

SESSION SEVEN

Living without Arrogance (*James 4:1-17*)

“The greatest test of whether the holiness we profess to seek or to attain is truth and life will be whether it produces an increasing humility in us. In man, humility is the one thing needed to allow God’s holiness to dwell in him and shine through him. The chief mark of counterfeit holiness is lack of humility. The holiest will be the humblest.” ~ Andrew Murray

I. Overview

Arrogance and self-centeredness wreak havoc with relationships—relationships with not only others but most importantly, in one’s relationship with the Lord. James describes exactly how pride creates division within the Church and enmity with God. In so doing, this New Testament writer calls for a sober reflection, a sincere repentance, and a submissive recognition of God’s sovereignty.

II. The Content

A. Arrogant Passions and Unanswered Prayers (4:1-3)

Verses 1-3 serve as a great contrast with the call to make peace at the end of chapter 3.

vv. 1 - The references to “conflicts” and “quarrels” could indicate that James is addressing actual violence among the believers. However, most likely James is using these words in a metaphorical sense (cf. 2 Cor 7:5; 2 Tim 2:23; Tit 3:9).

“passions” - This term connotes self-indulgent pleasure. A Jewish writing, written before the time of Christ, identified “pleasure” as the source of sin. “In the soul, it [pleasure] is boastfulness, covetousness, thirst for honor, rivalry, and malice; in the body, indiscriminate eating and gluttony.” (4 Macc 1:25-26).

v. 2 - The “bitterness” and “self ambition” raised in 3:14-16 leads to the following frustrations:

- “you desire something and do not have it; so you commit murder”
- “and you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts”

Dauids writes, “They oppress the poor (cf. 2:14ff.), either by legal oppression or by withholding needed aid, and envy those who are more successful, yet their desires slip between their fingers.” (*James*, 159).

v. 3 - One commentator aptly writes, “God bestows not gifts only, but the enjoyment of them: but the enjoyment which contributes to nothing beyond itself is not what He gives in answer to prayer; and petitions to Him which have no better end in view are not prayers.” (Hort, *James*).

God is not to be approached as a genie in the bottle, a vending machine, or a good luck charm. The granting of one’s desires is contingent upon a heart that delights in the Lord (Ps 37:4).

B. Humility before God and True Exaltation (4:4-10)

This section entails one of the strongest calls to repentance in the New Testament.

v. 4 - “adulterers” - James utilizes the feminine form of this term to recall familiar Jewish imagery. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is depicted as God’s bride (cf. Isa 54:5-6; Jer 3:20; and Hos 2:5-7). Israel is often portrayed as one committing adultery in her unfaithfulness to the Lord (e.g., idolatry).

“Friendship with the world” - Friendship in the Greco-Roman world entailed intimacy, a union both spiritual and physical (cf. Johnson, *James*, 279). Thus, a person who forms “alliances” with the world also becomes an enemy of God (cf. 1 John 2:15).

v. 5 - Two major interpretations exist:

- James is referring to God’s jealousy for his people (NASB, ESV).
- James is referring to the *human* tendency to be envious of others (NIV, NET).

Issues to consider in translating verse 5:

- The term for “spirit” can function as the subject or the object. It is best to take God as the subject for both verbs.
- The word for “envy” is normally negative and is never used of God in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, one can argue that James utilized the term for stylistic purposes.
- The immediate context of verse 4 recalls a God who was jealous for His people’s devotion (e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24).
- While the reference to “spirit” could refer to the Holy Spirit received at conversion, the term probably speaks of the spirit of life which God gave to humanity at creation (cf. Gen 6:3; Ps 104:29-30).

Consequently, the best reading of verse 5 is: “God jealously yearns for the spirit that he created in us.” In other words, “God vehemently desires fidelity/allegiance from his human creatures.”

v. 6 - God’s grace is sufficient to meet the requirements imposed on us. Quoting from Proverbs 3:34, James reminds his audience that God’s gift of grace only comes to those who admit their need and accept this gift.

vv. 7-10 - The previous reference to Proverbs 3 results in a series of commands between the *inclusio* of submitting in v. 7a and humbling oneself in v. 10.

- a. *Resist the devil* - The term means “to stand against.” By God’s grace, the Christian is guaranteed the ability to overcome the power of satan (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9).
- b. *Draw near to God* - James is referring to the restoration of fellowship with Christians and with the Lord (cf. Hos 12:6).
- c. *Wash hands and purify hearts* - “Both verbs had come to be applied more broadly to ethical purity . . . to denote both deed and disposition.” (Moo, *James*, 194). The reference to “double-minded” recalls 1:8 and the person who wavers in his/her faith.
- d. *Grieve, mourn, and weep* - These are responses of those who suffer God’s judgment (e.g., Isa 15:2; Jer 4:13; Hos 10:5; Joel 1:9-10). Echoing a similar thought in 2 Corinthians 7:10, Paul writes, “For sadness as intended by God produces a repentance that leads to salvation, leaving no regret . . .”. Unlike the response of a fool

(i.e., laughter - cf. Prov 10:23), the Christian needs to take sin seriously and not presume upon God's mercy by displaying a flippant response to one's sinfulness.

C. A Haughty Spirit and a Judgmental Attitude (4:11-12)

vv. 11-12 - Speaking ill of others stems from an arrogant heart. Such rhetoric includes slander (Ps 101:5), questioning legitimate authority (Num 21:5), and false accusations (1 Pet 2:12). Failure to love one another indicates one's disregard for the accuracy and applicability of God's instructions.

D. Unrighteous Self-confidence and God's Providence (4:13-17)

v. 13 - These businessmen "... decide where they will go, when they will go, and how long they will stay. Moreover, they are quite sure about the outcome of all these plans: they will make money." (Moo, *James*, 202).

vv. 14-15 - In these two verses, what does James remind his audience of?

v. 16 - Pride is the root problem of this self-sufficiency and failure to recognize the Lord's sovereignty is pride. James is not addressing their occupations or even their desires to make provisions for the future, but rather, he is confronting their egocentric attitudes.

v. 17 - Sins of omission are as real and serious as sins of commission (cf. Lk 12:47).

III. Intersect

A. We need to recognize the grave danger of entertaining sinful desires.

1 Peter 2:11 -

B. We must live our lives in an awareness of "our ignorance of the future, our fragility as fallen human beings, and our utter dependence on God's will" (Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 212).

Proverbs 27:1 -

In reflecting on biblical planning within our contemporary economic system, Barton, Veerman, and Wilson suggest five practices to avoid (*James*, 112):

- Envisaging retirement as a time merely to enjoy the fruit of our labor
- Seeing work as just a way to make the money we need to buy what we want
- Viewing material prosperity as a symbol of our independence
- Imagining God as aloof from mundane cares of money matters
- Making financial decisions without consulting Christ for detailed guidance

"Nothing sets a person so much out of the devil's reach as humility." ~ Jonathan Edwards