



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

What's Your Pleasure?

James 4:1-6

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Introduction

1. In the 1830s, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States to observe the new republic and compare it with the aristocracies of Europe. He recorded his observations in the book, *Democracy in America*. Among them was what de Tocqueville called a “strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants . . . in the midst of abundance.” Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because, de Tocqueville added, “the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart.” This strange melancholy manifests itself in many ways, but always leads to the same despair of not finding what is sought.¹
2. Timothy Keller reminds us that this “strange melancholy” has remained a problem.
 - a. He alludes to “the suicides in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash” (Keller, x).
 - b. “After the global economic crisis began in mid-2008, there followed a tragic string of suicides of formerly wealthy and well-connected individuals,” including the chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the chief executive of Sheldon Good, a leading real estate auction firm, and an executive of the collapsed Bear Stearns firm who learned he would not be hired by JP Morgan Chase, which had bought Bear Stearns (Keller, ix-x).
3. It is not just the “fabulously wealthy” who struggle with the problem.
 - a. Even people not considered “rich” suffer because they are focused on the wrong things, expectations that fail because they are not centered in God.
 - b. Nor is that the whole problem. Too often, those wrongly focused desires play out in attitudes and behaviors that cause other problems, often destructive ones.
4. Having introduced both a key contributor (3:1-12) and ultimate source of the problem (3:13-18), James turns to the fights and quarrels that were plaguing the Christians of his time, diagnosing the causes of their infighting (4:1-6), calling for their repentance (4:7-10), and giving concrete practical advice for dealing with the matter (4:11-12).²

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, x. His citation of de Tocqueville is from *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, 296, as quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, 3.

² See Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, 156-157.

Body

I. An Ugly Practice (4:1-3).

A. By any standard, the behavior James depicts in vv. 1-3 is ugly.

1. There were “quarrels” (πόλεμος, *polemos*) and “fights” (μάχη, *machē*) (vv. 1, 2).
2. “Passions” (“pleasures - ἡδονή, *hēdonē*) – “an intense pleasure or enjoyment”³ – “wage war (στρατεύω, *strateuō*) in your members” (NASB).⁴
3. It was so bad that he called the outcome “murder” (φονεύω, *phoneuō*) (v. 2).
 - a) Some think that James means this literally, that the fights and quarrels had gotten so out of hand that life-taking violence had occurred.⁵
 - b) Since “murder” is used metaphorically elsewhere (e.g., Matt. 5:21-23) and there is no evidence that such extremes existed in the church of James’s day, the figurative sense is better.
 - c) Why does James use such a strong term?
 - (1) To emphasize the seriousness of his point, or
 - (2) Warn what comes if they do not check their bitter feelings and strife.⁶

B. That such things were happening is traceable to frustrations they experienced (v. 2)

1. “You desire (ἐπιθυμέω, *epithumeō*) and do not have.”
2. “You covet (are envious - NASB; the word is ζηλόω, *zēloō*) and cannot obtain” (οὐ δύνασθε ἐπιτυχεῖν, *ou dunasthe epituchein*).

C. But there was also another dimension to their troubles.

1. Some were frustrated because they had never taken their desire to God (v. 2).
2. Others asked for wrong reasons, “to spend it on your passions” (ἡδονή, *hēdonē*) (3).
 - a) They thought God could be “manipulated as a kind of vending machine, precisely for the purpose of self-gratification” (Blomberg & Kamell, 189).
 - b) “God does not honor those requests” (Blomberg & Kamell, 189).

II. A Problem of Priority (4:4).

A. James revisits the problem of a practice that does not match the profession (2:14ff.).

B. He is clear that this is not just about inconsistency, but amounts to a denial of the faith.

1. “Adulteresses” (NASB; μοιχαλίδες, *moichalides*) is not a reference to women who had been unfaithful to their marital vows (cf. Moo, 143).
2. James uses the sharp address (Greek vocative) to recall “the whole OT tradition of Israel as God’s unfaithful wife denounced in prophetic books” (Davids, 160).

³ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 187.

⁴ The phrase is ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν (*en tois melesin humōn*). Here and in the previous “among you” (ἐν ὑμῖν, *en humin*) in v. 1, the plural pronouns can be taken grammatically to refer either to inner conflicts within individuals or to interpersonal conflicts between community members. Given the point James is stressing, including previous references to “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (3:14), it fits better to take them to refer to community conflicts. But, clearly, these would be caused by individuals not getting what they wanted, so the point is the same whichever way we take the phrases. Because people had impure motives, serious church problems existed.

⁵ See Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48, 141-147. Also Michael J. Townsend, “James 4:1-4: A Warning Against Zealotry?” *Expository Times* 87 (1975): 211-213.

⁶ “. . . it is simplest to take ‘murder’ straightforwardly and to regard it as that extreme to which frustrated desire, if not checked, may lead” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 141).

- a) See Ezek. 16:38; 23:45 (where it is tied to murder); Hos. 2:13; 9:1 (and chaps. 1-3 generally); also Jer. 3; Isa. 1:21; 50:1; 54:1-6; 57:3.
- b) Jesus also used it to refer to Israel's rejection (Mark 8:38; Matt. 12:39; 16:4).
- 3. Leaving no doubt as to his intent, James goes on to say that their behavior amounted to "friendship with the world."
 - a) Taken more seriously in antiquity than in the modern West, friendship was "a lifelong pact between people with shared values and loyalties."
 - b) His charge was that they had identified and entered into a relationship with the standards and priorities of the world (Blomberg & Kamell, 190).

C. The sin is in fact idolatry.

- 1. Idolatry was the context of the adultery references in the prophets.
- 2. Notice that in James there is no hint of any actual statues, images, etc.
- 3. Like the elders who came to consult Ezekiel (14:3ff.), the idolatry was found in their focus, that on which their hearts were set (cf. Col. 3:5).
- 4. That James had this idea in mind is clear in what he said are the consequences: "enmity" (ἐχθρα, *echthra*) whereby they had "made" (or "established," καθίσταται, *kathistatai*)⁷ themselves as "an enemy (ἐχθρός, *echthros*) of God."
- 5. There is no middle ground: "God will brook no rival, and when the believer behaves in a way characteristic of the world, he demonstrates that, at that point, his allegiance is to the world rather than to God" (Moo, 144).

III. Protection from God (4:5-6).

A. But, all is not lost, for God always seeks and will enable those who are humble.

B. The idea of God's seeking is the point of verse 5.⁸

- 1. The specific scripture to which James refers is not known.⁹
- 2. There are also questions about whether the subject of the sentence is God or spirit and whether "spirit" (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*) is human or divine.¹⁰
 - a) Since the Greek does not distinguish between the divine and human spirit as English translations do, that part of the question is unsolvable.
 - b) In light of the context that surrounds verse 5, it is best to take God as the subject.

⁷ "Cf. REB 'makes himself.' But the word's root carries the stronger sense of the NJB's 'constituted.' Johnson ('Friendship with the World/Friendship with God,' 171) suggests 'establish'" (Blomberg & Kamell, 190).

⁸ "... one of the most difficult to understand in all the letter" (Martin, 149).

⁹ Options include a loose paraphrase of a text like Ex. 20:5, a reference to what Scripture generally says with no particular passage in mind, a lost apocryphal work that is unknown to us, and a paraphrase of a Jewish midrash of Gen. 49:19. Blomberg & Kamell (p. 192) seek to resolve the question by extending the quotation all the way through verse 6 and seeing 5b as conceptually the same as the part of Prov. 3:34 quoted in 6b ("he gives grace").

¹⁰ The following translations represent the different views and show the difficulty.

[1] "Or think ye that the scripture speaketh in vain? Doth the spirit which he made to dwell in us long unto envying?" (ASV; cf. NIV) – human spirit as the subject.

[2] "Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously? (CSB [Holman Christian Standard Bible]) - divine Spirit as the subject.

[3] "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: 'He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?'" (NASB) - God as the subject, desiring the divine Spirit dwelling in us.

[4] "Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?'" (ESV) - God as the subject, desiring the human spirit made to dwell in us.

3. The point is that, just as he did not give up on adulterous Israel, he is not giving up on his people now.
- C. Verse 6 adds the reassurance of his enabling grace.
 1. Here, there is no question about the passage cited (Prov. 3:34).
 2. James uses it to reinforce the idea that God gives (δίδωσιν, *didōsin*, present tense) more or greater (μείζονα, *meizona*, from μέγας, *megas*) grace.
 3. But, this is a conditional promise, available to those who are "humble" (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*; cf. 1:9-10; 4:10), a term that includes the idea of humiliation; "God gives his gifts only to those who are humble, or humbled, enough to ask for and receive them" (Blomberg & Kamell, 193).
 4. James shows the expected response in v. 7: "Submit yourselves therefore to God."

Conclusion

1. Our text is a call to the most penetrating self-examination. It forces us to confront idolatry, the most fundamental cause of what continues to plague us. For, as 17th century English minister David Clarkson put it, "Though few will own it, nothing is more common." Thinking of the soul as a house, he went on: "idols are set up in every room" (in Keller, 154).
2. The fact is, "We prefer our own wisdom to God's wisdom, our own desires to God's will, and our own reputation to God's honor" (Keller, 154). Ridding ourselves of the idols that burrow down deep requires constant vigilance and surrender.
3. For they must be replaced, not merely kept in check. And all that will fill the void is the pleasure of knowing God and accepting him. Thankfully, he does not give up on us, and promises to supply the grace we need – if we are serious about surrendering to him.

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