

Submit to God
James 4:1-10
SS Lesson for 01/13/2019

Devotional Scripture: Prov 3:27-35

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: James 4:8

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

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Lustful desires sometime degrade my body (Rom 1:24)

Lustful desires lead to offering my body as an instrument of wickedness (Rom 6:12-13)

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Purity that leads us to help others (James 1:27)

Purity that comes from the hope and trust in God (1 John 3:3)

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Humbleness leads to the enjoyment of the presence of God (Isa 57:15)

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Saints should live with humility (Eph 4:2)

Humbleness keeps man content with what he has (Prov 12:9)

Humbleness is rewarded in heaven (Matt 18:4)
Humbleness is like being a child in God's eyes (Luke 9:48)
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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

We are told that pride is an essential element to making things better. We should have school pride, community pride, and personal pride. In the Bible, however, pride is often seen as a corrosive personality trait, something to be avoided. What the Bible means by pride (when seen negatively) is similar to boastful arrogance (James 4:16). It can also be likened to vanity or vainglory, a distorted sense of one's value and importance in the world (Philippians 2:3). Pride can even be related to envy, covetousness, or greed—the belief that your desires are more important than those of others (Romans 1:29). Those to whom James wrote apparently had problems with pride; they lacked humility. Many Christians and churches today suffer the same malady, so James's words are timely and vital to us.

There are at least four and possibly five men by the name of James in the New Testament. The one who wrote the book of the New Testament that bears his name was the brother of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). James was not a disciple of Jesus during his ministry (John 7:5), but after the resurrection he became a believer (Acts 1:14) and a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19). Yet James humbly describes himself as a "servant of God" (James 1:1), seemingly reluctant to use his family credentials. We do not know when the letter of James was written. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) notes his death about AD 62 at the hands of Jewish opponents in Jerusalem. This makes it likely the book was written sometime in the AD 50s, thus reflecting an early stage in the history of the first-century church. The recipients of the letter are evidently Jewish believers, as indicated by the reference to the scattered "twelve tribes" (James 1:1). Perhaps they were members of the original church in Jerusalem who were forced to flee due to the persecution spawned by Stephen's martyrdom and thus were no longer centered in one location (Acts 11:19). It would be natural for James, were he their former spiritual leader, to encourage them in the midst of their trials (James 1:2–4, 12; 5:7–11). James held very high expectations for his readers. He specifically wanted them to tone down the rivalries in their communities, some of which involved conflicts between rich and poor (James 2:5–7). This fits well with the theme of humility to which James turns in chapter 4.

Key Verse: James 4:8

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Fights, quarrels, lust, hate, envy, pride, and sin are words that stain this portion of James' letter like inkblots. In stark contrast with the closing words of chapter 3, "peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness," chapter 4 opens with "fights and quarrels." James confronted this despicable behavior with valor. Furthermore he gave clear advice on how to quell the storms that are so detrimental to spiritual growth and maturity. A believer must turn hatred into humility, judgment into justice, and boasting into belief.

The appearance of conflict among the followers of Jesus stirred James to intense indignation. The severity of his tone in this section is accented by the absence of the words "my brothers," which James used so frequently in other parts of the letter. He revealed the cause of conflict, outlined the consequences of conflict, and proposed a cure for conflict.

4:1. Characteristically, James introduced this new section with a rhetorical question, **What causes fights and quarrels among you?** Where do “fights” (lit., “state of war,” *polemoi*) and “quarrels” (lit., individual disputes or “battles,” *machai*) come from? James answered his own question: **from your desires that battle within you.** Conflict comes out of (*ek*) inner sensual lusts or pleasures (*hēdonōn*; cf. v. 3). Hedonism, the playboy philosophy that makes pleasure mankind’s chief end, still wages battles in people’s hearts.

4:2. War is the fruit of illicit wants. Lust brings about murder. Covetousness results in the frustration of not obtaining the hotly pursued desires. It all leads to the “quarrels” and “fights,” that “battle” against people, mentioned in verse 1. The last part of verse 2, **You do not have, because you do not ask God,** is best taken with what follows. James did not contend that the reason lust was not gratified was because people failed to ask God to fill those desires. He simply revealed the clear source of conflict deep in covetous human hearts.

4:3. The correct way for Christians to have their legitimate needs met is by asking God. One reason a believer does not receive what he asks for is that he asks **with wrong motives** (lit., “evilly” or “amiss,” *kakōs*). The verb **ask** is in the middle voice, meaning, “ask for yourself.” The purpose clause that follows further clarifies, **that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.** “Spend” could be translated “squander.” “Pleasures” is again the Greek word *hēdonais* (cf. v. 1). God will never provide for “hedonistic squandering”!

4:4. Instead of the customary “my brothers,” James bristled with **you adulterous people.** Again he asked a pointed question: **Don’t you know that friendship (*philia*) with the world** (cf. “world” in 1:27) **is hatred toward God?** Then he added, **Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes** (lit., “is constituted”) **an enemy of God.** The consequence is worse than ending up empty-handed; a rebellious Christian who has an illegitimate relationship with the world is at enmity with God!

4:5. This is one of the most difficult verses to translate in the entire letter. A very literal translation would be, “Or think you that vainly the Scripture says to envy yearns the spirit which was made to dwell in you, but He gives great grace.” Is the “spirit” the Holy Spirit or the human spirit? Is the spirit to be taken as the subject of the verb “yearns” or as its object? Is “envy” to be seen as “unrighteous desire” or as “righteous jealousy”? Numerous translations are possible: (a) “The Spirit who indwells you jealously yearns [for you] and He gives more grace.” (b) “He [God] yearns jealously for the Holy Spirit which indwells you and He gives more grace.” (c) “The [human] spirit which indwells you yearns to envy, but He [God] gives more grace.” The NIV favors the latter idea: **Or do you think... that the spirit He caused to live in us tends toward envy,** but “He gives us more grace?” (v. 6) Not only is the translation of the sentence a problem, but also the apparent indication that it is a part of Scripture poses difficulties. James’ question, typically rhetorical, “or do you think Scripture says without reason” (*kenōs*, lit., “vainly”), introduces the section. The ambiguous sentence that follows is not a direct quotation of any passage in Scripture. Rather than assume that James quoted some other sacred book, or some unknown Greek translation of the Old Testament, or that he simply referred to the general sense of Scripture, it seems more reasonable to assume that he focused on the quotation in verse 6, a statement clearly taken from Proverbs 3:34: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (also quoted in 1 Peter 5:5).

4:6. Whatever questions remain unresolved about verse 5, there is no question about the clear truth of verse 6. **God opposes the proud.** The word “opposes,” or “resists,” is *antitassetai*, a military term meaning “to battle against.” **To the humble,** however, God **gives grace.** Whether a believer is called to resist his human spirit which tends toward envy or to rejoice in the Holy Spirit who jealously yearns for each believer’s edification, the call is to shun pride and to submit humbly to God’s authority. The cure for conflict is a humble spirit which is rewarded by God’s unmerited favor. James continued by showing in verses 7-12 how humility is related to peaceful justice.

4:7. In verses 7-9 a whole series of commands (10 aorist imperatives) are given which, if followed, contribute to harmony and holiness. James called for commitment (v. 7), cleansing (v. 8), and contrition (v. 9). Like a magnet, the call for commitment has both positive and negative poles: **submit... to God** and **resist the devil.** “Submit” is a military term “to be subordinated” or “to render obedience.” “Resist” (*antistēte*) means “take a stand against.” Take a stand against the devil, **and he will flee.**

4:8. On the other hand draw **near to God and He will come near** in response. To draw near to God, however, demands His cleansing. **Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.** Both “wash” and “purify” are verbs that refer to ceremonial cleansing, a figure that spoke

eloquently to Jewish converts. The need for cleansing is clear from the way James addressed his readers, “you sinners” and “you double-minded” (*dipsychoi*; cf. 1:8).

4:9. Recognition of the tremendous need for cleansing allows no room for merriment. **Grieve** (lit., “be afflicted”), **mourn, and wail** was James’ candid advice. Exchange merriment for **mourning** and gaiety for **gloom** (lit., “a downcast look, lowered eyes”). A contrite spirit of confession is essential for God’s cleansing.

4:10. The key is humility. **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.** The way up is down. The lowly one becomes the lifted one. There is a marked advantage to humility—eventually it brings honor.

4:11. To **slander and judge one another** is totally incongruous to the humble spirit God desires. Furthermore, to judge another is actually a judgment of God’s **Law** itself. His Law is a mandate over all people. No one dares assume a haughty position over the Law. The slanderer is sentenced by the Law; the self-styled judge is jeopardized by the Law; only the humble person is honored. True justice is rendered when a believer subjects himself to God in humility and obedience.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Hindrances to Submitting to God (James 4:1-6)

1 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.

4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Hindrances of lustful desires (1-3)

Lustful desires choke God's word in me and makes me unfruitful (Mark 4:19)

19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

Lustful desires sometime degrade my body (Rom 1:24)

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

Lustful desires lead to offering my body as an instrument of wickedness (Rom 6:12-13)

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

Lustful desires lead to following the ways of this world (Eph 2:1-3)

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Lustful desires belongs to my earthly/sinful nature (Col 3:5)

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Hindrance of friendship with the world (4)

Friendship that seeks the love of the world (John 15:19)

19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Friendship that comes from the lust of the eye, lust of the flesh and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17)

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Friendship that causes my mind to be set on what my sinful nature desires (Rom 8:5-6)

5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;

Friendship that tries to win the approval of man, not God (Gal 1:10)

10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Friendship that conforms to the pattern of this world (Rom 12:2)

2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Friendship that has nothing in common with righteousness (2 Cor 6:14-15)

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

Friendship that is based on the principles of this world (Col 2:20)

20 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:

Hindrance of pride (5-6)

Pride that goes before destruction (Prov 16:18)

18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Pride of arrogance (Isa 2:11)

11 The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

Pride of a false sense of power (Dan 4:28-34)

28 All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." 33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. 34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

Pride of false wisdom (Ezek 28:6-8)

6 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god, 7 I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendor. 8 They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas.

Pride that makes one think more highly of himself than he ought (Rom 12:3)

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Pride that keeps one from seeking God (Ps 10:4)

4 In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

Pride makes one a fool (Prov 26:12)

12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Exhortations to Submitting to God (James 4:7-10)

7 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Ten Commands given in verses 7-10 (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)

James 4:7–10 contain 10 commands. They demand repentance toward God from the believer who has been behaving like a nonbeliever. Such a backslider has been choosing to be more influenced by worldly attitudes than by the humility God desires.

The **first command** (here) and the tenth command (in v. 10, below) mirror one another in their foundational **call for repentance** in terms of humble submission to God.

The **second command, calling for resisting the devil**, is the complement to submitting to God. The first step in turning to God has to be turning away from Satan and his unholy influence in our lives. Satan will flee, not because of any power we have, but because we are now faced toward God. Satan wants to escape the steady stare of God's goodness and justice.

The **third command calls for the** necessary second step in repentance. Having turned away from Satan toward God, the call to **come near to God** pictures us as taking steps toward him. God's gracious action of also moving toward us with eyes full of love provides confidence for us to keep going, even to accelerate into his outstretched arms. This picture is worked out marvelously in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32).

The **fourth and fifth commands (wash ... purify) call for determined action to take real steps to change our lives and attitudes.** The call to wash our hands pictures our bodies covered with the dirty evidence of our sinful involvement with the world. They must be cleansed in the sense of removing these things from our lives in order for us to be presentable to the loving but holy Father, who is waiting to welcome us into his presence. The call to purify our hearts demands that the same thing be done internally. God knows our hearts, so they must be changed in order for us to be near him.

Commands number six (grieve), seven (mourn), eight (wail), and nine (change) call for various reactions to the sorrow we feel for having betrayed God with our attitudes and actions. If our repentance is genuine and we have truly confronted our sin, this reaction necessarily will be emotional. We should be upset and horrified by what we have done. Speaking of repentance with similar language is both James (later, in James 5:1) and the prophet Joel (in Joel 2:12). The calling for our reversal of emotions from laughter/joy to mourning/gloom parallels what Jesus says in Luke 6:25: "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." It pictures our party life of sinful pleasure and self-indulgence being replaced by our attendance at the funeral of that old life, now dead to us. Will we do this voluntarily, now, before it's too late? Or will it be forced upon us, as in Luke 6:25, after it's too late? The **tenth command (to submit and to be humble)** mirrors Proverbs 3:34 quoted in verse 6. The tenth command also works to develop various components of true repentance. To submit and to be humble are almost the same thing. The last half of verse 10 ends this string of harsh commands with a positive, encouraging promise. Now, bowing clean and humble before Him, we will experience God wrapping his arms around us and accepting us fully into his presence to begin our new relationship with him.

Exhortation to submit to God (7)

Submit to God so that there can be life and peace (Rom 8:5-7)

5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; 7 the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Submit to God because someday all will confess and know Jesus is Lord (Rom 14:11-12)

11 It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Submit to God out of reverence (Eph 5:21)

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Submit to God with all my soul and spirit (Heb 12:9)

9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Respect and submit to God because He is mighty (1 Peter 5:6)

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Respect and submit to God because it pleases Him (2 Cor 7:15)

15 And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.

Exhortation for purity (8)

Purity that comes from being a child of God (Phil 2:14-15)

14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe

Purity that we should think about constantly (Phil 4:8)

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

Purity that leads us to help others (James 1:27)

27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Purity that comes from the hope and trust in God (1 John 3:3)

3 Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

Purity that comes from obedience (1 Peter 1:22)

22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

Purity that should set an example through godly speech, life, and love (1 Tim 4:12)

12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Purity that is obtained by fixing our eyes on Jesus (Ps 119:9-10)

9 How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. 10 I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

Exhortation for humbleness (9-10)

Humbleness is a requirement of God (Mic 6:8)

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Humbleness leads to the enjoyment of the presence of God (Isa 57:15)

15 For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Humbleness means to be submissive to God and those in authority over me (1 Peter 5:5)

5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Saints should live with humility (Eph 4:2)

2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Humbleness keeps man content with what he has (Prov 12:9)

9 Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food.

Humbleness is rewarded in heaven (Matt 18:4)

4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Humbleness is like being a child in God's eyes (Luke 9:48)

48 Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest."

We should take the example of Jesus and submit ourselves to humbleness (Phil 2:5-7)

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The fact that there is conflict among the saints to whom James is writing should come as no surprise to us. We find the disciples arguing among themselves in the Gospels about who was the greatest (e.g., Mark 9:33-34; Luke 9:46; 22:24). We find divisions and even lawsuits among the Corinthian saints (1 Corinthians 1:11-12; 6:1-6). Even the wonderful church at Philippi had two women who were at odds with each other (Philippians 4:1-3). The difference here is that James tells us this conflict even led to murder (4:2; see also 5:6). Doesn't this description seem inaccurate, or at least exaggerated? There are those who would say that James is using hyperbole (a fancy term for exaggeration), and that he employed the term in some metaphorical sense. I think he meant us to understand the term literally, and that he used it to shock us in order to get our attention. He says this to make the point that the conflict he speaks of is a very serious matter indeed. I believe there are two reasons why James included murder here as a sin that was possible among those to whom he wrote.

First, we must reluctantly admit that there is no sin of which the saint is incapable. We need only look at people in the Bible to see this. Moses took the life of an Egyptian, because he was mistreating a Hebrew (Exodus 2:11-12). David committed adultery and attempted to cover it up by murdering Bathsheba's husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11:14-25). If we think that we are incapable of any other sin, we deceive ourselves.

Second, James is speaking about the path of sin, and where it inevitably leads. In Proverbs 1, the "two paths" are described: (1) the path of folly, which leads to death (see 1:8-12, 16-19, 32) and, (2) the path of wisdom, which leads to life (1:20-23, 33). To pursue the desires of the flesh places one on the road to death and destruction:

I think the consequences of being on the path of sin are especially clear in our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

21 "You have heard that it was said to an older generation, '**Do not murder,**' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says 'Fool' will be sent to fiery hell. 23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. 25 Reach agreement quickly with your accuser while on the way to court, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the warden, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not at all get out until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:21-26).

In this text, Jesus takes up the teaching of the Law concerning the sin of murder. There were many who dealt with this law legalistically. That is, they assumed that when the law forbade murder, that was as far as it went. The same approach was taken with regard to adultery and divorce (Matthew 5:27-32). Jesus put this matter in a very different light. To Him, murder is not only a terrible sin, it is the fruit of unholy anger.

Jesus traces the source of the sin of murder back to an angry spirit. He calls attention to an angry attitude toward others which causes one to view others as worthless, folks whom the world would be better off without. Now don't pretend to be so pious that you don't know what this is like. It's the attitude that you and I have toward someone who cuts in front of us on the freeway, or runs a red light. We say to ourselves, "You idiot!" When we look upon someone else as worthless, then by inference we imply that the world would be very well off without them. What a rationale this is for murder. That is why Jesus forbids us to have this kind of anger toward others. We are to be reconciled to our enemy quickly, before our differences escalate any further. Murder, then, is the fruit of unresolved anger and hostility. This means that any of us, if we became angry enough, is capable of murder. James is not being as hypothetical as we might wish to think.

The reason why Christians have quarrels and conflicts is because they have allowed their fleshly desires – their "pleasures" – to dominate their lives. These "pleasures" wage war within each of us – within our bodies. They also result in conflicts and strife with one another in the body of Christ. The opposite effect happens when we "mortify the flesh," when we daily die to self. Those who "**put off the old man**" put the interests of others ahead of their own. They become servants, rather than striving to be masters. They promote unity within the body of Christ. This is a central theme in the Book of Philippians, especially chapter 2.

The church at Corinth is a tragic illustration of the self-seeking James warns us about in our text. They had divisions among them, which resulted in some Christians taking other Christians to court (1:10-17; 6:1-11).

Pleasure seeking dominated the lives of many of the saints. One man was living boldly in open sin (1 Corinthians 5). Others were also guilty of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). And some were so tempted by a good meal that they were willing to participate in heathen worship to eat **“meat sacrificed to idols”** (1 Corinthians 8-10). Paul exemplifies the servant leader, who sets aside his right to be supported, for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9). He stresses the need for self-control, for bringing our body into submission, rather than allowing it to dominate us (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). And then he cites case after case from Israel’s history to show that Israel’s failures were often the result of pursuing fleshly pleasures (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). If all this were not bad enough, pleasure seeking had corrupted the most sacred gathering of all – the meeting of the saints to remember our Lord’s death at the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:17ff.). Those who came early refused to wait for those who had to arrive later (this would be the poor). These early-comers stuffed themselves with food and drink, so that their “worship” looked a great deal like the pagan worship ceremonies some saints were willing to attend. The Corinthians were also self-indulgent in their participation in the church meeting. Many were not concerned with edifying others, but rather with the showing off of their own gifts and wisdom. No wonder James looks upon pleasure seeking with great disdain.

As I read verses 1-3, the focus is upon those who do not possess the “pleasures” they desire, and so they become willing to act in a sinful manner to obtain what they want. They **“desire and do not have;”** they **“murder and envy,”** but they are still not able to obtain what they desire. These people are the have-nots, who want much and sin much to obtain, but they are still not successful. James tells them that they do not have what they want because they have not prayed for it. They have sought blessings from everyone but God. But even if they had prayed, they would not have obtained what they sought because they would ask wrongly. God does not give us what we request simply to satisfy our fleshly lusts. He meets all of our true needs, but He does not cater to our every whim. The pursuit of fleshly lusts is the pursuit of vanity, and in this pursuit, we always come up short. God desires for us to be content in our circumstances (Philippians 4:11-13) and to learn endurance (James 1:2-4). That which we most need is wisdom, not wealth (James 1:5-8). God wants us to **“be perfect, not deficient in anything”** (1:4), but this has much more to do with our character than with our earthly possessions.

A Contributing Factor (James 4:4-5)

Our struggle is not just with the flesh – our inner cravings and desires – it is with the world and with Satan as well. In verses 4 and 5, James rebukes his readers for their worldliness – their improper attachment to the world, with its values and desires. We will either stand with our Lord, and find the world against us, or we will stand with the world against our Lord:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24).

James cannot state his warning more forcefully. He calls those who have become friends with the world **“adulterers”** (verse 4). In the Old Testament, Israel is represented as the bride of God, so that when the Israelites turn from God to idols, they are accused of harlotry (see Exodus 34:15-16; Deuteronomy 31:16; Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:20; Hosea 9:1). Similar imagery is employed for the church in the New Testament (see Matthew 16:4; 2 Corinthians 11:1-2; Ephesians 5:24-28; Revelation 19:7; 21:9).

Verse 5 is somewhat problematic because it is cited as a Scripture quotation, and yet we do not find any verse in Scripture that is exactly like it. We can certainly say that this quotation captures the sense of the Old Testament Scriptures. God is frequently pictured as a jealous God, who is provoked to jealousy when His people turn from Him (Deuteronomy 32:6, 21; Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Zechariah 8:2). God has placed His Spirit within us, and He desires fellowship with us. When we become friends with the world, it deeply grieves the Spirit of God within.

The Remedy: Repentance (James 4:6-10)

The question which immediately comes to mind in relation to verse 6 is this: “Why does God give **“greater grace,”** and for what reason?” There are various explanations, but it would seem to me that the **“greater grace”** referred to here is the additional grace God extends to those who are His wayward children. Lost sinners experience God’s initial saving grace when He draws them to Himself in salvation. But having become His children, we still are “prone to wander,” and we sometimes stray from Him. It is great grace that draws us to Him in salvation; it is greater grace that woos us back to Him when we stray. For those who are in despair at the fact that they have “messed up,” James gives these encouraging words, **“but he gives greater grace.”**

When we humble ourselves in repentance, He pours out even **“greater grace”** upon us, drawing us back into fellowship and communion with Him. When we have come to see that we have become too friendly with the world, we need but to humbly submit ourselves to God, and at the same time resist the devil, who will then flee

from us. The devil does not dare to harm us when we have drawn near to God. As we draw near to God, we will discover that we become much more aware of His presence in our lives.

The word “repentance” is not found in our text, but the concept is certainly here. James is telling us what repentance looks like. It begins with a deep sense of humility, which includes the absence of human pride. It manifests itself in a hatred of sin and in the putting off of sin. It involves a cleansing of our hearts and our hands (that is our innermost motivations and our deeds). The wavering double-mindedness we once exhibited disappears, and a single-minded devotion to knowing and serving God takes its place. Repentance involves a godly sorrow:

10 For sadness as intended by God produces a repentance that leads to salvation, leaving no regret, but worldly sadness brings about death. 11 For see what this very thing, this sadness as God intended, has produced in you: what eagerness, what defense of yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what deep concern, what punishment! In everything you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter (2 Corinthians 7:10-11).

James rightly calls for those who are repentant to **“grieve, mourn, and weep”** (verse 9). There is no place for a smile when one is repentant.

Years ago I taught sixth grade in a public school. I loved teaching, and I loved those kids, but I did use a paddle occasionally (it was really legal then). I used the paddle sparingly, and it only came out on rare occasions when it was obviously necessary. I purposed that while I would give only one swat, it would be painful enough that the student would not come back to class with a smile or a smirk on his face. One day, the principle called a student out of class because of some discipline problem. A few minutes later, that same student returned to class, with a big grin on his face. One of my students made a very profound observation. He said, “Look at him; he’s gone to the principal’s office, and yet he’s got a smile on his face.” The inference was that no one who was taken out of class to be disciplined should come back grinning. I agree, and so does James. There is great joy in serving our Lord, and even times for levity, but not when one is repenting of sin. I know that there are those who teach that one merely has to admit to having sinned, and that forgiveness is then virtually automatic. I believe that in order for repentance to be genuine, it must be accompanied by sorrow.

James once again calls for humility in conjunction with repentance in verse 10. When we humble ourselves before God, He is the one who will exalt us. This is most certainly **“greater grace.”**

As we prepare to move on, let me simply call your attention to the fact that these words from the pen of James are strong words. In fact, this call for saints to repent sounds a great deal like other instances where unbelievers are called to repent for salvation (for example, Luke 3:7-17). God takes all sin seriously. Those who are on the path of sin are on the path that leads to death. One can hardly take sin too seriously:

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/real-religion-requires-repentance-james-41%E2%80%9456>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Can you imagine a humility contest in your church? If we are told to practice humility, shouldn’t we honor the humblest among us? This could include nominations and campaign-style speeches where candidates tout their humility credentials to garner votes from the congregation. Then we could be proud of our humbleness. We could crown the king and queen of humility, the humblest people in our church! This is ridiculous, of course. Humility and pride are strange bedfellows indeed. Humility, by its nature, is a private act, a personal practice. Drawing attention to our humility is like a peacock strutting after its tail feathers have been plucked. How can we practice humility? Here are some suggestions. First, meditate on the greatness of God. Realizing the vast expanse of God’s creation—its beauty and intricate design—should make you feel very small by comparison. Second, remember the undeserved love God has lavished upon you. Paul said that while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6–11). Our love is almost always tinged with selfishness, but God’s love never is. His great love outshines anything we can claim (see Ephesians 2:4, 5). Third, let us find ways to serve that are unrecognized. I recently helped serve a meal at a homeless shelter. I made some new friends and received a hearty “Thank you,” but I wasn’t paid or otherwise rewarded. The people I served were often unresponsive and ungrateful, even greedy. I stayed to help clean the kitchen, and that was nasty work. I got a good dose of humility, remembering that there are those who do these jobs every day. God is great. God is loving. I serve God by serving others. These are lessons of humility that will serve us well. May we lay down our crowns, our claims to greatness—and pick up our crosses, our submission to God’s will, so that God may lift us up in his perfect timing.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

It's a challenge to ignore all the ways the world attempts to distract us from what God says is important or worthwhile. Every day we are enticed by advertisers who tell us if we want our lives to be more enjoyable, they have just the product we need. We see characters portrayed in the media who seem to find fulfillment through relationships or activities that God says are not right. We find ourselves envying the luxurious lifestyles of the rich even if the way they have obtained their riches is questionable. We admire the powerful or the famous and may wish at times that we were like them. Like those James was writing to, we find we are in two worlds—one based on what God says is right and good and one based on something else, and we find ourselves attracted to both. We can't totally avoid hearing about products or activities that promise to fulfill our desires but seem to leave God out of the process. We will continue to hear about people who seem to be getting a blessing in life even though they are apparently doing so apart from Him. To help us discern when we are being deceived, we must arm ourselves with truths from God's Word. His Word shows us the ways of the world are not better. We then submit to God and His ways so we are not seduced by the lie that our lives can be fulfilled apart from Him. We take seriously the consequences of ignoring God's instruction to "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33, KJV) and believe that God's ways are always best. When we continually say "yes" to God and His ways and "no" to the world and its ways, we won't miss out on what God says is both right and good.