

James chapter 4

What causes strife? (verses 1-6)

James begins this chapter with a serious question, “Where do wars and fights come from among you”? This is a question that should interest any person wishing to maintain peace within a congregation of God’s people. Not only does James ask the question, but in the next several verses he provides the answer.

Wars and fights in the church arise as a result of wars and fights within each individual member. The first thing James identifies as a reason for problems is “your desires for pleasure”. As he explains in verse 1, these desires originate in our body (James 3:6). The Apostle Paul wrote a lengthy description of this war inside our body (Romans 7:13-25; this passage is clearer in the NIV than in the King James Version or NKJV).

This war in our bodies results in sin if we allow the side of evil to win. As James explains in verse 2, we lust, but do not have; we murder and covet, but cannot obtain; we fight and war, but do not have. All of these characteristics are evil. They will only arise if we give in to sin. James says that we could have what we want and need if only we would ask, just as Jesus taught in Luke 11:9-13.

Another problem evident to James was that some of his readers were asking for blessings from God, but they were asking for the wrong reason. In this case they were asking amiss (Psalms 66:18-20). They were not asking in faith (James 1:6-8). Instead, they were asking “that you may spend it on your pleasures” (verse 3). James warns us not to ask for the wrong reason or in an unfaithful way.

James describes his readers as “adulterers and adulteresses”! Not that they were adulterers in the physical sense of the word, but rather spiritual adulterers. This is a very serious charge. James’ readers were trying to say they were Christians while at the same time living as close to the world as they possibly could. As James warns, “friendship with the world is enmity with God”. This echoes what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:24, and what John taught in 1 John 2:15.

James argues in verse 4, that if we want to be friends with the world we will become enemies of God. This teaching is urgently needed in our generation. James quotes from an unknown verse of scripture in verse 5, to point out that God’s Spirit is jealous for us. Some of the commentators that were examined in preparation for this study seemed to think that James was referring to Exodus chapter 32, when he quoted the verse found in this passage.

While God’s Spirit is jealous that we would not be friends of the world, at the same time, God provides us with the means to overcome the temptations of the world. In verse 6, James states, “But He (that is, God) gives more grace”. And, God also requires that we be humble in order that He might give us grace. If we are not humble (if we fall victim to the evil that James has described so far in this chapter) then God resists us. James quotes Proverbs 3:34 to prove his point. This idea of humility is expanded on in the next section of the chapter,

Humility is the answer to strife (verses 7-10)

The first step in avoiding strife is to “submit to God” (verse 7). In submitting to God we will “resist the devil”. Too many Christians do not believe that Satan is alive and

well and ready to oppose us at every turn. James understood that Satan was at work and he commands us to resist him (Ephesians 4:27; 6:10-18).

The second step in avoiding strife is to “draw near to God” (verse 8). James promises that if we draw near to God He will draw near to us as well. The third step in avoiding strife is to “cleanse your hands” and “purify your hearts” (verse 8). Notice how James tells “sinners” to cleanse their hands and the “double-minded” to purify their hearts. This step is the step of repentance (Isaiah 1:16; 1 Peter 1:22).

The fourth step in avoiding strife is a continuation of repentance. In this step, James commands, “Lament and mourn and weep!” (verse 9). Our laughter is to be turned to mourning (Acts 2:36-37) and our joy to gloom (Matthew 5:4). This godly sorrow that James describes indicates the level of our repentance. The final step in avoiding strife is a continuation or culmination of the first step. James commands, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord” (verse 10). If we will do this James promises that God, “will lift you up” (see Job 22:29).

Don't judge your brothers and sisters (verses 11-12)

Another way to avoid strife in local congregations is to heed the advice James gives in these verses. He tells us not to speak evil of one another (1 Peter 2:1-3). James also says that if we judge our brothers we are actually speaking evil of the law (in this case James is referring to the Law of Moses). If we judge our brothers we are actually judging God's law (Matthew 7:1-5). Many troubles and conflicts in congregations of God's people could be avoided if we would understand that there is only one Lawgiver and that is God! He is the one who is able to save and to destroy (Matthew 10:28).

James asks a question that should always be asked before we say something about our brothers and sisters, “Who are you to judge another?” (verse 12). The Apostle Paul also had much to say about this in Romans 14:1-13.

Don’t trust in the future (verses 13-17)

James concludes this chapter by warning us to take care of things in the present rather than worrying about the future. So many times we make grand plans about the future (verse 13). There is nothing wrong with being prepared, but we should not focus so much on the future that we fail to take care of business in the present.

The reality of our situation is found in verse 14, “For what is your life”? We are all too familiar with the brevity and uncertainty of this life. We should do as James commands and live our life in complete obedience to the will of God. As James states, “instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that” (verse 15). Anything more than this is described by James as “arrogance” and he also states, all “such boasting is evil”.

If we try to live our life based on what “WE” are going to do, we will fail to humble ourselves to God’s will. Jesus gave an excellent example of this in Luke 12:16-21. Luke also describes this problem in the life of Felix in Acts 24:24-25. Really, it all boils down to what James states in verse 17, “to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin”. We need to focus on the situation in the present, not in the past or an uncertain future. The best example of knowing to do good and doing it is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).