You can’t wallow with the hogs and expect to stay clean.”*

Spiritual adultery is the most difficult and painful of sins to admit. This is true because it affects every one of us to some extent.

This leads us to the fourth lesson in our passage today, peace begins with the Spirit’s divine desire.

Slide 5

Verse 5 is translated a number of ways, but I prefer *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase.

James 4:5, *“Or what do you think the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, watches over us with tender jealousy?”*

“Tender jealousy.” Those are powerful words. The Holy Spirit is the only one with truly pure lusts, because He longs after us.

It’s the kind of longing that the Loving Father had as he watched daily for the return of the Prodigal. It is the kind of desire that tugs at us when we’re seeking God’s will.

The Holy Spirit draws us tenderly to the Father with love. It’s He who can overcome our selfish longings with His own pure lusts. Look at what the Scripture says about the Spirit.

Romans 8:26, *“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”*

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul writes, *“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”*

It's the Spirit who knows us and loves us and lives in us. He knows our hearts and knows our needs. It is He who can bring peace to our lives when we allow Him to have his way with us.

As a child, when I couldn't find something and went to my mother for help, she would tell me, *“It's wherever you left it.”* Surely enough, as soon as I had retraced my steps, I'd find the missing object.

I wonder how often we forget the great indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and go running off to accomplish some great thing for God, only to find that our efforts are powerless and our conquests forgettable.

Like my mother, God reminds us that the Holy Spirit is right where we left Him. He'll go with us in the ways that God intends and no further.

The Holy Spirit will empower and encourage us in the plans of God, but only we will let Him. The Bible says He has a *“tender jealousy”* for us.

Slide 6

It's this “tender jealousy” at work when we talk about God's grace. God's grace is something with which we're familiar. We can't explain it, but we know how it feels, what it does for us.

Is it any wonder that we love to sing, *“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. 'Twas blind, but now I see.”*

Grace has a powerful effect on our lives. I've heard it defined as an acronym, "*God's Riches At Christ's Expense.*"

Various commentators have used words like "*unmerited favor,*" "*love without measure,*" and the like.

But is there anything we can do to merit God's grace? To read verse six, you might think that our attitude comes into play.

James 4:6, "*But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'*"

So, how can something undeserved be gained in such a way? The dispensation of God's grace relies on our willingness to receive it.

God will not give it to people who don't think they need it. What people must realize is that we all stand in need of God's grace.

It isn't just for filler that Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Even as far back as Isaiah's day, prophets were talking about our need for God's grace.

Isaiah 64:6, "*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*"

If for no other reason than this, we stand in need of grace. But how do we get it? This is where James answers the question. He says, "*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.*"

When we come before God, denying any merits we might have, acknowledging our inadequacy and His sufficiency, then we're able to receive grace.

There's nothing we can do but receive it. We can't dress grace up. We can't make grace any more attractive than it already is.

There's no way human beings can improve upon grace. All we can do is simply take it and say, *"Thank you, Lord."*

But this issue of humility is important. It's easy to have things go well and find yourself feeling pretty self-sufficient. You find a pattern that works for you, a way of living that's comfortable and gratifying.

Pretty soon, you don't need God as much as you used to, maybe that time in prayer isn't as pressing as it was before, maybe that extra time for spiritual disciplines isn't absolutely necessary.

It doesn't matter anymore how you treat your spouse, or that you pray for your children, or that you share your faith. Congratulations are in order, because you have just boarded a one-way flight to nowhere.

Proverbs 16:18, *"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."*

Whenever we're riding high, get ready for a sudden dose of humility. It's at these precise moments I recall Hebrews 12:6, which says, *"Because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."*

If you can continue in pride and arrogance without feeling the chastening hand of God, watch out! That same passage in Hebrews goes on to say that those who're not disciplined aren't children of God.

If we're going to follow Jesus, then we can expect to be disciplined when we become filled with pride. That's where humility enters into it and repentance begins.

Slide 7

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

Most of us don't know what repentance is, let alone how to go about doing it. So, let's define repentance in God's terms. Then we'll examine the process James outlines for doing it.

Biblical repentance comes basically in two parts: realizing the problem and turning away from it. It's the same thing as making a u-turn in a car or doing an about face in a military maneuver.

There's a realization that the direction we're headed is compromising at best, deadly at the worst. Then there's an evasive maneuver that doesn't simply carry us around the problem, but in the opposite direction.

It's why Paul tells the Thessalonian believers in 1 Thessalonians 5:22, *“Abstain from all appearance of evil.”* He's telling them not to even go near it.

Now let's consider the imperatives James gives his readers. The first is direct. He says, *“Submit yourselves, then, to God.”* Not just your mind or just your body, nor your possessions or your money.

The implication is that we give all that we have and all that we are to God. We're called to make Jesus the Lord of everything pertaining to us.

There's a sense that we place ourselves under the scrutiny of God and make ourselves open to His judgment in all areas. This is the kind of submission required of us.

Secondly, James tells us, "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*" Let's face it. Proud people are easy targets for the devil. Humble, submitted people aren't quite as easy to trip up.

Have you ever noticed the process by which Jesus was tempted in the Gospels? He was baptized, then led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where He neither ate nor drank for forty days and nights.

Then Satan showed up to tempt Him. In every situation, Jesus used the Word of God to counter the devil's attacks. In a time of perceived weakness, Jesus was strong. In a time of personal attack, Jesus relied on God's Word.

We would do well to remember this in our times of temptation. We need more of the Bible in us every day. The battle demands it.

James tells us next to "*Come near to God and he will come near to you.*" If you want to be close to someone, it's important to do two things: spend time with them and communicate with them.

If I want to know what Billy Graham was like, I can read his autobiography and listen to his sermons.

But in order to have really known who Dr. Graham was, I would've needed to either call him on the phone or drive to Montreat and sit down on his porch and talk with him.

It's the same with God. Only through prayer and reading the Scriptures can we come to know God in a personal way.

Do you know what's best about all this? James says that if we'll come close to God, He'll come close to us. That makes the effort worthwhile.

The next imperative deals with outer change: "*Wash your hands, you sinners.*" What James is saying is that our hands represent our physical bodies.

He's saying that a key part of repentance is the cleansing of our physical sins, sins that affect the body.

These include sexual sins, gluttony, laziness, poor stewardship of the body, and anything that leads us astray physically, but he doesn't stop there.

The remainder of our being is addressed next: "*Purify your hearts, you double-minded.*" This area affects our minds and ultimately, our souls.

The Bible tells us to be anxious about nothing, yet many of us worry. It tells us that to have sexual lust is as bad as committing adultery, but how many of us take it that seriously.

The Scriptures teach us that uncontrolled anger is a sin worthy of hell-fire, and the list goes on. James tells us that, just as we're to be cleansed of our physical impurities, we must also be cleansed in our minds.

Verse nine begins with three connected emotional responses: "*Grieve, mourn and wail.*" He is reflecting here the essence of godly sorrow.

When we see the seriousness of our sin before God, it ought to make us sorry. There's a reason to feel guilt. It's not unacceptable to weep over our sins before God.

I believe we're too quick to shrug off sin and try to seek God's forgiveness without knowing why we're asking. It ought not be this way.

The next two phrases build on this plea for genuine repentance: *"Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom."*

Ecclesiastes 3:4 reminds us that there's *"a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."* It's entirely appropriate to be moved over our sins.

How long has it been since you sensed the awful seriousness of your sins before God and were moved to tears by your shame?

Churches used to have mourner's benches for people who were dealing with their sins. In the old days people used to confess all their sins before asking Jesus to save them.

Finally, James says it plainly, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord."* I heard a song a few years ago that said, *"If we ever needed the Lord before, we sure do need him now."*

Those words are so true today. We need the presence of the Lord. We need the power of God. We need the protection of the Lord. We need the promises of the Lord.

BUT we'll have none of those things until those of us who know Him humble ourselves in His sight, submit ourselves to Him, resist the devil, draw near to Him, cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, experience affliction and mourning and weeping, turn our laughter into mourning, and turn our joy into sorrow.

We need a good dose of godly sorrow that produces repentance, because when that happens, then we'll see the glory of the Lord. We'll see the power of the Lord. We'll experience the majesty of the Lord.

Slide 8

Conclusion

This passage concludes with five words: *“He will lift you up.”*

These words remind me of the words of Isaiah 40:31, *“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

When we're finished with our fighting, done with our desires, loosed from our lusts; when we're filled with godly sorrow, humbled in God's presence, submitted to God's power; THEN, and only then, can we experience the hand of God as he lifts us from our faces to our feet.

THEN we can know the mind of God as He carries us on eagles' wings. THEN we can experience the strength of God as He sustains us in our coming in and our going out.

THEN we will know Him even as we are known, but it cannot begin until we acknowledge our problem and seek His solution.