

James 4:1-3 — Disunity in the Church

This week we continue our study of James, covering James 4:1-3. The main theme of chapter 4 is pride vs humility. Pride is always the result of me being dominated by my sinful or human nature. Humility always results from me being controlled by the Holy Spirit. James shows us how being dominated by our sinful nature destroys unity and relationships in the church, as well as our relationship with God because of the damage pride and selfishness does to our prayer life.

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Reasons for disunity in the Christian community

James 4:1-3 NKJV

Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

“Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks,” Jesus declared (Matthew 12:34). Here in chapter 4, James deal with the issue of the heart.

My daughter asked me if I had a story to use as an illustration for this weeks message. I do, many in fact, but I won't share them. I think that most people already have their own painful stories or experiences when it comes to this very pertinent or relevant topic. Most people, if they have been a christian long enough, have experienced a church split, clicks within churches, power hungry church leaders, and people who are sinning and get angry and cause division when their sin is exposed. Then there are the people who appear to be godly and kind but in reality are only manipulating you so you will believe what they believe, and do things the way they think it should be done regarding certain doctrines, styles of music, and even which version of the bible to use — they are trying to draw people into following after themselves.

Before we start, I want to point out that this unhealthy state of affairs that we see in many churches was not and is not always the case, and does not need to be so common. If we don't start with what God's actual plan for the church is, it's easy to become discouraged and give up because we think that there is no hope. We start to believe that all churches are as bad as each other. We can easily become disillusioned and disheartened, and like many Christians may give up on going to church altogether. But this is not healthy. God created the church so the we could grow in our Christian walk as we fellowship together and learn to forgive each other. Isolation is not the answer. Ask God to give you a merciful and gracious heart and that He will help you to find a church that is seeking to submit to God.

If we have an accurate understanding of the kind of unity that God desires for the church, instead of giving up, we should be striving in prayer for all members of our fellowship to be filled with the Spirit, walking with the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, or being led by the Spirit, so we will not fulfil the desires of the flesh as described here in the book of James. Only then will we experience the amazing, sweet, and beautiful unity that is a fruit of the Holy Spirit working in and through a group of believers.

This is what James was doing. He had experienced true unity in the very early church when almost everyone was being led by the Spirit, as we will read about soon in the book of Acts. However, in just a few years, possibly only 13 or so years later in AD 45, James is writing this letter to the churches of that time and obviously what he has to say about them is not flattering. However, before you give up on imperfect churches like these, remember that Jesus walks among the churches (Revelation 1:12-13, 20), and Jesus valued or esteemed the church of God so highly that He was willing to purchase her with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Jesus also has a glorious plan for the church which is His body:

Ephesians 5:23-27 NLT

²³ For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of His body, the church. ²⁴ **As the church submits to Christ**, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.

²⁵ For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. **He gave up his life for her** ²⁶ **to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word.** ²⁷ **He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.**

So you see that the church has a glorious future, but just like there are troubles in a marriage relationship, so there will be troubles in the church, and they are all caused by a lack of submission to God.

Galatians 5:14-17 NLT

¹⁴ For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

¹⁶ So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. ¹⁷ The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.

Notice the similarities between Galatians 5:14 and James 4:1-3, "But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another." Now we will see what God's ideal for the church is. It's fantastic, and it's possible.

Acts 2:42-47 NLT

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met

in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

If all believers in a church, or at least most of them, are submitted to God, walking in the Spirit, then there will be true unity and the resulting sweet fellowship, genuine love and overflowing joy. Let us seek and earnestly desire this true unity that is only possible as people are submitted to the Spirit and are therefore walking according to the power of the Spirit and producing the fruit of the Spirit.

Psalm 133:1-3 NKJV

¹ **Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity!**
² *It is* like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.
³ *It is* like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.

James 4:1-3 NKJV

Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires* for pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures.

v 1 **Where do wars and fights come from among you?** Unfortunately, the terms **wars and fights** are a good description of how Christians can treat each other. Battles that happen among Christians can be bitter and severe and cause many to be left wounded and bleeding, with many choosing to stay away from church completely. This is also a terrible witness to the world. Remember what Jesus said in:

John 13:35 NLT

Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”

v 1 **Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?** David Guzik comments: “The source of **wars and fights** among Christians is always the same. There is some root of carnality, an internal **war** within the believer regarding the lusts of the flesh. No two believers who are both walking in the Spirit of God towards each other can live with **wars and fights** among themselves.”

What's important to notice here is that it's not so much about which person is right or wrong, but the motive behind what they say and do. Am I doing something for selfish reasons, or am I doing it genuinely for the other person's good? Even a good thing can be done with a selfish motive, with the goal of getting something that I want. I think this is common among religious people. It's easy to use religion and the bible to get what I want. This is selfish ambition, where I do things for the underlying purpose of getting what I want, no matter how it affects the other person or people. It is so easy to disguise my true intentions with good sounding arguments and doctrine, and I may even convince myself that what I am arguing or fighting for is actually God's will; but in the end I'm only doing and saying what is necessary to get what I want.

How many times have you heard a Christian say, I know that this is God's will for me, I will be doing this, that, and the other. Then the next time you meet them, they are doing something completely different. What happened? Did God change His mind, or are they just using or playing the "this is God's will for me card" to justify what they want; to satisfy the desires of their sinful nature for pleasure and selfish ambition?

The truth is that discerning between the desires and motives of the flesh and the desires and motives of the Spirit can be difficult. Be patient. If you are not sure, then wait for confirmation. Stay in the word and keep doing what you already know that God has told you to do until God clearly shows you otherwise.

Also beware of advice from others who may mean well, but can be misguided. If someone claims to have a word for you, and God hasn't already revealed it to you, then it almost certainly isn't from God.

v 1 **that war in your members:** James hits the nail on the head here when he says that the problem is within individuals. He is describing the battle between our sinful human nature and the Holy Spirit. This is the war that goes on inside our members, literally our bodies. Why? Because this is where our sinful nature resides. Once we are saved, God makes His home inside of us, and He gives us a new heart with new desires. We are a new creation. But we still have our old nature attached to us, and will only be rid of it when we die or are raptured and get our glorified bodies. Our sinful nature is associated with our members or physical body. That is why when we get rid of our mortal body, we are also finally free of our sinful nature and will no longer have the desire or capacity to sin. Happy days!

David Guzik described the source of **wars and fights** as "a root of carnality." This is a good description, as a root produces branches, which produce fruit — good or bad, depending on if the root is good or bad. To be carnal means to be immature or controlled by our sinful nature. Paul described the same thing as "giving place or a foothold to the devil" (Ephesians 4:27) Basically, we allow some desire or sin to take root in our hearts and it then controls us. It could be unforgiveness and a desire to get even with someone, ambition to obtain a position of authority or preeminence in the church, a desire to look good and be seen as a spiritual person, the giving in to a sin which then causes us to justify ourselves by getting others to agree with us or join in with us, a desire to manipulate people to do the things that we want them to do, or to get people to believe what we believe — the "I'm right and everyone else is wrong mentality."

Why is James pointing out that the source of problems in the church is individuals who are not walking with God? Because almost all who have this kind of a critical and contentious attitude claim that they are being led by the Spirit of God. But if we are not producing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, then it is obvious that we are not being led by the Spirit — we are not submitted to the Holy Spirit or under His control. It is important that we be like David and ask God to examine us and see what the true motives of our hearts are — do they originate from our sinful nature, or from the Holy Spirit?

Psalm 139:23-24 NKJV

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me, and know my anxieties;

²⁴ And see if *there is any* wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 26:2 NLT

² Put me on trial, Lord, and cross-examine me.

Test my motives and my heart.

v 1-3 ...your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ²You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain.: Here James describes the types of **desires** that lead to conflict.

— **you lust and do not have:** This is covetousness, the desire for something that someone else has that you don't have, not being content with what God has already given you.

— **murder:** This refers to the anger, hatred and animosity that we can have toward others. Remember that Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22 defines murder as being angry with your brother without cause. Jesus is pointing out the inward condition of the heart which causes the outward anger that can eventually lead to murder. James' point in using the word murder is not to say that church members were actually physically killing each other, but rather to show the people the depth of the evil that is shown by their bitter hatred towards others.

v 3 Yet you do not have: What a sad, empty, and disappointing life. After all the effort expended to fulfil our **desires for pleasure**, we end up empty. Not only do our desires for pleasure lead to a life of conflict, pain and misery, but they also result in a very unsatisfied, unfulfilled, and empty life. We need to ask ourselves — is it really worth it? The answer will always be no. Just ask Adam and Eve after they listened to Satan's lie and ate the forbidden fruit.

Spurgeon: "The whole history of mankind shows the failure of evil lustings to obtain their object."

David Guzik: "This is the tragic irony of the life lived after worldly and fleshly desires; it never reaches the goal it gives everything for. This fundamental dissatisfaction is not because of a lack of effort: ... This helps us to rationally understand the folly of living life after the lusts of the world and our animal appetites. You are tempted to fulfil a sinful desire because you think (or hope) that it may be *satisfied*, but it will *never* be satisfied. Why not accept your lack of such satisfaction now, instead of after much painful and harmful sin?"

v 2-3 Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures: Why am I not satisfied? Either because I am not praying at all (**because you do not ask**), or I am not praying effectively (**You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures**).

As a Christian, I should be spiritually rich, enjoying the multitude of spiritual benefits that are mine because I am in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3-8 NLT

³ All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.** ⁴ Even before he made the world, **God loved us** and chose us in Christ to be **holy and without fault in his eyes.** ⁵ God decided in advance to **adopt us into his own family** by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. ⁶ So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. ⁷ He is so rich in kindness and grace that he **purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.** ⁸ He has **showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.**

I mean, if all these wonderful spiritual blessings are not able to satisfy me, then what is? The problem is not with God's provision, but rather my appetite. If my appetites cannot be satisfied by what God has already given me, then they are not desires or appetites that come from the Spirit.

v 2 **Yet you do not have because you do not ask:** this can be considered a spiritual law — God will not give unless we ask. Consider that God the Father says to God the Son in:

Psalms 2:8 NKJV

“Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.”

If even Jesus has to ask the Father for the things promised to Him, how much more for us. Also consider how Jesus asked us to pray in what we call the Lord's prayer in:

Matthew 6:8 NKJV

Give us this day our daily bread.

Then there is Jesus' teaching on prayer in:

Luke 11:5-13 NKJV

⁵ And He said to them, “Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶ for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; ⁷ and he will answer from within and say, ‘Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you’? ⁸ I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.

⁹ “So I say to you, **ask**, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ **For everyone who asks receives**, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

¹¹ If a son **asks** for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he **asks** for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹² Or if he **asks** for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who **ask** Him!”

Spurgeon: “If you may have everything by asking, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is, and I beseech you to abound in it.... Do you know, brothers, what great things are to be had for the asking? Have you ever thought of it? Does it not stimulate you to pray fervently? All heaven lies before the grasp of the asking man; all the promises of God are rich and inexhaustible, and their fulfilment is to be had by prayer.”

James has pointed out that we don't have because we don't ask, the problem of no prayer. But now James points out another problem with our prayer life — selfish prayer.

v 3 **You ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures:** David Guzik points out that “**Spend** is the same verb used to describe the wasteful spending of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:14. Destructive desires persist, even if we pray, because our prayers may be self-centred and self-indulgent.”

Jon Courson has a great application for this verse:

““I do pray,” you may say. “But I don't get what I ask for.”

That's because you're asking amiss. Prayer is not giving orders. It's reporting for duty. And once a person finally understands that prayer is not man saying, “Bless the business; bring in the money; solve the problem,” and God saying, “Aye, aye, Captain,” his prayer life will be revolutionised.

Prayer is saying, “Father what do *You* want to do in my life? I want *You* to do what *You* see is best for me because I get mixed up so easily.”

I walked into his room during his nap to find one-year-old Peter-John lying on his back, eagerly reaching for an object dangling just inches above his head. Living in a rustic cabin in the woods at that time, we were sometimes surprised by the visitors we would have. And this particular afternoon was no exception, for I was surprised indeed to see the object for which Peter was so intently reaching was a black widow spider.

We're just like Peter-John. We lie on our beds or kneel beside them and, through prayer, grab for things we think would be so wonderful, failing to realize they are nothing but black widows. Therefore, every bit as exciting to me as prayers God does answer are those He doesn't answer because I know I'll see that what I thought was so intriguing and tantalising will prove to be poisonous and deadly. Oh, may we learn not to give orders or grab spiders, but to do what Jesus did in the Garden: to submit to whatever the Father has for us.”