

Quarrels and Fights in the Church

James 4:1–10

As in previous chapters, James begins chapter 4 addressing a practical problem among his readers, who are, by way of reminder, Jewish believers. In chapter 3 he instructed them to avoid leaders motivated by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition (3:14-16) and to affirm leaders motivated by heavenly wisdom and understanding (3:13, 17). Godly leaders will lead their churches in peace (3:18).

But their churches will not experience peace until church members themselves repent of their worldly ways. This is the problem James attacks in 4:1-10.

James uses strong language in confronting this problem (4:1-2). *Quarrels* is literally the word for wars and *fights* the word for battles. What is the cause of these conflicts in their churches? Their *passions*. What are *passions*? *Passions* are strong desires for personal pleasure. *Passions* are the *lusts of the flesh* (1 John 2:15-17).

People spend vast amounts of time, money, and energy seeking to satisfy the desires of the flesh. Our personal desires are part of our human nature, and we will never escape their pull as long as we live in our present bodies. But they must not dominate our lives. Living for the desires of the flesh is one of the main reasons Christians do not bear fruit for the kingdom as Jesus explained in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:14). Our culture glorifies living for our fleshly desires; it is the primary pursuit of most people, including Christians.

The drive to fulfill our passions can be so intense it results in murder. When our pursuit is blocked, our natural reaction is anger. That anger is what drives quarrels and fights in the church. Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount that anger is the basis of murder (Matt. 5:21-26). It's possible James is using the term *murder* figuratively, but we think he is using it literally. Moses murdered an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew slave (Exod. 2:12); King David attempted to cover up his adultery by having Uriah, Bathsheba's husband murdered (2 Sam. 11:14-15). The point is, Christians living self-centered, lust driven lives are capable of committing any and every type of sin including murder.

Not only can living by our *passions* drive us to commit serious sin, it also negatively affects our prayer life. We aren't going to ask God to satisfy our lustful desires and even if we did, God's not going to grant our request (4:2-3).

The problem in our prayer life is a symptom of a much bigger problem (4:4-5).

When we live to fulfill our passions, when we live according to the world's value system, we are living as if we were never born again. We are living according to the self-centered, self-seeking nature with which we were born in Adam. That's the point of verse 5. *The spirit He made to dwell in us is full of jealous desire*. That's the nature of our spirit when we are born. As born-again children of God; as members of the Bride of Christ, we shouldn't live that way anymore.

That's the point of verse 4; we have been born again. We have been delivered from our Adamic nature. We are the bride of Christ. We are to be devoted to Jesus and God the Father. We are to live for Him Who gave His life for us. We are to live for things eternal, not for the passing pleasures of this life.

The world urges us to love ourselves, to put our pleasures before God's will. If we agree with that idea, we are adulterers and enemies of God. We have deliberately chosen to follow the world's philosophy rather than God's will. We cannot be on friendly terms with God if we follow the world's philosophy (Matt. 6:24). The world wants us to exclude God from all aspects of life. God wants our lives to be taken up with Him.

To be an adulterer and an enemy of God as a Christian is to be in a bad place. To live unfaithfully in this life is to lose reward and honor in the Millennial Kingdom (1 Cor. 3:15). It is possible to go so far down this road God will discipline us by taking our physical lives in death (1 Cor. 11:30; James 5:19-20).

But there is a way back (4:6).

What does this mean?

It means God stands ready to give any of His wayward children the help they need to be restored to Him (4:6-10).

If we realize we have been living for our fleshly desires and not for God, here is the path back to fellowship with God. First, we must *submit* in humility (4:7).

This means God's priorities become our priorities. What is important to God is what is important to us. It means our purpose in life becomes fulfilling God's will not our fleshly desires. Submission is not identical to obedience. Submission involves the surrender of the will, which allows for obedience.

We must *resist* Satan. When we do, he will flee from us. What is Satan trying to get us to do? By studying what he did to Eve and to Jesus in the Wilderness we know Satan's tactics. He wants to make us doubt and then disobey God's Word (Gen. 3; Matt. 4). We *resist the devil* by refusing to doubt God's Word and by obeying God's Word.

While resisting Satan on the one hand, we must also *draw near to God* on the other (4:8). When we do, *He will draw near to us*. To draw near to God, we must wash (cleanse) our hands, which is symbolic of our outward actions. And we must purify our hearts of double-mindedness, which is symbolic of our inner attitudes and motives. We cleanse and purify our hearts and hands by confession and repentance. We must remove sin from our hands, and deceit from our hearts. We need to become single-minded in our commitment to live for God's glory rather than trying to live for God's glory and our own selfish desires.

In verses 9-10, James calls his readers to get right with God and to do so through sincere, heartfelt remorse for the many times and ways they have sinned against God and treated Him so badly.

Feelings of sorrow will characterize genuine repentance. James ends with the promise that those who humble themselves and get right with God will be exalted by God. This means God will raise us to a condition of prosperity dignity and honor.

My brothers and sisters, is your life characterized by quarrels and fights? Is it because you are living for your passions and not for God? James 4:1-10 calls all of us to check ourselves and ask afresh, "For whom am I living?"

If the answer is, "I've been living for myself." Be encouraged. God stands ready to lavish His grace and help upon you. Humble yourself and God will exalt you.

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